

Live Art in Scotland: Sheila Ghelani

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Stephen Greer: I've been starting these conversations over the past few months by asking people about their first encounters with performance or performance art or live art, not because I believe in fixed origin stories. Or if I do it's always multiple origins. And I'm always interested in first encounters or first impressions, and I think I read somewhere that you had a background in dance. So maybe we could start there and talk about how.. what was your point of entry into this field?

Sheila Ghelani: I did dance at De Montfort University and as part of that we had a course called Dance Music Theatre, I think, DMT. I really clearly remember the first class and it was by Teresa Brayshaw. I remember that lecture very clearly because it sort of blew my mind. She talked about people like Forced Entertainment and.. I can't even remember. A Spanish troupe. She gave a lecture that expanded my horizon. It was the first lecture, and I was like, what? As part of that course, we also had to go and see performances, so I went and saw Meredith Monk at Phoenix Art Centre and I remember again not understanding what it was but being intrigued. I really think it's that course that opened my mind, so I would say university.

Stephen Greer: As part of that were you being asked or invited to make work that responded to that expanded view of what dance might mean?

Sheila Ghelani: No, I don't think so. Not in that first course, it was just an introduction to dance, music and theatre. I mostly did contemporary dance, but because I had a lot of back

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injuries, I ended up watching and that's how I got into choreography and that just opened out. I wasn't really making, but I was seeing a lot of stuff. I also clearly remember going to see Blast Theory at Cambridge Junction and taking a trip there with a few of my friends and seeing *Stampede* and just loving it.

Stephen Greer: And you've later worked with Blast Theory.

Sheila Ghelani: Yes, I became one of their Associate Artists. I still can't believe that happened and, in fact, I feel like that was when I started becoming an artist when I was working with them. I worked as a performer on *Desert Rain*. That came about because Helen, who was their company manager I think, I went to university with her and shared a house with her, so it was through connections. And also, Jamie who was in the company, they were both at De Montfort. I kept in touch with them and I went to a party at Blast Theory's house and it literally came about through accident, it was luck. I could've just carried on down the dance path, or I think I would've left making artwork because I was not finding the contemporary dance scene satisfying or even possible to work within. I think the chance encounter and a bit of luck tipped me.

Stephen Greer: Was that a transition to the kind of work you were making for yourself, or had you not started making your own work? Was it more company structure-based?

Sheila Ghelani: I was making contemporary dance around then, but I'd sort of stopped so I became a performer for them during *Desert Rain*. Then because of that I met Robert Pacitti and then I became a member of Pacitti Company. I would say for probably three or four years, I was just a performer of Blast Theory's projects and almost a deviser or collaborator of Pacitti Company for a few years and then I started making my own work. I had a few years of just being a member of companies. I worked for Joshua Sofaer as well around that time as a performer. It was almost like absorbing the scene and seeing what was out there and devising with Pacitti Company. Not with Blast Theory at all, I was just a performer, and with Joshua I was just a performer. But with Pacitti it was devising together and me realising that that was possible.

Stephen Greer: Okay. So, the projects where you had greater agency and with that came the sense of greater possibility.

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Sheila Ghelani: Yes, and realising then that were things that I wanted to talk about that maybe weren't going to be explored within those contexts. That's when I became part of The Living Room Project with Emma Wolukau-Wanambwa and Caitlin Newton-Broad. Emma had been working at Pacitti Company on one particular project as an Assistant Director I think, and Caitlin worked at Blast Theory. Caitlin and Emma also lived together and we just dared each other to start making and so we just hired a space, Jerwood Space every fortnight and just each led a session and that's how I started making my own work.

Stephen Greer: From what you were saying there, I sounded like there was going to be a different set of possibilities there for you to make the kind of work that was interesting to you. Was that an explicit part of the conversation?

Sheila Ghelani: Yes. We were all interested in Empire and thinking about colonialism and that wasn't something that was necessarily being explored in any of those areas. It was just a real impulse to make but be the one who was in charge. I often think back to that time because I mentor a lot now and I'll often say to younger artists, you've just got to dare yourself to begin and that's when you'll find out whether it's of interest or not.

Stephen Greer: I think sometimes I get into the loop of thinking back from the room that a work might appear in, or the festival, or the commission, which is totally understandable, but that can be, if not a stranglehold, but a real landmark which you orientate yourself on without really thinking, do I want to make this thing? Do I want to spend time in a room? So was it that process of that group of friends and artists, was it a process where you were sharing work with each other and getting feedback? Did you have an orientation on a final show, or was it just a process where you dared each other to work?

Sheila Ghelani: We dared each other to work, then we dared each other to put an Arts Council application in so that we could do a work-in-progress and get mentoring. I guess we knew that that was possible because we'd all been working at Blast Theory and with Pacitti Company. George Chakravarthi was our mentor. We hired a room, The Flea Pit in East London, again with another friend who was running that space. We did [a work-in-progress sharing] in the back room and it was horrible [laughs]. But I discovered I wanted to keep making work. Emma has gone into hardcore visual art and she's making really extraordinary work and Caitlin realised she didn't want to make work. It sort of worked out for each of us. That was where I first did Grafting and Budding, that was the beginning of it.

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Stephen Greer: We'll definitely follow that thread. Did you know George Chakravarthi before that point or was that a new relationship?

Sheila Ghelani: I think Emma might have suggested George as a mentor. We just thought George would be the right person. Had I seen George's work? I must have been aware of it. I hadn't been to NRLA then so I'm not really sure. I was definitely aware because I was in the scene, you hear and you see stuff anyway. I would have been aware of him through the Live Art Development Agency and Pacitti Company.

Stephen Greer: So Grafting and Budding that's been shown at East End Collaborations?

Sheila Ghelani: Eventually, yes.

Stephen Greer: Okay so that's prior to that.

Sheila Ghelani: Yes. So, we did this work-in-progress sharing, and because of that, I got lots of feedback. Loads of really great peers came because again, the Pacitti Company connection. It was a really supportive time. And because of that, I decided to apply to the EEC, the East End Collaborations. Who was my mentor? Helen Paris. So I would say that was a really important moment of sharing. I think I was performing *A Forest* at the time we shared that. I do remember being at CPT for some weird reason. I was out there showing work, but it's very different when you're sharing something of your own. I was a real late-starter, I must've been around twenty-eight or twenty-nine.

Stephen Greer: There's a gorgeous little film that's on your website marking five or six years of doing Grafting and Budding. At the start of it there's one of the images in a notebook which says that it was made in response to the challenge: If you made live art performance work on your own, what would you say, what would you do. I've encountered that work through its documentation and knowing that it's taken a few different forms as it's toured, I think it's the version that was done at the National Review of Live Art. Maybe you can tell me if the different forms are a response to different contexts or partly the rhythm of gaps in showing it?

Sheila Ghelani: I think it's the way I make work. I decided that in my solo practice I wasn't going to put any pressure on myself and I was able to do that because I could support myself through this other company work that I was doing. So I didn't have that sense of having to forge out a solo practice in order to survive. I was getting very satiated from

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sharing and working with Pacitti Company and working with Blast Theory. It was incredible. I was going all over the world with them both. I was really happy to take my time with my solo practice. I think that's why that developed, I just used those platforms to develop the work really slowly. I never tried to sell my work or get the work out. I was interested in what I was trying to say and I was in that privileged position of being able to do that because I was working with all these other companies.

Stephen Greer: I think I saw, again in that same video, text saying that one of the choices was if the opportunity felt like the right fit. I suppose my question then is, what was it about the National Review of Live Art that made it feel like the right fit or the right possible fit?

Sheila Ghelani: Good question. I hadn't been to it. Caitlin had and she said you must go, it's extraordinary, there's loads and loads of work and you'll love it. I'd heard about it and probably Robert had shown work there. It was like, I was going to say folklore, but it was one of those things that you talked about. It was showing really interesting work. You'd look at the programme and just think who's showing work there. It was great to be able to show work there. Terrifying too.

Stephen Greer: What do you remember of that? Was the first year at Tramway or The Arches?

Sheila Ghelani: It was at Tramway.

Stephen Greer: What do you remember of that first year, if anything?

Sheila Ghelani: Oh god. I just remember it feeling vibey. I remember Jamie McMurray's performance, that really stands out. I remember really loving it, I remember hating the set-up because you had an hour and finding that really like what the hell. It might have been half an hour. That bit wasn't enjoyable. I enjoyed the actual experience of performing. I remember just really loving the whole experience, I think. I wonder where I stayed, I can't remember. A couple of my peers came: Marty Langthorne, who was my production manager and the lighting designer, and he had followed The Living Room Project, and also Dicky from Pacitti Company. My peers and my best friends were there so I really enjoyed it. That's what I remember of it. And also it being a bit terrifying because a lot of important programmers were there. I enjoyed seeing the work, that's what I really loved.

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Stephen Greer: In the version that I watched – much of your work has your live presence behind it – there's the trestle table and the image that is projected behind you by the camera that's pointing down on the table. I'm describing this for the benefit of the recording [laughs]. There's a moment, again, it was in the version that I saw so I don't know if it recurs in all of the variations, where you step out in front of the table and you shake or pour a bag of soil onto the ground and plant your feet and then really deliberately make eye contact or invite eye contact with your audience. I wanted to ask you about that, but I also saw your unfinished manifesto for making that you posted recently, and there was a line in there that jumped out immediately where you said, I want to look into the eyes of the people I'm engaging with, every person, every pair of eyes.

Sheila Ghelani: That whole piece is about love and the story of my parents meeting, so I wanted to think about the desire that happens between audience and performer and so that's why I put that in. I also realised that there needed to be an interval, or a break in the rhythm of the piece and just wanting to meet everyone's eyes as much as possible. I think that's for me really because I'm quite a nervous performer, always have been, always will be. If there's a run, my first performance will be really shaky and then I'll get grounded and I'll be fine after that. I think that was a little bit of me really trying to ground myself and so that's why I step into the earth as well. It's a mixture of lots of things. That moment did stay.

Stephen Greer: There's something about the performativity of materials or objects across that work, but then maybe in lots of your other practices and projects. Maybe I can ask you a little bit about that. It almost made me laugh because when you say once you've made eye contact, you say I'm going to go back round and carry on doing some things. That object work, I'm interested in how you came to that perhaps knowing you had a background in dance. I can almost see that there's a choreographic logic to it, but it doesn't centre round the body.

Sheila Ghelani: That's exactly it. I do mention that as something that I do nowadays which is the choreography of objects. I think it's being interested in how to arrange things and taking the focus of the gaze off me, which I know it never really does. I don't love performing, it's a weird one. I think maybe that's what I'm trying to do with those objects, make them perform and re-focus people's gaze elsewhere than on me.

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Stephen Greer: I'm thinking about the installation works slightly differently. I think the second piece maybe that you showed at the NRLA would've been *Covet Me Care For Me*?

Sheila Ghelani: Yes.

Stephen Greer: That's an installation piece, but also a directly participatory piece and maybe another kind of thread in your practice. That had a life prior to the NRLA.

Sheila Ghelani: That was a SPILL commission. Again, Pacitti Company was really important there. That wouldn't have happened if I hadn't had that commission from Robert. That was very much about the audience becoming a performer and they may not necessarily realise it but that's what's happening. They're willing to become the performer; they're willing to put on the funny garb and go through the ritual that I've set out. I was still finding out what work I want to make, and I guess with hindsight, I've realised that I want to make all types of work and it's to do with hybridity and shapeshift and really following the idea and trying to find the right form. I let the form arise out of what the question is that I'm trying to interrogate, I suppose.

Stephen Greer: Staying with the idea or the questions and finding the form, that feels like an articulation of a deliberate slowness. Rather than saying I will do project X, I will hollow it out and then I will put it down and move onto the next one.

Sheila Ghelani: It's always been about trying to follow the research and let that go at the rhythm that it needs. It's a tricky one as an artist because you're trying to survive as well. I think because I had this other company work that I was doing, that sort of enabled that.

Stephen Greer: I want to come back to what allows that rhythm of work. Maybe we can talk about your collaboration with Sue Palmer. I know that you've got longstanding relationships with a few people and maybe the one with Sue Palmer stands out for me. If we follow the thread of the NRLA, the third work in that was in 2010 so it was *Sugar Sugar White*.

Sheila Ghelani: It was the thirtieth celebration or something. Yes, *Sugar Sugar White*. I didn't enjoy performing that one. That was in the Tramway. Some of my objects misbehaved, which sometimes they do. They upstage you. That's what I always say, you've got to be careful working with materials and objects because sometimes they do what they want to do [laughs]. *Sugar Sugar White* was a version of *White Squall*, which I maybe never really resolved as a piece of work. I was trying to think about whiteness. It's really complicated.

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Sometimes there are pieces that really coalesce, and they are quickly made and fully formed. *Covet Me Care For Me* was one of those. I just made it super quick and it worked as it was. I would say *Sugar Sugar White*, which was on the back of *White Squall*, in a way that was one I ended up walking away from as a piece of work. I don't know if I ever resolved what I was trying to resolve.

Stephen Greer: When I see it in the context of your other practice, but also more broadly, I'm thinking about the thread of autobiographical practice that's running through this and that these are works that are not about you in a conventional life story sense but are clearly articulations or explorations of heritage and identity and heredity.

Sheila Ghelani: Absolutely. It's an interesting one, my relationship to whiteness. Obviously, I'm of mixed heritage, but legibly, I'm white. I've always had quite a complicated relationship with that and what that means. That definitely played out a little bit in that work.

Stephen Greer: I found some artist pages that you did for an issue of *Performance Research* which was '24 Frames in Commemoration of You'. One of them looks to me to be like the little China figures which featured in *Sugar Sugar White*. One of the materials or objects that seem to stick around in your practice.

Sheila Ghelani: They were in that, and they were also in the thing that I did at Kaleid Editions which ended up being the flower press book. They're a thing or a material that I return to, those little China figurines. I often talk about my practice in relation to my two grandmothers, my Indian grandmother Jaya Lakshmi Ghelani and my English gran, Patricia Ann Garrett. Some of those little figurines were inherited from Patricia because she just loved all that stuff and the ritual I think I got from my grandmother. I definitely use practice as a way to process stuff but still also try and put it at a remove so that it's accessible to anyone.

Stephen Greer: There's a moment where you hear the rumble of the trains passing overhead, two moments, there's always more than one moment at The Arches, and you look up. It's quite effortless. It's like another object at work, maybe. That's a piece where it feels like you're very focused on the task of setting out these objects and placing them into

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conversation and encounter with each other and there is far less eye contact or acknowledgement of the audience.

Sheila Ghelani: Yes. I think that might have actually been me not being fully in control of the choreography or the ritual, so having to focus on the objects. I did that later.. Nikki programmed EPAF [European Performance Art Festival] or programmed a bit of EPAF in Poland and she invited me as one of the artists to go and do that piece again. I remember in that piece, in that version, I felt much more in control of my materials. It was more of a task-based performance art piece in a lot of ways, with its own logic. I'm concentrating on trying to critique whiteness. I end up stuffing the Nick Griffin BNP tape up a chicken [laughs] and now when I look back, I think what was I doing? But I think I was really working through something. I was working through my relationship with whiteness. I was still very confused at that time. Clear, but also confused.

Stephen Greer: It's not as though it's easily resolvable territory. It's interesting to hear that Nikki was involved in part of the future life of that work. Obviously, lots of folk have observed the significance or the influence of Nikki on the progress of their career. The National Review was at three different points. Looking back, do you have a sense of it playing out a particular developmental role within your practice?

Sheila Ghelani: Yes, definitely, there's no doubt about it. Being in amongst all those artists and also who came to that then definitely had an impact. I remember Antoine Pickels from Trouble, that's pretty much why I got to show *Grafting and Budding* in Brussels because he saw it. I feel like I had met him with Pacitti Company, but he definitely saw it. He didn't show *Covet Me Care For Me*. That relationship was important, he's continued to show my work. It was a very important platform. It raised your profile if you were in amongst that network of peers. I think that's what was amazing about it. You'd have really well-established artists alongside some of us that were just starting out and it was great.

Stephen Greer: Has that been the primary context in which your work has come to Scotland? In my research so far, there's been quite specific frameworks or venues who've supported or made possible live art from elsewhere in the UK to appear in Scotland.

Sheila Ghelani: Yes, I would say so. That and obviously BUZZCUT – I came to maybe the second or third BUZZCUT – which is also great. I'd also been in Scotland showing work at the

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Tramway with Blast Theory and *Desert Rain* with Pacitti Company. I think I'd shown *Audiology*, we also did *A Forest*. And I suppose the Edinburgh Festival as well.

Stephen Greer: I want to pick up on two bits there. What was BUZZCUT like? The NRLA finished by design after thirty years, but then the year later the parent company was forced to close, and then BUZZCUT sort of comes out of that bit of the moment, that bit of history. What was BUZZCUT like as a parallel but different space?

Sheila Ghelani: It was great. I remember feeling really old as well. It was really great to see work as well. I didn't actually show work, I just did a talk at the symposium. I loved the energy, and I loved the work that I was seeing. You bumped into peers and that felt really nice. It had a similar energy, but it felt like maybe on a smaller scale. I do remember feeling quite old [laughs].

Stephen Greer: That would've been at The Pearce Institute in Govan. You've also mentioned the Fringe. There's a trope of the Fringe being either a bit inhospitable to live art and experimental performance, or good if you go in with a tactical mindset. Those are the two primary narratives that I hear from people. Does that match with your encounter?

Sheila Ghelani: Yes, definitely. The only thing I've ever shown at the Fringe is an installation, which was *Ramble 1* at Forest Fringe. It's never felt like the right context for me, or I've never been prepared to foot all the cash up front, or been able to. I did do a British Council Showcase pitch, but I applied to the British Council so many times and never got programmed to be part of that Showcase. I can imagine that being a context where the Fringe might have worked for me. I've always skirted around it, it's never quite worked. I've never found my way in or been willing to put enough energy or resource into it, which I know you need to do. But I often go and see the stuff that's on.

Stephen Greer: How did you get involved with Forest Fringe? Ira, Debbie or Andy, who was the point of contact? Or maybe all of the above.

Sheila Ghelani: It would've been through Sally Rose, who was my producer. And actually, Sally Rose would've been my introduction to BUZZCUT because Sally was working with Rosana. I think Sally would've known Andy because of BAC. Sally did work as a producer for Laura and Harun at BAC. So that continued that relationship. Sally was really important as a key for opening up some of those relationships.

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Stephen Greer: The person who I mentioned earlier on that I wanted to come back to is Sue Palmer as someone I know that you've worked with for a number of years now. Maybe the ongoing project at the heart of that relationship is *Common Salt* so perhaps we could talk a bit about that. A lot of the threads that we've been talking about, colonial history and histories of whiteness being explored in different ways through that project as well.

Sheila Ghelani: Yes, massively. It sort of was a surprise that collaboration. It wasn't one either of us were seeking to make happen, but it was one of those where the chemistry is right, and the interest is right. It was through *Rambles with Nature*, which was a project about hedgerows as a border, as a boundary, as a symbol of Britain, as a place of diversity. I mentioned it to Karen Christopher because I'm in an artists' group and Karen Christopher is one of those and she knew Sue really well and she said if you're interested in that kind of thing, maybe you should meet Sue Palmer and so I took a punt and we really got on. That project just became what it is. There are several points where we should've given up probably because we just couldn't get funding, or we couldn't get commissions. We just couldn't get support. But both of us felt really committed to the material so we just carried on and I'm so glad we did. It was really hard; it took years to get that project out and about. I think because of that, we had to commit to it several times and commit to the material so that's why that collaboration feels quite strong. We've just started our next piece of work and we'll see where that one goes. We're still working on the *Common Salt* book which has been going on for over a year.

Stephen Greer: There has been a year of radical disruption to touring for anything.

Sheila Ghelani: It's such a pity because we were going to show the piece at the British Library. It took us years to get in there and we were really looking forward to it because there are all these extraordinary, but also disturbing, pictures that they've got in this particular boardroom that are East India Co. pictures and we would've been right next to them. Obviously the British Library holds a lot of the East India Company archives. It would've been brilliant to show the work there but it's probably not going to happen ever.

Stephen Greer: Maybe. I'm a painful optimist. That's another piece which is maybe characterised as a choreography of objects, but it's also presented in quite an intimate way. Am I right in thinking it has twenty or twenty-five audience members?

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Sheila Ghelani: Yes.

Stephen Greer: So again, there's that quite direct relationship. Maybe you could tell me a little bit about how those choices developed or evolved? The importance of those choices, because I think there's something very specific about the way in which objects are being used and the way in which the audience are seated almost directly at the table of the performance.

Sheila Ghelani: In a way it's like participatory work because there's nowhere to hide for the audience member. It's also about being able to look in the eyes of everyone. We want people to be able to look at objects. We were very interested in the idea of show and tell. Also, all of the decisions that get made around boardroom tables and the fact that in a museum you can go up really close to look at something, even if it's behind glass. It's playing around with all of those ideas. The table is where it happens.

Stephen Greer: Perhaps I'm projecting my own imagined experiences onto the work [but] it's maybe really easy as a white British person to be encouraged to hold histories of colonialism at not just literal arm's length, but at real distance. You can talk about them, you can look at them, but they're not close to you so that they might make eye contact with you.

Sheila Ghelani: Absolutely. As a work, some people find it really direct, and some people find that it's not direct enough. It's such a funny one. You can come to that work maybe and still keep things at arm's length. I guess it's to do with the fact that it's table salt and it's based around this one particular material and getting people to really think about these everyday objects and materials around us and the histories that accumulate and what goes into that thing or that object. It's literally everything so that people do have a personal relationship with colonialism because everything is connected. Some people in the audience still fall asleep during that work because we throw so much material at them. Me and Sue sometimes wonder if it's an easy get out as well, it's a turning away or a keeping some of these stories at arm's length, a refusal to engage. Could be the laments as well. We have a shruti box and I think that's quite soothing.

Stephen Greer: It is quite a beautiful sound. The last thing I wanted to ask you about, and I suppose I'm thinking that this touches on everything that we've talked about, is the

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conscious ways I understand you to be working with or through care in your practice. And maybe the way that your understanding of care has multiple registers. Some of it is to do with going, is this good for me professionally? Is this good for me personally? Is this good for me emotionally? Is this good for me financially? What are the ecological implications of this?

Sheila Ghelani: I think it does play out in all those registers and it also plays out in the relationship that I've got with Clod Ensemble and their Performing Medicine programme. It's all to do with edges, who's at the edges of things, who doesn't fit. So maybe I'll end up working with the patients in a psychiatric hospital.

Stephen Greer: In the way you've written or thought about care, there's a real sense for me of how self-exploitation is really baked into lots of the different forms of labour that cut across the culture sector and also cut across education and I'm sort of sat at the meeting point of those.

Sheila Ghelani: Massively. I do think about it a lot. I don't know if I'll ever solve it. There's just this awareness. It sort of consumes you as a practitioner. I do try to get people to think about their conditions of work and working. It was so fantastic, it was so seductive touring the world, but at the expense of some more everyday things. I'm interested in the conditions that surround the artist and precarious workers. We've seen that in the last year, what happens to freelancers. It feels almost like you can't not think about that if you're thinking about care as subject matter. It feels like you have to think about it holistically. And I would say I still massively get it wrong. It's a struggle. It's interesting that it's become such a trendy subject at the moment as well. That sounds wrong because of course it's great that it's something that everyone's thinking about, but also you do get the sense that it's another subject to be consumed.

Stephen Greer: It will get handled in a quite tokenistic way. There's a potential for that to happen.

Sheila Ghelani: Exactly, yes. I think there's a lot of that around at the moment.

Stephen Greer: As we emerge out of the pandemic, these last few weeks I've suddenly been interested in thinking about what's nourishing our practice in different ways.

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Sheila Ghelani: What am I about to do? I guess the direction that I'm really going to go off deeply into, is thinking about climate through another collaboration with another artist group. That's going to be quite major soon. The project with Sue is atmospheric, we're thinking about atmospheric forces. I think that's something to do with thinking about the air. Sue and I see it as a next natural step on from *Common Salt*. It's thinking about all the same histories, about colonialism and stuff and trade, but it's thinking about it in relation to the weather and climate. I think that's feeding my practice. I've been thinking a lot about where to make, or who to make with as we come out of this phase, if that's what's happening in the UK anyway. So trying to come to grips with that. Although I would say that there's always this reflection in everything I do. I feel like I'm quite a reflective practitioner in that sense. I'm always asking that question.