

c o m m o n
g r o u n d s

lace drawn from the everyday

The Bowes Museum
2 May - 21 June 2015

sarah casey



Foreword

The Bowes Museum is delighted to present Sarah Casey's exquisite drawings, bringing to light hidden aspects of the Blackborne Lace collection. This collection of lace is totally unique, being the surviving stock, study collections and documentary material of the lace dealers, A. Blackborne & Company. Sarah's sensitivity to the more ordinary examples in the collection, and the drawings she has created from them, are a new development in the story of this remarkable collection.

The whole collection was very generously given to The Bowes Museum by Dr. & Mrs. Ellis Tinsley in 2007, after the first exhibition here in 2006, of some of the finest pieces: Fine & Fashionable, Lace From The Blackborne Collection. Since then we have conserved and mounted key pieces in The Fashion & Textile Gallery which opened in 2010, and we have lent to a number of significant exhibitions both in the UK and abroad.

Santina M. Levey, when Keeper of Textiles at the V&A, started to unlock the fascinating richness of this collection. Her work was continued by Annabel Talbot with the support of the Esmée Fairbairn Foundation. During her three year project Annabel sorted and catalogued the study collections, which are now presented in drawer units for study purposes in The Glass Cube, a study/ storage facility in The Fashion & Textile Gallery. This facility is used by lace researchers worldwide. We are dedicated to making it a true public resource, so that everyone can enjoy the beauty of lace.

I introduced Sarah to Annabel just as she began to open the last few trunks of lace containing the surplus shop stock. It was categorised as the 'B' collection by Santina Levey, as she wanted curators to have some flexibility over how the 'B' collection was used, and not for it to become a burden, but be put to good use, perhaps as a teaching and handling collection. The idea of it being studied by a skilful artist to produce fine drawings will please her, and the Tinsleys, very much.

**Left: Bonnets in
the Blackborne 'B'
Collection, The
Bowes Museum**



It has given me great pleasure to be involved with this project, to see the relationship grow between Sarah and Annabel; a collaboration between artist and curator, which has resulted in this exhibition and catalogue.

Sarah's installation of transparent drawings of flattened and creased objects, just as she found them in the trunks, have an ethereal beauty. Her work, drawing in oil, creates a link between the craft of lace making and the art of drawing, with the fine linen thread reflected in the fine line of the pen.

One of my aims for temporary exhibitions has been to link our textile collections with contemporary artists' interpretations, to make new, exciting connections. Sarah has fulfilled this aim with this stunning exhibition of her work and it has given us the opportunity to show more of the Blackborne lace.

Joanna Hashagen
Keeper of Costumes and Textiles, The Bowes Museum



Above and Left:
Conservation of bonnets
from The Bowes Museum
collections in preparation
for Common Grounds



The Category 'B' Blackborne Collection

Annabel Talbot

Sarah Casey and The Bowes Museum's exhibition, *Common Grounds; Lace Drawn from the Everyday*, is inspired by a selection of lace and linen caps found in the Category 'B' section of the Blackborne Lace Collection.

Arthur Blackborne (1856-1952) was a renowned connoisseur of lace. During the second half of the 19th century he jointly ran Blackborne & Co. a lace dealership in London, with his father Anthony. Throughout his career he searched through the attics of the British aristocracy and travelled across Europe accumulating historic lace objects. His legacy, is a collection of some of the finest surviving examples of handmade lace dating from the 16th century. The entire Blackborne Collection was generously donated to The Bowes Museum in 2007.

In addition to the main collection, which is exceptional in its quality and quantity, the Museum received a secondary assemblage of items categorised as the 'B' collection. This has been stored separately from the main collection in carriage trunks and is an incidental group of objects, consisting mainly of remaining shop stock from Blackborne & Co. and lace items purchased through auctions.

Left: The 'B' Collection in the carriage trunk

Arthur Blackborne's collecting aim was to preserve and disseminate knowledge relating to the expertise of handmade lace in craft and industry. The prescriptive manner, in which the main lace collection has been ordered, reflects wider conventions in collecting and historic interpretation during the 19th and early 20th century. It strives for a linear history in which prospective scholars can understand and

interpret the developments in lace techniques and design. This notion of preserving lace expertise is linked to other individuals involved in the industry during the 19th and 20th century (3). They were concerned that if the market and popularity for handmade lace plummeted, which had occurred previously in the late 18th century, history would be repeated and many of the skills and understanding of quality in relation to this high end fabric would be lost (4). Therefore the main collection has an immediate purpose and worth and its contents are frequently requested for exhibition displays both by the museum and other institutions to represent historical developments in fashion and the decorative arts. This is at odds and opposite to the incidental 'B' collection, which does not have a conventional linear narrative but offers a wider historical context.

Established conventions suggest that editing and curatorship are a valid practice for collectors and institutions. The selection and authorship can highlight particular ideals, interests and biases that can be linked to wider historic narratives. The rationale and expectation of the 'B' collection is significantly different and it marks a departure from ideas about structured collections.

It is important to recognise that many pieces from the 'B' collection, when viewed in relation to the main collection, are symbolically devalued. The physical separation from the main collection and the linguistic categorisation, B as opposed to A or main, means that this collection carries very different connotations and promotes preconceived ideas. But the random nature of this collection gives us a visual understanding of how Arthur Blackborne's connoisseurship developed and how lace was used, valued and remodelled during the late 19th century.

Artists often take inspiration from the most noteworthy sections of museum collections, underlining their importance and historical significance. Sarah's radical step of using the caps from the 'B' collection for preliminary research has a significant effect on the



Above:
Bonnet in the
Blackborne 'B'
Collection, The
Bowes Museum



perceived cultural value of the collection both within the context of the Blackborne Collection and the museum.

**Fig. 1 Linen Cap
with Torchon
Lace insert**

Sarah's choice of objects moves away from the notion of celebrating the individual collector as a connoisseur. Instead the depicted caps, in the artworks, highlight wider ideas centred on fashion and industry during the 19th and early 20th century. Her selection from the category 'B' collection is of historical interest. It provides an insight into the market for contemporary lace, the burgeoning antiques trade during the 19th century in Britain and across Europe and the role of Arthur Blackborne's restoration workrooms. It is evident from the selection of caps, that historic lace items were often repaired and remodelled to suit the changing fashionable market throughout the history of lace. Her choice also allows us to reflect on earlier ideals about restoration as opposed to contemporary

**Blackborne 'B'
Collection, The
Bowes Museum**



**Fig. 1b Detail of
Fig. 1 Linen Cap
with Torchon
Lace insert**

notions of conservation of historic objects.

Caps or indoor bonnets can be found in abundance in museum costume collections. They are often overlooked because they are ostensibly similar in terms of material and construction. However for centuries they were an integral part of everyday dress for women and children in all classes of western society. The caps were often made of linen and embroidered or trimmed in lace. The shapes and styles of caps subtly changed alongside wider developments in fashion and the linen bonnet was often worn as part of national and regional dress. Additionally the quality of the cap could vary and reflect the economic and cultural status of the wearer. Many basic needlework techniques were used on indoor caps which can be found on other linen household objects such as petticoats and bed linen. These needlework techniques are present in the caps from



the 'B' collection and we can see that the cap in Figure 1. has open work seams. The linen used for the cap is of a fine quality, however the Torchon lace inserts could possibly be from a later date as it is made from cotton rather than linen. Torchon lace of this kind was being made in the Midlands during the 19th century. Additionally the label indicates that the cap was most probably brought at an auction sale on the 1st December 1933, this was at the latter end of Arthur's collecting career and the wider interest in lace had passed.

The linen cap (Fig. 2) with inserts of Honiton lace is of a similar quality, it is evident that the linen has been treasured during its lifetime because it has been mended and darned on more than one occasion. There is a specific technique for darning linen and it was considered an effective way of preserving garments.

Fig. 2 Linen Cap with Honiton Lace insert

Blackborne 'B' Collection, The Bowes Museum



Fig. 3 Machinemade net cap with needle run flower motif, tacked on to blue parchment paper

Blackborne 'B' Collection, The Bowes Museum

Damaged antique lace fabric was often reconstructed using blue parchment paper as a temporary support. Even the most disparate collection of lace fragments could be patched and reworked together for resale. We can see from the 'B' collection caps, some of which remain unfinished and still attached to the blue paper, that the workroom staff at Blackborne and Co. were skilled in this particular technique. The workroom have tacked the cap in Figure 3, onto blue parchment paper and it could be suggested that the machine made net with a needle run design has previously been another garment, perhaps a sleeve from a dress. It is hard for us to understand this level of recycling in today's consumerist society.

Perhaps the finest examples of lace have less to communicate about lace in terms of history and design development than an object that has been worn, remodelled and repaired throughout its existence.

Although we can surmise that Arthur Blackborne would question this idea, we must conclude that the category 'B' section complements and adds to the Blackborne Collection's uniqueness and importance.

Sarah's work, through her considered study of individual caps from the 'B' collection allows us to reflect and consider both notions of categorisation and the interpretation of history through object based research.

Annabel Talbot
January 2015

Notes

1. Levey, S. and Hashagen, J. (2006) *Fine and Fashionable, lace from the Blackborne Collection*, The Bowes Museum. p.7
2. The Blackborne Archive - Arthur Blackborne's notebook includes probate lists for high profile families.
3. Mrs Treadwin, a lacemaker and dealer and The South Kensington Museum also created lace collections during this period
4. Between c. 1780 - c.1815 the popularity for lace declined. Levey, S. (1983) *Lace a History*, Victoria and Albert Museum. p.77

Right: Detail of
linen cap with
Honiton Lace
insert.

Blackborne 'B'
Collection, The
Bowes Museum.



Drawing the Delicate

A found poem by Elizabeth Burns

This poem was created by Burns after having seen Sarah Casey's exhibition *Drawing the Delicate*, which included drawings in wax on tissue of lace garments. She took the introductory text from the exhibition leaflet, and deleted most of the words from it, leaving in place ones that she felt particularly referred to Sarah's work. The result is a kind of 'lacy' poem that reflects Sarah's process and her drawings.

visibilty

untouchable

archaeology

handling

delicacy
dress

care

light

murmurs

invisibility

garments

skin

fabric

reflection

shifting

silver

light

dissolves

delicacy

touching

marking

garments

light

intimate

elusive

intricacy

careworn

chemise

nightgowns

sleeping

tissue

trace

hand

fold

wax

sunlight

melt fade

gauzy

ghostly

sheet

imprint

Drawing Out Threads

Sarah Casey in Conversation with Gerry Davies

GD: We're sitting in the studio among the drawings that you've made for The Bowes Museum and it strikes me that your recent two projects have also involved translating fabric into drawing and your last major project was with the Royal Ceremonial Dress Collection at Kensington Palace. I wondered if you could talk about how drawing enables you to engage with this world of fragile fabric and textiles?

SC: I think drawing is particularly sensitive to fragile subjects. Drawing as a medium or discipline is often talked about as a peculiarly delicate and fugitive medium – Louise Bourgeois called her drawings feather thoughts. In this way drawing might share qualities with garments stored in archives and collections, in that they are partially present, they have a kind of half-life. So it's not only the textile object itself that attracts me, it's the environment in which these things are found and the opportunity to work alongside curators of textiles and conservators, who look at study and care for these textile objects.

GD: I'd like to pick up on this idea of the half-life of objects and the ephemeral. Looking at the work in the studio, it evokes a floating world of sensations and allusions rather than depicts a concrete world. The drawings are made to be partly visible and the materials, technique and presentation, are quite unlike traditional drawing. Could you say something about the relationship between your techniques and the ephemeral?

SC: The reason I talk of an object's 'half-life' is that these bonnets are stored away, carefully protected and preserved in order to be seen but they only 'live' for only

a short amount of their life in the visible world, on display being seen, so there seems to be a tension between the fact that these are objects, garments intended to be worn, handled, used yet they are buried away flat in drawers. This is reflected in the presentation of the drawings hanging in space, in an ambivalent position between wall floor and ceiling – a limbo. Also when we look at the drawings around us in the studio we can see them illuminated from certain angles but as we walk around them they fade and disappear, like the objects in the archive they are partly seen and unseen. This idea is also explored through technique of using light and oil. I mean, touch is hazardous to historical textiles because it leaves oily deposits, as is light but both light and touch are essential for display. So I was interested to use these 'damaging' elements to draw, as a way of reflecting conservational and curatorial concerns.

GD: I'm interested in your approach to the visible and the invisible because it's also reflected in the parts of the collection that you've chosen to focus on. The Blackborne Lace Collection is well known for its quality, having some of the world's most exquisite historic lace, but you've chosen to draw the modest lace of the 'B' collection. Why have you done that?

SC: The project arose out of a conversation with Annabel Talbot, then curator and lace specialist at The Bowes Museum, about a project where I had drawn royal garments, actually nightgowns belonging to Queen Alexandra, which were rendered invisible out of polite deference to these private underclothes of royalty. What the 'B' Collection offered was garments which hidden for a different reason- because of their lowly status, lack of rarity, they are overlooked. As a researcher my curiosity was piqued by this chest of lace which had been hidden away and unexamined. These bonnets we came to work with were in fact uncategorised, taken into the museum as a job lot, each item having no individual record attached to it. So by studying each through drawing, these objects are given

a new life, they can be known again and go on display.

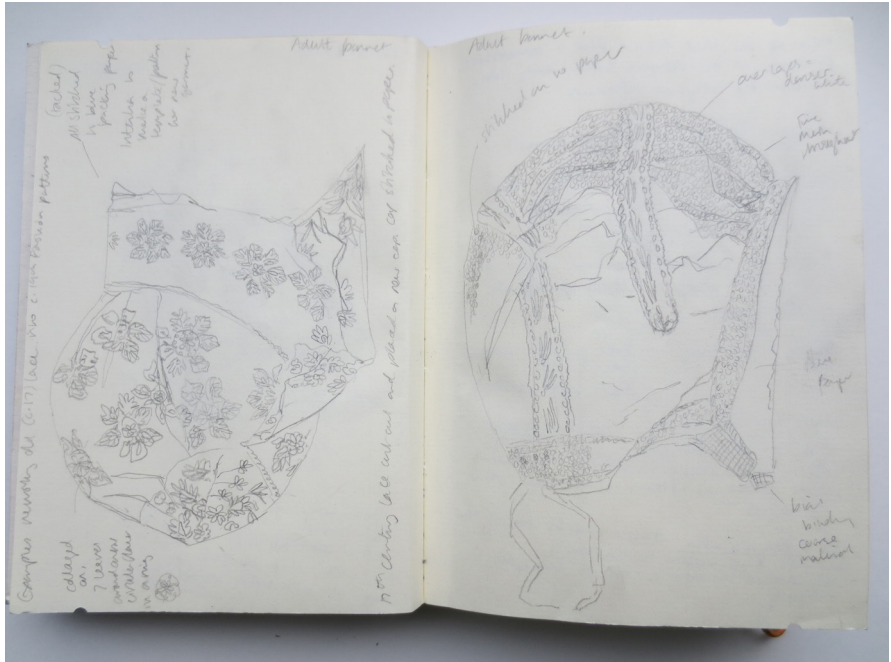
GD: I'd just like to move from the museum and the archive to the drawing language that you use, or if you like, the style. What we see here is a way of drawing that's patiently observational, accurate and I know, immensely time consuming. What does this approach to drawing enable you to do and what does it say about your attitudes to drawing more generally?

SC: The idea of drawing as a means of seeing the world is long established and well known; John Ruskin talked of teaching his students to draw so they may learn to see, rather than that they might make a pretty drawing. This is demonstrated in uses of drawing to elicit previously unseen information in the sciences, for example, early astronomy. Leonardo da Vinci observes in his notebooks how drawing in dissection of cadavers enables the fine and complex structures of the body to be known. The point is that drawing produces not an instantaneous image, a snapshot, but an image that emerges over a duration of study. So though drawing, the invisible can be rendered visible.

GD: How does this link to lace?

SC: With lace what we are faced with are complex clusters of interwoven threads and knots whose detail is hard to make out. It's possible through drawing these can be untangled. In fact, drawing was one of the methods used by Annabel to understand particular details of the lace. I'm quite interested in the possibility that drawing can be simultaneously an artwork and a document, accurate with a purpose and also poetic.

GD: I think the drawings go well beyond documentation. They not only represent the barely visible in terms of the manufacture of the fabric of the lace but also represent the invisible subjectively in the sense that the drawings communicate a strong sense of an absent wearer. These fabric caps and cowls that once covered a head are



Above:
Sketchbook
pages with
initial studies of
the Blackburne
'B' collection
bonnets.

now flat, they're flat in the archive and flat in your drawings, so we have this thin remnant of a culture of lace that once included both personal modesty and proud display. So the drawings seem to have a sense of personality. Do you think of them in any way as portraits of people?

SC: Very much so! As I spent time with them they started to reveal their individuality. When I first encountered them they evoked an image of a mass grave all piled up, hugger-mugger on top of each other, each without individual significance. Through the process of drawing their individual qualities became clear. There is also something in the format and aesthetic that reminds me of an x-ray or a brain scan. By the way, its funny you should mention that they are flat because while the paper is flat, the drawings hang in space. We discussed early in our project how we might address the disparity between lace made as a 3d object to be worn yet typically stored



flat in museums. So the installation of the drawings alludes both to the identity of the bonnets as garments and their history as archival artefacts.

Above: Work in progress in the studio, backlit by the window.

GD: As artists we often set out to ask awkward questions or create problems rather than look for tidy solutions so its interesting to sit here in the studio with this thorough, disciplined and consistent body of work. You set out to draw a box of 54 bonnets and here they are, they're all around us, but what did you discover that you couldn't have predicted at the outset?

SC: Well, crucially, the technique itself, which was developed though trial and error in the studio through making drawings with a whole range of types of materials, tools and paper. The way that linseed oil ages with time was serendipitous as it enables them to emerge from being

invisible at the outset to become perceptible over time. Since their making they've begun to yellow and age like some of the lace from the trunk which is an unexpected but pleasing symmetry.

GD: Aside from observational drawing's capacity to render the complex clear, what else do you think makes drawing as a method, as an investigative tool, appropriate for this type of project? For example I know you are an inveterate notebook keeper...

SC: I think there's lots of things. There's its portability -while it may be a limitation to only be able to use pencil and small notebook, this modesty is also its strength- you can take it anywhere. So it's also ubiquitous, people understand drawing to a certain extent - we've all drawn. I think within textiles, though, and even more so lace, there is a particular symmetry in the linearity of drawing and the threads depicted. Drawing like lacemaking is made by hand. And then we're back to the idea of drawing being particularly dextrous and delicate as a tool. John Berger describes Watteau's drawing like stroking a butterfly's wing - which evokes a wonderful sense of careful touching, perhaps like that of a conservator. By working alongside other researchers working with delicate material I am able to reflect back on how and why drawing is delicate.

GD: This project wouldn't be possible without The Bowes Museum as an institution, its collections, its textile archive, its curators and conservators and your drawings are the result of months, even years, of visits meetings and conversations which have included close study alongside other researchers there. Why is this way of working particularly effective for you?

SC: I think I am curious about what people do and what does on 'behind the scenes' and where drawing may fit into the world. As you well know drawing has been plagued in recent years by existential questions of what is a drawing so this way of working has grown out of a deeply

held conviction that we should ask what can drawing do, what can we do with this tool. Rather than consider drawing as something that is unique, isolated and specific look for ways that it may mirror, or find symmetries with other professions and researchers such as curators and conservators. So to this end, for the past eight years or so I've worked with professionals from archaeologists, medics and cosmologists.

GD: So thinking about the people that may come to see the exhibition, what do you hope visitors might take from your work, those who haven't thought about drawing very much or about bonnets, or indeed haven't thought about the two together?

SC: I don't think the show is about bonnets per se, it's more about what they represent. The bonnets are a type of historical garment that many people visiting the museum might have in their own attics, passed down by their grandmothers or great grandmothers. Items wrapped in tissue, trussed up with string and kept safe are familiar to many of us. If nothing else it would be worthwhile if the exhibition became a means about talking about these family keepsakes giving them a second life, a reason to get them out and tell their stories.

March 2015



drawings



1



2



3



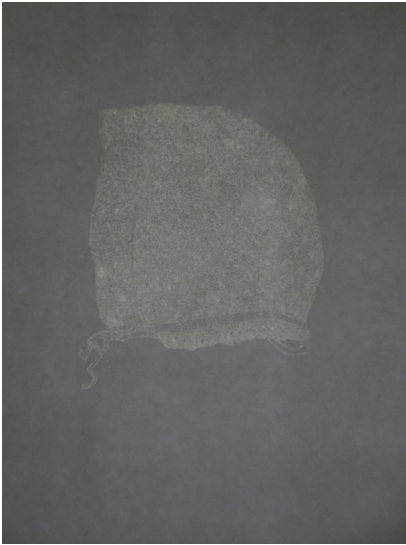
4



5



6



7



8



9



10



11



12



13



14



15



16



17



18



19



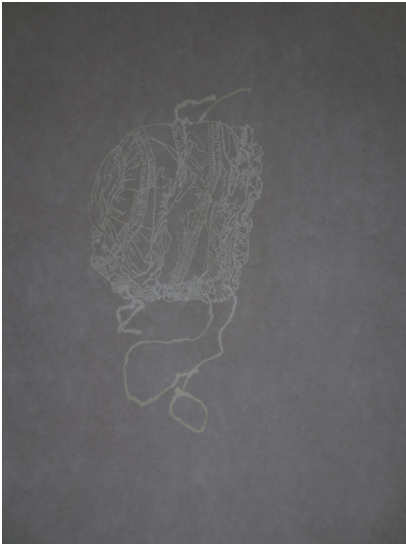
20



21



22



23



24



25



26



27



28



29



30



31



32



33



34



35



36



37



38



39



40



41



42



43



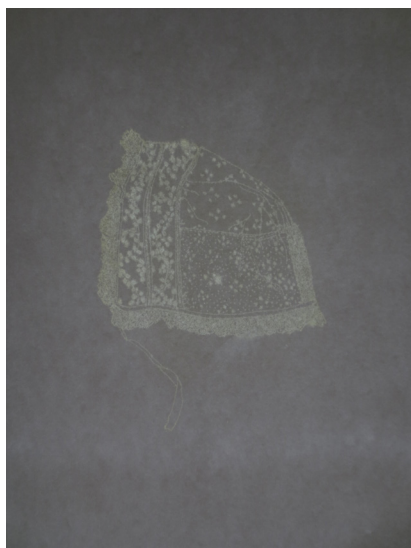
44



45



46



47



48



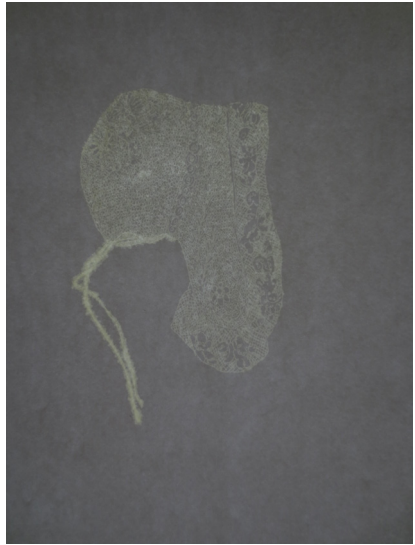
49



50



51



52



53



54

Common Grounds is a series of 54 drawings of equal dimensions.

Common Grounds /54

2014

Oil on paper

38 x 53cm

Contributors

Annabel Talbot

Annabel Talbot is an artist, curator, researcher and consultant. She worked at The Bowes Museum as the Blackborne Lace Collection's specialist and contributed to the museum's redevelopment, exhibitions and acquisitions programme. She has curated various exhibitions including, *Study, Design & Create: The 98 Lace Group inspired by The Blackborne Collection* 2012; and *Material Remains* by artist Diana Winkfield, 2013. She publishes on lace: *Selvedge* Vol. 58 (2014); *Costume* Vol. 45 (2012) and is currently working freelance on her first solo ceramics collection, which questions the synergy between historic design ideals and traditional creative techniques.

Gerry Davies

Gerry Davies is Senior Lecturer in Drawing at Lancaster University. He studied drawing at the Royal College of Art; he was a Fulbright Scholar at Purdue University in the U.S and Artist in Residence at Durham Cathedral. In 2010 his practice of documentary and on-site drawing in caves led to a nine week project drawing in the Jenolan Cave system of the Blue Mountains, Australia, and a solo show at the Drawing Study Centre at the National Art School, Sydney. In collaboration with Sarah Casey, Gerry publishes on drawing. Recent articles have appeared in *TRACEY* and *The Journal of Visual Arts Practice*.

Elizabeth Burns

Elizabeth Burns has published four collections of poetry, most recently *Held* (Polygon). Her pamphlets include *The Shortest Days*, winner of the Michael Marks Award for Poetry Pamphlets, *The Blue Flower: Poems on the Life and Art of Gwen John*, and *The Scarlet Thread*, a sequence on the Scottish painter Anne Redpath. Elizabeth has written about, and collaborated with, various artists. She lives in Lancaster and teaches creative writing.

Sarah Casey

Sarah Casey is an artist and researcher in Fine Art at Lancaster University. She makes drawings which test the limits of visibility and material existence. This practice reflects a fascination with the unseen, untouchable and unspoken. Drawing is a means of exploring what it means to see, touch and feel experiences on the edge of our grasp. In this instance, this means items of a dress collection which have been hidden away out of sight.

Over the past five years she has taken drawing to a range of challenging environments, working alongside archaeologists, medical practitioners and conservators to see what the activity of drawing may share with these other practices that must negotiate the delicate to reveal the unseen. An example of this is this collaboration with The Bowes Museum using her notebook to record how lace is stored, handled and viewed. In the emerging work, the drawn mark manifests some of the curatorial concerns around these objects, specifically how objects can be displayed. She has a PhD in Drawing and exhibits nationally and internationally. Her work for 'Common Grounds 3/52' was shortlisted for the Jerwood Drawing Prize 2014.

Solo Exhibitions

- 2013 Hidden Drawers, Kensington Palace, London
- 2012 Drawing the Delicate, Peter Scott Gallery, Lancaster

Selected Recent Group Exhibitions

- 2014 Jerwood Drawing Prize, Jerwood Space, London
- 2014 Paper, table, wall and after, Gallery North, Newcastle
- 2013 Darkness at the Edge, Propeller Visual Arts Center, Toronto, Canada
- 2013 Sketch Drawing Prize, Rabley Drawing Centre, Marlborough
- 2013 Drawing Open, Salisbury Arts Centre, Salisbury
- 2011 Sketch Drawing Prize, Rabley Drawing Centre, Marlborough
- 2010 Paper Works 3: British Artists working with Paper, Bury Art Gallery & Museum, Bury
- 2009 5th Interational Drawing Biennale, Melbourne Australia
- 2009 The Art of Research, TAIK, Helsinki, Finland





This publication accompanies the exhibition
Common Grounds: Lace Drawn from the
Everyday at The Bowes Museum 2 May – 21
June 2015.

Published by The Bowes Museum, May 2015
The Bowes Museum,
Barnard Castle, DL12 8NP

All works © Sarah Casey
Text © Annabel Talbot
Found Poem © Elizabeth Burns
Interview text © Gerry Davies and Sarah Casey
Photos of artworks © Sarah Casey
Photos of Textiles © The Bowes Museum
All rights reserved

No part of this book may be reproduced
or transmitted in any form or by any
means, electronic or mechanical, including
photocopying, recording or any other storage
or retrieval system, with out prior permission
from the publisher.

ISBN 978-0-9568433-2-6

Acknowledgements

Sarah Casey would like to thank
The Bowes Museum and Lancaster
University for supporting the project
and exhibition. Special thanks to
staff at the Bowes Museum notably
Joanna Hashagen, Annabel Talbot,
Hannah Jackson, Jane Whittaker,
George Harris, Rachael Fletcher,
Alison Nicholson, Sheila Dixon, Rosie
Bradford, George Harris, Katy Smith,
Emily Austin, Maria Pardos, Beverley
Peach. Thanks also to Lancaster
University colleagues whose
assistance has directly contributed
to the outcomes: Gerry Davies, Nick
Dunn, Martyn Evans, Dom McKenna,
Jonathan Kemp. Finally, I am indebted
to Annabel Talbot, Joanna Hashagen,
Gerry Davies and Elizabeth Burns for
their contributions to this catalogue.

The exhibition was supported through
research grants from Lancaster
University Faculty of Arts and Social
Sciences and Lancaster Institute for the
Contemporary Arts (LICA).

