

Edinburgh Art Festival 2019 : the creators behind Night Walk for Edinburgh

In one of Janet Cardiff and George Bures Miller's first collaborations, a suspended TV monitor shows George's feet jumping up and down. We hear the sound of his feet thumping on the floor, the impact seeming to cause the TV to sway back and forth. This is, of course, impossible, but our senses are easily deceived, and for a moment we believe it. In fact more than one illusion is at play – the sound isn't even of George's own feet hitting the ground. Cardiff and Miller couldn't get the sound system to work, so it's Cardiff's feet we hear, jumping off-screen. We see what we expect to see, hear what we expect to hear.



cardiff_miller_Imbalance.6 (Jump) 1/ 3 – courtesy of the artists

Our perception of reality is at the core of Cardiff and Miller's work. They have collaborated for nearly 30 years, producing film, audio, models, marionettes, even a carousel. They are fascinated by science fiction, collage, Cubism, film noir, and they like to keep moving, trying new things;

'When art becomes more about labour than about fun, it's time to move on.' (Miller)

Delivering the 2019 Edinburgh Art Festival's [Keynote Lecture](#) at the National Gallery of Scotland on Friday, the artists spoke about their ideas, and their internationally acclaimed careers. Married since 1983, they are at ease with one another, riffing off each other's sentences, clearly still taking pleasure in each other's company. When they met as students at the University of Alberta, she was a printmaker, he a painter – but even their first date involved film and sound; they watched *Hiroshima Mon Amour* while listening to a tape she had made of a band called Nexus. It was an early sign

of the genres that were to dominate their working lives for the next 36 years.


'We enjoy working together, travelling, getting the credit equally. He and I work on different parts of the piece, and usually it flows together.' (Cardiff)



cardiff_miller_*To Touch* | Installation View 1/2 – courtesy of the artists

Their first works were based on what they could afford; Cardiff's 1992 installation *To Touch*, features an old carpenter's table. As the viewer passes his hands over its surface, the table becomes an instrument – sounds activated by light play through speakers around the room. The sounds are fragments of conversations and stories; by moving his hands in different ways, the viewer creates his own story, a collage of tales. Miller created the light sensor system, and it's still in use in their more recent works – 'At that time our software was crashing every 20 minutes – but now the budget is a bit bigger' (Cardiff).



- cardiff__miller_marionette_maker_06 – courtesy of the artists
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Since those early days, Cardiff and Miller have created rooms, a cabinet (*The Cabinet of Curiousness*, 2010) mini-theatres (*Playhouse*, 1997), a vintage caravan (*The Marionette Maker*, 2014), a boat (*Ship o’Fools*, 2010). Perhaps their most famous early collaboration is *Dark Pool*, 1995, an apparently abandoned room, full of furniture, books, an old cardboard box, a screen. As the viewer walks in, sounds are triggered, snippets of conversations, of music; the viewer is left to guess what happened here, what it all might mean, to create his own narrative. Cardiff describes it as ‘haunting the space.’ All of their works are unsettling; there is a sense of unease, of disorientation, discomfort.



Cardiff_Miller Dark-Pool-JCGBM. – *courtesy of the artists*
With *The 40 Part Motet*, Cardiff and Miller turned their attention to the way in which we experience music. This installation takes Thomas Tallis's famous choral work *Spem in Alium* (1573) and splits it up into forty single voices. Sixty (20 more than 40 to accommodate changes of personnel, as the youngest singers were only allowed to sing for a shorter time) speakers are placed in an oval around the room, each playing back the individually recorded voice of a member of Salisbury Cathedral Choir.

Cardiff wanted the listeners to experience the music from the viewpoint of the singer, to give them an intimate connection with the music as they walk through the voices. Again the theme of collage emerges; each person will hear the sounds differently as they choose their path through the room. When the microphones were accidentally left on during a break in recording, Cardiff and Miller insisted on retaining the sounds of the singers chatting; these became an essential part of the work.



Cardiff_Miller: Forty-Part-Motet-at-Richmond-Chapel.-Photo-Steve-Taner. – courtesy of the artists

In 1991, while on a residency at the Banff Arts Center, Cardiff inadvertently created the first of the walks which were to become one of her trademarks.

Indeed, a new walk, *Night Walk for Edinburgh*, is Cardiff and Miller's commissioned contribution to this year's festival.

In Banff, Cardiff was recording herself reading names from gravestones; she played her tape back, played it again, and – in what she describes as 'one of those a-ha moments' – she realised she was listening to herself describing what she was seeing in front of her. She started to make her first walk, a 12 minute audio piece in which she directs the listener along a trail. Sound effects include footsteps, crows, a train horn, and towards the end of the piece a story starts to unfold between Cardiff's voice and that of an unknown man. As always, nothing is clear ('I just want to be with you'/'It's so beautiful in the forest at night'/We've had wonderful times');

'You hear the recorded sound in binaural and the sounds of

the city, of yourself. This weird double thing, this out of body experience, takes place.'



Cardiff_Miller_louisiana_2 – courtesy of the artists

The only people who tried Forest Walk 1991 were twelve of Cardiff's own students and friends ('that walk wasn't actually very safe...'), but one of them was Kitty Scott; five years later, Scott introduced Cardiff and Miller to Bruce W Ferguson, then a curator at the Louisiana Museum in Humlebæk, Denmark. Ferguson asked Cardiff to create a site-specific walk for the museum; *Louisiana Walk, 1996* was famously the result, a narrative rich in immersion and in mystery, what Ferguson called 'the intimate and unknowable...the private and the public'. The piece led to Cardiff and Miller's meeting with one of the most influential modern art curators in the world, Kasper König, a founder of the Münster Sculpture Project. In 1997, Münster Walk emerged. It follows an older man tracing his dead daughter's footsteps through the town, and was inspired in part by the death of the son of Cardiff's friend, who tried to recapture something of him by photographing the sites of photographs he had taken. (Cardiff and Miller often speak of a place 'holding the meaning of things' that have

happened there.)



Cardiff_Miller_Press_munsterwalk_02 – courtesy of the artists
Since then, Cardiff and Miller have co-created over twenty walks, latterly incorporating video as well as sound;

'Video is such a powerful media that even on a 2" screen you are immersed and totally focused' (Cardiff)

'A video walk makes you feel like you've just done some kind of weird drug' (Miller)

As technology has developed, people have become far more familiar with video ('People live in their phones'); as they walk, they see film of the identical location, except that the film was, of course, taken at a different time. There are two overlapping realities; a figure walks past in the

video – why doesn't he come out on the other side of the screen? ('It's an overlaying of reality, a confusion of realities' [Miller])



Janet Cardiff and George Bures Miller, location photograph

for *Night Walk for Edinburgh*, 2019.

Courtesy the artists. Commissioned by The Fruitmarket Gallery. Acquired by The Fruitmarket Gallery with Art Fund support and presented in partnership with Edinburgh International Festival. Photo: Chris Scott.

Cardiff and Miller started thinking about *Night Walk for Edinburgh* after *The House of Books Has No Windows*, their 2008 exhibition at the Fruitmarket Gallery; they wanted to remove the viewer from the art gallery;

'so that, at the end of the walk, they forget who they are and why they are there, but maybe the next day they know more than they did before.' (Miller)

The [walk](#), which uses a digital tablet and headphones, leads the listener through the backstreets of the Old Town, unravelling a disjointed tale – 'part game-playing, part surrealistic poetry, perhaps even a murder mystery'.



Images: Janet Cardiff and George Bures Miller, location

photograph for *Night Walk for Edinburgh*, 2019. Courtesy the artists. Commissioned by The Fruitmarket Gallery. Acquired by The Fruitmarket Gallery with Art Fund support and presented in partnership with Edinburgh International Festival. Photo: Chris Scott.

Cardiff and Miller are very much artists who follow their own agenda. They play, they experiment, and they create unique, multisensory art. And, as we can see – and as Miller happily confirms:

'We have fun.'

[*Night Walk for Edinburgh*](#) by Janet Cardiff and George Bures Miller was commissioned for the city of Edinburgh by The Fruitmarket Gallery, and is presented in partnership with Edinburgh International Festival. [Booking details here.](#)



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