

The Oval Court

We were new to the area. We had been granted a terraced house from ACME, the artists housing association which distributed short term accommodation due to be demolished, giving artists cheap places to live with studio space, a godsend. We were standing outside in the afternoon sun when she walked past; her dark hair cropped short with a sharp fringe, leather trousers and jacket and scarlet lipstick – pure style, she looked up at us with a broad smile, this was someone I wanted to get to know.

Hackney in 1977 was pretty shabby. Our designated home had a prop keeping it in place, no electricity - the walls still featured gas lamps, brown stained walls and there was an ancient range in what was to become our sitting room. We were delighted with it. My boyfriend was the artist and he got to work taking down the wall between two upstairs bedrooms to create a large studio. Being a textile designer I had a snug spot in the attic. The railway ran close by and my paintbrushes rattled in the jar whenever a train passed through. Our tiny garden accommodated a washing line and a handkerchief sized vegetable patch, encroached upon by the junk shop next door's burgeoning fence that looked about to collapse. We painted the front door bright red and had a telephone installed – we were really living. My gran had given me a gift of £10 and I blew the lot on a beautiful mauve and terracotta silk Persian rug from Brick Lane market. It is now much faded, but still much loved. Broadway market was a stones' throw away, stalls offering fruit and veg, cheap clothing, bric-a-brac, the usual market wares and bordered by the permanent shops including a smelly fish shop boasting the 'pie, eel and mash' my grandmother had related from her days growing up in the East end. This was well before its gentrification in the 1990's and 'the production of urban space for progressively more affluent users'.

Our local was a few doors down and I think it was maybe here that we were introduced to her. Helen Chadwick. Helen was also living in an ACME house round the corner in Beck Road, almost entirely taken over by ACME and practising artists. She was an artist and her partner Phil was an architect. Helen's studio was downstairs in the front of the house, the living area was neat and ordered and they had the original outdoors toilet.

Helen was always well turned out, usually in something she had created herself. She was edgy and confident and, despite her small stature, appeared ready to take on anyone who challenged her with a clipped remark. But what impressed me most was her wicked sense of humour, mischief and daring, keeping one on one's toes. I began to see more of Helen, our relationship grew, I was in awe. One year we attended the pre-view of the annual Whitechapel Open together, I was lucky to have two small drawings accepted. Whilst mingling, Helen introduced me as 'one of the artists' to a friend of hers. I felt like an imposter, but was hugely flattered.

It was exciting to be asked to model for her Train of Thought artwork and I agreed without really knowing what it would entail. We travelled by bus to Brixton each week and spent the afternoon in a locker, large and spacious, where Helen's piece of hand-made underground seating resided. It was identical to the real thing; a bench seat with a curved ceiling and wooden floor attached and velveteen furnishing, spray-painted with an authentic design - all made by Helen herself. The only exception was the strap hanger to hold onto - this she apparently acquired on the fly. I was asked to wear an outfit resembling a typical office worker, with heels and Helen added lipstick and eyeliner to my naked face. Mickey, the brother of one of Helen's neighbours, met us there, kitted out with a business suit and brief case. We sat together on the artwork and did as we were told. No messing. These were the days of 'U' and 'Non-U' behaviour, in other words today's 'manspreading'. Mickey sat with legs apart, newspaper fully open, elbows on both arm rests, that kind of thing, while my feet kept close together, hands on lap, elbows tucked in and eyes askance with an expression of slight distaste. We performed various versions of opposing responses while Helen gave commands to her partner Phil who snapped away with his large, professional looking camera from all angles.

One week we were asked to get down to our undies. Helen was reading up on body language, she was a voracious researcher, and wanted to study what was going on beneath the suits. I was mortified.

Sitting in my bra and knickers and horribly conscious of my less than perfect posture and pop-out tummy, I endured the afternoon in a sweat. I don't remember what Mickey's under-drawers were like, but I wasn't aware that he suffered in the same way. Years later I came across these photos in a book by Stephen Walker, an architect researching Helen's work. She had typed and scribbled various remarks at different points on the photograph: 'body looks weak and in need of support', 'sunken withdrawn neck tucked into shoulders', to name but a few.

Train of Thought was exhibited in the ACME Gallery, Covent Garden, the artwork sitting in the centre of the room and mounted photographs of our Brixton afternoons spread across the walls. In an attempt to raise funds Helen sold pin badges portraying my face in various forms of mastication - another body language exercise.

This experience did not perturb me however and in 1979 I accepted another invitation, this time as part of Helen's 'In the Kitchen'; a series of soft, stitched pvc kitchen appliances constructed on metal frames, originally made and performed at Chelsea College of Art; an oven, washing machine, sink unit and refrigerator. Three other models and myself were to accompany Helen by train to the Birmingham's Bullring for the Ideal Home Exhibition where the soft kitchen installation was to add some 'art' into the mix, satirising the stereotype of women as domestic goddess or kitchen slave.

The Bullring was vast and full of stands exhibiting a variety of home-orientated wares. The four of us disrobed behind the scenes and were strapped, naked into our designated appliances. I was the fridge-freezer. As Helen tightened buckles hither and thither I sensed a new tenderness in my breast area, but thought nothing of it. My body was behind a thin, pearly plastic sheet as the back of the fridge, while my head poked up into the freezer compartment above. Moving around was difficult. The washing machine fell over at some point and a Chinese vendor selling ornaments opposite immediately got down on all fours to enable him to look up her drum. Indeed, the pearly film in my fridge was not as opaque as I had imagined, so I was surprised at the crowd we drew when it was time for each performance, mostly males as I recall.

Helen, decked out in a lime green trouser suit and 60's winkle-pickers, enlightened the audience with slick spiel describing each mechanical woman against a background recording of cheesy Hammond organ music, while we shuffle-danced back and forth answering her list of interview questions, my doors left open, and all of us trying to keep upright.

Two weeks later I was to discover that the tenderness was the first sign that I was pregnant with Hannah.

On one of our visits to my in-laws in Pembrokeshire with our family of three small children we ran into Helen and Phil as we made our way down a steep banking to the beach. We hadn't met up since our move to Scotland 7 years earlier. Helen was researching for a new project, *Viral Landscapes*, and we caught up with them later in the pub, child-free. Helen showed us her catalogue of recent work, *The Oval Court*, an impressive and beautiful series of collages based on photocopies of her own body with all manner of animal, vegetable and mineral objects. It was part of her first major solo exhibition, *Of Mutability*, at the Institute of Contemporary Art in London. This was an extraordinary work and must have embedded itself in my head only to rise up again, unintentionally, through my own work many years later.

It came as a dreadful shock to hear of Helen's untimely death at the age of 43. I travelled down to London from Scotland for her memorial in St Martin in the Fields, staying with friends in Beck Road, two doors away from where Helen had lived. Jen and I left the house around 5am, to decorate the church, with a bevy of Helen's female pals. A MOMART truck arrived laden with flowers and we sorted them into place. Sunflowers and cornflowers were spread behind the altar, red roses attached to the steps leading up to the lectern and gladioli circled the pillars. Jen and I joined in to cover the middle aisle with gerberas, head to head, creating a golden, orange path up the centre of the church. Marina Walker gave an address and Peter Gabriel sang at the piano. And of course the one person who would have appreciated this most was absent.

There were so many flowers, everyone who attended was given an armful to take away. Pete and I crossed London after the reception at the ICA like eccentric, misplaced bridesmaids. I kept my roses for a year before they eventually disintegrated.

When it was time for my daughter Hannah to choose the subject for her thesis I was thrilled to hear that she had chosen Helen Chadwick. It was five years after her death. I accompanied Hannah back to Beck Road to speak to Pete and Jen and Mikey Cuddihy, who lived opposite Helen, close friends with precious stories to tell. By chance we had discovered an acquaintance at home in the next village was the sister of Helen's gallerist in Mayfair, and she gave us an introduction. Zelda patiently answered Hannah's list of questions and took us to a room in the basement to show us an original photograph from the Oval Court. Helen, naked to the waist with a girdle of ostrich feathers, gazing into a circular mirror reflecting a room beset with golden orbs.

I treasure a photograph that Helen gave me from our Brixton sessions. It is the only one featuring my husband Mark. He turned up early to collect me and was placed on the carriage seat next to Mickey and me, unshaven, cigarette hanging from his lip and red Kickered foot crossing his knee, reading an open newspaper. Extreme 'Non-U' behaviour. Sometimes I find myself turning to Helen for encouragement and advice, when feeling lost and confused in the studio. She is always witty and accommodating.

Denise Zygadlo, June 2024