

TRANSLATION

Interview with Sophie J. Williamson (2020)

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1. Your work is full of so many different cultural references and influences, magpielike, and within these you find shared languages and synergies. How do you position your references against another?

A good example is Ether Plane~ Material Plane, an installation I made for Manifesta 11. I was interested in the way different cultures created belief systems, rituals and artefacts for the transition between life and death. I brought together ethnographic ritual objects from collections in Zurich, each of which dealt with this transitional state, death, and the presence of the body and the soul. Photographed as collages along with my own ceramic works, they created a visual dialogue between different cultures, locations and time periods, connecting these worlds and belief systems. Of course, they were all already inherently connected: they each shared a political history that placed them in collections in the city. They shared a physical history as well, as I mostly used artefacts from clay that endured the process of firing; I borrowed terracotta figures from the NOK, a mysterious and ancient civilization from West-Africa, and a female burial urn from Colombia, which was believed to sprout new life. And they each shared a social connection, in the exchanges between myself and the dealers, curators and private collectors who had lent them. The worlds and stories behind each ritual object crossed paths in the making of the work.

2. Many of the materials you use have very specific local histories or meanings. For example, in Let It Come Down you use the Rembrandt tulip petals and the South Sumatran ship weaving designs. Does it matter if their relevance is lost in translation depending on the culture in which the work is shown?

My process of making is very much guided by material. I recently finished a public commission for Amsterdam's Central Station, mural made from 100,000 dried tulip petals. The image resembles the large weavings of ship cloths from the south of Sumatran; usually depicting a ship, they suggest the idea of human souls in motion to the afterlife. Both tulips and ship cloths have a personal significance to me: my father travelled by sea to the Netherlands from Indonesia with his family in the 1950's, and my maternal grandfather and great-grandfather were tulip bulb exporters. For this commission, I worked with many tulip growers --I

got to know everything about tulips, its origins, the colours, the industry. Meanwhile I was also researching the purpose and cultural meaning of the Sumatran ship cloths the island had a long trade history with Indians, Chinese, Javanese, Arabs, Portuguese and the Dutch. Traces of these exchanges became part of the motifs in the textiles, becoming a sort of collective memory.

I wanted to explore the different themes and meanings within these textiles, and this resulted in a series of tulip petal collages. For the collage, *Let It Come Down* (the title for which is borrowed from *Macbeth*), I used black tulip petals and Rembrandt petals, these to me translated best this feeling that I wanted to capture of falling matter, collapsing structures. I'm not too worried about the relevance getting lost. Many of my works are informed by more than one source of reference, as is the case in *Let it Come Down*. The patterns of falling black tulip petals referenced different things for me: on the one hand I was thinking of 'black rain', which refers to the nuclear dust after the nuclear bombings in Japan, but I was also thinking of the similarities between the Navajo diamond pattern weavings and the wave pattern in the South Sumatran ship cloths. The loom-woven patterns are common to many different cultural traditions, so the works are likely to evoke different references for other people. I like to work visually, so I would rather not rely on an explanation of the work through a text, I hope the work gives enough to be interpreted by the viewer.

3. I was also thinking of the specific colour dyes that you use in the yarns for your textile works. These have specific meanings, but these will vary in different cultures – or eras. Why is colour important to you?

I am from a culturally mixed background, my father is an ethnic Chinese from Indonesia and my mother is half English and half Dutch. Because of this I had always noticed cultural differences to understand my social surroundings. When I started art school, this led me to an interest in artists who combined art and life experience, for example Hélio Oiticica and Joseph Beuys. Both artists use materials with a certain (personal) meaning as part of their work. Vibrant colour is not very common in European contemporary art; when I was in art school, I felt like colourful work was assumed to be shallow. When I discovered these two artists, I came to understand the meaningful potential of materials: Beuys' felt or beeswax or the vibrant pigments of Oiticica's *Box-Bolides*. Both were very interested in transformation and the alchemy of one thing turning into another, and both sought to activate colour as a therapeutic strategy, for Beuys his own personal healing and for Oiticica as a means to heal society.

I have described my knitted floor pieces as 'resist shapes' in the *Let It Come Down* exhibition at Camden Arts Centre. They are sculptures but also places, island or zones within the exhibition space, on which a

performance can take place or on which you can recline and meditate on a hand-dyed knitted rug. I choose a turmeric colour yarn for one of the works, as turmeric is associated with healing properties; it has been used in Asia for thousands of years and is a major part of Ayurveda and traditional Chinese medicines. It's also a spice that is commonly used for dying, for example for the ochre yellows in the Sumatran ship cloths. It is well researched that the colour of our surroundings influences us unconsciously, so it was important to me that I was aware of the different cultural readings and implications of the colours I used in these spaces.

4. You've spoken to me before about 'in-betweenness' or transience. For example, the crystal appears regularly in your work, a form that is between a solid and liquid, or the idea of the soul in limbo. Why does this in-between, unstable or transformative space interest you?

The knitted floor pieces are geometrical shapes derived from crystalline forms and structures. Additionally, crystals usually form formations and so the lay out with the floor pieces can also be seen as a model for an infinite space. The floor pieces also hover between sculpture and stage, their arrangement forming both a negative and positive space, simultaneously taking up the room's volume and cutting into it. For me these vibrant floor pieces create a conduit space for the mind and body to connect.

I have been working with the idea of the soul in limbo since 2004. I came across this line 'I am the soul in limbo' as a statement by Nadja, the central character in the surrealist novel of the same title by André Breton. The sentence made me realize all the different ways you can feel in limbo—mentally and physically. Whilst researching the African artefacts that I borrowed for the Manifesta11 work, I discovered that in many African belief systems it's common to travel between different realms. Future, past and dream states can shift, and the black and white patterns you find in some of the African objects symbolise these different realms. Through trance or other forms of ritual it is believed possible to transcend to different planes of being, translating between different realities, for example Candomblé, an Afro-Brazilian religious tradition practiced in Brazil. I've also been interested in the description of out-of-bodily experiences and occupation of the body by other identities as frightfully described in Paul Schrebers *Memoirs of My Nervous Illness*. For me, 'the soul in limbo' became a way to address the fluidity of identity, the fractured moments of which reality is made of and as a place of resistance: personal, spiritual, physical or political.

5. Languages seem central to your work. By this I mean languages of colour, shape and materials. Then you further employ the languages

of different art forms to transfer or transform these once again, for example through poetry, literature or dance. What is it in this flux or somersaulting that you are drawn to?

In the past I have been working around the idea of the 'event'. For me the event is a zone of transition, where people, objects and the surroundings are connected in something I've called a 'situationistic border': between a world in calling and a present reality.

In Lévi-Strauss memoir, *Tristes-Tropiques*, he describes the paradoxical status of the anthropologist as the observer while nevertheless maintaining the need to engage as a human. For me exhibiting throughout the world - Mongolia, Brazil, Korea, China, Australia and so on - also made me very conscious about the effects of travel on the mind, and our connection to the world and to others. That's why I often want to work with local materials, like clay from the yellow mountains, or bamboo, or cacao fruits, but also with people with whom I develop language-based performances.

I worked with wonderful actors and dancers in Brazil around common Portuguese words but whose meaning is somewhat untranslatable. For example, the word *saudades* means a deep emotional state of nostalgic or profound melancholic longing for an absent thing or person that one loves. Body language, tone, speech and rhythm is ingrained in each culture, for example in Brazil the rhythm of Bosa Nova music and dance seems tangibly inherited from generation to generation: with time outsiders can learn this, but it seems to come so naturally to locals. For the Gwanju Biennial, I was introduced to a Korean art form in which singing is connected to objects and movement, like fan dancing and ghost dancing. I am drawn to the different cultural complexities of the spirit and of communication with them: how a medium is sensitive to other worlds. I became interested in combining choreography with objects and breathing: the sound of breathing, or a pause in breathing during singing or moving. I also worked with Mongolian throat singers, I was very interested in how the throat singing connects to the body and the lyrics to the landscape and history of Mongolians as a nomadic people. In the performances that I make, I combine these different kinds of languages that I encounter with my own, it's sort of sound poetry.

6. I was wondering about your collaboration with dancers and choreography, Miri Lee. This seems to me to be a form of translation or interpretation; translating the visual and the tactile into movement. What is the collaborative process? How does it influence the work?

After my experience in Korea, I was inspired to continue working with movement in relation to objects. When I was invited by Witte de With to show in Shanghai, I wanted to work again with language, but unlike my experience of the Brazilian Bosa Nova or Mongolian throat singing,

where I could grasp the implied emotion without understanding the language, I couldn't do this with Mandarin. Instead, I was drawn to Chinese characters: how they derive from a pictorial image, as well as having in mind the motion of creating calligraphy characters. I made a group of 12 vessels with clay from the Yellow Mountains and I worked with 5 female dancers and a choreographer from Shanghai, creating a choreography on 5 knitted floor pieces based on the titles I gave to the vessels and the Chinese characters they translated to. The characters became the choreography, as well as the Chinese idea that the vessel is as much about the empty space as about the vessel.

I met Miri Lee in 2010, she's a Korean dancer who came to Amsterdam to study improvisation. Her movements are very fluid, but also very influenced by her studies in Korea, in which the breathing and moments of stillness are followed by a set of intense movements. Her movements are very low to the ground, very different I felt from European dance, which is much more vertical. This language of low movements, connected really well to my work and floor pieces. Motion is mathematically described in terms of displacement, distance, velocity, acceleration, time, and speed; the object's motion doesn't change but it does appear to be in a choreography.