

The Remarkable Philip Lee.

A diary of my engagement with Philip's work, before seeing a performance.

October 2010

Right, here goes... my mission, as I understand it, is to describe something new and original, outside my comfort zone, concerning someone I've never seen performing live, based on what people have said, and what I have read, and the film clip I have watched on Cally Trench's computer. The first image of Philip imprinted on my mind is from the At Play 1 exhibition preview at South Hill Park, Bracknell: a grey figure, immobile like a statue, unflinching, not a whisper of movement: in a suit but with clay on the face, hands and feet. Other images seem almost always to show him **naked**, except for 'body paint'. Why should that matter? But somehow it does, to me, even though as an art historian I was trained to analyse Classical and Renaissance nude sculptures. I guess I missed out on a bohemian upbringing, and life-drawing classes. In some ways I might be the perfect voice, as I see it as a challenge set by the artist to break down barriers and get us – the audience - examining our feelings about nakedness, and the human condition: not least the frailties of the human body and its gradual but inevitable deterioration. So now I must rise to that challenge, and lay my own perceptions and feelings bare.

April 2011

At last I met Philip, fully dressed, at Brock Barracks, Reading in the spring, just after my father had died, for a project pioneered by Imogen Welch. I experienced Philip's gentleness when he drew my face with his fingers, so light-touch, with quirky movements to draw out a wisp of hair, a curve of cheek, an indent of smile. I smiled throughout, with my mouth closed (embarrassingly neglected teeth!) and looked at him as he drew me, flesh on flesh. The experience made me yearn for someone so gentle, caring and intimate of touch in my own life, though this was fully objective, professional, intelligent and studied. He stirred up feelings of longing, and led me to a new search for my own destiny on that day. He thanked me for allowing him to draw my face, and kissed my forehead, and later hugged me on parting. I was made to feel that something new and special had taken place in my life, and that Philip, while not the focus of it, was the conduit. That to me seems an artist's role, in essence - a conduit for new ways of thinking, and viewing the world. Philip is clearly a consummate artist.

One comes to any piece of art –writing, painting, musical or theatrical performance – with one's own baggage at that moment, and it becomes the subtext for one's emotions and responses as one reads, views, hears, absorbs. Here was I, with a new life sentence on my health, my job about to disappear, and my father gone forever. We need art to take us out of ourselves, to help us find new meaning in life, to lead us to think laterally, and to push us beyond our self-imposed boundaries.

Here is my dispassionate analysis of Philip's performance as I perceived it, before I was able to get to see one of Philip's actual performances with slip, in the flesh.

For his performance, Philip removes his clothes, and slips into something less textural: grey slip, slopped on by Cally who slaps it on in stages, and squelches about him to ensure an even covering. As I understand it, it is not one performance, but a series of different performances, in a number of groupings – like fashion collections for a fashion designer is the nearest equivalent I can think of, here - that are progressively more advanced in their thinking, each experience building on the last, each leading the artist through to the next stage of his work. The practicalities have to be thought about – how not to get slip in the eye, how to keep still and not slip over. The mind-over-matter must play a part in ensuring that, for art's sake, the artist keeps his poise and pose, or series of poses and a range of poised movements. The pace is slow, studied, careful, considered.

So, here we have a man who takes his clothes off to perform. Mark Spitz without the trunks. A slip of a man: tall, lithe. Man in slip, not petticoat but clay; a marbled maroon-on-grey human body moving in slow motion; a poetry of spatter painting on clay. The precision of execution and resulting chaos of paint exploded onto walls in Anish Kapoor's Royal Academy of Arts installation of 2009 overlaying the solid beauty of an Anthony Gormley bronze figure. Images of the Slab 1 performance recall for me Lady Gaga's appearance at the MTV music awards in the autumn of 2010, dressed in slabs of meat. When human flesh is laid bare it is difficult not to think in terms of the evolution of man.

A Lee performance is, I think, something I **must see** in the flesh. I can feel the anticipation building.

June 2011

Meanwhile an idyllic early summer lunch in a sunny rural Hampshire garden surrounded by aquilegia flanked by a genteel flock of bantam hens brought forward another revelation. I began to wax lyrical about my impending freedom from the weary shackles of museum work to my friend and colleague, Catherine, over a glass of prosecco and a delicious salad. I enthused about the **Remarkable and Curious Conversations** project and my small part in its development. I mentioned Philip Lee and my musings on his performances, prior to actually viewing them. My friend's husband Richard revealed that he had been taken to a preview of an event in Brick Lane some months back, in 2010, and had witnessed an extraordinary art event remarkably similar to the one I was describing. I encouraged him to recall and describe the event further, and that left me in no doubt that he had indeed witnessed one of the performances I was so keen to see. A man's view of a man in such a performance is different to that of a woman, without doubt. I asked if he felt discomfort or envy – no; curiosity – well, yes!

When all is said and done...ME TOO! The October date's in the diary, the venue South Hill Park, and I am determined to do Philip justice with my words, to embrace his art and learn from it, and perhaps lead others to learn from it. I am also curious to know how Cally's role as Philip's able – and remarkably unabashed - assistant has developed over the period of the project, too.