

An interview with Make it Slow exhibitor Lizzie Farey

By Grace Whowell

In October 2013 I was lucky enough to interview Lizzie Farey in her studio in Kirkcudbright, Dumfries and Galloway. Lizzie has a large room in a beautiful Georgian townhouse, part of the WASPS charity that supports artists across Scotland. Surrounded by willow and serenaded by seagulls, I asked her about her life and work as a willow artist.

GW: You started off as a stained glass artist. Willow is very different, organic and more intuitive perhaps, did you instinctively know it was the right material for you when you tried it?

LF: I had been working with glass for a while but I took to willow immediately. I was introduced to it through my sister-in-law who is basket maker in North Wales. Willow is the complete opposite (to glass), it's flexible, it smells wonderful, it's generally natural in hue, it doesn't cut you, it's easy to use, though it has its challenges too. I was working with leaded glass so a piece could take two or three weeks to complete, whereas I made my first basket in an afternoon. I was attracted to the immediacy of it, not that you can become very good in such a short time! I also lived in a very rural cottage in Scotland; it made sense to use the materials that grew around me. So I went on to working with different local materials, larch, heather. They all feel different, smell different.

GW: I remember going on tour with one of your large willow and catkin pieces in the Travelling Gallery. Every time you opened the bus in the morning you got a wonderful smell, a sweet organic smell that always reminds me of that tour.

LF: Yes, the whole thing about working with these materials is that it is very grounding, it can bring you back to a very calm, safe place, personally speaking anyway. It's the feel of them; I like the idea of people being able to touch the work in the gallery, to bring them back to earth.

GW: So, what are the challenges of working with willow?

LF: I think learning to use it just at the right time. I grow all my materials and there's a time to cut it, a time to dry it, then you soak it underwater. That kind of knowledge, in the end I just trust my hands to know. You can't time it, in summer the water is warm and in winter icy cold so it takes longer. An old tradition is soak for a week use within a week. It's frustrating if you leave it longer and you start to use it, your hands immediately know it's not going to behave!

GW: What about using other materials such as ash?

LF: It's very different again, it's stubborn, it pings back and hits you in the face. Heather is very different, and contorted hazel; I love to experiment with new woods because I know willow so well. I like the challenges of using new materials. I want to move into new areas.

GW: Do you find it physically demanding?

LF: When I started I had blisters and pins and needles but now I don't feel anything, I don't use gloves or cream, I like the feel of it in my hands. I've learnt that these hands need to be really reliable so I don't do anything too straining. If I have a big piece I'll work it out over a week and pace myself.

GW: How soon did you start to make the transition to more sculptural works and why?

LF: It came quite naturally, pretty quickly. I'd done fine art training and gave it up but that expressive side of me was always there. A practical reason was that in this area there were two very good male basket makers, making stunning, hefty practical pieces. I didn't want to compete in this area so I started to make more expressive pieces that gave me infinitely more contentment than just repeating things. I can still make a good basket! But the thought of expressing myself personally was more appealing, it led me on and on.

GW: Landscape is a huge influence on your work, obviously your locality impacts on what you make. Here you have sea, hills, pasture, forest, lochs, everything!

LF: I find it incredibly calming, I was drawn here because of the space around me, the space around each person to expand mentally and physically into that landscape. It did impact upon my work.

GW: Do you see your work (apart from site specific commissions) as being made for domestic spaces?

LF: Yes, I do more and more. In the past people have compared my work to Andy Goldsworthy's but that's not quite what I'm about because I'm not making things that are ephemeral. I'm interested in making forms that people can relate to on a personal level, have in their own houses for a sense of calm or beauty. This piece (on the studio floor) for a nine-year old boy that died, to make something in memory of him, to me that seems a lovely thing to be able to have in your house. Some of the pieces I make are almost similar to a coracle or boat; I'm interested in making forms that people can relate to, say the 'essence' of a boat, a reminder, to take people back to that spot in nature where they have experienced something. If I can do that for people, that's one small thing I can do!

GW When you are making work, how do you start? Do you draw and sketch ideas beforehand?

LF: I've got maybe too many ideas when I'm working!

GW: Do you draw in the landscape or do you absorb it and it then let it come out in the work?

LF: When I'm driving it's hard to keep both eyes on the road, but yes, I have ideas in my head that I have to sketch out, but sometimes I have to start a piece, so it's sketched out in my head and worked out in my hands. Or for the bird forms, I will draw them out to get the ratio of the head and the wings, in a very simple way, and then use the willow to act as a drawing.

GW: To dictate the line?

LF: Yes, in that sense it takes me back to the stained glass. The Japanese sculptor, Ueno Masao, staying over the summer, he said 'your work is like stained glass'. I hadn't really thought about it but some of the lines are like lead.

GW: Yes, you can see that in the drawings, it's like a grid, planned out as you would with stained glass.

LF: Yes, like when you plan a design, I hadn't realised it had had an impact.

GW: Do you find you get into a rhythm of working on a piece and then it's hard to stop and pick up again?

LF: I quite often have 3 or 4 pieces on the go because of the nature of the work, because of the willow. I'm generally working to a high turnover so I have to have a schedule.

GW: How do you cope with distractions when you are working? Do you work for long stretches when you are making?

LF: I like to have a good stretch, if I know I have to break off in the middle of the day I find that quite difficult so I try and have a long stint, sometimes from six in the morning to six at night. I find that important. I do have distractions and I do manage them, I'm quite disciplined. When I'm in the 'zone' I am so happy, so when other things come along there is an irritation there. You are striving for that moment when you are at one with the work. So you have to get rid of those distractions.

LF: Is there any piece that has taken a particularly long time, maybe due to scale, or that has been harder to resolve?

LF: Sometimes if a piece hasn't worked I'll burn it and start again. A piece for a law firm in London took six weeks but that was nice because I got into a rhythm of working.

GW: You are virtually self-sufficient in the materials you use, is that process of growing and harvesting the willow important to you?

LF: Definitely, it's knowing the entire process from the beginning. I chose the varieties that I want to grow, I know what they look like at different times of the year. For me the crème-de-la-crème is salix purpurea, which grows deep purple and dries out to a pewter grey. It's slender at the butt, slender at the tip, just the most beautiful willow. So if you're getting a bit lost, you can just walk amongst the willow, reconnect, it makes sense to know the things (you use). The other advantage is it's free! I used to buy it in and get so possessive about it and anxious if I had soaked it and not used it. Now I have a freedom with my materials, I just cut some more.

GW: Apart from potters who dig up their own clay perhaps, it's quite unique to have such a deep connection with your raw materials.

LF: Yes, I'm married to it!

GW: Has the work of other International artists influenced your work, particularly after your visit to Japan?

LF: Yes, the whole Japanese ethic of simplicity, paring things down to the bare essentials. Certainly with Ueno Masao, even with the way he spoke, he would say things like 'As is it above, so it is below'. We get so caught up even with the words we use, if we can just simplify them as well. I think that is probably my aim for the rest of my life, to get back to the essence of something. So yes, he has been an influence. In the earlier days, Hisako Sekijima, the way she works, more and more I am drawn to the East.

GW: There is a high regard for the crafts in Japan, and there is perhaps less distinction between the arts and crafts, whereas here you can be defined by the material you use, do you find that happens to you?

LF: Yes, sometimes you see work that goes for huge amounts (in the fine art world), but I think we use a lot of the same processes, artists and craftspeople. I think I am on the fine art end of the spectrum, I know where I position myself. I think whatever you do you have the same struggles, same ambitions, desires, in that sense we are not that different. I enjoy the process of using my hands intimately, knowing my materials. I find it hard perhaps when other artists don't do it themselves. But there are painters who still love the qualities of paint, and potters with clay.

GW: And you with willow? That's partly what we are exploring in this exhibition, that connection with materials. Do you have anything else that inspires you, music perhaps?

LF: Yes, music's huge. It's interesting because I tend to go and read about other artists' lives, from authors to composers. I recently read about the life of Beethoven and I found it fascinating. I think it's the struggles that influence me more, and failures, and yet their art pushes through all that. I like listening to the radio too, I am enjoying Grayson Perry at the moment!

GW: He was very interesting talking about himself as a potter, but his 'potter's mark' or making with his hands not always being the most important thing to him. With most potters that is important; he is a fine artist but always refers to himself as a potter in a kind of humble way.

LF: Perhaps sometimes we get too hung up about our material. It is just a medium to express something that can be about an inner struggle or not. I'm amazed at how many artists have terrible emotional lives. Quite often when I am going through a difficult time emotionally I produce my best work. I wouldn't like to say what I was going through when I made that (*When I Think of You*).

GW: Looking at the actual piece now, I can see the struggle, the dense layers.

LF: Yes, the darkness but slowly coming into blossom, like getting through the winter and things are beginning to emerge and get softer. People have had a strong emotional responses to the work, a couple of pieces I did when my father died, people actually burst into tears when they saw them and they knew nothing about the pieces.

GW: Do you feel your gender influences your work?

LF: Yes, I suppose women are maybe drawn to my work more than men. Perhaps the emotion... I'm not saying men don't have that too, but there is a drive that I have, that I think is female, an enjoyment, but a striving, a working through of things. With the spheres they go through this terrible chaotic feel, like they are all going to spring apart, like they are never going to become this round sphere. Pretty much like my own life! They feel like they are all going to fall apart, then you stay with it, stay with it and it becomes this incredible thing.

GW: Some of the other pieces are very ordered and grid like, have they come from different times in your life?

LF: They are looking at the colours in the material, putting them next to each other. They are quite recent. It's about getting away from the fluidity and looking at structure. Maybe it was moving to the town, looking at roofs and windows, straighter structures.

GW: You're showing some work with Craft Scotland at SOFA, do you find the American market quite different?

LF: Very different, they're with you all the way in the sense that the British have a resistance to work. They ask how long will it last, or will it last? Yes, it's wood! Americans have already reached that point, they have a lot of what they call fibre art, they are a bit more advanced in that way

GW: Were you aware of the Slow Movement before approached to do this exhibition? How do you feel it relates to your work or indeed other areas of your life?

LF: Yes, we were brought up that way. I'm the youngest of five; we always, always grew our own vegetables. My mother refused to have a freezer because everything had to be eaten in season, fresh, or she'd do a lot of bottling; proper food at the right time of year. So when fast food came in, this whole thing of instant gratification that we are seduced into thinking is the right thing, we remembered our mother's words. She always cooked on a Raeburn or an Aga, the kettle took so long to boil but it was just one of those things, you waited, you had a cup of tea at the right time. That always stayed with me, and that integrity of materials, like chefs who use beautiful ingredients, I think I'm a little bit like that. I'll choose the willow that will suit the piece and the space in a house, choose the colours, the textures. It's that whole thing about integrity.

GW: How do you see your work developing in the future, are there any new directions you see yourself pursuing?

LF: I'd like to get more into public buildings. The piece for the London law firm was 4 metres in diameter. It made sense to me among all that concrete and steel to have some proper twigs! I imagine it would have a very subtle impact on those working there in that environment. As I'm getting older, I like the thought of doing a bit of teaching, not too much.

GW: To pass on your skills?

LF: To bring out people's own enjoyment, maybe when you sit at a computer all day, once you start having contact with this wood and you are making something that can be beautiful or practical, I think it can have an impact on your life.

GW: I think if you have that time when your brain and your hands are working together, everything else can just go out of the window. It gives you time to focus, like a meditation, switching off from everyday life. It's such a valuable thing to do and to teach.

LF And it's not instant either, you have to work at it! So we shall see.

With thanks to Joe Gregory and Sara Trentham-Black for additional questions.

Make it Slow is an Art Unpacked touring exhibition curated by Grace Whowell Nov 2013 – October 2014