

# EAST QUAY

A sculpture of a yellow tree trunk with a pink figure in the background. The tree trunk is the central focus, showing a textured, yellowish-brown surface with a hollowed-out section. In the background, a pink, rounded figure is visible, featuring a large, dark, oval-shaped opening. The overall composition is set against a plain white background.

**REVEAL AND CONCEAL**

10.09.2022 - 02.01.2023

Laura Ford

## Laura Ford, *Reveal and Conceal* by Hettie Judah

*My piece of sculpture (usually figures) do not represent only study in forms. They represent emotional states usually of a painful kind – such as... impending engulfment (under water) a very old theme.*

Louise Bourgeois (*Psychoanalytic Writings*, c.1958)<sup>1</sup>

Laura Ford's sculpture invites us to respond to and acknowledge our animal self – the self that reveals itself in our unbidden thoughts, in disinhibited drunk behaviour, or moments of overwhelming emotion. This instinctive, un-edited version of ourselves is one that we associate with childhood: those years in which raw sensory response to situations can consume the body. In the arena of non-verbal communication, there are few things as starkly eloquent as a toddler's tantrum, a young child skipping down the street, or the hunched shoulders of an adolescent sulk.

The children and animals that populate Ford's sculptural universe are neither children, nor animals, precisely: they perform instead as avatars for feelings or states of various kinds. Ford is often associated with feminist artists of an earlier generation – notably Kiki Smith and Paula Rego – but their casts of birds, beasts and human characters are used to very different ends. Where Smith explores the symbolic and mystic vocabulary of various cultures, and Rego the dark and redemptive powers of fable and fairy tale, you need no knowledge of art historical symbolism to understand Ford's work. Whether animal or human, her figures instead speak to us at an instinctive level. With the faces masked, or cloaked in elaborate costumes, they are reduced to a kind of raw abstract personhood. We read Ford's sculptures as we read the body language of living humans, checking for signs of stress, fear, anger, shame or anxiety in the way that they hold themselves and relate to other figures in a group.

The lower space at East Quay hosts what seems to be a motley array of children in masquerade. Some wear animal costumes – a frog, an octopus and a pink poodle – albeit these are animals with the simplified cartoonish quality of plush toys. They might have wandered away from a birthday party or school play but while their outfits are festive, their demeanour is anything but. The little pink octopus appears isolated and lost in thought, while the frog and poodle are watching anxiously. Ford made this trio for a public exhibition in Cardiff in 2016: they were positioned in a glass shopfront looking out toward other figures positioned on the wall of Cardiff Castle.

At Watchet, they are reimagined within a huddle of figures manifesting intense emotional states.

*Two Love/Hate Girls* (2014) hide behind balaclavas, their pockets filled with miniaturised versions of themselves, as though trapped within a hall of mirrors. *Three Sorrow Filled Cats* (2014) dressed in bonneted Victorian capes give the mournful big-eyed stare of a manipulative pet soliciting treats. *Pale Fat Ghosts* (2019) weeps extravagantly as she grasps a pair of demon dolls to her chest, as though inviting them to communicate on her behalf.

In these unabashed public displays of feeling we are party to something that might otherwise remain private – Ford's figures are physically costumed and masked, but emotionally naked – such is the 'reveal' of the exhibition's title. Children and animals are a useful cypher for Ford precisely because we consider them to be open and honest.

Michel Foucault's study of prisons, schools and military structures *Discipline and Punish* (1977)<sup>2</sup> includes an Eighteenth Century engraving of a twisted oak sapling lashed to a stout pole, forcing it into an upright position. Foucault found the engraving in an orthopaedics manual: the tree was intended to suggest a child's body, and the straightening that could be achieved with corrective restraints. But it also became a useful metaphor for psychological control, and a system of education and discipline that forcefully trains the developing mind and body. The end goal of such a system is to bring the subject to a state of docility in which it internalises and reproduces the controlling imperative, and compliantly polices its own (and others') actions.

The lashed tree in *Discipline and Punish* is the spiritual forebear of Ford's *Espaliered Girls* (2007) – child figures in which the upper half resembles a violently pruned and disciplined fruit tree.<sup>3</sup> At East Quay, Ford has positioned her *Espaliered Girls* before the other figures like a living fence. Having themselves been submitted to a violent form of control, the trained tree figures in turn exert control over their peers. Part of the social conditioning we receive in the transition between childhood and adulthood is to rein in – or at least hide – our feelings. Such is the control that the *Espaliered Girls* are attempting to exert over the other sculptures. In keeping the group contained along the back wall of the gallery, branching arms extended, the *Espaliered Girls* prevent us getting dangerously close to feelings that have apparently slipped beyond the limits of social acceptability.

Different revelations and concealments are underway upstairs. A new series of watercolours picture cats in various states of submersion. They are, at first glance, comic. The urge to laugh at feline behaviour seems to be near-universal: a cat video

that's funny in Yokohama will also raise a chuckle in Yeovil. There isn't much material stuck to the walls of Ford's studio, but of the two pictures taped up when I visited this spring, one was a reproduction of a painting by Paolo Uccello, and the other was a cat meme. We find cat videos funny because it's hard to resist anthropomorphising domestic animals. Cat expressions and positions can seem uncannily reminiscent of human response: to us they might appear content, confused, louche, manic, humiliated, furious or affectionate. In attributing such feelings to feline companions we experience an enriched relationship with our pets. But really, who knows what's going on in those little cat minds?

Ford's painted cats are absolutely anthropomorphised: they are experiencing human feelings. The water in these paintings is an alien element, one that cats legendarily dislike, and they are responding to their immersion in a variety of ways. Ford worked on these paintings during lockdown, and they explore the disconcerting impact of months of enforced isolation. There is a whole broth of feelings at play here from anxiety to luxuriance. In many, the cat seems to be submitting to something that it does not enjoy, yet nevertheless accepts dutifully. As with the costumes worn by the childlike sculptural figures, the water becomes a masking device, so that we can never see both body and face. In many pictures, the head and paws stick out above the waves as though the cat were looking at us over a painted screen, a sense of artifice enhanced by more-or-less stylised rendering of the water.

The artist has described these works exploring a mind-body separation: these are beings divided between the two elements of water and air. This separation might permit a transcendence of limitations, and the ability to thrive in adverse circumstances. Or conversely it might manifest in the mind misbehaving (as it so often does), offering dark thoughts in light times.

Describing the female orgasm, we often reach for the language of water: we talk of feelings washing over us, ripples of pleasure, waves of sensation, liquid merging. Such are the invisible floods engulfing the three large Jesmonite cats on the gallery floor. Describing the work, Ford referenced the ground-breaking book on women's health and sexuality *Our Bodies, Ourselves* (1970)<sup>4</sup> and its description of the complex, concealed structure of the clitoris and related erogenous zones. In learning about sexual response, women are often invited to imagine these areas as a visible, exterior shape – the US sculptor Sophia Wallace has based the forms of her *Swan* series on the hidden structure of the clitoris. Ford has instead imagined this felt presence in terms of phantom limbs, which for the sculpted cats manifest as vast bushy tails to be endlessly pursued, but seldom caught. One of the Jesmonite cats in the upper gallery is in the process of vigorously chasing

her tail: the other we find reclining in a daze, having apparently just succeeded in catching hers.

We might find Ford's sculptures funny, or cute, and that's part of their dynamic. Scale has an impact on how we respond to them. Ford has made sculpture at an 'adult' size – the satirical *A King's Appetite* (2017) included a grotesque Donald Trump-like Prince Regent lamenting his ailing giraffe – but those perform in a different way. We feel more comfortable approaching figures that we read as childlike: we let our guard down. They may be uncanny, but they are not immediately threatening. Ford appeals to our humour and our sympathy to lure us into engagement with her work. Rather like the soft costumes that clothe her hard sculptures, she eases us into a close encounter with feelings and other phenomena we might otherwise find distinctly discomforting.

<sup>1</sup> Philip Larratt-Smith (ed.), Louise Bourgeois: *The Return of the Repressed, Volume II: Psychoanalytic Writings* (Violette Editions, 2012) p.93

<sup>2</sup> Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, first published as *Surveiller et Punir: Naissance de la prison* (Éditions Gallimard, 1975)

<sup>3</sup> 'Espalier' denotes a tree trained to grow flat in a system of horizontal branches, often against a wall, to encourage fruiting.

<sup>4</sup> Boston Women's Health Book Collective, *Our Bodies, Ourselves* (New England Free Press, 1970)

## In Conversation

### **Hettie Judah: How have you addressed the gallery spaces at East Quay?**

Laura Ford: They're both long spaces. Downstairs has a big wall which you can see from outside. I wanted to use that for a wall-based work, but one that came out of the wall. I'm layering up lots of older and new sculptures, like a school photo of these various characters. In front of them will be the *Espaliered Girls*.

### **HJ: Are you taking a different approach in the upper gallery?**

LF: Very different. That started off from watercolours I was doing. In a way the watercolours are about a mind-body separation. You've got this cat which is painted quite differently when it's out in the world, not in the water: it's much more present and it's watching you and it's aware of you. We don't really know what's going on underneath the water. Sometimes it's sensual and they look like they're enjoying it, and sometimes it looks like 'get me out of here! This is not where I'm used to being!' They've all got very different emotional feelings about them.

### **HJ: And that led into a series of sculptures?**

LF: I have made lots of cats in the past but these cats have got kind of phantom limbs. I think of them as a kind of erogenous zone: what it would be like if suddenly you had this big tail you were trying to catch? This orgasm that you were trying to have? It

could be read like that, or it could just be read like a silly cat that has just caught its tail.

**HJ: There's always that dynamic between the first glimpse of your work, and what you start to sense afterwards. You can see things that look like they might belong to a fairy tale realm, that have cuteness and appeal. But there's something else going on. Here we have an exhibition where, on the ground floor we've got all these children lined up and the upper floor is full of paintings and sculptures of cats - but it's not a show about kids or cats.**

LF: That's right. But what do you think it is?

**HJ: There's obviously something uncanny about a mute figure of a child. And there are a lot of anxieties connected to the different figures and the different ways that they're masked: they're all in different ways masked or adopting a persona or, indeed in many, a selection of masks.**

LF: When I was growing up, I had some very tough uncles, and a mother that used to have depressions, and she'd get cross. She was fantastic except you had to watch her emotionally and watch for the ups and downs. The whole family was like that. You had to read the whole family really quickly: What's the mood today? Where are the shoulders? How is the mouth set? I think we all do that subconsciously: walking down the road, to work out whether you're safe, or whether somebody's drunk and they're going to come at you. That's embedded in the works.

**HJ: With all the masking there's also an element of performance.**

LF: In around 1983, '84, I started doing a lot of performances with Annie Griffin. We were obsessed with Pina Bausch - what I loved about her performances was that there was quite a lot of repetition. Characters would come on, do the clucking of the chicken noise or whatever, and you really didn't know what was going on. Usually, it would build and build and build, and then you'd have a very strong emotional response to the end of it: you understood it emotionally and then you could unpick it. What we also loved in those performances was the humour: they were quite funny. Now that Bausch is dead, I think they play it for laughs, but back in those days you were too afraid to laugh, it was too upsetting to laugh. There was an awful lot of tension around those performances. I think I learnt a huge amount from her, and I still think about her and the way she constructs things now.

**HJ: It feels like the figures have got mechanisms to feel that they're safe and contained.**

LF: Yes, or again, masked. I think the little figures behind are quite histrionic. They're feeling those things, whereas the *Espaliered Girls* in the front are trying to stop them.

**HJ: You have made espaliered women in the past. Where does this motif come from in your work?**

LF: We had a small garden in Kentish Town and I started trying to espalier apple trees against the wall, and I realised I was being quite brutal to them and had to really cut them back and tie them and train them. I was thinking, 'God, it's like my children! I can't do that: I can't cut them back and I can't train them against the wall.' I started thinking about the way

they train you at school, the way you're brought up, the things that form you.

**HJ: It's interesting how having been formed by discipline, the *Espaliered Girls* become the disciplinarians.**

LF: Yes, that's true. The show's called *Reveal and Conceal*, and what they're concealing is things that are revealing, so there is this sort of curtain that comes down.

**HJ: With all the different doll-like elements and masks and the extra heads going on, there's a suggestion of play but the child figures don't seem particularly playful: it's more as though they're balancing multiple personalities.**

LF: Yes. When you listen to your mind chattering, these are the little voices you might hear: they're the different elements of personality.

**HJ: You are using figures from a few different series.**

LF: There are two little rock-throwing girls. They have 'love' and 'hate' written on them and they're quite aggressive. The octopus was in a show in Cardiff, looking out over the road, because over the road were some kids dressed up as animals creeping over the big Cardiff Castle wall. They were looking at it in a very worried way because they knew what Cardiff was like on a Saturday night. I find it fascinating that you make a work that's site specific and that has various meanings and that you can take it somewhere else and it does something else. I like that aspect: it's playful as well.

**HJ: It was really interesting that in your studio, you only had two images pinned to the wall: one was Paolo Uccello and the other was a cat meme. It's the sublime to the ridiculous.**

LF: Yes, high and low.

**HJ: Do you do pictorial research?**

LF: I do. Actually, a lot of stuff used to come out of reading novels, but not at the moment. At the moment I'm just looking at pictures of things: I'm not sure I'd call it research.

**HJ: Do you search out images of people getting drunk in car parks, and that kind of thing?**

LF: Yes, I definitely do that. I think a lot of these cat things have come out of listening to Thundercat. That album called *Drank* is all about him getting wasted. It's a fantastic album, about leaving your worries at the club and just being out of it. That will spark thoughts about what's it like to be a woman at a club, out of control like that. Can you do it still, and do you get judged for it?

**HJ: You mentioned earlier that the cats series came out of ideas you had during lockdown?**

LF: Maybe it was slowing down, maybe it was just being in some states of anxiety, but maybe some states where there was actually pleasure. Being in a place that you're unfamiliar with. They're to do with safety or danger, going with things, fighting, trying to get above water, going under the water, all of those feelings associated with the time. Should I be in panic? Or should I go: 'Well, fuck it.'?

**HJ: Again, the water becomes a masking device but for the body rather than the head.**

LF: Yes. And is it pleasure that's being felt in the body, with the face not giving much away? Or is it actual

terror? What happens when you get into a pond where there's lots of weeds lapping around your legs?

**HJ: Even as they're dealing with quite heavy stuff, there's a comic element as well.**

LF: Yes, there always is, because everything is always slightly ridiculous.

**HJ: Does the humour become an ambassador for talking about more difficult things?**

LF: Yes, it's fantastic for that, isn't it? One of my favourite little clips is [comedian] Paul Whitehouse being a Welshman: he's going to be interviewed by an Englishman. The Englishman comes up to his gate and he says: 'You can't come in here, only Welsh people are allowed, no Englishmen!' And the Englishman goes: 'Oh, sorry, sorry!' And he says: 'No, I'm only joking with you!' and he brings him in and makes him feel warm, and then he does something else. He'll keep bringing him in, then being really mean to him and messing with him. That's what I like to do with the work.

**HJ: So you comfort people and then you slightly terrify them and then you comfort them?**

LF: Yes, exactly.

**HJ: You hit them with the cuteness and then the weirdness and then the humour...**

LF: ...and the sweetness, and bits you recognise, and bits that hold you and then bits that push you away as well.

**HJ: You were saying earlier that some people have had quite strong objections to your work?**

LF: Well, the work makes you feel things, and if you're feeling angry or vulnerable, then you might have a very strong reaction to it. You might want to close it down for all sorts of reasons. At the end of the 1990s, there was a strong resistance to any kind of narrative. I don't think my work is narrative at all: there's no linear story being told, no fairy tale. But somehow the work wasn't intellectual enough or it was in that arena of 'girls' stuff', so it was pushed out.

**HJ: Because it was talking about women's desire?**

LF: A woman's experience, yes.

**HJ: And also response to children?**

LF: Yes, all of those things.

**HJ: It's difficult stuff to talk about and it's certainly not very accepted in the art world! When you were working on performance, were you looking at mask work at all? Jacques Lecoq was very fashionable in that era. I remember doing mask workshops: you wear a blank mask and the position of the body would tell you so much.**

LF: Which is amazing. But no, I didn't do any mask work. When I was at art school, we had to write two theses, and one of them I did on fairground shows, partly because nobody had written about fairground shows, and partly because I was quite dyslexic and there were no books, which was fantastic for me. I wrote a load of what were probably fantasies, lies, but I had done some research: I'd gone to see old relatives, like a guy who had the last boxing show left on earth. They all embroider their stories, so it was a great thesis. He used to talk about the winter being the time you'd get artists in to paint up the front of the shows to get people in, to entice them. On the fairground every year we'd try to make the arcade

look flashier and more interesting. There's quite a big element of that in my work: What's going to arrest the eye? And then once you've got your audience, what are you going to do with them?

**HJ: Peter Blake is obsessed with fairground art.**

LF: There used to be lots of fairground shows as well and they were always amazing. When I was little I used to go to Neath Fair and my grandmother would take me around the sideshows: people dressed up as things or women in bikinis covered in gold paint lying in glass cases of rats.

**HJ: More like an American carnival?**

LF: Yes. You'd get these things that look like sculptures but they weren't, and they'd chase you out of the booth. That was quite influential, I think.

**HJ: Most of your sculptures look like they could spring to life and get up to something.**

LF: Yes, definitely. Every kid has imagined that's what their toys do.

## About East Quay

East Quay is a brand new arts venue in Watchet, West Somerset. It is home to contemporary art galleries, artist studios, a paper mill, a print studio, a restaurant, an education space, and accommodation pods. It is run as a social enterprise that seeks to signal how community-led renewal can empower people, help them to develop agency and rebuild a local economy in a turbulent and uncertain global context. Please visit our website to learn more about our programme of exhibitions and events. This exhibition is generously supported by Arts Council England.

[eastquaywatchet.co.uk](http://eastquaywatchet.co.uk)



*Tailchaser 1 & 2, 2022 by Laura Ford. Image: Barney Hindle Photography*