

# ***Sculpting Lives podcast transcript***

## **Series 1, Episode 4: Phyllida Barlow**

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[music]

**Phyllida Barlow:** "Because you're a woman, I'm not that interested, because by the time you're 30, you'll be having babies and making jam."

**Edith Devaney:** She wants to disrupt her own history. She wants to make it difficult for herself. She doesn't want things to come easily, she wants to grapple with them.

**Phyllida Barlow:** I desperately wanted to be a sculptor and to make sculpture.

**Sarah Victoria Turner:** Hello, and welcome to *Sculpting Lives*, a podcast with me, Sarah Turner.

**Jo Baring:** And me, Jo Baring.

**Sarah Victoria Turner:** In this episode, we are interviewing the artist Phyllida Barlow and curators who have worked with her. Phyllida has become one of the best known sculptors in the UK, working at the moment with some really major shows in Britain and around the world. That's happened quite recently. So, why are we interviewing Phyllida?

**Jo Baring:** What's really interesting about Phyllida is that until about 10 years ago, people used to call her 'the best sculptor that no one ever heard of'. She was primarily known for her brilliant teaching career. Then suddenly, over the last 10 years, she's had this huge visibility. She represented Britain at the Venice Biennale, she's had an installation at Tate Britain, and she has been taken on by a major international mega gallery. We're really interested in why that happened, aren't we?

**Sarah Victoria Turner:** Yes, and fairly later on in her career. It's something that she talks about herself.

**Jo Baring:** Exactly. We went to her studio and she just moved studios, and I think it's a testament to the busyness of her career, how loud the studio was, so excuse us for the buzz, there's a lot of background noise, isn't there?

**Sarah Victoria Turner:** Yes. We had to nestle in a corner, away from welding and chains. The great thing is you hear the sounds of the studio-

**Jo Baring:** The work in the studio.

**Sarah Victoria Turner:** -yes, what's going on, but it creates- let's call it 'ambient noise'.

**Jo Baring:** We started off asking her about how she started at art school. She studied at Chelsea in the early 1960s and then moved to the Slade. Sarah, British sculpture at that time, well, it was dominated by some really significant white male sculptors, wasn't it?

**Sarah Victoria Turner:** Yes, and they controlled the scene, they probably got all the shows and the reviews and were the people who were teaching. People like Reg Butler. Phyllida talks about her interactions and how she had to push back against some of the assumptions that they made about her training to be a sculptor.

**Jo Baring:** That's right. We start off in her studio early one morning. We are delighted to be here in your studio, which is so exciting, and obviously, there's going to be there's people making, so if there's noises, that's what it's going to be, isn't it?

**Phyllida Barlow:** Yes, exactly.

**Jo Baring:** What we've found is that, actually, quite a lot of the artists that we're looking into did not start off studying sculpture, so they came to it in a different manner. You didn't start off studying sculpture, did you?

**Phyllida Barlow:** I started in painting, and obviously, from a young age, I was doing lots of painting and drawing. When I went to Chelsea Art School, one of the teachers said, "I think you use paint clay and I think you should come to the sculpture classes."

**Sarah Victoria Turner:** Who was that?

**Phyllida Barlow:** That was Robert Clatworthy. In fact the name 'British sculptor' I think can fill people with horror, and it's quite interesting to know why that is. At that time, I think right at the very beginning of going to art school in 1960, I was very infatuated by the postwar generations of European art and British art. I understood it or empathised with it enormously, all its vulnerable qualities and its slightly dark renderings of humanity I found very compelling. I think it took a couple of years for me to suddenly turn quite aggressively against it all and wanting something very different.

There was another teacher called George Fullard, who is not particularly well known, who was a great inspiration to look further afield, to look outside that quite particular formal language that became associated with more Kenneth Armitage, across Lynn Chadwick and Ralph Brown, Bernard Meadows. I mean, they were quite tribe. Somewhere in there is Elisabeth Frink, but I think in quite a distinctive form, and I think Hepworth is as well.

**Sarah Victoria Turner:** Did you meet with some resistance or raised eyebrows that you as a young woman student wanted to intervene in this kind of sculptural world?

**Phyllida Barlow:** I think it's slightly peculiar, because when I think of Chelsea's sculpture department at that time, which had just been two small rooms not bigger than that and not a lot of sculpture courses in general, you only ever have 6, 8, 10 students, whereas painting would have 20 or 30, so there was always this sense that you were in a small kind of cultural world anyway. One of the teachers at the Slade said, "You can't do decoration on sculpture, it's no longer is sculpture if you do that." I said that I would be looking at these Indian carvings. I can't remember the rest of the conversation, but it was something like, "Yes, but that's what they do in India."

**Sarah Victoria Turner:** "You were at the Slade!"

**Phyllida Barlow:** Yes.

[laughter]

Those sorts of situations where you're defending something. It's probably very good for anyone to be in that situation, to have some fight. It's quite interesting to have those challenges thrown down, but it's also, you know you've got to master this tremendous single-mindedness.

**Jo Baring:** It's so fascinating to hear a internationally famous, significant artist talk about the fact that her gender really did impact the way that her tutors at art schools saw her, treated her, and how they envisioned her career going on, isn't it?

**Sarah Victoria Turner:** Yes, but what's really interesting is that she is not bitter about that, and perhaps, that's with hindsight, now she is successful. She uses that productively, that feeling of like, "Sod you, I'm going to get on with my career, whatever you think"

**Jo Baring:** "I'm going to show you."

**Sarah Victoria Turner:** She pushes against it and goes her own way.

**Jo Baring:** It's actually really brilliant to think that she is much more well known than Reg Butler now, isn't it?

**Sarah Victoria Turner:** Absolutely. Reg who?

**Jo Baring:** Yes, exactly. It's something that she's obviously talked about in a different context. There's a project called Artists' Lives, isn't there, Sarah, where she's interviewed for?

**Sarah Victoria Turner:** Yes. It's an oral history project run by the British Library, and Artists' Lives do very in-depth recordings with artists. They take them back to as far as they can possibly remember in their childhood and question their motivations behind becoming an artist, what shaped their career. The Artists' Lives project have very kindly let us use their recordings of Phyllida talking about her art school years. She begins this next interview by talking specifically about her encounters with the sculptor Reg Butler at the Slade.

**Phyllida Barlow:** I did end up going to the Slade and, of course, he was still there. On the first day, when I met him, the first time I met him, he said, "Right: three things. One is, you don't come with any credit." I thought, I didn't understand what that meant at all. I didn't know what he was saying because he'd known my mother, that didn't mean-- Two is, and this is absolutely true, he said, "because you're a woman, I'm not that interested, because by the time you're 30 you'll be having babies and making jam. Three, apart from Barbara Hepworth, name any other British female, or whatever wording, name a woman sculptor," and then quickly followed by, "Let me tell you, there are none." Those were the three things he said and that was it.

I think those things can act as the most extraordinary triggers for your future, because I remember when I did eventually go into teaching, I thought the people I'm most interested in, in teaching, are the ones who are struggling to get a foothold on this whole system, because if you've made that kind of decision to go to art school, and maybe you come from a background that isn't 100% supportive, all sorts of things, the last thing you need is a load of self-opinionated so-called tutors as artists telling you this, that and the other. I quickly wanted my teaching to just be of a totally different kind.

Actually, I remember meeting George Fullard after my first year at the Slade and he said, "What's it been like?" and I said, "Absolutely--" excuse me, I said, "fucking awful. It's such a dark place" I said. He said, "What do you mean?" I said, "Well, there's no light in the sculpture." He said, "Do you mean intellectually, artistically, or literally?" I stopped and I remember thinking and I said "All three." Then I told him the story about Reg Butler, and I remember George saying, "What he doesn't realise is that women will actually be the major artistic drive in a few years."

He says, "He doesn't understand about the notion of a female creativity and the number of men who also have to use the female side of themselves to make art." I

think he was a genuinely inspirational character. There was something about that whole stance of Reg Butler that I found deeply disturbing and brutal.

At the end of my time at the Slade, Kenneth Armitage was the person who came and looked at the work of the students, because it was the Slade diploma then, it wasn't a BA degree or any of that stuff. He didn't believe the work. I mean, this again just shows the sort of times. This was 1966. He didn't believe that the sculpture I have made was made by a woman. The joke was that William Coldstream had to point me out. I find it incredibly voyeuristic because the students were asked to stick around whilst this event was going on. I didn't know they were doing this. This was reported to me afterwards, and to show the photograph of me that they had on the records, to show that this was done by a female student. I mean, what's all that about? Why would it be of any interest one way or the other?

I think those kind of experiences weren't exactly about becoming a rabid feminist, they were more my hatred of things that make judgments before anything's happened and are a bit like my father giving me an absolute hatred of authority.

[music]

**Jo Baring:** After art school, she leaves Slade in the mid-'60s and she's included in some exhibition. There's an exhibition in 1965 called The Young Contemporaries Group Exhibition, which she's got a sculpture in. Then that's really all so when she starts teaching. In the late '60's, she takes up a teaching position in sculpture at Chelsea College of Art. She's very much in sculpture. She's making sculpture, she's teaching sculpture, but one of the things that we've thought about within this podcast is definitions of sculpture, isn't it, Sarah?

**Sarah Victoria Turner:** Yes, and Phyllida, from the very beginning is testing what-

**Jo Baring:** What that means.

**Sarah Victoria Turner:** Yes, what is sculpture? What is sculpture materials? She's noted for using some kind of quite low grade, low-tech materials as well using fabric, pulling things out of the every day and pulling them into her practice.

**Jo Baring:** Well, those kinds of non-traditional materials. I suppose, when people think about sculpture, they're thinking about the bronze, the marble, that sort of thing. With Phyllida, it's not at all, is it? It's much more ephemeral in a way.

**Sarah Victoria Turner:** Yes, and she's disrupting those hierarchies from the very beginning.

**Jo Baring:** We asked her about those fluid definitions of sculpture and also a bit more about her practice, didn't we?

**Sarah Victoria Turner:** Yes, and whether she sees herself as a sculptor.

**Sarah Victoria Turner:** Did you have a sense of or was there a moment when you gained a sense of you were a sculptor and this is what you were going to do as a career? Was there a moment where like a light bulb went on to move you?

**Phyllida Barlow:** The minute I went into the Sculpture Department of Chelsea I wanted to make sculpture and be a sculptor. This release from working with an image, an image as a two-dimensional image, it was like a complete liberation. This sense of being of the whole form in front of me, especially clay and plaster. It was just a sort of freedom away from something into something quite unknown.

**Jo Baring:** You talk about the unknown and freedom, how did that manifest itself in the materials that you were using?

**Phyllida Barlow:** They were quite straightforward, clay mainly and then casting. Clay to plaster, that's what I became fascinated with, was the casting process, the sort of magic of an object disappearing and then reappearing in this other form. It just seemed to me incredible that we were making things that then could be quite weighty, could be heavy, but they would disappear.

I think my fascination with sculpture as a language that stands in competition with the rest of the world around is ongoing as a kind of restraint. Maybe that's not a good thing or maybe it's a good thing, I don't know. Maybe I'm still finding out. I don't think I particularly seek freedom, if you know what I mean, in inverted commas, but more there was a drive there to be of the world and of now, but also in contrast or maybe even in competition to that. Not that I want to compete with nature, because I don't think-- Nature will always win.

**Jo Baring:** Do you feel that there is a definition of what sculpture is?

**Phyllida Barlow:** Well, I certainly know that it's not just about the object, it's about sensations, being in relationship to, whether that's weather, or temperature, or smells.

**Sarah Victoria Turner:** Are you thinking about how others experience your work as you make it, as you-

**Phyllida Barlow:** Not as I make it, but the minute it becomes-- If it does go for an exhibition or whatever then I do.

**Sarah Victoria Turner:** As it leaves your studio?

**Phyllida Barlow:** Yes, but whilst it's in this stage, it's very much a relationship between me and this. Not really about the viewer or viewer's sense of the dramatic shift of the work as it goes into that space.

**Sarah Victoria Turner:** Exhibitions are a major factor in shaping an artist's career and really catapulting someone into public visibility, getting them reviews and getting them talked about. In the last 10 years, we can really see Phyllida Barlow's exhibition history intensifying.

**Jo Baring:** It was really interesting to see. I think the first one that really propels her reputation forward is the 2012 show that she did at the Henry Moore Institute in Leeds. Two years later, 2014, she's doing an installation at Tate Britain, and it's really 2017 where she's chosen by Britain to represent the country at the Venice Biennale which really puts her on this international stage, doesn't it?

**Sarah Victoria Turner:** Yes, and she kind of took over the Pavilion. It's a historic building designed at the end of the 19th century by Edwin Lutyens. It's a very neoclassical pavilion. She puts her sculpture in there and she said she wanted to occupy the guts of the building. All her forms, all her sculptural work kind of spills rooms.

**Jo Baring:** Spilling out.

**Sarah Victoria Turner:** Yes. She really uses exhibitions to play with space, to disrupt institutional space, and does a kind of takeover of them as well.

**Jo Baring:** That's right. Within *Folly*, she uses a lot of columns by stripping back the grandeur. When we think about column, we think of all those classical proportions. That's taken away. She's using cheap industrial materials. She's not intimidated by the space at all, is she?

**Sarah Victoria Turner:** Not at all.

**Jo Baring:** It's an overwhelming encounter when you go in.

**Sarah Victoria Turner:** Most recently, she had a show at the Royal Academy. She is an RA, and she used the new spaces, the new galleries at the top of the building, which only opened in 2018. We went there, didn't we, Jo, together?

**Jo Baring:** We did. Obviously, with the podcast, it's quite hard for us to give you an idea of that exhibition space, but we've tried to. You'll hear us whispering walking around the Royal Academy.

**Sarah Victoria Turner:** People giving us funny looks as we huddled under a sculpture having a chat.

**Jo Baring:** But just trying to give a sense of what the exhibition was.

We're in the Royal Academy in the final week of Phyllida's exhibition Cul-de-Sac, which is made up of three separate rooms of her work. The title Cul-de-Sac comes from the fact that it literally is a dead end. You walk through the three rooms and instead of coming out at different door as you usually would an exhibition, the viewer is forced to turn back on yourself. As you turn back and look at the three rooms from a completely different angle, it's a whole new sensation, isn't it? It's a completely different experience looking at the work.

**Sarah Victoria Turner:** You see the works in relationship to one another, don't you, in a new way. When you come in, you can only see parts of the work, and then it's this process of standing back and just having a new encounter with the works, if you look at them in this kind of series.

**Jo Baring:** Exactly. Again, with Phyllida, the space and the exhibition area is crucial to the work. She talks about the space being a protagonist, doesn't she? They're working in tandem with the space. You really see this with the galleries. There's two different doorways and the works are deliberately placed, I think, so that we can see right through to the final room and vice-versa. When you're at the end of the, so-called, Cul-de-Sac, when you look back, you can see all the other installations and it's a completely different viewpoint.

**Sarah Victoria Turner:** Absolutely. It's interesting to think about these works occupying this space in the Royal Academy as well in relationship to the Academy's history as a place of making. Actually, these galleries have suddenly become big studios with their top lighting. They're not the hallowed hall grand space, but they've become more work-a-day. That might be something to do with the materials that Barlow uses more every day. We've got plaster, we've got fabric, concrete, cement.

**Jo Baring:** Normally, in the Royal Academy, you will see the experience of the finished bronze presented on a plinth, whereas here, the making, the process is actually a part of the finished work.

**Sarah Victoria Turner:** Yes, the feel to it.

**Jo Baring:** The actual feel. There's no artifice. I'm looking up now. We can see pencil notes with numbers and-

**Sarah Victoria Turner:** Yes, splashes of paint.

**Jo Baring:** -measurements, paint everywhere. These are re-used. We've deliberately shown how things are formed together. There's dried plaster. We can see all that. That's not hidden. We can see the brushstrokes, and that's a crucial part of it. The process is key, I think, in the work.

**Sarah Victoria Turner:** Should we just take a walk around? Because we're walking under and through them. Your body has a different relationship with you squeezing between two-

**Jo Baring:** Yes, I just doubled-down down now under something. Normally, that's a completely different gallery experience, because normally there, you're not allowed to get up-close. Things are roped off and you look at them from one particular viewpoint. Obviously, the sculpture you walk around it, but here, we're encouraged to look over and under.

**Sarah Victoria Turner:** Yes, and you're right about not having a plinth. I think that puts things into a completely different relationship. Actually, in this second room of the exhibition, there are things on the wall as well. The sculpture coming out of the wall and floating.

**Jo Baring:** Which is a really kind of visceral sensory experience, isn't it, as you're walking around. You are encouraged to-- You can't walk through the doors in one long way. You have to walk around the sculpture to get to the next room. You're forced to walk around it and view it in a different way.

We left that exhibition and whilst we were still at the Royal Academy, we tracked down the curator there who was responsible for working with Phyllida and putting on that show, didn't we, Sarah?

**Sarah Victoria Turner:** Yes, that's Edith Devaney, and she is the contemporary curator at the Royal Academy. She talked us through the process from the conceptualisation of the exhibition to its realisation.

**Edith Devaney:** She was fascinated by this space, the fact that you've got very high ceilings, the fact that she felt that the wall as you come in the door was very close to you. That was my first experience with Phyllida saying, "Actually, it's really narrow," and I'm thinking, "Oh no! We've got this lovely space and an artist just thinks that it's really narrow." It was fascinating to work with her on the gestation period. She works in a very particular way, which I'm sure she's described to you. It is extraordinary, actually, because she put such pressure on herself. She leaves everything to-- She's thinking about it for a long time, but the actual fabrication of the pieces happens quite late in the process.

The pressure she puts on herself is part of the performance of the piece. I think that becomes a really important element. She's probably spoken to you about the three elements that come together for her. She talks about them as being protagonists: It's the space, the work, and then the public coming in. The people, the visitors are the third. In the end, the most important element in understanding and bringing this work to life.

She was inspired by the space, had ideas about the work. We had so many interesting conversations about it because I was obviously familiar with her work. I had seen her work at the Venice Biennale, which I thought was an extraordinary installation, but very dense. She was really almost competing with the architecture there and filling it. There were blazes of color. Then I saw her commercial exhibition at Hauser & Wirth in New York in November before our show. I really wanted this to be very different and I wanted her to have that sense of freedom.

She came up with the title really early on, Cul-de-Sac. She likes working in that way because it's obviously that's where her mind's going. Not only was she thinking about the idea of having to walk back on yourself and retrace your steps and how that would make you engage with the work, but she was also thinking of David Lynch-ian notions of suburbia with the cul-de-sacs and the manicured lawns and something terrible going on behind that beautiful front door. That sort of thing was coming into play as well, which is more cinemagraphic.

I was really interested in engaging with how she sees herself as a sculptor and how she understands people will relate to it. She said something that I thought-- I don't think I'd ever hear a male sculptor saying that--This was an early conversation. She said, "I appreciate that people can walk past a piece of sculpture and maybe not take it in and not really see it." She said, "That doesn't matter that they're engagements of a particular type and it's very fleeting." She said, "I still have a sense that they have a notion of it." That's a important thing to how it makes you feel.

I think that goes back to the whole idea of her thinking about working against the modernism that had come into play in the 1950s and 1960s. She felt that there was this unspoken but undeniable moralistic messaging in all of those very masculine ways of sculpting, whether that was one of the reasons that she turned towards the materials that she did. Of course, the thing about her materials is they're so anti-monumental that they don't last. She knows that, they're not permanent. Again, that's such an unusual thing because everyone now is thinking 'legacy', it's the top line, isn't it? She's just not thinking in that way at all. I find that really interesting.

Again, it goes back to that notion that she said, "Well, what's interesting is not the memory of the work in people's heads, it's the memory of how they felt when they encountered it." It's a subtle difference, but it's a really important one. It has that absolute generosity of thinking and of spirit. When you go back to that notion of how she sees the public and a visitor as one of the three protagonists, you can see exactly what she means. It's their circumnavigation of the work, their emotional landscape that they're bringing with them and it is influencing their engagement with the work that actually is a fundamental part of their appreciating that piece of art.

I always struggle about this notion of her being female, and pushing that too much, and being a mother, because that's spoken about. Her teaching career, the fact that

she's got five children, [crosstalk] I think we have to be really careful because I think she's much more important than her biography. Of course, it feeds into it. She was working against that very male modernism that I described a moment ago, but she was looking elsewhere. She was looking towards Arte Povera, she was looking towards what was going on in America. That wasn't just by female artists. She was looking at different expressions. It was different ways of thinking, and different materials, and that element of softness, and color that comes into her work so often.

Going back to that thing about how you encounter the pieces and the fact that your eyes pulled up, your eyes pulled across, you're circumnavigating and you're looking at them in different angles. Now, Phyllida says herself her sculpture is quite hard work. I know what she means because a painting has got a one point perspective, and therefore, it's got a vantage point. So, we all know how we have to stand if we're looking at a painting or a photograph on the wall, but sculpture is very, very different, and how we engage with it, in what level, whether you're on your hands and knees going-- because you see it differently, or you're looking up at it, or you're walking around, or you're high up and you're looking down on it, all of those things make us feel very differently to it and changes our sense of relationship to it.

Just to go back a little bit just to when I first met her. I was doing something with Alison Wilding, got to know her and her work and I admire her work tremendously. She started talking about Phyllida as the greatest sculptor that she's talked to that no one's ever really heard of. Of course, that's before Hauser & Wirth. It's when she was still at the Slade. I thought, "I have heard of her," but you didn't see her work much. I mean, really wasn't-- She didn't have a commercial gallery, just didn't see it.

I checked it out and with Alison's help, managed to commission her to do something in the courtyard. She did something before she was a member. She did something as part of the Summer Exhibition. When she turned down the transit van with all of these bits of painted sticks in the back and then set to work and painted this extraordinary piece in the van. It was absolutely brilliant. Then, all of it happened for her. Maybe those years of just being able to do what she wanted have been very important for her.

[background noise]

**Sarah Victoria Turner:** We went back to Phyllida's studio and asked her to reflect a bit more on the successes she's had recently. It's quite a personal conversation I think, isn't it, to have with someone saying what's happened, what are the factors involved, is it about money, is it about gallery representation. The great thing about Phyllida is, she's really candid and so articulate. She was very open with us in her responses.

**Jo Baring:** Exactly, but also we're kind of assuming that different definitions of success. Just because she's more visible, and she's having bigger exhibitions, she's been taken on by Hauser & Wirth, it doesn't negate the rest of her career, does it?

**Sarah Victoria Turner:** Not at all.

**Jo Baring:** When you're asking those questions, you have to be slightly aware of that, but as you say, she's very open, she's very candid about the impact that has had on her work, and also enabling her to realise those more ambitious projects, I think, too.

**Sarah Victoria Turner:** Yes. Having a major gallery representation from Hauser & Wirth, she's talked about how that has enabled some of those projects to happen in a way that if you were self-funding, you were trying to make them happen yourself.

**Jo Baring:** It's just not possible, is it?

**Sarah Victoria Turner:** Yes, and sculpture, as we've said before, is so expensive, and the practicalities of just shipping works and organising things, it does come with its own logistical nightmares.

**Jo Baring:** Even if you're using really inexpensive materials, it's still the fabrication, as you say, you still have to ship them, you've got to have a huge studio.

**Sarah Victoria Turner:** Studio assistants to pay.

**Jo Baring:** There are assistants. It's kind of a small-

**Sarah Victoria Turner:** Well, it's a business.

**Jo Baring:** -business, isn't it?

**Sarah Victoria Turner:** It is, and that is really significant in developing a career.

**Jo Baring:** Yes. Phyllida, was great. She didn't mind us getting pretty up close and personal with her, did she? Here she is.

**Sarah Victoria Turner:** I think she'd just tell us to pass that or she didn't want to answer a question.

**Jo Baring:** Exactly. Well, here she is in her studio.

**Phyllida Barlow:** It just seems fantastic that I can fulfill certain ambitions, but although I was aiming for them before all this happened, they were going about in a very different way, and they could never quite achieve what I have been able to-- not achieve, but to engage with for the last, say, 10 years. I think that has given me a kind of new way of being in the world I want to be in for making the work.

People always say to me, "Have you changed since you've had a gallery?" I say, "Yes, of course, I've changed, but it's not the gallery. The gallery hasn't made me change, it's what the gallery has been able to support. I don't want to be making the same work that I made 10 years ago. I'm glad it's evolved, but whether all the ways in which it has evolved are what I wanted to continue to be always a constant, discussion I have with myself.

**Jo Baring:** It's also interesting that we ask so much of our artists now. For example, we've pulled you from your studio to be interviewed for this podcast. I'm sure you're writing essays on Rodin, you're here, you're being interviewed for various films. Do you resent that?

**Phyllida Barlow:** No. I think it's very important to-- as much as one is able to-- to engage with this broad an audience as possible, and not be afraid of that. I don't know what the best audience is. I think a lot of people are very critical of the use of size in the work. I'm very aware of what people find problematic with the work that is ugly all these things that come up, and that how I stand in relationship to that is very important. How that gets communicated verbally is another layer where maybe one can offer something that's understandable to an audience, an entire audience. I certainly don't want to be a remote person.

**Sarah Victoria Turner:** It does seem that sculpture has a particular function in a way. That it can find an audience by its presence in the world. Jim and I went to the Yorkshire Sculpture Park and we were looking at some of your work that's cited there in the park, and you're seeing people interact with those works. It's not the art world. They're not an art world audience. They're going for a nice walk because they want something solace or peace. Then just seeing how people are, actually, having very genuine and quite profound interactions with the sculpture, and that's quite a new thing, I think.

**Phyllida Barlow:** I think it's extraordinary. At Venice I had a huge confrontation with what I'd done. It made me realise that this passive and active looking and at the British pavillion you have to go to it, you have to walk around, there has to be that interaction, and that one which is an active interactive, not a passive one.

**Jo Baring:** It's such an unfolding experience and, I guess, the same research at the Royal Academy, that scenes start to unfold as you move through the space.

**Phyllida Barlow:** I don't use particularly expensive materials, but it's still phenomenally expensive. If I want to pursue my interest in these qualities of height and space, then I need this sort of space to do that in too ,but I could easily say, "Right, stop it now because these things are environmentally not good." Everything is to me almost on a knife-edge of testing one's own integrity. If I'm going to start worrying about the

environment the way that I think I must, then this has to go. I think that's where we're all at.

**Sarah Victoria Turner:** Yes, it's a dynamic of the whole art world, isn't it?

**Phyllida Barlow:** Yes.

**Sarah Victoria Turner:** Exhibition making, touring, traveling, we're all in this kind of bind in art world. How do we follow those ambitions and those which are, to my mind noble, ones that connect to the rest of the world, so do as little damage as we can.

**Jo Baring:** You talk about the use of not--, well, relatively inexpensive materials. Did that engagement with those materials start off as a practical concern, practical reasons?

**Phyllida Barlow:** Yes, I think practical, but also, I love those materials, clay. I think everything with me goes back to clay even though I actually don't use it very much. I found the armature clay, and the armature really quite a fascinating conversation and combination of skeleton and flesh, if you like, and then gradually evolving those and trying to make work early on that didn't have armature so that they were completely solid stuff, and the stuff would always be things that I would get my hands on very cheaply, not necessarily from skips, which is what everybody says. I've never got anything from a skip.

**Jo Baring:** That's an urban myth. That's a Phyllida Barlow urban myth, is it, the skip?

**Sarah Victoria Turner:** Well, not a skip surfer.

**Phyllida Barlow:** We've just moved studio, actually, which is why it's all a bit better at the moment.

**Sarah Victoria Turner:** Was that for space reasons?

**Phyllida Barlow:** The lease came to the end and it was eye-wateringly expensive, really horrendously so, which is, I think, what London has become.

**Jo Baring:** Have you always had your own studio?

**Phyllida Barlow:** For years, I had it, yes, but right next door to where I lived. My husband has a studio at the garden and I have one down the side of our house.

**Jo Baring:** How did that work when your children were little?

**Phyllida Barlow:** I just carried on as best as I could, and when the fourth and fifth came along, who were twins, it was then quite difficult, so I'm going to the studio very late at night. That's when I became obsessed by darkness as a sort of ingredient of

experience that I would turn off the lights at the studio and make works in the dark. It's always become a source of fascination for me, an idea. A sculpture in the dark. That sensing of something but not being able to see it necessarily.

**Jo Baring:** That's interesting, isn't it? The practical experience of having children, so then, definitely, you have to go to a studio late at night, then fed into something in to the work for you?

**Phyllida Barlow:** It did very much, yes. Not an easy time.

**Sarah Victoria Turner:** It was a huge pleasure to spend so much time with Phyllida Barlow talking about the arc of her career. What was really clear to us from talking to others is what an inspirational figure she is. So many artists, curators and others look up to her and are really inspired by the work that she's doing.

**Jo Baring:** That's right. I suppose, within her teaching career, she had such an influence on successive generations of artists. She is a loadstar, isn't she? Not just as a woman artist, as a sculptor, but really as an artist of international significance.

**Sarah Victoria Turner:** Definitely, and in her teaching career, she became Professor of sculpture at the Slade. Became spokesperson for sculpture and sculptural training in the UK. I think also what people really admire about her is as an artist in her 70s, she is continuously experimenting with form, questioning the boundaries, and asking what is the role of sculpture in the world today.

Thank you to everyone who has made this episode happen, particularly the sculptor Phyllida Barlow, Edith Devaney, and all the other people who have supported us, especially the Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British art.

**Jo Baring:** The images and exhibitions that we talk about in this podcast are all available to view on our Instagram page, which is [@sculptinglives](#). Thank you and goodbye.

**Sarah Victoria Turner:** See you next time. Bye. This podcast was written and presented by Sarah Victoria Turner and Jo Baring, produced by **Clare Lynch, with research assistance from Isabelle Mooney.**

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