

Transcript

Meet the Artist: Anna Fox

The Village is the earliest piece of work we have in the show and it's been re-constructed exactly like it was in 1993, when it was exhibited in Worthing Museum and Art Gallery. It's an installation and the first time I have worked on an installation. I wanted to broaden my practice and to take advantage of the experience of exhibiting work, so you get a feeling of what the work is about from the way it's shown.

[*The Village*] was collaboration with Val Williams who worked on the text with me and to some extent the editing of the images. There is a soundtrack that is made up of all the text and conversations that I collected from being in the village for a year and a half or two years. [The soundtrack] is made up of tiny little phrases mainly said by the women, things like: "*only housework for women*" "*we're sending toys to Romania*" "*we shouldn't have to feel too guilty*" "*if you listen carefully you can hear the voice of God*", combined with a BBC soundtrack called *The Village* which has the birds and bees playing. [The soundtrack] is played very loudly in a box in the centre of the room. The colour images are all of events such as weddings, parties, hair being done and dressing up for various things. They are all projected on a very large scale in a small box. As you walk in the box you hear the sound track, which is quite loud, and the images assault you with their scale. They are quite dark images made with a flash and they have an aggressive feel to them, so there is a claustrophobic feel and only a few people can fit in the box.

On the walls of the box are the images of the garden, which are literally black and white pictures of me spying through the hedge of the village gardens. It looks like an empty stage set and as if something has either happened or is just about to happen. Those were based on stories my mother told me about growing up in the village. [One story] was about how she had been dressing up and playing around in the garden and realised there was somebody watching her through the hedge, which is really creepy and is a story that stays in my mind.

Back to the Village came about when I literally did actually move back to the village where I grew up and out of London. So I became part of the community as opposed to viewing the village an outsider. I am still interested in what lies behind the façade of the picture postcard and media representations of the village. I decided very early to photograph only events where people were dressing up. I photographed the Nativity play, the village pantomime that happens every year, Guy Fawkes, Halloween and the Pram Race. Those are the five things I photographed year after year. Part of my inspiration had come from an earlier visit I had made to the Birmingham City Library that houses the Benjamin Stone Archive. I saw these amazing pictures he had taken of village carnivals and events from all around the country. I was staggered by the way they had this timeless feel to them. The way that people dressed up meant it could be any time, until you look at the very fine details of the shoes or clothes underneath the costumes. I became fascinated in how when one does this, if you photograph people dressing up for events they are suspended in time.

My Mothers Cupboards and My Fathers Words, which is the full title of the work is actually quite an evil book. It's a very tiny book which I designed myself. I very much wanted to be in charge of the whole process. I chose the typography, the weight of the paper which is very thin and its deliberately like that. It's very delicate, you can hold it in your hand, and it's a delicate pink colour with a scripted font. It says *Mothers Cupboards* on the front. You don't actually see the phrase *My Fathers Words* unless you turn the book over, so its hidden and there is a secret in there. The background to the story is that my father was very ill for a number of years and he became wheelchair bound and very frustrated. He used to rant a lot at all the women in the house. We have a quote from him here that says *"I am going to tear your mother to shreds with an oyster knife"* *"I will cut your bum off and serve it in slices like raw ham"* and *"You toad. Pity I got rid of the well: you could have gone down there and been cemented over"*

Each time I have a piece of text, I paired it up very carefully with an image. A lot of them are about eating the women or cutting them into pieces. I am trying to get this sense that there is equivalence between the cupboards and the words. Its all about this very loyal, quite difficult relationship that myself and my brothers all having to witness. The recording of it is my response to finding out a way of having to deal with it.

Country Girls and *Pictures of Linda* are linked because Alison is the subject of *Country Girls* and Linda is the subject of *Pictures of Linda* and were both members of the same small town punk band. I started photographing musicians in and around small town Alton in the mid eighties, for a magazine called Zigzag.

Extract for the film *Pictures of Linda Lunas*

Voice of Linda -

"My parents are both from Italy. Down south, I believe. Mafia Country. They had both come over to England after the war to go to university"

From that period on I have very regularly photographed both Alison and Linda in very different ways.

Extract for the film *Pictures of Linda Lunas*

Voice of Linda -

"I can get in all your boots and cut your head off"

Voice of Anna -

"No, I don't want my head cut off"

The Pictures of Linda were much more a documentary about her and how she changed. She is fascinated in dressing up and wearing wigs. She has thousands of different outfits and she likes the idea of documenting them.

The controlled collaboration is very much based on the fact that Alison and I saw ourselves as joint artist's contributing to this piece of work. We were totally interested in representing how we had felt growing up as young women in the countryside, in small towns and villages. We felt isolated and often-small town life was quite violent. We were both fascinated by the story of a young Sweet Fanny Adams who was murdered in the early nineteen hundreds. Sweet Fanny Adams was a young eight-year-old girl who lived in Alton who was chopped into pieces. The local bank clerk did it. He had never done anything like it before and he was the last man hanged in Hampshire.

I am very interested in humour, particularly satirical humour. I grew up in Jane Austin country and I've gone back to live there. I was always fascinated by the way she uses this subtle use of satire in the way that she describes her community and her position as a woman within that community.

Notes from Home is continuation of the autobiographical work and is really same as the *Cockroach Diary* and *My Mothers Cupboards*. It's made at the point when I move out of the city and back to the country and into village life. I had moved with two small children and although in some senses you are free in the countryside, you feel a little bit more on our own. Again, I was photographing things that were in front of me. There are a series of five different narratives; one is called *Making Cakes*, which is collaboration between me and my son Louis when we made cakes together. Also, within the series there is the swimming pool cake, Easter nests and other crazy constructions. *The Rise and Fall of Father Christmas*, which is a life size model of Santa that my other son Felix made for the village art competition, which was a fair monstrosity to have in our house for the three months he took to make it. Then there is *Pete's Food and Flowers*. Pete was an old friend of mine, who came to lodge in the house. It turned out he was suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder, which we didn't discover until he was in the house. He obsessively bought flowers everyday he was there and made us meals, which were quite wild and eccentric, so I just photographed them until he had to leave. *Super Snacks* is literally pictures of me snacking and the final one is *Gifts From The Cats*, which is a record of all the dead animals that the cats brought in as presents for me.

Cockroach Diary and *41 Hewitt Road* are very deliberately designed as book works. I designed them myself because they are telling stories. The design is also important so the *Cockroach Diary* appears like a natural historians diary. Its in a sleeve, there are two books you pull out, one is the text and one is the images. The text is a literal scan of my diary, which I kept at the same time as photographing the cockroaches and it actually looks like the real object. There is an element of authenticity about it. I had to photograph the cockroaches with an autofocus camera because they move very quickly, which I am sure lots of people know. This was a completely different departure for me in terms of photographing, because I normally photograph in medium format. Also important is this narrative story that runs through both pieces of work.

The *Cockroach Diary* is a tragic comedy. It has funny bits and sad bits. The particular funny bits are my hysteria in trying to get rid of the cockroaches and slowly realising that you can't get rid of them. All the silly stories that people tell me about what happens when you kill a cockroach, like you squash it and hundreds of its babies are born or you squash it and hundreds of its relatives come to mourn it, and I am actually believing these stories as I go along. During the story I go through all these processes of trying to get rid of the cockroaches, including calling the council out, using various poisonous sprays, but as everyone knows cockroaches cannot be killed, not even by a nuclear war apparently. I get to a stage where I am completely hysterical about this. Then I notice they start to go away a little bit. You find me musing very vainly at the end of the book about where these cockroaches are, as I want to photograph them.

In terms as my past documentary work I became more and more fascinated with the relationship between photographer and their subject and in fact how powerful one is behind the camera. It became an investigation into what it was like to be both the subject and the producer of the work, so investigating oneself. And also other people like Keith Arnet saying he never went more than eight miles from home to make work, which I thought was interesting. Of course, one can concentrate on yourself and your own doorstep, so I was very literally [working] within my own house. *41 Hewitt Road* was also the site of *Cockroach Diary*. I have always been interested in literature as a big influence in my work and as a younger person and the Kafka *Metamorphosis* story had a huge impact on me. I love the way that he used the insects as a metaphor for the troubled society that he was living in. In *Cockroach Diary* it's not really about the cockroaches, they are literally what are in the pictures, it's really much more about a dysfunctional group of people sharing a big Victorian house in London together.

You asked me before about autobiography and the function that played within my work; both these pieces of work and later pieces are very autobiographical. They are very much designed to be based on stories that other people can relate to. Although they are about me in the first place, in the wider sense about lots of people's experience. I still see them really as documentary stories as well as the fact that there is an element of narrative fiction in them as well.