

in conversation

This email interview was held between Lyn Smuts and Mandy Conidaris in November 2014.

MC - I've based this short interview on comments you have made on your website, and it revolves around my asking you just to amplify on these, if you'll excuse the pun on sound. You have quoted Lucy Lippard from her book *Overlay* as saying "Art itself may be partially defined as an expression of that moment of tension when human intervention in, or collaboration with, nature is recognized."

For me, it is interesting that you use sound – essentially a fleeting phenomenon - as the reference to the human aspect of some kind of participation with the Earth, whereas you use imagery of mountains or hollows to refer to the natural world, which speaks of the potential for the Earth's physical constancy. Is this in part due to any personal philosophy or understanding of how transitory is human life? Could you comment a little on this observation and question?

LS - In her (tentative) definition of what art itself may be, Lucy Lippard uses the words tension and recognition. To talk of art as the expression of "a moment of tension" is wonderful. It implies so much potential. That moment is a gestation, and it will lead to work informed by what one has done, read about the history of the world, dreamt, experienced in nature, in learning and through contact with other people. The moment of tension is when things move into place and the connections are made.

What we now experience as a physical constancy was of course created by movement. In the case of our natural environment or landscape, by massive movement and massive sound. Our affinity for landscape may be prompted by patterns of energy we recognize within it. Rather than dwelling on the transitory nature of human life, which you enquire about, I would say that I am very interested in the interconnectedness of things.

MC - When or how did the actual link with sound and printmaking happen in your work?

LS - At a Science Open Day (of the Oceanographic Research Centre), I came upon a display of sonar printouts of the ocean floor. I was completely captivated by their graphic presence, and by their excessive length (endless scrolls that could arguably circumvent the world). Because of their proportions and the repetitive graphic mark-making, these printouts suggested the notation of time. The similarity to musical scores was pronounced. To make these recordings, sound waves were sent down to make contact with the ocean floor and their echoes were, on return, scorched electrically by metal prongs onto damp paper. The method resulted in a strange purplish/magenta colour, a colour with human rather than mechanical connotations, which I retained in the big print *Magenta reading*.

Made by sound and visually drawn by echoes, these scientific print outs confirmed and strengthened a kind of synaesthetic appetite that has not diminished yet.

MC - You have also described Ernst Chladni's experiments in the 1790s where he used metal plates and fine powder to demonstrate that all matter vibrates. You say "Chladni mounted a metal plate horizontally and dusted it with a fine powder and then drew a violin bow across the edge of the plate. The sound frequencies produced in this manner by the human hand cause shifting visual images which evoke a shifting communication with the structures of nature."

This essentially underpins much of your work, and you have been exploring aspects of a visual expression of sound for many years. Could you describe how you discovered this information about Chladni, and the impact it had on you creatively?

LS - I discovered the work of Chladni by browsing through the 'acoustics' shelves of the library! There is currently a lot of information and many examples available online though. Yes, I found it very relevant to my interests. Of course the fact that he used "my" materials - copperplate and fine powders - just heightened my interest. I repeated his experiment with resin powder on copper and initially etched and printed the resulting patterns. The two prints: *deep frequency* and *into silence* were made in this way. For these two prints I went to some trouble when playing to obtain an asymmetrical pattern. The patterns in *deep frequency* suggested a subterranean movement, a birthing of a landscape. I immediately related it to my mountain images and consider the prints *Table Mountain* and *deep frequency* as complementaries. I regard *deep frequency* as potentially a depiction of subterranean movements (and sound) that could, for example, cause a mountain to come into being. And I see the mountain as solidified energy.

I then experimented with monotypes. The monotypes better conveyed the fleeting quality of sound. I used a finer powder and printed only one image and printed it immediately. The impact the Chladni system had on me creatively was to move me into interactive and collaborative work and also, to some degree, into non-figurative or abstract work.

MC - And further, could you speak about the way you see Chladni's process as evoking memories and dreams – also fleeting aspects of human existence?

LS - Chladni did his experiment to demonstrate that all material contains vibration. He toured Europe and held meetings and house gatherings to demonstrate his findings (i.e. he did performances). When I invite the audience at an exhibition to play the copperplates instead of being observers, the process evokes the most wonderful reaction. The images that come into being are organic in shape and fleeting by nature: they shift into another formation easily. Very often the shifting patterns evoke comments by the players about their memories and their dreams. The process is experienced as a kind of communication

with forces within nature. And sound and shapes are experiences as the same thing. This underlies my work.

Thank you Lyn!