*The Errant Muse*

University of Liverpool, Victoria Gallery & Museum

16 November 2019 to 28 March 2020.

Critically acclaimed artist Charlotte Hodes and 2019 TS Eliot Prize shortlisted poet Deryn Rees-Jones are showing an ambitious new exhibition at the Victoria Gallery & Museum, Liverpool which may be of interest to your listeners. Disrupting the classical fantasy of the muse as a female presence servicing male ‘genius’, *The Errant Muse* offers an alternative perspective. Taking the form of papercut, ceramics, film and poetry, Hodes and Rees-Jones’ works think about creative processes and draw on a rich array of influences to develop a compelling sense of continued curiosity and the search for resonances in a world in flux.

A rich array of women writers act as touchstones across Hodes and Rees-Jones’ various projects, and this show foregrounds their ‘errant’ voices across three centuries. Helen Thomas’ memoirs are the beginnings for the book and animated film, *And You, Helen*, which uses words, papercut and drawing to reimagine her voice and reflect on her difficult relationship with her husband, the British war poet Edward Thomas. *Perpetual Night,* a new series of Hodes’ papercuts made in conversation with Rees-Jones’ text, loosely gestures to Virginia Woolf’s seminal text, *A Room of One’s Own*, and the limitations on creative practice for women. Elizabeth Bishop’s haunting refrain, ‘must we dream our dreams and have them too?’, is central to an exploration of the workings of the imagination in the film *Questions of Travel*. The film draws parallels between actual journeys and the poetic and artistic journeys of reading, drawing, thinking and writing.

These women are not set up as icons in themselves, but rather as stopping points for exploration. All were advocates for female independence at a time when, despite their many privileges of race and class, this ‘errancy’ was often a brave departure from societal expectations. These ‘errant muses’ are stepping stones in Hodes and Rees-Jones’ ongoing creative processes, and their lives and works act as a lens through which to reflect on our current moment. The artists’ conversational process of re-encounter and redraft is echoed in the exhibition’s intuitive arrangement, where meaning accrues as the visitor navigates between constellations of image, text and artefact.

An interdisciplinary show, *The Errant Muse* explores the relationship between poetry and the visual image. Surveying the cumulative dialogue of Hodes and Rees-Jones’ work as visual artist and poet, the show foregrounds their processes as female practitioners. Over years Hodes and Rees-Jones have shared thoughts and ideas and responded to one another’s work, each becoming a holder for what they could not contain or understand as they worked alone. Troubling clear cut definitions of art versus text, the exhibition experiments with alternative ways that text and image can be arranged to create new modes of reading. The show opens with *Perpetual Night;* the lines of Rees-Jones’ lyric poem are here enshrined within Hodes’ intricate, hand cut papercuts. The sequence shows a female figure negotiating domestic furniture, finding a space for herself within it, sometimes escaping from it, and continuing from frame to frame across the scarlet gallery wall. Visitors can listen to *Perpetual Night* assembled in full, to transformative effect; held together by the poet’s voice, the series of fragments, both text and image, comes to life.

Showing across a set of interlinked spaces in the gallery, the exhibition engages with objects and manuscripts from the Victoria Gallery & Museum and the University of Liverpool’s Special Collections. Relieved of the narratives of genre and time, these artefacts create a fresh memoryscape for the imagination. Ornate display cases juxtapose Rees-Jones’ haunting lyric poetry and Hodes’ art works on paper, ceramic and glass with the intricacies found variously in tiny, exquisite etchings by William Blake; an early draft of Elizabeth Bishop’s ‘Questions of Travel’; fin de siècle botanical models made by the Berlin firm R. Brendel and Co. By setting Hodes and Rees-Jones’ own works in new alignment with the rich and strange treasures of the archives, *The Errant Muse* invites its audience to conjure their own narratives and patterns of association.

Presenting an ideal of ongoing musing and of inspiration in motion, the show is preoccupied with moments passing. This is a melancholic thread throughout that is echoed in the elusive dance of the female figure that passes through Hodes’ artworks and felt in Rees-Jones’ close attention to immediate experience; watching a leaf fall ahead on a pavement, lying awake in the night with a sleepless child. Memory, loss and the struggle to process change permeate the show, both in the original works shown and the artefacts featured. Scrimshaw engravings carved by nineteenth-century sailors with needle and ink into the bones of slaughtered whales are a haunting reminder of the impulse to leave an imprint on a dying world. There is a tension between the attempt to hold onto fragments of time, and the more hopeful sense that life continues, whatever happens.

<http://vgm.liverpool.ac.uk/exhibitions-and-events/special/theerrantmuse/>

<https://charlottehodes.com/>

<http://derynrees-jones.co.uk/>

Looking forward to your thoughts,

Harriet