

CUPID
AND THE
CURIOUS
MOANING
OF
KENFIG
BURROWS
SOPHY
RICKETT



CUPID AND THE CURIOUS MOANING OF KENFIG BURROWS

by Sophy Rickett

Glynn Vivian Art Gallery, Swansea

27 September 2019–24 January 2020

Gallery 7

Cupid and The Curious Moaning of Kenfig Burrows, is a site-specific installation by Sophy Rickett, where photographs and text by the artist are installed alongside a partially restored painting from the Glynn Vivian Art Gallery Collection.

Originally attributed to the C17th artist Mario di Fiore (1603–1673), the painting has not been seen in public for decades, due to the layer of coal dust and dirt that accumulated on its surface while it was stored, for many years, in a boiler house.

Rickett became interested in the thick layer of dirt as a subject in itself; a forensic layer of time that covered the subject of the painting like a veil. She imagined the connection between the film of coal dust that obscured the subject of the painting, and the dark smoke of the colliery mines that were intrinsic to life in this part of the world.

As part of her installation, and in dialogue with Jenny Williamson, Conservation Officer at Glynn Vivian Art Gallery, Rickett requested that a small section of the painting be cleaned; a process which would partially remove one subject (the layer of smoke), to reveal another (the sleeping cupid).

The creation of a small test patch in a discrete corner of a painting is a normal part of the conservation process. What is unusual here is the positioning and shape of Williamson's test patch. The circular motif, near the centre of the painting suggests a peephole, or the lens of a camera. It is a gestural flourish that that emphasises the subject (Cupid and his sleeping eye); a radical departure from the normal protocols of conservation technique.

Here—and in the other photographs and texts in the installation—history is understood as partial and incomplete. While the story of Thereza Dillwyn Llewelyn and the legacy of her and her father John's photographic archive were the starting point for the project, Rickett allows her own experience to influence the path of her 'investigation', and her primary research. Weaving together imagery and text, she adopts an idiosyncratic approach, that combines chance encounters, subjective memory and miscommunication with the facts that she uncovers through site visits and close readings of the historical material.

Cupid by Mario di Fiore,
c. 1650

The painting has been
partially restored by
Conservation Officer
Jenny Williamson

Seeing it Through
Anouchka Grose

As Sophy Rickett came close to completing her investigation into the life and work of Thereza Dillwyn Llewelyn, she stumbled across a badly damaged, dirt encrusted painting in the storage rooms at Glyn Vivian Gallery.

At the time, she knew little about the painting, not least when and by whom it was painted, but she was intrigued—not by what she could see; more by what she couldn't. The subject in the painting—a sleeping cupid surrounded by a garland of flowers—was obscured by a thick layer of coal dust that had accumulated on its surface during the years it had been stored near a coal boiler. The damage is a real trace of something; the gradual accumulation of dust, particle by particle over the years, of lives lived across time, of deterioration, of loss. But what is the subject here - the painting or the smoke?

At some level, history is like an endless spring clean; a relentless series of decisions about what to keep and what to throw away.

Can there be a reliable system for deciding? Just because you like something now, does that ensure you will make use of it in the future? What about the boring stuff, the embarrassing stuff, the



stuff you can't quite see the point in? What if that turns out, at some later date, to be the very thing you need or crave? You don't always know what's important at the time. Even if you had an inkling, you couldn't possibly grasp the full extent of it.

But what does all this have to do with the Llewelyns, a well-to-do Victorian family from the tiny Welsh village of Penllegaer? Certainly, they showed an unusual interest in posterity. John Dillwyn Llewelyn, a father of six, was a botanist and early experimenter in photography. He gave his eldest daughter, Thereza, a camera for her eighteenth birthday; perhaps a rather discrete present compared with the observatory he had built for her sixteenth. Thereza's mother was the cousin of Henry Fox Talbot, the inventor of some of the earliest photographic printing processes. Her aunt was Mary Dillwyn, thought to be the first person to capture a smile on film, in 1853.

And then again, what's Sophy Rickett's investment in a bunch of long-dead camera enthusiasts? Yes, she's also a photographer and, like Thereza, was given her first camera by her father. But would that be enough to forge a fruitful connection?

The story began when Rickett was invited to engage with the Llewelyn archive; to make an exhibition that fused her interests with theirs. The challenge, for Rickett, was finding points of

Installation of works from
The Curious Moaning of
Kenfig Burrows; Gallery 7,
Glyn Vivian Art Gallery
Swansea.





Caswell Bay (1), 2016

Following spread
Tree (divided), Margam
Mountain, 2019

contact. On the one hand, there were surviving photographs, texts, paintings, objects—a storehouse of ‘interesting’ artefacts. But on the other hand, so much had disappeared: the people, the house (which has been knocked down and replaced by a car park), some of the artworks were damaged, their provenance unknown. As Rickett observed on a visit to Caswell Bay, a sandy beach where Thereza was once photographed holding a telescope: ‘[...] as I stand there looking up into the thick canopy of evergreens and conifers, seeking material echoes of that past; nothing.’

So where to look instead? First, perhaps, by scanning what’s actually present: a male archivist with his gloves on, and then with his gloves off, digitally reproduced versions of photographs (mounted on homogenous yellow card), Penltergaer car park

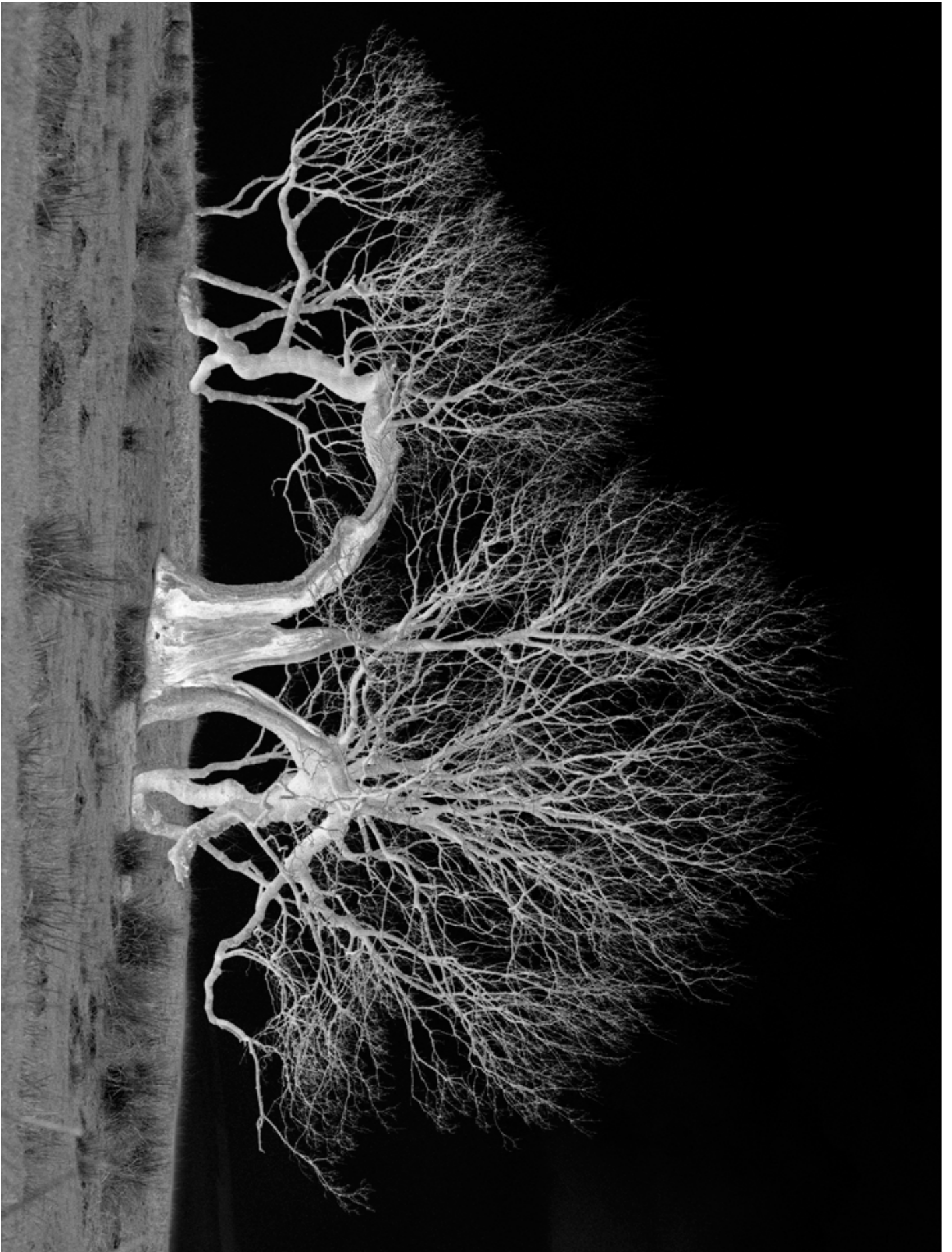
(empty), Penltergaer car park with a woman facing away from us (and who states that she doesn’t want to appear in Rickett’s project ‘in any way’). Wherever you look, it might seem, there’s little to see. Or there’s something, but maybe not the right thing. But perhaps something starts to rub off on you; you begin to study your own life through an unfamiliar lens. What’s your daughter doing in her cheesy school photograph? ‘Having my picture taken,’ comes the irrefutable answer—just like Thereza, obligingly holding still for her dad. What might you see next to the water by your own home? A dead dog in a bag, if you’re unlucky. What do you find if you Google Kenfig Burrows? Reviews of an isolated nudist beach (mostly positive, although one couple apparently found the stares of fellow bathers mildly invasive). You catch yourself searching out everything and nothing, both finding and failing to find what you’re looking for, as if you could have any idea in advance what that might be.

Thereza’s camera, and her diaries, perhaps captured more of the Llewelyns’ daily lives than most other families of the time, but what do the resulting documents tell us? By contemporary standards—informed by unflinching autobiography and reality TV—not all that much. Developed in the half-century before the birth of psychoanalysis, there’s a heavy focus on visibility, material observation, and a distinct lack of interiority. It’s as if there’s a fundamental ambivalence; perhaps the Llewelyns wanted to hang onto something without giving too much away. They made use of a novel a machine for storing traces of life, but how much life can one still discern in these traces? The surviving artefacts are both fascinating and boring, or even fascinatingly boring. Perhaps, on their own, they fall slightly short of deserving our attention. They seem to require the attention of an artist like Rickett to re-invest them with something, to bring them back to life.

What she has done is to temporarily give herself over to this history, but without colonising it for herself. She’s both immersed and separate, understanding and perplexed. She sees and she doesn’t see, and this space of uncertainty becomes the work.

Rather than, perhaps, identifying with Thereza in order to temporarily blow false life into her, Rickett simply lets her be, much like the inscrutable rocks she repeatedly photographed. For a brief moment, the two photographers can exist alongside one another, allowing for the odd friendly echo: a civilised meeting before each goes her own way. Rather than jumping up and down and saying, ‘Look, this is important!’ Rickett lets the archive speak for itself, even when it seems struck dumb.

If everything deserved our attention, history would be a mess.



Things have to disappear, to get lost, at the risk of their being the 'wrong' things, the things that might have seemed to count later. Who painted that cherub? Are they a lost genius? What secrets might be embedded in its languishing surfaces? Perhaps it doesn't matter; maybe it's just an undead object, a mediocre painting that's out-survived its viable existence as a knick-knack in a family home. And this, in itself, may ignite a response in the observer—especially an observer, like Rickett, who has seemingly made herself open to any form of relation, even the most elusive, empty or melancholic.

Perhaps in its taciturnity and incompleteness the Llewellyn archive opens a space for the contemplation of everything and nothing; life's pluses and minuses, losses and gains. Should we strive to make our mark on the world, or just let the world make its mark on us before passing graciously on?

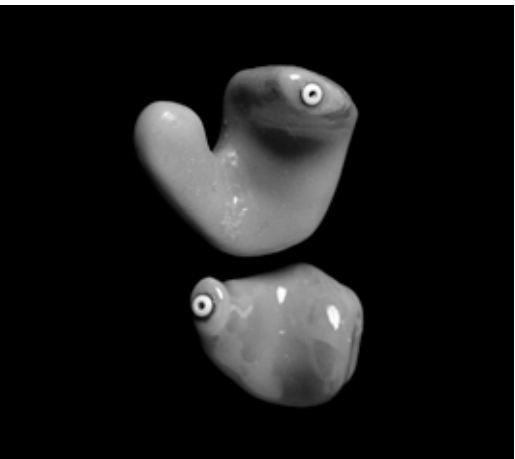
Some things speak beyond themselves, have extraordinary repercussions, shout loudly down the corridors of history, while others are more like a curious moaning, a wind blowing up from the beach.

What you listen out for is up to you.

Stones, Kenfig Burrows,
2018/2019

Hearing Aids, 2019

Opposite
Fossilised Earbone of
a Whale, 2018/2019



Gallery 7

List of works from left:

Woman on a Beach, 2017/2018

Silver Bromide print, with paper strip

Tree (divided), Margam Mountain, 2019

Silver Bromide print / 505x755mm

Young Girl, 1973/2019

Silver Bromide print (from archival negative)

Dead Dog, Woodberry Down, 2017

C-Type print

Carpark, Caswell Bay, 2018

Silver Bromide print

Apartments, Caswell Bay, 2016

Silver Bromide print

Young Woman/Observation (5), 1998/2019

Silver Bromide print (from archival negative)

Tree, Kenfig Burrows, 2019

Silver Bromide print

Caswell Bay (1), 2016

Silver Bromide print

Stones, Kenfig Burrows, 2019

Silver Bromide print

Hearing Aids, 2019

Silver Bromide print

Fossilised Earbone of a Whale, 2018/2019

Silver Bromide print

Cupid by Mario di Fiore

c. 1650

Condition Report: The painting has a thick layer of dust, dirt and soot, over a yellow brown natural

resin varnish. The paint layer has severe cracks which have raised, with brittle edges and there is a small tear in the canvas, some damage and minor losses. A small area of the painting was cleaned to remove some of the layers that had accumulated over time and allow access to the original appearance of the painting. The dirt was removed using damp cotton wool swabs and the varnish was removed using organic solvents.

Archivist (2), Photographic Collections,
National Museum Wales, Cardiff, 2016

Silver Bromide print

Archivist (1), Photographic Collections,
National Museum Wales, Cardiff, 2016

Silver Bromide print

Plait, 2019

Silver Bromide print

Young Woman/Observation (2), 1998/2019

Silver Bromide print (from archival negative)

Plastic Flowers, Plastic Onions,
National Museum Wales, 2018

Silver Bromide print

Dunes, Kenfig Burrows, 2019

Silver Bromide print

Young Woman/Observation (3), 1998/2019

Silver Bromide print (from archival negative)

Rockall, 1961/2019

Silver Bromide print (composite from
two archival negatives)

Caswell Bay (3), 2016

Silver Bromide print

Caswell Bay (2), 2016

Silver Bromide print

The Curious Moaning of Kenfig Burrows was published by GOST Books in September 2019. With a text by the artist and an in-conversation between the artist and David Company.