

Monochromatic Minds | Pre Recorded Talk | Gwyneth Rowlands  
With Dr. David O'Flynn and Rose Ruane | July 2020

03:38

hello I'm Jennifer from the Jennifer Lauren gallery, and I'm here today with Dr. David O'Flynn and Rose Ruane who have been researching Gwyneth rowlands, and we're going to hear more about her life. So, If you'd like to say hello.

04:28

So can you start by introducing us to who you are and what your relationship is to Gwyneth?

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Maybe I'll go first if that's okay rose. so i'm dr david o'Flynn. I'm by trade a consultant psychiatrist but I've been running the Adamson collection for about 12 years now. thousands in the collections - the body of work created by long term patients in the so called netherne hospital facilitated and helped by the artist Edward Adamson. And a big part of the work is about 300 objects by Gwyneth rowlands, who was a patient we think, probably between 1965 and 1983, that kind of time

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and I'm rose. so, I'm an artist and an author, and I'm currently doing a PhD in creative writing at the University of Glasgow, that's involved in exploring the Adamson collection through creative writing, and through spending time with the archival material that's held in the wellcome I became aware of, Gwyneth's manuscript fox hunting, where she told some of her life story in the run up to her confinement in Netherne, and where she compiled her artistic influences and immediately made the jump from one into explorer fiction to explore the facts of the woman and work because it was there in her own words and she expressed towards the end of her life a clear desire to be talked about and so immediately this fiction began and she wanted to talk about the fact of greatness in her life and work.

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Great. Can you tell us a little bit about Gwyneth's life before she went into the institution. Well, the little that we know.

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Rose?

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Well, we know that she taught English, and that that was what she did when she travelled around the world, which was what she ended up doing a lot as a young woman. So for

example from fox hunting, we learned that she was teaching at a Jewish school in Berlin in the events leading up to the Second World War, she talks about experiencing the pupils beginning to disappear from her school. And then, when she left Berlin to come back to the UK, just as the war was beginning she smuggled out the belongings of a Jewish friend so she came back to England to sell. She was wearing her friends jewelry and fur coat and then she didn't stay in England for very long. She then spent time travelling the rest of the world traveling around Africa, South America, the Middle East, Egypt, and teaching English wherever she went. she had a lot of adventures she was very intrepid she talks about the war seriously. But later she was very involved in the sort of textures and pleasures of the world she talks a lot about oranges and embroidered underwear and amazing textiles and, and then there's these incredibly moving accounts of her upon her way back to England and seeing the devastation of war and then after that the life story really peters out. she makes a reference to teaching when she was back in England, but she doesn't talk greatly at all about the events leading up to going into the institution.

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David, can you tell us about these flints that we can see on the screen now and where are they currently housed.

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So they are amazing. I think some of the most important parts of our collection in many ways and then people don't really know them yet so the story goes as follows. The art started going on in the studio in 1946. She probably went to the studio quite early in her admission which we think is around the 1960s and started as not seeing herself as an artist and she wanted to copy pictures of things, particularly butterflies onto pebbles. We've got quite a lot of these butterfly pebble pictures, very meticulous and most like folk art. kind of traditional made meticulously copying - very elegant. There's always a myth Roger Cardinal said to me there's always a myth around outsider artists, apparently one day, I would say have you thought about trying something else, possibly, and she allegedly picked up some Flint's from the fields around the asylum in Sussex and lots of things in the fields, and then started painting on them. And we have probably about 250. so the collection moved from Netherne to (name?) in 1983. And we recovered sort of four carrier bags about 200 Flint's from Ashton, two years ago, they were left in the horse trough with another bunch. And they were a combination of a lot of other materials. There's some wonderful sort of Old Miss by vantine iconic pictures on lino with gold paint very faded, you couldn't really photograph them. quite a lot of bones and lots of bits of piping - all found materials, any parameters you could use. and also there's a lot of very little sweet little animals like dogs and seals but I prefer these complex objects, the ones where she's painting on every surface, every angle is covered. And so much figurative or abstract interest somebody who loves them and pointed out. she often paints on the bottom of the flint. People use Flint. So we quite like them. So as I think rose says, and our new raw vision article

coming out very soon. We talk about the butterflies to small animals to the compact pieces. But there's no real evidence for that, and we suspect she carried on doing certainly little animals, and the complex Flint's probably at the same time. But it's clear she doesn't alter the stone at all. And she's clearly decided by the surfaces of the stone to put her expression on there.

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Where are they now?

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So, they are six in the reading room, wellcome. Second floor when it opens again, just by the straight jackets and the Freud's couch in the corner. The rest are in the old bethlem museum in boxes waiting for a home. We're very keen to keep them in the UK. So we're connected with maudsley a mental health hospital in London. There's a new build going up and the current plan is. We're going to have a Gwyneth rowland's cabinet on each floor of the building. We have some on display at Lambeth hospital at a mental health hospital in Brixton, and the people using the services and the patients really value the objects and we think they could look fantastic because we don't really want them in the vault of a museum. we don't want them disappearing outside. So the idea they have a life in a mental health unit with people having their treatment that can gain something from seeing them, will be wonderful.

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Definitely. So the flints are a part of this larger collection that you said is the Adamson collection. Can you tell us a little bit more about that collection of work.

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So it's started in 1946, and finished 1981, and all work done in a room with adamson facilitating. Adamson set up in the 1940s to create the art studio and art therapy, which are quite diverse, but pretty much the same. So, he created a space provided materials and encouraged people to express freely. So we reckon we got about five and a half thousand works from about 100,000 when he retired after 30 years. 2000, the drawings are by a sculptor Cora Linda Polanski, and her work. His sculptural work is some of the best in the museum. The best are in our store, and the drawings are being stored at wellcome. There's 10,000 drawings and paintings by about 100 people they all gifted to wellcome. They are now called the adamson collection at the Wellcome collection. And they're being catalogued, they're being photographed digitalised, they are available on request. But till you have the visual digital catalog they're hard to find but for us that's amazing so the huge chunk is authenticated and safe at the wellcome forever. And there's about 50 pieces, maybe 60 pieces at the American Visual Art Museum in Baltimore. Because, Rebecca hoffberger, the founder and director was great friends of Edward's, in 1990s, he donated work to there from when they opened. So it is

a scattered collection, we don't have our own home. But we are very keen to keep the collection in the UK and keep it together.

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Rose, what have you uncovered since you've been doing your research. is there anything that's come to light that we didn't really know before.

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I think the complexity and richness of her life story and actually, and the kind of amazing literary brain that she had and the sort of free association that you see in some of the work like that kind of religious iconography playing off against pattern and, you know, different eras and little overtones of Picasso. it's really evident however playful it is there's no accident to it that she was drawing on a wealth of cultural influences and a huge reading of poetry and understanding of art history both sort of theoretically and in terms of how extensively she toured those historical sites during the period of time where she was traveling. I suppose it's allowed us to understand how she engaged with the world. the fact that she was a very sort of sensory person. The way she engaged with the textures of the world is very apparent in the work and seems to reflect back to you know when David's talking about the way that they're housed in the cabinets in the hospital at the moment and the aspiration for them to be on every floor there's a real sense when people look at them have that desire to touch them and explore them that seems to go directly from the way she experienced the world. the way she made the work and the way that people experience an exhibition. And so I think it's sort of allowed us to feel a sort of through loan from her influences to the effect of the work now when it's exhibited, definitely.

I think we're pretty sure she didn't create any further art objects, after discharge. She spent the rest of her life in touch with adamson, but working on fox hunting work on this three volume large wonderful object to tell her story, and interesting commentary. She calls it a commentary on the stones.

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Okay. Did she ever live to see her stones exhibited anywhere?

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she didn't ever travel to any of the exhibitions, but she became increasingly aware through her correspondence with the Adamson collection that they were there and she asked for photographs, she saw documentation, and she was given all the sort of interpretive materials or advertising materials and a lot of them are pasted into Fox thing in the sort of colonized passages, and there's a very clear, growing comfort with that. And as she started to understand the fact that the stones were out there having a life and increasingly an appetite to think of yourself as an artist and, and she'd really hoped that foxhunting might be published

she had grand designs on being published by Faber who published I suppose her literary heroes Seamus Heaney and. And so yeah, she definitely knew about it, although she never went to any of their exhibitions because she was pretty fresh out of the institution. she lived to a ripe old age but she was physically quite frail, by the time the exhibitions were taking place, but she knew of them, and she was pleased and excited by the knowledge that the work was out there in the world

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in fact she really sort of started dropping out of sight during the 1980s. The 1960s, 1970s were very influential. But then art therapy moved away for Adamson's point of view, and the collection pretty much dropped out of sight so when I started the rescue projects in about 2010, it was all in boxes and cupboards in a mental hospital, it really dropped out of sight. So there are very few exhibitions, after the Ontario show.

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so until you started to uncover it again?

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Yeah, well, joy.

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it's about to appear in the new edition of Raw vision so can you tell us about what we can expect from this article?

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It was wonderful, working with both wonderful collaborators we both had such fun. I think we just are delighted to, to feel we know her little bit. I think she was almost sensed outside the asylum. That was the end of the story. And to make a full rounded amazingly brave woman charging around the world was fantastic. I think we gave a bit of her story, and I think we really try and give a sense of the works. There are many selected some of them maybe have more signature pieces which is great. Hopefully we will wet the appetite To want to know more about her, because I think she should be well known in these kind of art circles, and she isn't yet. I Feel people are going to be drawn to her work. So it's exciting to be in with launching her to the world properly.

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Definitely, definitely. Great, well thank you for talking with me today about Gwyneth. And I'm going to say goodbye

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thank you for sharing her work and the wonderful show you had.

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That's quite alright. What a pleasure.

Thank you for letting us talk about Gwyneth today.

Bye.