ELEMENTS
A Girton Adventure
by Yelena Popova
Artist in Residence
2016-17
Grange Cottage Studio, Girton College.
GIRTON COLLEGE: ARTIST IN RESIDENCE

Girton’s artist residency dates from 2013. It enables visual artists to live and work in the College for up to a year. The hope is that their creativity will be influenced by us - by the history, geography and materiality of the site, by the Fellows, staff and students who inhabit it - and that our thinking and practices might in turn be shaped by their presence.

‘Elements’ is part of this engagement. It is an art trail created by Yelena Popova, the third incumbent of the artist-in-residence scheme. Yelena’s predecessors are Colden Drystone (2013-14), and Sonny Sanjay Vadgama (2014-15), whose end-of-year exhibitions were mounted in the Judge Business School. Yelena, in contrast, entices us on a journey - a tour of the College and of her work, including items co-produced with students.

This booklet includes a map of the trail, a guide to the artworks and a hint of the synergy between them. The rest is up to you. I think you will find some iconic spaces transformed by the new exhibits; equally, you will see that many new works are inspired by the environment and operation of the College - 53 acres of gardens, woodland and grounds, mud, earth and ashes, the material trace of past generations, the energy of today’s youth…

The Tour weaves not only through the College but also around Girton’s other collections - 672 works by over 416 artists, dating from 1300 (Scenes from the life of the Virgin by Francesco di Vannucio, 1356-1389) through the pre-Raphaelites, to a clutch of 20th Century artists including David Jones, Winifred Nicholson and Stanley Spencer; and the 21st century exhibition of ‘People’s Portraits’ (a growing collection of individuals from all works of everyday life assembled in partnership with the Royal Society of Portrait Painters). There are also, of course, paintings, photographs and installations contributed by Yelena’s predecessors as artist-in-residence at Girton.
All this is testimony to how the setting - the heritage and culture - of a single institution can form a catalyst for creativity, transforming the whole College into a space where imagination thrives. For the artist-in-residence, there is time and space to experiment; new histories, geographies, disciplines and publics to work with. For the College community there is the discovery of new practices, dialogues and ways of knowing; an opportunity to learn about art, and a route through art into new ways of seeing the world.

The artist-in-residence scheme is, in short, part of a unique educational adventure. Girton is proud to be at the centre of it, and we are grateful to the founders and funders who have made it possible. They are Suling Mead (1975, Economics) and Ruth Whaley (1974, English): two Girton alumni whose vision and energy have, like that of the artists whose work they support, truly made a difference.

Susan J. Smith, FBA, FAcSS, FRSE,
The Mistress
Clay Venus workshop with Girton students.
Introduction to Elements

Yelena Popova finds herself living in an institution; one built for women; a monument to the pioneers of women’s education. For a year she is ‘in residence’, yet also on show. Elements (Girton Adventure) leads the visitor through varied communal spaces, to witness extant and new constituents of the artists practice, made alone or with groups of students. Her work, across media, interrogates materials alongside the contradictions of Idealism and Capitalism. The College buildings encapsulate these tensions through their architectural styles (the Gothic Revival and Arts & Crafts), conceived as an affront to manufacturing and mass-production in the 19th century.

Popova who is originally from the Russian Urals, has as a constant thread through her work the politics of landscape and ownership. The chemically unstable industrial landscape paintings (1) implicate the politics of land ownership from Soviet Russia to US oil companies and the contested techniques of fracking. Questioning the responsibility of humans towards the landscape, the paintings enact the inevitable and unknown changes, whilst their unreliable surfaces place them outside of the art value system. Her Invisible Paintings (7) from Human Studies series continue the subject of visibility and value.

The chemical production of paint pigment has changed the very nature of painting. Popova prefers to source her own pigments and mix her own paints. The mixing of home-made paints finds its valour as ‘something you have to strive to do’. The Soil Studies in the Reception Room (9) made with Earth Pigments (Sienna, Red Ochre, Umber, Ochre) and egg on A4 paper. Presented on a table surrounded by an extraordinary testament to the tenacity of making – the magnificent embroideries ‘Tree of Life’ by of Lady Julia Crew and her sister Lady Cory. Popova’s gestural marks on paper offer a bank of soil for this ‘Tree of Life’ to grow.

Popova’s interest in industrialism and mechanic production turns to contemporary posthumanist theory with her Parametric Paintings (2,4), simulating the digitally performed bodyless shapes of contemporary design and architecture. These conceptually contradictory paintings are made free hand as a form of dance routine on canvas, whilst giving an appearance of algoritmic patterns transmittable by machines. A fascination with algorithms fuelled Popova’s research on Jacquard weaving, it’s history and techniques. The Infinity Loop Lectern piece (10) produced for the chapel is part of this new emerging body of work.
Working within the conventions of (traditional) Portraiture Popova takes her interest in ever changing painting quite literally. In the Dining Hall Popova has produced a new portrait, Portrait for Future Faces (5), to join those of the Girton Mistresses. A cut-out blank silhouette venerated by a digitally engraved surround presents an empty space for the future to enter; in this space the anticipated sitter(s) is given permission to be distinctively different while locking them into a ‘carved in stone’ surrounding reminiscent of the glorious interior of the Dining Hall itself. This object-portrait refers to an ornate ‘riza’ (robe or cover) used to protect and honor Russian Icons whilst humourously alluding to painted ‘head in the hole’ fairground boards.

Further portraits, Glaze Paintings (3), are ceramic experiments where Popova follows the pre-industrial, even prehistoric, path of artistic production and seeks to rediscover and relearn the ancient wood-ash glazing recipes and techniques.

Living on site with her husband and young son has thrown the feminist discourse of women’s rights, privilege and the hard-won access to knowledge, in to stark relief. Negotiating (as working mothers do), between the pace of childhood and that of personal production, the weight and meaning of industrialism and feminist thought weave through her works across Girton College. Some spaces (4,5,10) present works made by students during the workshop sessions. A series of playful collages in the JCR were made at a student’s gathering that collided together Yelena’s son’s 4th birthday tea party with a collage making workshop. At another ‘clay play’ session students made female figurines, inspired by prehistoric clay Venuses. Following the Italian tradition of recording miracles by amateur artists, then donating them to the church, these symbols of fertility are presented to the library, the church of knowledge; claiming, with Girton, a space for motherhood in the hallowed walls of academia. A ‘choir of handwriting’(10) can be found in the chapel – a simple gesture of repetitive infinity loops are replicated by individual students, neatly illustrating extraordinary variety in our physical output.

Some of the work will fade and change, like the embroideries in the Reception Room. Chemicals will react, paper curl, unfired figurines crumble in to dust, collages become dog-eared and Sellotape will slowly slip from the walls of the JCR. Across the building we assemble a picture of this artist, woman, mother; a quiet, scientific painting practice with a profound knowledge of materials. Knowing, celebratory and curious of the complexities of institutions, feminism, production and value.

Eliza Gluckman
Curator, NEW HALL ART COLLECTION, University of Cambridge
1. FDR Dining Room
Parametric Paintings, 2017

2. FDR Dining Room
Industrial Landscapes, Chemical Reaction on Canvas, 2017
3. Wall outside FDR
Ceramic Portraits, Wood ash glaze and clay on stoneware, 2017

4. Dining Hall
Portrait for Future Faces, Etching on brass, 2017

5. Red Brick Corridor
Wood ash and umber earth paintings, 2017
6. JCR
Collages made with Girton students, 2017.

7. Red Spiral Staircase.
Human Studies, calcined oyster shells and wood ash on linen, 2017.
8. Stanley Library
Clay Venus Figurines made with Girton students, 2017.

9. Reception Room
Soil Studies, Earth pigments and egg on watercolour paper, 2017.
10. Lectern Cloth for the College Chapel
Digitally woven jacquard, 2017
Tapestry Design for Girton College. (Proposal)
180x140cm, to be digitally woven, 2017.
1. Fellows Drawing Room (FDR 1)
Parametric Paintings, wood ash, red brick dust on cotton.
Invisible Painting, wood ash, oyster shells and red pigment on linen 117x97cm, £3500
Parametric Painting 82x61cm, £2500
Parametric Painting 82x61cm, £2500
Untitled (grey), wood ash and red brick dust on canvas, 117x97cm, £3500
Untitled (terracota), wood ash and red brick dust on canvas, 117x97cm, £3500
Untitled, wood ash, umber earth and calcined shells on canvas (2), 30.5x35.5cm, £1200
Untitled, pine pollen, umber earth and wood ash 72x56cm, £2300
Untitled, umber earth from Girton’s grounds 71x51cm, £2100

2. Fellows Dining Room (FDR 2)
Industrial Landscapes, chemical reaction on canvas, 30.5x35.5cm, £900 each
Untitled, red brick dust on canvas, 40x29cm, £1200
Untitled, wood ash from FDR fireplace, red brick & umber earth on canvas, 36x56cm, £1500

3. Wall Outside FDR
Ceramic portraits, wood ash glaze and clay on stoneware, 2017, £600 each

4. Dining Hall
Portrait for Future Faces, 2017, digital etching on brass, £1200

5. Red Brick Corridor
Wood ash and umber earth paintings (3), 2016, 117x137cm, £4500 each

6. Junior Common Room (JCR)
Collages made with Girton students. £30 each

7. Red Spiral Staircase.
Human Studies, 2017, calcined oyster shells and wood ash on linen, 96x81cm, £3200

8. Stanley Library
Clay Venuses made with students, £60 each

9. Reception Room
Soil Studies, earth pigments and egg on watercolour paper, £100 each

10. Chapel
Digital Jacquard Woven Lectern Cloth, 2017
Choir of line drawings by Girton Fellows and Students, £20 each.

If you would like to purchase any of Yelena’s work, please contact Tamsin Elbourn-Onslow
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