

Bold Tendencies 2021 Q&A with Frances Drayson

What first inspired you to become an artist?

There wasn't a particular moment, more of a cumulative thing. I liked to draw when I was little. I'd try to copy book covers and create made-up animals. During art school, I was in among many different kinds of practice, which made being an artist seem more possible.

You graduated from the Royal Academy of Arts in 2019 — followed soon after by a solo show at Lily Brooke Gallery in London called *Lathe of Heaven*. What did you focus on whilst at the RA, and how did this translate into your first solo show afterwards?

At the Royal Academy I started to use faces, characters, finger-marks and impressions: things that are typically thought to be representative or expressive. I tried to complicate these — repeating a gesture so it became mechanised, pushing work through multiple processes, removing material or information. I was interested in distinctions between natural and unnatural, human and animal.

Some of the pieces in *Lathe of Heaven* were made while I was at the Royal Academy. The show title is from a novel by Ursula Le Guin, which itself is a mistranslation of a passage in Zhuang Zhou's philosophical writing. The novel's protagonist alters reality through his dreams but still remembers the previous realities. There's a repetition/layering of information to the point of distortion that is central to the story in a way that feels connected to my making process.

There were multiple hands, heads and voices in the show — but no bodies. The two heads were cast from a 3D print of the Capitoline Wolf — a bronze sculpture depicting a she-wolf suckling the mythical twin founders of Rome, Romulus and Remus — removing her head from the body and the boys suckling from it. Her expression is somewhere between agonised and blank. This inscrutability is partly from the layers of mediation the face has gone through.

For *Plot of Land I and II* my Oma (grandmother) drew the different versions of the continents, first from memory then by tracing maps. Those drawings got vectorised, etched into Perspex and layered over each other. The jazz drumming I made for the video piece was an exercise in removing spontaneity from something linked to improvisation. It plays between chapters of text on screen, marking the changeover of the narrator. Each of the works in *Lathe of Heaven* had to grapple with a variety of processes whilst retaining traces of its former reality.

A recurring theme in your work is the distrust of systems of categorisation and a celebration of voices or characters that defy representation. Why are questions of identification—and their systems of control—such an important subject for you?

Some kinds of representation can be contingent on productivity or give something/someone a misleading fixity. I'm drawn to positions (in writing, or films or music or art) that are antagonistic to this, or at least ambivalent. In the work there's a desire to inhabit each format for that instance without being tied to it. I link this process to figuring out terms for being seen. I'm thinking now of self-reflexive cartoons where characters can escape by throwing a portable hole onto the floor.

In October 2020 you had a solo show at ArtLacuna called *Crypsis Pairing*. The show included ceramic sculptures alongside a specially made soundscape. Can you describe some of the central themes that informed the exhibition?

At first I was thinking of veiled communication, faulty signalling and threatening intimacy, particularly from the isolation of the first lockdown. Crypsis refers to methods animals use to elude predators or catch prey, and it covers a huge range of behaviours and modifications. I was researching predator-prey pairing, studies of pairs that co-evolve more and more elaborate forms of crypsis to out-do each other.

The impact of losing my mum in the summer turned me towards thinking of the barrier that grief can put up around you from others, and the sudden distance between yourself and the person you lost — a hunt for meaning from something moving further and further away, and a need to hide at the same time.

The physical works point towards connections that aren't quite made, or concealment that's inadequate, or touch that is sealed off. The sound piece Lottie Poulet and I made was binaural, for headphones. We wanted it to be an insular rather than shared experience, that shifted between intense closeness and distance. Matilda Moors wrote a text for the show that helped bring all those strands together. It helped to reframe my experiences through different reference points and processes, to make links outwards from it.

Working across mediums is something you do regularly in your practice, especially with audio and video. You have spoken before about the connection between the language of computer programs and metaphors for emotional states or the human body. How do these different areas overlap in a significant way for you?

While at the RA, a friend helped me get into making sound using Logic Pro X. I was trying to understand its interface and terminology without a lot of patience or musical training. You can drag in audio to a grid based on time signature. There's a regimented left-to-right timeline, and you can apply noise and distortion etc. I thought of physical sites of production where 'messy' matter is organised and bursts of disorder are factored in: the self-management needed to take part in social interactions, the agreed pressure releases. Noise is as familiar as signal and can be capitalised on in the same way – Robin James has written well about this in relation to EDM.

Your new commission for Bold Tendencies is called *Either or After/Sun Dogs*. Can you briefly describe the physical work and its different elements?

The work has three main components. The two double-faced reliefs are mounted on twisted and curved angle bar steel spines. Each spine has ribs bolted along its length. The ribs are railway sleepers similar to those already in the garden, chopped down. The reliefs are cast brass resin, brass being a cheap alloy metal compared unfavourably with gold. Some are grinning and others are mid-shout. The third component is a relief. Partial casts of a face are fixed in place with handfuls of concrete and scraps of crochet tablecloth. I changed the amount of pigment in each mix to emphasise its assembly in stages, creating a variety of grey shades. There's two offcuts of flat bar welded on, crudely approximating the angle bar of the two spines.

***Either or After/Sun Dogs* has a wealth of reference material including representations of the sun, celestial events and jester figures found in 16th century Nuremberg. Can you elaborate on this reference material and how it has informed your new work?**

I was researching trickery, illusion and warping, which says something about my feelings on the theme of Arcadia. I looked through 16th Century German imagery, searching for stories or representations of uncertainty or the inexplicable. A lot of the material falls within the German Renaissance period, around the time of the Reformation.

Till Eulenspiegel is a trickster figure from German folklore who leads people astray and plays humiliating pranks. In one story, he escapes punishment by tricking Nuremberg guards into following him across a broken bridge. There is a 1515 woodcut of the bridge with its broken slats — I saw it and thought of a boardwalk, split in two.

During my research, I was struck by an image of another woodcut made in 1561 for a broadsheet by Hans Glaser. It depicts an event witnessed by residents of Nuremberg that year — accounts of the sky filled with strange, rapidly moving objects. Parhelia (sun dogs or mock suns) is one explanation of the event — they are caused by sunlight refracted by ice crystals in the atmosphere. They appear as a pair of lights either side of the sun.

There's hubris in trying to piece together an event from multiple accounts, freezing rapid movement in a woodcut. The result is so odd. I thought about approaching the commission as a similar kind of endeavor. I found a few more woodcut illustrations of parhelia and the sun, personified as two partial faces flanking a whole one. These appealed to me as facets of a single persona and as decoys.

The work is installed within The Derek Jarman Garden — this was something you proposed early on in the process, and it was a decision that meant a lot to you. Why was it important to choose this location for the work?

I've never been to Dungeness. I've only ever watched videos and read about Derek Jarman's house and garden, so I have a second-hand knowledge of the place and what it might feel like to be there. The work within exists in a recreation of that

garden, which adds another layer of distance. Jarman described gardening as entering into another kind of time, maybe a temporary suspension from capitalist time, though dependent on it. After his death there was discussion about how to manage the garden – if it should be maintained to be as it was the day he died, the week after he died... These kinds of decisions are familiar to me at the moment. Gardening is an ambivalent act – it can be a ritual of care, of remembrance, of insular enclosure, of acceptance of change – making gardens places of tension.

How do you think about your new commission in relation to the Bold Tendencies 2021 programme theme of Arcadia?

The commission came from a distrustfulness – of representation, of fixing, of essentialist ideas of the natural. I linked the desire for Arcadia to the grieving process, of looking back in search of meaning and coming up short.

What have you got planned for the rest of the year – are there any special projects in the pipeline?

I'm planning to spend some time researching over the summer. Afterwards, I'm hoping to collaborate with fellow artists on some sound and performance experiments. That, and teaching.