



***PORTRAIT  
OF  
YOUR  
SPACE***

# Portrait of Your Space

An interview between Natalie Bradbury (resident and writer) and Simon Woolham (artist) about the experience of creating a site-specific 'Portrait of Your Space' to be installed in the entrance hallway of Natalie Bradbury and Steve Hanson's home in Greater Manchester. Simon spent time in the house taking graphite rubbings of objects and textures found around the space. The interview explores some of the conversations that took place between Simon's initial visit to the home in July 2022, to scope out the location and identify a site for the work, the process of taking rubbings, and the creation and installation of the completed drawing, made of a selection of rubbings and textures found in the home, in March 2023.

**NB: I thought that post-war public art, and particularly art as experienced in the social spaces of the welfare state (libraries, schools, churches, housing, shopping centres, new towns etc), might be a good place to start this conversation as it's come across as a shared interest during the course of talking to you making this work. This feels especially relevant because you grew up in Wythenshawe, a very large estate which – although conceived and initiated before the war – contains some really significant post-war churches by eminent architects of the era as well as public art commissions for schools.**

**I've been familiar with your work for a while, but the first time I made the connection with a lineage of post-war public art was when Steve and I cycled along the Bridgewater Canal to a group show at AIR Gallery in Altrincham in October 2020 (one of the first exhibitions we went to post-lockdown, having been rather starved of art during that time!) and saw one of your wall drawings, 'Towards the Unknown', which documented a walk along the length of the Kennet and Avon Canal. It completely dominated the space and the exhibition.**

**I know you're interested in texture and this drawing really felt very rich in texture in spite of being two dimensional (graphite on paper). It was also really rich in pattern, feeling like a composite of small sections of detail. This meant that it both held a lot of interest close-up and invited lingering visual exploration, at the same time as having an immediate and powerful impact at a distance, like some of the best examples of post-war murals do: tactility and the creative and experimental use of relief and casting techniques in materials such as concrete was a really important part of the work of artists such as William Mitchell and others of his generation. I immediately thought about how much I would love to see it in a building like a school or library or in the foyer of the office building where I work (for a large funding body who shall remain unnamed, who display artworks from their collection around their offices) so that I could get to know it more intimately, and have its details reveal themselves to me over a longer period of time in the way that public art allows.**

**Can you say a bit more about how and why you became interested in the public art of that time?**

SW: As you said, Wythenshawe was both a pre- and post-war development. Despite its initial intentions as a garden city with a self-sufficient identity, it was severely affected by a particular moment in history, the 1930s deep economic shock and World War II. My grandad, whose family moved into Wythenshawe from the slum clearances of inner-city Manchester in Ardwick and Gorton in the 1930s, said that by the 1950s gangs were rife. It didn't have a library, swimming baths, central shopping centre or civic centre until the late 1960s, when temporary prefabs were finally cleared.

From the outside, the spatial experience of Wythenshawe is like a rabbit warren. Growing up, you adapted to gain experience and instinct of what spaces or avenues you avoided, and what roads or shortcuts were

sometimes okay. Wythenshawe and its buildings (abandoned or not), parks, tips, motorway bridges, yards, ginnels, carparks, friends' bedrooms, moats, wagging woods ('wagging it' is a term we used for bunking or truanting off school and there was a wood next to our school which we called 'Wagging Wood'), greens and semi-working lampposts on corners, were our playground. In the 1970s, abandoned school roofs and internal spaces were abundant due to asbestos clearances. We were up close and personal to textures of history. I clearly remember that concrete dominated a lot of these external and internal spaces.

I'm equally as excited by experiencing and looking at churches and carparks in Wythenshawe. Often post-war public artworks are embedded in these buildings, especially in a number of the school buildings and environments, as an extension of the materiality or fabric of the building. This interrelationship is an important influence on me.

Drawing is, for me, an excavation within and from a site: drawing as place-making. My practice is a playful yet deeply explorative process of building with and interpreting fragments of history. I'm interested in collecting textures, and the up-close spatial and textural processes of William Mitchell and other artists of his generation.

I also expand on the site of the work, which is another influence of the public works from the 1960s and 1970s. I have always been fluid and worked with and in gallery and non-gallery spaces in a locale. I extend this through walking (physically and psychologically) and song-building, working with musicians or community choirs from a locale too.

I have built drawings, for example, with a number of library spaces, including in Skipton, North Yorkshire and Cambourne in Cambridgeshire. I have built collective or collaborative drawings at my daughter's high school, Tytherington School in Macclesfield, at Wythenshawe Hall and at the Forum in Wythenshawe.

I see the spaces of the drawing as akin to a cubist-like process, an inter-relational approach. I define this as a self-initiated 'residency of the mind'. To me, drawing is a physical, spatial and psychological methodology: it interplays with and draws out history, generating dialogue between microscopic personal details and the broader social and political landscape. And 'getting lost', creating tangential portals, is a valuable process of engaging with space. To quote Walter Benjamin, to:

*lose one's way in a city, as one loses one's way in a forest, requires some schooling. Street names must speak to the urban wanderer like the snapping of dry twigs, and little streets in the heart of the city must reflect the times of day, for him, as clearly as a mountain valley.*

Another ever-present influence that runs through my practice is *For Space* (2005) by Doreen Massey, who grew up on the same road as me in Wythenshawe. My drawing/walking is a spatial practice that produces vistas of history, a theatre for defining space through and with spaces and things. It connects a past through to the present, emphasising how history and space is not a fixed quantity but is rather mediated through experiences with it.

Benjamin again asserts the importance of memory (or history) as a live, explorative process in the present:

*Memory is not an instrument for surveying the past but its theatre. It is the medium of past experience, just as the earth is the medium in which dead cities lie buried. He who seeks to approach his own buried past must conduct himself like a man digging.*

This is a good analogy for any practice-led research. Like Massey, the uniting legacy of William Mitchell and the public artists of the 1960s and '70s is their seeking of socially spatial and creative solutions. Rather than separating art and architecture, I would use the term 'artitecture' for their ideas and my own practice. This celebrates layered 3-dimensional and 2-dimensional spaces, both physical and pictorial, and space as lived/living.

**NB: Framing this work in a context of modernism and 20th century built environments, it's interesting that you pick up so strongly on the social and lived experiences of places, and navigate between macro and micro scales of interest. One of the key critiques of the modernist era of architecture and planning was that it was theoretical and remote from people's real, everyday lives. It projected and encouraged an ideal of how people could and**

**should live and use spaces, rather than taking into account established and long-standing street patterns, relationships or ways of living and socialising. In your depiction of Wythenshawe, you've described really evocatively the everyday reality of modernism as it played out everyday and close-up in the latter decades of the 20th century, which is an aspect of the modernist experience that is often overlooked in favour of grand plans, diagrams, models or photographs of iconic buildings: often what is lost from this picture is the human, or an awareness of how humans really live.**

**I'm also interested in the distinction between the private, individual experience of modernity and the communal, collective experience of modernism and the welfare state, so it's interesting how your work seeks to create dialogue between small personal details and the bigger picture. With this in mind, I wanted to ask you how and why you decided to embark on the project 'Portrait of Your Space': what made you want to turn your attention towards the small, intimate scale of the domestic home?**

SW: No matter what is thrown at us humans, whether social, political, spatial or architectural, we adapt and survive. In 1980s Wythenshawe, for example, unemployment was double the national unemployment rate, at over 30 per cent of the population (the national average at the time was around 17 per cent).

As an individual, I am currently in the UCU and striking, but this, of course, is not an individual cause. It is a collective cause, for the future of education nationally and internationally; we are all connected. With this in mind, I do not believe in the individual, only the collective. When I started 'Portrait of Your Space', although it would be on a small, intimate scale, engaging with individual homes, spaces within those homes and individuals within the home/domestic space, I would always read smaller details as part of the 'bigger picture'. They connect and map out to the wider social and political multiple conditions of space, histories, the world and the universe.

The domestic, everyday context is key. This links in a lot of ways to my PhD research, which expanded the notion of an artists' residency of the mind. I explored the idea that we can't avoid taking our past with us everywhere we go and that through this, domestic and public barriers disappear.

**NB: I'd like to pick up on your terminology, and the use of the word 'portrait'. Although your work and approach to place – which encompasses collecting the traces and layers of a particular space through drawing – has something in common with mapping, the term 'map' implies a formal, distanced, and measured approach to portraying topography and landscape. The word 'portrait' on the other hand suggests people and use – putting an emphasis on the human aspect of a place, as opposed to the architectural.**

**In conversations both Steve and I have had with you in the process of making the work, something that's really come out is that you wanted to get to know both Steve and I better, and that it would be a portrait of both of us to some extent, as much as it was a portrait of our space.**

SW: I question, and expand, what is ordinarily called a 'portrait' or 'portraiture'. In the context of art, a portrait is often human or animal. It usually relates to specific measurements, ie the height is larger than the width. If our spaces are an extension of humans, animals, bacteria or other living (or previously alive) matter, then a portrait can be any extension of this. The artist and researcher in me doesn't like creating definitions, as everything is always moving; nothing is stagnant. I'm sure the vast majority of creative thinkers would agree that this keeps them ticking and alive.

For 'Portrait of Your Space', I build a drawing in a private home from the exterior and interior architecture, environments, objects and furniture, developing an intimate portrait. It is a process that is about getting to know the person or people that live and experience that home through the multitude of conversations, architectural layers, historical layers and shards of time. It is spatial and patterned, piecing together fragments not to create a whole, but an exaggerated version of those fragments, which have conversations with other fragments. 'Portrait of Your Space', as a title, throws out the notion of individual ownership. It is very much a collective drawing and drawing-out of conversations and histories. 'Portrait of Your Space', through an entanglement of connections, is also a portrait of myself as much as it is a portrait of the current holders

of the home.

Like 'portrait', 'mapping' is another term that is used and manipulated by artists. I like formal measurements so that I can question and break them down. We are at a new beginning socially and through that new beginning we must learn from and see each other's perspectives and histories. If we don't do this soon, then society will carry on being segregated and we will go very much backwards into deeper rifting.

We wear our environments, and our environments wear us, therefore we must tread carefully. 'Portrait of Your Space' seeks to develop and 'draw-out' relationships and conversations through its holistic approaches and processes.

**NB: You call us the 'current holders of the home', which reminds me that we are just temporary residents in a building that has a much longer history. This goes back to the 1890s, in our case, when this area of densely packed Victorian terraced housing was built (estates such as Wythenshawe were, of course, later reacting against this type of housing by aiming to provide homes abundant in space, light and greenery away from the inner-city).**

**I'd like to ask you about the process of creating rubbings in our space, and your approach to choosing objects and imagery, both as a source for taking rubbings and for building a drawing when you are back in your studio. When I've seen your drawings in the past, it felt like you were almost creating a typology of a place (ie, bringing out the features which were specific and recognisable to what you found there, both natural and man-made). After you spent time in our space, I was very struck that many of the objects you chose to use for rubbings felt quite generic, ordinary and non-specific – for example a bath mat, a spatula, a silicon washing up sponge – and could have been found in any one of the hundreds of terraced houses surrounding us (or indeed in any home). As individual components of the drawing, the source objects are not necessarily remarkable or recognisable, yet they are nonetheless evocative and familiar to a shared domestic experience. At the same time, you have included some unique reference points (a rubbing of our front door number, for example, similarly to how you included fragments of text such as signage in previous drawings).**

**It seems to me that you combine the specific heritage of place with the banality of everyday life. This brings to mind some of my other favourite post-war public artworks, concrete reliefs by Henry Collins & Joyce Pallot which were commissioned for settings such as BHS and Sainsbury's stores around the country in the 1970s. Unlike many other post-war public artists, whose designs were often abstract, their work drew closely from the history, architecture, industry, culture and landscape of the towns and cities in which it was situated. I think another reason their work was so successful was that it reflected the experience of contemporary life back at people as they passed by on the way to the shops; often their murals incorporated motifs such as a basket of shopping containing an assortment of household goods.**

SW: One way or another, I have the mantra of 'reflecting the experiences of contemporary life' repeating in my mind. This is extremely important, like holding up a huge mirror and heightening layers of experiences and histories, akin to a process of collectively reflection. I think that nothing is ever in isolation. The holistic experience of 'Portrait of Your Space' heightens this idea and is immersive, both physically and psychologically. To add to this, I think that all things we do should be seen as a development, moving our past and present forward into our futures, or in other words, to see things as building or building confidence in some way.

Confidence is also key in terms of the relationship between us. For me, you and Steve, there is a certain amount of stepping out of our comfort zones, to start with me coming to your house and you and Steve allowing me to come to your house. After this point it is moving forward with, and through the process, drawing and drawing-out conversations. You were both relative strangers to me beforehand, only pieced together from what I knew of you both through social media, conversations with others (including strangers), and through imagination, et al.

With all this in mind, my expanded drawing approach to choosing surfaces to rub and interact with is often random. It's non-linear and open, boundless and borderless, like folds in time and space. It's akin to Cubism or a stream-of-consciousness. The chance process then extends into a multi-sensory navigation of

the spaces. This encompasses what I hear, smell, touch and see, between my internal and bodily self and my external experience and interactions with the living spaces and histories. It is important, too, that I am also often thinking of art and what might be seen as non-art histories, or both. For me, what is normally perceived as drawing, collage, sculpture, performance, happenings, are all entwined.

Back in 1999 when I did my MA at Chelsea College of Art, I used to live near Rachel Whiteread in Haggerston, London. Her home, or one of her homes (as well as Mo Mowlam's home at the time), was round the corner from her seminal artwork 'House'. Back in the '90s when I was doing my BA, and I first saw that piece reproduced, I remember thinking was it a drawing? Was it a sculpture? Was it a home anymore? The answer is always both 'yes' and 'no', of course. I am also often thinking about the expanded notion of home: home as a building, a den, the mind.

Now, in my mind, I'm making links between Whiteread and Collins and Pallot, thinking about the different uses of concrete and the ways in which they each opened up the realms between public and private, domestic and non-domestic.

In the end, choosing which surfaces of objects and architectural materials and motifs is just as random as me choosing what to do with the rubbings once I get them to the studio and start building the artwork, which is just as, if not more, physical, bodily, and performative as gathering the graphite rubbings. This is when I really start to combine and re-define the boundaries between drawing, walking and song-making, which become the same thing to me.

Time and duration is a big influence too, both philosophically and physically. In durational terms, the process (and therefore the qualities of the rubbings) are fast, medium and slow; in fact, the final artwork that I hand over to you can be read in those terms, too. Fast, medium and slow has an influence on the weight of the artwork, its parts and its compositional reading.

**NB: I'm quite surprised to hear us described as relative strangers – Steve I suppose, but I thought you and I were friends! If that's not the right word, then I suppose we're peers, being part of the same, small art scene, but approaching it from different angles – you as an artist and me as a writer. We've always chatted at private views, plus I've written about your work before via the exhibition you curated at PAPER Gallery, *This Land Is Our Land*. Maybe it's just that these encounters are quite fleeting and circumstantial and are based around talking about our work and what we've been up to rather than actively seeking out each other's company in a way a 'friend' might.**

**You talk about stepping out of our respective comfort zones. Since moving in to the house, we've had numerous tradespeople spend time here, from a period of a few minutes to several months. Each has interacted with us to different degrees. Some have been taciturn and reluctant to even accept a cup of tea, whereas others have taken any opportunity to talk to us, at length, often telling us their life story or sharing conspiracy theories, to the extent where it's felt that they didn't want to leave for the day!**

**I'd like to pick up on the notion of work in relation to this project, as well as your comments on time and duration. During your visits to our house in preparation for the drawing – first to see the space and scope out the contents of the house and then to take rubbings – you turned up at our door in white overalls, a bit like a painter and decorator might wear, and then set about taking measurements and investigating. You very much got on with your work in the background while we got on with our work.**

**It didn't really feel like you were a guest in our home – you were here to do a very particular task, rather than to see us, really – which required a bit of navigating in terms of us being the hosts. We were asking each other, should we offer you lunch and cook for you? Although you'd brought your own sandwiches, we did all sit down for lunch together, but it felt very much like you were on the clock and couldn't stretch out the break to chat indefinitely. Your mindset felt very focused, and about getting on with the job. Can you talk more about what 'work' means in the context of your practice?**

SW: Whether you are the kind of person that thinks you roam more (mind and body), or the kind of person that thinks you focus more (mind and body), inevitably the clock (body or an actual clock) has an influ-

ence on the way we act. The biggest influence on me, and my wife Hannah, is our two children. Children absolutely change your internal and external clock, because from the moment they are born (or even in the months before), we quickly realised, that our clock is their clock, and their clock is our clock, and our selflessness is expanded hugely; we become, to one degree or another, more like protectors and more 'on the clock' as you describe it. This, of course, in relation to 'work', references the much-used notion of time is money, and money is time. To add, I would like to contradict this a little though, and argue that thinking time, contemplation time, time to relax, boredom time, however it is described, is still work, and I feel this time is often misunderstood and underrated.

I really don't like being pigeonholed as a drawing artist. If I was going to use 'drawing', and I sometimes do, it would be 'expanded drawing', in reference to Rosalind Krauss's term 'Expanded Sculpture' which came about in reference to artists working with notions of place and natural and human manipulated materials. What I am making is not a drawing, it is an artwork, with both 'art' and 'work' being of equal importance, and that point of view has evolved over quite a long period of time. What is most important is finding the most appropriate medium and format for the idea, whether biro, paper, video, graphite, found objects, audio and music, a book, a stone-lithography print, paint, a performance, dressing up, being physically present or not, etc.

Historically speaking, and certainly within the context of our late-capitalist era, generosity and being supportive, is constantly being taken advantage of and we witness this everywhere. More specifically, those passionate about their jobs, their skills, their 'work' are often even more so. On my MA at Chelsea College of Art, I was taught by some amazing lecturers and artists, but it was Dave Beech who I feel left the biggest mark on me. I remember Dave saying on the first day at Chelsea that if you were driven by money, then fuck off now. That was powerful, because it affirmed to me why I had journeyed to the point where I was that day in 1999, that I certainly wasn't driven by money.

I am absolutely not saying that financial support, and being paid for your time making the work, and then the work itself, is not important. Artists should be paid for their labor, but for artists it is more often than not what drives them. At PAPER, for example, we all agreed that the supportive aspect of artists being paid should be highlighted and that all labour associated with making the work is important: essentially, all labour should be democratically supported financially. Unfortunately, over the past 23 years (through my own direct and indirect experiences), artists unfortunately are a part of the cog of manipulation, used and abused by others, sometimes to the extreme. Changes are afoot, but I do not know what that looks like: I have not witnessed any alternative to our current late-capitalist turmoil, although I do hope there is one for the future of my kids, my students and beyond.

With all this in mind, I see the process of 'Portrait of Your Space' as being divided into four main parts: the measurement, the excavation, the building and the installation. The measurement, as already mentioned, is the initial getting to know you and the home through identifying where an artwork would be sited. The excavation is the next layer, whereby we build on the conversations and relationship by excavating the home through the process of taking graphite rubbings, textures and layers of history. Then I build the drawing for you. Previously this has been either embedded in the site where the drawing is being built or in my studio at Rogue Artists' Studios in Gorton (coincidentally where my grandad, as already mentioned, moved out of in the mid-1930s). Finally, the installation involves going back to your home and placing your drawing in your space, for your 'Portrait of Your Space'.

For more information and to commission a 'Portrait of Your Space', contact  
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Cover images: rubbings taken by Simon Woolham during a 'Portrait of Your Space'

