

# Obscure Secure report

*“All these pictures had a voice, a sensibility, and in some cases a sensuality, which, cumulatively, created a visual dance, made even more exuberant by the break with conventional hanging, for these exhibits rose up and across the wall in an order that seemed open, possibly haphazard. Certainly it was an arrangement in which any notion of a hierarchy of importance had been discarded.”*

**Frances Spalding on Obscure Secure**

## About Obscure Secure

### Obscure Secure artists

Obscure Secure lead artists: Claudia Böse, Hayley Field Jacqueline Utley  
Obscure Secure selected artists from Ipswich Borough Council's collection: Anna Airy, Prunella Clough, E M Every, Lucy Harwood, Helen Kiddall, Beatrice Lithiby, Peggy Somerville, Effie Spring-Smith, Blanche Vulliamy, Kathleen Walne, Connie Winn

**Obscure Secure** is a collaborative artist-led project to explore Ipswich Borough Council's collection of women's painting at Christchurch Mansion and contextualise it with three contemporary women's practice. It resulted in an exhibition open to the public (for over four months) with an events programme that stimulated debate, raised awareness and gave voice to the hidden treasures within the collection, creating a new context for exploring the work.

The project allowed the three lead artists to:

- spend time working 'in residence' to research and select work from the Museum's collection of women's work
- a period of production to make work in response to the collection
- exhibit these works together in the Wolsey Art Gallery at Christchurch Mansion
- engage the public with the exhibition through a series of talks at Christchurch Mansion during the exhibition period
- produce a small publication about the project available with the exhibition
- hold a final event at Studio 1.1 (an artists-led project space in London) bringing a 're-creation' of the exhibition to a contemporary art space and reflecting on the learning from the project

**Obscure Secure** aims to:

- bring unseen work out of the Museum stores
- raise the profile of women's work in the collection
- create new work by contemporary women practitioners
- create new contexts for exploring the work

### Obscure Secure activity

Research / production period  
15 June to 5 September 2015

Exhibition at Wolsey Art Gallery, Christchurch Mansion  
6 September 2014 to 18 January 2015

Talks programme: 6 September, 2 November, 15 November, 29 November 2014

Exhibition at Studio 1.1, London

26 February to 1 March 2015

Talk: 1 March 2015

**Obscure Secure facts and figures:**

artists employed: 10

Wolsey Art Gallery audience: 5520

Wolsey Art Gallery event audience: 261

studio 1.1 audience: 439

studio 1.1 event audience: 28

web visits: 4400

**Opening event**

**6 September 2014, 11am to 1pm**

**Speakers: Martha Fleming, Emma Roodhouse, Claudia Böse, Hayley Field, Jacqueline Utley**

**Audience number: 138**

The opening talk was led by artist and Director of the collections based research programme at the University of Reading, Martha Fleming. Martha contextualised the project within the practice of artists working with collections, explaining this specialist practice and the complexities of working with heritage institutions and their collections. She suggested that Obscure Secure had a very different approach - in that it was a more open and exploratory process, from the research stage to the way the final selected work was hung with new work made by the project artists.

Martha highlighted it's value as a review of twentieth century painting, along with its intent to bring unseen work out from the stores. The artists discussed their selection and particular pieces, talking about how and why they had resonated with them. Emma Roodhouse, the Museum's Art Curator explained about the developing relationship she had with the artists and how the project had evolved.

The opening event allowed for discussion both during the more formal introduction and after at the informal reception where audience members asked questions about the work from the collection and our own work.

**Art in Focus: Women as Artists**

**2 November 2014, 2 to 3pm**

**Speaker: Emma Roodhouse**

**Audience number: 41**

The second event was hosted by the Friends of Ipswich Museums. The Museum's Art Curator Emma Roodhouse led the talk, focussing on a wide range of the women artists in

the Museum's collections, including painters, sculptors and illustrators and artists selected as part of Obscure Secure. Emma highlighted the accomplishments of the artists, although they are largely much less recognised than their male counterparts.

Following the talk there was also an opportunity for people to see some of the artists' work that Emma had brought out of the stores for the event, also to speak to Emma, Claudia Böse, Jacqueline Utley and Hayley Field about the project.

### **In conversation - Frances Spalding with Valerie Sinason**

**15 November 2014, 2-3.15pm**

**Speakers: Frances Spalding, Valerie Sinason, Claudia Böse, Hayley Field, Jacqueline Utley**

**Audience number: 44**

Psychoanalyst and poet Valerie Sinason led the talk to explore the connections between Obscure Secure, the work of Frances Spalding (art historian, critic and biographer) and her own work as a therapist and analyst. The conversation looked at the process of uncovering and bringing other people's lives and work to the fore. Valerie talked about the complexity of an artist's practice and its relationship with its audience - Frances emphasised the difference between understanding an artist's life and their work. The Obscure Secure artists were drawn into the conversation regarding the connection with process, their earlier conversation with Valerie during the research stage of the project and the exhibition at the Mansion.

There was an appreciation of the historical timeline the project drew through the women's work in the exhibition, Frances highlighting the specific interest in bringing contemporary work into it - making the project a live and exploratory experience, something she connected with her own process of writing about artists.

The final fifteen minutes were opened up to the audience, where people asked questions about specific artists Frances has written about, also about some of the work (from the collection) in the Obscure Secure exhibition and the thoughts behind the artists decisions when selecting work for it.

### **Does process matter?**

**29 November 2014, 2 to 3.30pm**

**Speakers: Emma Cameron, Jane Frederick, Molly Thomson, Claudia Böse, Hayley Field, Jacqueline Utley**

**Audience number: 38**

Panel discussion facilitated by artist and art therapist Emma Cameron with artists: Molly Thomson, Jane Frederick, Claudia Böse, Hayley Field and Jacqueline Utley.

Emma led the discussion with a series of questions around process to explore each artists experience, the audience were encouraged to join in the discussion and question or comment throughout the talk. This made for a lively debate, from initial thoughts on how our differing art educations have influenced the way we work, to thinking about exactly when a work of art begins, to how we prepare to make work and whether exploring our process is a valid thing to do.

**Studio 1.1 exhibition: 26 February - 1 March 2015**

**Discussion event: Sunday 1 March, 3-5pm**

**Speakers: Stephanie Moran, Claudia Böse, Hayley Field, Jacqueline Utley**

**Event audience number: 28**

Discussion event led by artist and writer Stephanie Moran. Conversation was based around the text Stephanie produced on the project - discussion ranged between ideas around intuition, gender, the project and its processes, specifically considering its reconfiguration at Studio 1.1.

*"If thought is an act, and painting a process modelling thought, what structures these thought-acts? Intuition is a component of thinking, a grasping of patterns in order to operate in a hostile, inherently foreign and deeply unknowable world environment<sup>[1]</sup> For Reza Negarestani intuition constitutes a basic level of abstraction. Where intuition demonstrates a fundamental human neuro-biological response, instinct may form its embodied counterpart qua set of sense memory reflexes.<sup>[2]</sup>"*

*"The use of intuition maintains the "emotional and intuitional" tradition of abstraction outlined by Alfred Barr<sup>[3]</sup>, continued through 80's psychological readings by writers such as Kristeva and Fuller, and still persisting in an 'affective turn'.<sup>[4]</sup> Intuition as a premise may be overly vague, anti-intellectual mystification, obscuration or reaction; it may over-privilege the body, in 'embodiment' and reliance on instinct in itself without the necessary 'intertwining of intuition and reason' to complete the 'act of thought'. <sup>[5]</sup> The kind of potential Negarestani describes for 'bootlegging' and 'changing the shape of thought' through mathematical abstraction may have an equivalent in abstract affectivity and its 'structures of feeling', but these need to be thought rigorously and specifically in art to be meaningful or useful.<sup>[6]</sup>"*

*"How much are creative processes connected to gender? When biologically and neuro-biologically founded instinct and intuition inform working processes, does that make painting inherently gendered? Or is there a process of temporal retrieval of painting substance that comes from a pre-subjective, pre-gendered biological?"*

<sup>[1]</sup> Reza Negarestani and James Trafford speaking at 'Radical Geometries', Tate Britain, 10 December 2014

<sup>[2]</sup> Reza Negarestani, 'Torture Concrete', 2014

<sup>[3]</sup> Alfred H. Barr Jr, catalogue introduction 'Cubism and Abstract Art', New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1936, p19.

<sup>[4]</sup> La Caze and Lloyd locate this turn in cultural theory, coalescing in the 90s, coming out of "phenomenological and post-phenomenological theories of embodiment; cybernetics and theories of the human/machine/inorganic; non-Cartesian traditions in philosophy; aspects of psychological and psychoanalytic theory; traditions critical of normalising power including feminism, queer, and subaltern and disability studies; a collection of attempts to react to the linguistic turn; critical theories and histories of the emotions; and aspects of science and neurology." Marguerite La Caze and Henry Martyn Lloyd, 'Editors' Introduction: Philosophy and the Affective Turn', Parrhesia 13, 2011, p2

<sup>[5]</sup> James Trafford, op cit.

<sup>[6]</sup> In the way that affect has been philosophically theorized and politicized in Deleuze: "Affects, according to Deleuze in his deployment of Spinoza's work, are independent of their subject. With Guattari he developed an anti-oedipal philosophy of desire and theorised art as a bloc of sensations, a compound of perceptions and of affects." La Caze and Lloyd, *ibid*, p1

**Extract from text by Stephanie Moran**

### **Obscure Secure reference library**

Along with the exhibition on the wall, plan chest of archival material from the museum's stores and a wide-ranging talks programme, the project also developed a reference library. This was placed on a bench in the Wolsey Art Gallery at Christchurch Mansion and also accompanied the re-configured exhibition at studio 1.1 in London. Books included in the library included source material the artists found to research the lives and work of the artists in the collection and contextual work around gender and art.

### **List of books included in the library:**

*Vision and Difference by Griselda Pollock*  
*Gender and Art by Gill Perry*  
*Women, Art and Society by Whitney Chadwick*  
*British Art Since 1900 by Frances Spalding*  
*Beyond the Battlefield by Catherine Speck*  
*Anna Airy by Andrew Casey*  
*Mixed Palette by David Buckman*  
*If my table could talk by Michael Wynne-Parker*  
*Prunella Clough by Frances Spalding*  
*Amy K Browning by Joanna Dunham*  
*Peggy Somerville by Stephen Reiss*  
*The Child Art of Peggy Somerville by Stephen Reiss*  
*A Broad Canvas by Ian Collins*  
Ipswich Women's History Trail booklet

### **Press and media coverage**

BBC Radio Suffolk - *item on Obscure Secure including interview with Claudia Böse and Emma Roodhouse*

Ipswich Community Radio - *Discover Suffolk, 2 programmes dedicated to discussing Obscure Secure with Claudia Böse and Hayley Field, led by presenter David Falk. Breakfast show coverage of the exhibition, including interviews with Claudia Böse and Hayley Field.*  
East Anglian Daily Times - *double page review in Saturday 13 September issue*  
Suffolk magazine - *double page feature on the exhibition by Andrew Clarke in November issue*

In Suffolk - *on-line arts listing website, review by Lyndsay Cooke*

Ipswich life magazine - *free publication distributed to Ipswich residents, feature on exhibition*

Guardian Guide - *exhibition listing*

Listings in local press and online

### **Feedback from exhibition**

Sadly, our comments book that formed part of our reference library accompanying the exhibition at Christchurch Mansion was stolen. It held many comments from visitors - both positive and negative. These included complaints about the low lighting level in the gallery (needed for conservation reasons), to pleasure in the surfacing of the women's work, to dislike of the way the work was hung, to praise of the hanging and of certain pieces of work.

*"The Obscure Secure project and exhibition was very well received and we are grateful for the work that you... have put into it."*

**Jayne Austin, Colchester and Ipswich Museums**

*"I just want to repeat how impressive and exciting *Obscure Secure* is. I think that you all made something of a very high calibre by pooling your different interests and skills and following your research interests with coherence across different practices. No mean feat."*

**Dr Martha Fleming, Director collections based research programme, University of Reading**

*"The show generates a lot of engagement and questions from the audience. It changes the room."*

**Front of house staff at Christchurch Mansion**

#### **Discussions generated:**

Ipswich Art Society - discussion on the exhibition - expression vs. intuition

Suffolk New College - project used as subject matter for Foundation Course student work

University Campus Suffolk - project used as subject matter for exploration by Fine Art students

#### **Audience make-up for events:**

Artists (local, regional and London based), curators, educators, friends of the museum, local interested people, Paint Club East members, art students, amateur artists, therapists / therapy students, people interested in women's studies, Ipswich women's history group, Studio 1.1 members.

*"From a lesser known piece by Anna Airy, one of the first women to be officially commissioned as a war artist, to a dreamlike landscape by child prodigy Peggy Somerville, the contemporary artists have unearthed not just the work but the lives of those who came before them, describing this part of their project as 'an immersive experience of rich visual material along with biographical narratives'. Included in the exhibition is seemingly a homage to these narratives, a plan chest containing newspaper cuttings and inventories from previous exhibitions. But, more importantly, there are also glimpses of the processes behind the work, snippets of sketches captured on the back of old envelopes and jotted notes of inspiration.*

*Obscure Secure could very easily have turned into a history project but it did not, perhaps instead it is history from an artist's point of view. The bottom draw of the plan chest contains the working notes of Claudia, Hayley and Jacqueline, differing only by the date on the top of the newspaper clippings and showing the working process as timelessly relevant.*

*Process is really what *Obscure Secure* is all about. How do artists make a painting?"*

**Lyndsay Cooke, In Suffolk**

## **Project summary**

The project's overall aims to bring unseen work by women artists from the Ipswich Borough Council collection into the public eye, raising the profile of the artists, creating new work by contemporary practitioners and new contexts for exploring it, were well met.

Over a period of three months we (the three lead artists) accessed the Museum's stores and archives to research the lives and work of the women artists in the collection. Through this process we selected work by eleven women artists to represent in the project, we also produced a new body of our own work in response.

The unconventional *Obscure Secure* exhibition hang at Christchurch Mansion was striking in its contrast to the linear hang of works by Gainsborough and Constable that filled the other walls of the Wolsey Art Gallery. Both provocative and enhancing, *Obscure Secure* engaged the museum's visitors and got many and varied responses. The accompanying reference library and display of archival material in the gallery's plan chest extended opportunities for visitors to engage in the work and lives of the artists in the collection. A fold-out poster was produced to accompany the exhibition which included brief biographies of the artists from the collection, images of some of the work and extracts from the contemporary artists' written conversations during the initial stages of the project.

The talks programme extended to include talks by five other women artists, a curator, a poet / psychoanalyst and an art historian - in addition to the three exhibiting artists. All talks were well attended and included opportunities for audiences to engage in the conversations. There was a real hunger for the discussions, displayed by the enthusiastic involvement of the audiences. In Ipswich audience members commented that there were few other such events to explore themes around contemporary art - particularly exploring women artists.

The exhibition's reconfiguration at Studio 1.1 (an artist-led contemporary gallery) was an exciting chance to find new ways of exploring the work and the connections between it. The gallery offered very different spaces to work with, in contrast to Christchurch Mansion. Because we were unable to take the work from the collection out of the museum we chose to use photographic reproductions of it, altering their scale by rationalising them all to be around A4 size. Instead of one large wall, the exhibition was hung on seven different smaller walls in two interlocking spaces. The reference library was transferred to the gallery and a publication was produced for the final discussion event.

The project has been an inspirational experience for us. Working with collections, more specifically the lesser-known women artists in them, has been highly motivating and feels like an important area to focus on in the future. Exhibiting the work from the collection with our own contemporary work offered a fresh way of exhibiting them, avoiding a more conventional hierarchical approach. In researching the project we uncovered many other women artists we are interested in exploring and plan to continue our collaboration around this theme.

**Claudia Böse, Hayley Field, Jacqueline Utley**  
**March 2015**