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St Hugh's Foundation for the Arts - Report

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Initial Plan

In my application I set out my plan to explore ideas around coercion, jingoism and my response as an artist to what has happened during the pandemic and the attendant issues around it. My primary medium is poetry and I have worked on new poetry during this time.

What Has Happened?

I was able to have some dedicated thinking time and I enjoyed exploring lots of ideas that came when I began an open thinking process. In truth, I ended up with too many ideas and concepts and began to think on a grand scale. I conceptualised an installation piece, a response to my fury at the failed state, the abdication of moral responsibility from the government which has left us floundering and on a dangerous trajectory towards authoritarianism. I envisaged a choice emerging; two possible futures.

One future featured a grim wall where bodies hang bearing the heads of goats – these scapegoats, the victims of hysteria, group-think, demonization. I have to acknowledge Margaret Atwood's novel *The Handmaid's Tale* here. The novel has had a profound impact on me since I first read it in the 80s. The grim Hulu TV adaptation haunts me. Everything in the novel and in the adaptation has precedent somewhere in the world. I thought of how authoritarian regimes pick off their victims in layers and how we currently have political prisoners here in the UK – Julian Assange and Craig Murray, both journalists who have paid a heavy price for speaking truth to power. Journalists are often the first layer closely followed by dissidents, artists, poets, writers.

The second future came from a vision I had of people on a barely seaworthy boat riding a rough sea. They were seated at a round table on the boat, holding hands, sharing all they had, fighting the conditions they found themselves in together. Of course I was thinking of refugees and of rescuers like Pia Klemp who defied authorities and faced imprisonment for saving refugees in distress at sea. The round table came from my love of Arthurian mythology and the chivalric code – which is outdated and entirely masculine but which champions virtue and selflessness.

I also looked at the history of the UK, from the election of Thatcher in 1979 to the present day, and examined how the pernicious mythologies of neoliberalism and capitalism have infected every level of thinking and effectively crushed all opposition to supremacy of capital.

Adjacent to the ruthless amorality in the ruling class I also identified the subtle use of emblematic signs and signifiers in language and culture that serve to influence people's thinking. The British flag has become a toxic emblem of nationalism and jingoism. The flag of St George is similarly appropriated and I personally now find both flags profoundly threatening and disturbing in the way they are used by mainstream politicians. Once they were only used in such ways by the National front, EDL and far right extremist groups.

I wrote a huge, meandering mind map of all my thinking and began turning it into a sketch and ideas pad- this is on-going and messy so I won't share any of it here. I also wrote a lengthy stream-of-consciousness piece that I am working into a poem sequence. The first part of that is below.

As part of taking my own writing more seriously and giving it space, I submitted a play that I first wrote in 2016 to the 2021 Women's Playwriting Competition. It is a play that imagines a dark post Brexit, post civil war, post climate catastrophe future where the country is split asunder and returns to brutal feudalism and in which women are reduced to chattels. I have yet to hear back from the theatre company. My desire to rework the play and submit it came directly from working on these ideas and issues in this project.

I have also joined a poetry group online with professional editors who support poets to compile and publish collections of their work. I am looking to publish with them next year and the work I have undertaken in this project will be included in that publication.

Conclusions

My work in this area will continue. I have a bank of ideas, some of which I can realise, some of which might never come to anything but they exist and that is enough. I have had a great opportunity to ask myself 'What if?' questions and explore lots of pathways that I otherwise would not have had time for. I am immensely grateful for that. I have confronted some difficult and challenging ideas, rubbed up against views and attitudes that make me distressed. I've had some good conversations with other artists and writers and I have moved my writing work to the front and centre of my practice – which is where it deserves to be.

Thank you so much for your support and for allowing me to create space to explore, think and write. It is hugely appreciated.

Poems**Take it to the Sea****1.**

I take it to sea,
this grief within me
makes me deaf, sightless.
Memory of bells clanging
as waves whisper in sibilant foam
on the strandline.

Clíodhna says,

*tell the birds, they will unfurl it from their wings,
release it to sky.*

I see birds, gannets and gulls,
few of them today,
their plumes tacky with words
of other spell-makers and lamenters.

I seek the horizon, interrupted by wind farms.

Water is enough for now.

Sea roars and breaks, ebullient sound.

It is too rough to enter.

I have been dreaming of swimming

under violet sunsets between black cliffs,
of crayfish and firefly squid,
being out of my depth.

Clíodhna reassures that should I die,
she will take me back.

Clap for Life

1.

Clap, clap, clap

Clap of hands, slap of flesh,
collective deference,
the tale of our time,
twisted by subterfuge and egregious lies.

Bottle

Peering through bevelled glass,
I watch the birds come,
their bright eyes urge trust,
to take them at their song.
They sing tunes we can't sing,
our voices stilled, breath stopped and bottled
for fear of a poison it might contain.
The bottle is a prison where we are atomised,
unsure anymore of what is outside.

Clap for Life

2.

Clap, clap, clap

It's applause that causes fright,

then comes freeze or fawn, flee or fight.