





# Clare Jarrett

## The Sorting Table

The Cut, Halesworth, Suffolk IP19 8BY

1st July - 14th Aug 2021

**Catalogue essay by Lynne Bryan** (scanned 12/25)

**7 Pages** (after this one)



## Surfacing

May 2021, the Covid restrictions are easing, and I'm able to meet with Clare in her studio to discuss her work for her forthcoming show at The Cut in Halesworth, Suffolk. Clare's studio is new to her and even newer to me. It looks like a squashed and stretched garage from the outside. Inside, it's roomy and cold and bright. There are two floors, each of them busy with materials and works-in-progress. On the ground floor are stacked and falling boxes, textile pieces - made from a thick cream canvas that Clare has stitched and in places padded - hanging from the walls, and under these a staggered shelving arrangement, comprised of planks. On and around the planks are casts of small objects - I can see apples and children's toys, a handbag, a padded bra, a pair of long, thin shoes like clown shoes - in browns and yellows, greens and greys. Clare tells me that they've been cast in Jesmonite, a material she came across recently at a sculpture workshop in London. It's acrylic, resin, expensive, she says, but I like the feel of it, the weight.

It looks sort of flattened, I say, matt.

You can polish it up with beeswax, Clare says.

I stare at the objects.

I'm liking the disorder, I add. All this jumble.

You are? Good, she says.

I nod. Yes, I'm liking the disorder and the sense I'm getting of these items being in a state of flux. I'm reminded of an archaeological dig that I was once lucky enough to be shown around in Western Macedonia, Greece. The dig was enormous, on an industrial scale, investigating several prehistoric wetland settlements. What I remember most about this dig was standing inside a massive covered area where the archaeologists and their helpers were sorting through the finds. It felt like chaos. There were tables and rudimentary shelves covered in objects which had just been excavated from the dry, grey earth. These objects were waiting to be dusted and cleaned and labelled. There were pots and fragments of pots and bones and grave goods and deities and grinding stones and jewellery and clay tablets scratched with proto-writing. I mention the dig to Clare. She tells me that her casts are less about something being buried than unearthed and more about something surfacing, although she's not sure what.



They're definitely in limbo, she says. Definitely. And they're waiting to be sorted too. Here...

She hands me the clown shoes. They've been cast lolling side-by-side on what might've been a piece of pavement, or a board. Two ridiculously shaped loafers, all detail visible: the elastic side strips, the stitching, the patterning in the leather. I imagine their owner bare-footed, wandering aimlessly somewhere.

Where did these come from? I ask.

Jamie found them. He just found them on the street in Wood Green, North London, Clare says. Then, that handbag, there, well, Catherine gave me the handbag; she brought it back from China where she was working for a while. And the comb, Catherine brought that back from Africa. The small shoes are Maddy's from when she was four. The doll was mine. So, all family things. The apples are from our garden. I think of the apples as Covid apples. I picked the apples in autumn and now they're wonderfully rotten and I've cast them like this. I think there's something wonderful about the apples lasting until this point, like we've lasted. There's something going on about time... Mainly I've taken things from the past and made them into something that's about the present, about now. It's funny, once I've preserved these things, I don't feel the need to keep them anymore. I've preserved them away from myself, if that makes any sense, out and away from myself.

A discarding, I say.

Mmm, Clare says.

Upstairs, along one wall is another shelving arrangement covered with another load of casts. These aren't as various; they're all of one side of Clare's face. I can see an ear and a nostril and pores in the skin and wrinkles. In most Clare is wearing a woollen hat which the Jesmonite has transformed into something pitted and bandage-like. The hat seems both solid and crumbling, Clare's face too. The work is unflinching and honest, no vanity. In some of the casts Clare's fingers are crawling out; they're bent, clutching. Clare describes the process of making the casts; there's the Jesmonite, and plaster is required



also. She describes being worried about not being able to breathe and how she started covering her hair to prevent the plaster from melding with it. We continue to talk, our words jotting about. Clare then mentions the gallery space in The Cut which is long and thin and divided by hefty metal support beams and struts. She visited the space last week to think about how she should present her work in it. The beams dominate, she says.

She takes her phone from her pocket and clicks onto an image.

I'm not sure if any of this work is right for it.

She hands me the phone.

Scroll that way, she says.

I see the casts placed on what look like scaffolding boards arranged on the gallery floor. Then, behind them, is a textile piece that I recognise, which Clare and I discussed a while ago now. I remember writing in an email something like: 'It makes me think of the body - ribs. Then the netting - makes me think dead bride.'

It's hard to tell whether they go together, I say to Clare, whether the textiles should be presented with the casts, or whether they're actually different kinds of work and should be kept for different shows.

I know, Clare says. I could divide the space into sections. I'm thinking about that. I'll have to visit there again, keep trying things out.

In a later sequence of images, in the foreground, there's a new textile piece which is like a colourful squiggle drawn in the air.

I like the squiggle, I say, suddenly realising that it – or a version of it - is not that far from me, hanging from a hook in the studio ceiling.

Armature wire covered in sari fabric, Clare says.

Clare is both an artist and a writer. She studied at Chelsea School of Art and the Royal College of Art, where she later taught drawing. In the 1980s, she moved from London to initiate the BA Illustration course at the Norwich School of Art. She's exhibited internationally, and her works are in various museums and collections. She's also the author and illustrator of five children's books, and was awarded a Hawthornden writing fellowship. Clare and I met through



writing and, in 2014, the literary organisation Words & Women, which I ran with the writer Belona Greenwood, commissioned Clare to make a piece for a Chelsea Flower Show Fringe event we were holding in the Plantation Garden, Norwich. The garden is Victorian, small, with dramatic Italianate steps at one end. Clare decided to hang sari lengths in sections from the top of these steps to the bottom, a drop of 18 metres. The result looked like an enormous bright painting. This was the first time Clare used clothing in her work, and it led to a further commission: *Sari Garden*, selected for the 8th Edition of Sculpture in the City, London, 2018.

I love the colours, I say to Clare as we sit facing the squiggle. I love the shape. It's like an open mad cloud, like a diagram, a message. The colours are brave.

Fluorescent orange, red, pink and purple. There's a stretch of the orange which then meets with the red which runs for another stretch before it meets with the pink, and on and on. The fabric-covered wire is twisted and looped and the colours run against each other, out from each other. It's quite joyous.

I might call it *Scribble*, says Clare.

She tells me that trips made to India, by herself in 1979 and with her husband, the photographer Patrick Sutherland, to Spiti in North India, in 2017 and 2018, influenced this work. Also, the German-born American artist Eva Hesse (b.1936 – d.1970) who created sculptures with unusual materials such as rubber tubing, fibreglass, resin, cord, cloth, and wire. The artist Brice Marden (b.1938) too.

I love his paintings, says Clare. I saw an exhibition of his work at The Serpentine. He's been an important, distant, in-the-background painter for me. He gave me permission to scribble. I mean, not only him but...

Clare jumps up from her seat.

I've just thought of something, she says, beginning to move her arms and hands in a very precise way as if she's drawing a shape in the air, flattened sides, a box, no... a circle. I do this in Tai Chi. It's called Cloud Hands. Your linking *Scribble* to a cloud is making me see... Well, here's another thing: *The Cloud of Unknowing*. Have you heard of it? It's a book, a text from the Medieval period. It's about allowing yourself to surrender to the chaos of not knowing because something may come out of it. That's how I approach my work, definitely, yes.



She sits back down. And we are quiet for a while, me wondering whether Clare's thinking what I'm thinking: that not knowing is an important part of the writing process too. The Australian author David Malouf believes that writers have to be very aware of what they are doing but also unaware in order for the work to determine itself. The Irish novelist and short story writer William Trevor stressed the importance of curiosity and bewilderment. The American novelist EL Doctorow described writing as driving a car at night with only the headlights on for guidance but - no worries - because it's possible to make the whole journey this way.

Clare's exhibition at The Cut was scheduled for last year but the pandemic meant it had to be postponed until this July. Clare's found the delay, combined with the move into this studio, intense and fruitful. She holds up a long, narrow stretch of linen hand-embroidered with the dates and times of the many Zoom meetings she had in 2020.

*Zoom Archive*, she says. I made it for the Sainsbury Centre, their Artists' Programme. I used a different coloured thread for each meeting.

Another female artist prompted this work: Lorina Bulwer (b.1838 – d.1912), who was declared a lunatic at the age of 55 and placed in a workhouse in Great Yarmouth, Norfolk, where she had to unpick oakum – tarred rope - for 10 hours a day. The incarcerated Bulwer produced long, embroidered texts on cotton expressing her anger at the way her life had turned out. Her words are all uppercase and run on from each other with little spacing and no punctuation. They resonate with her character and her pain.

I enjoy sewing, Clare tells me. I like sitting quietly, just doing it. It's domestic. It's contemplative. It's work that I've been able to do, during lockdown, while the family's been around.

She stitches more of her sari tubing for *Scribble*. She does this on her sewing machine which is far from quiet. I drink tea as she stitches, surrounded by the noise which reminds me of the noise that filled the kitchen in my childhood home where my mother did piecework, stitching lace onto and elastic into knickers for Marks and Spencer. Clare produces a new tube, beginning to turn



it from the outside in so the thread line is hidden. This is hard to do, and as she tugs and eases the fabric we talk some more. We talk about what it is like to be female, to be daughters and mothers, generating and nurturing family. We talk about how our own creative practices were turned to a low simmer for a good decade or more as we attended to the needs of others. We talk about how glad we are that our children are older now, that we've not had to experience a lockdown crammed with the additional responsibility of teaching them and keeping them buoyant, entertained. We talk about how family life has made us feel both rich and vanished too, somehow. Clare says she is reading the American writer Rebecca Solnit's *Recollections of my Non-Existence*. We laugh at the title. It's about the importance of freedom for women, Clare tells me. The importance of escape.

We're escaping at this precise moment through our conversation in Clare's squashed and stretched studio. It feels good.

Clare has one last piece she wants to show me. It's in a see-through bag. A string of what looks like organs made from a creamy-white cloth, knotted and padded.

Last year, I planned to hang them up in The Cut like a fat thread but then the show didn't happen, she says, and I had to store them somewhere and I put them in this bag and, actually, I like them in the bag. I think the bag is now part of it.

I tell her I'm reminded of a photo of Tracy Emin (b.1963), which accompanied a feature about the artist in *The Guardian* recently. Emin is recovering from aggressive bladder cancer and the photo is a selfie she took in the hospital mirror after her radical surgery to cut out the disease. Emin's naked and from her stomach hang two bags which capture her waste. Apparently, according to the feature, she will have to have these bags attached to her for the rest of her life. But Emin is bullish. She declares herself to be the happiest she's ever been because there were things she was scared of, that she's not scared of anymore.



I am finding it hard to leave. As I edge towards the door, which will take me from Clare's studio out into the big wide world, is a cast of Covid apples. The apples are nestled and perishing inside a box. They look like sad little breasts, wizened cushions. Yet, they're in the brightest, garish yellow. This small piece is as weirdly joyous as *Scribble*. Its form resembles that of the bagged organs. Its colour reminiscent of a sari.

Making, Clare then says, I just love making, Lynne. I love materials, not only feminine materials but all kinds. I can't be bored. I have this compulsion. I have to be inventive.

I look right and left again, before crossing the road and walking down the steep hill into the city. So many masked faces. So much shuffling and stepping to one side. So much compromised life.

I imagine Clare back at the sewing machine, hunched over her fabric, allowing the work to come out from it, making one thing from another thing, intent.

Lynne Bryan  
Norwich June 2021

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