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December 2009 Feature: Roxane Permar & Nayan Kulkarni

Tripping the Light Fantastic

ROXANE PERMAR and NAYAN KULKARNI tell Kenny Mathieson about the ongoing Mirrie Dancers project

MIRRIE DANCERS is the name given to the Aurora Borealis or Northern Lights in Shetland, and provides both inspiration and a title for an 18-month project commissioned by Shetland Arts and conceived by artists Nayan Kulkarni and Roxane Permar.

The project will involve participants from all over the islands, leading to a permanent installation using light and lace in 2011 in Mareel, Shetland Arts' new cinema, music and education venue, which is currently under construction. Residents around Shetland have an opportunity to participate in creating light-based artworks, not only for their own locality, but also feeding into the Mareel installation.

Shetland Arts say the project will allow the creation of artworks "that bring light as a significant art form to Shetland for the first time. Light is a magic ingredient acting as a literal and symbolic beacon for our ambitions, for the community and for Mareel".

The first phase of the project invited participation in creating temporary illuminations for ten sites throughout Shetland, taking place through this winter. Participants in the "Light Labs" held earlier this year made videos and translated them into illuminations for local sites across the islands, creating a "festival of light" through the dark Shetland winter.

In the second phase, the lead artists will work with Shetland Lace Knitters to create a permanent installation at Mareel, using Light and Shetland Lace. Skilled knitters working with the lead artists will experiment with a variety of materials, yarns and technical processes to make unique laceworks for interior projections.

The lace work is going to be stunning, and in a sense it is harking back to the beginnings of cinema – I'm essentially developing a very



Lead Artists Roxane Permar and Nayan Kulkarni (Photo - Ivan Hawick)

sophisticated magic lantern

NORTHINGS: Roxane, how did this project come about?

ROXANE PERMAR: I saw an advertisement placed by Shetland Arts in the *Shetland Times* looking for artists who make public art work using light for Mareel. I had been in contact with Nayan and knew he was involved in some major public arts projects. I alerted him to it, and rather than him apply on his own, we decided to do a joint proposal.



Illumination of the Floating Tin Shed, Lower Voe (Photo - Austin Taylor)

The commission at that point was funded to conceive the project, but not to deliver it, so part of the application process was demonstrating that you had experience of fund-raising. I have done quite a bit of that in my work, and in the end we won the commission and I found the SAC's Inspire Fund.

Including the public in the project was very much part of our proposal, and both Nayan and myself do a lot of that as part of our practice, so it seemed a good fit. We then met with the architects, and they were keen to do something both inside and outside the building, so the project grew a bit from our initial thoughts.

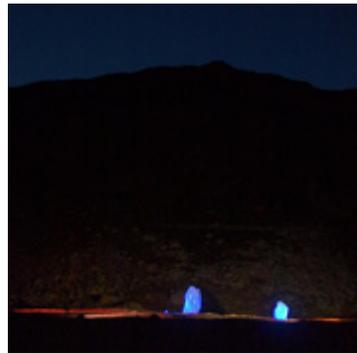
The development phase convinced us that we could do it and that it would work, and Kathy Hubbard at Shetland Arts and myself have managed to raise additional funding for it. That bit right at the start of this kind of long complex project always feels like the most creative part, when you are figuring out what it is you want to do – after that it starts to be more about problem-solving.

NAYAN KULKARNI: The Mareel work is a permanent installation for both exterior and interior, and I am responsible not only for designing the lighting installation, but also the fittings and the electronics, so it is a big responsibility.

A building changes and evolves as they design it and deal with site issues, and the art work has to be able to adjust to those changes, so I have to be aware of that, and make sure the light will still work as effectively. The main

change so far has probably been to the advantage of

the lighting, and I'm currently trying to work out how to make an external light fitting that will survive the waves crashing over it! I think that is a first for me.



Detail from Illumination of Da Giant, Lochend, North Mavine (Photo - Davy Cooper)

NORTHINGS: The project falls into two segments, and at the moment you are in the midst of a winter of outdoor illuminations – tell me about those?

ROXANE PERMAR: We are calling this part of it Mirrie Lights, and it is basically related to the exterior light works for Mareel. We wanted to make it possible for anyone who is interested in contributing to do so through our Light Labs, and we have ended up doing a series of temporary illuminations around Shetland.

Nayan was keen to do the illuminations in different locations in Shetland, and I was also very

aware of the controversy around Mareel. I believe with public art there has to be a real sense of it belonging to the local community, and I was conscious that Mareel was not being warmly received by a large part of the population.

Also, people away from Lerwick wouldn't necessarily feel that sense of ownership in the work we did there, so we wanted to take it out to them and give them a chance to take part in the process as well, and make work that actually becomes part of the installation.

That began at the end of May. We did a number of tours and came away with a list of sites, which we narrowed down to ten. We did the Light Labs with what was basically a mobile media lab, and people were able to make films on simple video cameras and take them to Nayan, who turned them into light.

So we have a growing number of people gaining an understanding of the process, and now we are doing a series of illuminations around the islands, and there is a genuine feeling of ownership with the people who have been involved.

NAYAN KULKARNI: The illuminations seem to be growing – the first two were quite simple, just illuminating tin sheds in the landscape, although the sites were not as dark as I expected. The next ones will be much darker sites. In simple terms we are pointing at the selected sites with lights, but in the pointing at them with light you change their imaginative space.

One of the guys we are working with has been driving past one of the sites with standing stones for years, and didn't even know they were there!

The other thing we are learning is the kind of speeds and colours that work, which is a fairly intuitive process. The size of the installations and the way the audience looks at them is different it's a different thing to get out of your car and look at it, and to drive past and see it fleetingly. I think we will learn from each of them, and take it on to the next one, so we are growing a language in the process.

NORTHINGS: So you create a kind of abstract light work from the regular videos that the participants have made, and those abstracts are then incorporated into the illuminations?

NAYAN KULKARNI: The Pharos software we are using allows us to stream video through and see it as light, so if you give a video camera to someone with no experience, they can go out and film whatever they want. Our installation then forgets about the picture, but does reflect the colours and changes of colours in what they saw and filmed.

That can be quite dynamic and it can also be quite subtle and static, and it has allowed our art work to have a complete randomness in a sense, but also allowed very complex colour arrangements to be developed. So basically they have amazing sophisticated control without having to worry about how it actually works technically, because the cameras are very simple.

It's then a matter of working out how to apply that to specific sites, both for the temporary works and for the eventual installation at Mareel. The effect so far has been quite different on different sites. It is quite challenging to programme it in the rain and a force seven, because you can't make the final decision until you see it installed. The next one we do in December is in



Editing a film at Bridge End Outdoor Centre (Photo - Malcolm Younger)

Shetland's only glasshouse at Tingwall, and is the only one that we have the luxury of working indoors, although the audience will see it from outside.

ROXANE PERMAR: It is a big learning curve for us all, and very exciting from that point of view. With the outdoor illuminations you don't really know how it will work until you do it – we have done a lot of preparation and research, but you never really know how it will be until it happens, and that is exciting. And we have a growing group of people who are learning with us, which is great.

The illuminations run for about two and a half weeks, and we have 40 lights powered by two mobile wind turbines. We have two sites where we will use all 40 lights, although they are quite small and subtle.

NAYAN KULKARNI: I'm keen that we only use what we make ourselves, so the lights in the project can use only the power that the two wind turbines generate, for example, and you design a system around that. It challenges all aspects of the work.

KENNY MATHIESON: *What about the lace knitters – how is that going to work?*

ROXANE PERMAR: We are having an initial exhibition at Bonhoga Gallery in July 2010. We have 22 knitters on the project at the moment, and it is very much a developing process. There is a lot of trial and error involved in how it actually works at this stage, which is quite exciting.

We started working with the idea of lace as the motif for the interior work, and I think it may

have come from the fact that the architects were thinking about patterns on the interior walls. We were working together in Nayan's studio trying to evolve our concepts for the whole thing, and we came up with the idea of putting lace in the projectors.

We did try it with a machine-knit lace, but if you are going to have lace in an art work it needs to be

unique, so it was an easy step to decide we needed lace knitters. Shetland is full of knitters, and I have worked with some of them in the past. I was a bit worried that they would not be interested, but they have been fantastic – they have really come on board with it.

We have some of Shetland's finest established lace knitters, we have younger knitters, we have some who have only recently started working with lace, and we have some students from the college, so there is a real range there.

NAYAN KULKARNI:

The lace work is going to be stunning, and in a sense it is harking back to the beginnings of cinema – I'm essentially developing a very sophisticated magic lantern. And there is something magical about it – it's not like a photograph, although they are close, but there is a texture and subtlety and a sense of



Knitter choosing yarns at Lace Lab (Photo - Malcom Younger)



movement that is
their own.

Lace Lab (Photo - Malcolm Younger)

I would say about 70% of my work is probably site-specific projects in public architecture. I became interested in working with lights as an undergraduate, so I've been doing this for over 20 years now. It probably started from an interest in trying to make sunlight an active rather than a passive element in my work, and then I became interested in working with artificial light as well.

We are using a very low temperature system, and we are still developing the optics, and that will go on right through to the final installation. I think what Mareel will get will be pretty spectacular, and will be tailored to the specifics of what we need for this project.

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