

# **British Art Talks podcast**

## **Season 2, Episode 1**

### **Lucy Skaer: Leaving the House**

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[music]

**Anna Reid:** *British Art Talks* from the Paul Mellon Centre, championing new ways of understanding British art, history, and culture.

[background noise]

**Lucy Skaer:** Come in. Gladys, come on, in. Good girl.

This is the house that I grew up in. It's in Central Cambridge and it's quite a big Georgian townhouse that used to belong to the university and they sold them all to academics, so it's a strange terrace of eccentric academics. [laughs]

Sit. Good girl. This is Gladys, my puppy. She is seven months old and she comes everywhere with me, so she's here. She's such a good dog. You're going to say something?

**Anna Reid:** Welcome to the autumn 2020 series of *British Art Talks*. I am Anna Reid, head of research at the Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art. This series foregrounds three contemporary artists touching on the highly distinctive and unexpected ways in which they both construe and work with histories of their field. Lucy Skaer lives and works in Glasgow. She was born in 1975. She was nominated for the Turner Prize in 2009.

This year as a result of pandemic conditions, and of her father's deteriorating health, Lucy, along with her siblings had to empty out her childhood home, a townhouse at Belvoir Terrace in Cambridge. Lucy's story of leaving the house is an account that is on the one hand deeply personal, and yet it speaks of historical processes. The house and its material appear as if something like the unconscious of her formation as an artist. I met Lucy in Cambridge on the 15th of October.

**Lucy Skaer:** I'm Lucy Skaer, a sculptor predominantly. I'm here in the family house in Cambridge, which is the house that I grew up in, and it's just on the market at the moment. It's sold, it's under offer, so I've been in the process of looking through all of

the things and clearing the house with my siblings. In the clearing of the house, I've come to realise how influential this place is and the choices that probably mostly my dad made on the things that are here. The books and the artifacts, like the ceramics and painting, they've been really influential on my choices as an artist. It's amazing that I can come here, witness that, see that, and see how those things have influenced me.

My parents moved into the house in the 1960s, and the house went through various transformations during that time. First, they were just renting it, and then they came to buy it and started their family. Then, as we grew up and left, my mum also left and my dad ended up being the sole occupant of the house. It became almost a bit of a bachelor pad. My dad was very prolific in printing out parts of the internet, annotating them and marking them up. He's a scientist.

The house became stranger still as my dad developed Alzheimer's and he began to collect a lot of things. He would forget that he had already bought some highlighter pens, for example, and then he would go to the shop and he would think, "What things do I like?" He would just buy the things that he liked in the shop again and then put them where they belonged in the house, which all sounds quite rational, but then there began to be huge heaps of highlighter pens, like over 90, 100 highlighter pens. The same with milk bottles, plastic-handled milk jugs. He just really liked them, so he collected them and put them on all the surfaces, also washing-up sponges, a huge pile of them.

I reentered the house at that point, and I recognise things from my own practice in the way that he was behaving because I also like series of things. I like collections of things. I like variants of the same object. At that point, I started to become really interested in the house as a site for my own work and approaching it almost like a, not a found object because it's so deeply familiar to me, but as something that I could work in.

I think that the way that my dad collected and arranged things and the artworks that he loved had quite a different kind of relationship to a normal ownership relationship. I think that he had them because he used them in a way, he used them for his life. I think that he, my father was very influenced by Jim Ede, who he knew, who was the founder of Kettle's Yard. Kettle's Yard is like a artwork in itself, almost. It's a house in Cambridge that I used to go to a lot and I still do go there a lot, but I went there through my childhood. It's an arrangement of lots of different modernist artworks, most of them particularly British modernism.

When I was thinking about what I wanted to talk about in relation to British art, I thought about this way that people collect and arrange things in their homes, and that there are all these British artists doing that. When I was looking into Jim Ede and Kettle's Yard, I found this interview with John Goto, who is artist and resident at

Kettle's yard. It's the last recorded interview with Jim Ede. They're both speaking about death because John Goto's father has recently died. I was struck by how Jim Ede talks about stillness and about death in this interview and how he relates the objects in the house to this sense of stillness.

**John Goto:** I've come to view Kettle's yard as a single artwork, a montage made from paintings, furnishings and objects.

**Jim Ede:** This fits in a little with what I'd thought. Whenever I've heard the word "collection", I've said to myself, "Well, this isn't a collection. It's a number of things, perhaps."

If you don't love the things you are going to present with an enormously human love, then what's the good? I find that I'm very occupied with light and shadows. I had a group of pebbles arranged in a tray from the lightest towards the darkest. A woman came in with her granddaughter who picks them up and they went "whoosh" all over the room. Well, that's what happens even with grownups.

**John Goto:** In my first few weeks at Kettle's Yard, I saw it more as a succession of still lives.

**Jim Ede:** I never thought of it in that way, but curiously enough, the other day someone said they were thinking about all those still lives at Kettle's Yard. You see, I believe in stillness if only I could achieve it, which I don't think I can. Harmony is another word for it. Stillness is really a very strange word. To be still meaning, to be attentive, to take in, to search, and indeed to be at that place where you don't take in anything at all, just to know.

**John Goto:** As with the child knocking over the pebbles, is there sometimes a contradiction between family life and this quest for stillness?

**Jim Ede:** Yes, there is. I have been very fortunate in building my own city almost. The moment the door was open, there was harmony. Five or six people would sometimes come to Kettle's Yard and that would seem like an enormous crowd. Then 12 would come and then 14, and I had to scatter them to different places until finally, I could absorb, say 30 coming to that tiny little house and they didn't look as if they were there at all.

**Lucy Skaer:** Here later in the interview, John Goto:

**John Goto:** You feel that death is part of a natural process, even part of an aesthetic process?

**Jim Ede:** Yes. Take, for example, those twigs. Death, I have thought about it quite often and it's come to me to think about it as if in a dream. I have the feeling quite

strongly that if it's anything it's coherence and balance. There's no need for people to be chattering to each other or be troubled by one thing or another. There is no trouble anymore. It's all straightforward and clear. Death is not a thing to be afraid of in any way. It's a cohesion of natural intensities. Sometimes when I look into these great lights and there is a flutter of wind and leaves, it's as if a whole village is coming towards this garden. A lot of people together like in a French picture perhaps.

I knew about death as a child because on one occasion I was told to run up and find grandpa. We were waiting for him to come down and say a prayer. I went up and there he was lying on the bed with his mouth open and his eyes and he didn't say a word, so I, knowing full well that he had died, came running downstairs saying, "Grandpa is on his bed and won't say a word." Everyone rushed up and I was told to go back. When I was finally allowed to see him, he had a sheet over his head. They lost a wonderful opportunity of introducing me to this thing. They were frightened, and he was the only sensible, quiet person.

[music]

**Lucy Skaer:** I'm interested in Jim Ede's feeling to share Kettle's Yard, rather than to have it as his own house, and how the object came to have a shared meaning because of the way that he arranged them and also gave access to people. That reminded me of something that I read in an amazing book by Christina Kiaer, which is called *Imagine No Possessions*.

It really charts a different relationship to objects than one of ownership. She's looking largely at Russian Constructivism and this notion of a socialist object.

I'm interested in this idea of the socialist object and how it can be different from a ownership of an object. Rodchenko speaks about the things in our hands that must be equals, that must be coworkers or comrades. I'm interested in that notion of the use and the equality of an object to a person, but also in the anthropomorphism that that implies that the object is given a human agency.

Among the things that my dad had in the house when we were clearing it out was this flint which he picked up on West Runton Beach. We used to go there quite often and he would always come back with as many rocks as the car would hold in the boot so that it would always be right down on its springs. He had these flints around the house. One of the flints he had reminded him of the head of a horse, so he made an oil painting of the flint turned into a horse.

Later in my own work, I made a very similar move of turning these sculptures that had been abstract into animals in a hunt. Mine were hares and rabbits, but I saw this parallel strand in my dad's artwork, and indeed, it seems more widely that

anthropomorphism is a way of finding a narrative in the world. That you go out and you project what you want to see onto something that's there, but it's not a wholly convincing transformation. The thing still remains itself even though it's seen also as a horse.

My dad did an example of that undoing of anthropomorphism when he found a flint on West Runton Beach in the 1960s, and he was struck by how much a Henry Moore sculpture it looked like. Henry Moore had spent holidays just down the coast there, and he'd collected those flints and then made them into figures. My dad thought it was urgent that he should go and bring this flint to Henry Moore to show him, so he did. He went and made an appointment with Henry Moore. My parents when they were newlyweds went, Henry Moore had them for tea, and my dad produced this flint. Henry Moore was actually really patient and nice with them and kept the flint. I think it's still in his house or studio there.

One of my favorite anthropomorphisms is in my friend and collaborator Rosalind Nashashibi's film, *Eyeballing*. She was on a residency in New York and didn't know anyone in the city but was surrounded by people. I think to find a way through that quite isolated time she started seeing and filming faces everywhere. You get the back of her electric toothbrush with the bristles as a little sprout of hair. You get the plug socket with its eyes and nose and mouth. Then out into the city, you get blank windows as eyes and an awning as a gaping smile. You go around the city being shown these faces that aren't faces. They're convincing because the films show you how to see them, but they're not convincing in terms of actual full-on believing those things. Going out into the world with a certain narrative is something that we do all the time, but I love this way of making it so obvious that it's in the eye of the beholder.

A huge influence on me is Paul Nash, the British Surrealist and also a realist because he was a war artist both in the first and second World Wars and saw all manner of chaos and disruption. I think that that really led to this drive to try to cohere things again. He wrote an amazing guide to Dorset that was part of a series produced by Shell and edited by John Betjeman. I have it here, I'm just going to read the start of it.

He starts with a chapter called *The Face of Dorset*. When we speak about the face of the earth, the face of the waters, quoting that ancient imaginative expression, we probably refer to an extent or expanse of space rather than the suggestion of the featured mask.

**Paul Nash:** - an extent or expanse of space rather than the suggestion of the featured mask. In describing some comparatively small localized area of land and sea, it is perhaps possible to think of it in a more literal sense, as in fact something like a countenance. At least I've sought to conceive of such an actual symbol in this

description of the county of Dorset. As I see it, there appears a gigantic face composed of massive and unusual features at once harsh and tender, alarming yet kind, seemingly susceptible to moods, but in secret overcast by a noble melancholy or simply the burden of its extraordinary inheritance.

Indeed, the past is always evident in that face. It's not always the furthest part which is the most assertive. There are certain places at certain times where the record of some drama can start into life as a scar glows with sudden memory. Such places at such times are inseparable from the deeds associated with them. The wreckings of Chesil Bank, the vial robberies of Cranborne Chase, the murderer of Corfe, or the sadism of the Bloody Assizes.

The ace of Dorset is not long distorted by such memories. On a sunny day, the delightful vagaries of the Chase are enchanting to watch under changing lights. The bank lapped by a blue sea, fringed by tamarisk and harbouring one thousand swans is only a pleasant dream as you lie on Abbotsbury Hill. Nor can you think of Jeffries while you eat crumpets at his lodgings at Dorchester. Corfe alone is implacable. No mood or nature or human intrusion can affect that terrific personality.

No one who has looked at Maiden Castle can be expected to tolerate its comparison to the furrows on however vast a brow. An analogy may be apt for general characterization, but yet it may fall apart against the deliberate translation of detail.

**Lucy Skaer:** -but yet it may fall apart against the deliberate translation of detail. Let us, therefore, sidestep from imagery to fact. I can see that a lot of my tactics in my own work have come from drawing things straight from art history and incorporating them myself but like anthropomorphism. Not in a way that is meant to permanently transform or be wholly convincing. I've made a work called *My Terracotta Army, my Amber Room, my Red Studio* and it's a variant for myself of the Chinese Terracotta Army and of the Amber Room that went missing during the Russian Revolution. Matisse's Red Studio and I've brought all of those things together into one really excessive work.

Likewise, with Rosalind Nashashibi, we've made a work that refers to Paul Nash's *Flight of The Magnolia*, which is an amazing painting by Paul Nash in which, in a cloudy sky at sunset, he sees a flying Magnolia that's blossoming. It's relevant and terrifying to him because it was during the time that an invasion by air to Britain was expected, so that the sky might flower with parachutes. His vision of this giant Magnolia flower is very arresting and also alarming. With Rosalind Nashashibi, we made a film called *Our Magnolia* that imagines what that sight of the Magnolia would be for us. For us, it's Margaret Thatcher and her bouffant hairstyle like, that's our Magnolia. It's borrowing that starting point but also a transformation of it or an extension of it. I think that that borrowing and using forms and other artists' work has been something that's gone through all of my practice.

That brings me back to this house. When I came one time to visit my dad, when I was planning to begin my project of making works in the house, I parked my car at the back, and I came up the back garden and I opened the back gate. Instead of seeing up the garden as I usually do, I was confronted by this mass of flowers that was about three feet from my face. What had happened is that there was a huge rose that had grown up through the apple tree. It had become so weighty as it was in bloom, that it snapped the apple tree stem(?), stalk(?), trunk(?). That it had snapped the apple tree trunk and the canopy of flowers had fallen and blocked the back garden. That somehow turned into a work of mine, where in my old bedroom, I replaced the paint of the window with pieces of lapis lazuli. That experience of not seeing through but seeing a blank, but a very rich, decorative blank became incorporated in my work. I've made various works in the house that are made from the house. By which I mean, they're made from the front door, the floorboards, the window in the bedroom. Each of the works consumes part of the house. While they are very tied to my own memories of this place and my own associations, they also destroy the house. They're quite brutal and almost a cannibalism of this place.

If we were to look under the carpets here, we would find replaced floorboards in the shape of a box. What I did was, over a period of a few months, I inlaid the floor with lapis lazuli tiles with pieces of bronze. I made copper lids for my dad's bowls. He's got lots and lots of pottery bowls, so I made specific copper lids to cover each of the bowls. Then I cut them and laid them in the floor. A lot of the inlay in the floor matches where furniture went and charted movements that I've made in the furniture and then the house. When I'd finished decorating parts of the box as it still lay on the floor, I would put the carpet back over and then go away and then come back and do more. It's this cumulative decoration of the floor. Then when I came to assemble a piece, I lifted these floorboards out and I made them into boxes. Then the boxes went off for an exhibition.

[music]

**Lucy Skaer:** The main source of all the treasures in the house is the attic, so we can go up there now. Yes, this is a tiny portion of what was here. This is old film. I think it's biological, maybe electron microscope images. Looks if some kind of worm or something. It's a treasure trove. [background noise] At the moment, this room is not really as it was. This is a tiny, tiny amount of the things that were here. It was more of a thicket of objects until we've cleaned it up.

The things in this house are so much part of the house as I knew it, that I find it impossible to really separate, so it's quite odd to see this room in such an empty state for me and in such a rational state because it was always much, much more filled with things, the things were filled with possibilities in relation to each other, and I suppose, to ideas, and uses, and stories.

It's going to be quite hard to leave for the final time. I do feel really good about a family moving in, though, because it's been a lovely place to live.

**Anna Reid:** And your father went out and collected all of these himself? These are all his finds. That's a seed pod, isn't it?

**Lucy Skaer:** It's a pipefish, dry pipefish.

**Anna Reid:** Oh, wow.

[background noise]

**Lucy Skaer:** Lots of it's just random.

**Anna Reid:** Tell us a bit about the works that your dad made. Because there are a lot of life drawings but he did make sculptures as well. Tell us a bit more about that.

**Lucy Skaer:** Yes, he did make sculptures. Most of them were him adapting natural objects by adding things or sometimes subtracting things. They looked quite Henry Moore-like, but he also made models of molecules that he was working on. He used to make them up here in parallel to these other things. He did make a lot of life drawings and then some paintings as well, some just quite biological paintings of plants, but also these more transformative paintings of things, like the flint turning into a horse. I loved that, although he was a scientist by profession, he just always had this artistic life.

**Anna Reid:** When you talk about his works depicting molecules, I was thinking about some of the abstract forms that come through these natural forms. The way that you've used the lozenge forms and quincunx forms in your works. Is there any connection between some of these forms?

**Lucy Skaer:** Well, yes because those lozenge forms that I use, they're simplified from an emerald gem cut. That would have been to do with the way that the molecules split in the emerald crystal, so that when you cut the faces, it reveals the structure of the material. Then I've just lifted it and adapted it, so that's my wild card, I suppose, coming in.

**Anna Reid:** Bare as the house was, unemptied cupboards and boxes remained in the attic, and were, just as Lucy's body of work, full with stones, minerals and geological forms. There was a hum, a sort of vibrancy in the structure of the house picked up by Freya, our producer. In the artist's childhood bedroom, where prints of a work by Paul Klee once hung above the mantelpiece were the window paint that she blocked out with lapis lazuli, I asked Lucy about her use of this deep one blue in her works at the house.



**Lucy Skaer:** It's funny we're sitting in the living room that probably, where I first saw pictures of lapis lazuli because my dad had a lot of books about Egypt and about ancient Egypt. It's almost like, those materials have just migrated from that bookshelf into real life being set into these floorboards. of this room. I think that a lot of the choices of materials just came from my quite childish dreamings about what those materials would be like that I'd seen in pictures.

**Anna Reid:** We know that your father was very fond of Kettle's Yard and knew Jim Ede and there's a sense throughout here that the influence of British modernism and the community at Kettle's Yard or the open house since Kettle's Yard is quite materially formative of your practice. I was interested in thinking about how you work in collaboration, and how you have this ecology around the way you work. Do those things link?

**Lucy Skaer:** Yes, I think they do. I think that this idea of using an object or using the work by another artist is very much from that ethos of Kettle's Yard. I suppose the way that you can be influenced and enriched by things that someone has gathered together, I think that that in my work relates to an open door to the past or to other places or to other people's visions. I think that that has been really apparent in my collaborations. Because I remember with Rosalind, when we first started working together, I thought, "Oh, brilliant. Now I can imagine what her brain's like and just stick it onto mine as an extra room." [laughs]

I feel like in some ways the way that I've used, for example, Brancusi's work which I saw in Kettle's Yard, I've just used that as a form and repeated it in my own work. It's such a direct move but I see it as very different from appropriation. I'm not trying to appropriate that work. I want to use it for what formally it does. I think that that idea of interconnectedness between artists and the way that work formally is has come from an ecology such as Kettle's Yard.

**Anna Reid:** It's really interesting to talk about Brancusi's Bird in your work, and I'm thinking of your 2008 installation at the Chisenhale Gallery, *The Siege* where you had Brancusi's ethereal dematerialized birds that were recast and sitting on the gallery floor as a cast in coal, and they're part of a siege setup where they are being inundated with waves drawn of Hokusai and da Vinci. There's this very embodied situation of material forces. A lot of your works have that character to them. I'm just thinking about how this house at this time is really subject to those external forces and how that's brought this work about, this use of the house.

**Lucy Skaer:** In *The Siege*, the installation that I made in the Chisenhale, I was interested in the idea of a siege because it pits time against resources. I thought about how if you are under siege somewhere, all of the things become rife for being repurposed. A chair could become fuel or it could become a barricade. There would be this possibility of radically changing the use of things and the meaning of things. I

used Brancusi's *Bird in Space* because it seems like it's both a material object and something immaterial.

I remember this great quote about Brancusi's sculpture *The Newborn*, that I've also used in another installation. I think it's Briony Fer refers to it as being part baby and part ball bearing that it sits this middle line between being a representation and just being a material object. I think that in this house, my cannibalism of the house relates a lot to that idea of something being both hugely empathetic and just material.

**Anna Reid:** I've heard you talk about significant form as a modernist concept of material and objects that have been drained of the contextualizing information and that they become almost timeless, does that relate to your view of this house?

**Lucy Skaer:** I think that in this house as it's evolved, through my dad's illness, his mind has become unstuck from the things in this house. Things that are really resonant to me, to him no longer have any memories attached. I think that there's some blankness that's revealed that to me is exciting but it's quite brutal. I think that there is a modernist idea of things as material only that come back up through this loss of memory or loss of other meaning. I felt like the meanings that were in the house had become interrupted and that the house was therefore available in a different way to being reused or changed in a similar way, we were speaking about *The Siege*, to being repurposed.

**Anna Reid:** Raw material or salvaged material.

**Lucy Skaer:** Just available in a different way but also in quite a destructive way. The first work that I made in the house was from my dad's coin collection. I made the whole coin collection into one sculptural lozenge form by pouring molten tin into it, so all of the coins are in there. It's still the coin collection but you can't go through them anymore, they're just fused into one object. The transformations removed them but completed them and set them as a permanent thing.

**Anna Reid:** I'm interested in the relationship of your sculptural practice to the question of death. I know that you talked previously about the significance of Holbein's *The Body of the Dead Christ* to practice. Also, I know that you went to meet Leonora Carrington and spoke to her about how she felt about the question of death. Really, just in the year or so before she died in Mexico. How does death figure in this project?

**Lucy Skaer:** That is a good question. I think that there is something about the cadaver which in that Holbein's *Dead Christ* is so startling. Holbein apparently painted it from a body that was pulled out of the Rhine, and it's a really alarming picture because Christ looks so utterly dead in it, but you also feel like he's about to

move. When you're standing in front of that painting, it feels like you're watching a film because there's this possibility of transcendence at any moment. It's actually very similar to Paul Nash, *Flight of the Magnolia*, you feel this thing constantly becoming.

Sculpture, because it plays out in our dimension in three dimensions and in our time, it does have a relation to death. In this project and in this house, because it's so biographical, it felt like a real transgression to start pulling up floorboards and cutting holes out of the fabric of the house in a way that is an absolute admission of materiality, and I think that has to do with mortality, but it also has to do with transformation.

In some ways, it's just a very strange thing to materially still be able to be in the house because not many people get to return to the place that they grew up. I suppose because I've had the continued relationship with this house throughout my life, I feel very rooted here, but in another way, I feel like I've been able to deal with some of that by destroying parts of the house. That sounds terrible, but it's like a surgery almost.

**Anna Reid:** When I look at a lot of your works whether it be an abandoned projector, cinema, or an abandoned quarry, there's this incredible aspect of your work that is really about a reanimation or animation of objects and a life of an animate object. It does make me think of Paul Nash's objects in the *Landscape*. Can you talk about the possibility in play in this work?

**Lucy Skaer:** Yes. I'm thinking of Paul Nash's *Monster Field* now, which maybe you're referring to, which is these amazing photographs that he took of trees that have fallen down that he just describes as being monsters. He describes walking out into this field and it being full of monsters, not full of dead trees. I think that that is very much my dad's vision. Growing up in this house, like all of these collections of fossils, of corals, of shells, of butterflies, of cigarette cards, of coins, they all also had this animated life of being something also in the imagination. I think that children just have that, but I think that maybe artists continue to have that, or some people continue to have that.

I think that through my dad's dementia, there was also a huge amount of play, repurposing, animation and hallucination, and all of those things that I find quite inspiring and lively. In my project, in the house, there is this feeling of play and also of transgression and consumption and preservation, strange border line part of the consumption of preservation.

**Anna Reid:** Thank you, Lucy, for having us here at your family home.

**Lucy Skaer:** You're welcome. It's been lovely to talk to you.

**Anna Reid:** Thank you to Lucy Skaer for this episode of *British Art Talks*. Lucy's solo show *Forest on Fire* is now open at the Bloomberg, London Mithraeum. You can find a set of images related to this episode and further information on the [Paul Mellon's Centre website](#).

Join us in November for our next episode of *British Art Talks*, *The Gothic* with Elizabeth Price.

A transcript of an interview between John Goto and Jim Ede is part of The Atomic Yard, a residency at Kettle's Yard, 1988 to '89.

*The Face of Dorset* in Paul Nash, *Dorset Shell Guide*, London Architectural press 1936.

*Leaving The House* is produced by Freya Hellier, and it is a Loftus Media production.

**[00:43:28] [END OF AUDIO]**