

Video Transcript

Title:

Christine Borland | Answering Anatomy

Summary:

Aesthetics and ethics are key aspects of Scottish artist Christine Borland's work. We visit the artist in her studio to learn more about her interest in human anatomy, and why it's not a bad thing for questions to go unanswered.

Duration:

06:16

Transcript

Christine Borland

The reasons that experts agree to give up their time to speak to me, or help me do things, or collaborate with me; usually it comes down to the fact that some of my unanswered questions are actually shared by them, and some of the questions that come up must go unanswered. I suppose just being a bit of a wild child of the 70s, kicking around the countryside as your playground really, that an interest in botany (of course I wouldn't have called it such a thing there), but a general interest in natural sciences, life and death, the way things interact with each other and interconnect, was very much a part of my childhood wondering.

When I was at art school I was really intrigued by life drawing – representing the figure. I was really bad at it, but I knew that that interest in the body was very much there. Art and anatomy from the earliest days had a real interconnected relationship in terms of representing the body. So when I went for the first time to the Anatomy Museum and I saw the specimens in jars; the intricacy and beauty of both the human specimens preserved, dissections preserved, just the beauty of that, it was kind of like, 'that's it'. That's the jigsaw puzzle piece that was missing. This is how I can think about my interest in relation to the body and the presentation of the body. The very first questions that I was asking were usually about borrowing things, so I was going to ask to borrow specimens. I think I got lucky; I met someone who was an incredibly engaging and interesting person, a kind of old school anatomy, general interested in liberal arts. I was given a catalogue of the bone

suppliers who supplied the specimens to the students in anatomy. And that sort of blew my mind – that you could buy human bones – just ring up and order a spine, or a complete skeleton, or whatever. That's an important example of the kind of dialogue, usually it's something quite simple I'm asking, but it opens a door into a whole sort of world of knowledge.

Quite often I will have a strong association with a material that is immediately suggesting its use. So the use of plastercasting is a good example. Of course it's got an artistic association with historical casting, but also life and death masks being taken in plaster – I suppose going back to my interest in medical museums, and the way that it's used there. The materials themselves are – I'm very careful to think about what story they're telling, but then of course there's the very day-to-day artist's work of 'what do the materials do once you start manipulating them? I do spend a lot of time just sitting with a sketchbook, and trying to think through things. But then it's really important to spend a similar amount of time with materials, because sometimes these thoughts that just couldn't develop, suddenly they manifest themselves.

First of all it's the aesthetics, but then it's the ethics as well. The question of, well yes, that's an incredibly preserved gallbladder, injected with mercury to show the tissue network, but whose was it, and how was it obtained? And that's something that I've been able to keep – that's stayed with me throughout my whole career; is trying to ask that question to medical professionals and museum people, and also trying to work my way through it in the work, to try to figure it out for myself, and hopefully for audiences too.

One incredible object, a foetal skeleton that had been bound in leather, and there was also a female pelvis with it, and it was a demonstration model for childbirth. What I was interested in when I saw the objects there was this – the two sides of the coin between yes, it's a teaching aide; it's a demonstration; it's got this sort of medical purpose that's to do with education, yet the object itself is so full of pathos, and there will be a tragic story inherent in it. Is that a dignified way to be handling that? What about the history of that? What about the woman whose pelvis is also being used as a demonstration model?

Sometimes it's about trying to find answers, but often it's about layering more and more questions on top of things that there is no definitive answer to - it's just, the big picture is life and death, so these things are incredibly complex, and quite often the works do often

represent that too. Most of the time the journey is more important than any answer at the end. It can be that these questions remain unanswered.