

This Stuff Matters

'We Are Still Here – Four Women Making Abstract Sculpture'

Transcript

Artists' Q&A with Gillian Brent, Jill Gibson, Alexandra Harley and Sheila Vollmer, chaired by curator and educator Meghan Goodeve.

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Gillian Brent

All right. Hello, everybody. Thanks for coming. Really nice to see you here. So I'm speaking on behalf of **This Stuff Matters**, which is Sheila, Jill, Alex and myself, a group of sculptors. I'm the only one from Sheffield. But they've all come here, rather than go down to London, which is nice or to France, where Jill comes from. And we're really lucky that Megan's come to



chair this talk and to try and stop us just rambling on, by taking control and ask sensible questions. And to make sure that we don't bore you to death. Because if we might, too, because we're so passionate about what we do, which is good.

Meghan Goodeve

Hi. So I'm Megan. And I am not a sculptor. But I have worked in sculpture. So, I helped set up something called Yorkshire Sculpture International, which was a festival of sculpture in 2019. I don't do that anymore. What I do now, is to run an artist development programme for artists across the UK. So I guess I'm really interested in sculpture. And I studied that from a kind of an art historical point of view. But more practically, today, I'm interested in like, kind of hands on how do you how do you support artists. And I think this is a really amazing example of where artists have come together to actually form something themselves and have a way to for some external help, actually done something. So yeah, I'm going to help guide the conversation today. And I thought we would just start off with you guys just really briefly explaining who you are, and giving everyone a sense of who you are, hopefully Fantastic. Who would like to start, shall we go down the line?

GB

So I'm Gillian Brent. I'm based in Sheffield, and I have a studio at the other Yorkshire Artspace building Persistence Works. I moved to Sheffield in 1985, because I couldn't find anywhere, couldn't afford a studio in London. So I came to Sheffield to find somewhere to work. I studied at Wimbledon School of Art and St Martin's School of Art where I met at Alex; we were on the same course together. And then we've not been close by these throughout the last 40 years or so we've kept in touch and then we've kind of come back together, realising where we are now, how much we still got to share and to say to each other. I tend to work in, my main material through my career has been steel. But at moment I'm mixing that with other materials as well, with wood and concrete to make

abstract works that do have some objects in them. So they do have something that people might connect to. But they are basically... my way of working is thinking about the abstract forms and their relationships. So I've got the one by down there, one in the middle on the speaker cabinet. And then we decided as this was a little bit looking back over our careers that I've also bought an older piece that I made 20 years ago, which is the taller standing steel piece over in the corner. It's been sitting in my sister's garden for the last 20 years. I had to go and dig it out.

MG

So each of you bought at least one older piece and some newer pieces

Jill Gibson

I haven't. That wasn't logistically possible. Ryanair wouldn't allow it.

Alexandra Harley

They don't allow very much really! Right, I'm Alexandra Harley. Like Gillian said, we met when we were in college together. I worked predominantly with wood for many, many years. And it's only in the last... certainly in the last sort of eight or nine years, that I've expanded away from wood. I did the AA2A award, that gave me the opportunity to work with ceramics which has fed back into my other work because I was looking at junctions and relationships with parts. And then I got a fantastic opportunity to work in Italy for three months fully funded in a foundry in Tuscany, just brilliant. I did bronze casting out there and so since then I've been working a lot with bronze and just doing a lot more casting and setting up a little place with a friend of mine, a little foundry back at his place, and then also a little private place and doing the work ourselves. that's been absolutely fantastic.

So that's an example of much older work, (pointing to Crimoysin) this piece, next to Sheila. The bronze is that tiny little one that's over the corner that came from an opportunity presented by the Milwyn Foundry over lockdown. They offered Royal Society of Sculptors members the opportunity to have a little piece of cast, called the '10 gram Challenge'. And then I've also got the blue and the grey piece on the window there, which came out with an opportunity presented by Stage One who are a Yorkshire based company. I've been thinking about, transition, as Helen's just said, Helen Turner, York St John University before the discussion started, future proofing, about being able to carry on making, and that is a paper piece that was scanned and 3D printed by Stage One. So what I've been doing.

JG

I'm Jill Gibson, originally from Sheffield I grew up here. I actually grew up at No.2, Long Henry Row, Park Hill flats. That was my grandma's flat. So coming back has been quite emotional in some ways. And I had to bring, Alex brought one of the pieces up with her that was in London, which is the central piece over there, so I'm eternally grateful for her doing that because the other piece, pieces, one on the windowsill over there and this one here were produced in France, to specific Ryanair dimensions. And I almost had to wear this one on the plane around my neck; I have worn pieces of my work before; I'll talk about that a little bit later. But yeah, the piece is extremely lightweight. And it wasn't designed like that. It's just the way that I actually happen to work. But it was great and fortuitous. So I managed to get two pieces that are not too bad sized, but perfect to fit in little bag. So it

was great, because shipping work, as you probably know, and especially after Brexit, things have become extremely challenging to do that. So the way I work and the materials that I use is probably easier, but it has had some constraints, so that's been quite interesting. But the circular shapes, I was looking at those today and thinking how lovely it is, in some ways that it almost feels complete that I've come back here today, 50 odd years later in my life and I am sitting here right opposite Granny's flat, so the circle is kind of quite pleasant to me. Really in terms of the work materials, I'm very material based, my background, I did my degree at Glasgow School of Art in the 80s. The programmes have changed a lot since then. I started out doing textiles, and I probably, well, I have continued working with textiles but in a very sculptural form, I moved into sculpture in my final year there, and I have worked in textiles, but combining that with other materials; metals, concrete, Jesmonite, and more recently foam, which are the three pieces that you see here today. I'm having to rethink that, from an environmental point of view, it's a concern of mine, I live in rural France, and I'm a lot more in tune with the environment and live quite an eco-friendly lifestyle there, that we have no mains heating, and a fosse septique which is quite a challenge at times. But I think a lot more about the environment and so using these materials is something that I have been rethinking, hence the paper because I'm beginning to explore that as a material for potential use in the future. So I will hand you over to Sheila.

Sheila Vollmer

I'm Sheila Vollmer, and I'm originally from Canada and came to London in 1987 to study at St. Martin's, and I fell in love with sculpture, at college in Canada. It's a very different education than you have here; more materials based and you had to do everything from printmaking, to sculpture to drawing, but when I just remembered touching the clay the first time and trying three dimensions, I can only describe it as falling in love it was, just the right thing. I know Alex from Morley College where we both work. And I suppose in a sense, that's partly how we all came together and the connection. And I work constructively, my work and all the pieces here. This (*wall*) piece here is from 1996. So that was about eight years after I arrived. I had previously been working with found objects constructing and joining together; and worked with window frames, and at a particular workshop called Shave Farm workshop in Dorset, Devon. And when I got back to the studio I had collected all these frames from local farms and back in the studio I thought how can I carry this on and through the help of my wonderful partner, builder learned how to do lap joints and carpentry and thus, this piece came about inspired by the window frame. I work somewhat systematically where I like to have a set of rules, but then allow a randomness to come through it. So I knew I wanted to stay within the original 60 centimetres, but then work in the continuous line, and then see what happens within that. And then colour is very important and sometimes I know it as I'm making it. Sometimes I add it later, but making the views around the work extending, you know, as you walk around it accentuating that inside outside. These are newer works both this year, the skirting board and the metal. And the skirting boards. Again, from the windows, it was continued with that sort of domestic found element. And initially they would literally come off the floor spiralling around; and cutting and joining with piano hinges, which are a great for joining them. And then I've also always worked with metal, and often in line and more recently getting into bigger flats, and playing around, again, how things touch, how elements touch and how they touch the ground or relate to the space that they're in.

MG

I think you started to answer what my next question was going to be which massive question, which is kind of "why sculpture?" I'm really interested to hear from, from each of you, or a couple of you that like to speak to this idea of like, why specifically sculpture? What kind of dream is that and what was kept you... you've obviously sustained that engagement for sculpture for a time now, and I'm interested in why sculpture not something else?

AH

I found it much easier than painting.

GB

Me to I think I think in a three-dimensional way. And I'm interested in materials and handling things, and putting things together and relationships and physical relationships with space. And though some of those things happen in painting, it doesn't...for me, it makes much more sense to me making sculpture.

MG

And when we were talking earlier, we were talking about the piece in the corner, the vertical piece, (Gill's) and you're saying you don't draw before you make so you kind of think through construction.

GB

Yeah, I work in very responsive way. So I make something and then put something to it. And then there's something to it and then maybe take something away and then add something else to it. So I don't plan it. I don't it's...that's my process.

JG

It's an interesting thing, because of my background, I studied embroidery and woven textiles as my first degree. That by its very nature is constructive, so it led again, I mean, this is historically, many, many women come from the same place. And then especially now from the same kind of background, having to make one's own clothes. If you've not seen me stand up, I'm six foot tall, so it was very difficult growing up in the 70s and 80s to get trousers long enough, so it just feels natural, a natural way to work. I would look at the body in the form and construct things that were perhaps not really very good, but they flowed and they fit to the floor. I was quite self-conscious of that. So I think that construction and how to make things three dimensionally was quite a natural thing. Just purely because I'd say, yeah, it's just feels natural. I think it has been a natural way for me to work. Okay. I do like to draw. I paint occasionally and I find it challenging and a real discipline. And then I love it because I find oil painting in particular, so difficult. And it's beautiful and I have a real admiration for those people that use paints in that way. But for me, it doesn't feel natural, I feel I really have to struggle with it and sometimes that is just too difficult.

SV

I think there's also that aspect that you have so many different viewpoints; that is just a joy and a challenge at the same time to be able to walk around the piece and get that surprise element in making it. And I think in construction where you can defy gravity a bit, then say,

a lump of clay where we're a bit constrained; where you can turn it upside down and play around with it. And I think that, for me is like no other medium

AH

There is a relationship to the space that changes the sculpture when you bring it to a place like this. This relationship with the spaces that I have in my sculptures, was strange and worked very differently when I worked in a small studio. But being able to bring it out and see it sort of strutting in a new and larger space, gives it a different aspect

JG

That's quite interesting being an artist now and about having access to studio space. And I think a lot of that is quite relevant to being female. In my lifetime, I didn't know many women that had studios. It was very difficult to attain and it felt like quite a male domain in the 80s and 90s and then more women started to be able to have studios. But now it's almost going back the other way studios are unattainable and unaffordable and quite difficult to get hold of and access, and sadly we are sitting in a room that I understand is going to be changed into, I feel sadly, not printmakers but that's, that's wonderful. But it's going to be changed into a print studio, so what would have been a fantastic working space, and it's a big space with ceiling, which is great for sculptural work is very difficult to obtain now and I think we had a conversation about you've met somebody in conversation who said they work as an artist on their laptop, so the nature and the way that we work has changed and change quite dramatically and goes in trends, but a lot of affordability and access and availability. So I think that I may have pre-empted you there and answered your question.

MG

Thinking a lot about as you're talking I was thinking about, there's a story of Phyllida Barlow, making sculptures. And she when her children were young, she used to go down into her cellar and make them the lights off. So she didn't disturb anyone and how that actually that process kind of helped her in her making because it was about touch and feel rather than, like a visual understanding of sculpture. So I was thinking a lot about that. And then just because we have works that are from different times, like whether or not you feel any of the works here kind of reflect that space that you were in when you were making them. Yeah, I wondered if there's anything here because I think Gillian, particularly yours. They seem like quite two separate bodies of work in a way.

GB

I used to have a big studio, really big studio and make really big works. And my, I think my career changed in my opportunities and ways of earning a living changed. So I was making less very large work. And also it just got too expensive to have a big studio. And so I... about five years ago downsized to a smaller studio, which has meant that I'm making much smaller work because I can't store the work. Sometimes I make the work that as long as I know it's going somewhere and it's not coming back. But it is a bit of a struggle sometimes to squeeze around but I mean I think I think it's changed the way I work which in lots of ways is very positive. It's made me much freer with what I do and experiment more with different materials and do different things. So it's not it's not all negative by a long way.

MG

And Alex, the scale of your's deals is quite different it compared to the wood piece. And then the two smaller pieces...

AH

Well I was younger!! The wood, yeah, I mean, I can still lift that wood piece. It's not as heavy as it looks. The size of two other pieces were proscribed by the other fabricators; I wasn't able to dictate. I mean, quite literally, the small bronze was something called the '10 Gram Challenge'; we were given just 10 grammes of wax. And believe me, it took me a long time to reduce it down to 10 grammes. And the 3D print was just to experiment with, for them, Stageone they were, they were looking at what the capabilities of the machine and whether or not how much detail it will pick up. And the dots of the Braille paper have not come out, so it's not been quite as sensitive as they thought it was, or had hoped it would be. And I think things are moving on very quickly in that field anyway. So, there was no point in making it, (BRAJ), that much larger, though they certainly could have done, but had they done that, then, and it hadn't worked, there wouldn't have been any point that. The wood piece, Crimoysin is constructed from individual parts that are quite small. It's just the construction itself that has become that large.

SV

We also had to think what we could fit in the car. It all had to fit in. And knowing the space. You (Gillian) sent us some photos which gave us a sense of what would work.

MG

I was quite interested to hear that you felt kind of very naturally drawn to sculpture making. It just seemed like a natural fit. And then obviously, I, I mean, younger than you guys, and I was at university at a different time than when I didn't go to art school close to do that history. So I don't. But I've read I've kind of read about art school, and we had a very brief coffee A while ago, and we were chatting a bit about what it was like to be at art school. And and I mean, my my kind of naive understanding is that maybe sculpture was a bit of a male domain, in our school. And so I was kind of, it's interesting to hear on one hand that you would find naturally drawn to that as a way of making but maybe kind of institution that you were you were you're studying? Was there a sense that it was kind of a male domain? Or did you have to kind of kick back against that? Or was it an easy path into sculpture making for you guys within education?

GB

I think, I mean, we were counting up, me and Alex, and there weren't there was an equal number of women and men on our course. But there was definitely it was... there was definitely a very physical male kind of approach. And I felt that there were times at college, when my response to certain situations, my emotional response to social situations was frowned on because I, you know, things would go wrong, and I'd get upset and might even cry and the tutors found that quite difficult to deal with. And so I think there wasn't there was a kind of quite a kind of Butch male,

AH

We didn't have any female tutors.

GB

We had one tutor who visited, mostly all our tutors were male, and they were all... it was all about how big a lump you could hump around, how big a hammer you could swing to forge the metal. And, you know, there was a lot of that, and I love metal. And I've I'm not one of those women artists who has who said, well, I'm not going to do what the men do, I'm going to work in a material which I think is more suitable to me. I embrace that whole thing about working in heavy metal. But I still think my sculptural, my approach is different to the men because of I am not a man. There's not much I can do about that!

AH

There was a huge expectation on us to turn into men, to be able to do that

GB

Yeah.

AH

And it was just, it was, you know, we've sort of accepted it; we sort of thought, well, this is.... we've got to step up to the challenge. So, in some ways, for us, I felt that it was a good thing because we really, really worked hard and we put our backs into it. Yeah, absolutely we did because we just had to keep up, we had to prove ourselves. Every single day we went in, we had to prove we were as good as them, we had to prove we were as capable. We had to find ways to work. And ways that weren't belittled, didn't work, that little was very challenging.

GB

And I was more argumentative than most, which didn't always go down well.

JG

I did embroidery, a textile course, and we were all women on the course, all the tutors were women. And I finally moved into the sculpture department myself. I literally went down and started working with people. You may know, Andy Scott, who did the Kelpie structures on the outskirts of Glasgow, and Kenny Hunter who has shown at Yorkshire Sculpture Park, and they were my friends. And they were two blokes who I am eternally grateful for in many ways, because they taught me how to weld. The tutors, I don't really recall having a real sort of tutorial with tutors in the sculpture department, it felt very free. At the time that I was at art school, you could move. And that was, I understand that things have changed dramatically in art schools now. And I don't even think that that would be possible now. And I, I moved freely into papermaking departments and into sculpture department, the ceramics department. They were all separate buildings and you could just wander in and make and it wasn't until I really put my final show up and had a video piece of work in my final show, it was quite unusual. And I put my show up, my embroidery tutors were horrified and a guy called Michael Brown arrived. He was my external assessor and a very well-known embroiderer. And he was fantastic. A real champion. And I stunning them his great sculptures, some more in metal, welded pickaxes with leather stretched over lock castings that's in the Clyde I do believe at the bottom. And he, he was great. And he really said no, go on, just go and do what you're doing. And that was just a fantastic thing. But I don't think that the important teacher, Christy White, was very happy.

SV

I'm similar to both of you, I think there was an equal number of male and female students, but I don't think I had any female sculpture tutors. They were more in the drawing, or not even the printmaking department; which was also a love of mine. But you really did have to prove yourself. And I felt you weren't really being taken as seriously as the male students were because it was seen more as a risk that the female students will go into the art department. But I had a wonderful sculpture tutor who really encouraged me, which is one of the reasons I chose it and stuck with it. And later he invited me back to come and do some teaching after I've been in England for a while. So, it was a strange mix. Unfortunately, though, there was sexism and some inappropriate behaviour by the male tutors. And it was only in my time that it was starting to be challenged and highlighted. Whereas, you know, it had been just, that's the way things are.

MG

I realised that we've been chatting for 35 minutes and haven't even mentioned the word abstraction. Yes. Something that brings you all together. So I feel like before we run out of time, yeah, we probably should do that. Because I think there's one thing I think women making sculpture is that it's a bit more common now than maybe when you guys were starting off. But I think that there's an even smaller percentage when we look at women making sculpture that's abstract. For various reasons. So I think I was quite interested to hear from you guys in terms of like, how you sit, how you position yourself in the wider art world and all the rhetorical narratives that are that are going on at the moment because when we were when we've been exchanging few emails and we've had a coffee and stuff before listen. I think genuinely, there's quite a push for more kind of subject base art at the moment. And I think particularly when you're well actually get all sorts of types of characteristics like, you know, if you're black or brown, you should be making work about race. If you're a woman, you should be making work about a woman, all those kind of things, I think there is a bit of an expectation in the art world to follow them. And I'm interested about why abstraction why? What do you feel about that?

GB

I've always avoided sort of the identity politics in my work. I've never really, I've always felt right from being a student that people aren't interested in me, they're interested in seeing good art. And that's what's important. And I've never tried to be a woman artist, I've always just wanted to be an artist. And it's only in my, you know, recently that I've started linking up with women and sort of saying, Yes, we're women working because of we still find 40 years on, or whatever, from when we graduated, that we still feel that we're overlooked. We do and that's the way we... we have strength in numbers. And I think abstraction is always... I mean, it was part of my education. And I think it's quite hard to actually break your education, that there was a quite a period in my education, where it was about figurative figuration. But it was when I moved back into abstraction. And I just think it's... I know a lot of people say this isn't true, but I don't want to make work that's about subject, I want to make work that's about the physicality of the world. And that is abstraction is a way of me processing the world I see around me, and how things behave and how things balance and interact and physically hold themselves up in space, all of those things. And to me, that's something that's common to all of us. So I'm not trying to just speak to one audience,

though, that doesn't necessarily work because people want to see work about your sexuality, or gender or your ethnicity. And I want to transcend that.

SV

It's almost more freedom, I felt in abstraction. And I trained in the figure first and clay it was quite a traditional approach to sculpture. But at the same time, we were learning about abstraction and how to join things how to put things together. But I, I also am a musician or I shouldn't say musician I play the piano and I love music and it's a big part of my life. And I sometimes with students in the same way, say how can you approach abstraction? Think about music and how we break it down into rhythm and mood and structure. You know, I feel a similar thing happens with abstraction in what colour can do or line, or form, or size or space. And we don't question it so much with music, it's kind of a given you don't think so much, what's it all about? We listen and relax.

JG

Yes, for me, it's very much about the material. It comes from a great joy of playing. And I harp back today about being a child upon long Cannery Row, and the playgrounds were all made of concrete, this huge concrete stretches. But the freedom, literally roller-skating across great lengths, you see the length of the walls on there. On a pair of roller skates. You can really go for it and have great fun exploring things. And I think crawling around on hands and knees as a child finding mud and sticks and tar and putting them together to build 'things'. I loved that. And I think that that for me is an always has been this great joy of finding something and I have worked in this material now for four or five years. And I'm still finding I don't feel like even started playing with this stuff. I think it's got so many places to go. And yet I'm questioning why I'm using that material on the one hand that distresses me because I want to move away. But it's also incredibly exciting because it's opening doors to a new way of thinking a new way of working. And it feels like there's enough time to work. That's the most frustrating things. Sometimes it's time. It's a time constraint to put one's energy into a feeling of great freedom that a material can offer and for me, that's what abstraction is about. You produce a piece of work and there's a lot of process and a lot of thought and a lot of production, a lot of anxiety to get to where you want that material to be into the place. There's a great beauty in achieving something that you feel is hold about some material that you've worked with for a long time.

But its still play time

AH

And how can I add anything to that?

GB

I think I am very different from you, because I don't go through a long process, I'd actually try and take away as much process as I can say that it's literally about putting things together, looking at how they relate and how the tensions between them and how they describe or don't describe space, how they go from being together to being chaos. And so I use minimal amounts of process so I'm not cluttered by spending ages and ages and ages doing something that there might be a disaster. So it's very quick and responsive

JG

Playful.

GB

But it's still... it's still experimental, we've been arguing about when we like the word play or not.

MG

It gets used quite a bit

GB

It gets overused. And it can be... it can be quite pejorative, as well, I think. It makes... makes light of things, that are actually quite serious and quite, actually quite disciplined and quite rigorous. So it's not that we're not just playing, not just having fun, it can be bloody hard sometimes, to get something to work and to get something to go together. And there is a rigour in our thinking about what we do. But on the other hand, that ability to experiment, have an element of freedom is also very important.

MG

I am, I was in London yesterday, there's a new show in a commercial space of women in abstract sculpture, and the narrative that they seem to be putting forward. And it's mainly based around work that has been produced in the kind of 60s and 70s. I think not, not necessarily in Britain, but was this idea of with an expansion of materials in terms of like what was sculpturally accepted as materials, there was then space for women to, to be able to use that to their advantage to kind of work in abstract way. And so, I don't know, I didn't know your work, really before coming today and before being invited to do this. I was interested to see what I was going to find when I came here in terms of the materials and I think Jill you're definitely, you're kind of, you seem to be the one that's furthest away from kind of traditional, kind of sculpture, materials. Whereas the three of you, I feel like you're still quite grounded, I think in quite conventional sculpting tools. That's not to say what you're doing is conventional, but wood metal, we've got some found objects. And we've got bronze. Yeah. So I don't know what you guys think of that kind of theory that they're, they're putting forward.

AH

I've seen that show, it's fabulous, at Waddington Custot in Cork Street, I think it's outstanding. And what I think has happened, those women at that time, they were moving the materials forward, they were embracing new materials that allowed them to work in different ways, present in different ways. And that fed back into the other traditional mediums. And I was also quite surprised - there's a lot of knitting in there - and so, like huge scale, massive pieces. And I felt at that time, only a woman would have made that because they didn't have the space. It was something they could roll up and it would take up very small space. It was something they could do and put down they didn't have to work at something until it was finished

GB

Rolled up and put under the dining room table.

AH

Yeah. They got interrupted, they could just put it down. And I really thought that was an interesting show. Because you know, I could see the history of what women had done and how that fed into a lot of later work, later on. That was Lynda... I've never seen Lynda Benglis before and a couple of others and I thought it was great.

JG

It's interesting how history kind of comes back and we look at Ruth Asawa in the states. She did these amazing hanging structures then the wrappings of Marisa Metz and then that's replicated again, then it kind of comes back around, but it's reinterpreted. And yet, if you Google abstract women artists there are actually relatively few, it's probably more obviously in America, it's bigger place. But there's still relatively few. So it's almost feels like now there's been a Revolution in the Making exhibition in the in the States, and now the one in London and others. It feels like we're almost emerging. But I think we'll continue to emerge using traditional working methods which have come from our history, you know, we're sitting in Steel City, and this is a real hard working class area of coal industry and steel industry where it was traditionally, men and my grandmother worked in the munitions factory in a male dominated industry. Well, it was and then all the men went away and left all these amazing women who pick up the pieces pick up the skills and reinterpreted in their own way. And I feel like, for women working in abstract sculpture, I mean, I don't know what do you think about abstract sculpture as an audience that some of you are artists working in abstract sculpture to work in different ways do you question that - you have asked yourself.

So who pick up the pieces pick up the skills and reinterpreted in their own way? And I feel like, for women working in abstract sculpture, I mean, I don't know what do you what what do you think about abstract sculpture as an audience that some of you are tissue work at school to work in different occasions question that you have asked yourself

Member of the audience

I have a dominating thing all the time. That if, if you leave normal life, to be a sculptor, whichever medium you work in, at the end of the day, how does it earn wages for you? Coming from a Steel City, where I mean, the religion of the North is work. I used to work down the pit and when I told people I was going to be a painter, they said why? And that's there all the time. And I'm 83 now. It's still there, how are you going to earn a living?

GB

Well, that's why I don't tell people at parties what I do, because that's all they say, Well, how do you make a living out of that? And I said, you wouldn't say that to me, if I was a solicitor or any other job. Nobody's interested in what you do.

JG

Would they say that, if I was a bloke, would that be the same question?

GB

But it is, it's actually quite... I find it quite insulting because nobody's interested in what you do. They're only interested in what they think it's worth financially. And that's, you know, the...

Member of the Audience

At the end of the day, I hate to say this, it is the bottom line is, because when I first started off, it was tripe quite frankly, and I got into debt. And you know what they say about debt; when debt knocks on the door, love flies out the window. So I had to do something I knew, would sell. I didn't enjoy it but...

GB

I think we've all found ways of making a living, other than... So I've chosen not to make work that sells. Particularly because I don't want to compromise what I do. And I also don't want to make something that I can only sell to really rich people. Because I have an uncomfortable relationship with making something for only a very small proportion of society. So I've chosen to use my skills to work with people, as an artist but in the community. So though I make work in my studio, I also do a lot of work with young... I have over the last, you know, 20-30 years, done a lot of work with young people, with children in schools, with adults with all sorts of different needs. So I use my artistic skills to hopefully enrich other people's lives in some way or help them think about their lives in different ways. Think about the world in different ways. So that's how I've chosen to make my living. We've all got different...

SV

Alex and I work in education, so very similar. That's how we pass on all that love and excitement about it. And skills.

Another member of the audience

Coming back to the thing about abstraction and I'm a sculptor and a great friend of Sheila's. I have a piece of hers in pride position in my living room and actually it's fascinating, because I don't know, really what it is. But we've had when people come around to the house and there are loads of conversations that generates discussions about what is that piece about. So I think in terms of abstraction, it's wonderful to, to have those kind of discussions generated.

GB

We were talking earlier about narrative in art and how with some artworks, you have to explain it to people. And there is this narrative behind it. And until they've understood that they can't understand the artwork. And I've never wanted to do that. I wanted everybody to bring what they bring to it, their past, their history, their experiences, and they can see what they want within it. And then it like you say, opens up conversations. And as somebody who also works with other artists' work in art galleries, working with people, it always gives me the chills when I look at an artwork and somebody notices something that I'd never noticed, somebody who's got no background in art, and they say, but it looks like or it reminds me of, or look at that bit there. And you just think like, we all respond in different ways, we all have our ways of doing and so abstraction is particularly a way of of art that I think is more open to people who don't actually have to understand it beforehand. They don't have to know the story. They don't have to know about the artists, they don't have to know if the artist is black or white or queer or whatever, they can just respond to it purely for what it is.

Third member of audience

That's the ideal situation; where people come and look at an abstract piece of art and go, what's the theory behind it. But most people feel quite alienated. And they come to a gallery and see pieces like this. They don't know how close to go.

GB

What's that all about?

Third member of audience

Look at the skirting board I chopped up the other day, I'm saying it's not a question of saying that's one of the issues artists have.

SV

But it's about time and time spent with something and I think we're in such a visual world, that images are thrown at us. And in advertising, you have to understand it immediately. And it's about people slowing down and spending some time with the piece. And I notice that often people come to our exhibitions at the studio and you spend a bit of time talking to them, you walk through it. And I think you know, you wouldn't expect to understand Beethoven the first time you listen to his music. After you, listen to several of his pieces, understood the history of the time that it was made in where it came from; as you gather more history and information you understand more. But I think with visual arts we think we should know and don't treat it the same. You've got to give it time.

Fourth member of audience

That's also the thing about abstract sculptures. That's great, that looks like a dog. What does that mean?

AH

That is a way that some people find that they have to look for an image that they can then engage with, something that allows them access. Somebody came into my studio and pointed out something they could 'see', a dog I think it was, they were horrified when I picked up the chainsaw and cut the piece out. They were just devastated that I felt so strongly that it wasn't a dog.

JG

Yeah, the notion of pareidolia. You look at something and try to interpret it in a way that is understandable to you when you don't know anything about that piece piece of work - you're searching for and seeking. And I think it's those two questions that are the most important in some ways that abstract work can allow you to search for meaning and it can be extremely personal. And unless you get the chance to meet the artists actually talk about piece of work and how it's made or you know why it was made and the reasons behind that where the artist is coming from. You sometimes have to let their imagination run away with you and not some other wonderful opportunities. I think I struggle on occasion we had a small conversation earlier on about where I like to cite my work and I don't always like to put it in the gallery. I quite like to just stick outside in a skate park or something like that, because I like the fact that lots of people could just go what's that? And actually, that is a better question because at least they've taken notice of something in their own

surroundings and it doesn't need to mean anything, but it's just almost a stopping point. The looking at the work and thinking of it, it can alter one's perspective about some things.

AH

You're very privileged and I thank you for being a collector, that's brilliant. But having that work in your house means that you're seeing it at very different times of day, in different light, against and with different things around it. And - does that change your perception of it? Does it take some time for you?

Sheila's collector

You know, did it take some time for you to say like, we should get a photograph? Yes, because when the stuff comes in through the window and then when the light's on (I've got those lights that you know), you can turn the lights on and the shadows. So absolutely, it doesn't.

AH

Precisely

SC

Yes, it's wonderful. And I, you know, I have different rather than watching telly on because I am a collector, I am privileged to be a collector, I am not rich, but that's what I've decided to spend my money on and put on my walls, nice paintings, sculptures, and rather than watching telly just sometimes just go around, look at all those beautiful pieces of art ~~to~~ ~~collect~~ I have collected. In metal, so yes. (laughter)

AH

The artist has taken however many hundreds of hours to make that piece of work. And I think it takes that amount of time to fully appreciate it. So yeah, you can't just sort of come in, you might come into a gallery like this and go, 'Oh, nope, not going to bother with that', or, 'wow, that's intriguing'. And there are inevitably things that you're just not going to spend time with there are books that you're not going to read or music you're not going to listen to.-But there are other times when you think that you're intrigued enough to be able to want to have a bit of an entree into the world of that particular piece of work.

SV

I think people have to trust their instincts. My students sometimes say to me, I read this review I don't understand why and what's it all about. Why is it good? And you just have to go and have a look, if it grabs you find out more and if it doesn't fine; there's no right or wrong?

MG

Yeah, I think it'd be if you guys, I think we're in a flow now. So if you guys want to ask questions. I've still got a few more of my sleeve. But I'm more interested in what you guys want to ask. And then if we have time. Yeah, that sounds good. Yeah. Well, yeah, I

Fifth member of the audience

I was just interested because I know Gill, you've started to using found objects in your work more recently, and how that kind of dynamic works, you know, you're also abstract. Usually

I suppose you're bringing in materials that might be recognisable. So how does how does that sort of play out?

SV

Well skirting boards; it was a found material at the time that I was using window frames. I also used a barn side at one point. And I'd be attracted to it because of the look of it, but also the story it told. And at the time I was reading, I don't know if you've heard of Gaston Bachelard, 'The poetics of space. He was a philosopher, a French philosopher, and it was more about poetry and how he was relating poets in terms of what they wrote about the domestic house and how we each relate to a space in different ways. Some people might relate more to the basement and someone to the attic or playing under the table as a kid making tents. The skirting board, it just attracted me initially. I did have it on the floor attached to and coming out of the wall. I still play with this to specific spaces, falling into the space and a lot more on the wall. This is the first one I've actually done independent of the wall. I've just realised that. I just made it last year and is something I want to take further. But there is a system in how I put them together and using a simple technique of joining things with piano hinges which I find quite beautiful as well. And is also domestic, in how you might have a door or window open. (Audience: So you're building in that reference to a recognisable and deconstructing it).

But at the end of the day, I'm really interested in how the moulding plays off the more open shapes. And then, the way you cut them, you get this randomness and movement when you put them together as well.

GB

I think I use objects ...I started use, I don't know why, I just started using, I think it's partly because I wanted to bring certain elements of mass and volume into my work that I didn't have in the materials I was using. But it's also there is something about that kind of subjective memory narrative that people have. So I'm not saying that this is about something, but there are elements in the sculpture that people might recognise that take them back to the everyday. So they basically partly say, this isn't actually a something that's out there that is completely away from your everyday normal life. This has got elements in it that we can all recognise or certain people can recognise in certain ways. So I pick things that have some kind of resonance to me. But I don't make a big deal necessarily big deal about that. But I think it is about giving people a reference point that then maybe sees then helps them see the rest of the abstraction of the sculpture. It gives them a sort of little chink they can go use to get in, I think, I don't know, I change my mind all the time...That's one thing. I don't know. Does that work for you? I mean, everybody else feels like

Fifth member of the audience

You could be right, it seemed like at that time, when you move studios as well, if you were making more, if you'd like, to domestic scale. Yeah, I think they did that for me, as well as some of the cups in and it's just yeah, it made those...

GB

But we've had conversations about this whole thing about domestic as well, because there's a big thing about women using domestic... and the domestic realm being a woman's world,

which I completely dispute and shouldn't be the case. And we hope these days, it isn't the case. So I think there are men who make work with that domestic vibe. And I, I don't mind making things about domestic things because I think that's something we all relate to. Because we all live in houses, we all have families, and all of those things. And so I don't think we should just think of the domestic world as a purely female domain,

AH

I think a lot of people generally are taking on domestic in inverted commas, materials, a lot of weaving, and a lot of knitting and so on, textile based things, because they are something that can be wrapped up small, smaller thing. So when you pull it out, it becomes this wonderful space, you can adjust it to fit in different spaces as well. But you know, people sort of adapting to their practice, to their making environment.

JG

And their showing environment

Chatter.

JG

We had a conversation literally about showing that there might be a possibility for the four of us, which would be great and the space is much bigger, and I considered actually just bringing the raw materials on site and doing that kind of installation this time. Because to actually try to transport the work is such a huge cost. And it's so difficult. And now we've got these rules and regulations that eight months ago, I won't get political on you, but we didn't have so much across Europe, these constraints are something that will always kind of ebb and flow and in and they will change again and again. And again. And I must interesting observations because it does make you think in different ways. I mean, not only about how something stands, its mass, form and and the actual work, but all the other things that you have to consider. And that that you can't work in isolation from those, it's not really possible to do that.

GB

And we don't have... we're not all supported by large galleries that help pay for all our costs. And we don't have, you know, we don't get the kind of commissions where we get to make work that's big and overblown because of we are famous.

MG

I was talking to an artist the other day in the panel about we're talking about collecting was the whole kind of folks panel, one of the artists said that the best thing about my work being collected was the space that it created. So it wasn't actually the kind of like financial gain that you had or, although for me, it was actually, because we talk about sculpture. It's like the fact that this, this kind of sculpture that would be sitting in the studio actually, like it was a bit tongue in cheek, but the space that yeah, there's the physical space, but also that that kind of granted them permission to make more really, and you're actually this, this has gone somewhere belong somewhere now, so I can make something else.

GB

And it's also getting some kind of sense of approbation, somebody's saying, This is good. This is what I'm having, this is worth doing. And if you don't sell it, you don't get it anyway, you sometimes think why am I doing this?

JG

It's great, isn't it? I've got this material. And now I can make something to fit that space.

SV

Although the story goes that Brancusi would miss his pieces if they sold and he'd remake them. I love the fact that I can go visit Kate and see my piece (that's not the only reason I go to see her). And you know, it comes alive in a different space as well.

Member of the audience

Yeah, I just wonder you might not be as prolific as the pandemic, how has the pandemic affected your work or if it has at all? And, and also kind of interrelated question is about wellbeing; I work in the field of well-being for a charitable organisation. I know that I'm starting a course in photography, because I think doing something creative is really beneficial and I'm just interested in your comments.

AH

Once Rishi Sunak announced the furlough scheme, I thought that was the best home residency I was ever likely to get. It was a very troubling time for everybody, obviously, with all of those things going on, but I had an outlet, I was able to go to the studio, I was lucky because that stayed open. I had some financial security, a little bit of support. And I relished, that space and time and that iso..., I didn't mind the isolation. We're all on our own anyway (in the studio). So, I think I went a bit nutty, with complete isolation. But I actually really enjoyed that focused amount of time. I did think that we were just going to go into lockdown for a fortnight. And I made a list of, I started to think 'well what am I going to do? I made a list of pieces that I wanted to finish off. And sometimes it was just a matter of mounting them so they would actually stand up, or a bit of paint or, making them gallery presentable. I am still working through the list though I have made some new, some brand-new work as well.

JG

It's an interesting question. It forced me back from my studio. At the time, I got locked down. And I'd actually live very close to Newcastle. My partner has a place out in France. So I'm now in France because of covid primarily. But it was a really difficult one for me because my son suddenly arrived and got locked down with me. And he's in his mid 20s. And that's quite a shock, and there I was, no studio really although I could go in but it was difficult. And so you were forced into that domesticity and the the one thing about being a sculptor, you kind of thought Okay, so now I am actually making work in the domestic sense again. So that's quite interesting how I think that every artist is has affected every artist that the way you make work has had to be probably smaller, much more controlled. I mean, the 10 Grand Challenge, and we were all part of that. And we were making pieces that literally were busy the size of Alex's this big on the kitchen table. So I relished that in some ways because it focused you in a different way that I well served for me I wouldn't have perhaps had the

opportunity to sit down and think in a more constructive way about how you work and how we can make work along with my son that was eating me out of house and home watching wall to wall Netflix, it was a challenging, challenging time and worrying for everybody else. We're not out of it either yet. So I don't know what the future will bring for people, I think there's been a lot of work in mental health, that that has affected a lot of people as well, how we move on from this really interesting question.

SV

We really saw it in adult education, with some students who were desperate to come back, but then others who were too afraid to come to the classroom and also how it affected them during the lockdown. There were a lot of online courses; not so much in sculpture, because we just couldn't. It was a lifesaver for a lot of people and their mental health to do an online course in art. I was doing a piano class online, and it did keep a structure going for me. But I found it all very stressful, because I had to work through it. I would have loved to be furloughed. But you know, I did get more work done, because I didn't have all the other issues of travelling to work and back and studio and it was a more concentrated time. I think we're really lucky as artists. And you hear of musicians as well, you know, that possibly they couldn't go and perform anymore, but they had all this time to, to create new music and to record.

MG

I have some up my sleeve. One thing we haven't really talked about is kind of how your group operates. And what that, you know, what that gives to you as artists, I'm really interested in that. I know there are other artists in the room listening, who might be interested in how you, I guess, maybe not so much how you came about more about how you operate and what that enables you to do and achieve, that maybe you couldn't do without it

GB

There was a thing in Sheffield, possibly three years ago, (I've lost track of time since Covid), where they had to think about the journey of the artist and I went along because I actually had the time to go, which was unusual. And there's all these artists talking about their practice. And it was all seemed to be about how they got support from each other and how they found their people when they were at college. And then they stayed with their people. And I realised how I'd become very isolated from other artists. And I was working my own way because there are actually very few artists in Sheffield who make work similar to me. So I started thinking what I do need.. I'm not getting stuff back from galleries or the wider art world, I need, I'm on my own. And maybe if there was more of me, it would be more of an impact. And so I started to look for other artists to work with, because I felt it was a way that we could, you know, four people is better than one and that we might make an impact together in a way that I couldn't on my own. And also we can support each other and be each other's people and make us feel that we are actually doing something that's worthwhile and meaningful and not just diddling about.

JG

I know it was one question that arose when we were looking at the probably the biggest difference that we all found about being a woman was the fact that we could talk quite

openly and collectively as a group. And, you know, we have arguments, we work in different ways. We don't really know each other that well, Alex invited myself, Sheila and Gillian, to the show. I never met Alex before point. And we got together after that. So it was a great show. We had a lot of fun - let's do more of this. So in a way, I mean, I should let Alex talk more about that. But it's evolved. And, and we communicate. We communicated via zoom more, more than a few times and email frequently and we message. And I don't know if this is true of men or not, I don't know. But I suspect that women chat as groups more openly and freely, which has allowed us to, I guess, bring together come together and what have we're all very as distant from each other physically, but we, it's fun. And we talk about art, we talk about issues we put work on. And I don't know why the men do that so much. And I think that that was probably the biggest difference we came up with, about what are the differences between men and women working in abstract sculpture. Maybe that is the answer. We talk to each other.

GB

And we talk about each other's work. And it is actually quite hard to get people to talk to you honestly about your work, it's quite hard to actually get any kind of genuine critique from other people that you respect and value, so finding people that you think like, well, I, that I know what they do, and I respect what they do. So if they tell me what I'm doing is gone a bit wrong, I believe them. Or if they told me, something's good, I believe most of the time people just say, yes. Oh, I've liked it on Instagram. So that means you know, you're all right. And you think if that's not enough, you need more as an artist, to actually sustain you and to help propel you forward. And to give you new ideas.

AH

One of the things that I was intrigued about by bringing us all together was the changes that we've seen since we started out. And we're now at a pivotal point in our lives, when we as individuals are going to see changes in the way that we potentially, in the way that we work. We're losing our stamina, as we get older men and women. You know, I was just I thinking we've seen a huge change in art schools between then and now. And I'm just thinking about what am I going to do next? Where am I going, now? What is the potential? I think there's a..... at the turn of the 60s and 70s, there was a massive introduction of new materials, that artists were exploring, the foams and new materials, plastics, and all sorts of things. And those have all moved on, those.... that technology is continually being updated. And we're now able to use things like 3d printing, and 3d casting and new methodologies that we can embrace. And I was thinking, how can I do that as an individual? So..... and I needed to be able to talk to somebody about it, I need it. I can't You can't just stop somebody at the bus stop.

GB

I can imagine you would actually.

AH

I tried that. Okay, well, you know, but this was a platform, which I could honestly say that I don't feel that I've got the capability to do this and say, two or three years time, how am I

going to carry on making and I know several older artists as there's a woman I know who, who still does all their own carving..... in her head, she sits there and watches the guy carving her pieces, and she's listening and visualising it, and she's in her head, she's making every single thing. So, if there's something a stone change in the stone or something, she's onto it immediately. I think that's a remarkable thing to be able to do. ~~It~~ I'm not in that position to be able to hire anybody -yet. So, you know, that for me, that was this was a period of a little bit of reflection, bringing us all together. But a community that was moving forward. And going forward into into what ? Yeah, that's gonna be so exciting, I think. We don't know what it is, but maybe we're living for a bit But we're, we're all excited about it. ??? But the community in the abstraction.

AH Yeah, it will be about how does that How is that abstraction going to change with the methodologies and potentially This is fabulous.

Member of the audience

Men are jealous of each other. Very status oriented. I want my name in the paper. All right then I want my name on TV. Alright then, I want to be the next James Bond. My work might be tripe,

AH

But you still want to be out there

GB

Do you think men are more competitive than women.

Member of the audience

Oh, massively.

GB

Are there any other men who feel that is the case? Or do you feel that's been a problem for you as a man not fitting into that competitiveness?

Member of the audience

No, it's been a pain, to be honest with you, because at the end of the day, financially orientated, I have five children. And my wife regretted that, but the thing is, it's been that I have told lies about it, I could write a book about it actually. And it's always been that edge whatsoever. So I cannot wait to see. So there's always been that fiscal edge, coupled with the fact that your ego gets in the way, but it's a tool that you must have, because somebody else may take your wages off.

Member of the audience

I think the issue of openness is common amongst men and women, you know. Some people, who are more creative.

GB

Do you think it's more common with creative people, artists than it is with the general population?

Member of the audience

I don't know. I mean, you're talking about status. And there are those Artists that being an artist is their status. And where you sit in the hierarchy of that is massive, it's those ice sheets that always talked about.

MG

Yeah, and where you place value? So like, I think that's a really interesting question. Because some, there's a presumption that value is being represented by blue chip galleries, having a big museum show, but maybe there's, if we have different value systems, and there's as much value in what you in this kind of bringing together a group of peers and working together and working through problems and thinking through new ideas. So it's, I guess, it's the question of when...

JG

And bringing everybody together, through sharing it, it's yeah, you know, I'm not sitting here being paid for this. It's lovely to be able to have these kinds of discussions to, to just almost help forge new ways of working and the friendships and collaborations. I don't know any of you in this room, but it might be somebody that that is when I was talking to you earlier on about the possibility of me pushing my work forward in paper. And it may be that you know, someone who works for you, and that might be like, a wonderful way forward, so these kinds of events are really, for me invaluable, because it opens up possibilities. I think that's important.

Member of the audience

I have a friend. Called Trevor and we have lunch, every Christmas, and we spend in town, according (inaudible.....) to a good day. Pretty often men often say, men of God is up to complex, you know, some sort of...

AH

There seems to be some tension in the corner. Yeah, of course.

Female member of the audience

I completely disagree. Not all men are the same. It's just the men who aren't pushy and competitive, aren't as visible.

GB

Same with the women that aren't as pushy.

MG

There was this quote that I read by Hassinger, who's one of the artists in that show, I thought was really interesting, because I thought was like terribly inspiring, but not in maybe a straightforward way. And it was just, she talks about the fact that there were many obstacles in in her path, both as a woman but an African American, she felt underappreciated, but she decided she wasn't going to be hostile about it. And she was just going to continue to make work even though there was no place to show it. So she just made art and she was a teacher, and she raised the kids. And that's the quote, and I thought

that that's like actually into, like, inspiring so many levels and things. In some Yeah, like even when you know, the conventions of the art world aren't necessarily the blue-chip galleries. Okay, your museum isn't ringing you up saying I want to show your work, actually the most important thing is that you carry on making work. I think that's so evident in what we see today. So I kinda thought would be nice to finish on finish on that.

GB

It is frustrating when you make work, I feel that there's no point in making it if other people don't see it. I can't just make it for myself. It needs to be a conversation, needs to be communication. So thank you all for coming so we can share our work with you.