

/FEATURES/INTERVIEW/

ANNE- MARIE CREAMER

by S.E. Barnett



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S E Barnett:

Let's start with your video 'Meeting the Pied Piper in Brasov'. You made that piece during a journey through Romania when you stopped in the city of Brasov and had an encounter with a group of dancing Hungarian Székey children. I know with that piece and a lot of the imagery in your other work - there's a lot of chance. There's a lot of engagement with the accidental, and I'm curious to know how you plan for the accidental in your work?

Anne-Marie Creamer:

That phrase is almost a contradiction in terms. I remember a few years ago I did a symposium in Ghent. Among the audience sat the theorist Thierry de Duve, and later he said to me 'there is a certain skill in coming across all this chance'. I'm aware that when I give talks on my work I recount details of chance within the production of the work; in 'The Prompter of Krumlov' it's finding the old mans coat, with the 'Ellipses' project it, it's finding the wedding rings in the cup of coffee, or my encounter with the dancing children in Transylvania.

It's to do with receptivity and being able to recognize in the moment that there is resonance to some encounters. You must remember that I started off as a painter but I think I always wanted to be a sort of storyteller. When I began to create time based work, the connection between my life and my work became

increasingly blurred, and that allowed me to create a much more fluid form for my work.

S. E. B:

That leads us directly to a question about the relationship between your artwork and your life. I'm going to go at this sideways; I think that might be more interesting. A lot of this work, in terms of art and life, has to do with 'not being at home' - being in another place. Being somewhere else than your home - how does that figure into your work?

A-M C:

It is something I've noticed has happened rather than something I prescribed in advance. Arguably the nucleus of it was when I was invited by the Union of Soviet Art Critics to do a tour through the USSR. It was in 1991 and I found myself travelling through the Soviet Union as it was collapsing. During that epic journey, people would tell me stories about their lives, partly because I was a willing listener but also because I was a stranger.

There was something about being a foreigner that I really enjoyed - it gave me mixed feelings of empathy and distance.

S. E. B:

That leads me to the question of language. What do you see as the relationship between image and text?

A-M C:

Text, literally as in the writing of a letter is very significant. If I give an example; in the piece 'Flying through Amber: the last wish of Vladimir Slapeta' I worked with the painter Andrew Grassie. Unbeknown to Andrew I began by writ-

ing him a letter in the voice of an elderly man who pleads him to make a painting of a room he remembers in his parent's house, now long gone. It's a very sad letter! From this I made an animation and an installation.

In the work 'Mikes Kelemen Returns to Transylvania' the writing of a letter effectively narrates the film. Mikes Kelemen was an historical figure, the Chamberlain to the last Prince of Transylvania in the eighteenth century. He was born in one of the small villages near to where I was staying in Transylvania. He ended up fleeing to a small place just outside Constantinople where he lived in exile for the rest of his life.

After his death, there were found two hundred un-posted letters, which he had written to an Aunt in Transylvania. In these letters he talks about his life, he jokes with her, and answers her questions. During attempts to return these letters to the family, it was revealed that this Aunt was completely fictitious. In the film you see a man's hand - Kelemen's - writing in Hungarian to his Aunt, telling her that by God's grace he has finally made it back to Transylvania and that he is looking for her.

I like the idea of an impossible return.

S. E. B:

Hang on a second, so the Aunt he was writing to was a fictional addressee he created?

A-M C:

Yes.

S. E. B:

And why do you suppose he did that?



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A-M C:
Perhaps the pain of never being able to return home was too terrible for him to deal directly with, and instead he invented this fictional Aunt. So by this displacement he could address his need in a way that was sustainable for him over many years. She became home. In my opinion, this invention is fascinating. I find it much more interesting than anything he says in the letters.

S. E. B:
And that happens a lot in your work. There is this very interesting co-mingling of facts and fiction. How important is it for you that the audience know this when they see the work?

A-M C:
I do try to tread a tight-rope whereby lots of things have an ambiguity to them about quite how grounded they are in fact or fiction. The area between the two is interesting to me. Even when you really might sincerely mean something it is tied up with mythology or fiction. I think the investment in an experience and the narration of it is complicated and always fascinating.

S. E. B:
Where does your work fit within the cinema, the theatre, the art gallery- does your work belong in the theatre, does it belong in the cinema, in terms of your use of poetic language?

A-M C:
I am interested in the space within the gallery; it allows me to spatialize narrative. I like the ways in which you can use a projected image, a painting,

or certain objects, and place them in relationship to one another so that the viewer is held within the space of that narrative.

There are possibilities in a gallery, certain conflicts and contradictions, which you take the viewer right into. Recently I've made thirty-seven watercolours that narrate the journey that I made to Transylvania where I encountered the dancing children. I would argue that these drawings could also be a film, in another form, a sort of impossible film that I can never make in practical terms. There is something about the structure of the Russian Doll which is an important analogy for me; it conjures the idea of nested narratives embedded within each other, like the form of a mise en abyme. So I could do a work, and a version of it could be a play, a series of watercolours, or a film, and these could all be inter-connected.

S. E. B:
And why this emphasis on the hand-made? It makes me think of the hand in the 'Mikes Kalem Returns' video.

A-M C:
Partly it's the physical act of pleasure in making things by hand. But there is this sense of authorship associated with the hand and of playing with a sense of who or where is the author in the work.

S. E. B:
Yes, I wonder where you are in your work - where is your authorship? And in relationship to this - whose stories are these?

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A-M C:
Great. There's only been one time so far, in a video I did with my sister about finding wedding rings for the 'Ellipses' project, when I've literally been in the frame of the work. But even then I was a tiny little figure, filmed in the distance. And that's about as far as I think I want to go in terms of me declaring myself at the centre of the work. Although, I do play with the fact that I am there, behind all the encounters I base my work on.

S. E. B:
Yes and in 'Meeting the Pied Piper', the camera is looking down at something, so 'somebody' is present and 'narrates' or sees, choosing to hold the camera that way. 'Somebody' is documenting these experiences and events.

A-M C:
I like the idea of being both present and absent at the same time. By subterfuge and displacement or via ciphers or characters I can be present in these multiple, different ways. If I had to be present in my work I would prefer that somebody acted me.

S. E. B:
It's almost as if you're manipulating these stories, which you then document.

A-M C: Yes that's true

S. E. B:
Like you're a documentary filmmaker of stories.

A-M C: Yes. I am conscious

of the setting up of stories; of creating them or noticing how they happen. There is significance in being a storyteller, because there is always a way in which you conjure or manipulate and invent. But it's always towards a try to create something that has a resonance to it. And for me that's absolutely ok.

S. E. B:
So what happens when the base of that story is some one else's story? If you take someone who's living, or has passed away as the basis for a work?

A-M C: Well Mikes Kelemen is a long time dead.

S. E. B:
But nonetheless this is your starting point.

A-M C:
Right now this question is becoming more of a concern. I am planning a new work in which I will present the life and times of the oldest person of a European city. But this person will be entirely fictitious. I intend to work with a range of people who live locally inviting them to collectively fantasize about what the contours of such a life might be through time. So it will be a sort of filmic exquisite corpse structure, and this in turn becomes a portrait of the place in which the work is made.

S. E. B:
But also this leads onto a representation of place, because in terms of your ethical concerns part of what I'm interested in is that you're moving these from oral story-telling to representations of stories that reflect a certain person or place and in that



way there's also a lot of movement back to language, like from Hungarian to English, and I'm just wondering how you contend with that?
Are you bringing stories from something to something, or are you taking stories from something to something else?

A-M C:
I'm not a multi-linguist so I've found people I can collaborate with or I've worked with translators. What's interesting are the mistakes, the elisions, the gaps in understanding between the speaker, the audience, and me because even as you and I are speaking to each other now, even if I was born in the same town as you, these gaps in understanding would still be there. And particularly in story telling, the gap between what's said and what's heard can become much more pronounced when you've got this added question of language. Even within the same family that can happen!
I think this is an inescapable part of being human. I'm not an anthropologist or a folklorist. Doing this as an artist suggests that my actions are authored. This is a vital difference for me.

If I really was an anthropologist the things you mention would be a real problem, but it's about something else.

S. E. B:
I'm curious about memory, especially in regards to storytelling because you touched on the notion of repeated storytelling and its relationship to slip-page and veracity. I'm interested in that. And I also have another question, that question is - is your

work nostalgic?

A-M C:
I'm glad you brought that word up. I am interested in nostalgia and I take it seriously.
In my work there are characters, often unseen, who want to return home and can't. I think of nostalgia not as this sentimental wistful thing but as something problematic and complicated, something to do with an infernal longing.

I'm less drawn to the making of nostalgia fixed and idealised. I'm drawn to something that can be explored, that can be speculative, something that can be a deadly dark infernal thing.

S. E. B:
It seems like we're back at the subject of psychoanalysis: that there's thwarted desire.

A-M C:
Yes. And it happens in different ways; at the level of the structure of the narrative, or of the condition of the protagonist, but also of the way image, media and representation interrelate. I am interested in the possibility of a certain kind of Romanticism and I am trying to understand what that might mean these days. But I am equally interested in mixing this with works that are full of paradoxes.

S. E. B:
Yes, because in terms of paradox the flip side of this is an idealisation. And I think you're spot on where you say it should be taken seriously.

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A-M C:
Nostalgia is a fiction as well. Like, where the hell is 'home' anyway? It always is a fiction you see, in life as well as art. I don't believe in absolute objectivity. I think it's nonsense. It's impossible. But I equally think that absolute subjectivity is equally impossible. The truth is this murky place somewhere in the middle.

S. E. B:
But you yourself have referred to the notion of playing with the audience, of 'what's true, what's real'. I mean we see it in cinema, which you generously call from, that 'this is a true story' and that brings a certain amount of power.

A-M C:
Yes. I know the relationship to a real thing or event is again suggestive of a certain authority. I play with those makers of belief. I remember as a ten-year-old child sitting with my maternal Grandmother in her house in Ireland and her bringing out from a cupboard a little relic that had a tiny scrap of clothing encased in a gold locket. With great reverence she explained to me that this was a fragment from the skirt of Saint Philomena. Then about a week or two later I was at my other Grandmother's house and she too went to a drawer and brought me out a similar locket. This apparently rare relic was suspiciously common. But I also suspected that my Grandmothers knew this too but I was struck by the

fact that it didn't really matter to them: the relic served as a conduit through which they could experience a sense of faith, and that was all that mattered. So right there at the heart of belief was also a knowing fiction - fictioning.

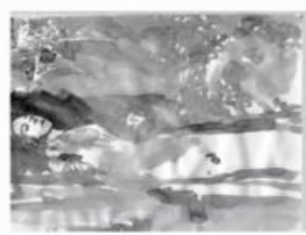
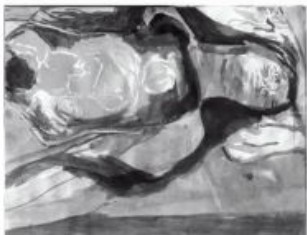
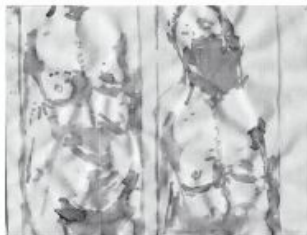
S. E. B:
That's a great word 'fictioning'. It begs the question, which was the object - the object or the story.

A-M C:
Exactly! And you know it's probably no accident that be it a drawing, a painting, a letter, or an actual encounter that you've got a definite apparent thing that gives a weight to the story you can build around it. Rather like the fragment of the skirt of Saint Philomena.

S. E. B:
That's a nice place to end it.

A-M C:
Yes, it is.

S. E. BARNET is an American artist currently living in London. She has previously published articles in Leonardo for MIT Press Leonardo, and was Assistant Professor for Fine Arts at Otis College of Art and Design. She is currently doing a Ph.D at Kingston University.
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IMAGES IN ORDER OF APPEARANCE:

Mikes Kelemen Returns to Transylvania
Video still.
B&W/ Colour Digital
video 12 minutes 30 seconds.
2006.
PAL 48 Mhz stereo sound
Filmed in Transylvania, Romania.

Meeting the Pied Piper in Brasov (x 2)
Video still
Single channel projected colour video
Digital PAL DVD, 48 mHz stereo sound
7 min duration, 2006
Filmed in Transylvania.
Supported by the Hargita Cultural Center, Romania

Amnesia, 38, from drawing series.
ink or watercolour on paper
12 x 10 inches.
2001

The Prompter of Krumlov
Video still
SINGLE CHANNEL PROJECTED COLOUR DIGITAL PAL DVD, 48 mHz stereo sound.
11 mins 44 seconds duration.
2009
Starring Michal Pechoucek

The Fabulous Fox 15, from series. (Detail) X 2
Digital C prints, 2008
33 x 24 inches
2008

Amnesia (Detail)
stills sheet.
Single channel projected colour animation
Digital PAL DVD, 48 mHz stereo sound.
8 min duration, 2001
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British artist ANNE-MARIE CREAMER'S videos, drawings and paintings have often centred on the existence of artefacts or chance encounters, such as the 200 letters Transylvanian exile Mikes Kelemen wrote to his fictitious aunt in the 18th century, her encounter with a group of dancing Székey children in Romania, finding wedding rings in a cup of coffee on a train at Paddington station or an old coat in an abandoned apartment in Bohemia, and procuring the small painting that the fictitious Vladimir Slapeta commissioned from painter Andrew Grassie. Her art practice is centred on taking an exploratory and experimental approach to narrative and storytelling, where such encounters are combined into reflexive and deceptively simple tales. Keenly interested in the possibilities of a transcriptive arts practice, her films and drawings often feature stories nested within other larger stories, forming a mise-en-abyme structure connected across mediums and formats, within which her drawings can appear in her films or installations in surprising ways, sometimes featuring as an animated sequence, a still, a spatial device, a found object, or an un-realised film.

LINK: www.amcreamer.net

