## NCAS Talks - Spring and Summer 2023 - A Retrospective

With thanks to an NCAS member and attendee

Will Gompertz with Rana Begum, Outpost and Hazel Soper, Harriet Loffler and the Women's Art Collection, Carl Rowe, Maggi Hambling, and the Singh Twins.

Photo of Rana Begum courtesy of Angus Mill



Will Gompertz in conversation with Rana Begum RA 27 May 2023

In collaboration for the first time with the Norfolk & Norwich Festival 2023, **ncas** was delighted to host a conversation between the Barbican's Artistic Director, Will Gompertz and the acclaimed Royal Academician Rana Begum, at the Norwich School Blake Studio.

Born in Bangladesh in 1977, Rana Begum is a London-based visual artist whose work distils spatial and visual experience into ordered form. Through her refined language of minimalist abstraction, she blurs the boundaries between sculpture, painting and architecture.

In a wide-ranging conversation, Begum described her earliest influences and the development of her practice, focussing on the importance of light which is fundamental to her work. She attributes her fascination with light to her childhood in rural Bangladesh, which she left when she was eight to settle in the UK. Begum states, "I realised that my connection to light began very early on. I found it fascinating just to watch the change of light in the rice field, or the water of the bathing pool, which was always flooded in sunlight — I remember my mum telling me off when I sat there staring." Her first visual memory of the UK was light reflecting off snow, as the plane landed on the snowy airport runway. The enchanting, myriad ways that light gleams from different surfaces and spaces have remained her abiding obsession.

Educated at the University of Hertfordshire, the Chelsea College of Art and the Slade School of Art, Begum paid tribute to her tutors who encouraged her to work and experiment in various disciplines and mediums. While a student at Hertfordshire University, she was particularly drawn to the work of American abstract artist Agnes Martin. It was also at that time that she first became interested in the relationship between light, colour and form. Her visual language draws from the urban landscape as well as geometric patterns from traditional Islamic art and architecture. She is a huge proponent of maquettes which help visualise the interplay of light within and outside her installations.

Begum was first recognised internationally in 2017 when she was awarded the prestigious Abraaj prize at Art Dubai for her installation *No 764 Baskets*, which was subsequently installed in St Peter's Church in Kettles Yard, Cambridge in 2018. Typical of her work, the resulting cocoon-like installation drew on childhood memories, in this case, of basket weaving in her village in Bangladesh, as well as time spent reading the Qur'an at the local mosque, where the dappled morning light, sound of the water fountain and the mesmeric recitation created an atmosphere of peaceful concentration.

Begum also discussed other installations including *Piece No 670*, rhythmical steel layers, part of her *Space*, *Light and Colour* show for the Sainsbury's Centre 2016, *No 814* coloured glass panels at the Frieze Sculpture Park, Regents Park London, 2018, *Infinite Geometry No 1066*, an intricate brick pathway at the Wanas Art Foundation Sweden 2021, *Catching Colour*, suspended sprayed cloud like mesh at the Botanic Square, London City Island 2022, and, most recently, *No 1225 Chainlink*, an ephemeral yellow painted chain-link fence structure at *Desert X 2023*, in California's Coachella Valley. The variety of mediums used are a tribute to Begum's early training and inclination to experiment. Her works effortlessly absorb and reflect varied densities of light to produce an experience for the viewer that is both temporal and sensorial.

Will Gompertz is a world-leading expert in the arts. Having spent seven years as a Director of the Tate Galleries followed by eleven years as the BBC's Arts Editor, he is now Director of Arts and Learning at the Barbican Theatre. As someone who did not develop an interest in art until adulthood, Gompertz is determined to dispel the layman's fear of the modern art world and those who inhabit it. In his own words "I was a late starter" and only developed a life-long love of art after encountering Willem de Kooning's, Rosy-Fingered Dawn at Louse Point in Amsterdam's Stedelijk museum when visiting with his then girlfriend, who he went on to marry. Throughout his career, Will has focused on driving innovation and change, opening up the arts to the widest public. He has interviewed and observed many of the world's leading artists, actors, writers, musicians, and directors. He is the author of See what You're Missing (2022), Think Like an Artist (2015) and What are you Looking At? (2012).



An evening with OUTPOST and the work of Hazel Soper 9 May 2023

Facilitated by Norfolk-based artist Carl Rowe, Norwich School's Blake Studio was the venue for a fascinating talk on OUTPOST, an arts-run charity presented by OUTPOST Committee Chair, Maddie Exton and the work of one of its alumni, multimedia installation artist Hazel Soper.

'Committed to the uncompromising presentation of contemporary art', OUTPOST was founded in 2004 under the inspiration of Lynda Morris, then Norwich University of the Arts (NUA) Professor of Curation and Art History, in response to the recognition of a lack of affordable studio space, and as a means to keep graduating artists in Norwich. Run by a Steering Group of eight members, each a volunteer creative who serve for two years, OUTPOST runs 85 affordable studio spaces in Gildengate House in Anglia Square, as well as the OUTPOST Gallery, which stages about five exhibitions a year. OUTPOST has been exceptionally successful in nurturing young talent that has often been selected to show at prestigious art shows including Frieze, and its members have attracted significant arts grant funding. Additionally, the curatorial and administrative skills acquired by members have led to new careers in small galleries across the country.

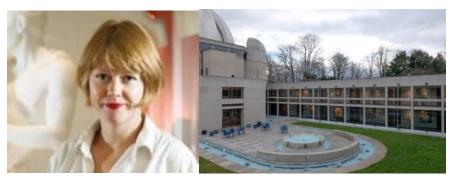
Maddie Exton explained that talented individuals who lack formal training are not excluded. In this sense, OUTPOST is a model of co-operative, low-cost inclusivity. It is not only the largest low-cost studio offering in East Anglia, but arguably the whole of the UK.

Hazel Soper is a video installation artist, exploring the effects of technology and capitalism on women's autonomy. Referencing traditions of female labour, she often uses textiles to create installation elements, alongside close-up, non-narrative video pieces. Collage also has a strong presence throughout her work, both with analogue collages, and through the juxtaposition of appropriated text in video, audio and print form.

Her latest haunting installation *I Lived Here Once And Then You Killed Me* explores women's histories and British folkloric traditions. It specifically looks at the local legend of the 'Somerton Witch', who was buried alive inside St Mary's Church in East Somerton.

Before dying, the witch cast a spell on her wooden leg which grew into a tree that eventually destroyed the church, being the centre of the community and symbol of the control and values that repressed her.

"I think imagination is imperative to create a different, alternative, inclusive future for us all. Folklore and stories also reflect our beliefs as a society and which roles we are expected to play. As an angry feminist, I think it's important to revisit and re-examine which roles we are cast into and why - and if we want to be one of someone else's story at all".



A talk by Harriet Loffler, Curator of the Women's Art Collection Based at Murray Edwards College, Cambridge 4 April 2023

Harriet Loffler, Curator of the Women's Art Collection based at Murray Edwards College, Cambridge, (and formerly Curator of Modern & Contemporary Art at Norwich Castle Museum & Art Gallery) delighted a discerning audience with an insight into her work as Curator, including the history, nature and significance of the Collection and its future.

The superlative Collection, the largest of contemporary art by women in Europe, is a celebration of women's agency and creativity, an art historical record and a living, evolving body of work. At the heart of its founding mission is the principle of collaboration and community in which women take centre stage.

Today the Collection includes over 600 works by leading international artists, including Barbara Hepworth, Dame Paula Rego, Maggi Hambling CBE, Lubaina Himid CBE, Judy Chicago, Tracey Emin CBE, and Cindy Sherman.

Housed not in a traditional gallery but in the working college environment, Harriet explored the challenges this brings to maintaining the Collection, including those of deterioration, vulnerability and storage, while highlighting its advantages as an integral part of student life. She raised issues such as how to add to the Collection, what criteria to adopt to reflect the collaborative nature of its origins, and whether to change from receiving donated work to purchasing works.

Built as a "manifesto for the education of women", Murray Edwards College (formerly New Hall) is a fitting recipient for the Collection. The iconic brutalist building was designed by architects Chamberlin, Powell and Bon (who went on design the Barbican Centre in London) and completed in 1965.

The Collection is open to members of the public and is free to visit, 7 days a week.

The **ncas** talk, held at the Blake Studio, was one of a series kindly hosted by the Norwich School.



A talk by Carl Rowe, Artist and former Head of Fine Art, NUA 21 March 2023

What influences an artist's work? The audience at the Blake Studio were treated to a fascinating insight by Norwich-based artist and academic Carl Rowe, whose work over the years has consistently featured cans, sticks, pipes, food, dust and traps - "like the most reliable actors in a repertory theatre group".

Graduating with a MA in Fine Art from Manchester Polytechnic in 1985, and latterly Associate Professor and Course Leader in Fine Art at Norwich University of the Arts (NUA), Rowe creates paintings, prints, drawings and objects. He describes his art as switching back and forth between an engagement with socio-political issues and subconscious renderings. "Despite this seemingly disparate approach, the objects that I deploy in my artwork remain constant and have appeared repeatedly over the years, each time in a new guise, sometimes as metaphor and sometimes as themselves". As such, they might be described as "hero" objects.

Rowe often uses a surface layer of humour, absurdity and the arcane to mask a strong undercurrent of concern for humanity. A memorable example is *Banquet for Ultra Bankruptcy*, (2013) based on the Marinetti manifesto and *Synaesthesia /3* developed in collaboration with Simon Davenport for Art Laboratory Berlin, where the two artists combined the performative with artistic research on a cultural history of the senses. Rowe explained that more recent works wrangle subjects such as gases, particulates, pollen, eels, traps, calibrations, marker points, fonts, logos and domestic objects within seemingly nonsensical and vexing associations. At times, geometric forms, lines and shapes intersect or abut exactly. Elsewhere, they misalign, glance or overlap. Real space coexists with imaginary space in an implausible graphic paradigm. There is a strong sense of duality and unseen forces at play. Colour is notable, in some works naturalistic and low key, but in others it is ramped-up to a feverish vibrancy.

Rowe has an international profile as both an artist and an academic. Recently retired from teaching, he is now an artist member and studio holder at OUTPOST in Norwich and member of the Printmakers Council. His work has been exhibited widely in the UK as well as in Germany, Spain, Portugal, Ireland, Italy, Canada, US, Estonia, Japan, Malaysia and Egypt. In addition to studio production, he has also worked on public art including billboards, print portfolios and hospital art including work for Woodlands Mental Health Unit at Ipswich Hospital and Northside House Forensic Mental Health Unit.



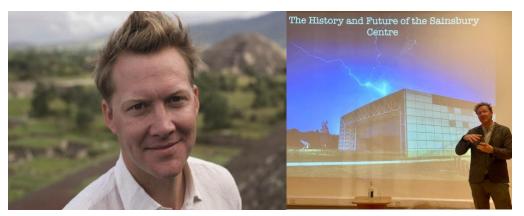
Maggi Hambling CBE in conversation 20 February 2023

"It's all about feeling. The eye, the heart, and the hand", declared internationally acclaimed artist Maggi Hambling during a wide-ranging conversation with Norwich Castle Museum's Senior Curator, Francesca Vanke, to a packed Norwich School Blake Studio.

Featuring, amongst other works, Hambling's haunting *Heron in the Shallows*, *Polar Bear* and part of *The Edge* series, Hambling shared her life-long love of nature and passion for the wider environment: "My work is directed by life – the climate crisis, melting ice caps, pollution in the rivers, the sea devouring our coast."

The Brigadier, a portrait of her lifelong friend Penny Allen, née Colman, and The Laugh are two examples of her exceptional series of portraits that perfectly exemplify Hambling's maxim "every portrait is like a love affair". No stranger to controversy, Hambling also touched on the arguments that have surrounded her sculptures, A Sculpture for Mary Wollstonecraft, A conversation with Oscar Wilde and Scallop. She has no fear of the subject of death. The Happy Dead series shows a flip side to death with souls looking to the stars. Hambling's more recent abstract seascapes owed more to Constable than Turner, she explained.

Happily, Hambling continues to teach art "to hand on, to give back". She left an enthralled audience with her mantra "to draw every day. Drawing is the basis of everything I've ever done".



Professor Jago Cooper, Director of the Sainsbury Centre for the Visual Arts 25 January 2023

Professor Jago Cooper, Director of Sainsbury Centre for the Visual Arts, shared his vision for the future of the Centre with the **ncas** audience at the Norwich School Blake Studio. His enthusiasm and passion were palpable, as he spoke about the origins of the Centre, the reasons why he left the British Museum for the Sainsbury Centre, and how he wished to restore once again the 'magic' of the visitor experience.

The brainchild of Lord and Lady Sainsbury, the Sainsbury Centre for the Visual Arts was commissioned in 1975 and opened in 1978. Professor Cooper explained that Lord and Lady Sainsbury shared a belief that the study of art should be an informal, pleasurable experience, not bound by the traditional enclosure of object and viewer. Indeed, from the outset, the Sainsburys were adamant not to use the term 'gallery' or 'museum' in naming their new enterprise, hence its broader title Centre for the Visual Arts.

In response, the Centre not only embraced the cutting-edge industrial architecture of Norman Foster on a site within Norwich's brand-new university campus, but it also employed a novel display policy: objects on plinths with no directed pathways to guide the visitor – none of the usual gallery and museum partitions, classifications or dominant direction of travel.

The combination of using ground-breaking architecture to house a world-class collection of art and artifacts, with the freedom for visitors to find their own way in viewing it, was considered a radical innovation for the time and arguably helped influence future museum and gallery design.

Professor Cooper wishes to restore that spirit of radicalism on which the Centre was first founded: removing the segmentation which has since crept in and challenging the 'Big Exhibition' policies by introducing a range of voluntary charges to encourage a broader range of visitor, thereby positioning the Centre as a destination for both local residents and visitors from across the globe.

"Since its inspired creation in the 1970s, the Sainsbury Centre has always been a place that breaks the rules in how Art and Culture should be seen and experienced. My objective is that visitors can once more, 'experience artwork as a living entity' that can provoke and answer the big questions of our time".

The Sainsbury Centre is working towards an exciting relaunch in late May 2023 to tie in with their fiftieth anniversary. More details are available on <a href="https://www.sainsburycentre.ac.uk">www.sainsburycentre.ac.uk</a>

The talk, one of a series of **ncas** talks, was kindly hosted by the Norwich School.



The Singh Twins in conversation with Dr Rosy Gray Slaves of Fashion, Hidden Histories

11 January 2023

The Singh Twins captivated a packed Norwich University of the Arts Theatre as they explored the creative process behind their latest hard-hitting political artwork, *Slaves of Fashion, Hidden Histories*. Co-hosted by Norwich Castle Museum & Art Gallery and Norwich University of the Arts, The Singh Twins were interviewed by Dr Rosy Gray, Curator of Modern and Contemporary Art at Norwich Castle.

A surprise encounter with the 'Indienne' textiles at the Slavery Museum in Nantes, provided the inspirational spark for Slaves of Fashion, Hidden Histories - an exploration of the hidden narratives of empire, colonialism, conflict and slavery through the lens of India's historical textile trade.

Featuring the Singh Twins' original digital mixed-medium light-box artworks, drawings and paintings, as well as objects from the artists' personal archive and participating museums and galleries, their work also explores modern day legacies and debates around ethical consumerism, racism, and the politics of trade.

In their own words "If you care about the environment and you care about human rights, then you should really care about what you put in your shopping basket too, and that's partly what the message of *Slaves of Fashion* is about. But it's equally about redressing neglected and hidden histories, showing how we are all connected through a shared colonial heritage and how our understanding of global narratives around Empire can help us to view ourselves and the world around us in a new light."

Describing their creative practice as 'Past-Modern' as opposed to 'Post Modern', their highly decorative, narrative and symbolic work is essentially a modern revival of Indian miniature painting within contemporary art practice. But their distinctive style is much more eclectic. In addition to the Indian miniature tradition of painting, they also draw on the artistic language and conventions of other traditions, East and West, old and new, including ancient Greek and Roman, Persian and Medieval European manuscripts, European Renaissance art, 18th Century British Satirists, the Victorian illustrators, Pre-Raphaelites, Art Nouveau, and pop culture, as well as symbolism, pattern and photography. There is seriousness, wit and mischief in their art.

The Singh Twins have always collaborated with each other in their art practice. Often working in tandem on the same image, they use a range of tools, materials and modern digital and traditional techniques to create their artwork. Meticulously researched and exquisitely detailed, their highly decorative and intricate 'miniatures' are painted by hand, while their large-scale fabric lightbox pieces are produced digitally incorporating details from digitally scanned, hand-painted and historical material. This helps them achieve rich, detailed and multi-layered work with precision. Their large-scale digital fabric artworks are then stretched over lightboxes to add intensity and luminosity, further enhancing the bold colours.

The Arts Society's Sue Herdman observes, "Theirs is an art that is impossible to pigeonhole. It is about craftsmanship and beauty, global politics and wider issues, human connections, hidden histories, shared heritage and identity".

As part of the *Slaves of Fashion* project, The Singh Twins were commissioned to create a companion work in response to selected objects from the Norfolk Museum Service's collection. This resulted the mixed-media image *Alternative A-Z of Empire*, using an 18th century jigsaw puzzle titled *Inhabitants of The World Alphabetically Arrang'd*, as its starting point. Commissioned by Norfolk Museums Service, the work was made possible with generous support from Art Fund, The Friends of Norwich Museums and Norfolk Contemporary Arts Society (**ncas**) and is now on permanent display in the Norwich Castle Museum & Art Gallery.

