



Fay Zmija Nicolson was interviewed by curator Maitreyi Maheshwari, 9 October 2019.

**Maitreyi Maheshwari:** How do you go about generating material for your work? Image, sound and gesture are all key parts of your process. Where do you begin?

**Fay Zmija Nicolson:** It's difficult to say what comes first. I make work through setting a series of constraints around a type of action or gesture. I don't focus on finished objects, so there's this tension between constantly generating stuff and thinking about how to show it.

With the silk works, I wanted to see what was possible using something as simple as a piece of A4 graph paper and some watercolours. I paint them without planning what I'll do, like an improvised performance.

When it comes to sound work, although I have taught myself to play the piano recently and I play the guitar, I tend to 'write' with my voice primarily. I never write things down or think from the paper to the music. I always begin with singing. Walking helps because it offers a rhythm.

Over the past two years I've been doing research into what I call 'transaesthetic' ways of learning or thinking. It made me realise that there's always been this connection between sound and colour or gesture and tone within my work.

**MM:** That idea of gesture, movement and the body becomes very much interconnected with all these forms of mark-making: the painting, the writing and the music are all forms of mark-making.

**FZN:** I like the idea of using the body as the primary tool or material. Of course, I use technology to record, edit and manipulate it. I see my practice as developing a methodology of making that comes out of an aesthetic responsiveness. I absorb things, I'm drawn towards them, maybe I become a bit obsessed by them, then I start to make connections between things.

The Bauhaus has been a key starting point, I think, for a lot of my research around aesthetics and learning. A lot of their workshops focus on developing students' aesthetic skills through a series of exercises.

**MM:** Are there specific people that you look up to in the Bauhaus?

**FZN:** Josef and Anni Albers. Their teaching practice is more important to me than their actual work. Josef Albers' book *Interaction of Colour* explores how our perception of colour depends on where we are and what we're next to: what kind of light source or materiality. I like thinking about that idea from a social or political perspective. Dalcroze's eurhythmics use a similar approach, but with the aim of exploring musical, rather than visual, perception.

**MM:** So, within your work there seems to be this idea of things existing in relations, and those layers of relations actually being the thing that produces an effect, or a bodily affect. Is how the viewer's body responds to the things you're bringing together part of the process for you?

**FZN:** A lot of my work has been about trying to create and probe those sorts of bodily affects without necessarily relying on a narrative. There is a book I love that changed my thinking on sound and music called *Music and the Mind* by psychiatrist Anthony Storr. In one chapter he looks at harmony and dissonance and why certain harmonic intervals affect us. He looks at our responses to different tonal relationships (such as a minor chord). Sometimes, what we think moves us because it's some kind of essential force is actually something that's learnt and socially conditioned.

In my solo shows or performances, I want to create a scene, a place that's outside the everyday world, that might affect the way somebody moves around a space. When the viewer is there they become

part of it, even if it's in a very passive way.

**MM:** In *TONE POEM*, all the silk prints have very geometric forms on them. But other screen prints you've made have also involved body parts – things that have felt much looser gesturally. What determines the forms that you play with? Do they come out of research or are they more intuitive in terms of design?

**FZN:** When I think about the difference between my screen prints and my silk prints, I think about the kind of materiality I want to explore, the kind of experience I want to convey. The screen prints are very rhythmic, made by repeating the same motifs, often with more gestural elements underneath. The canvas is quite heavy, rigid and bold and has more of a relationship with painting. Sometimes I want something that's more slippery and relates more to the body – something that doesn't have a sense of a loop or a beat, something that's more sinuous and about flow.

I felt the need to return to silk as a material because it suits the music I'm making at the moment, and I wasn't finding that connection using screen printing.

**MM:** Was *Spa Songs* your first body of work which incorporated music? Can you talk about the body of research that culminated in the performance at the Brunel Museum? The work very much related to these watery spaces. How did that work come about?

**FZN:** I moved to Bermondsey and liked to go on long walks to explore the area.

I was in a café one day, a place called the Watch House. It's a strange building on the end of Bermondsey Street. Night watchmen, who were employed by the Abbey, would patrol the area and lock local 'criminals' up in it overnight. Sitting there, I had the sense of a violent juxtaposition between the past and the present: I could feel the

layers of history. The whole place is full of underground rivers – the Neckinger runs there and occasionally streams would pop up in the road. It felt like the area was very porous. *Spa Songs* related to the spas in the area and to the idea of something just coming out.

I hadn't made any music or used my voice for a long time; then I just felt like I needed to. But it didn't come from nowhere; when I found out about Bermondsey Abbey I started listening to a lot of early music, which is the birth of polyphony in Western music history. I'm always intrigued by the fundamentals of something. The Bauhaus presented an opportunity to explore this idea of primary colours and essential forms. Early music offered that too. The stave is the first graph ever made, where pitch and time are put together in one place.

With music, I got a sense of people trying to work out a system and its rules. Which harmonic intervals are sacred and which are profane? It took two years to make this work and I never imagined myself performing it.

**MM:** The live element of the work also calls on the language of ritual and ceremony. Was that deliberate?

**FZN:** A lot of the final decisions came about through workshoping it. The costumes (which were capes made from large canvas circles) became a big part of the piece and how it was performed. At the beginning of the performance, I'm wearing all of them. I sing four repeating notes in a call to the performers, who come down the stairs and sing back to me in a canon. You get these cascading musical harmonies, set off by one beat. A hand gesture went with each note. As the performers came towards me one by one, I dressed them in a cape. It was as if they split from my one voice to become many voices.

**MM:** These actions seem to imitate a type of training process...

**FZN:** My teaching plays a big role in what I do. For workshops, I begin with warm-ups that take inspiration from someone like Meredith Monk or Pauline Oliveros. If I'm given total freedom, there isn't much division between what I do in a performance or in a workshop or in my studio. It's about establishing a way of being that may enable us to be more responsive to what's around us.

**MM:** Playing is such an essential part of that form of learning. It is bodily. There is a sense of experimentation in terms of how you learn. It exists in lots of different forms: as a kind of game that kids do that requires skill or chance, and in make-believe or risk-taking activities.

**FZN:** Playing a game is also about setting rules for yourself. Fantasy and make-believe are important for my work even if I'm doing something that registers as an object in the real world, like a painting or a print. When I'm making it, I have a sense of performance or losing myself in an idea that might come together to create a bigger kind of moment where other people can play within it.

Jacques Lecoq said, 'The body knows things about which the mind is ignorant.' I think that sums up a lot of what I'm trying to do. There's a lot of knowledge that we take on inadvertently, that we pick up just by walking into a room and being taught something in a certain way.

The performance is a key part. Going back to what you were saying about the screen prints that have more bodily elements – in a way, they were a precursor to my more physical performances. Before, I'd never really performed in a singing or dancing way with my work. It took a lot of confidence to do that.

Image on reverse: Fay Zmija Nicolson, *We Exist! We have the Will! We are Producing! (Dawn)*, 2019. Water colour and pencil on paper. Courtesy the artist.

**Artist's presentation:** Sunday 8 December, 3pm & 4.30pm  
*BONE, BREATH, GESTURE*

Fay Nicolson presents a new performance that will use song, costume and gesture, drawing on improvised games and ritual actions, to create a space for 'transaesthetic play' within her installation *TONE POEM*.

**Fay Zmija Nicolson** (b. 1984, Derby. Lives and works in London) studied at CSM, 2006 and has an MA Fine Art from the Royal College of Art, 2011. Recent large-scale projects include: *Spa Songs*, song cycle and performance, Commissioned by DKUK for the Brunel Museum, London, 2018; *OVER AND OVER PURE FORM*, performance and video, Kunstraum, London, 2016-7; *PLAY SENSE*, exhibition and symposium, Gerald Moore Gallery, London, 2015. Fay has exhibited and taught internationally and has work in numerous collections.

Zabludowicz Collection Invites is dedicated to solo presentations by UK-based artists without UK commercial gallery representation.

176 Prince of Wales Road  
London NW5 3PT  
Opening times  
Thursday–Sunday, 12–6pm  
Other times by appointment  
FREE ENTRY

zabludowiczcollection.com

ZABLUDOWICZ  
COLLECTION



ZABLUDOWICZ  
COLLECTION  
**Invites**  
FAY ZMIJA  
NICOLSON  
31 OCT–  
15 DEC 2019