

# Lucy Willow



If you were in Cornwall in November 2022, you might have found yourself in Penryn, near Falmouth. If you did, there is a relatively high chance you would have passed some time ambling along Commercial Road, perhaps browsing a few shops, stopping for a coffee. You might even have popped your head into Grays Wharf – a small but perfectly formed gallery and workshop space for local artists. And if you did that, there is no question that what you saw would have stopped you in your tracks. Because *Drawn from the Well* – an exhibition created and curated by Lucy Willow (1967, Whitstable, Kent) as an outcome of a nine-month residency at CAST in nearby Helston – had that effect. The works were made in response to an ancient well that Willow discovered on the boundary line of a memorial garden for her late son, Jack Perry, whom she lost in 2006

when he was nearly 16. (There is something quietly devastating about the fact that Willow describes Jack not as 15 when he died, but as ‘nearly 16’.) The deep black charcoal drawings on the walls and the broken porcelain ceramic forms across the floor are hauntingly beautiful, but it is the stitched textile sculptures that provide the gut-punch – the connection to whatever raw and tender grief you carry within your own internal landscape.

Made from Jack’s clothes and schoolbooks, the abstract forms evoke umbilical cords tumbling out of wombs. ‘When I first started thinking about the well, I thought about the idea of an umbilical cord that could go down into a space that can connect you with something otherworldly or linked with the dead,’ says Willow. ‘I’m always looking at ways that, in a metaphorical or symbolic sense, we can communicate with the dead, because those relationships continue – I still feel as if I’m a mother to Jack, to a child who isn’t here anymore.’ The umbilical cords feature heavy stitches down one side – an attempt to repair what has been lost. ‘The mending is really rough and raw, very much about stitching something together in a very visible way, in a very bodily way,’ she says. ‘These textile pieces tend to get left out of exhibitions when other people curate them – there’s something that is undesirable, that we don’t want to confront. I can and do make things that are aesthetically easy to live with. And then there are these pieces, that really aren’t as easy to live in relationship with.’

But death isn’t easy to live in relationship with either, and that’s what Willow’s work explores. ‘A lot of my work is about our relationship with grief, which is a relationship with the love I still have for Jack,’ she says. ‘The idea that I didn’t know where this black space

in the garden ended became symbolic of my experience of grief – it’s never-ending, it goes down and down and down, further into layers and layers.’ Willow spent a lot of time just sitting in the ancient well – which she describes as ‘a cave with steps leading down into a deep, dark space’ – thinking and writing. ‘I love exploring the narrative of a space through creative writing, so I spent lots of time in there, just writing,’ she explains. ‘And then, feeling as if I was looking down into this dark – this depth, the idea of a symbolic womb space emerged, and I started to wonder what would happen if I started excavating that place.’

The first works Willow made were a series of charcoal drawings through a process she imagined was similar to scrying (sometimes explained as divination) – the idea of the artist as a medium who can communicate with the unseen. ‘I’m not sure what the right word is, because I’m not really mystical or spiritual, but there’s a space you can connect to when making work, and images can be drawn from that,’ she says. ‘So, it’s working with an intuitive knowledge about a space, and making drawings from that knowledge.’ The drawings started to look like ultrasound scans, which she didn’t expect. ‘They look like an empty womb space,’ she says. Next came the porcelain fragments. ‘They feel as if they were drawn up from this well space,’ she says. ‘When they’re fired, they look like skin and bone and they tell a story of grief because they’re broken, they’re fragmented, they’re lying on the floor.’

But these are not the pieces Willow can find herself in. ‘The charcoal and porcelain pieces are easy to live with, but I feel I’m invisible in that work. But the textile pieces – they are about tearing, ripping, stabbing, breaking. I’m connected to the cloth, to the materials



that I'm using, and it really does feel as if I'm stitching something bodily together – they've really visceral. Parental grief is so difficult for people to hold the space for, so you find that you just can't talk about the details of that experience. In these pieces is the anger, the rawness, the loss that I haven't been able to share – there is a literal sense of "spilling my guts". But there's also something powerful about the mending, the binding and the stitching. I'm not trying to do it invisibly – I'm trying to show the visible marks of how I'm putting myself back together again. So that feels ritualistic; that feels really important in my work.'

The pieces Willow created as part of her CAST residency and the resulting exhibition at Grays Wharf are just one example of a broad and diverse body of work that holds space for communities to come together, to share their own stories and to think and reflect. 'I really hope that I carry on being invited to make work of this sort,' she says. 'My work often prompts people to reflect on what's lost, on what's broken, on their own grief – and it's so important that there are spaces quiet enough for people to contemplate these things. It's so rare, isn't it, that you really sit down and listen to somebody's story?' While working recently with 13-year-old pupils in a school, Willow talked to them about the *Drawn from the Well* projects. One of the boys said, 'Your work is so sad, but life is sad.' The discussion that comment opened up felt important: 'We had this amazing conversation – at a 13-year-old level – of how sad feelings could be put into making art,' she says. 'If you've got to live through what we're all facing in the world today, there is so much grief. I can't say I'm changing the world, but my hope is to continue making spaces where we get to reflect on that.'



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