

Susan Francis is an artist who works in sculpture, installation and video. Her early themes focused on excavating the emotional life of families from the perspective of the individual. Her careful nuanced pieces explore the detail of the myriad emotional upsets that take place daily within the domestic and family scenario, distilling significant moments with intense effect. Her work is based on the notion of uncovering the deliberately hidden, constantly seeking some aspect of authenticity and therefore a semblance of truth behind the outward show. For example, in *Polly Wolly Doodle*, two girls play pass the parcel, unwrapping layer after layer of newspaper, anticipating the mysterious heart but taking forever to reach it. They find that it's a pair of shoemaker's lasts, to their bewilderment and disappointment; a denouement the viewer can empathise with.

Words and text fragments play an important role, contributing to the narrative nature of her film work and often functioning as a framing device in both film and within her installations. Her titles are powerful indicators of the subject matter, for example, *The Truth about Bob and Pat*, *The Loaded Gesture*, and *Palace of Sham*.

Originally from Northern Ireland, the church, or elements of religiosity, are often present in the work, which makes use of symbolism, ritual and occasional liturgical music never an overt theme, it provides some of the flavour that makes Francis' work distinctive.

In May 2014, she talked to writer Dany Louise about the development of her practice and her current projects.

DL: Can you describe how the themes in your work developed?

I left college in 1989, and was very active as an artist after that, but then I took a long break while I had my family. When I picked up my practice again in 2009, after having four children, I was awarded an Arts Council England lottery grant which enabled me to explore new media. I focused on the environment at night. The night takes on a different form when you have children. You spend hours awake alone while the rest of the world sleeps, in a sense night becomes an entirely new visual and psychological world and this interested me.

The first work I did was *Night Vision*. I was inspired by an old quote from Thomas Tryon in 1691: "Let the night teach us what we are, and the day what we should be." I went to see a number of women of all ages and backgrounds, and asked them very open questions about what came up when they thought about the night. What did it mean to them? They often hadn't told people these things before and I literally let the camera run as they answered. This piece has been shown a number of times in London, Oxford and Bath.

I spent a whole year researching and it was a very rich time. I gained so much from that. It gave me a really solid foundation to move on from. In that period I began to unravel my work and to take it apart. My mother constantly redecorated her house in Northern Ireland and that idea has become a central metaphor of my work; this idea of covering something up with more and more layers. My work is concerned with peeling away those layers to reveal what's underneath, what is hidden by all that covering up. It's the theme that is apparent in everything that I do.

DL: What have been your major projects to date?

Prudence Maltby, a South West based curator, asked me to create a work as part of her "Made to Last" exhibition which was shown in Salisbury Cathedral. That's how *Polly Wolly Doodle* came about. Everyone was asked to do something with shoemaker's lasts. The next series of work I made under the thematic umbrella that I called *The truth about Bob and Pat*. I tend to work under successive themes, with the work almost like the various acts of a play. This began from a brief exchange with a family member and a whispered secret, then various domestic items were drawn into the conversation, such as a latex cast from the artex ceiling above the marital bed, discarded items and dismantled furniture. Ultimately, I was inspired by a violent incident that was subsequently hushed up, to make *The Loaded Gesture*. In this work, a tiny dolls hand is raised on the tip of a pin. She is pointing an accusatory finger which the viewer glimpses it through a spectacle lens.

DL: You've been seeing increasing interest about your work. How has this trajectory happened?

Curators do contact me and invite me to make work. Helen Sloan who was curator at SCAN has taken an interest and makes studio visits every now and then. An a-n bursary award enabled me to have two mentoring sessions with Judy Adams, the curator of the 2013 ArtSouth public realm works. The art scene is a small world built on relationships, and a lot of the organisations I have worked with have common people and threads. Invitations have led from one exhibition to another.

I'm very particular about where I exhibit and I seek out spaces that particularly interest me. Shortly after it was made, I was invited to show *Night Vision* in Oxford as part of *Invasion of Privacy* curated by Gabriel D'Angel who has done some interesting work with her project Not Famous Yet. I then had a great opportunity to show at *Wunderland* in tactileBOSCH in Cardiff in 2011, an enormous rambling falling down warehouse. I love the energy of showing in alternative spaces and I like the artists that this enables you up to show with. Space is often very much part of my installation work and video work. The right space really adds so much to the atmosphere I'm creating.

DL: There are strong emotional elements to your work, for example, addressing the dilemmas and changes associated with aging parents, as you do in your film *My Fathers House*. It's quite brave to put overtly emotional work out in our fairly macho society. How do you find that this aspect is received?

My work does deal with psychological and emotional nuance which is often associated with women in our culture. I also make work that is 'in the first person' and I think the key challenge for me is to bring an audience into the same place that I'm in. It's an indicator of the success of the work if I can do that. I'm not sure that it is necessarily a gender-based thing though.

DL: You're at a pivotal moment in your career and artistic development right now, with two big projects underway. Can you tell us about your World War 1 centenary commission, your film *Experimental Ground*?

***Experimental Ground* came about through an invitation from Prudence Maltby to myself and the artist Henny Burnett. Prudence is curating *Cicatrix*, a project that is part of the World War One commemoration, funded by Arts Council England. She's from Zimbabwe and I'm from Belfast, so neither of us are strangers to military presence. The word "cicatrix" is based on the Latin for scar, and it refers to the scar left by a healed wound, be that physical, environmental or psychological. I live on the edge of Salisbury Plain and there is a lot of Ministry of Defence land near here. I was fascinated by the chance to get into the Porton Down military establishment which is on the Plain. I had no idea what it contained when I started, but the making of *Experimental Ground* has been based around it. It touches on some dark areas on what was the rather chequered and somewhat painful past, but without shining a direct light on it. It's been a massive experience.**

DL: So with this project, you are moving away from the domestic sphere into much broader universal themes?

Yes, it's very much about being outside the glass case looking in, but on a grand scale. Ministry of Defence establishments are by their definition secretive and hidden, and it very much fitted into this ongoing theme of my work. I went to see what I could reveal, what I could peel back, but there were lots of constraints. I think that what I wasn't allowed to see is as important as what I was allowed to see. The finished piece is constructed from moments and instances that are juxtaposed together. There is a sense of ominousness in the film.

DL: There seems to be a lot of symbolism in *Experimental Ground*, for example, the tragic masked and white suited figure alone in the field. It's a very powerful image. What did you want to convey with this?

People use masks for protection, and this figure is referencing the use of chlorine gas as a weapon of war, and also referencing the chemical experiments that took place on Salisbury Plain. People did die and locals have many memories of what was a troubled time in its history. There is also an abandoned village on the Plain, called Imber - the military told people to pack and leave during the Second World War and then didn't allow them back. So it's also again about covering up.

DL: There seems to be a critical element about the Porton Down defence establishment. Did you intend that?

I didn't want to be condemning but there are always questionable elements to the work of any nation's military. At the end of the film, where the lighter sounds come in, I'm purposely suggesting "this era is in the past, and we are now in the present" but in all honesty, there will always be questions. I've avoided dealing with any actual incidents.

DL: What is your view of the ethical issues of working with the Ministry of Defence?

It is really difficult and maybe I went into it naively. It raised a lot of ethical issues – how do you reference World War One without glorifying it but still honouring those whose lives were lost? You have to deal with the subject of death somehow, there's no avoiding it. I also didn't want to repeat what other artists were saying in their works. The terms I was given by the military were very constraining, although in the end I think those constraints worked in my favour. I was given a lot of training before I was allowed to access some parts of the Plain. But in the end, my access to the Plain was withdrawn because someone was concerned that I wouldn't show the military in a good light.

DL: There's a strong ecological theme in *Experimental Ground*. What did you want to draw attention to?

There are juniper bushes scattered around like skeletons. They were the first things I noticed when I moved here because they have really weird sculptural shapes. Their existence has been altered by the cordoning off of that land. The scientists did try their hardest to re-propagate them, but it hasn't worked.

DL: You often use fragments of text in your work, and *Experimental Ground* has a verbal soundtrack in places. In a way, the words simplify the many layers of the visual and abstract aural information. Is there a tension, do you think, in your powerful use of visual and aural languages with your use of the written word?

One of things I did find difficult with this film is that I had a certain duty to the audience, which was to be accessible, because of where the film was going to be shown, and the people who would come to see it. With the objects and installations I make, there is a constant tussle about whether to include text or not. It's always a real struggle with what to use, and how to use it, because its so powerful once you use it. That's part of finding the balance in a work, feeling for the timing and the spaces, the right rhythm, deciding what to leave out and what to put in. When you get it right you know instantly.

DL: You're working on another major project, that you've called *Stranger is Typing – the Search for Nenny*. It sounds multi-layered and ambitious – how did this project come about?

This project started because I had an interest in isolation, and you access the online world by yourself. I began to look at the spam emails I was being sent. They are mostly ridiculous with their promises of lasting relationships or failsafe business opportunities. One of the spam emails was by someone claiming to be Mrs Nenny William. She was dying and wanted to leave her money to someone who would spend it on the church and Christian causes. It was important that the figure was claiming great religiosity. The powerful hold of religion and what it makes people do is a background theme in lots of my work.

Anyway, I went online to look for this woman, and in doing so had conversations with complete strangers about looking for her and about issues of trust. It was quite dangerous. You don't know where it's going to lead when you have that online conversation and start to make a tenuous relationship, however guarded. You mix a bit of truth into your interactions and then sometimes they get too close to home. I'm very aware that at times while working with the sordid, or the empty and mundane, it's possible to extract a certain poetry which borders on beauty, but which also presents complex and troublesome questions.

DL: Did you find her?

I found people claiming to be her!

DL: How are you approaching making sense of all this research? What form will the work take?

I'm working with a local amateur drama group who will be acting out some of the conversations. I've recorded their voices and this will form part of the soundtrack for an installation. I'm hoping to exhibit it in the future as a multi screen video work.

DL: Finally, how would you summarise the nature of your practice?

I see my work as a constant enquiry, an incomplete sentence or phrase, if you like, articulated through material, object, space and film. It is quiet work, a vocabulary of cast-offs, objects, processes, transient moments even, prone to decay but familiar to us all. We continue, I think, to traverse a psychological landscape that is constantly shifting beneath us. We gaze back at the past we have come from while hurtling forward into the uncertain territory of a digital world. Uncertain though it is, curiosity is really what propels me forward, like a child who momentarily lifts a stone to see the crawling reality of what lies beneath.

DL: Thank you