

Five texts written for Sprengel Catalogue, Hannah Collins, 2015

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1. JOURNEYS

I am not sure of the moment that I stopped being someone who sometimes travelled to places and began to move in a more reflective mode and to think of motion as a vital part of my art. As a traveler I developed an ability to adapt to diverse circumstances into which was incorporated a wider sense of home, to reach a destination as an exercise of will, and to navigate through the unpredictable.

The ability to adapt came at least partially from the accommodation of my father who suffered from severe paranoid schizophrenia and whose lifestyle was dislocated. Over many years I focused on surviving the time I spent with him. I followed his twisted and fragile connections with everyday life, as I tried to appreciate the meaning and repercussions of his re-arranged connections. I used my mental agility to follow loops and knots of his mind and cleared time to prepare prior to meeting him and more time recovering. These periods were challenging.

One Christmas day in the cold hut in the Sussex countryside where he was then living, we sat on broken chairs and ate sardines out of a tin. He found this a satisfactory way to spend Christmas in the company of a loved one. I became more comfortable with a very basic existence than with anything more elaborate. I was able to see more clearly when everyday clutter was at a distance. When, at the age of twelve, I went to see his doctor in the hospital at Harrogate I was warned of the futility of any idea of communication in the future. I had been standing by my father who had been committed and tied to a bed.

In contrast, my mother was always working. At two in the morning I almost always found her writing neatly on the ever present galley proofs. Faced with my father's illness, my mother worked her way up through Penguin, in an era when paperback books were revolutionising reading. She became the managing editor.

On one occasion my father sat in the park outside my studio in Hackney and asked me if I ever wondered where he found the strength to continue, whereas I often felt that much of the agony was reserved for those supporting such a sick person. Travel was the way to distance myself from the problems associated with my father, and also to encounter a sense of peace, or to face the world on different terms. I needed to reach a place that was not tied to my own history, class or age.

Travel would have seeped in through my genes. My grandfather, on my mother's side was a direct descendent of Joseph Banks, the scientist and botanist who accompanied Captain Cook on the Endeavour. The voyage to Australia and New Zealand lasted from 1768 to 1771. My grandfather Rodwell Banks, was an engineer working in the development of early aircraft, he was a pilot himself; he was in charge of engine production during the Second World War and developed fuels for the successful land speed record attempts on the salt flats of Utah. I was familiar with these events from his photographs of the era that were kept in a brown envelope. He left a trail of overwhelming achievement.

I knew almost nothing about Joseph Banks other than that he was a man consumed by nature who had recorded and gathered plants from the other side of the world. His small engraved portrait hung on the wall in my grandparents' flat, but I imagined Australia in its entirety as a series of plant drawings. Banks's journey itself was too long, too distant, too unfamiliar to imagine.

My first important journey as an artist was to Istanbul. I wandered through Eastern Europe shortly after the Berlin Wall came down. I made a large format photograph of a tree covered with memorial plaques outside a former Nazi prison. Beside it a new young tree had been planted. I found a huge, stunted tree that grew beside a giant steel factory. Outside Warsaw was a gypsy camp where homes were dug out of the ground. There, smoked food in plastic bags hung from branches.

My journeys have just a skeleton of intent. I experience a lightness that I never feel near home. The photographs begin with chance encounters. I return to the sites to allow a series of references and relationships to develop. The process is not immediate, the opposite of imagery made in the moment. The results reveal themselves slowly. What

leads to the image is a journey – people encountered on the way, places stumbled upon, the radio in the car, snow that caused delays, an accident caught in the wing mirror – everything that couldn't be photographed. The picture is a result of chance and circumstance.

The journey would be meaningless if nothing were made. The lightness of travel needs to be reflected in the lightness of the imagery.

2. CARDBOARD

The streets of Hackney in 1984 looked very different in their appearance to today. They were more deserted and darker. My studio at 10 Martello Street became my home when I moved on from my early marriage and had no-where else to go. I confronted my own company and intentions head-on. The re-invention was harsh. My studio was uncomfortable and cold, and only the caretaker remained in the building at night as you were not allowed to live there. There were no other residents.

In a hulking old brick building on the corner lot opposite the studios was the All Nations, a flourishing West Indian club, that was only open from midnight on a Saturday. Guests poured out between six and seven am on Sunday mornings. Each week, the unlit street below filled with smart cars and couples in formal elegant clothes. I dreaded Saturday nights as the noise interrupted my sleep, already broken with anxiety. The rest of the time the neighbourhood seemed as empty as a desert. During this period I frequently wrote short sentences about events in this environment. This relieved my anxiety and became a part of my working process.

Broadway market, the nearest street with any shops, then reminded me of a harsh, remote Eskimo town. The bare metal shelves of the local supermarket opposite London Fields contained just a few cans. I eventually encouraged myself to go out and explore where I lived – a rough mixture of East London poverty and 70s alternative lifestyle. Through windows and occasional broken panes of several squats you could see the posters pinned to the walls. Printed Indian bedspreads hung as curtains in faded pinks and blues. Small workshops re-cycled all kinds of things. Grubby mechanics mended cars in deep dark spaces. I began to collect material that I found lying around the back streets. Cardboard boxes and plastic wrapping piled up on my studio floor. I gradually developed the idea of transforming them into flattened surfaces by photographing them together.

The first photograph included a television borrowed from the caretaker and my own mattress. I invited two friends who didn't know one another to take part. I lit the scene with care. My aim was to create a momentary place on a real life scale. The temporary combinations seemed to liberate each from its origins.

The pictures included less and less, until I arrived at only cardboard packaging. I saw piles of cardboard carefully left to be collected by homeless people as darkness fell. The piles in my studio resembled the piles on the street – the valued materials amassed by the local dispossessed. The cardboard arrangements appeared endless as if they continued beyond the edge of the image.

For me photography served several purposes: as preparation and thinking, as documentation and eventually as a means to record the staged environments. The cardboard was a protective shell. I drew a picture of a shell for my first and only tattoo and an image of my tattooed back became the invitation card for an early exhibition.

My quest to resolve my relationship with my father continued, he had been diagnosed with severe paranoid schizophrenia. As he deteriorated he became itinerant. At one point he was a patient of R. D. Laing, I lived in a world mediated by Laing's treatments which endowed my father's paranoia and visions with legitimacy. I had to adapt to a new reversed order of thinking. I learned to adapt to these other realities, both individual and social.

My father carried his food around in a bag which also contained bundles of his letters, some of which were written to people he never actually knew. At home when I was a child we had a copy of Roman Vishniac's book of photographs of the Polish ghettos, my father resembled a figure from the ghetto. His family were orthodox Jews emigrated from Poland to England in the 1920s. On arrival they had changed their name from Zabolsky to Collins in an act of reinvention. My paternal grandfather had once owned cinemas in the North of England but by the time I was growing up all that remained of a fortune were a few old documents and redundant investments in funds like the Dresden Municipal Rehabilitation Fund. The carefully amassed money had slowly seeped away and any fortune had turned to dust with the passage of time. My father's illness had begun when he was a student at Cambridge, he then often couldn't sleep for fear of death. Marriage had stabilized him for a few years but the schizophrenia took a permanent hold. He had started a magazine called *Politics and Letters* with Raymond Williams, the author of *Culture and Society*, an important book about the nature of Britain's postwar possibilities. My early childhood contained a sense of optimism, which

was to be overshadowed by illogical events and anxiety. Williams' writing and career flourished while my father succumbed to madness.

My cardboard environments were incorporated with language that described their relationship to the human body. I printed the enormous pictures at night using long strips of photographic paper. During the many hours I looked at the negative image projected in front of me, I mentally inhabited it, creating what seemed like a darkened world in parallel to the world of illuminated spaces. Here I found a connection to surrealism and the irrational world of dreams – a world intimately related to the body. The process mirrored my everyday relationship with my father, whose logic escaped me. Eventually the work acquired its own internal logic, but it began from a point of rupture from the more conventional daily life.

3. ISTANBUL

Signs of Life came about as the result of an invitation in 1992 from the British Council and make a series of works for the 3rd Istanbul biennial. Istanbul's position on the boundary between East and West was highlighted after 1989 when the Berlin Wall had been pulled down. The city seemed porous. An assortment of strange objects appeared on the wide streets, propped up against trees and walls, separated from their origins as if drifting, washed up following a flood. The crowds at the bus station were intense. There was evidence of massive cultural change on the streets, but it was as if a slow, languorous opera was being staged in the surrounding theatre of the city.

A tanker on the Bosphorus Strait floated into view at the top of my camera frame. In a street market on the east side of the city a Soviet made lifeboat sat fully inflated on a cobbled street, an icon of St Francis was propped up against a nearby car tyre. In both images I recognized an emptiness that I had found in the cardboard in my studio. Again these images of the actual fabric of the city allowed me to think of reproducing the surfaces at a scale that related directly to the body.

Things appeared to hover around the periphery of my visual field, sometimes in one position, sometimes another. Nothing was fixed. I was witnessing so much transition and was in transit myself.

Back in my studio I thought of the rolls of thin photographic paper as a skin. The analogy was limited as after the punishing process of development the printed surface of the paper reached a degree of permanence unlike our skin which is in a state of constant growth and decay.

Simultaneous erosion and accumulation seemed to be a defining characteristic of Istanbul in 1992. One scale was personal, intimate and human like the piles of luggage in the Kurdish bus station or the rubbish lingering on the street corners in the old districts. On another scale these transitions were global as East and West cultures touched, buildings were knocked down, repaired, adapted or proudly left standing. Crowded, juxtaposed, old and new, structures seemed randomly positioned. Strange empty spaces emerged in the vacant lots where buildings had once stood.

The layered walls of Istanbul had been peeling and crumbling for centuries. I imagined the walls as a surface on which 35mm film was projected on a continual loop. Sometimes the film ran backwards and giant discarded stones were hauled back into place where they had first been positioned only to fall again at later time. In an area of old factories I saw the blackened walls of a tannery covered with a thick greasy layer. They looked as if they would collapse if cleaned. In the last decade these same walls have been restored. The regeneration of the city is complete and total.

Signs of Life is a marker of a period when transit and travel were different. In less than a generation the ease of recording information has made our sense of place more superficial. The surface of the world has changed irreversibly. The force of globalization is also one of eradication.

4. DESERT

When I first arrived in Barcelona I did not have a studio. I worked in my flat on the third floor with no lift. The building had never been restored, improved or redecorated, though it was built from good materials – marble, wood and brass. The windows on the staircase still contained the original bright coloured panes. There were old water tanks, with rough wooden covers and faded canvas on the roof. A continuous drip feed filled one tank and then the next. When the last was full the water spilled over and ran away. Some occupants were well supplied, others often ran out.

The staircase remained solid though neglected. The wear from generations covered every surface, the walls were battered by the years of moving furniture. The centre of each discolored marble step had been worn. As I was climbing I thought about how time volume and weight interacted. I started to explore how to describe traces and volumes without depicting weight.

It was quickly apparent that it was better to work with light materials, and things I would then use for other practical purposes. My materials became the things that I had to carry up anyway like food and water. The first pictures were of cooking eggs suspended in water. I found a lightness that had never previously been available or which I had never seen. The opening up of relationships with material became, a priority. As I found ways to suspend and remove weight, balloons appeared as grapes. The water-filled, almost weightless lettuce leaves had a place in the studio for a short time.

The attempt to picture spaces using less cumbersome means was reflected in my need to move works around without complicated or costly arrangements. I simply rolled the pictures up to pack them. The emphasis was more on the image and less on the object. I wanted to get closer to the more ephemeral and transitory nature of dream imagery.

I am making a new work about the sculpture of Noah Purifoy. Purifoy, an African - American originally from Alabama went to live and work at Joshua Tree after a career spent in Los Angeles. When he went out to the desert Purifoy was over seventy years old. He spent the following fifteen years creating sculptures, covering a desert site with his structures. These were entirely constructed from recycled things on a number of different architectural scales. Visitors can freely enter the remote site down a dirt track through

the scrubland. The sculptures tail off into the infinite space of the surrounding desert. In the background are the distant mountains. Just as I started to photograph the sculptures a rabbit shot out from beneath me. There are no restrictions to the site. It invites the visitor to take personal responsibility for viewing. The site will inevitably return to nature in due course. The impermanence is poignant.

The photographs portray a number of sculptures that appear weightless as if suspended in the air, though they are in fact heavy and cumbersome. A large white work made from packing cases is an ode to Frank Gehry. This structure, the size of a large room, standing on thin legs is both absurd and beautiful. In contrast, a collapsing, tangled, black metal heap lies as a ruin nearby. While the white structure floats, its black counterpart creeps across the desert floor. To the edge of the site is a long wooden scaffold. I thought of it as a rodeo stand, only to discover its gallows humour – the structure has been copied from a Clint Eastwood Western. At night it hovers like a ghost. Wind whistles through its skeletal form. In different lights it interacts with the sky above.

Purifoy grew up in a sharecropper family in the era of the Jim Crow laws. He was unusually well educated with four degrees. His move to Los Angeles in the early 1960s coincided with the excitement at the time. Walter Hopps had then organized both landmark Duchamp and Kurt Schwitters exhibitions in Pasadena, Purifoy was influenced by both. Purifoy became at various times a furniture designer for an up-market Los Angeles department store, a social worker, teacher and a cultural organizer. In 1965 was present during the Watt's rebellion when the district was largely burnt to the ground. There was rage at the entrapment of the ghettos. Afterwards Purifoy and his colleagues roamed the streets picking up the shattered parts of buildings and the melted neon signs. From this negativity and ruin re-purposing and recycling became his working method.

My response to Purifoy's work was immediate and powerful. I was moved by the fundamental questions he posed to ask about his role and place in an era of profound cultural, social and political turmoil. This was apparent through the absurdity of some structures, he did this with great attention to the detail of their surfaces and the combinations of the materials. His interaction with nature was self-evident as I wandered the site. As light fell, works that had seemed wedded to the earth become ethereal in the

nocturnal gloom. There is an inescapable reference to the Southern rural conditions of his past.

I travelled the West Coast recording the voices of those who had taken part in the defiant expressions of the 1960s. The recordings have been mixed to form a soundscape to be heard in conjunction with the photographs. Purifoy's contemporaries are all over seventy years old and many have died. Those who could talk covered a vast array of subjects and styles. African-American artists spoke with the power of poetry of imagining their African heritage. Performers spoke of happenings. They had even created a birth canal, dressed as the Statue of Liberty and pretended to be shot. Black Panthers spoke of their vast organizational task as they demanded change and of the freedom they felt when they began to carry guns. Those from the South spoke of seeing a newspaper image of Emmett Till in an open casket, this picture radicalized a whole generation. Others remembered segregated washrooms and buses. Filmmaker Ben Caldwell spoke of the desert as a place of refuge and safety, revisiting a sense of paranoia that suggested a powerful link to our present culture.

5. THE EDGE

I was particularly aware of daily life on the outskirts of Barcelona when entering or leaving the city on the newly created ring roads that had been built for the 1992 Olympics. By 2000 Chinese-owned warehouses occupied large lots on the industrial fringes of the city. Other everyday routines were being lived in this contested, ambiguous and expanding space.

I entered the barrio of La Mina and eventually I even felt at home there. The Mexican film-maker Alejandro González Iñárritu, who later made *Biutiful* in these same outskirts told me that he had a similar reaction when he came to the city. In the older, outer reaches people lived unsentimental, harsh and exacting lives. The atmosphere was also surprising and enchanting. There was an alchemy that could transform the most difficult moments. I witnessed imagination, desire, longing and loneliness. Children made drawings of animals, cars and friends on the pavement with a piece of chalk. Young and old men danced with precision around a fire. A man played a guitar in the corner of a vast plaza. The huge public spaces of La Mina amplified the beauty of any human gestures, which were visible from far away or from any of the many windows high above. Small individual figures could be seen moving with intention, isolated in the vastness.

My photographs could not neither communicate nor transform sufficiently the language of this periphery.

La Mina, a series of brutalist housing blocks raised in 1973, challenged my sympathetic reading of metropolitan Barcelona. The beaches that stretch north towards the Costa Brava and France remained undeveloped and abandoned. The beaches accommodated an aging electric plant that emptied warm water into the sea. Fishermen and vagrants lived among old workshops and small cafes where owners had survived serving simply beers, cigarettes and some basic stews. Some had never been into the city. Alongside them was La Catalana, a decayed village area where local gypsies kept many horses and people grew vegetables. The village was cut off from the outside by surrounding developments. The only road passed under a railway bridge and behind the massive route out of the city towards France. After the bridge lay the six housing blocks of La Mina. The large

community of gypsies were moved there from Somorrostro, a sprawling shantytown that had been their home since migrating from Andalusia twenty years before.

Photographs of Somorrostro show an intricate semi-urban area, built from re-cycled material, running beside the beach. Carmen Amaya, the most famous of gypsy dancers, whose powerful, severe appearance came from an earlier Barcelona and had been brought up in the shacks. In *Los Tarantos*, a film made by Francisco Rovira Beleta in 1963 when the beach areas were home to the gypsies, Carmen Amaya plays a powerful matriarch fills the screen. Nominated for an Oscar as best foreign film, *Los Tarantos* displays a deeply sympathetic reading of gypsy culture. Rival families play out a version of Romeo and Juliet against the background of the vibrant city.

For a year I remained on the street, because as a woman I could neither enter houses nor be seen with the gypsy leader Manuel Fernandez Cortez who slowly introduced me the community. I took photographs with a large format camera but the fugitive nature of the subjects was frustrating. I had recorded nothing of value, the pictures are a mixture of vacant lots, edges of the scene, people with their backs to the camera warming themselves by fires and entire families who glared back at me. The invisibility of a whole culture was the characteristic I wanted to negotiate. I was neither directly reporting nor recording. I had to find another way to work to look beyond what a still camera seemed to offer.

Over a year I worked with a Manuel to gather a group of participants to develop an as yet unspecified film. As I was negotiating a relationship between the film crew and the community I was also negotiating my own relationship with their leader, whose life could not have been more differently defined from my own. I learnt that jealousy could be a valued and useful emotion, that time could be made to stand still, and that status was clearly shown by small and important gestures. Manuel appeared at my door with a collection of fingernail- sized fossils carefully laid out on his palm. In the space of a breath he had annihilated any sense I might have had of his lack of knowledge about a deep history.

Over a few months I found funding, built up a crew and got to know some fundamental principles of filming. The community controlled the action and imagery itself. My first attempt to film complex relationships was made on 35mm film and the director of

photography was the son of the cinematographer for *Los Tarantos*. He had been on the sets in 1963 helping his father and knew how to work with gypsies. At the time when *Los Tarantos* was made there was a trust in the power of film as a unifying force. This was obvious in every scene. Mistrust arose in the intervening years. It was as if the brutal architecture was reflected in social relations.

The single permanent testimony to the gypsy community in La Mina is a bust that stands in the middle of the main plaza. It portrays Cameron de la Isla, the most famous of all modern gypsy singers who died nearby in 1992. First hearing the rasping voice of Cameron was one of the reasons I had such utter respect for his culture. Though the statue seemed hideous, it took me months to realize its importance. It stands as a symbol to the artistry, ruthlessness and belief in the gypsy way of life. It was an act of significance to place the statue at the centre of La Mina. Each time I doubted the possible relevance of making a work within another culture and particularly among the gypsies, I only had to walk past the statue.

Through the film the community held up a mirror to themselves. I filmed from a low angle at all times, except when I went to the top of the imposing blocks. The film was simultaneously presented through five channels. The drama was sustained through the five shifting parallel images. I recently sat with Manuel and reviewed some of the relationships that continued beyond my time in La Mina. The housing blocks are now being pulled down, the Chinese warehouses have expanded, and an annual community memorial event remembers the holocaust. Tio Emilio, who carefully described his community's relationships to death, virginity, marriage and money as well as his career in spaghetti westerns alongside Sophia Loren has died and the Church of Philadelphia with whom I battled when it came to filming, has gained more ground.

Filming the edge from the centre turned out to be as elusive as putting together sheets of cardboard or locating a violin player in a room full of mattresses. The work claimed its own territory when it was taken from the periphery into the clean white space of the museum.