

Interview with Florence Peake by Matthew McLean on occasion of her solo exhibition *WE perform: I am in love with my body* at Bosse & Baum, June to September 2017

MM: Looking at the drawings at Bosse & Baum, I found myself trying to mirror the bodies with my own body. I'm really intrigued by how you formed those positions. But you didn't document that?

FP: No, it was totally private; a private performance. I'm not interested in it being a live thing at the moment, that people can watch; I'm not interested in the gesture of performance, or the art object as a remnant of an action. There's a kind of romanticisation in that notion of the ephemeral act. I'm not interested in the artworks as traces, as things that are left over. In my practice the artworks have their own autonomy.

MM: So do you want viewers like me to think about the process when looking at the drawings?

FP: Yes and no. There is a live, performative moment, I'm not denying it. But there is also a privacy to that moment. I want to keep the mystery of that experience. All painting, all making, has a theatre, has an element of performance to it. It's a question of what relationship the object has to that gesture that has happened. What I'm trying to engage is the somatic, the soma. I have to get into the internal landscape of the body. I am thinking about it being quite engaged with presence. That's where I want the viewer to be too.

MM: How would it be different if the drawings were made in front of an audience?

FP: It might be quite boring, really! It's really not visual. I have this sensual experience, with my body, with the floor, with the mark-making. It's mostly about the floor. The floor is an amazing resource: that's something I learned from different kinds of dance practices that I've done.

MM: But doesn't all dance take place on the floor?

FP: Yeah, obviously. But I suppose the difference is for a lot of dance, even modern dance, verticality is privileged. To be upright, weightless: that's the endeavor – think of the leaps in ballet. Then with someone like Martha Graham, she slaps everything onto the floor. Even outside of dance with body-work practices, the floor is crucial to Feldenkrais, or body-mind centering, or “constructive rest”, which is a floor-based position in Alexander technique. The Skinner Releasing Technique which Joan Skinner developed, which I teach, uses the floor as a way to explore releasing and ‘letting go’ as a way of allowing for freedom of movement. It's where the fall can fall. Falling and exhaustion are interesting to me. There's the idea in Skinner of falling as rising. You know, you can read Quantum Physics and conclude there's no such thing as gravity.

MM: So you're obviously very immersed in dance theory, in the schools of dance. What place does it occupy in the development of your practice? Did you study dance formally?

FP: I've been involved in dance for most of my life – training in dance, then scholarships to The Place and the Laban, which I ended up rejecting. 25 years ago, when I was 21 there was a punk spirit still in the dance scene. I did Skinner technique with Gaby Agis; ‘releasing dance’ had a different kind of resonance in this context of rebelliousness, it wasn't hippy. When I saw Michael Clark I was excited by this idea that anyone can dance, even though his dancers now aren't like that but I saw that dance is inclusive – it's not about body shape, or type. I'm still very conscious in my practice now when I think about the body: which body, whose body, and the cultural implications. I saw *I am Curious (Orange)* in '89, I think. Seeing Leigh Bowery dancing... it felt very liberating.

MM: Such an important, exciting time. But was it difficult to be around all that energy and not be sucked into it?

FP: Dance training was horrifically militant. When I left dance college I got to work with some amazing people and companies; Gaby Agis is a choreographer who has had a big influence on my practices and making - her work has an immediacy to it and she uses images, visualising, picturing and feeling states; Gary Stevens and,

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later, Station House Opera from the Theatre of Mistakes lineage. But it was all camps and gangs. For a long time, I struggled to think “am I in this camp, or in this one, or in both?” I remember a thing I did at the National Portrait Gallery – one of the first things I did in a visual arts context, I suppose – and inviting an artist I performed with to see it. We were drawing portraits with our mouths. I wanted him there; but then I felt incredibly embarrassed because it was a more emotional and expressive piece of work than the formal aesthetic from that ‘gang’.

MM: So was there a turning point – making a particular piece of work, say – at which felt you resolved that tension, that sense of not knowing which camp you belonged to?

FP: I think with *MAKE* (2012), that was a piece where I thought “I really don’t have to worry about those allegiances anymore and I can do this with confidence.” I had found a way to make work about all the things I wanted to - the formal and the expressive – and all the things I enjoy, the tension between those different aesthetics and methodologies.

MM: I’m thinking now about the fact that the drawings are made in private. I feel like that privacy, the way it holds physical movement from being a performance, is somehow connected with this idea of not declaring your work as one thing or another, to suspend that moment. Does that ring true?

FP: I dunno. Maybe it feels like a power trip, you know – to withhold something. It’s very not like me actually. I think it’s more to do with wanting to avoid that relation that often holds between performance and objects where the art is just a kind of residue. When you see the interaction, you sometimes get this very basic thing of [FP screws up her headphones in one hand, and dumps them on the table]. It’s too literal to me, this kind of gesture. It always has emptiness.

MM: Whereas you want the artworks to have their own autonomy, as you say?

FP: Yeah, exactly. They come from the “performance” but they’re not reducible from the result of it.

MM: Okay, so without risking that autonomy, could you describe the process of making the drawings?

FP: I might make one or two at a time. They get so messy, so quickly, with the oil stick, lying on the floor drawing the outline of my body. It’s kind of scrambled sometimes. I have to resist, often, going and going and going with it – sometimes it needs you to stop, step back. Resistance is really productive. I have to resist what you want to do to the image. I’ve been watching bodies for so long in my life, touching bodies. I work with touch, really, fundamentally – and it’s hard to always be economical: because there’s this inventory of poses and forms of the body in my mind that I like to disrupt.

MM: So how do you work out the sequence or the series, the selection, that is on view at Bosse & Baum, for example?

FP: It’s quite a loaded term but I think about character, what characters there are. It’s like casting.

MM: Ceramic casting?

FP: No, like casting a performance, an ensemble of dancers. Say, you need 10 dancers in a show. You might know someone is really talented, but also a nightmare to work with – who might walk out on a job. And then you have to think about how the ensemble is balanced, how the dancers will work together. To give a voice to the piece, you have to coordinate all these components and qualities. It’s like cooking, getting all the elements to produce the right flavour or colour. Even at the level of an individual drawing, the colours, the lines which I add to, which elements I emphasise, and the direction across the page, the action, that’s all part of the “recipe” too.

MM: I’m in love with the colours you’ve worked with in this series. How do they figure in this process?

FP: For a while I’ve been exploring this Constable cloud palette: it started with a piece I made for Field Broadcast which was commissioned to take place in Dedham Vale, where Constable painted.

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MM: Was being in the countryside – or out of the city at least - at Wysing part of that?

FP: Not really, actually. It wasn't a response to environment. Generally I was looking for a pastel softness, which ultramarine, grey-ey blue, lends itself too. It's about that softness against the floor, with these more bold colours. I think of the tissues of my body melting, the back of the neck loosening, all those bodily tensions slipping and sliding.

MM: I wouldn't have guessed that association. It must be very personal. You don't follow codes, or visual correspondences.

FP: For me, dance is kinaesthetic. You know, for someone with kinaesthesia a number might have a colour, or a colour a sound. It's a way of reaching feeling states. If I'm lying on the floor I might be trying to reach a mossy forest landscape – the kinaesthetic state of a mossy forest landscape. I want to ask: what do you feel when you conjure that image? Or, what is the effect of a colour when your eyes are closed. This idea comes again from Joan Skinner: the imageless image. We don't have to experience visual images visually.

MM: You could say colour is just movement anyway – because it's light waves.

FP: I love that!

MM: How do you work out the poses?

FP: It's quite instinctive, really, and they're done really quickly so it doesn't become considered or precious. I get on the ground, I try lying, I let myself sink. Because I'm interested in the somatic experience I don't think about the shapes I'm making but I try to reach a feeling state. It's sensorial: textures and feelings. I might feel something in my foot; or [FP closes her eyes, stretches one arm out] the direction comes out through my arms. My torso is the core. And my pelvis – especially my pelvis.

MM: Why the pelvis?

FP: The body is three spheres, goes one theory – the ribs, the waist and the pelvic, autonomous but interconnected by the limb of the spine.

MM: Martha Graham used to tell her dancers to “move from the vagina”, I read – when her company included men she often criticized them for not initiating the pelvis. Is there a sexual element to this posing process?

FP: Sexual sensation comes into it – but it's a broader language than that. It's about gravity and weight and *sensuality*, more than sexuality. Sexuality is part of the sensual but it inhabits a different space.

MM: Do you think we mistake the too often?

FP: I think definitely in this country, this culture. We're quite un-evolved in relation to sensuality. When I spent time in India, I was so aware of how much everyone would touch each other; men touching each other, quite naturally, in a way you don't see here. It's affectionate. But growing up was very touch-based for me. I was one of five siblings and we'd just pile up lie all over each other all the time. The thing with touching that I'm very aware of is that it's mutual, reciprocal. The whole time we are touching, we are being touched. [FP touches the table top]. I could say I am touching the table but also the table is touching me.

MM: Is it always about affection, or tenderness?

FP: My work isn't always so pleasurable. I could be immersed in the floor, or immersed in anxiety. But yes, the erotic is a deeply emotional state, or feeling. I want a depth of feeling...

MM: Which is the same metaphor as gravity: going deep...

FP: But pressure might also lead to lightness. It's about moving into or out of something, it's spatial. Resistance is important, how the floor is resistant and how I gain feedback from surfaces about my own tone and texture.

MM: Has there been a project where you've been more interested in exploring these "darker" emotional states?

FP: In 2014 I did a piece at the Hayward called *Swell the Thickening surface*. I had been working with a lot of objects and decided to just work with energetic states and the body. This piece came out of a residency I did with Helen Poynor on the Jurassic coast, a natural environment.

MM: Another natural environment!

FP: Yes, it's funny that. There I was trying to explore purely the body in space, and it led to me to thinking about shaking – spiritual practices that use shaking but also how shaking relates to mental health. It can be a response to trauma. Or a sign of ecstasy, or overdose, or exhaustion, or masturbation. It was important that this very simple gesture was so multifaceted. It was really about heightened states. But it had to be disciplined, concentrated – not like random hippie shaking. So the rule was you only shake when you're in contact with something – the wall, or the floor, or even just my bum on the seat, here. And then I thought, once you bring another dancer into contact with that, it becomes very varied, produces a new narrative.

MM: So there's that tension again, that meeting of energies - that contact between one tendency and another, or one thing and another. I wonder about the lineage that you see this work in, aside obviously from that complex dance landscape that you described. Something about the physicality, that sense of a body's imprint, in the Bosse & Baum works, made me think of Yves Klein.

FP: Yes, I'm aware of that. But Rebecca Horn, in terms of historic figures using the imprint of the body, has been more important to me; or Nikki de Saint Phalle. Some aggression there. I suppose the lineage I'm in is the Judson Church scene – though that's much more formal than me. To be honest, it's just so funny for me to be looking now at an artwork from the past. The weight of history, of what's happened since: it obstructs, sometimes. There is art that I love and feel so much about but, when I see it in a gallery, documented or whatever...when I saw the Rauschenberg show, I was thinking: I feel completely numb, feel absolutely nothing. Maybe I just prefer this stuff existing in my imagination – what it was in this amazing moment that doesn't exist anymore.

MM: Okay, so let's abandon the past. What about the future – what are you working on now, or next?

FP: It's a project that came out of *The Keeners*, which was performed in London Fields in 2015. It came out of *Make*, too, in a way, some of the formal elements. But it was channeling this tradition of keening, which is this Gaelic tradition of vocal mourning. The performers called out losses from public lives; they keened for five hours. And I'm thinking now about the political landscape, which invites a lot of grief. What I want to do is to re-interpret *The Rite of Spring*. I'm really trying to ask if the Rite can be performed as a protest: against Fascism, or injustice. It will be on a bed of clay, and the performers will build sculptural forms upwards, that keep getting dismantled and rebuilt.

MM: It's taking on quite something, to confront the foundational piece of modern dance

FP: I know! It could be so intimidating. I don't know if I'll use the music or not, partly for that reason. But the thing is, coming from that postmodern, Judson, tradition, I am also drawn to the complete conviction of modernist choreographers. Maybe it does mean being naïve, but it's that same part of me that thinks you need to be brave, to have flair. Sometimes I think: what would it be like to be Martha Graham and develop a whole system, and philosophy? This is the thing: with a lot of commissions from institutions, I'm sometimes feel like I'm being asked to change the world, with no resources. The feelings are real - I believe that this action or this imprint is going to say something. But there's always this question of whether it has any impact.

MM: I think that's kind of irrelevant, or impossible to answer, or something.

FP: I mean any small act of process has an impact. I could make a mark just there [FP gestures to a wall through a window]. It would exist. Even if never seen by anybody.