

Mischief: Lucia Nogueira

15 January - 13 March 2011

Kettle's Yard Teachers' Support Notes

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“I sometimes think that my work is all about gaps. You have a linear routine in your life that carries on, and then suddenly something happens and it breaks the line. I think my work is very much connected with what happens when the line is fractured.”

Lucia Nogueira

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Kettle's Yard, Castle Street, Cambridge, CB3 0AQ
www.kettlesyard.co.uk

Introduction to the show

The Brazilian born artist Lucia Nogueira died in London in 1998 at the age of 48. This will be the first exhibition in the UK to survey her sculptures, installations and drawings from her ten year career.

Before her death Nogueira had become one of the most individual voices in sculpture in this country. In collecting, adapting and juxtaposing everyday and often unprepossessing objects, found in the street or in junk shops, she was not unlike others of her generation. But Liam Gillick once described her as 'taking things that are close to hand and imbuing them with malignancy and magic.'

While her career as a sculptor was conducted in London, she described how her practice derived from her Brazilian background: *'My way of thinking is very much from Brazil: my way of picking up objects comes from there too. It is something connected with childhood and also with the Brazilian psyche. Our way of thinking is not as linear as it is in Europe. . . . In art you obviously have a background in art history that is very rich. We don't have that in Brazil at all. I think the way we developed our visual sense is different from the European model. I didn't have that. We just do everything in a very empirical way, even art.'*

Combining pieces of discarded furniture and other objects, her sculptures engage with the space in which they are set. Some are very simple. In a work called 'Mischief' a wooden chair has lost its seat and one leg traps a white bridal train that turns out to be an unrolled strip of plastic carrier bags. 'No Time for Commas' has a tied-up bag scurrying endlessly around inside an upturned table top. We don't know what's in the bag nor in the cupboards turned to the wall, nor why a cable disappears into a plan-chest. In one corner an empty cable wheel is immobilised by a steel pillar.

Nogueira drew obsessively and throughout her career. The exhibition includes a selection of these drawings, often line drawings which she has painted in. She does not use these drawings as preparatory sketches for her sculptures as some artists do, but as unique and strange explorations into a surreal make believe world.

There is humour and enigma in the drawings. Row upon row of buttons become a crowd of spectators. There are rows of what look like staples, each one slightly bent, with its own personality. Watercolour blotches take on the character of objects which can't quite be identified except when one becomes an elephant on wheels, or a trio of blots sit themselves down on park chairs. An ink-black helicopter hovers ominously over a column of yellow clouds.

Lucia Nogueira was born in 1950, in the town of Goiânia in central Brazil. She took a degree in Communications and Journalism in Brasilia and moved to the USA where she studied photography. In 1975 she came to London and studied painting between 1976 and 1980, at Chelsea College of Art and the Central School of Art and Design. During the '80s she continued to paint as well as making jewellery and furniture. Her earliest sculptures date from 1988. In 1993 she was awarded a residency at the Fondation Cartier in Paris and in 1996 a Paul Hamlyn Award for Visual Artists. She died in London in 1998.



Mischief

Found Objects

Objet trouvé, *n.*

An object found or picked up at random and presented as a rarity or a work of art.

Nogueira had a gift for **selecting, re-appropriating, arranging and combining found objects**. She would walk around London collecting discarded, broken and unwanted items. Back in her studio she would play with their positioning and the relationships between objects, negotiating their status to create lively, humorous and disturbing artworks.

In interview, she emphasised her connection with the streets, which she walked endlessly. She used the streets both as a source of raw materials, which frequently show signs of their previous life, and as a source of feelings and situations.

Through selection and combination, Nogueira allows us to re-see objects, to release them from their function and to take on the qualities of other things – for example the use of bin liner in this sculpture reminds us of a bridal trail. This transformation is heightened by the material fact-ness of the objects she chooses, and of the familiarity we have with them.

Activity:

Collect a bag full of objects from around the classroom, your home, the nearest skip! – if they are obscure or in bits, all the better. Place them in the middle of a large table and allow students to choose two objects each.

Spend some time examining the objects, thinking about their materials, shape, texture and function. Write a list of describing words.

In pairs, describe the objects.

Now spend some time combining, arranging the two objects in an area of the classroom.

Draw or photograph them. Trace round them on large pieces of paper. Can you still recognise them?

Discuss all together whether the relationships between the objects change in their new position. Do the colours look different? Does one object look smaller next to another? Does their pairing make it more obvious or less what their function is?



Familiar / Unfamiliar

Nogueira arrived in the UK from Brazil in 1975, aged 25. As a newcomer to the country, she found herself in between two cultures. She talks of the gaps and dislocation of leaving a place,

‘There’s a connection there; not only with the place where you find yourself but also with the place you come from – because if you left you didn’t resolve things there, did you? So you’re in the middle. I think it’s quite healthy to be this.’

This disjunction, and the resulting strangeness, is apparent in her work; cupboard doors are left ajar, blank eyes peer at you, drinks cans are stripped of their familiar branding, questions are unanswered.

There is often a tension associated with this and, throughout her work there are oppositions between humour and danger, function and disfunction, attraction and repulsion. With her drawings especially, we find ourselves drawn to seemingly cute characters, animals mainly or personified objects, only to find uncomfortably visceral pools of ink, muddled colours and leaked edges. We see elements of Surrealist anthropomorphism in these drawings in how she attributes human character or personalities to the impersonal or the irrational.

Nogueira often started working without knowing how the piece would finish. In being intentionally open-ended in her practice, her work has a very light touch – it is not over thought or over worked. By refraining from pinning down meanings, she allows us to engage with our own connotations, readings and memories, and so new meanings can be created by the viewer. Likewise, by using familiar found objects, her sculptures seem recognizable to us, and yet they avoid being instantly understandable due to the strange pairings and placement.

Activity:

Find several magazine images of interiors, street scenes or landscapes.

Cut out individual elements of these pictures and place them into a different scene.

Play around with different objects in the different scenes.

What are the effects? Does scale make a difference? Do they look out of place? Why? Does this make them humorous or something else?

Younger Audiences:

Lay out pre-cut shapes, objects, people on to the ‘wrong’ scene, interior or landscape.

Ask your group to identify the objects that belong to that environment and those that don’t.

In each case, ask them to explain why and place the object in the scene they think it corresponds to.



Full Stop

The Absent Body

This exhibition is full of people. They're not exactly present, but throughout there are traces of situations past and those left unfinished. Perhaps it is due to her use of found objects, many of which had domestic functions, which carry traces of their history with them? Perhaps it is the very human scale of her installations that allow us to so readily join in when we approach them?

The body was a very important subject in art spanning the late 80s into the early 90s, due in part to the reaction against the highly commercialized art in America at that time. Many of Nogueira's contemporaries (Antony Gormley, Helen Chadwick, Cathy De Monchaux, Rachel Whiteread) were exploring how they could use their own bodies as inspiration and how the body reacts and interacts with objects around us.

The body is often alluded to in Nogueira's work and viewing it can be like encountering another individual and leaves us feeling unable to second-guess how they will behave. Her sculpture offers us specific opportunities for encountering, comprehending and registering uncertainties. Like entering a room and finding someone asleep, 'each of her sculptures are states of rest filled with the latent possibility of further change'¹, and this makes her work intriguing, appealing and unsettling.

With the sculpture *Full Stop*, for example, we are made very aware of the set-up of installation. The objects are too obviously placed, too mischievous, to be accidental - almost a booby-trap.

Her light-handed placement of objects in the gallery allows her to create emotionally complex relationships between objects and between objects and viewer.

¹ Andrew Wilson, as quoted by Ian Hunt, *Kettle's Yard Catalogue*, 2011

Activity:

Most of the objects around us carry traces of their use and their past.

Check yourself for traces – mud on your trouser bottoms, scuffs on the soles of your shoe, calluses on your fingers from playing the guitar. What do they tell others about you?

Find an object at home which shows signs of use – worn down edges of a chair, dirt on a plate, wet foot prints on a bath mat.

Make a detailed drawing of these markings in pencil, including the surrounding area.

Place a layer of tracing paper over the top and draw over the outline of a figure using the object.

Younger Audiences:

Who's Been Here?

Sitting in one room (class room, kitchen etc) ask all the players to try to memorise the room.

Then everyone close their eyes and one player (pre-selected by the group leader) has to undertake a short activity; wash a dish, open a book to read, begin to write a letter to a friend.

Then return to your seat and everyone open their eyes.

Use your memory to spot what has changed.

What clues have been left?

Can you guess who it was that had been selected to carry out the activity? Why?



Nogueira and Kettle's Yard

Nogueira's close attention to the positioning and the relationships between objects frequently mirrors Jim Ede's (the founder of Kettle's Yard) approach and philosophy to the arrangement of objects in his home. For Ede, everything had its place. He paid particular attention to how his combination of artworks and everyday objects interacted within each room. Nogueira, with her skillful installations, and Ede, with his rigorous placements, both used a light touch and intuition when arranging objects to achieve their desired effects.

We see in both the house and the exhibition at Kettle's Yard, the transformation of objects from the functional to the aesthetic. Like Nogueira's broken and discarded objects picked from the streets, Ede's House is filled with cracked and chipped crockery and glass. In their careful display, objects transcend their function and take on new qualities and desirability.



Untitled, 1992

Contained/Captured/Hidden

Nogueira's sculptures defy definite meanings. An element of this uncertainty is the way part of the information from which we read situations is often hidden from us, as we see in her untitled work above. We recognize the wooden object as an item of furniture, probably a chest of drawers, and therefore we instinctively know that there should be something contained within.

Nogueira teases the viewer by placing it against the wall, sparks curiosity by restricting our view and making us guess at what needs to be hidden? Who wants it hidden? Is it shame, embarrassment or resistance on the part of the object? She continues the theme with the addition of the chains and the highly polished drinks cans which have been stripped of all their branding, leaving no clue as to what they contain and in stark contrast to the warped stained wood.

These objects resist scrutiny; they suggest unknown internal pressures as well as creating them in the viewer. We are left to fill in the gaps and to imagine the consequences of actions half started.

Activity:

Chose an artwork, remember to consider the drawings as well as the sculptures. Imagine you have happened upon this scene and need to explain the scenario to a friend. Are the objects clues? Who has placed them here and why? What happened before, and what happened afterwards?

Start to write a short story (max 300 words) - an account of the scene – describe where we are, what's happening and the people involved in this event.

Try and be as concise as possible with your words. Nogueira used very few objects with which to set her scene, try and do the same with your words. Use the word bank (in teachers pack) to help you.

Younger audiences:

Younger audience should try the same activity but tell their stories instead of writing them. Work in pairs or small groups.

Can you guess which artworks is being described to you by?

Activity: Word bank

(Print out the following page of words, one for each member of the group.)

Choose a piece of work and, going through the list of words one by one, pick out the words you feel best describe your artwork.

Highlight the important words.

Add any you feel are missing.

Try drawing around the words in a way that reinforces its meaning.

In small groups, take turns to discuss the words you have chosen, explaining why.

playful withdrawn dangerous hidden

familiar clever cold strange abstract

heavy fragile hard random hot

alien accidental dark surprising

energetic exposed natural childish

intentional closed destructive

escaped man-made comfortable

functional tense real friendly urban

representational threatening calm

figurative soft composed finished

intense tired open poetic

balanced revolutionary

Biography

1950	Born in Goiânia in central Brazil degree in communications moved to USA
1975	Arrived in London
1976-9	Studied painting at Chelsea College of Art
1979-80	Studied at Central School of Art and Design
1988	Earliest sculptures made
1993	Awarded residency at the Fondation Cartier in Paris
1996	Awarded a Paul Hamlyn Award for Visual Artists
1998	Dies of cancer aged 48

Weblinks:

- View the catalogue from the exhibition at Kettel's Yard:
http://www.kettleyard.co.uk/exhibitions/nogueira/nogueira_catalogue_online.pdf
- Drawing Room exhibition of Nogueira's work:
http://www.drawingroom.org.uk/exhibitions_past_nogueira.htm
- Listen to a talk with curator Adrian Searle, artists Tacita Dean and Rachel Whiteread in conversation about Nogueira's drawings:
<http://www.drawingroom.org.uk/education/talks.htm>
- <http://www.chisenhale.org.uk/archive/exhibitions/index.php?id=106>
- Part transcript of her only recorded interview with Audio Arts Magazine:
http://www.tate.org.uk/britain/exhibitions/audioarts/cd3_in.shtm

Quotes:

'My work is about urban lives. It's very much the sense of those things that you find on the streets which are expressions of people's behaviour and thoughts.'

'...when you are a foreigner one has to be completely alert all the time. If you are living somewhere else, it doesn't matter how long you live there, it's like being on a tight-rope all the time. But it's quite nice, you know, because it makes one think all the time.'

'My way of thinking is very much from Brazil: my way of picking up objects comes from there too. It is something connected with childhood and also with the Brazilian psyche. Our way of thinking is not as linear as it is in Europe. . . . In art you obviously have a background in art history that is very rich. We don't have that in Brazil at all. I think the way we developed our visual sense is different from the European model. I didn't have that. We just do everything in a very empirical way, even art.'