

Lucy Jones in conversation with gallerist Jennifer Gilbert

Tuesday 8 December 2020

Funded by Arts Council England, as part of a series of talks with established disabled artists across the UK.

(Transcribed as well as can be, a few names may be incorrectly spelt)

Jennifer: So for everyone that's just logged on, I've just popped the live captioning link if anyone needs it into the chat box. So if you click on that, it will open up a new screen, where the live captioning will appear if you need to see both at the same time. If you need to see the interpreter's, you can click to pin their video. If you hover over their video, there's three little dots. And if you click on the three dots, it will say pin video, and they'll be pinned to your screen. Otherwise, Lucy I think we'll crack on.

I'm Jennifer from the Jennifer Lauren gallery. And this is Lucy Jones

Lucy: [hello](#)

Jennifer: Lucy's got Jennifer Gilbert on her screen name, but ignore that.

So the point of this talk today is: earlier this year, I carried out some research with some disabled artists around the UK about what they knew was available, and what they understood to be missing. And lots of the artists raised to me that they'd like to hear from established disabled artists about how they got to where they were today. So I managed to get some funding from Arts Council England. And this is the first in a series of talks today with Lucy Jones, who is represented by flowers Gallery in London. If you want to ask any questions, please pop them in the q&a, which is at the bottom of the screen.

We have two interpreters today. Siobhan is on the screen now. And Alex will swap over halfway through and come on the screen if you need to watch them.

A couple of other things, there'll be a series of images on the screen. And after talking with Lucy, we've popped the measurements on the images, so that you can see the scale because some of them are very large. And some of them are very small. And it was important to you, Lucy for people to see the different scales of your work. And for the purpose of having some people on the talk today that are blind artists, we will be describing a couple of the images so that they're aware of the kind of things that we were talking about. So without further ado, we will get started. So Lucy Philip vann wrote a lovely introduction in one of your books about you that said, Lucy Jones, who was born in London in 1955 is renowned for her exhilaratingly challenging, generously life affirming, often discreetly provocative self portraits, and her almost entirely unpeopled landscapes of flaring color and raw wild beauty. So we thought we'd start at the beginning and talk about where your art career started. And I believe you won award an award when you were quite young?

Lucy: it was no big deal. It was at byam shaw and I was about 8 or 9 and I won a sketchbook. So nothing to write home of. I have to tell you, my mother was bowled over and I couldn't understand why my mother was making such a big deal of it. So that was that really.

Jennifer: So after your a levels, you went on to study art. Do you want to tell us about where you went and how you found it trying to get into study art? And how was it when you were actually there?

Lucy: well to be honest I was going to study Geography at Durham University and although I could have done my sister pointed out in no uncertain terms that for somebody who can't really read, would find this incredibly difficult and maybe I should think about going to art school. And for whatever reason I asked my father. He was known for being tight, well not that tight with money, but anyway he said that yes I could go to art school for a year and postpone my Durham trip. And living round the corner from byam school of art which was where I won the prize, and if you had enough money and my father said he would pay for a years tuition so that I could go by myself.

Jennifer: Great and how did you find it when you were there?

Lucy: It was good. I enjoyed it. one of my teachers came and sat me down and said look Lucy if you get your act together you could be really really good at this. And I went oh really, oh okay, so I got my act together. So I did another year at byam shaw which I got a minute grant for and then I went to Camberwell because I wanted to go to a quote kind of if you like established out of the private system, I wante to go to a well established art school – whether that was a good thing I am not sure. I learnt a lot at byam shaw. I probably learnt more at my time at byam shaw than all my time at camberwell actually. It was a very very good foundation. So I cant' remember what the question was.

Jennifer: do you think they were quite supportive of you when you were there Lucy at camberwell?

Lucy: Yes, they were. I think that they. I had a slightly eccentric way of working in that I did a lot of work at home in the evenings because I worked on really big pictures at home and I would get my dad to tie the paintings to stop them toppling over and then I took them into camberwell. So I did 12 foot paintings that I painted in two halves. But camberwell was a very, well in one way it was quite stodgy but I was very much based on easel painting and if you didn't do easel painting you did abstract painting in which case you could do very vey big paintings. But I never got into abstract paintings as I wanted to do figurative work. So I did very different kind of work, but they supported it and I think they were endlessly surprised by me.

Jennifer: Someone's just mentioned that they don't think the captions are working Lucy, so I just need to double check what's going on to give me two seconds.

Right, I'm just going to have to carry on I'm really sorry for the person that needs the captioning. But for some reason, it just keeps saying request access. And it's all logged in. So I have no idea why it's not showing the captions.

I'm really sorry to that person. And there will be a full transcription on my website afterwards that I will do. So I will notify everyone when it's gone live.

But anyway, well, we'll carry on. So after you did your degree, you went to the RCA and you got a scholarship to go to Rome which was in 1982. And you said that this was the first time that you really dared to look at yourself.

Lucy: Well, yeah, that got slightly lost in translation, I tried to correct that bit in the book and never quite got there. It was when I got back to London that I really started to do self-portraits. When I got back home althiygh I did do paintings of London I wanted to, well I started doing self-portraits. I had actually done a self-portrait at camberwell which was admired, and that always encourages one to do this and I did do a couple more at the royal college but when I went to Rome I mainly concentrated on painting what was around me.

That's very fair. There's a quote that I read from you as well, that said, it's like slowly taking a bit out of me of a box and examine them. So how did this make you feel at the time and have you come to terms with this more now when you said you were looking at yourself more and coming to terms with kind of how you looked?

Lucy: Yeah. I think my self-portrait work has developed through many stages and people always want to know why you do things and quite often I really don't know. Even when doing them. But you have to kind of find a reason after you've done them and I did things slowly and gained more and more confidence about describing myself and my world and yes. Sorry I'm waffling. Can you ask something else?

Jennifer: I can ask something else I thought maybe we do a quick description of one of the images that's on the screen now. If you want to tell people what we can see?

Lucy: You can see a head of me in my green glasses which are kind of oval shaped. My face is really yellow and my hair is slightly blue/purple and the background is a turquoise. I was thinking about this the other day actually. People always ask why my landscapes don't have people in them and I think this also applies to the self-portraits. Is that in many ways I am quite a lonely person in that often people with disabilities you are quite lonely and I think one way of expressing that to leave people out of landscapes, to try and explore that idea in my self-

portrait work instead. If that makes sense? In that I am much better one-to-one with people than in a crowd of people.

Jennifer: Yes that makes sense. Lucy someone's asked, well James has asked that he saw the photo that I use to advertise this talk, which is you sitting on the floor and often that is how you work and he's asked, have you found a particular way that you position yourself when you work that's comfortable for you?

Lucy: Um, no. Not really anymore. My balance and everything is getting much much worse and at the moment I am trying to do a self-portrait and I am hanging on to my trolley in the studio but I am absolutely sure I am going to fall over backwards into the pallet of paint and the whole thing will go all over me.

Jennifer: haha

Lucy: but lots more of my work I am doing on my hands and knees. Flowers gallery get you to do something at Christmas which is called small and beautiful – which took a long time and I was leaving my other work. But anyway I have a different desk at the studio that I am hoping will help with posture.

Jennifer: Yes. There was a time when you were younger that you said that you used to always go down and sit on the south bank on the pavement didn't you and kind of work from the floor?

Lucy: Well I would take a tiny little stool and sit on the stool and balance a board on my knee. In a way the southbank was very quiet in the morning and I could get away from the art school and away from everything and it would be completely quiet working on my own on my drawing, which I used to find very relaxing and calming and people wouldn't interrupt me or anything. I could just get on with it.

Jennifer: Joanne has asked, were there any particular tutors or artists that you felt impressed you?

Lucy: When I was at Byam Shaw there was a tutor called Graham Nixon who had a huge influence over a lot of people and when I left byam shaw to go to camberwell I began to be very independent of tutors in that I didn't want to copy what – well didn't want to just end up just doing what everyone else was doing in the art school which is what happened with everyone at camberwell. At byam shaw everyone ending up doing drawings exactly like graham and you'd have a session to draw like graham. So I realised as a painter you just dig your own burrow. It was about identity you see, you needed to hang on to your identity as a

person really and not end up drawing like some of the tutors from the drawing classes you know. I was always trying to do what I wanted to do. Can you ask another question?

Jennifer: I can. So you were diagnosed as dyslexic quite late in your life when you're in your 30s, which I imagine, helped you to understand things a lot more. And in this painting we can see on the screen now you sometimes use words and phrases in reverse, which you call mirror writing in order to stimulate for the viewer the experience that you have had trying to decipher letters being dyslexic. Did you want to tell us a little bit about that?

Lucy: Well, the dyslexia had a huge influence over my life. It does make you very aware that you are often making mistakes, and it distances me from other people because you can't read the books they are reading and you can't keep up and people don't know so you're always hiding in a way because, it is bit like coming out, because you have hidden your shameful secret for so long so when I did start thinking about it and doing something about it it was an incredibly powerful moment in my life. And I also feel, like straightforward writing on a canvas can be too easy the message. The writing on the painting that we are looking at the moment, the purple writing has a painterly quality as well as kind of having a message. So it is not just a message, yes.

Jennifer: I was just going to say Lucy just so that people are aware what we're looking at in case they can't see the image that it's you sitting on what I presume is the ground because it's all like dark underneath you. And you're all dressed in a Bluey purple vest. And you've got bright blue turquoisey legs and a bright blue turquoisey face with your green glasses on and then you've got this back to front writing in purpley color that says watching you looking at me?

Lucy: Yeah.

Jennifer: James has asked, he says that he loves the physicality of your brushstrokes and that it gives your work power and a strong honesty. And he said was this sense of your own physical expression, something you set out to put in the work?

Lucy: I didn't set out to do that. But that was the way I wanted to make marks and marks are very much a part of my work. We are looking at the southbank now and it is really quite an old paintings but it was very much about the mark making and holding paintings together with a very very definite structure which if it didn't have that structure all the paint marks would float away into something else. It has actually got a very strong cross at the bottom of the tree and then the tree is cutting the paintings almost in half. And I have got a train bridge going across the river and an avenue going in the other direction and it is kind of held together by the tree, but with all the paint marks, if it didn't have that structure it would fall apart.

Jennifer: just to say if anyone could put any questions into the chat, because for some reason today, when I try and look at the q&a, I have to almost stop sharing my screen. So if sometimes if you see the screen keeps disappearing, that's the only way it's letting me look at the q&a. So if you've got any more questions, if you could pop them into the chat box, I can see that quickly. But today the QA does not want to play. Anyway, let's get back to you. We're just switching interpreters to Alex now. Okay. So I guess returning to your life history, and sort of when you came back from Rome, you used to teach at Chelsea School of Art and the Slade in London. Could you tell us about how those roles came about and what it was like for you to be teaching in those roles?

Lucy: Well, I went to the private view of Francis Bacon at the Tate, not quite sure how that came about, and one of the college seniors saw me at the private view pointed at me and said I want you to teach painting at Chelsea and an old tutor of mine called David (heaton?) was also teaching at Chelsea so I got bought in as a part time tutor which was great. U did really enjoy Chelsea and I really liked teaching there. I was very lucky to do this, and I got the job at the slade because David then moved to the slade and I moved with him – but I only did a day a week in each college, which was plenty.

Jennifer: That sounds very interesting.

Lucy: Well, it's not very encouraging is it? But nearly everything in the arts is a bit like a snowball rolling down a hill and it collects stuff on the way and as people see your work or like your work and then someone else picks it up and they like it and so on and all of this was incredible chances that they wanted me to teach – an incredible chance.

Jennifer: Was there a lot of support in place for you to be able to do those teaching?

Lucy: Well, no. Absolutely none. It was terrifying. Absolutely terrifying. I missed my students when I gave up teaching but at least I wasn't completely terrified anymore and that was a relief.

Jennifer: Did you give up your teaching when you decided to move out of London?

Lucy: Yeah, I did get to too difficult and too complicated to keep going to London.

Jennifer: so, in what year did you move out of London? Because you moved into the countryside, didn't you?

Lucy: It was about 16 years ago. It was really good.

Jennifer: And do you think that moving out of London affected sort of your ability to be seen within the art scene? And maybe that you went off people's radars? Or do you think that wasn't the case?

Lucy: For me, I guess I don't think it was the case. It was a kind of, well a new partner and I that kept going. I had support from Jackie Wolfsagar (?) of the financial times – she saw my work and really really supported my work and there were all sorts of things. But somehow this came about and the snowball got bigger and bigger.

Jennifer: So, How did Jackie come about to see your work? And if she was very supportive, where did she see in the first place?

Lucy: She saw it at a show at flowers gallery for the first time. She had known of me for years but she had never come to see my work and I think she was blown away by it so that kind of started that ball rolling. And I have always had incredible support for my work. Originally sarah kent supported my work in my final show at the royal college. I got a minute mention in time out and years later that connected up matthew and the flowers gallery. Just little things and you never know what might connect you up with the next thing.

Jennifer: Definitely. So I guess it'd be good now to talk about flowers Gallery in London because it's a contemporary art gallery with several locations not just in London. So how did they come about to represent you in the first place?

Lucy: Well, his name has gone out of my head. They have artist of the day and a friend of mine, his name has gone out of my head, and was asked to pick someone to do artist of the day and he picked me. He came to my studio and he said right I am going to pick you for artist of the day and he had never met me before, I wasn't a friend of his. Matthew can write the name. Well I was doing artist of the day and the financial times came and they picked up my work at that point and put it in the paper. And that's how – then Matthew offered me a proper show, I mean a three-week show the following year and I did that – nothing sold until the very last day. I had gone away with my new man Peter and came back .. oh Oliver bevan, well someone from the met in new york had come in and bought several pieces of my work for the met. I was so excited for my new man that it didn't matter nothing had sold. But this guy from the met in new york bought my work on the last day of the show so that was an achievement – I was lucky that he was in London and that he went to flowers gallery that day – so matthew kind of kept me on.

Jennifer: Was it I guess just a quick thing for people that don't know artists of the day is something that flowers gallery has done for many years now. And they select people to select other artists that have one one day show in the gallery that don't use so it's like from 10am to

6pm your work hangs in the gallery and then it's out the door so you were picked up through being part of a one day show Weren't you Lucy?

Lucy: Yep

Jennifer: And Lucy could you just describe this is one of your landscapes on the screen. Could you just describe to us what we can see in it?

Lucy: You can see a ploughed field which is painted in a reddish red colour and the red colour is scattered throughout the hills, where the field is ploughed. So there is red and green which is there but they are complimentary colours so I am working the green against the red. And there are yellow fields either side, probably of rapeseed oil and then as it goes backwards up the hill there are dotted around fields and hedges and then quite a turbulent sky.

Jennifer: Yes it is, it looks pretty moody

Lucy: Yes

Jennifer: Matthew's written in the chat that it was William Lieberman, the director of the 20th century art at the Met in New York that bought some of your work from your first exhibition.

Lucy: Thank you.

Jennifer: Matthew is the font of knowledge for us today.

Lucy: Well, yes. He's got a good memory. Oh I forgot to mention Peter de Francia – he was very supportive of my work. He worked at the Royal College and I found him absolutely terrifying – he had a vast memory and intellect but he was very supportive as this very strange creature who kept her head down! And just got on with her work

Jennifer: Yeah, it's good that people are so supportive of you. Would you say? So there's some people on this call today that I guess aren't represented by galleries and are quite keen for one day maybe to be represented by a contemporary gallery. So could you say maybe how you think it's impacted your career by being part of something like Flowers Gallery?

Lucy: For me, hugely because I can't get around easily to talk to people so promoting my own work. So it is huge. The only thing I would say is promoting my own work is a partnership between the gallery and me and quite often when people get a gallery they assume that that is it and that they will do all the promotion and I see it as more of a partnership between the gallery and you. But how you get a gallery now I just don't know. You know the Arts Council

bought two pieces of work when I came back from Rome, so all these things, I don't even know if the arts council are buying anything at the moment because there is no money. And in a way I have been doing a very unfashionable thin. I have been doing figurative painting that has on the whole been regarded for the last 30 years not very fashionable. So if it was a sculptor or more of a conceptual artist I might be more in vogue. But I have kept at it year in and year out.

Jennifer: I think you've said before as well that your landscapes for you tend to sell better than your portrait work.

Lucy: Yeah it does. But to my amazement people do buy the portraits, which is great.

Jennifer: Great. I think on the screen now we can see quite an abstract landscape in comparison to some of the ones we've just been looking at. And Cassie's asked, Do you use structure in the same way in your watercolor landscapes as well as in your oil paintings?

Lucy: yes I mean this is an oil painting but yes I do. I make the structure in the drawings and then I use the structure of the drawings to play about with the colour in the paintings.

Jennifer: Cool. yeah, that's perfect. We've talked about the Arts Council, which was one of my questions, which was good. You say sometimes that your work, you use it as a camouflage and like a mask, which I thought was a really interesting way of describing it. So can you talk about why you use that language around your work?

Lucy: With the self portraits? I'm not quite sure what I meant. Where did I say that?

Jennifer: I've been reading your books. I've pulled this out of your books. But if you can't remember that's totally fine.

Lucy: I can't think what train of thought I had there.

Jennifer: I'll ask another question. We can move on. So another thing that I read in your book, Tom Shakespeare, who's a disabled artist is a great friend of yours. And he's written some incredible things in your book. And at one time, he says she is an artist who happens to be disabled. She does not use art as a political strategy. She does not even want to be categorized as a disabled artist because it feels to her like a limitation. Cerebral palsy, dyslexia and depression a part of her biography, but they're not on the label for the artwork anymore than being a woman or living in Ludlow should define her or explain what she does. So do you want to talk a bit about you know, these conversations that you might have with Tom about, you know, how you're described, when you talk about yourself and how other people might talk about you?

Lucy: I hope and think that people have a respect for me as an artist and I don't think that all the people who have supported my work have just done it because they feel sorry for me, or they want to help me, because I just don't think that could go on all your life. And I very much struck out as a painter who happens to have disabilities. However, there is a tension between me wanting to poke fun, to poke at the world and just very gently kind of point out that there are differences. Can we go back to an image called handicap. 'With a handicap like yours' – this was a doctor describing me and I just wanted to poke him a little bit and say what do you mean with a handicap like yours, do you mean I have an extra hand which is coming onto the canvas – so what exactly do you mean – so I thought of that title and quite often I use tongue in cheek titles to just poke the world. To make people think but I still want the work very much to be about painting and even if people might not like the painting with me standing clutching my stand, and I have painted a gorgeous green colour behind me and a top in a complimentary colour purple and the title 'awkward beauty' comes out of the tension between the colour which I think is quite beautiful and the slight poking of the doctor. They were trying to say with a handicap like yours what do you expect so I wanted to poke that idea a little bit with a third hand.

Jennifer: Yeah. Oh, that makes sense. I like that you're bringing a bit of humor but like you said doing it with a subtle poke with a bit of humor. Yeah. So, you know, raising the thought of what exactly do you mean when you say that to me? I find that really interesting.

Lucy: Yeah. That's how my work has developed. Looking at myself through self-portraiture has gradually developed in this way and I have the confidence now to poke a bit of the world. Just to make people think but also use painting and paint marks in a very beautiful way to make it.

Jennifer: So Lucy, we've come into the end of our time now. So, you know, throughout your life, you've in certain situations, like you went to the Lucien Freud private view, and it happened to be you were in the right place at the right time to kind of be offered these roles. And through being selected as artist of the day with flowers gallery, that's been an incredible opportunity for you as an artist to get your work picked up by this contemporary gallery and stuff. I'm just going to flick back through to where we were. Because the links not on there. Annoyingly. Everything is getting wrong today. If you go to flowers gallery website Lucy has an online exhibition currently there, which the link should be there and it's not showing hopefully Matthew could pop the link in the chat for me, but I thought we'd end Lucy by saying to you that you know I did this series of talks I'm going to be doing for disabled artists and emerging disabled artists and those that even those that might have been plugging away for a while but have had no joy is there any words of advice that you might offer them from you that you might offer to these artists or things that they could think about or anything?

Lucy: just keep going and just keep plugging away. One of my teachers at camberwell said you'll be alright lucy as you have the tenacity and endurance to keep going and a lot of it is about endurance ad keeping going and that's great advice. Because all of the things that I used to know have changed and the public tend to be more interested in very conceptual work, which I think is a pity but there you go and partly academics have kind of taken over the world in a way. But maybe if your work fits into that it's okay. But I really don't think it helps to shove your disability down people's throats. It won't help at all.

Jennifer: Is that you saying that from experience Lucy?

Lucy: Oh yes. It is. It is the same with gender stuff like this. If you over step the mark then you get a reaction back and maybe that's because I am not brave enough to stand up for disability. Although I do stand up for disability I don't shove it down people's throats.

Jennifer: That's a good point about the fact that you're saying that maybe you're not brave enough because I know some disabled artists that would you know, are very happy to put it out there and take what's coming back so that they can explain their situation and why they're doing what they're doing.

Lucy: Yep.

Jennifer: Thank you for sharing that with us. And thank you for chatting with me today. This brings us to the end of our conversation.

Lucy: Have a look at my book as I express myself a lot better through my book and through writing. I am sorry at the beginning of this interview that I started blanking out which is not very clever but I hope everyone got something from this interview so thank you for listening.

Jennifer: I think people have got quite a lot so that someone's even written that they feel more confident in themselves through listening to this talk, and that it's been the most inspiring talk of 2020. And Matthew has popped the link to your online exhibition with flowers gallery for me in the talk. So thank you very much for talking to me today, Lucy and thank you to flowers gallery for helping me out with all the images and all the help with the talk. And thanks to the interpreters today. Alex and siobhan and all that's left to say is goodbye and I hope everyone has a wonderful day.

Lucy: Bye. Bye. Thank you to the interpreters.