

Transcription

Patrick Fox

Sheila Ghelani

Claire Weetman

Recorded remotely via Squadcast, Sheila is in the East Midlands and Claire is in St Helens

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Patrick Fox - Hello and welcome to HoGcast, aka Conversations Over a Brew. I am Patrick Fox from Heart of Glass and we are an arts organisation based in St Helens, Merseyside. We support artists and communities to go on creative journeys together and make art. HoGcasts is a series of intimate recorded conversations exploring the stories of the people we make art with. Typically they are recorded in St Helens over a brew.

So much goes into the making of a new art work that you might not ever get to see or experience, so these conversations are a window into the making art. Behind any great artwork and no matter the artform there always exists a network of relationships between people and typically lots of tea.

This podcast is about the power of listening and conversation and how making art can bring us together and create change. This is episode 3 of our podcast series and you can find past episodes on our website and also on Spotify by searching 'HoGcast'.

This conversation was recorded in late 2020 and was recorded remotely due to Covid.

In this episode we meet artists Claire Weetman and Sheila Ghelani. Both are long term Heart of Glass collaborators. Claire is a founding steering group member of Heart of Glass and has been with us since the very beginning of the Heart of Glass story. Currently she is working with us on a project with refugee and asylum seeking women. Sheila is a frequent collaborator and all round good egg, and she has been working with us with young people from St Helens Carers Center. In their warm conversation the artists explore the parallels between their work and what it means to be an artist working in a community setting. They talk about the challenges and setbacks of working through a pandemic and whether art and it's weird magic can and should change the world. Big shout out to the amazing volunteers and organisation that supported them through the process including St Helens Carers Center and Refugee Women Connect. Before they chatted, Sheila and Claire mailed out packages to one another, both artists had used care packages as a way to connect with the groups during the pandemic We listen as they unwrap their packages and talk about the objects inside; how and why they chose those objects, their symbolism and meaning, and their hopes for how they might offer a moment of care and reflection to the individuals who receive them. The conversation begins with Claire

talking so without further ado; sit back, grab yourself a brew and enjoy, and please be sure to let us know what you think.

[THE SOUND OF A KETTLE BOILING FADES IN, THE CLICK OF THE SWITCH INDICATING IT IS BOILED, WATER BEING POURED AND THE CLINK OF A TEASPOON STIRRING TEA IN A CUP]

C - Should we follow questions?

S - I think we maybe should. Let's have a look. What is the first one? How did you first meet? Well. So we met in that **Chrissy Tiller** workshop, didn't we?

C - Yeah, yeah, I was just having a look at what, what it was and it was, it was March 15.

S - Oh my god.

C - So yeah, but yeah, that workshop with Chrissy in St. Helens. So yeah, how did you find that? How did you come to come to that session? How did you...?

S - Well, I'd. Yeah, because actually, I hadn't worked with Heart of Glass at all then. But I remember being really interested in them, and I'd just done two projects with Tate Liverpool. And so I heard about it through Lindsay who was the Tate person and I thought "Oh, this sounds really interesting, and I'd like to meet the Heart of Glass people." And also "I think this sounds like it'll be really useful" So actually, I came, because I was living in London then, so it's quite a long way to travel to come to Liverpool and I stayed overnight in a weird Ibis [LAUGHS]...an Ibis Styles. Yeah, it was, but it was good. It was like I was thinking, I thought "Oh, this will be like professional development" and I think, you know, as a freelancer, you just never do that kind of thing, but I decided to. It's hard to remember now. But I do remember feeling great that I'd been St. Helens and I don't know, it wasn't inevitable that I would end up working with Heart of Glass, but I just knew that they were doing interesting things. And I remember getting a really good feeling and meeting some really nice artists, including yourself within, within it, and then following people on social media. So there's a few others that I remember from that initial workshop. Yeah, I don't know. I don't know what came out of it. I know that it felt good.

C - Yeah.

S - It's so hard to remember.

C - Yeah. It, you know, it does feel like an, like an age ago. Well it was five years ago, but...

S - Yeah. I remember the baths in the because we did half the workshop at Tate Liverpool, didn't we?

C - We did

S - And half the workshop in the rugby?

C - Yeah, it was at Saint's rugby ground.

S - Yeah, and I remember the baths in the changing rooms

C - Oh yeah, because we...

S - That's got, I've got a real distinct memory.

C - Because we got a tour didn't we.

S - Yeah, we got a weird tour. It's such a strange memory.

C - Yeah, the, the many strange tours that are on offer in St. Helens.

S - [LAUGHS] Yeah. So actually, then it was really useful that I had, I sort of knew a bit about St. Helens when I first. I have to be super sensitive, like coming into an area and I don't know, it's that classic thing isn't there of the artists coming in and making work and then just disappearing. So that's why I really value the relationship with Heart of Glass and the fact that it was built on the back of a couple of projects done in Liverpool. Because it's quite, it's another part of the country, it's not at all where I live or I'm based, but you can sort of still develop sort of a deeper relationship.

C - Yeah, I think having that relationship is, is important whether, you know, whether or not you you're here or not.

S - Exactly.

C - And I think having that possibility, you know, for, for me as someone living or working here. I want to work with people here, but I also want to meet and work with people who aren't, you know.

S - Yeah, yeah.

C - From everywhere else as well. It's kind of like it's not an exclusive thing that should happen.

S - Yeah

C - There's a richness in

S - Both

C - In all those exchanges that come and go.

S - Yeah.

C - Yeah. So because, where, what else? Where else do you, do you make work and things like. I know I've seen your **Common Salt** work, which seems to be sort of.

S - Yeah

C - Is that a self driven project?

S - Yes, it is. Yeah, that's a performance project and like an actual sit down performance, which people, yeah, sit down at a table with me and my collaborator, **Sue Palmer**. And we made that, so in a way, in a way, it's quite traditional in that it sort of like goes to places and then we pack up and leave. But it's also not in the places that we go to libraries, like museums, like weird little, we've done it in a hotel. You know what I mean, it's sort of like we choose small, tiny spaces, and it's only an audience of 20 to 25 people each time, so that we can chat to people afterwards. But yeah, so I do all sorts, I do that kind of thing. And that's gone all around the UK. And then, then other projects that are very much like the projects that I've done with Heart of Glass. Doing one in Peterborough as well at the moment with **Peterborough Presents**. But yeah, just all sorts of bit of everything. Basically, that's sort of, and you, you're quite similar, aren't you? I saw that you'd have sections, that you have performance installation.

C - Yeah.

S - You do lots of different types of practice.

C - Yeah, yeah. Sort of, they're, I often kind of think of them that they're all a type of drawing.

S - Great

C - But there's always a line that's kind of drawing.

S - Yeah.

C - You know that's outlining something or...

S - Yeah.

C - You know making a mark in a space. But...

S - Yeah.

C - Often it's, you know, it can often be just as a drawing, or as a print, or as a performance or, or an action or an installation. So that they kind of have these, they sit in these sort of traditional artistic categories, but that thing that runs through them all is this sense of a, some kind of mark, or some kind of trace some kind of.

S - Yeah.

C - Even when I'm making the performance, I often think of it as a physical manifestation of a drawing or something.

S - Yes.

C - It just so happens that instead of on a page, it's in a square, or a street.

S - Yeah.

C - On a, on a set of pedestrian traffic lights. Or, yeah.

S - Yeah, yeah. That's interesting, because I always think of mine as, like a thing that I do is the choreography of objects and I think because my original training was in contemporary dance. It wasn't in visual art and I have always got the two themes of care and something that relates to hybridity, which then relates back to my own mixed heritage, that sort of always bubbling up in between, yeah, underneath everything I do. So care, which is really a subject that everyone's really interrogating at the moment, which is good.

C - Yeah.

S - Those are the main things that I think link all my projects together. It's interesting.

C - Yeah, yeah, it's kind of. Yeah, I think it's, for me, it's that idea of a space and how we move, move through it or interact with it. And you can find how that's marked or or seen.

S - Mmm

C - But yeah, just I think that that sense of care felt really important whilst making work over the past year, let's call it. [LAUGHS]

S - Yeah, so what was this. Tell me about this project, then so, what the package that I've received through the post.

C - So I've been working with people in St. Helens over, let's see, for about four years now who, so people who are either seeking asylum, or are refugees who were living in St. Helens. And I've worked and developed a number of different projects and then, at the end of last year Heart of Glass invited me to work with them, and the charity, Refugee Women Connect. And they are a charity, who support women in the sort of Merseyside area, so they're based out of Liverpool, but they have an outreach here in St. Helens. And they support women who are of any refugee background. So they have a drop in, usually in person in a building. And lots of the women and their children would go there once a week and eat together, chat and get support either from the staff from the and the volunteers there or just from each other. So we started sort of January, February, having some, just sort of like a bit of a research period, kind of going to the, the sessions starting to try and work out what we could do, how we could do that. And then, and then we couldn't do that anymore. [LAUGHS]

S - [LAUGHS]

C - But I proposed that we have this project where we would go for walks together and then come and come back into a room and make and then maybe see what we could make or discuss or create. The idea that we might make some 'zines, so kind of this having at least

some kind of vessel where we could kind of collate all of the things that were, people were interested in. So the first part of the package that you've got is a, was kind of a very swift let's do this before everybody goes on furlough, because it seemed really important to keep in touch and to, to kind of make sure that we were still able to try and at least do something together. So that went out with different materials for me making them a little 'zine in and it was based on flowers because whilst we've been, whilst people haven't been able to meet they'd set up a whatsapp group, so as part of that whatsapp group with the women and we were able to share images and a lot of things. So yeah, so we sent out that as a sort of an activity pack with materials, photographs that had been shared on the on the group. Yeah. Little how to how to make things and then they shared, shared their sort of, some of their images back through the, through the WhatsApp then. Yeah.

S - So great.

C - So that started, started the process off, but then that sort of morphed into. I wanted, I was aware that all the women who were involved were also mothers. So often, they would sort of use the pack so that their children could be entertained and could do that, but I also wanted that opportunity for the women to feel that it was for them as well.

S - Mmm

C - Because the, I felt that there, there's a dual usefulness in that was, that as a, as a mother, you kind of go "Okay, you're entertained over there, I have time to do something else" That's great, but I also wanted that sense of "You're entertained over there and now I can do this, or I can think about this" So the second sort of box that went out, was, had more objects in that, that were more focused on, on response that the women could, could have as well. Yeah, there's a I think some of the objects within this pack that you've sent, and probably the last pack that I've sent are kind of a bit more in common, in the sense of, of having a drink. But within, within that pack as well, there was that there was a bath ball in there.

S - Yeah.

C - There was a mirror. You know, I really wanted to make sure that the things that we sent out were, had a sort of dual use. That they were useful, but we could do something with them together. I think with it, all the objects that I got of yours and that process of putting things into those boxes, there is that sense of you kind of want to create this sense that they've all got these dual things behind them, a symbolic thing or a useful thing.

S - Yeah. They're so nice.

C - So what were you saying about that hybridity, about, about things and objects?

S - Well, it's interesting about. I think that's actually the theme, I think, really, the theme care comes through more than necessarily hybridity. I don't know, I haven't thought about hybridity in relation to this project so much, that's an interesting question. Because yes, mine was called These Head. Sorry, classic. This Head, These Hands, or These Hands, This Head. Oh My God,

my brain is actually not working today. [LAUGHS] And, yeah, anyway, so with my project, I was working with young carers. And so in a way, even me just working with young carers, that sort of like an interest already has been sort of piqued and similar timeframe to you, as well, I started in January, doing a bit of research. And then the project was supposed to, actually we had done three sessions before pandemic, before the pandemic shut everything down really. So I had, had some contact time, and I was due to go back to do the fourth session. And so the young carers that I was working with were more like teens it wasn't like the really young tots. It was, yeah, it was teens. And so and it was a drop in session as well at a very specific time. So they have this centre that they go to the Young Carers Centre in St. Helens, and it's somewhere that they can go to relax basically, and, or maybe some of them were doing their like homework, or it's just a space for them. They can play games. They can also chat to people about serious stuff if they need to, if they need to offload just a really extraordinary organisation and all of them are caring for someone in some way. In when they're not there, and when they're not at school. And so I was just working out how I might make a piece of work with them and, yeah, so the box, well, we weren't going to make, we weren't going to make a box. We weren't going to make a gift actually, at all. We were sort of thinking about more of a playful sort of installation kind of room. But then everything shifted. So yeah, obviously, what I've made is a young care care pack, basically, for the young carers. And again, that sense, it came out of a conversation where I asked the question, so what do they need? What would be useful to them? And I'm saying them because actually, that was with the organisation, and then the organisation also would then check with young carers what they felt they needed. So it's sort of like not a top level thing it's actually, yeah, it's from them as well. So in the end, yeah, we've made a kind of care pack for them. With a few things in that all relates to the project. Yeah. Is This Head, These Hands.

C - This Head, These Hands.

S - That's so funny that I couldn't remember it.

C - Yeah. Where did that, where did that come from? Did that come out of those original workshops?

S - Yes. So out of the research, basically. So when I went and did the sort of drop in research with them, I just chatted to them. And Rhyannon and chatted to them. And also Laura, who sort of like their activities coordinator, I mean, she's just extraordinary. She also would, you know, she also chatted to them as well and one of the things that came up was they all talked about sleep and not being able to sleep. And then there was a young carer there who just very quickly did a like drawing on her mobile phone. And just drew like a head and inside wrote the word anxiety. And so there was this thing about like, rest, resting your head or yeah, what, "what does your head literally hold?" as a question. And then there was also a conversation about hands, this, there was a young carer there that had got drawings all over one of her hands. Which I thought was great, she must have done it at school or something. So we started talking about Henna. And then, then this idea of like, "what are they holding?" And yeah, the symbol of the hand as something that might hold, hold stuff as well, and it could be from, from their mobile phone through to kind of I don't know, a pen or, but just yeah, more symbolic, the metaphoric

idea of what they're holding as well as young carers. And hands are so related. You always think of hands. Like if you google care, you see loads of like hand holding.

C - Yeah. Yeah. I think there's the hands as an image. I've been using them in, throughout work as well

S - Yes, I noticed that.

C - Yeah, sort of, sort of thing. I've often thought about the, the dual symbolic that the hand has as well so within, within the packages I've made illustrations of hands and how they're kind of holding on to different things. When you were talking about the sleeping as well, there was a conversation through the, the drop in session, only the day where they were talking about the mattresses that they're given in the houses where they go, and how they're all terrible and none of them can sleep because of it.

S - Yeah.

C - Yeah, and that we should tell people about this.

S - Yeah.

C - But, but just sort of that sense of just that for people who are going through so much, who are experiencing so much as young carers, as people who are seeking asylum, that sense that just, that sense of comfort and care and being looked after. And there are those amazing people out there, I know you mentioned Laura from young carers, the volunteers who are working with Refugee Women Connect, the staff there who are there, who are doing absolutely amazing work.

S - Yeah.

C - I think that sense of the, of sending out the packages, and that the idea of care comes from almost mirroring and amplifying that sense of these people who are out there throwing their hearts in, in into looking after people.

S - Yeah.

C - In these really sort of difficult times in, in their life.

S - Yeah. Yeah.

C - Yeah and that, that sense of how can, how can we amplify that, show that but in a sort of, but whilst still being really respectful of, of that personal situation I think is.

S - Yeah.

C - It's a difficult balance to find.

S - Yeah.

C - I don't know how you found it?

S - It sounds like, yeah, yeah. But it sounds, also did you have contact throughout then? it sounds like you did through the Whatsapp group.

C - Yeah.

S - That's amazing.

C - So we did, we did, so the when, when you said before about having to talk to the staff in order to work with the young people, there's still been, you know, that kind of difficulty in communicating. There's often sometimes, you know, there's different sort of protocols in there to kind of protect everybody's...

S - Absolutely.

C - You know personal space and I think that's really important. But sometimes that's really frustrating that you kind of want to go, but "Aan we just, can I just meet you?" You know, and you're like, "No but we can't, because we can't be in the same room." And just trying to have, you know, there's all of that potential that you kind of feel that you'd like to have made with this project this year. I think as well, you kind of, you kind of think if we'd have been able to have that slightly deeper conversation this would have turned into that and it would have been amazing. Yeah, I think that, that sending out of things to try and keep connected has been, you know.

S - It's definitely a trope isn't it?

C - It is yeah. But for me, in some ways, it came out of what already existed because through the drop ins that already happened, the, the organisations that these women work with, often will provide food packages, or they were already dropping off clothes for the children or things like that. That's something that was happening anyway because, because there was a need for it even before you know even pre pandemic. You know, there, there was this sense of people gifting and giving things that people needed. And there was all already that sort of system there because the volunteers who would be and the staff were dropping off cleaning products for the women and, and...

S - Amazing.

C - Care, you know, like, super essential care parcels as well.

S - Yeah.

C - So. So yeah, that sense of providing something through that kind of mechanism was familiar, but also hopefully provided a yeah, something a bit, that was that you didn't, maybe you didn't know that you were missing or that provided that way of connecting in a different way.

Yeah, I think as much as it felt frustrating with, with the contact that we had, I think it's been, you know, we were really lucky that we were able to maintain that contact and yeah, just carry on with that spin. Yeah. All those periods of where you kind of think you want to, you know, you want to make something. How, how were you feeling with with that, as well how was that?

S - I thought it was absolutely fine because actually, I don't know how you felt when it all started, but I didn't want to make work in March, actually, or March, April, May. I think I had like a few months of just wanting to process what was happening and, but not through practice, somehow. And that's really weird for me, because practice is how I process the world, art is how I make sense of stuff. And I just, I turned away from it. It was so interesting, especially when, like, across the nation, everyone's turning to creativity. And so actually, yeah, no, it's totally fine for things to pause and felt really right, because I wanted to pause. How about you? How did you feel?

C - I don't know just sort of saying that, how that is now I'm just wondering if the things that. Sort of feels like maybe the packages that we sent out almost mirror, what was going what was going on here. That sense of the first package was, here's a, you know, was kind of almost a, here's what we're going to try and do and almost trying to hold on to that and, and sending that out. Whilst sort of balancing that with kids being at home and things like that, as well, kind of that, that was probably like homeschooled, kind of, you know, the depth of homeschool sort of period. And that kind of felt a little bit more like something you would do in homeschool, maybe. And then I suppose the next one sort of towards the end, which went out until the end of July, I think, was, felt a little bit more like I could get a bit more of a hold on it. Maybe start to make stuff but also that needed to be really useful. And yeah, and they'll be no pressure sort of going on. And then it was sort of in the autumn, the one that went out there and as well, sort of yeah, that was there was more probably more things going on within the themes that sort of reflect what I do. But it's, yeah, it just has been really hard to make stuff. And then I've had the sort of the conflict as well about how to, because those are things that are quite personal that happened between us and the women, and that, that's, what's happened there, but how do you, how do you show that as a, as a project within an arts organisation? And how has that, that come out? I've been sort of very conflicted about how to almost tie that all together and you were talking, you were talking about it earlier about weaving things in that sense of weaving all things together over that period. But then, kind of getting to the stage of what's, you know, where's where's the end? Where does, where does it sort of like, finish? But yeah, sort of trying, again, trying just trying to sort of show all of those things that have happened in a way. I'm still working, whereas yours is sort of in that sort of ready for print stage, there's still like, fuzzy vague things, but yeah, this has been points where I've been but why why should, why do I need to make anything else? What's the point?

S - Yeah, yeah. But you've made stuff...

C - What's the point of making something?

S - ...all the way through.

C - Yeah. Yeah.

S - It's so extraordinary. The activities to do like I was just like "Oh my god, there's another one. There's another one." Like, the sun prints with the lights, the experiment, the invisible ink, the walk, the yeah, the flowers 'zine. It just feels like there's just so, there's so yeah, there's just so much in there. Like you've been making like these things. I know its process as well but like, yeah, it's just amazing. I was like, "Oh my God, this just feels great." [LAUGHS]

C - You're probably the first person outside of the project to have received most of what, what, what has gone out as well because it has been sort of like we've it's been kitchen table kind of stuff because it's not it's not been easy to get to the studio to do things. It's kind of been okay, well, and you know, things have got to live here. Boxes have piled up. I've packed things on the kitchen table and then they go out and trying to keep that means there's not I haven't made more than we needed.

S - Yeah. So it's a series of gifts you've been giving out throughout.

C - Yeah.

S - It's Amazing.

C - Yeah, it's kind of it's been. It, sometimes it feels like you've not been able to do anything. But then, yeah, you sort of just look back at it and go, actually, there's a, you know, there's, it's all thought behind it as well. You know. Because I think that's with the things that are here too, that there's all of that, underneath, that that people don't necessarily see when they see a, an outcome of an artwork as well.

S - No, absolutely.

C - I'm going to pour my tea, because I made it just before I arrived because I thought, I'd drunk one earlier. They did say it was a conversation over a brew.

S - Yeah exactly. That sounds so great. [LAUGHS] It was genuinely exciting when your package arrived. Can I just say.

C - Was it?

S - It was so heavy. I was like...

C - Well there was a glass bottle in there.

S - There was.

C - I had to check.

S - And sun cream.

C - Things that you can't send in, in packages with some of the couriers; glass bottles, fruit.

S - Yeah. There was a lemon in there.

C - There was a lemon in there. Yeah, cuz the artwork on, on the card that came with that was, was when life gives you lemons. So on. Yeah. One of the Rebecca is a volunteer in the group. And I think she'd use some of the paints that have been sent out and painted that as a sentiment, and we talked about quotes and things like that. And we talked about when life gives you lemons, you can drink lemonade, hence the rose lemonade that was in your pack. But then somebody I think somebody said, or you can throw them at people.

S - [LAUGHS]

C - Just that, just I really liked that sense of throwing, throwing it back. Can, can we throw all the all the rubbish back? Yeah. How? How can we do that? And because I think that's, that's the other thing that is sometimes conflicted in this work, is that you. Sometimes you want it to, to make a difference. Often you do want it to make a difference. By, by making that work, and so how, how can you do that, but still care? And still, it's still being respectful. So yeah. Because it with, with, with your work, it's, that's about caring, how do you, how do you find that sits within that sort of activist kind of sense? Because I never. I would never say that I have any kind of activism background, and I always really sort of shy away from that kind of expectation or stereotype kind of that we expect of activism. But also you want to, I want to do no harm. But I also want, want there to be a sense that we can do some good as well.

S - Absolutely. Yeah.

C - So how what's, what's your take on that?

S - I feel, its so interesting. Because it feels like both. It feels like everything as a practitioner I want, I want to be able to change the world, in, with these small acts, these small kind of moments and yet, at the same time, I know, really, that maybe I could do that more effectively in a different form. So actually it's a question I reflect on all the time, like whether art is the right way to be doing what I'm doing and carrying out my beliefs and trying to improve the world. And yet at the same time, I'm completely committed to art as well as like a kind of weird magic that does open up a space of reflection, and just yeah, does sometimes step into those gaps where other stuffs fallen away, even though, you know, it's not arts responsibility to do all that stuff and shouldn't be. Yet, at the same time, I have a question about whether it should. Yeah, I don't know.

C - That often a conflict of, internal kind of.

S - Always, there's no right or wrong answer. It just shifts slippery. For me, it's slippery. Yeah, absolutely. Yeah. I guess that's why I asked the question, what, what do the young carers need at the moment.

Patrick Fox - Thanks for listening to this episode of HoGcast. We'll be back again soon for another conversation over a brew.

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