



## Penny Payne Hearing from Artists

*Through sculpture and installation, Penny Payne draws attention to the role of women in the fishing industries that thrived along the North East coast during the late 1800s. In 2021 she will show work at MIMA, in the exhibition Sonia Boyce: In the Castle of My Skin. Here, she is in conversation with Helen Welford, Assistant Curator in January 2021.*

**HW: Your work considers the overlooked history of women in the North East fishing industries. What messages do you want to share in activating these histories?**

PP: My interest in the women involved in the fishing industry on the North East coast was sparked when I encountered photographs of the women wearing traditional dress. I was particularly drawn to the women based in Cullercoats, a fishing village just a couple of miles from my home.

The traditional blue or black woollen skirts of the working fisherwomen were heavily pleated. The pleats varied in depth and quantity but added a delicacy and individuality to the 'uniform' of the women. I began from this point to consider the women as individuals within the collective of this close-knit community. By looking at the detail of dress, I generated ideas and questions about femininity in relation to patriarchal society and familial duty.

The role and significance of these women is generally overlooked when narrating the



Penny Payne portrait

history of our coastline, especially since the industry has been in heavy decline for many years and the involvement of women within it even more so. As in many industries, the role of women is a powerful one: they are the backbone of the community and the family home, whilst working long hours in harsh working environments. They are denied the heroic status afforded to the men who went to sea.

I want to highlight the marginalisation of these women, and consider their individuality as well as their collective strength. I open up discussions on femininity, labour, societal constraints, and address our historical maligning of these women who are often describe as coarse, foul mouthed and argumentative.

**HW: I first came across your work through your installation *The Weight of Salt* 2019 at Middlesbrough Art Weekender 2019. Can you talk about this work and how your ideas have developed since?**

PP: *The Weight of Salt* was the first work I developed about the female narrative in the fishing industry. It is informed by the individuality that I saw manifested in the women's skirts but also the physicality of



*The Weight of Salt* (2019) Salt and wool cloth.  
Photography: Penny Payne

the working environment. I was at the time fascinated with the salt lines that I envisaged drying on the hems of the women's skirts with the continual immersion in sea water. I really liked the idea of capturing the passage of time in this way, an everyday event of no particular consequence that creates a timeline of activity which I find visually poetic.

As a sculptor my instinct was to develop a three-dimensional work that played with this idea of time but also represented the women's identity. Salt is a powerful substance that describes the multiplicity of ideas that I was trying to present when considering the women. Salt is an antiseptic and a corrosive, as well as a preservative and a valuable commodity with an innate value to our everyday. I liked the way that this material had its own intrinsic identity and a materiality that is familiar.

In the work, the women are represented by twenty brick-sized blocks of salt, each

wrapped in wool cloth. The cloth is hand-stitched and pleated to mirror the pleats in the women's skirts. I wet the blocks and over some days, the salt began to bloom and crystallise across the surface creating unique patterns. This was for me an expression of the women's individuality within the confines of the community collective. The salt also responded to atmospheric changes which became a fascinating development within the narrative.

The skirts have since become a recurring symbol in my work. I like the domesticity of the cloth and the physicality of the herringbone stitch that holds the pleats in place. As a garment, the skirt symbolises the uniform of the female. I'm using this imagery in my next work to highlight the halted futures and curtailed horizons that were part of life for these marginalised women. The ideas will be realised in a performance titled *Horizons*. The work is a powerful visual narrative which can be connected to inequalities experienced by women in the workplace today.

### **HW: How do you use and incorporate archives, craft traditions and material histories into your practice?**

PP: My work examines histories that are in the process of being forgotten, even though the underlying narratives are still relevant. Over an extended period, I have studied material and historical archives in an attempt to understand the larger narrative and place of sculpture, installation or performance within a contemporary context.

The materiality of the work incorporates the common substances associated with the fishing industry such as the wool skirts, willow and tar. By using these materials I feel that I'm layering the work with more complex anthropological and societal references.

The craft traditions that surround the industry are incorporated into the sculptural language of the work. This gives the work conceptual weight because they directly refer to and involve traditional making techniques and makers in their construction.



*Horizons* (2020). Wool cloth and cotton.  
Photography: Penny Payne

I'm fortunate to have access to a local willow weaving group who have been generous in helping me to understand of the history and use of willow. Willow was woven to create wicker baskets called creels which were used to carry the catch. It is a skill that is luckily kept alive by such groups of enthusiasts.

**HW: Your work will be part of the exhibition *Sonia Boyce: In the Castle of My Skin* at MIMA in Spring 2021. Can you describe the piece and how you intend a viewer to experience this work?**

PP: *Horizons* is a sculpture, performance and film drawing attention to the role of women in the North East fishing industry. In the filmed performance twenty-five women hold stitched banners/skirts up at Cullercoats Bay, visually blocking the horizon. The act draws attention to the reality of the sea as a place of work and danger rather than recreation for the women. It highlights the inequality of female working environments and the obstacles that

are prevalent. It also draws attention to the sense of community and the triumph of the individual in asserting an independent spirit.

Stitching on the banners echo decorations applied to traditional garments worn by the North East fishing women. The heavy wool skirts, pleated and stitched, are stretched onto willow frames and sealed on the reverse with tar as a symbol of the sealing and preservation of their histories.

Banners will appear within the installation by Sonia Boyce, and displayed as sculptural forms. It is important for me that the viewer experiences the materiality associated with the themes of the work, and understands the labour invested in the gathering of the histories, which is manifested in the pleats and stitching.

By experiencing the physicality of the banners, the observer will understand the scale of the filmed work within the context of the seascape and the environment of the fishing industry. In light of Covid-19, the filmed performance will take place at a later date when safe to do so. In the resulting work, the juxtaposition of the sculptural, filmic and performative aspects of the piece blur the lines in my practice and allow for a multi-layered expression that combines the domestic with the overarching theme of the history of the feminine. The banners as such represent the skirts that the women wore and I feel it's important in the context of the exhibition that the visitor gets to experiences the beauty of their manufacture but also the encumbrance of the cloth, the weight and impracticality of them.

**HW: How does collaborative making manifest in your practice?**

PP: Community was an important aspect of the fishing industry on the North East coast. It feels very important that my new work *Horizons* has a strong collaborative element in the physical creation of the piece. By working with individuals and groups to sew the banners and weave the willow structures, their involvement gives the work greater



*Blue Skies* (2019) Projection. Durham Lumiere 2019.  
Photography: Penny Payne



*Unwoven* (2020) Wood frame, willow and tar.  
Photography: Penny Payne

integrity and insight into the women's working lives and the autonomy the small acts of creating give them.

I gave the women involved in the project basic instructions on the size of the completed work and how to create a herringbone stitch. Leaving all other details to the individual allowed the women to improvise and so imbue their banners with their identity. This method informs the greater narrative of the work. I rather like this window into the private world of the individual as it elevates the banners from the mass produced to the singular.

The performative aspect of the work would not be possible without the collaboration of the volunteers. Working with twenty-five women to physically hold the banners and block the horizon is intrinsic to the work. The women are from all walks of life and all ages. The work takes on a humanity and a physicality that is tangible within the setting of Cullercoats Bay.

By capturing this live event I highlight the transient histories of the women.

Collaboration is exciting within any project. It may be that it revolves around the physicality of a piece and the learning of a new skill or in the sharing of ideas. Artists by their very nature have a broad spectrum of approaches and ideas development which often leads to interesting outcomes when brought together. I've found that connecting with individuals and artists alike has led to conversations and other materials that have informed and continually inform the ideas that I have. For *Horizons* I have been able to work with individuals not connected to the arts and with experienced filmmakers and sound engineers. By forming these connections I am able to continually broaden the outcomes of my practice.