

# Tenderness

## and how to get there

By Jes Fernie

Cecil Thomas (1885 – 1976) used his skills as an artist to make models that helped the British army anticipate enemy attacks during World War I. He was injured in the process and recuperated in a French hospital. With shrapnel lodged in his diaphragm, and the gruelling associated trauma of life in the trenches establishing roots in his brain, he returned to London in 1918, homeless and in search of a studio in which to make his sculpture. He came across a handsome deserted building in South Kensington, broke into the basement using a table knife, and discovered a series of beautiful, spacious rooms.

Many months later, after an interminable series of rebuffs, dead-ends, and financial challenges, he acquired a lease to the house and moved in. That was 1920. Fast forward a hundred years, and that building is now Dora House, home to the Royal Society of Sculptors, where the exhibition **Making Together** is being staged.

It is serendipitous, but also deeply moving, that two of the four exhibiting artists of **Making Together** have created sculptures, paintings and installations that summon the ghost of Cecil Thomas through their exploration of the subjects of homelessness, social justice and trauma. Drawing on their lived experience and family narratives, Thompson Hall and Simone Kennedy have made a coruscating, live body of work that brings us nearer to an understanding of the varying, often disturbing, ways that the world impacts how we think and feel about ourselves, how anxiety and conflict flourish under certain conditions, and how art can lead us to a place of transcendence and possibility.

Together, Hall and Kennedy have constructed a tent, the fabric of which has been painted with isolated, running figures, bulbous, pulsating larvae, threatening bullseye targets and scuttling, arachnid forms. It is a menacing, unsettling sight that expresses both artists' feelings of alienation and exclusion from society. Using colour as a mechanism to draw the viewer in, the experience of looking becomes increasingly more contemplative, with darker overtones weaving their way through to our consciousness. Experimenting with soft sculpture, found objects, and beguiling honesty, the brain is employed as a metaphor for childhood development, personality construction, different ways of thinking and processing, and the mystery of the unknown. Suits and patterning mourn absent fathers and continue the conversation about who we are and where we come from (Kennedy's father was a tailor who loved plaid and Hall's grandfather came to England from Ghana in the 1950s where he was compelled to exchange his colourful smock for a drab, grey suit).

Symbolism is the thread that draws these two practices together – both artists looking to find ways to express their ideas through a visual language that is seductive and strange. Kennedy's use of the fly as a metaphor for her sense of self and her relation to her mother alludes to societal ambivalence about both flies and mothers – they are often un-loved or dismissed, but they are also resourceful, hugely complex, and incredibly useful (I am delighted to learn that flies are the unsung cleaners of the world, pollinate plants at least as well as honey bees, and can be used, in their larvae form, to heal infected wounds). Hall's gestural free-standing drawings of shadowy figures speak of isolation, lost father-figures, and

the fraught nature of masculinity in 21st century life. His brain sculptures allude to the psychological impact of burying hardship, and the damaging impact of trauma on one's life. The symbolism is often stark, but it is presented with a sense of care and tenderness.

When I look through, read around and consider the second artist pairing of Leslie Thompson and Eleni Maragaki, I am cast adrift – I find it hard to see how these two very different artists could build a productive working relationship, their practices diverge so wildly. Thompson, with his fluid, generative, often multi-coloured drawings, all made from memory with no preconceived plan, and Maragaki with her kinetic sculptures, 3D drawings, books and puzzles which present precisely constructed worlds made up of order, geometry and monochrome. Thompson depicts family members, superheroes, animals and favourite pop stars, whereas Maragaki is interested in creating symbolic links between natural and artificial environments. But this is the magic of collaboration! Together, these two artists have discovered a portal that has led them to a place of discovery, joy and intrigue through a shared interest in the natural world, animals, landscapes and colour.

Their collaboration was generative, with work going to and fro between the two artists, creating a responsive learning process that delighted both. After a conversation about Maragaki's homeland of Greece and the animals that inhabit the landscape, Thompson began to draw goats, cats and tortoises and make clay models of the creatures from memory. Thompson taught Maragaki his singular method of working with clay to construct animals, and Maragaki taught Thompson to make spring flower fold books, a sculptural, accordion-like object that offers multiple viewpoints and a rich 3D experience. On the train home from London to Manchester, Thompson filled one of these expansive books with an array of his favourite African animals (giraffes, rhinoceroses, tigers and lions) and his trademark hand-written text snaking its way around the drawings. In a flag book, also on display here, Maragaki has drawn ninety-nine landscapes from the Savanna and South Africa – working for the first time from memory, echoing Thompson's intuitive process.

In another collaborative work (*Meteorite*), Thompson has populated one of Maragaki's meteorite drawings with a procession of gayly advancing animals, each following in each other's footsteps (look carefully and you can also see a second meteorite in that dancing party – a delicious mirroring that adds humour and intrigue to the proceedings). The hard edge of Maragaki's constellational structure creates a tender meeting point for Thompson's soft, organic forms. The red, purple and blue of that meteorite also denote the artists' favourite colours: Thompson (purple) and Maragaki (blue and red, which of course mixed together to make purple). Another pleasing piece of serendipity that weaves its way through the artists' practices.

Making art with someone you don't know can be a raw and liberating process. There is ego, fear and ambivalence, as well as magic, intrigue and the promise of new worlds. All four of these artists expressed a desire to experiment with, and learn from, each other and this is what they have done, through working more instinctively, broadening their repertoire of subjects and materials, acquiring new skills, and finding new ways to express their interests.

Something beautiful has happened here. It is evident in the spirit of the project, the enthusiasm the artists have for their joint endeavours and each other's practice, and the end result – the sculpture, the books, the drawing, the time spent, the risks taken, the things learned. It is rich and strange and generous, and it is all there for the taking.

# Making Together

A Royal Society of Sculptors collaboration with Art et al.

## About the exhibition

We invited four artists, working in pairs (Thompson Hall and Simone Kennedy; Leslie Thompson and Eleni Maragaki), to collaborate with each other to make this exhibition. They have spent the last four months visiting each other's studios, talking on Zoom, feeling their way towards something that is unreachable within the confines of their own practice. The project represents a desire to support and facilitate dialogue between neurodivergent and learning disabled artists from UK supported studios ActionSpace and Venture Arts, and members of the Royal Society of Sculptors. The aim is to help create a richer, more diverse visual art infrastructure that challenges expectations and traverses boundaries.

## The Royal Society of Sculptors

We champion contemporary sculpture and the artists who create it. We are leading the conversation about sculpture today through exhibitions and events for all, welcoming everyone interested in exploring this art form and its many possibilities. An artist-led, membership organisation, the Society supports and connects sculptors throughout their career.

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et  
al.**

Art et al. is an international inclusive curatorial platform of collaborations between artists from supported studios, peers, and arts professionals that highlights diverse voices and creative practices. These collaborations and partnerships result in commissioned writing, original multi-media content, and both digital and in-person exhibitions, expanding the scope, role, and definition of contemporary art.

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**Jes Fernie**

Jes Fernie is an independent curator, writer and lecturer based in the UK. She is interested in the social, political and environmental context in which art is made, situated and viewed.

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