**An interview with Lauren Gault**

**By Julie-Ann Delaney**

**1.Within each of the three galleries the Usher collection has been hung thematically - with rooms divided into works of Portraiture, Landscape and Still Life. Art now art isn't often discussed or exhibited under these kinds of umbrella titles, so how did you go about considering where your work might best sit?**

I think in this case, it was quite easy for me to decide as I had just found (and referenced) a *Still Life* work within some research I had undertaken on residency at a place called Cove Park in Helensburgh.

I haven’t explicitly referenced a painting within my work before, and so I was surprised that it was of interest to me. The work I was looking at, ‘*Still life with Cheeses, Almonds and Pretzels’,* (c. 1615) by Dutch artist Clara Peeters (b. 1594 – c. 1657, features a very small - almost hidden - self-portrait of the artists’ reflection in a beer jug lid.

 

 Clara Peeters, *Still life with Cheeses, Almonds and Pretzels’,* (c. 1615)

It really made me think about ‘painting as artefact’ and that somehow time was a much more fluid thing when looking at (and in this case being looked back at) a painting. It made me re-think what the position painting - and especially the *Still Life* genre - has to my own work.

This encounter also made me think about the importance that historic works have on my approach to making - especially within a genre that isn’t immediately recognised as being relevant to art now.

Overall though, the most interesting thing to me about the *Still Life* room is the palpable sense of the ‘missing figure’, or the action/intention behind the positioning of the objects. The action of the artist/individual who made the arrangement and how that is still so very visible. It is almost uncanny that the viewer stands in a similar position to the painter of the work. All these thoughts went into the making of a new work that in some way acted as an interface between the old and new works, between the Usher collection and me.

**2. You have made new work for the exhibition - how much has this been influenced by the works on display from the Usher Collection, or by the thematic of the room you are within?**

I began by thinking of the *Still Life* room as a ‘collection’, considering what brought these works together in the first place and how to address them as a whole. I was keen to reference some works individually - to pick out those that seemed to bear particular significance to the direction that my work was taking.

The printed tracing was very much influenced by those *Still Life* works which feature additional elements in their composition. I focused on – *Carnations* (Peter de Wint) *Still life with Parrot* (William Hilton) and *Roses Triumphant* (Anna Airy). These works all have components that really caught my attention– a fallen petal, a mirrored set-up, an animal caught in a still frame. The fallen petal for example can represent mortality and alludes to how ephemeral earthly objects can be. Egyptian tombs were said to contain *Still Life* works - present as a ‘slice of life’ that becomes real in the afterlife. The fallen petal and the animal seemed to me to make the works more animated in their stillness. I wanted to incorporate this approach in the making of the work, and to explore how could these actions might transfer into sculpture.

**4. Does the experience of exhibiting within the context of a collection - where the works of art span a range of periods, styles and materials - differ from working within a contemporary gallery space? If so, how?**

I use found objects and objects from particular periods in history in my work so I felt excited to be included alongside artworks from a variety of periods and contexts. I like the idea that in some way I can be part of this history, or part of the works new narrative. It’s exciting to be placed within this context as normally I select what objects are placed along side my work, it is the opposite in this case as they have been dictated to me.

It allows for new connections and associations to be made in unanticipated ways and I hope that it will open up new readings for both my work and the Usher Collection works on display. I like the idea that I can ‘step into’ a collection, which is really stepping into a period or periods of history. I am given the same platform or address as the historic works. This I hope encourages new interpretations of my work and vice versa.

**5. Can you tell us a bit about the materials and processed behind the production of the work?**

I began by looking at the composition of each work in the room, and thought about the very careful positioning behind each set-up. I was interested in that moment where a composition was decided on as finished.

As I mentioned before, the *Still Life* was supposed to be a slice of life, a way into knowing something about domestic life or otherwise; an experience of object, texture, and environment without actually experiencing it. I wanted to interrogate this moment of something being ‘finished’, and also try to suggest an inferred figure within the room.

To do this, I began by putting together my own compositions and making prints. I assembled glass, water, fallen petals, and gelatine and placed them directly onto the surface of a scanner. I then made over 50 scans of multiple set-ups, arrangements and lighting qualities. What is produced is a view of the objects from beneath - or a view ‘through’ the still life arrangement. I was interested in how this in some way revealed a little more about the works on display; their formation, how they came to be, the who, the why and the when.

This was further explored by the glass element that appears to spill or sink through the shelf like surface of the sculpture. This is the same glass as used in the scanned images. In the written description of the works that I was given from the Usher collection, the surfaces that the *Still Life* compositions rest on are described in great detail. I think this resonated with me and played a part in why I chose this approach.

I also placed some gelatine on the scanner surface that became wet and changed across the compositions. There was something about this material that I thought was bodily, ghostly, and capable of moving between forms (gelatine being able to jellify other materials!).

The ceramic at ground level is a hand built glazed ceramic, based on the internal carapace of a turtle shell. In ancient China, these were heated (like ceramics) and the consequent cracks that formed upon heating were interpreted, like a way of ‘divining’. These ‘oracle bones’ existed in China between the 11th and 14th century. Within the ceramic I engraved all the names of the artist in *the Still Life* room, including my own. It was a way to refer to the on-going histories or path or the works, existing as one as a ‘collection’ that in some way could reference the people and the works at the same time. I felt that the process of etching into the clay was like a reverse or dictated divination in some way.

I have also been interested in the relevance of water in this context. Like energy, no more is formed. Water being used today, is the same as that which kept our ancient ancestors or even the dinosaurs alive. It would have been present in each of the *Still Life* works and I wanted it to be physically present in the space. It sits within the ceramic on the floor, which acts like a vessel or vase. The etching on the inside of the ceramic is magnified and reflected by the water.

**The portraiture work**

This work was a very new and instinctive way of working for me. It happened quite late when I was trying to think of how an action or intention could be expressed within a material. How I could leave a trace and be somehow present.

I took some clay and used several pieces to record actions into parts of my body. In the end I made works that take on the form of my thigh, elbow, knee and a finger. All of the elements fit into each other like a Russian doll - so that a suite of actions and parts of my body can be recorded in one ‘thing’. They were made very quickly and involved a lot of movement. I basically disregarded everything I had learned about clay in terms of how you are meant to handle it.

I was interested in continuing the approach I had taken with the clay pieces with the laminated hair work. I started experimenting with different processes, for example using vacuum formers, laminators etc. in order to record a moment or action (to make something still).

I had been researching Victorian Mourning jewellery which contained material which had been worn by the dead person, as well as elements such as hair or miniature painted details. The idea was that these pieces were said to have carried or retained something of the person it represented. The laminated work was my interpretation of that idea (and also reflected the approach undertaken when making the clay works), however using a completely different process and materials.