

*Title: New Arrivals* audio interview

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*Contributors: Marie Harnett and Senior Curator Stephanie Straine, National Galleries of Scotland*

*Transcript*

*Stephanie Straine*

Marie Harnett is a London-based artist who studied drawing and painting at Edinburgh College of Art. She is best known for her astonishingly intricate photo-realist pencil drawings of film stills, which she selects from trailers, watched often online. Her drawings zone in on moments of high drama, character interaction and often extreme emotions. As an artist she is interested in the potential of images, creating an emotion response in her viewer even, or especially when estranged from their original context or narrative. Marie's works are held in numerous international public and private collections, including the Yale Center for British Art in Connecticut, the Museum of Modern Art in New York and the British Museum in London.

I'm curator Stephanie Straine. Welcome to *New Arrivals*, a series of podcasts introducing the artists behind some of the recent additions to the Modern and Contemporary collection at the National Galleries of Scotland. Currently on show at our *New Arrivals* show in Modern One in Edinburgh, at the very end of Gallery One, hung against a deep, dark grey wall colour, is a set of five framed drawings by Marie Harnett. The image size in each case is only roughly 5 x 10 centimetres. You encounter them just before the entrance to Gallery Five, where you can find some of our most recent acquisitions of surrealist works. Quite fittingly, as there is certainly a dreamy and dreamlike quality to these five pencil drawings which I am pretty sure are also the smallest works in the entire exhibition. These works entered the national collection in 2017, thanks to the generosity of Andrew Scott, Tanja Gertik and Sir Sandy and Lady Crombie.

Marie, it is a pleasure to speak with you about these five drawings from your *Heleno* series. *Almost, Bike, Martini, Silvia* and *Sing*. And we should explain that these titles are all as you might say straightforwardly descriptive, so they allude to characters or objects or activities in the film depicted. You are in London and I am in Edinburgh. It's great to be talking to you from this distance and about these works, which you made nine years ago now. I am going to ask you, can you take us back to that year, 2013. And maybe tell us about what you were focused on in your practice at that time.

*Marie Harnett*

It doesn't feel like that long ago. In my practice then I was more focused on creating narratives within the drawings so that is why there is a series of five. It is a series that is meant to relate to each other and respond to each other and be seen as a group. And also back then I was and I still am very much exploring emotion within my drawings but I think then it was very much about love and love stories, melancholy and lost love and using the film *Heleno*, which I haven't seen, I just worked from the trailer. It had these beautiful images and I just wanted to use them to tell what I felt was a love

story. I later found out it is about a famous footballer who maybe wasn't a very nice guy. But back then it was very much just about exploring that kind of theme and that kind of story and using that film to do so. And as you say, the titles are very explanatory. There is one with a martini and one with someone singing. The title and the work are in a sense simple. I didn't want to add too much to the drawings then with the title but I have changed that now and I use lines of dialogue from films as my titles now. It has evolved a bit but I was trying to keep it simple in 2013.

### *Stephanie Straine*

For me it is really interesting to hear you talk about working within the series and working with sets of images because as I had sort of suggested, you were taking these stills and losing the original context of the films. So as you say it is not important to you that it is in this case quite an autobiographical drama about a particular Brazilian footballer set in the 1940s and 1950s. It is more the look and feel and ambience of the work. I love this idea that you are separating or detaching the images from the original filmic narrative but creating the space for your audience in fact to build or construct a new narrative from the sequence of five works because that arrangement to me inextricably calls to mind film storyboards, that idea of laying out or planning a production. I wonder if you could talk about any of the other influences when it comes to that structural idea of building groups of images.

### *Marie Harnett*

The first time I remember seeing works a bit like that and that inspired me to try it as well was in the Turner Prize, maybe 20 years ago. It was the Chapman brothers with the Goya etchings and they did this kind of film strip around the entire room. I remember walking into the room and there was this impact of all these works that you couldn't quite see from a distance. When you see the first one you immediately want to see the next. It's like breadcrumbs, a little trail and you don't want to skip one so you have to explore and go through and I think a lot of artists work that way as well. I really liked that sense that even though there's so much in common between the works, with the series, they are all the same size and prints on paper and at a glance it all looks like they are roughly the same but I like the fact that they are not. You have to look at one and then go on to the next and next and then you get this unfolding story. It all builds together to hopefully make a whole and I think that is quite magical. It is a nice thing to explore and it isn't all told immediately. I won't say you have to work for it because it's not a lot of work but I like the fact that it unravels slowly.

### *Stephanie Straine*

I want to pick up on that idea of unravelling because I think we have seen that process unfolding in the last three months with visitors to the exhibition. I am really taken by the sheer amount of visitors who speak to our colleagues and tell them how captivated they are by these works and I am curious to ask you about the role of wonder, of astonishment, even, in your practice because so many people when viewing the series in person, you can see that there is something incredibly physical about how the works literally draw you into their orbit. You can't see them from down the corridor or across the room. You have the tiny hint that there is something to look at through those small black frames. When you get closer there is this moment of figuring out exactly what it is you are looking at and I think there is a moment of astonishment or wonder. I thought maybe is it even confusion, that you are putting people into a state of confusion, is that experience of these stages important to how people encounter your work?

### *Marie Harnett*

Well it is really lovely to hear that people are having that experience. It is not something I set out to do, but there a whole host of reasons why I like working so small is. It is very personal so you have to interact with it pretty much one-on-one. You can't fit two or three people in to look at the drawings at the same time. So you have a very personal, very intimate experience with it. It is also a bit secret and private and hidden. So if you want to see the artwork, you have to go up to it and you have to spend time with it and you can't just quickly glance and carry on and I like the fact it ends up being its own little private world. The images I choose to work from, they are important to me and I enjoy them and they make me feel a certain way. And when I am drawing there are all of these different levels. It can be quite sketchy and it still doesn't quite feel right. And it is only when it has reached a level that I feel that emotion of vibe or theme that I was going for with the image has been reached then I'll stop and very often it's when it's this polished and smooth work. You do get people coming up and saying 'no, it's a photo!' and it's fine if they think that but if you do put a photo of the still next to the drawing they actually look different and there is something about drawing that brings it to life. It is not an intentional thing to confuse or to create wonder. It's just the way that the work feels right for me, that's when I know it is finished.

### *Stephanie Straine*

That idea of taking it to a point of almost extreme finish I find really interesting in relation to the fact that you are using the humble graphite pencil as your medium. Obviously we live in a world of contemporary art where anything is possible. You can make artwork out of any material or medium that you would wish. I am really intrigued by your steadfast commitment to the pencil. You have already alluded to this but I would love you to speak a bit more about what you find so satisfying about working with pencil on paper as your primary medium.

### *Marie Harnett*

It won't let me go - I keep trying to leave it but I can't let it go! It is actually because of going to Edinburgh College of Art that I ended up working with drawings. In the BA we had to do two days of drawing. I often thought of drawing as the sketch for paintings or something to note down ideas, not a finished art form, and the tutor said 'approach it like you would a painting.' And something clicked when I thought of drawing on a level with painting which people sometimes don't. And realising the different effects you can get, it can be very scruffy and sketchy and rough but it can also be supremely detailed and it can buff out to almost nothing. It also lends this silvery, delicate quality which I think people can respond to whereas paint is very, very physical feeling. When you look at a drawing I think you are quite aware that it feels delicate and you know that if you had an eraser you could pretty much get rid of it. So there is a delicacy which I really like. Also it is very loyal. I like the mark that I can lay down with it. If I pick up a 2B pencil I know pretty much what that is going to look like. I can use it, it is immediate and there is no clean up. I have travelled the world and had my studio, for lack of a better word, in a little case, and that is all that I have needed. There is something quite magical about that, the fact that it can go anywhere with me and I know how it is going to work and it is kind of endless in its capabilities. I do try and do other things but I find myself missing drawing.

### *Stephanie Straine*

It sounds like you have created something that it quite harmonious with your own physical body and so the paper and the pencil becomes an extension of that. And to me that relationship to you, relationship to the artist's hand although on first glance as you say we might not make that connection because there might be that moment of double take where we wonder if it is a photo

but the more information that fills in we realise it is not, we see the buttery soft pencil creating something that a photograph can never do but I love to think of that bodily extension and drawing being an extension of yourself, your personhood and how that creates a connection which feels related in some way to the moments you are drawing out and selecting from the films which often are moments of encounter or connection, some kind of human drama and I am really curious to know a little bit about how intuitive that process is for you. You have talked about the fact that you restrict yourself to the film trailer; you don't watch the full film because the trailer itself will give you 300 or more stills to choose from. What is that process like and do you ever feel like you get halfway through a drawing and think 'oh no, I've chosen the wrong still here.'

*Marie Harnett*

Yes, I have a little drawer of drawings that just didn't work. I have even completed some of them and think 'this just didn't work. It doesn't happen too often. And in the sense of working from trailers, I think it's changed a bit now to how it was when I did the *Helena* series, which is I very much stuck to the one trailer and I used that as a form of narrative. Like other artists might go out and do portraits or landscapes or used found photos and build something from that. I was using the trailer to build my own story whereas nowadays I work from many trailers and I have more of a theme so my works at the moment are a bit more surrealist and they are a bit more standalone and a bit spooky so I can pull in images from all these different trailers and it is quite instinctive.

*Stephanie Straine*

Although we have spoken about the drawings having a very small scale, you can see that to have achieved that level of finish with graphic pencil on paper, it must have taken a huge amount of time and a huge amount of careful working of the surface to reach that sensation of it almost having appeared on the paper as if by magic. I wonder if you can talk a little bit about duration in relation to your work. To me the durationality of the drawings has some relationship to film as a temporal medium. And for me that feels connected, somehow.

*Marie Harnett*

The actual drawings take about three weeks, sometimes two weeks to make. And there is a nice element to that the fact that I am taking a moment, something that is very much not film from a film, so it is completely still and it's a work in its own right. We are aware of possibly something before, possibly something afterwards, but I think they become their own entity. There is something very nice about taking something that is a split second and it's moving quickly and it has been slowed down and takes three weeks to come into being and then it is forever paused. I like that relationship between the film and the drawing.

*Stephanie Straine*

It has this beautiful tension between the still and the moving image, as you so beautifully described. That tension or dialogue in terms of still and moving I also see in relation to scale. So you have obviously the very intimate scale of your drawings and you talked about them almost feeling like a secret or private world in order for us to truly see them you have to have this direct one on one encounter. For me that seems like an obvious contrast to the scale of film as we would see it projected in the cinema but I have been thinking about that a little bit more and I began to think actually the darkened space of the cinema maybe does have more of a relationship to that idea of a private, secret world because once you are there, sitting in that seat in the dark of the cinema the kind of publicness of that space drops away and you are left with a one on one encounter with the

film because of the sheer scale and immersive quality of it. And so I think I changed my mind in thinking that there was a distinction between large and small and the relationship between your works and the cinema. I started to think actually maybe there is more connecting those spaces than there is keeping them apart.

### *Marie Harnett*

That is so interesting and I think you are right. I think when you are in the cinema, and it is certainly something I love because I absolutely love film, is the fact that it is, even though you are sharing it with so many people, it feels very private and it is darkened and you are usually fully absorbed. You are not usually looking at other things or talking to anyone else. Viewing artwork can be a bit like that too and also strangely when you are seeing a film and somebody's face is on the screen - I don't know how big a film screen is, but it certainly isn't life-size, and the small drawings aren't life size but when we read a film or read a drawing I feel as if we read it as life size. We don't think necessarily when we are in the cinema 'Oh my God this huge face,' we are on that same plain with them and so we are capable of bringing ourselves into the film or the drawings and I think we are the connector between them almost.

### *Stephanie Straine*

It feels very invitational and I think that is a compelling aspect of your work. That is what we are seeing as people encounter them for the first time in the public space of the gallery, that they feel as if they are being invited into that space, which is not always the case. Sometimes an artwork might repel you or make you cold or uncertain, so I think there is something in that invitation which people really respond to, and I wonder if that has something to do with the way you obviously have a very evolved and very compelling visual vocabulary. You have thought about many and varied sources of visual inspirations. You are not simply looking to the film trailers that you use as raw material and subject matter. You have previously talked about having an interest in Dutch seventeenth century painting and romantic German painting, baroque, swooning figures from eighteenth century art. Maybe more recently the dreamlike elements in the practice of artists like Dorothea Tanning, and Dora Maar.

I suppose this is the point where I want to open it up. Can you talk a bit about how these different influences from art history might play into the way that you work or the way that you choose what you want to do with your drawing.

### *Marie Harnett*

I don't necessarily go out seeking inspiration but it's when you are walking around a gallery or museum and it does tend to be mainly artwork that inspires me. I know a lot of artists can get inspired by politics or music or the things they see day to day. But I am inspired by artwork and obviously film. You don't necessarily think you are necessarily interested in one thing. It is only when you look back through photos of what you have been taking pictures of in the museum that you think 'wow, there's an awful lot of pears in here, clearly I am interested in doing something with still life!' and so in the last show with my gallery there were more still lifes and things that I felt related back to Dutch interior scenes and like I said at the moment it is definitely more surrealist and spooky and so that's why it was so incredible looking around the show at Modern One and seeing the Dorothea Tanning and the Leonora Carrington, her *Portrait of Max Ernst* which is just amazing! It is so inspiring and you're not sure how it is going to come out but it is only in hindsight that I can see how much it has influenced. Also the France-Lise McGurn painting that you have there and even though that is not surrealist, I absolutely love it. There is something about it, and I don't know what

it is, I mean I think it is an amazing painting but you file it away and I'm sure it's going to come out somehow. It is not a direct thing but I can see the influence further down the line. It is absolutely incredible to be in a show with such inspiring works.

### *Stephanie Straine*

I am delighted to hear that you saw a resonance there with your practice, particularly because you mentioned a couple of times this move in your practice towards something that feels more surreal, more strange, and that you are bringing together multiple stills or trailers in work so maybe now is a good time to ask you to talk a little bit more about what how things have evolved in your practice since *Heleno*, what has shifted for you in these intervening years and what are you excited about now?

### *Marie Harnett*

In terms of what I am working on now, I have moved on from a sense of a defined, five-drawing series. It is much more broad in terms of theme and the drawings are more standalone and aloof. So whereas before I felt they needed to be together, they couldn't be separated, they needed to support each other and tell a story together, now they are a bit more standalone, maybe a bit more gutsy, I don't know. But they are definitely separate but having said that I still very much... at my last solo show I hung the works a bit like a musical scale so they were up and down. It was this kind of flowing theme running out. So even though they weren't technically a series they still very much relate to each other and connect to each other. I have also started working on draughting film which works really well with pencil, it really grips on to it so it doesn't go as soft which I actually quite like at the moment but it also has this translucency which works so well with graphite.

### *Stephanie Straine*

That is quite a shift, to move from the very soft, giving texture of a piece of artist's cartridge paper to something like draughting film, would seem to be very unyielding to the graphite?

### *Marie Harnett*

One of the drawings in the *Heleno* series, it's a close-up of a girl's face. When you are working on paper you can make that smooth and soft and kind of luscious. You kind of can do it on draughting film but it is a slightly harder edge. I have also started to move away from drawing faces as much. It's a bit more obscure and abstract. It might be the back of figures or more cropped things. So maybe that is also tying into it, I don't want that softness because I'm not necessarily doing a very detailed drawing of a cheek at the moment. Who knows what I will be doing a few years down the line, but it seems to be tying in with what I am exploring in my work.

### *Stephanie Straine*

That seems exciting and to hear you talk about it, you can really get a sense of how you almost personify your drawings. You talk about the new ones as being more aloof, which is not something you would normally ascribe to an inanimate object and I find that is a really telling insight into your practice. You can see how connected you were to the works and the way that the making and the materiality expresses themselves in the final artwork. To me that is fascinating.

### *Marie Harnett*

It is so personal. The way I draw is like sitting on the sofa with a book, so it is very, very intimate and I'm with them for a few weeks and I feel very connected with them. Although I am still happy to let

them go. I know some artists struggle to let them go but I am ready for them to go off and explore which makes me sound like such a weirdo!

*Stephanie Straine*

Not at all. It makes sense to me that having spent so long with them that you would have this connection where you almost create this sort of animated life for them which for me seems actually very akin to the way that some surrealists approached their work, the strategies that they applied to creativity. Again, one of the benefits of showing the work within *New Arrivals* is that there is a completely intergenerational encounter. We are not showing your work with other objects made in the UK in the twenty-first century necessarily. We're showing them with something from 1910 or 1935 or 2018 and that kind of mixing and remixing of historical periods for me echoes with the fact that there are different historical senses of time in your practice. So the film *Helena* was made in 2011 but it is set in the 1940s and 50s. I suppose as a final question I would love if you could speak about your attraction to that sort of mid-century period and how you see there being a relationship almost between your drawing style and strategies and the golden age of Hollywood and that aesthetic.

*Marie Harnett*

I think you are right about art being a bit timeless, even though we are artists living and working today, works can slot in to previous periods and vice versa. I always find it quite incredible, the fact that you can see an artwork from 80 years ago but it feels so immediate because you can see the brushstrokes or you recognise the thoughts behind it and I think the *New Arrivals* show does that magnificently.

In terms of working from period films, there are a few layers to it. I used to be an extra on film sets and I saw how much detail went into films and the costumes and everything. It went down to the tiniest, tiniest detail and that comes across on screen. And I think part of the reason I am then drawn to those kind of films is the fact it is so considered and composed whereas some contemporary films based in contemporary times, they lose that a bit. I guess there is a dreamlike quality to films that are set in previous times and they allow us to escape a bit which is the same as when you see a work in greyscale. When you see a pencil work you can escape into it a bit more because it's not got that reality of colour in it.

*Stephanie Straine*

I think that is a beautiful sentiment on which to end. I love learning that surprise piece of information that you were actually a film set extra which to me is a great piece of information to add to the understanding of your work and your practice. I just want to thank you, Marie, for joining us and for speaking so openly and beautifully about your practice. I think it will add so much to how people encounter the works in Edinburgh. Thank you so joining me.

*Marie Harnett*

Thank you so much for inviting me. it has been really wonderful, thank you.