

Harriet Cooper:

Okay. Thank you so much for coming tonight. I know it's been a bit of a weird weather day, but it's nice now, so we're able to have a bit of daylight at one of these events for a change. My name is Harriet Cooper, and I'm the Head of Visual Arts here at Jerwood Arts. We're really, really excited to have Vicky Higginson and Selina Hurley here in conversation, alongside Jerwood Arts Fund Makers Open.

Harriet Cooper:

Jerwood Arts Fund Makers Open was established in 2010 to recognize and promote the significance of making practices and processes within contemporary art. It supports exceptional UK-based artists and makers to develop their creative ideas independently, enabling them to experiment, learn and take risks, with substantial curatorial support. For this eighth edition, we've been really delighted to support the work of artists and makers Anna Berry, Cecilia Charlton, Jahday Ford, Francisca Onumah and Helena Russell, and Vicky Higginson. I'm hoping that many of you will have had the chance see the exhibition in the galleries, and to see Vicky's installation, *Coping Mechanisms* in there. The commission is a series of glass healing devices that draw on folklore, mythology, and medical history to imagine ways to treat emotional ailments. If you've not had a chance to pop into the galleries yet, we'll have them open a little bit after the talk, to have a look, more in-depth.

Harriet Cooper:

So we're really excited to have Vicky and Selina here to talk about some of the ideas behind the commission and shared interests and research that have fed into it. The conversation lasts about 30 to 40 minutes, and we'll have a chance to ask questions at the end. We're not expecting any fire drills or anything, so if you hear anything alarm-like, do head for the door. And yeah, if you have any problems at all or want to step out during the event, please do feel free to. Before I hand over to Vicky and Selina, I'm just going to quickly tell you a little bit about them both.

Harriet Cooper:

So, Vicky Higginson is an Edinburgh-based artist who works with hand-blown, cold-worked glass. She graduated with an MA in Glass from University of Sunderland in 2011. She's exhibited work nationally, including at the British Glass Biennale in Stourbridge, and Collect in London. Internationally, she's exhibited in Ireland, Japan, the Czech Republic and the USA, and had residencies at Edinburgh College of Art and North Lands Creative. She was awarded the Student Award at the British Glass Biennale in 2012, the Creative Scotland Emerging Artists Bursary in 2015, and received a scholarship to a masterclass at Corning Museum of Glass in 2018.

Harriet Cooper:

Selina Hurley is Curator of Medicine, and is Lead Curator at one of the five new permanent Medicine Galleries at the Science Museum, focusing on the theme of medicine and therapeutics. After completing degrees at the University of York and Imperial College, Selina has worked on numerous projects at the Science Museum, including Climate Changing Stories, the contemporary science element of Mine Maps: Stories From Psychology, and the fiftieth anniversary on the first human-to-human heart transplant. She has recently co-edited and contributed to the forthcoming book, *Medicine Cabinet*, and a forthcoming chapter in *Medicine: An Imperfect Science*.

Harriet Cooper:

So, without further ado, I'm going to hand over to you two, to have a wonderful conversation and tell us more about some of these ideas.

Selina Hurley:

Okay. Well, thank you very much for that intro. And also, I'd like to say thank you for turning up even though Natasha McEnroe was billed today, but unfortunately she couldn't be here because she is ill, so thank you all for coming. So Vicky, I think the thing that I really feel about when I look at your work is I can really see the medical devices that have inspired some of those pieces. And they're also ones that often get overlooked, so what drew you to them to inspire your piece?

Vicky Higginson:

Because I was looking at healing devices as an idea, I wanted to think of objects that could help someone's emotional state. So I then wanted to look at medical devices as the inspiration for the forms. And also, just having visited the galleries at the Science Museum, some of the objects weren't anything that I'd come across before. So things like the anesthesia inhalers just struck me as something that you could then use as a really conceptual idea. So, if you're in the original objects, they have... Oh, there's one just there. So, they have sponges that are soaked in ether, is it?

Selina Hurley:

Yeah.

Vicky Higginson:

Yeah. And then you'd inhale that, whereas I thought, "Oh, what if you put something else into the vessel?" And in some ways then, as well as the medical side of things, that linked to some of the more... Like folk medicine and that kind of thing, with shamanism and inhaling different substances. But yeah, the actual objects themselves, I looked around the ones that seemed interesting concepts. And then also ones that just related really well to the ideas that I was looking at. So something like a reflex hammer to awaken your emotional responses and that kind of thing. Yeah.

Selina Hurley:

I mean, it certainly made me look at the objects I see as very practical and very used sometimes domestically in a really different way. That emotional state of being is often really hard to represent in museum objects, so it's wonderful to see them can take on a new life in a way here. So the ear trumpets that you've focused on hearing, and it's the same type of concept is there, but you've taken it a step further with those as well.

Vicky Higginson:

Yeah. Yeah. I thought things like the ear trumpets were just such amazing objects, but then how could you use that to... It's a method of communication, and then what if you could create a communication device to do something, to communicate with people that aren't there anymore? So, how would you use it and what would it look like? And yeah, it just seemed like a good starting point for that.

Selina Hurley:

I think what really comes through, especially with the fairytale, is it's a really personal work for you as well. So, can you tell us a bit more about that?

Vicky Higginson:

Yeah. So a lot of it came from things in my family history. So, I've lost both my parents and also my brother, five years ago. So, for example, the inhaler one has a feather that was from my brother's funeral. The birds were in that place and I picked that one up at the time, so it was something that was very personal to me. And also just each of the objects was to address something that... Excuse me, that I would like to have some way of solving in my life. And I think, I mean, I spoke to other people about what kind of objects they would like or what kind of issues they would like to be able to solve. But ultimately, they were all things that I thought would be something I would like to use or something that would address an issue that I've had in my life.

Selina Hurley:

So, the feathers come a lot in amulets, so folk things, so things that you might carry or pick up. Particularly in my family, things that resonate really well is feathers. If we see a feather, we think of a loved one as well. So, is it the first time you've used feathers in your work?

Vicky Higginson:

Yeah, I've never used them before. It was something that I- I started picking them up when I was on dog walks, just from the start of lockdown, actually. I just started noticing them, because I guess you get a lot more of them in Springtime. And I started picking them up without any real idea of what I was going to do with them. And then I thought, "Oh actually, maybe I could use them in some work." And then, when I was looking at the idea of bringing in fairytales and also folk elements, they have such a lot of symbolism in a lot of different cultures and a lot of different stories. And I also brought my own interpretations of the different birds and the different types of feathers. But yeah, I haven't used them in my work before and I wasn't sure quite how to bring them in, but I feel like it's worked quite well.

Selina Hurley:

I think they do. I definitely do. And I think a lot of them, when I look at your work, they act as connectors between the pieces in a way, to bring the different elements of the glass together as well. And talking about the glass, I think there's a lot of medical collections with glass. So, glass always reminds me of pharmacy, of jars, of feeding cups. So, all that kind of domestic wear, but also coming back to the amulets and the folklore. So actually, around here in Bermondsey, you used to wear a blue necklace to ward off bronchitis. So, each borough had its own tradition and its own colors of glass to protect children. So, what is it about glass for you as a medium, as an artist?

Vicky Higginson:

As an artist, I guess, I started working with glass on my undergraduate degree, and it's something that you hear from a lot of people that do glassblowing that you start it and then they just get hooked, which was very much the case. And I don't know if it's just something about the physicality of making it and that it's so immediate, working with it in the moment, in the heat, and you have to make split-second decisions. I really enjoy the process of working with it.

Vicky Higginson:

And I also do quite a lot of cold working, so the grinding and the cutting into the glass, which is something that is a much more labour-intensive, in some ways, process. I mean, it's not as physical, or it can be, but it's not as physical and as immediate as glass-blowing, but you can really make things more personal. And some of the work in here has engraved motifs within the glass that are something that

I've been doing for a while, and I wanted to include in this work because it was something that's very... I feel like it's something that I do quite a lot. It's personal to me.

Selina Hurley:

Yeah, definitely. And I think with glass blowing as well, your breath becomes part of the work, so you're physically part of the work yourself. And I suppose, especially with a piece so personal, that you are infused within it as well.

Vicky Higginson:

Yeah.

Selina Hurley:

It's the sense I get from talking to you and meeting with you as well. And I think there's something about glass, and that also comes from a medical side, that it's strong but fragile at the same time. So you have this almost dichotomy going on. I hate handling anything glass at the Science Museum. If it's massive and glass, I won't go near it for fear. And X-Ray tubes, so there's lots of ways glass is used to help you see things. And I just wanted to know what your thoughts might be on that.

Vicky Higginson:

Yeah, because that was one of the- another reason that I was looking at medical devices, because there is so much glass involved in them, that it seemed appropriate to be looking at those sorts of objects. And also, this is the first time I've used mirroring in my work as well. And mirrors seemed like something that is used in a scientific way quite a lot, but also in terms of mythology and folklore. And a lot of different cultures have mirrors as symbolism, but also things like spraying and fortune telling and that kind of thing. They just have so much different symbolism that feeds into the ideas of the work, but that also obviously links back to medicine, as they're used so much.

Selina Hurley:

Yeah. The mirrors always remind me of the doctors' ophthalmoscopes that you see in 1950's dramas. And the medicine collections at the Science Museum are quite broad. They're fairly anthropological in their scope, so we have a lot of mirrors for... We actually have scrying mirrors as well. We have crystals that have the magic connection rather than the strictly scientific medicine that you might expect to find at the Science Museum. It's made me look at some of the kits, the violet ray kits, particularly in a new light. So for those of you unfamiliar with violet ray kit, it's a device that you used to plug into a lamp in your home, if you had electricity, and it would spark purple for red or blue sparks. And the idea was to help numb pain. Sometimes you get combs to help hair growth. You might get some rather suggestive-looking probes which go where you might imagine to reinvigorate yourself. So there's lots of meaning within the violet ray kit of recharging, but also numbing pain. And it connects to the inhaler as well.

Vicky Higginson:

Yeah. I mean, that was one object that I just came across and was like, "What is this?" There's some incredible examples of them, but it seemed in some ways akin to magic in a way. It's like, people created these things that, does it do anything? Especially with the light and the glass and the way that you use them, it seems more of a ritual thing than necessarily a scientific object.

Selina Hurley:

There's definitely an element of showmanship or showpersonship within them. That idea of plugging in and the lighting up. And if you watch videos of them, you still get that performative sense from them. But they're actually one of the things we were offered most at the Science Museum when I started, because people were clearing out houses, and it's just something that people had bought to help themselves at home. And I think that home side really comes out in your work. So, the pestle and mortar, for instance, which we probably more associate now with kitchens, have that real medicinal link.

Vicky Higginson:

Yeah. Yeah, but also folk medicine as well. That seemed to be something that is used a lot across both really. And then, my one more took the idea of breaking things down, but breaking down ideas rather than physical...

Selina Hurley:

Yeah. And I think-

Vicky Higginson:

... materials.

Selina Hurley:

Yeah, there's lots of things where, as a viewer, you come to your work. So, the first question I asked was, "Can I breathe into the inhaler?" That was a very medical way of thinking about them, but I think there's lots of ways that viewers can interpret your work as well. So, have you had any surprises of what people have taken from your work so far? You can say no.

Vicky Higginson:

I guess I've not been there when a lot of people have been looking at the work, but yeah. I mean, people always see different things than I have seen into it. The ear trumpets do look a bit like lamps, so people think that, but then I guess it's not necessarily immediately obvious what things are, especially once something like that, that's been- taken inspiration from an object, but then altered so much to be more of an installation piece.

Selina Hurley:

Can you talk a bit more about the writing, the fairytale aspect? So, you follow the installation and you follow the story as well, about what that experience of writing was like for you?

Vicky Higginson:

Yeah. I mean, that was something that came quite late on in the project. A lot of the time that I'd been working on the project, I'd been doing a lot of reading and things, like reading fairytales and also modern interpretations of fairytales, and traditional folk tales and legends and that kind of thing. And I just felt like I wanted to try and write something that was appropriate to the pieces. And I wasn't sure if I was going to include it. It was just something that I thought I'd have a go at it. And in the end, it just seemed to add a much greater depth to the pieces, and also to explain what they were about without just writing it on a sign on the wall. But yeah, to link it back to a lot of the research that I've been doing into fairy tales and stuff, but in a really organic way that brought my own experience into it, and it gave more of an explanation of what the pieces were.

Selina Hurley:

As a person that writes labels for a living, I do appreciate a different way of viewing it. And I think it helps people move around the space actually, and I think that's a beautiful thing to encourage.

Vicky Higginson:

Yeah. I mean, it was very much written as excerpts, and they didn't have to be in a particular order. I think I'd written them in a different order than they were in the gallery, so they can be displayed in any order. It's not that you have to use the objects in a certain order. Yeah, I didn't have an overall story in mind. I wanted it to just be little excerpts from an imagined story.

Selina Hurley:

I think medical history often draws on lots of different things, like you do. So, we draw on things like religion and folk medicine. So if you ever do come to the Science Museum, there is a whole gallery, like those that are on display, but devoted to faith and hope and fear. And I think the emotions in your piece do come across really strongly, where there is that connection to them as well.

Vicky Higginson:

Yeah.

Selina Hurley:

So was there anything that inspired you that didn't quite make the cut? I'm always quite interested in what might have not made it as well.

Vicky Higginson:

Yeah. I mean, there's definitely other things I had, just... I just kept churning out ideas for things to make. There's one that I would've really liked to make, and I still may do, based on the bellows respirators, which are just amazing. Especially the tobacco ones.

Selina Hurley:

So there is... It actually has a link to the Thames. It's called the tobacco enema, and they were placed by the Royal Humane Society along the Thames. And the idea was, if you were apparently drowned, so you've been pulled from the river, they would take tobacco and either put it in your mouth or the other end to revive you, to literally give you a shock to wake you up. Now, how successful they actually were not, I do not know, but it's an incredible piece. And to us it seems strange and almost slightly outlandish that you would use tobacco in such a way, but it just shows you the cultural and social resonances around things, because tobacco was a stimulant. And so they were looking for medical ways to use these things. So I-

1st Questioner:

What about coffee?

Selina Hurley:

And coffee as well. Chocolate starts as a medicinal product, and there's lots of different... Custard powder also starts because a pharmacist has a wife allergic to eggs. So there are lots of things that start off that we don't think of as medical, but actually they, in their journeys, and now medical objects with

[inaudible 00:19:58] have taken on another new meaning as well, which is why I love looking at it as well.

Vicky Higginson:

Yeah. Really, the idea of the respirator, that had a lot of potential and ways that could rejuvenate you mentally or kick-start ideas and that kind of thing, I don't know.

Selina Hurley:

We also have... It's an iron lung. So basically, if you've heard of them, they were essentially for people who had polio and had paralysis of the chest, so they couldn't breathe for themselves. And you get these massive electrical, huge, coffin-shaped machines. But we have one that is essentially a giant bellows on a box, because they depended on electricity. So, if you have a power cut, what are you going to do? So, there's this huge thing. I'll have to show it to you. You'll love it. And you just have... It's the human effort of the bellows. So, it's probably the size of about six of those chairs put together. So yeah, you can see the ideas of air and these things that become one thing of fire-making to start with, but then get transformed into something else as well. Oh, I love talking about medical things. This is the most brilliant evening for me after having a day at work. So, what's your favorite piece out of all of them?

Vicky Higginson:

I think, as an object, the one based on a reflex hammer is the one that I like the most, and it's something that I want to progress. I've got ideas of how I can do other interpretations of the same piece, but I don't know. I was pleased with how they all came out, actually. The respirator as well, I think. The inhaler has just turned out better than I hoped in a way. The actual respirator piece just... I wasn't sure how to do that, and it came out really nicely, so...

Selina Hurley:

I have to say, that is my favorite piece, for the background story of it. But I look at it and I see it, and I see the first operations done with it. The thought of trusting someone to put you into an unconscious state, the thought of having a surgery perhaps at home on a kitchen table or in an operating theatre being watched. So, I feel the personal connections at either end of that machine. So, the person who'd be operating. Well, as in putting the fumes in and measuring, but also the person going under as well. And I think, particularly in medical collections, sometimes there's so much focus on the practitioners that sometimes we miss the people. And I think you've brought those people back in by creating these emotional pieces, because they are a dialogue.

Vicky Higginson:

Yeah. I mean, I think that one is probably conceptually my favorite one. I think just as an object, I really like the hammer, but yeah.

Selina Hurley:

I think there's lots of stories where, in medical history, we don't think of them as healing anymore. So, there are examples of things that are practices that we no longer use, things like blood letting which sound odd and why would that happen, but it's all based within a theory of bodies or theories of person and emotions as well. So, if you were to pick an object that really spoke to emotional responses that you

saw in the medical collection, could you pick one, do you think? Pressure, I know. That's fine. It's really hard. It's really difficult.

Vicky Higginson:

Well, there's just such a lot of fascinating things. I just can't remember them.

Selina Hurley:

Yeah. So the Medicine Galleries at the Science Museum, there's about 3000 objects on display, some of which you are seeing on the screen now, but we have 150,000 in store. So, there's always much more to discover. And there's also a lot we don't know. There's some stories that have come to us with little or no information. They've just somehow survived. And sometimes we have to use connections to other objects to work out why. So, when I see a beautifully provenanced storytelling, I'm like, "Yes!" Because I don't often get that in my line of work. We're often having to make either assumptions, or we do work more in a participatory way now, so we will go out to communities and ask more questions.

Vicky Higginson:

I feel like the... When I went, there's a big square display with a lot of objects from the Wellcome Collection that was just, a really... I think because there were so many of the objects together, it was just a really beautiful display. And that had some of the more unusual items that aren't necessarily things that are now used, but were just really fascinating objects.

Selina Hurley:

So, we look after the Wellcome Collection at the Science Museum. So Henry Wellcome was a pharmaceutical magnate, not as in fridge magnet. I have used the wrong word, but he owns a pharmaceutical business and was probably the first big one, but he also was very interested in collecting the experience of just being human. So, that collection runs from everything from saints, amulets, scientific models, surgical instruments. So, it's really broad in its scope. And actually, this is part of the display that Vicky was talking about. There's so much that we can't display, but actually we wanted to give people the experience of what it's like to be in a museum store. So, what is it like to walk in and open those cupboards and go on a journey of discovery?

Selina Hurley:

A lot of the items in there, there's probably about a thousand items, which is built around the lift, only 15 have labels. And that is a deliberate choice, so people do look around and try and guess what things are, and sometimes the displays are spiked with a modern example. So for instance, feeding bottles, there might be a plastic one in there to help people go on their own journey. Now, visitors are very unpredictable. Some say, "We want more labels," and then others say, "But we don't read labels," so we can never really win as museum people. But I think that's part of the experience we want to give people, is to bring their own experiences to the museum and also take some different ones away. And I think that's probably the same with your work as well.

Vicky Higginson:

Yeah.

Selina Hurley:

In a way.

Vicky Higginson:

Yeah. I didn't want to be too prescriptive about how people read the work. And I think, back with the written story element, I was a bit worried that that might be a little bit, giving too much information, but I wanted to add that. But yeah, again, like you say, it isn't saying, "This is what this is about." It's just more of an emotional connection to the pieces. Yeah. I think I definitely as you're saying, in the Science Museum, I think I like having some things that tell you exactly what they are, but then that whole display, I was trying to work it out. I enjoyed that side of it.

Selina Hurley:

Yeah. I mean, it's just a small snapshot. So that's part of why I love my job, is I get to go around - we do do the more, "This is what an anesthetic inhaler looks like," just because some of the things look so strange, you'd never... Sometimes I'm like, "What is this?" And I have to remind myself of what these things are. And I think that's part of our histories. We all have a history of medicine, whether or not we've seen or used any of these items. You'll probably go home tonight, I hope, and look at your homes in a different way, and be like, "Oh, actually that first aid kit speaks to a lot about me," what's in it and things like that. So you do tend to start looking in a slightly different way at your own home. Plasters for me are a thing. I never keep a used plaster, but it tells so much story. The first night in my flat, I cut my finger. And so I had to... And I was like, "Oh, if I was a historical person, I'd be like, 'Oh, I must keep the plaster.'"

Vicky Higginson:

I did have an idea once, and I would've needed to start years ago, of keeping the tissues every time I cut myself with a piece of glass. That would've been incredible, but just how often it's been, 10 years now.

Selina Hurley:

But these are the things. We don't tend to think of our own medical experience sometimes in real time. So sometimes we need that distance between ourselves, and probably same with you to create your work.

Vicky Higginson:

Yeah. Something you need time to reflect on.

Selina Hurley:

Yeah, definitely. So, a lot of my job in the last two years has been to collect the COVID-19 pandemic as it has come out. So, you relive the pandemic once through it yourself, then you relive it for the museum, and then you relive it again when you put it on its shelf. So, we're constantly going through the same sort of cycle. So, it'd be lovely to have a couple of years break, and be like, "What should have been collected from the pandemic?" Because it's quite a pressure to do that whilst it's happening as well.

Vicky Higginson:

I think in relation to that, even just making the objects and thinking of them and thinking of what kind of thing I would like to make was therapeutic in itself. Even if the actual ideas of how the objects would

work isn't feasible, just making them in the first place was really... I found it really helpful and cathartic and...

Selina Hurley:

And it's a process. So I really enjoyed seeing on your Facebook all different pictures and iterations of things. So, you were documenting that process as you go for yourself, but also to help you make sense of it afterwards as well maybe.

Vicky Higginson:

Because it was very much, I didn't have an idea of what the things were going to be from the start. When I came up with the idea, I had some ideas for objects that weren't necessarily things I could make. So, as part of the process, I just did a lot of research, reading and visiting museums, and was really open to seeing things that would then spark ideas, which... Yeah, the Science Museum collection was just so pivotal. It was great, but...

Selina Hurley:

It is a great collection. I will pay Vicky later for that small advert, but it is. It's probably not what you expect. I think there's a lot of unexpectedness within it, and that's what we love. We also have art commissions within it as well. So, there was a Mark Quinn, 'Self-conscious Gene', which greets you as you come in. And there was also kinetic sculpture by the duo Studio Roso, which looks at how disease spreads. And we also have a piece by Eleanor Crook, who's a wax artist, but cast in bronze, which looks at a good death. So, you have a figure between saint and surgeon, and on the skirt, we all got to pick an amulet, which could be whatever you wanted. And so, mine was my favorite object, which didn't make it on display, which I was so sad about, but it also had links. It had a pestle and mortar, so it's called A Hair in the Moon. It's a netsuke. And I had rebuilt a pharmacy for the gallery. And it was a running joke in my family that I would take these things to...

Selina Hurley:

So there was a lot of meaning involved in those amulets for us, so as part of the staff we were also within the gallery, as well as our blood, sweat, sometimes tears, depending on what's on display, but yeah, I think the surprising element is great, and I love that we have inspired you, because that's what we wanted to do. We wanted people to come, maybe see something they didn't know, maybe see their own experiences, but actually be inspired to have a conversation, which you've done in glass, basically. I have no more questions for you. So maybe, we will open it to the floor, if anyone has any questions. We might even start chatting again between us. I'll go to the lady here first, and then...

1st Questioner:

Just a quick question about colour because I think that really stands out. Medical devices, people with you know- clear glass, and I really enjoyed the color actually and I thought it made it very emotional actually hearing your story. I wondered if you chose colours with specific meanings or...

Vicky Higginson:

The colours were a very personal choice. They were just colours that I really enjoy, and that I... I was looking at different colour palettes, and I wanted it to be quite joyful colours and quite uplifting. I guess there is a lot of white and grey, so there were the clinical aspects, but then bringing in the really bright colours. Yeah. It was more just a personal choice. They don't necessarily symbolize anything specifically.

I suppose the reflex hammer, the colours reflect the magpie feathers. Those ones are more chosen specifically for that, but the other ones was just colours that I like. But it was also, I guess, coined the term folk futurism to explain the concept of quite futuristic-looking objects, but taking in a lot from folklore. And I've always quite liked retro-futuristic style, so it was quite graphical. Not necessarily cartoony, but I wanted to use bright colors in it. I didn't want them to be too... Although, the ideas are quite serious, I wanted it to be uplifting as objects.

Selina Hurley:

Over to you, and then we'll come that way.

2nd Questioner:

To draw on that, I think, because really, they're quite attractive as objects [inaudible 00:34:38] was quite interesting. I was actually going to ask about the writing and mark-making on the glass pieces, because I wonder if with particularly, the ear trumpets have this kind of etching disturbance and I wondered if we could know more about that.

Vicky Higginson:

Yeah. So, the mark-making within the pieces, the quite drawn sketchy mark-making came a lot from things like neolithic, rock arts and Pictish carving, that kind of thing. So, I picked up a lot of ideas from anthropological collections, but then also stuff like symbolism and stuff used in alchemy. But then the actual pieces, the symbols don't actually have direct meanings, but they were things that I... There's certain motifs within there that I kept coming back to, like circles and some of the combinations of lines.

Vicky Higginson:

And they were also... I think some of the really interesting things came across in the research were about how surfaces can be transitional planes, or in things like rock art, in say cave paintings, some cultures believed that the rock surface was the plane between this world and another. And I wanted, in some of the pieces, for the glass to be that transitional, liminal surface. So it's like, if you're trying to communicate, that the symbols and the surface of the object help to transmit the ideas and to... I don't know. Does that make sense?

3rd Questioner:

Yeah. You just said [inaudible 00:37:05] question about, you discovered these objects that you wanted to produce for this collection. And as you went on, the physical act of producing that glassblowing, did you learn something new about glassblowing itself, or has it changed your perspective on what [inaudible 00:37:25] could be? Or how is it going to inform your future projects?

Vicky Higginson:

It's definitely by far the biggest project I've worked on. It was one that allowed me to bring in a lot more techniques together in one place, not necessarily in blowing the glass, but things like mirroring. I have done quite a few pieces before where it's... So, with these ones as well, it's blown and then I'll cut them up and stick them together with adhesives and things. So, I learned a lot more about that side of things. In terms of the actual blown glass, so the mark-making and stuff, that was something that I had done before, but not on this scale. And it was something that I wanted to incorporate into more conceptual pieces.

Vicky Higginson:

Yeah. It was really nice to be able to work on a project that was just conceptual and didn't have to be a functional object, and just have the time to play while I was making stuff. I didn't necessarily have an idea of how the objects were going to come together, all the different components. Some of the time, I would just be in the studio making approximate shapes that then I would put together later in my studio, which is fun. I've got a lot of spare parts, so I can make a lot more stuff, which is nice.

4th Questioner:

Yeah. I was wondering, when I saw the title of this piece, about healing and the [inaudible 00:39:07]. I always think [inaudible 00:39:10]. If you have an experience when, let's say when I was a child and I had to do something [inaudible 00:39:11], it was quite traumatic to see all these instruments, which were designed probably by men, and almost like a torture instrument rather than healing. So it's interesting how you perceive and maybe thought about colours which can be healing, of course. And who designed these instruments that we have here? And how healing actually they were, and also mention the fairy tales and shamanic healing [inaudible 00:39:43]. [inaudible 00:39:49] I'm dismissing it at all, but could they have been more creative in designing those instruments, really? That's my observation.

Selina Hurley:

I think you are right. I mean, there's a lot of surgical instruments made by men, made for male hands, particularly made to operate or treat women. So, there are a lot of gender politics at play, and sometimes you'd wonder if the approach was the most conservative one. So, you sometimes get surgeons who are, particularly in the 1890s and 1880s before anesthesia is really on the scene, that are really gung-ho about operating on women. And there's lots of things about choice and consent. And I think sometimes actually, when people look back on our treatment and healing, what will they think? What will they think when they look at the side effects of chemotherapy, of radiotherapy? So, I always think the same question and then apply it on a hundred years about, well, what does that look like?

Selina Hurley:

And I think that also, coming back to the amulets and the folklore, is that particularly in the Science Museum, it can often be dis-judged straight away. It's like, it's not science, but this is what people do. This is what people do to heal themselves, to make themselves feel better. So, why shouldn't we show it? So, I think sometimes there is a little bit of resistance, institutionally to it, but actually I think the range of healing practices that there are, and who decides what is healing and who decides what's not, is a really important question that we try and play with or unpack a little bit more.

Selina Hurley:

We also particularly look at when medicines go wrong. So, thalidomide, we have a big display, which was a morning sickness drug in the 1950s, which led to a lot of impairments. And we tell that story, because that is people's lives. So, we don't shy away from it. But I love that you've asked the question, because it's a really important point about who decides.

Vicky Higginson:

I feel like there are some examples of instruments that have been created for like aesthetic reasons, or there's definitely ones that they would've, I guess, been more for the wealthy.

Selina Hurley:

Yeah, definitely. Like the violet ray kits, there's definitely an element where they've been designed to make you think of their uses, and the fact that they're clear glass to transmit the color. It's all part of the design elements to it. But there are definitely ones that you look at and go, "Really? That was never going to work." We have things called Perkins Tractors. They're literally two pieces of metal. And the idea was to draw the excess electricity out for your body. Now, to us, who live in a world of atoms and cells, that makes not a huge amount of sense. But if you live in a world where electricity is the thing that feeds your body, and electricity is a new and exciting thing, then you start to see how it can make sense. And to some people, it did work, for them. Oh, yeah. Go.

5th Questioner:

I remember when we talked about your project, Vicky. We did talk a lot about feathers [inaudible 00:43:16] and had different kind of associations [inaudible 00:43:31] and I was really interested about how some of the specific symbolism in some of the pieces can relate. So, you've spoken a little bit about things like swans and how [inaudible 00:43:43] around different [inaudible 00:43:48]?

Vicky Higginson:

Yeah. Looked into different cultural interpretations and symbolism and feathers. But a lot of the time, when I came to see how I viewed them, it was more of a personal interpretation. I guess, things like swans to me suggested transformation, which actually, I guess, came more from fairytales and things. I have used quite a lot of crow feathers, and that was something that was, when I was walking, there's a lot of crows in the park near where I live. And the crows seem like a community, and they come, and there were a couple of crows recognize me when I walk past because I give them bits of my dog treats. And they came to symbolize community and family, I guess. And actually, in looking into more research, I guess a lot of the time, crows can be seen as bad omens and that kind of thing, whereas I hadn't seen them in that way. It turned out that in Japan, they are seen as a symbol of family, which was interesting to see that that had to come in somewhere else.

Vicky Higginson:

Yeah. I don't know. Magpie is... I always just felt it was just really exciting whenever I found a magpie feather, I think, just because they're such beautiful feathers. And it was actually not that common to find them. And then pigeons, I've used quite a bit. The one that's the violet ray type one is all wood pigeon feathers. And I felt like, because pigeons are everywhere, all over the world, all the time, they seemed like the witnesses of life. They're always there, watching what's happening, and that's what they came to mean in the work. Yeah. They're just the eternal watchers.

Selina Hurley:

I like to think that the medical objects that have survived are witnesses to our own journeys of healing and health too. Whilst we might not know the names of the people, we know the experiences. So they're there, so that idea of the witness. And I love that the birds became a community, because often museum objects are often so very singular. And so you don't get that sense of community, or maybe not- perhaps COVID is a slightly different example, but mostly, if it's an inhaler, you think of maybe one or two people. You don't get that same community sense.

Vicky Higginson:

I think maybe that's one of the things I liked about the big display, because there's so many objects all together. It's so many different people's experience of the same things. Yeah.

Selina Hurley:

Yeah. Does anyone else have any questions for us at all?

Harriet Cooper:

If not, I would love to say a massive thank you to [inaudible 00:47:01].

Selina Hurley:

And thank you for listening.

Harriet Cooper:

Yes, thank you. Thank you for coming.