

Cathie Pilkington RA is a sculptor. **Neil Walton** is subject leader for PGCE Secondary Art and Design at Goldsmiths, and a visiting professor at the RA Schools. Here, they discuss Cathie's development as an artist, her role as Keeper of the Royal Academy Schools and the future of art education in the 21st century



Cathie Pilkington

interview



Left *Pieta 1: Playing Dead* (2018)
Jesmonite, resin, oil paint, wool blanket and modelling stand
© Mr Perou

Right Cathie Pilkington in the Keeper's Studio, Royal Academy of Art 2020
© Hayley Benoit

Neil Walton: Can you tell us about your development as an artist, especially your first encounters with art at school and college?

Cathie Pilkington RA: From an early age I was drawing, painting and making things, but joining up this intuitive, unconscious activity with art education was difficult. I didn't grow up with art at home or trips to galleries, but I do have early memories of crayon drawing, painting and making clay models, while picturing birds and animals was an expression of my personal feelings about the magic of nature. By contrast, secondary school art lessons seemed remote and procedural, with uninspiring exercises and random art historical references – I remember a slide lecture with works by Henry Moore and Elizabeth Frink, but at the time they struck me as bizarre and ugly.

Then I went on a residential two-week course to Wales with other A-level students, taught by staff at a local art foundation course. It was a revelation. We experimented with materials and large-scale work, and I found myself painting all day in a

forest on huge boards with a limited colour palette, and drawing on windy cliffs with massive lumps of charcoal till my hands froze. We made drawing machines in plywood and took them to the beach to make land art. I signed up for the foundation course after that, which was probably one of the most exciting years of my life.

When did sculpture start to feature and what drew you to it?

I have always felt a power in the stillness and silence of objects. My dad had a kitchen drawer full of odds and ends – like treasure – and my grandma's ornaments were a source of endless fascination. I started making sculpture on my foundation course, without any idea of what I was doing, but my formal introduction to sculpture was at Edinburgh College of Art. The culture there was very blokey. Crits felt obscure and intimidating, and the lectures seemed to come from another planet. I began to think, if this is art, it's not for people like me. I wanted to learn how to make things and

express myself, so I changed to the jewellery course. This sparked a three-year period of making objects on a relatively small scale using silversmithing techniques. At first this move was liberating. I could learn techniques quickly, on a manageable scale with no art theory or crits. I could make my own language instead of having to analyse and criticise something before it even existed.

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elements as a kind of content in itself. Now Frink and Moore have come back as ghosts to be exorcised or atoned, alongside all my other miscellaneous cultural baggage – toys, dolls, ornaments, classical sculpture and folk art. It's the return of the repressed!

In 2019, you became the Keeper of the Royal Academy Schools, one of the nation's oldest, most venerable art institutions. What does the role involve?

The Royal Academy of Arts was established by a group of artists and architects in 1768 to professionalise the teaching of the arts of design. This model of a self-funded independent artist-led institution still stands today. Exhibitions were originally introduced to fund the school. Today the galleries host a diverse and hugely popular world-class programme of exhibitions. Historically, the Keeper was literally the academician artist-in-residence, living on site and in charge of the day-to-day running of things. Every Keeper has brought their own style and personality to the job. Over the years, the role has evolved along with the rest of the Academy. Now the RA Schools run as a thoroughly contemporary postgraduate fine art course with an exceptional academic and technical team, and a very collaborative approach to leadership and direction. It's a huge privilege to be involved with this historic institution.

How do the RA Schools compare to studio courses in other art institutions?

Because of its independence we can provide a unique opportunity for our diverse, international intake. We offer a three-year postgraduate programme and we don't charge tuition fees. Social mobility is high on our agenda as we can offer places to students who might not otherwise be able to study at postgraduate level. Each student receives bursary support, has a studio space to work in and access to fantastic technical workshops and expertise. There is a programme of lectures, with visiting artist talks and crits, alongside tutorials which monitor progression. Today's Academy is a place where traditional, modern and contemporary art is made, shown and debated; a vibrant, risk-taking, experimental artistic community. Because we are a small school, we can work closely with our students. We provide them with a social and critical network that serves them long after graduation.

The incorporation of art schools into the university sector, a sector that has been subject to increasing marketisation and performativity principles, has raised all sorts of questions about art in higher education. It has added urgency to what were already pressing and difficult questions about the model. It feels like the sector is in a process of change – just witness the numerous independent art schools that have sprung up over the last decade. How do you see the current state of the field?

The appearance of alternatives is a healthy thing and a sign of dissatisfaction with the status quo. It shows that the market-driven model is broken, but we also have to be constantly asking ourselves if art schools are how they should be, where they are great and where they could improve. We should ask which features are essential and which need to be rethought – features such as crits, lectures, the use of studio space, the ways that students show their work and how we can be more inclusive.

Top *Weird Horses*, work in progress (2023) © Cathie Pilkington

Above *Degas Dolls* (2017) in the life rooms, Brighton; painted resin, wood, steel, aluminium, foam and paper collage © Mr Perou

It sounds like you've had quite an ambivalent relationship both to sculpture and to art history.

For a while I was stranded between art and craft. I found the craft world ultimately too limited to material processes, and the fine art world was too caught up in concepts, theory and politics. I finally found a solution while doing an MA in the sculpture department of the RCA. With all the material and conceptual possibilities opened up, I began negotiating a position which engaged with the complexities and contradictions of high and low cultural positions, with craft and art, with matter and art history, with all these conflicting

Right *Weird Horses*, work in progress (2023); fabric, plaster, resin, Jesmonite, bronze, straw © Cathie Pilkington

'Sculpture used to be confident, to know what it was for, but today things are not so clear. Now anything could be described as a sculpture, so it has to work very hard to be in the world, to be separate from other things'

Some time ago, Thierry de Duve wrote about a crisis in art schools¹. He saw value in the academic and the Bauhaus model, but he was scathing about the contemporary curriculum. Without sharing his skepticism about the latter, I wonder if we can use this critical overview to imagine a kind of meta-academy, which draws on a self-consciousness of different models of art education. This would enable a more pluralistic re-reading of the past, allowing students to find alternative histories and see themselves in a more diverse and inclusive curriculum.

I like the idea of a meta-academy as a critical re-interpretation of history. In the last century, the RA Schools were always lagging behind and its academic institutional history seemed

to put a brake on its development, but I think that has completely switched around now. Because of their history and their location outside the mainstream university sector, the RA Schools are now uniquely placed to lead the debate about art education's future, to have a highly visible

presence with this debate nationally and internationally. To have an independent contemporary art school at the centre of such a historical institution at this time is an incredible opportunity to ask questions about past, present and future art school models. What is it that we teach in art schools now and how should we do it? What is the model fit for the 21st century?

What changes and developments are going on at the moment?

The RA Schools is currently undergoing a major refurbishment, the first in hundreds of years. The project is scheduled to be completed in spring 2024. We are making the school fully accessible for the first time, creating additional studio space, expanding workshop facilities to include a performance/time-based media studio, and adding a canteen and library. As part of the works, the schools' incredible plaster cast collection has been taken off site. I am very interested in curating this collection and the historic Life Room in such a way that the casts can be accessed as teaching aids, adding flexibility to allow interventions by students. It's an exciting time to be the Keeper. The challenges are huge, but it feels like a time of both structural and conceptual refurbishment. The whole team are working hard on a strategic review of the operational and pedagogical model we offer.

How does your role as Keeper work with your identity as an artist?

I'm really interested in how a contemporary artist can work with the problematic inheritance of historical canons that no longer fit with the way we live now. I'm passionate about traditional methods of studio production and expression, but we can't be traditional any more – that requires a shared and uncontested culture. We can't rid ourselves of our problematic inheritance, but we can attempt to integrate parts or



fragments, to rehabilitate and revivify objects and images to make them meaningful to us now. I see a connection here between my Keeper and artist roles. I'm both a sculptor and an assembler, assembling ideas as well as objects. I often work with collections or make contemporary interventions in historical settings. In this way, my current role of Keeper fits well with the content of my work.

What are you currently working on as an artist?

I'm working towards a solo exhibition at Karsten Schubert London art gallery called *Weird Horses*. I'm often drawn to engage with motifs that seem exhausted and overburdened by history, to test out what meanings and relevance they can have today. The image of the horse is a loaded – even clichéd – motif that's deep in the canon, and a relic of past ideas, myths and empires. It's tied in so closely with the structures of civilization, it's almost rendered invisible. I always start with something personal and direct, and then I think very hard about how I can integrate that rawness with contemporary realities of life and with what art has become. Sculpture used to be confident, to know what it was for, but today things are not so clear. Now anything could be described as a sculpture, so it has to work very hard to be in the world, to be separate from other things. My weird horses are fabricated in mixed materials, using a combination of studio methods and including fabric, plaster, straw and bronze. They are stitched, poured, cast and assembled. Instead of their bodies being heroic and streamlined, my horses are fragmented, absurd, in bits. It's unclear if they are still being made or falling apart. ●

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Reference

1. De Duve, Thierry (1994) *When Form as Become Attitude – And Beyond* in Foster, S. & De Ville, N. *The Artist and the Academy; Issues in Fine Art Education and the Wider Cultural Context*, John Hansard Gallery