

- Debs I'll keep an eye on this because the battery might start to run out so I'll keep an eye on it. If you see me looking at it it's not because I'm chasing time.
- Alex No and am I all right, I don't have to lean forward?
- Debs No, you don't, it is quite good, yes. Thank you ever so much for doing this. It is really very good of you to do this. I would like to start by asking you how you came to be where you are?
- Alex How I came to be where I am? Goodness, how long have you got? I started, I've always wanted to be an artist I suppose, so I suspect although I've only just recently picked up on that but she was probably my role model and she was quite different from other Winchester mothers, because I was born and brought up here.
- I didn't go to Art College until I was 26 and then I did a Fine Art Textiles degree at Loughborough where I moved away from what I thought I would be doing, which was printing fabric or weaving fabric or something, into creating big, because there were three different print specialisations, print, weave and multi-media and I ended up doing multi-media. That wasn't what multi-media means now; it was what multi-media meant then, which was using lots of media.
- I ended up being very influenced by landscape. I've always been – we walked a lot as children and I've always loved landscape and being out in the fresh air. So I created big hangings based a lot on St. Ives because we spent quite a lot of time in St. Ives and we ended up moving down there after I'd graduated. And then I had children so that sort of distracted me for a while and then my marriage broke down and I moved back to Winchester.

Sorry, you don't want all this sob story do you? But it is sort of pertinent. I moved back to Winchester when the children were very young because my parents were still here and I started working up at the college in the Dance Department as an Administrator to start with. Then the then Head of Dance realised I had more promise than just being an administrator so I started getting involved in doing costumes and things for productions because of my textiles background. Because as well as doing fine arts textiles I also can sew and make clothes.

She suggested the Larburn Centre in London had just set up this new scenography degree, which was Scenography for Dance. For people who don't know that's design but it's a very integrated approach to theatre design. It is about looking at everything at once rather than separating out lights, the body and set.

So for some reason I decided it was a good idea to go and do an MA with a job and two tiny children and on my own and did it. ((laughs)) I don't know quite why I thought it was a good idea looking back but it opened up a whole new world to me. Consequently I got appointed first as a technician at the College. I didn't really have the qualifications but it was a great experience and it brought me back to that idea of space and place in the world and how we look at and how we perceive the world.

So it was a lot to do - working in a scenographic way is a lot to do with thinking about how the audience is perceiving the world you are creating and also how the performers are perceiving that world you are creating. So that was the seed if you like of what I work with now.

I did a few projects that were very theatre based or dance based but I've again moved away, never wanting to be in the centre, always wanting to be on the edge. I did my last year and my final year project, my thesis was to do with installations and making more experiential installations relating to dance and performance and looking at projection and projected imagery and how projected imagery and live performance – because at the time, it was the 90s, and everybody was starting to use projected imagery and performance and I never thought that they used it well.

It was always a flat screen at the back of the stage and I was looking at how you could integrate that more into a theatrical space and the idea of drawing as a performance. So a drawing is a kind of performance of your thought and so I used projected imagery and performance and created an installation and that was what set me off on this path creating – working with space and place rather than with theatre or with objects.

I then got a lecturing post when I got my MA and my work was quite integrated with performance then because I was working in the Performing Arts department and I did a few installations, usually with just myself as a live art kind of installation, layering projection and live body performance.

Then I left my job and became a full-time professional artist.

Debs A big step.

Alex Yes, especially on your own with two young children, madness and created a big project round a site in Winchester called the Nanominster, which again was working in a similar way. Because of that I got interested in glass and I won a couple of professional

development awards and working with the archaeologist there were lots of fragments of glass that had survived thousands and thousands of years and I was really interested.

The project I was interested in was the environment and trying to think about the lives of the people who had lived in the Nanominster a thousand years ago and how that related to our lives as women in Winchester now and through that the glass was one of the material objects if you like that I was trying re-envisage within the context.

Some of the professional development money I won I used to go on a glass-making course, just a weekend, and then since then glass has been a really important part of my practice. That is the last six years so it is a very methodical process with glass; you have to be very precise and know about firings and this, that and the other and it all has to be clean. So that has been a really good discipline for me and I do love it and I am just coming back now to the idea of working on a bigger scale and in a more scenographic way so I have created larger installations with glass that, you know, what is the word? Intervene in the space and I still use sound and light so it does related back to my performance but I suppose, does that explain it fairly well?

Debs Yes, it is certainly a career that has evolved hasn't it?

Alex Yes, and the glass kind of relates back to the textiles because if you look at the glasswork I am doing now I am trying to create these hangings working on a bigger scale and that relates back very closely to the work I was doing in college nearly 20 years ago.

Debs It is just another medium.

- Alex It is just another medium but it is all about colour – what is lovely about glass is that it holds the light and it changes so it has that performative effect if you like in that it moves through the day and it changes with the light.
- Debs And it animates in some way?
- Alex And it animates and it is just, it is almost a not there material. It is not a solid and it's not a liquid, it's somewhere in between so it has a lot to say about the state of the world and science as well as art and expression.
- Debs Yes, and it lasts such a long time too.
- Alex It does and it's easy to clean and that's marvellous.
- Debs So that's covered several of the questions. So you said about your mother as a role mother but has anyone outside your family really influenced you or their style that you've looked up to as a role model?
- Alex Well my mother as a role model is probably more about the way I live I suspect, not my work. She was very much a graphic illustrator, which my son is turning out to be, so it has skipped a generation. I do draw but not in the same meticulous way that they do. So I think, do you mean people I know or people I'm inspired by?
- Debs Inspired by really; for instance I was really inspired by William Blake and Grinling Gibbons.
- Alex Well I mean it's a real eclectic mix because I've always been inspired by William Morris and again, more than just his artwork and the arts and crafts but his philosophy and his politics and the way he lived I
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suppose. My thesis when I did my undergraduate degree was about hand embroidery and where did that stand in a world where technology was coming on board.

And I am still very, that passion for making and using your hands and it being part of your life is a really important thing for me as a person and an on-going concern in the world we live in now, especially as the mother of very creative practical boys you wonder where – I think making is an intrinsic part of many of us. I would go so far as to say all of us but certainly for some of us it's a necessity.

I feel awful if I haven't been using my hands; it sounds really arty and ridiculous but it is, it is just that hand eye thing is just an important part of my make up and of a lot of the people I know. I know I mix with probably quite creative people but you know everybody is creative and I work with children a lot and I can see that with children. They want to be making they don't want - they want to be doing. There are people who need to be doing. So William Morris and I'm always interested in reading and even pre-Raphaelite art, which is actually quite opposite to lots of things I like. So those types of things do inspire me a lot.

So that's been a constant since my teenage years; I found a book on Holman Hunt in a charity shop or a jumble sale when I was about 14 and it was his life written by his grand-daughter and I was as intrigued by their lives I suppose as much as by their art.

Debs They were amazing lives.

Alex Absolutely amazing lives; so in my idealistic little world ((laughter)) with my rose-tinted glasses. I'm sure women didn't do very well in my world but hey ho. I liked the idea of Jane Morris, they all wore

their big floppy clothes as opposed to the corsets so yeah, I suppose that was good. I mean in later, if I try to think about recent work, the person who inspires me most is James Turrell, who works with light.

In the work I am trying to do now I am trying to – I take him very much as an inspiration so he creates, I think I've got, I did have a book but I lent it to a student years ago and I don't think I got it back again. He creates these, well for example one installation I went to see at the Yorkshire Sculpture Park a few years ago, he does work, he creates these sky-scapes, which are just little rooms with a hole cut in the ceiling so they are very contemplative and very quiet spaces and that again is a theme that reoccurs through my work is this idea of creating spaces for contemplation. You just watch the sky and the light changing and it is just a very beautiful sort of space.

But also he creates these indoor art gallery installations and one of them you go into a room and the opposite wall is what seems to be a big meter by three meter square of light, which seems to be like a light on the wall, a fluorescent light, and the room is bathed in this kind of pale lavender light, very calming. You walk down a ramp and before you go in it says, "Walk up to the wall and put your hand on it." So you walk up to the wall and you are expecting it to be solid and it isn't. It's a void going through into a thing that is lit behind the wall. That experience was, the first time, I sat quietly for a while and it was this real understanding of how we are all. I use the word spiritual because it was, I understood, oh yes, I'm made up of all these molecules and I'm just a part of the rest of the world, which is made up of the same things. So that was a real epiphany I suppose for me.

That is also why I like the glass, these glass pieces, they hold the light like that so it is kind of trying to create an art work that does manifest I suppose that cross-over. It is a real crossover between science and you know spirituality or however you want to say it. So I suppose that is important in wanting to create experiential installations, which is what I really want to do and I try to do.

And then Roscoe, I don't know, I admire what he did. I don't always like his paintings and again I think they are very experiential like most art actually. You have to be with it. It is all very well technology and everything but actually you need to be there in the space experiencing it.

The other person is Richard Serra, who does these huge as you know eclipse and it is again all about changing the spaces we walk through or our perceptions of space. So those three now are quite inspirational, which is totally opposite to sort of William Morris and the Pre-Raphaelites but in a way.

Debs But there is a balance there isn't there?

Alex Yes, and I think that, and then also glass – not much of the studio glass, I find that a bit sterile and cold but if you walk into Chartres Cathedral or anywhere like that, you know, particularly Chartres Cathedral, that is just gorgeous. Or even I remember going into a little chapel in Moreno once and there was very simple, it wasn't pictorial, just very pale coloured glass and the way the light shone through it and catches on the stone. So yes, it is that use of materials in our material world I suppose and creating.

Debs No, that's good and glass is an amazing medium really isn't it?

Alex Yes, it is and it's ancient. You know, it's been used for centuries and these pieces of glass from the Nanominster and there is stuff from Egypt, you know, BC, 5,000 BC there is glass that has survived. So it has been inspiring people for years.

Debs Yes, thank you. So I've found a CV of yours online or something.

Alex Did you, God it must be quite old. I don't know where it -

Debs I'll send it to you. I printed it as a .pdf but you've done so many different things and from what you were saying just now, so many different things and the way you've evolved and in education as well. So out of all of your different roles, which do you think is the one you are most at home with if you see what I mean?

Alex Being in here.

Debs Being in here? ((laughs))

Alex Without anybody. As I get, you know, I've done a lot of work in schools and I do feel comfortable in a school now because I know that environment and I love working with children but actually I'm happiest when I know that I'm coming here for the day and even if it is only tidying up it is just my – you know I've been here for seven years. Yes here making, dreaming, I mean that is fundamentally what art is isn't it? It is having a space to dream. We all should have and I think increasingly we don't have and I think it is really an important part of being human I think. But yes, making work -

Debs Being creative?

Alex Yes, I mean I am always thinking and, you know, I walk down the street and I am sure I ignore people because I'm off in Planet Alex.

It's a defence mechanism for having two teenage boys. ((laughter))
But you know definitely me, and it's funny because being an artist is so much tied up with your identity as well and you know, I'm happiest when I can put my grubby clothes on and come in here and not have to worry.

Debs Yes, I'd much rather have a baggy jumper on and something -

Alex I've realised that this top actually has got really beyond the pale but I almost wore it out on an ordinary day the other day and thought, 'No, actually that definitely is a studio item of clothing.'

Debs It's a shame to have to meet the world sometimes isn't it?

Alex Yes, it is.

Debs It sounds very secular but it's quite nice. So with Explosive Acts because there is Alex Hoare and there is Explosive Acts, is there any other or is it those two? Because I type you in and it's Alex Hoare website and then I get Explosive Acts as well?

Alex Well Explosive Acts is a left over from when I was working at the college and working with Rob ((Conkey?)) Did you cross over with him? He left a while ago? He was Head of Drama. When I was there he was a Drama lecturer and he was doing his PhD. We did some Shakespeare; some collapsed, not collapsed Shakespeare what do you call it? Explosive Shakespeare I suppose and set up Explosive Acts as a website for a particular production that we did and I just keep it because it's my e-mail and I quite like it as an e-mail, it's quite -

Debs Yes, it's good, it's punchy.

- Alex The actual Explosive Acts website, I don't even know if it's up and running at the moment.
- Debs I didn't check.
- Alex No, so it's just, yeah.
- Debs No it isn't, I did check, it goes to a Virgin kind of register this name, I think.
- Alex That's funny. Well I still use the e-mail so anyway and I pay for it every year. I'll check it.
- Debs I typed something and it went to a – maybe it was somebody else.
- Alex Anyway that was that but no I'm really just Alex Hoare and I use like Factory Studios for business purposes but the postman doesn't always deliver stuff. It depends which postman it is and also the post box is getting covered in ivy. But yeah, Explosive Acts is an old sort of left over but I am really Alex Hoare. My Alex Hoare website covers everything although it does need updating dreadfully, which was what I was talking to you about last year but it still hasn't happened.
- Debs That's another conversation.
- Alex Yes, that's another conversation, but yeah.
- Debs And you've done so many installations for performances one way or another, which is the one that you, well explain a couple that you were most pleased with?
- Alex It's always the next one actually. It's never the one that you've just done. Well my favourite piece of work that I've completed to date,
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although this next one is going to be much better, is the font, which was in Winchester Cathedral. I don't know whether you would call that a performance or an installation. It does involve sound. Did you want me to talk about -?

Debs That was another, I was coming to that.

Alex Okay, well I'll talk about performance too if you want me to?

Debs Yeah, okay, whichever I don't mind.

Alex I don't, I mean actual performance installation, live performance work seems such a long time ago now and it was a really experimental time.

Debs Okay, well talk about the font then because that really interests me and it kind of fits in very well with the whole Beaulieu Abbey thing that I've done as well, which is what the PhD is about.

Alex Okay well I suppose what is important about the other stuff is that it does feed in to the font but I do see that performance art area very much as experimental. It was good I mean it was nothing that I am ashamed of but it was a different me and it was quite a long time ago I suppose. I am just trying to think if it was – I don't even think it's on my website. I did a performance called Painted Sexuality, which was about the female body, which always -

Debs It's on your CV.

Alex Is it on my CV? Well there you go then. Yes, I think it is on my CV, which I did back at college. So it was quite a – standing back from it now you think, 'What were you thinking?' ((laughter)) And actually I did it live twice at college with students when I actually took my

clothes off as well, which I didn't do with the lecturers and which is all I am ever remembered for at college is as the lecturer who took her clothes off, which you could sort of do back then. You couldn't do that now. I set up a whole thing in MB26 or something. I hung stuff from the ceiling and they would be cameras in there probably now wouldn't there?

Yes, it was a third year module about inter-textuality and it was run by three of us and yes, I did a performance where I come in as a live model, studio model, and take my dressing gown off and sit in the installation with this projection and sound-scape and the sound-scape was all Tony Blair talking about weapons of mass-destruction so that juxtaposition between the female body as an object and then put my dress on and started painting on these big hangings. So that was the installation and that is one I suppose that sticks out in my mind, whether for good reason or not I don't know.

Debs Was that an idea that you personally came up with, you know, individually came up with or was it a team thing?

Alex No it was my research, it was my work. I think I had a research divination or whatever the grants were called to develop it. Originally, the original performance didn't, there wasn't live nudity. There was film but not nudity but just film of the female body and the whole idea was layering, and it was layered onto different, the projection layered through the whole space on different surfaces and then I came in as the artist painting figures, big figures on these huge bits of acetate so you could see through and I was behind and then the sound-scape was all to do with what was going on at the time.

So it must have been 2002 in parliament they were talking about weapons of mass-destruction and war and it was actually the, there was an exhibition of my paintings as well and it was actually the sound, the radio that had been going on while I had been painting. So there was video of my body and then there was video of me painting the female nude but just from my head, not live so the build up of that picture. So yes, that was one thing that I did.

And again it was all about how the space was organised so it did go through the space, it wasn't just a flat screen and that was sort of relating, that was still quite close to when I graduated.

And then I suppose the Nanominster as well was hugely influential because I started working with, again that was about space and what is there and what isn't there so absence and presence. So what you see and actually what the history and the stories behind that space are. So that idea and that way of working was starting to build up in my more theatre or inside based work and then it sort of developed into being more about not just me but outside. About people's stories and about places and sights and things like that.

Debs So all that experience led quite nicely into doing the Font?

Alex Yes, so the Font, I still think to date is my best piece of work.

Debs So was that, were you given a brief to come up with something to do with a particular space or were you yeah, did you get a brief basically of what they wanted?

Alex We were asked, there was a festival called Hyde 900, which was in 2009, which was the 900th anniversary of the founding of the Hyde Abbey down here and artists were asked to respond. We had a talk

from Graham Scobey who was then the museum's archaeologist, I can't remember what his exact title was, you know about artefacts and the Hyde Abbey and all that sort of thing.

One of the things he showed us slides of was this Book of Hyde, which had the names of all the monks who had lived there and the names of the benefactors all sort of beautifully written. But also when they'd run out of space that had been written in between and they would have been sung at Mass. You know people would have paid to have their name sung at Mass six times a day or whatever it was. That to me had a direct relationship to the space of the Hyde Abbey, which of course is no longer there, well there are bits of it, and to the people who lived in the Abbey. I took the idea of a font, which has three different meanings; so as a baptismal bowl, as a typeface and as a kind of font of knowledge.

I worked with the imagery, with the writing to enamel the names into the bowl but then also the signatures of the people who live on the site of the Hyde Abbey as well. Then we did the, Amanda Smallbone, who you probably know up at the college, she does plain chant so she chanted the, we got the correct pronunciations from someone else at the college whose name I can't remember who does early English. She chanted the names and then we layered that with the people singing or speaking their names now. So as you walk towards it it is lit up and it is also the shape of the plinth reflects the shape of the Norman font in the cathedral because it sat directly opposite when it was in the cathedral so it kind of had that old/new balance. It would have been lovely if it could have stayed in the cathedral but I guess not. It's in St. Bartholomew's in Hyde now, which is where it should be because it is on the site of the Hyde Abbey and yes it sings to you as you walk towards it.

So there is something about that the sound does envelop people and draw them in and make them feel – and that sound is very evocative and you know helps to immerse people in the space.

Are we all right for time? I'm just very conscious that I've got to -

Debs It's ten past nine.

Alex Okay, I have to leave about five past, twenty-five past, is that okay. I'm very sorry.

Debs No, no that's absolutely fine. So you mentioned all those different names for the font of Amanda Smallbone and so on, so was it a team of you or were you directing people?

Alex In terms of?

Debs Of creating that, the Font.

Alex Well I very much created, yes, well I mean I was directing. I knew what I wanted so yes, yes, and I made the font. I had technical help because it was a bigger piece than I'd ever made before. In fact the first one went disastrously wrong and I had to rush up to Farnham and the lovely man at Farnham, Colin Webster, helped me, helped me do it because it was on a scale that I hadn't done before. In fact the day it came out of the kiln, the morning of the private view, it was still warm so it could have all gone horribly wrong, but it didn't. Somebody was looking out for me that day. So yes, in terms of making your vision become reality, I can't sing so you know -

Debs So my, I don't want to lead you but when I was doing my project I was having to put a lot of faith and a lot of trust into people who understood where my vision was for getting the project done.

Alex Well I think for me it's, I often don't have a clear vision. My speciality isn't music so I would say, yes I do – and having come from a theatre background where you do work very collaboratively and the whole point of scenography is you work as equals not that you have the director. You don't have that hierarchy. You actually work in a very collaborative and equal way so that helps me to have the, I guess when I'm, yeah, I mean with the making I would want to do it myself because I feel that is, although I will need technical help the actual doing of it I was able to learn the techniques and I want that to be my artists mark if you like.

But with the sound, although I do work with sound and do sound editing and stuff, if I need an expert I will say, "This is what I want," and I will trust them to interpret it or we'll work together until it is how I want it to be.

Debs Yes, it's that relationship I'm after.

Alex You know I'm quote good at, quite open to what they have to say. I am not a sort of, "You must do it this way." I'm very, it's, the whole process is an evolving process. You don't really know at, you have an idea at the beginning but the reality of what that idea becomes is never exactly how you envisage it or very rarely. Maybe it is for some people but for me it is certainly that process of making it is the joy of it. Things evolve and things change and you are constantly questioning and constantly changing and so therefore if the sounds, if Amanda or Steve Soloway, who helped me edit it as well, come up with something that is slightly different to what I'd envisaged then the chances are it is probably better. But I suppose you do tend to work with people you like and you trust rather than – I wouldn't go to somebody whose work I didn't feel was empathetic with my own.

- Debs Yes, it is, I think it is really important because otherwise the disappointment in the end result and the frustration that it is not what you wanted it to be because some people have maybe let you down or not come up with what you wanted?
- Alex Yes, and I think that is an age thing as well don't you? I do think I was very precious about things as a young woman, you know. I remember being very particular. I've never been very particular you know but very sort of egocentric maybe but as I've got older and more realistic, you know, the realities of what you can achieve -
- Debs And the experience of things having to change.
- Alex - I'm always looking at the audience and I'm always looking at how are they going to see this? This isn't about me. I may do the artwork but ultimately it is not about me, you know, it is about me putting something out there that people want to have an experience with. If you do it with that spirit I suppose for want of a better word. Art is about generosity it is about giving. It shouldn't be about, well I think I mean I'm sure a lot of people don't think like that but it is about I see the world in a particular way and I have a skill that I can interpret that into things that are beautiful or are meaningful, I hope, that sounds a bit pretentious. But you know that is what my skill is and what I want to do is create these moments where people stop and think and look because we don't nowadays.
- Debs So you are thinking from your perspective about what, if you went to go and see something how you would feel if you saw this?
- Alex Yes, or Joe Bloggs in the street because I don't want to be part of an elitist – a lot of what I do isn't particularly fashionable. I don't mean fashionable but my work I think does appeal to a broad range of
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people, partly because a lot of time people are involved in the making of it. So I do engage people a lot in the process so whether it is singing their names or in the Swan Centre it is doing pictures so feeling like they are part of that process.

That is not to say I directly translate what they've done into a picture or representation but that is what has happened with engaging with those people feeds into whatever I make, whether it is just through the tacit knowledge I have gained through working with those people. It doesn't have to be a direct representation of that. It is quite often just what I've learned about a place or about people through the process of working with them I suppose.

Debs One last one -

Alex Sorry, I hope I'm not rushing you.

Debs No, no, no the, when it's there how do you know, successful is probably the wrong word, but how do you know the audience, the visitor is actually soaking it up in the way you have imagined they would?

Alex I think the thing is you have to put it out there and – it's not, you can't imagine how everybody is going to engage with it because everybody will come to it, especially if it's in a public place like the Swan Centre. You know you try and pick things that are universally recognised I suppose in some way, whether that is consciously or unconsciously. I know that there are certain sounds or certain things within that installation in the Swan Centre that everybody, you know, there is the sound of running water, which will either make you want to run to the loo or it will make you think of the sea.

Keeping your feet on the ground is quite an important part of being an artist, especially when you work in the public realm but, you know, I know there are cleaners who go up there because they find it a tranquil place to sit if they are stressed at work. So there are, it is that not everybody is going to come to it. Everybody thinks they know about art but also everybody, everybody has got something to say but what you have to do is try and – you let it go, you know, you give birth to it and then it goes out in the world and that is all you can do and some people might hate it but there's nothing you can do about it. You create it in the way you know how and in the way you want it to be experienced and how, what will be, with a message or whatever. It's not a message but what you want people to experience and whether they experience it in that way or not is up to them. Everybody comes to it with their own – you might come to it one day and be in one mood, you know, you can't, you can't mitigate for those sorts of things so you just hope that at some point it will get -

Debs Thank you very much. So what is the next step?

Alex The next step is to put my dress on and go up to ((Weeks?)) School! It's this, it's a big hanging, which I'm doing up here, which is a progression of this little one here, which is to do with changing colours. That was actually to do with a residency I did in Scotland. So that is kind of the sea, seaweed sort of colours. But this is to do with dawn and the colours of dawn and yeah -

Debs I'm very envious.

Alex Well don't be. I'm sure you've got a nice house and nice car and ((laughs)) – mind you you're a university lecturer aren't you?

Debs Yes, but I never used to be. I'll stop this now.