



Annie O'Donnell

Hearing from Artists

Annie O'Donnell investigates histories of place and identity through sculpture, movement, performance and collaboration. She is based in Billingham, Tees Valley, which is her hometown and central to her research. Her work is in the Middlesbrough Collection at MIMA and she is working with MIMA on a commission for an exhibition in 2021. She is in conversation with Olivia Heron, Assistant Curator, in May 2020.

OH: How did your upbringing in Billingham shape your thinking and influence the colours and materials you choose to work with?

AOD: My ongoing research examines how place influences sculptural practice. I am fascinated by the 'primal landscapes' of childhood, where we first interact with people and things in space, generating a sense of place. This core understanding becomes a portable 'hyperlocal' which helps us to read the physical and social elements of other places, and of course, ourselves. I come from a long line of wanderers: mine is the first generation of my family to be born on Teesside. Connections to place have therefore for us always been understood to be tied to movement and work – where people go and what they do to survive. My family came to Billingham to work for ICI (Imperial Chemical Industries).

My creative exploration of my hometown and the nearby ICI chemical plant that has shaped it has a playful yet urgent quality for me. It speaks to the increasingly dilapidated structures of the surrounding industry, and the company-town Modernism of Billingham itself, architectures which, for me, conjure a sense of a particular historical moment receding from view.



Portrait of the Artist as Harry and Tot, Roscoe Road, Billingham (Family photograph 1930s).
Courtesy of the artist.

Like most ICI employees, my parents had what could almost be described as an archive of company publications and objects, particularly those relating to ICI's Plastics Division, where they both worked. These often became jumping-off points for anecdotes about wider events – our versions of bedtime stories. My father in particular had a clear grasp of how people mould what surrounds them, even in so-called 'natural' landscapes. His paternal grandfather was a gamekeeper and sawyer in County Wicklow, Ireland, and this activity had an influence on all his descendants. For my father, everything – from rural landscapes and materials to the industrial – was seen and felt as essentially man-made.

The colours I am drawn to in my practice are those of the bright plastics he inspected at work, or of the plants in our garden. They can be the pastels of faded fluorescent pipes on the approach to Oxygen Corner, or the neon of the nylon net ballroom dresses our next door neighbour used to make. Of course, this means my practice is also heavily invested in time as well as space. I term it 'collage practice', pulling together and juxtaposing elements from everyday life.



Emergency Fan (2019) collaged papier-mâché, theatre gel, balsa wood
 Photograph by David Griffiths

OH: The view from your studio in central Middlesbrough is of a landscape peppered with industrial ‘giants’. Tell us how you deconstruct and transform elements of these to create new narratives.

AOD: I do sometimes think I have a peculiar relationship with the monumental industrial structures of ICI in particular, but then I remember that, for example, pairs of cooling towers were known to generations of locals as ‘Pinky and Perky’, ‘Gert and Daisy’, and ‘King Kong’s Binoculars’, so perhaps I’m not alone in that. This naming of monumental objects reduces them to feeling manageable, a less oppressive size. In a similar way, the myths that accrue around industries and towns can also be deconstructed into anecdotes with personal meaning.

The effect of that proximity to the structures on the body is very noticeable as you pass through the land between Billingham and Middlesbrough. It isn’t a case of skirting around the chemical plant, as the roads that pass through it mean that you can get up close and personal to structures of a colossal size. It’s rare that they are completely closed forms – it might be possible to see water running down at the bottom, or steam rising from the top – they appear in some way alive. I enjoy thinking about objects and materials as people, or of people as places. Again, I feel this is an early learned behaviour,

as I was encouraged to imaginatively explore my physical surroundings.

It is always intriguing to travel through the industry with other people: sometimes they only see shades of grey and I only see flashes of high colour. Familiar structures are often unexpected to visitors too – chimneys rising from bellow sections, pipes that run in gantries over the road. These gantries resemble those other Teesside icons, the bridges that cross the River Tees, and remind me of theatrical proscenium arches. I will often invert their shapes, or assemble shapes remembered from ICI’s former plants, as repeating motifs when making sculpture.

OH: Originally, you trained as a dancer and choreographer. How does this play out in your sculptural works?

AOD: Dance plays out in all aspects of my practice. I find it difficult to even describe myself without referencing it; I don’t remember the time before I danced. My spatial awareness is connected to basic principles like the dancer’s square;¹ the drawing of lines in the air that extend through and out of the body; the sense of proprioception (feeling the body’s position in space); and the role that vision has – the self in the mirror, the partial or non-view of body parts while moving. The need to take rhythmical movement sequences and repeat or reverse them is still crucial, and although these movements may now only be observed by



Lorraine Smith in *Elizabeth and The Three Sisters* (2016) outdoor dance, sound and wearable sculpture performance
 Photograph by David Griffiths

me in the studio, they still lend a performative quality to the resulting sculptures. The works are often at body scale – assemblages of materials and readymade objects as long as my shinbone, or as tall I can jump with my arms above my head. I often place them in installations that resemble theatre sets, perhaps with highly coloured wall paintings or floor coverings. Sometimes they hang as if about to land, or touch walls as if at the ballet barre. Actual bodies have usually been missing from my works, but increasingly I invite dancers, artists and musicians to animate them by creating ‘wearable sculptures’ and initiating long-term collaborations.

OH: Can you unpack the story of your work *He Who Holds The Reins (The Charioteer of Delphi)* (2012), which is part of the Middlesbrough Collection?

AOD: In 2012 I was preparing the thesis exhibition for my PhD, which had included research into the commissioning, placement, movement and reproduction of so-called permanent public sculpture – basically, how people in power attempt to shape place identity, and how this can be reworked and made more relevant at a smaller scale. The sculptures I made for the spaces of Platform A Gallery in Middlesbrough were abstract portraits of ‘Town Giants’. The subjects ranged from well-known figures from history (with and without existing memorials) to works triggered by contemporary conversations overheard in town.

The works for the gallery entrance encouraged viewers to think about how thresholds act as spaces for temporal and spatial transformation. They included *He Who Holds The Reins (Charioteer of Delphi)*, an installation photograph by Kraig Wilson of a performative event at Newcastle University, where I made sculptures from paper for plaster casts originally used in life drawing classes. The cast shown in the photograph is of the *Charioteer of Delphi* (c. 478 BC). This is one of the most famous surviving bronzes from ancient Greece. It was originally highly coloured and included a chariot, six life-sized horses and two grooms, only fragments of which still exist.

I had regularly made wearable sculptures for the anonymous charioteer during my MFA and PhD studies, and on this occasion, collaged a pair of ‘hyperlocal’ goggles to help him understand changes to places over time. His head is seen in profile, and the visible side of his goggles includes an image of Henry Bolckow, the German co-founder of Middlesbrough, from ‘Domini’, the town’s Victorian satirical newspaper. The work has recently been shown at MIMA alongside a drawing by Claes Oldenburg and Coosje van Bruggen, whose sculpture for Middlesbrough, *Bottle of Notes* (1993), I researched as part of my thesis.

OH: Research, reflection and writing are key within your practice. What is intriguing you right now, and will it inform where you might go next?



He Who Holds The Reins (Charioteer of Delphi) (2012), photograph of a paper sculpture for a plaster cast of a Greek Bronze
Installation photograph by Craig Wilson

AOD: My process usually consists of a long period of research, running concurrently with the collection of materials and found objects, and with the almost meditative construction of assemblages and collages. This works on a reflexive loop. Eventually the making process produces quicker spurts of work that I consider to be finished. I fully embrace concepts such as improvisation. This resembles the rehearsal and performance periods of my previous career.

At the moment I am fascinated by international company towns. They are towns within towns: workers constitute industrial and commercial communities with their own rights and rules; surrounding communities also operate in conjunction with working patterns such as shifts. They are internationally similar and increasingly rare. Some now have no connection to surrounding industry at all, but still have communities and street plans that resemble the original. One example is Marktown in Indiana, USA, built for a steel company in the style of an English village. None of its inhabitants – some of whom are fifth generation – work in the new oil refineries that now dwarf it. I had planned to make research trips to selected locations in order to build international links with Billingham but this is now on hold during the current Covid-19 crisis.

As an artist who responds to kinaesthetic and haptic triggers, it feels difficult to imagine how I might move this area of research forward during the current restrictions, but I hope eventually I will be able to. Meanwhile I have been following leads to under-researched aspects of the place and the company I know so well. ICI's past use of exhibition stands to promote its products and ethos – essentially, its use of propaganda – is fascinating. One émigré designer's work is particularly intriguing to me, as it blends the recognisable shapes and forms of ICI's chemical plants with the domestic styling that I remember from my childhood home. Now that the initial shock of the lockdown has abated, I am beginning to collage sculptural ideas for this project.

¹ Each dancer imagines a square or cube around themselves. As they turn to face new directions or stretch out limbs, they use the corners to align themselves to the stage and others. This enables, for example, an audience to see a group of dancers as a unified whole – each facing the corner of their own square. In the current Covid-19 crisis, a strange version of the dancer's square is being observed by everyone, as we become increasingly aware of our position in space in an attempt to stay two metres from each other.