



An artwork in context

To celebrate the launch of Monument, Spot On facilitated a socially distanced conversation between artist Elliott Flanagan and Debbi Lander. Debbi is an international curator of digital art and currently directing Lancashire's bid to become UK City of Culture in 2025.



Debbi: When did you start practicing?

Elliott: Officially 2017. I had quite a checkered history to get to this point. When I left school, I quickly got into work and was in sales and I always had this ambition to be creative and to be an artist but life is what happens when you're busy making other plans. Eventually I got to a point where I thought 'if I don't do this now, I'll never do it' and I went to art school.

You're from Burnley. In terms of the culture when you were growing up - would that have made it easy to think about being an artist

This is something that I discuss in my work a lot. It's similar to what Spot On Rural Touring does, which is giving people who don't have easy access to art the opportunities to immerse themselves into creativity and theatre. Burnley's a very working class town so there wasn't much access to visual and conceptual arts. Another thing that I discuss in my work is masculinity. There's an archetype of what a man should be, certainly in my generation and growing up in the town that I lived in. Anything to do with the arts is seen as 'not masculine'. These were ideas that were always around me but I had this other life for myself where I was exploring the visual arts. I was very interested in music and fashion as well as things that I'd share with my friends like football but it was something that for a long time I kept to myself. I think I'm becoming truer to that artist side of me with every project I do. It wasn't the usual journey but I'm glad I had that time before 2017 where [I acquired] this bank of experiences that I can look back on when I'm making work which is an advantage for me I think.

Do you think that your background has a particular slant on how you make work and what you make work about?

Definitely. Burnley is so much a part of my identity. It's definitely this central tenet in my work and something that I always go back to.

What struck me when I was looking at your new work that you made for Spot On was that it fits into a long tradition of quite abstract gallery based work and it's really imbued with a deep social conscience which is more akin to socially engaged practice. That says to me that you aren't from a middle class background but I don't know if I should assume that?

It's a good point. One of my early influences was 'kitchen sink' writing; films like Saturday Night Sunday morning, and Alan Sillitoe. I recognised things in that from my background. My work is imbued with that. This work is very much a step forward visually and the monologue that's at the forefront of the work is something I've not done in the past. I'm not political in my work but it is part of my personality. I do have my beliefs. With my work, I'm trying to be more uninhibited. Many artists seem to be using a lot of art theory and I don't see anything of them in their work. I think it's brave for artists to be uninhibited and have themselves in the

work. I didn't do that and I'm trying to do that more and more. That's where you can probably pick up on my background and my beliefs about things

When you took on this commission we weren't in Covid or were we?

No. When it was advertised Covid was not on the horizon and then when I got it, it was just something that was emerging on the news. The commission was about using the 25 year archive as a starting point but it had to be about Covid-19 and about lockdown because I was so hampered by it. You've got to be flexible and adaptable and move with change and you've got to soak up that change and represent that in the work. Particularly something like this that's so seismic for not just us but for everyone. It's a global thing.

What has been the major impact in terms of the work you actually did make?

The work was only going to be community driven and about people.

There aren't any people in it?

It's representing the isolation that we feel and certainly at that time of lockdown, the sudden cut-off from all these things that we take for granted like intimacy - that closeness and communal thing. I could only film during my daily exercise. Luckily for me, Burnley is quite rural. That feeds back into the rural communities that Spot On Rural Touring used to invest in. I was working from home. I never had the tangible archive there in front of me. It was about moving with the times and the work reflecting that. It does include images from the archive that represent the pre-pandemic lockdown. That dialogue between a place, the community and artists has been cut off. Those archive images represent that. Isolation, a sense of loss and grief are part of the lockdown experience. But also that reconnection with nature that maybe we all felt during that time. It was the arrival of spring - cherry blossom - things we've always taken for granted. A moment of stillness to look around at nature to see what was going on.

This commission was based on the archive. How did you use it as a source of inspiration?

I visited Spot On and looked at the archive and what really stood out for me were photographs from a show from 2000. The story of charlatan clairvoyants who toured rural

areas during WW1 and took advantage of people who had lost their relatives in combat. It was one photo that captivated me.

Is this a photo that you actually had in your hand? You touched that one.

Archives are tangible - there's something very romantic about them.

And you have that sort of connection with the time?

The photograph is mid-bow and the actors are receiving this generous response from the audience. It's very much the essence of what we're talking about. It's a very intimate setting and you've got this burnt orange light that saturates the photograph and you can see this outline of the crowd. It's a perfect moment really and I thought that was a really good place to start. For me it was the essence of being together and sharing things, the dialogue between artist/performers and the community in a tiny little place. That was the starting point. The venue was Churchtown in a rural part of Lancashire I've never even been to and the intention was always to go there, speak to people and soak up the community. But the way it's turned out, I couldn't be happier with it.

It's one of those fortuitous things. This idea of lost community out of root. Obviously that's very pertinent. Rural communities in this year of disconnection.

It works both ways. These rural communities haven't had access to the arts and at the same time, particularly in this era of lockdown, they're more cut off than ever so there is that strong sense of isolation and that's something that's explored in the work. That's in the monologue.

My favourite line "We're all stashed away". It's incredibly powerful and has many layers in terms of what you've just been talking about.

Yeah. Everything's put on hold - relationships - I talk about family, friends and lovers and being together which we need. We can't do all these things that we've taken for granted. I think that these are things that are essential to who we are and a lot of us - the majority have never experienced anything like this so it would be remiss of me not to include that in the work. The work ultimately is positive because at the end it says we'll be together again and we will.

That brings me to the wonderful positivity of the amazing colours that you work with in this project. Was that a conscious decision?

It came out of this everyday ritual of exercise. I would go out and film. I wanted it to be something that was abstract and you want the viewer to work a little bit as well. You don't want to make things too easy for them. The stuff that I filmed and the photographs from the archive, I manipulated. I wanted these colours to be strong, to be vibrant and that came from experimenting with the images. Not just taking the image at face value. Landscapes and things can be stunning and beautiful but I wanted to capture them in a different way.

It's set in spring /summer but this is Lancashire and it's quite grey most of the time.

I wanted the work to be positive because ultimately, that's what I am as a person. As I say, I'm trying to show more of myself in my work. People don't need telling how bad things are - it's tough out there with lockdown and a recession and things. This work is about escape - soaking up everything that's going on. It's like escaping for five minutes and stepping into something that's immersive and is of both this world and another world

That's one of the best statements I've ever heard by an artist. The idea that in a way your role is to tell people that it can be great - it is positive - it's fantastic.

It's giving people the opportunity to escape.

There's three elements, the visuals, the monologue and the music. I've collaborated with a couple of musicians, William Brown and Ashley Snook. They are emerging together as a duo doing soundscapes and things. Again, that was a really interesting way of working because they said send me words and we'll react to them in the music. I made a playlist of things I was thinking about but it was very important that they made their mark in this soundscape. They both experimented. They reacted to these words and we sent tracks back and forth, speaking on Zoom and via email. I enjoyed seeing their reactions to things I was telling them. The soundscape, the music, came together really well.

So was the score changed after the visuals? Are you saying it was generated from the monologue or?

I'd only given them words and a feel of how I wanted it to be. I'd given them some very rough footage of things that I'd filmed but it was raw footage. It didn't look like it does in the film. The whole point of the first part of the commission was all about gathering things: looking at

the archive; writing and interviews. I spoke to some of the main protagonists from the show and from Spot On Rural Touring. I wanted to be an expert, or certainly know what rural touring was about. The second half was about editing, having the monologue and having that fit together with the music and the visuals. It was like putting a jigsaw together. When I had that framework of what it was going to be I edited it again.

Monument - the title. Where does that come from? Is it a real place to visit?

It's not a particular monument but it has these dual meanings. You often get monuments in villages where rural touring happens. In a village, it's part of the community, just as the post office and the people are. It's a constant. You've got monuments that commemorate the first world war, which relates to the production photograph from 2000. So it works on that level. As much as you get people commemorating the fallen you get young people having their first drink at the monument. Spot On is this monument at the moment - on pause - It's a monument to what we did pre-lockdown. We'd come together, we'd share memories. The idea of a production and being together and sharing this intimacy of theatre experience is on hold. It's not a reality at the moment.

So let's talk about how it's going to be presented. I understand that it's going to go online but it was previously planned to tour to libraries and village halls

Yes, it was going to tour but obviously, because of the current climate, it can't do that yet so it's going to be online. It will be accessible on the Spot On website and via my own website. I'm hoping it does have a life beyond this. When I was making the work I imagined the visuals as being giant and in a space. I always imagine my work in a space. I can see the visuals as large and the sound enveloping visitors. That's something that I'd definitely like to explore with it in the future.

It feels as though the work is made to be large. But people are going to be looking at it on laptops, mobiles and tablets. I wonder what your thoughts are about that and whether there is a sense of wanting to adapt it for mobiles specifically. Could it be done or is it even desirable?

I want it to reach a wide audience. I want it to be inclusive. I want it to reach as many people as possible so if that is via a mobile phone or via a tablet then that's fine. Obviously I would prefer it to be in a space but the way people access art is changing. When you're working in a moving image, you do have that benefit that that work can exist on a tv screen and a

tablet. For a painting, you want to be face to face across from it - that's where you can have that dialogue with the work. That's the benefit of working with moving images I think.

Can we talk about the audience? I understand that it was commissioned for an audience in Lancashire as it's primary destination. It's a pretty universal piece of work. It's quite interesting really because it is about locality but it's not specific to here.

I didn't want to make work that was specific to a certain place. I think Lancashire is in my blood and in my bones so it will be there in the work. I think you can limit yourself when you think about a specific audience. Art is all about travel and immersing yourself and experiencing cultures and being open to it. Whenever I think about my work I don't necessarily think about the region or England. I think this is an experience that I want everyone to share. I didn't necessarily need to think about whether this would be specific to people in Burnley or Lancashire. You can easily box yourself in. Last year was a good year for travelling, and that's how I see being an artist. I worked in Venice, I worked in Germany and I never thought I was making work specifically for Germans, it's for all of us.

Some artists come from a place where they are very conscious of the experience they want the spectator or the viewer to have. Where are you on that spectrum? You mentioned that you like people to work a bit.

Not dumbing ideas down. Treating people with respect. The great thing about art is that an artist can make a piece of work and describe the meanings but someone approaching that work - it will mean something different to them. Your work has got to be open to that sort of different interpretation because that's what gives it life. Something that strikes a chord. The work I make is for a wide audience. It's as inclusive as possible for people. It's to communicate with as many people as possible. The artists, writers and musicians that I admire share those ideas.

It's in the eye of the beholder isn't it? But the role of the work is less of an invitation, it's giving people a point of view or a way of perceiving. From my interpretation, because I've been living in a flat on my own for quite a few months. My experience has been looking out of the window. That sense of a reflection of time - that's how it works on me. Was that in your interpretation or is that just my experience?

I think that the work is open and it's there for you to embrace. I want the work to be inclusive and if you go to the work with your baggage and experience of things that's fine. There is no right way of feeling or understanding. Go to this work and what you get out of it will be personal to you really. It's not preaching to you.

As a viewer of the work on a TV and my phone, what I really appreciated was that it reminded me that what I am feeling or going through - other people are too. In that sense it achieved the goal of a shared experience. The piece gave me a considerable amount of comfort and a reminder that life isn't normally like this.

Thank you very much for illuminating me personally but hopefully people who are going to be seeing your work. It was delightful.