

Zoë Fothergill display at Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art



The winner of the 2012 John Watson Prize, which is awarded each year to a graduating student at Edinburgh College of Art, will present her most recent work in a new display at the Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art this week. Zoë Fothergill, whose impressive degree show earned her the award, is fascinated by the ways in which digital technologies have begun to alter our experience of the world. The three new pieces she has created for Fur, Bizmuth & Spiny Oyster are based on her research into the internet phenomenon Autonomous Sensory Meridian Response (ASMR).

The term describes the physical response; generally felt as a pleasurable tingling in the head and scalp, which is reportedly caused by exposure to a range of sensory triggers, and which has been closely linked in recent years to the experience of watching homemade 'whisperer' videos posted on internet sites such as YouTube. These videos are posted by people known as 'ASMRtists', who attempt to stimulate the viewer's response by addressing the camera in a soft voice, and generating gentle, soothing sounds, by touching, handling and describing inanimate (and sometimes animate) objects – crinkling paper, tapping fingernails, or brushing hair for example.

To date there has been no dedicated research to establish a physiological basis for ASMR, but news reports have suggested that many people successfully use the videos as a means of alleviating the effects of stress or insomnia. The experience is described in a variety of ways, but for some it is akin to

synaesthesia (where the stimulation of one sense produces a secondary, involuntary stimulation of another), or to hypnosis. For others it has a titillating or confessional thrill, but for most of the hundreds of thousands of people in the online community that has grown up around ASMR these intimate, non-sexualised exchanges are the source of the specific, euphoric sensation which has variously been described as a 'brain massage', 'head tingle' and 'braingasm'.

Fur, Bizmuth & Spiny Oyster, comprises three new works which explore the different forms that ASMR videos can take, and celebrates Fothergill's fascination with the phenomenon, combining found online footage with studio-based material produced by the artist.

The first film, *Keep Delete* (2014), focuses on the show-and-tell format adopted by many ASMRtists, as they handle a range of objects and describe for the viewer their tactile, material qualities. The work combines a beautifully edited collage of YouTube video clips with a whispered narrative recorded by the artist. This follows the transcript of an online editorial discussion around the absence of scientific evidence which preceded the deletion of the first ASMR page on Wikipedia.

How does that feel? (2014) will be presented on a small screen with headphones, positioned at a desk and chair, to allow visitors to experience the work individually. The film brings together a succession of clips from 'role-play' videos, the other principal format used by ASMRtists. In these the performer enacts a scenario which mimics a direct, one-to-one interaction between themselves and the viewer – such as a session at the hair salon, an eye examination or a make-up application – which is again accompanied by a softly-spoken or whispered monologue, recorded on binaural (or 3-D) microphones to intensify the illusion of a personal, intimate encounter.

The final film casts three objects – fur, bizmuth and spiny oyster – as its principal characters, who together enact a

'transactional analysis' (a form of psychoanalysis that originated in 1960s California) of ASMR. The work explores the nature of the interaction between the performer and the viewer, as well as the psychological motives behind individuals' involvement in the ASMR community.

A limited edition publication has been hand-made by the artist to accompany the exhibition. It includes two commissioned texts, a contextual piece by Emma Balkind and a fictional work by James Clegg, in addition to an interview between SNGMA curator Linsey Young and the artist. Imagery produced by the artist is combined with specific paper/fabric selection to make the publication both a visual and tactile experience. The publication has been made possible by the generous support of Arts Trust Scotland.

The research for this body of work was initiated during a residency at Hospitalfield Arts, Arbroath in July 2013 for which the artist was awarded funding by Creative Scotland's Professional Development Programme.

Since graduation Fothergill has exhibited extensively including at Embassy, in Edinburgh (2013), at Flood, in Dublin (2013) and at FilmForum in Los Angeles (2014).

Artist Talk: Monday 31 March, 12.45-1.30 pm

The Studio, Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art (Modern One)

Artist Workshop: Thursday 3 April, 5.30-6.45 pm

Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art (Modern One)