

INTERVIEW WITH VAPPU VABAR

VV Say a few words about your background as an artist. Where did you study? Anything you specialised in?

MH From 1984-87, I trained as a sculptor at Falmouth School of Art followed by a Master's degree at Chelsea School of Art, London. In 1990 I was awarded a Scholarship in sculpture at the British School at Rome, Italy.

VV When did you come in contact with Eastern Europe? Was it easier to make an exhibition (and find a studio) in Prague, than in England?

MH My first contact with Eastern Europe was in 1992 when I decided to live in Czechoslovakia at a critical time in its history when the country was about to separate, simultaneously struggling with its property restitution laws and a rapidly changing economy. As a result, it was extremely difficult to find studio space in Prague. Eventually I negotiated a studio at the Academy for Fine and Applied Arts in return for teaching English to the sculpture department. Exhibiting in Prague was equally problematic. Several commercial galleries showed interest in my work, spent hours discussing exhibition details and then failed to finalise dates.

However a panel of leading artists and critics selected my work for an exhibition in 1994 at one of the main state galleries in Prague, Nová Sín. Financing the exhibition was both time consuming and frustrating. After writing over 100 letters to possible sponsors, I received a grant from the British Council and support from Adco Travel, the first company to open regular bus routes between London and Prague. Many people, both in England and the Czech Republic, were involved in its installation. I found the greatest reward in exhibiting there was the opportunity to express my ideas and feelings about living in Prague in a visual form after frustrating months of inadequate verbal communication.

VV Why did you decide to make an exhibition in Estonia?

MH I was invited by the Sammas Gallery to exhibit recent sculpture from London and I was curious to visit Estonia after my experiences in the Czech Republic. I wanted to compare the lifestyle and attitudes of a people, again at a significant moment in its history (living in a country that was formerly a member of the Soviet Union as opposed to a satellite state)

and one like the Czech Republic that has kept its identity through numerous foreign occupations. I wanted to see if Estonian artists' work differed or dealt with similar problems as that of Western artists and to see how they survived personally with the rapid social and political changes.

VV Would you call yourself an artist who makes feminist art?

MH I find the word 'feminist' difficult to define and would need to know what you meant by the word. For me, feminism means equality, equal recognition and participation for women. I am not interested in working specifically about women's issues. However as I make sculpture that is concerned with society's attitude to the body, I will obviously lean towards my own experience. If you are asking me if I am involved in feminist theory, I can only say that I am aware of gender issues but I prefer to let my work articulate this in a non-textual fashion.

VV Do you have any special interest in cloth and artificial fur or do you simply find these the most suitable material for expressing your kind of ideas?

MH I have always been fascinated with the surface texture and tactility in sculpture. Previously I would manufacture the surfaces myself, until I found that it was more appropriate for me to choose ready-made materials that were the exact colour, texture and sheen that I needed. I twist, knot, force and bind material into the desired form. I use these physical actions to refer to the social constraints on individuals, either self-induced censorship, or the psychological manipulation and power struggles of family, relationships, religion and the media.

For me, materials have a strong emotive power, whether the sensuality and allure of velvet or satin, the warmth or repulsion of fur, the discomfort and displeasure of nylon, or the clinicized restraint of rubber. Combinations of materials evoke class, gender and age differences. They contradict or clarify an emotional, sexual or poetic response. Each time I choose a material, I am aware of its connotation but seldom know at that stage why I am using it. From my initial intuition, my reasons become clear whilst I am making the piece, or even afterwards.

For example, 'Zhirinovsky twirling an expensive brassiere on his finger proclaimed that he would give cheap underwear to each and every constituent who voted for him.' This piece started with my fascination with the outsize underwear department store in Prague. It was the first time that I had used clothing rather than cloth. It gave me the possibility to refer to one's fears and underlying discomfort with one's body image (desire for youth and healthiness) and the pathos of overt and managed

Another example of the emotive power of materials was a piece entitled 'Help Yourself,' again exhibited in Prague. It consisted of a series of golden satin sacks filled with coal which was coated with a thin layer of chocolate. The work referred to the festival of St Nicholas when children are thrown into a coal sack if they have been naughty that past year or given chocolates if they have been well behaved. This time I was surprised by the response. I used chocolate to disguise the coal, to disappoint the viewer with its lack of sumptuousness, but found that the audience were more disappointed with their coal being ruined by the chocolate, except the kids of course.

VV What were you working on before the Prague and Tallinn exhibitions? Have you made any 'traditional' sculpture?

MH I have never been interested in carving stone or wood, nor modelling figures in clay. My method of working has always involved constructing objects through the combination of often incompatible materials rather than reducing a block of inert matter to reveal its inner life. Also, I found that my figurative work left little to the imagination and had no sense of intrigue. I was never truly satisfied with the result.

VV How many exhibitions have you made in all? Just name some other interesting projects and perhaps you could describe the ones you've enjoyed most.

MH I have had solo exhibitions in Antwerp, Prague and now in Tallinn and have exhibited in ten or more group shows. My first major exhibition was during my final year at Falmouth School of Art. I entered a national competition called TSWA3D which was showing ten site-specific works around Britain. My site was the Arnolfini Gallery in Bristol and the brief was to make an installation for visually impaired people. I made a hand-rail that lead the audience along a trail of tactile books and chairs that shocked, soothed and tantalised the hand. During this exhibition I realised how important one's other senses were, other than the visual, when appreciating sculpture.

Another exhibition I enjoyed very much was called 'Moment to Moment' at the Cambridge Darkroom in 1990. Walking around a pile of fur heaped onto the floor, the viewer discovered a video monitor showing close-ups of a woman's body breathing. Through combining these materials I aimed to suggest a lack of trust and intimacy between people and to emphasise the pain and suffering we are prepared to inflict on others.

During my scholarship in Rome, I made two installations. One was called 'Sow's Ear,' a series of satin bags filled with plaster and tied up with leaded rope. There were 300 in total, nailed onto the arched colonnade of the British School. They looked like dried fruit, cheeses or even punch bags. I

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wanted to suggest abandoned human activity; something that was once fertile and alluring that had been soured and polluted. The title came from an English proverb, that you can't make a silk purse out of a sow's ear.

Another piece I started in Rome but only finalised in Prague was a cat-o-nine tail whip. It was made out of copper tubing flowing in and out of the wall. On the end of each 'thong' was an eye made from plaster with a religious pendant inserted as the pupil. Each eye was surrounded by a cat's tail. I took the pendants from a religious supermarket where I discovered nuns piling religious nick-knacks into trolleys. The cats' tails came from a market where redundant fur from the clothing industry was sold to make key rings, etc. I wanted each eye to tell a story and to reflect our guilt and self-censorship which culminates in a web of farcical false representations and facades.

VV What new projects do you have in mind for the future? Are you intending on exhibiting in Tallinn or Estonia again?

MH At present I am working on a life-size cloak made entirely of woven peacock feathers. The Saaremaa Biennial 'Fabrique d'Histoire' has inspired me to use video/slide projection again and I am now considering combining the cloak with time-based media.

I would love to show in Estonia again. I met many interesting artists during my visit with whom I want to stay in contact, and I enjoyed making the piece 'Implant' in Tallinn rather than just bringing work from London. There is a possible exhibition being organised in Paldiski next year which I would really like to be involved in. If possible I would like to organise an exchange between Estonian and British artists to further develop links between the two countries.

Miranda Housden

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