

ARTIST Q&A

LAURA
ELLENBERGER

Tell us a bit about yourself and your background. How did you begin your career as an artist?

In 2011 I finished a four year BA fine art degree with honours at the National Art School in Sydney which was mind changing (as art school is intended to be). I live between Sydney and London where I have a full time studio practice.

Prior to this I was a photographer in South Africa where I was involved with documenting the political struggle and social issues during the Apartheid era. Just as it became visibly dangerous for me to be working independently in the field I managed to secure a top job with a national lifestyle magazine. It gave my work incredible exposure and I went on to specialise in architectural and décor work using a 4X5 inch plate camera. I enjoyed a lot of free reign in my creativity and learnt to develop my creative practice without prompting from outside.

What is your creative process like?

I usually work on two or three drawings at once. I use them to work off each other and constantly switching between them keeps them alive and not over-worked. I also have several threads on the go at once and revisit each repeatedly during the year. I draw, paint and photograph. I rely on time to test the integrity of my work and find that development over time consolidates it.

You've lived and worked all over the world including Johannesburg, Cape Town, London and Sydney. How do you think this has had an effect on your practice?

It's had a huge impact on who I am which has naturally informed my creative journey. Living in different places and getting to appreciate different ways of thinking has helped me realise that there is not necessary a right and a wrong, just different ways of looking at things. This

open ended-ness is evident in my work and leaves space for the viewer to engage.

Who has been the biggest influence on your work? What other artists do you admire?

Sculptor Marc Quinn was an inspiration which led to the first life mask I took of my subject and which developed into the veiled drawings. Fiona Pardington's still life photographs of the life masks of various Maori heads have been an influence. Richard Diebenkorn and Alberto Giacometti deal with the figure in space in a way which fascinates me. I never get bored by Andrew Wyeth's dry brush paintings which are imbued with a presence which isn't always visible.

Why did you choose the medium of drawing?

I majored in painting and chose to do drawing for my honours year because at the time I felt I could develop my conceptual thinking faster through drawing. Drawing is process driven, and drawing is thinking. Philip Guston said that he draws and draws until he is ready to paint, and for the moment I am very engaged with drawing and its endless possibilities.

Does your work have an underlying theme or idea?

I'm interested in the human condition, people's thoughts and the fact that we never really know what happens below the surface. At the same time I respond to the surface and how it feels, and my drawings engage with both – the physical and the psychological.

What is the symbolism behind the veils?

I hadn't thought of the veil as a symbol although it can represent the physical skin (the wax and paper texture) which we are sure about, and underneath it is that which is less tangible – thoughts, emotions. The veil transforms the drawing from a drawing of a face – the outside, towards something deeper – a mirror of the viewer's thoughts - the inside.

My work is temporal and meditative. The veiled drawings hold time. The space behind the veil creates endlessness, an undefined space for just being. The quiet nature of the work is a contrast to the sometimes frenetic world we live in.

Does the audience play a large part in your art making practice or is it more of a personal process?

Both. The head drawings start in a personal way but I develop them beyond the personal towards the universal, and viewer's quiet engagement completes the work. The non-confrontational nature of the closed eyes invites one to gaze and linger. The full impact of this experience must happen in the real as the three dimensional quality of the drawing and the subtlety of the work doesn't translate onto a flat surface.

Walk us through a typical day at work in your studio.

I can't say that I have typical days but I am in the studio almost seven days a week and there are bursts of concentrated productivity which can last up to ten days at a stretch. I am fortunate to be close to London and the galleries and these visits are a break from the focus in the studio.

What has been your biggest career highlight/achievement?

To have gone back to study as a mature student was an incredible experience. I had a solo photographic show when I was 21 at a prominent art gallery in Johannesburg without realising what an achievement it was then, and now I feel very fortunate to have broadened by creative thinking through art and art history and to have this opportunity to show at a progressive and energetic gallery in Sydney.

How do you see your practice evolving in the future? What's next?

Now I am leaning towards developing a body of work which links my old photographic experience and my more recently developed artistic eye. My negatives have come out of storage after ten years so I am curious to see if anything can be developed further.

I will stay committed to exploring what lies below the surface and the ever present undefined undercurrent. I am interested in space, both physical and psychological. I like to leave the viewer with something unexplained, something to wonder about.