



photography • Graham Matthews

Philippa Lawrence

words } Jessica Watkins

Philippa Lawrence has already had quite a day by the time we convene outside a wintry inn, isolated somewhere in the dramatic landscape of west Wales. She has been working on her first major public art commission, in the town of Llan-drindod Wells.

During the few hours spent in this small town, Philippa managed to meet a remarkable range of charming folks. The day began with her borrowing ancient keys and chilling out in the small back rooms of the church whilst the priest delivered Morning Prayer. Then, a delightful hour was spent with an enthusiastic stamp-collecting postmaster at the Post Office, followed by biscuits with the "museum people", plus five contractors in hard hats on the grassed slope. Moving on from this, she slipped in tea with her project manager and finally obtained an introduction to the hospital matron. All in the name of her art, naturally...

Recently you made a piece of work called Bound. This involved wrapping one tree in colourful fabric across every county in Wales. The outcome was a fair few tremendously eye-catching pieces of art. Can you give us the scoop?

I travelled Wales a lot searching for trees. Dead trees are actually quite hard to find – and I'm picky; it's got to be a beautiful tree, and dead. Dead means a more stark shape and no damage to the tree. The physicality of binding the tree in fabric was a small act but when repeated it became a form of meditation in its own right.

Most of my work is about trying to draw attention to things that might be overlooked and also revealing aspects of a site or place. Through wrapping the trees and concealing them, I wanted to reveal their beauty. And also I was trying to take art-work out of the gallery and into an environment where everyone could enjoy it... the farmer and the local community. Sometimes the farmers were just really isolated and wanted to talk. They were the most welcoming people who respected the time and energy I put in. At the end of one particularly long binding the farmer came up to me and gave me a gigantic hug.

Have you ever fallen out of a tree while wrapping it?

Not whilst making the work, but I was a very good tree climber when I was small. I actually made the work in a cherry picker. That's a bit of machinery that takes you high up in the sky. I was

usually up there with a friend of mine, Andy Hazel, and you're in a very small area. You wouldn't want to argue up there; it's an intense working space!

Why choose Wales as a place to make art?

Bound was about trying to make a piece of work that referenced the landscape which I've grown to love, and also to give something back, because although I'm not Welsh I do feel really close to Wales. By binding a tree I felt it almost bound me to the landscape, and in a way I felt as though I'd 'earned my stripes'.

But, I make my work wherever I am and it's not dependent on one specific place. I have been invited to have exhibitions in Australia, Japan, Canada, the Czech Republic and Iceland. These opportunities gave me the chance to make a real connection to the spaces where the work was to be shown. I make a site visit where possible as I would be uncomfortable 'parachuting' work into an alien space – I would feel it had no connection.

The Italian artist Maurizio Catalan is known for using the words of other artists to answer his own interviews. If you were to steal someone's words, whose would they be?

If I stole anyone's words it would be those of Sylvia Plath. Well, Ella Fitzgerald's voice reading Sylvia Plath's poetry!

As a contemporary artist you play with a range of media. I've seen you work with everything from dead flies to neon lights to pompoms. Would you talk me through it?

I'd bore you if I talked you through them all! But by the time I go to bed I'm exhausted because I'm constantly sifting the universe and looking at the 'stuff of life', juxtaposition, colour, shape and materials. I want to learn about the world of materials and then share my delight in that. You can meet fabricators and model makers, and infiltrate pockets of industry you wouldn't normally have access to. I'm just hugely inquisitive! I am currently very excited at the chance to learn laser cutting with felt – I have had an idea for over two years and now I am about to make it real.

Who's the most peculiar character your art has ever brought you into contact with?

There was one character that electroplated things. He was just like a mad scientist in a lab. He would almost give anything a go, however dangerous. After about an hour I felt quite unsettled and wanted to leave! But actually there are a lot of people out there on an orbit that isn't 'normal', and I do seem to meet quite a few of them.



Who are your influences?

I don't think I'd say 'who'. They lie in life, and good poetry. And Einstein's First Law of the Conservation of Energy, in which he states that energy is neither created nor destroyed; it is just transformed from one state to another. You think about death or life. Everything is subject to change and growth and development, but nothing should be lost.

What books currently rest on your bedside table?

The Earth From The Air by Yann Arthur-Bertrand, and Full Moon by Michael Light. It's wonderful to sink into the images in both these books. From my bed I can travel for miles and they alter how I feel. Under those two lies The Secret Diary Of Adrian Mole, which was lent to me at Christmas and made me laugh out loud on a flight home from New York. And in pride of place is Beech-combings – The Narrative Of Trees, by Richard Mabey. It's an exploration of the ancient relationships between humans and trees. I know it's going to be very important to me.

And what CD is in your player right now?

At the moment it's Massive Attack's Mezzanine. Before that I was trying to impress somebody and was spinning Miles Davies!

Do you have a favourite Bob Dylan song?

Aren't they all perfect?

Are you especially fond of any of your works in particular?

I'm proud of Bound because I think that project really unites people. I'm also proud of my neon bathtub because that was a nice use of a beautiful object that had already had a life. I like to think historically of how many people have used that bath in the past. It was like a boat for the soul of the people who'd passed through it.

What are you currently working on?

Aside from the Public Art commission I am enjoying having some time to consolidate – to finish and develop some works without pressure from an exhibition. I am developing some work using maps and working with ideas about commodity and how we harness and exploit nature – I can't say more because I want it to be fresh when it is shown. For the past three years I have worked in a very focused and intense manner, and I was delighted that my first major solo show toured, but it is time to pick up on some of the ideas that were left behind in that process. That said, I feel that there is probably a juggernaut just around the corner and I will be off and operating at 250% again before I know it.

And uh, do you believe in God?

... Sometimes I think that he's having a bit of a laugh! No – that's flippant – I have a strong spiritual understanding of personal beliefs, but not of a God with a capital 'G'. I do though believe there is soul in us all, and that there is a bigger picture.

Who would play you in a movie?

Chance would be a fine thing! I don't think my life would make a very good movie at all – so if this were ever to be a reality it would have to be someone very talented whose performance would completely absorb you. I think that person would be Cate Blanchett if she wasn't too busy – in fact only Cate Blanchett would do!



photography * Alex Ramsay



www.philippalawrence.com