*I wanted to start with the where and when of how your interest Eliza began?*

I’d always known the Museum, and had a sense of the family drama, and there’s the portrait of Eliza. Then - it must have been around 2013 – the Museum invited a number of artists to make postcard works for a fundraising auction, and I took up the offer of a tour that included the private apartments. We were walking through these empty rooms, and, as a fleeting aside, my guide said how, before this was the Model Room, it had been Eliza Soane’s bedchamber. I was struck by the idea that, for the majority of the history of the house, there had been this previous life to this room.

So, I did a drawing of what I thought might have been in the room, but I didn't have any information at all. I had nothing. And it provoked thoughts about trying to dig into how the room might have been, and who this very shadowy figure Eliza Soane had been.

As a contemporary artist, it's very hard to respond to the Soane, because it's already so exquisite, and so wonderful. Adding a new thing to it seems a very difficult thing to do. Which made me think about what one could do with something that the Soane had lost.

*How did that idea develop?*

I’d done a residency at the British School of Rome, and made a film at the Teatro Valle in Rome, where Pirandello staged the premiere of Six Characters in Search of an Author – filming actors in this Baroque theatre. I realised that approach wouldn’t work here; the shell of the room was there, but the entire contents was gone. So I thought that there might be another way - to work with the archives to figure out a bit more about Eliza and what had been in that room - so that we could form a list of these objects and do some filming.

I met with Helen Dorey, Deputy Director, and she introduced me to Sue Palmer, the Museum’s Archivist, who knows more about Eliza than anyone. In discussions about an agreement around taking photographs, it was suggested that I might develop a project for exhibition at the Soane.

*You’d worked in film before, and in more traditional animation – how did the idea to use photogrammetry and CGI come about?*

In Rome, I’d found myself having dinner with some archaeologists, who talked about their use of photogrammetry, and shortly after, I started working at Central Saint Martin’s. Elizabeth Wright, Head of Sculpture, was also interested in photogrammetry as a way of opening up a different way of thinking about sculpture, working with time and objects. That technology was opening up, and I began working with photographer John Griffin, using open source software, and then with CG artist Edmund Brown. In theory, we knew this should work, but it was a very different approach, approach and context to archaeology.

*Is there a conceptual difference – in that you were creating an imagined space?*

The objects in the room – in the film – about 36 of them - do all exist. The first stage was sitting in the archive, with Sue’s guidance, getting to know Eliza and John Soane through letters and to understand who those people were. And beginning to understand the material culture of her life and trying to map that onto objects in the collection. The process has involved being a detective. We took thousands, of photographs of the objects and built 3D models from them for the film. This was a very involved process for the Soane too.

I spent the first few years of this project having to describe in detail a room I had never seen, to draw it and make a storyboard of a journey around it, which was very difficult. The contents of Eliza’s bedchamber have not been together since 1833. I also needed to help people see why this would be important - The difference in approach from archaeology is that we were working to create assets for a film – a more poetic, imaginative reclamation.

*And as well as assembling those objects, you were reading Eliza’s letters and diaries, and extracts from those form the soundtrack of the film..*

We're so used to seeing 3D objects archaeology and architectural visualisation, and I thought, well, what's the purpose of that? I knew that this wasn't just about the material contents of the room itself, and that there needed to be a kind of expressive force behind that visualisation. It had to really matter and have an emotional quality to it. After Eliza’s death, Soane had kept that room as it was for 19 years. So, I was trying to figure out how to make the visualisation of that room matter to the audience – to convey the sense of longing, and the presence of this dead wife. I began to unpick what that might mean by getting to know Eliza through her letters and understanding why she mattered - not just that she was his wife, and that she died suddenly. He was the son of a bricklayer, and ended up an eminent situation, obviously. He had married up. From the letters I learned, she was clearly the emotional centre of the family – with the disputes between the sons and the father, she was often the person who was holding things together. I found someone that I really liked. Soane is brilliant and talented, but a difficult person. She was charming and humorous and funny. There's one rather devastating letter, to her elder son, George, not very long before he ended up in prison for fraud. She’s trying to compel him to understand what his behaviour will result in, to imagine himself further in time, and the effect this will have on his future children. It's an incredibly candid letter, where her voice is really fresh, more than 200 years later.

So, the soundtrack is ordered out of fragments, from diaries and letters – phrases – with music composed by Verity Standen. It’s choral, because I didn’t want to make a play and the choral form would allow me to telescope complex history and events; it’s centred on and driven on voice, with those voices addressing a lost body. I think the voice, here points to something more mythic.

*If, in a sense, it's a feminist reclamation of Eliza and the space, there's also a tension isn't there - the museum, the building – is a masculine space, and he was an architect…. In his grief and mourning, is there an element of control – in his leaving that room untouched?*

The entire environment of the museum – his home – is like a stage set, a total work of art, an installation. There are parts that are like fictitious characters. And the way you travel through time, and you move through the museum. He did incredibly creative things through his grief. Architecture and light, colour – exerting control in every little part of the museum. Thing things that Soane did with his wife's absence and grief.

But I didn’t want this project to be just about the things Soane did. I wanted to excavate *her* voice, who she was and why that matters – this full, very bright, intelligent person.

*So, you’ve created this room, populated with objects – the film explores the room. I wondered about how the how you use the “camera”. It’s sometimes directive – like Hitchcock – looking for clues and meaning. But it’s also disruptive, our point of view isn’t always that of a person, you track and you trawl and crawl, and you deny us a resolution…*

I had initially thought that there would be a single arcing shot, moving towards the gloves , with other establishing shots and journeys around the room. But with the soundtrack – the pacing of the voices, the rising and falling – breath forms a sort of spine to this work, and I took that as an editing structure – to make the room come to life. I was reluctant to linger on any object for long – except the gloves at the end. I wanted to suggest this absent person, who you can never get to. So, the editing lingers, brings you close, but not too close – the feeling of searching, a restlessness connected to a sort of emotional force – a longing to connect that is never satisfied.

*The CGI feels somewhere between the hyper real and impressionistic – and there are two moments where the realistic illusion is broken.*

I was wary of the sometimes plastic look of CGI surfaces, so I gave Ed lots of visual references, and particularly paintings by Joseph Gandy, who’d worked as a draughtsman for Soane. But from the very earliest writing and storyboards, I knew I wanted these two moments when, in differing ways, this language of naturalism would break down. I described the first moment in the film this happens to Ed as the colour draining away, so it’s almost like you're standing inside a mausoleum. And the second sequence, made by me, is a more chaotic or falling apart of the language of the animation itself – thinking of the Piranesi drawings on the wall, and his Carceri, or Imaginary prisons etchings. The second sequence needed to suggest a labyrinth world that sits underneath the surface of this room. The image is broken, literally, and it’s a metaphor – the fragility of that naturalism, and an emotional space, not just an architectural space.

*And then, you’re in the middle of this process when then two big things happen – one global, one personal..*

Yes – in the pandemic, we end up doing all this via screens.

And we had been working towards the exhibition happening for the end of October 2018 when, at the end May that year, I became very ill - I was discovered to have a very rare tumour at the base of my spine. I spent such a long time in that NHS hospital bed, and I remember thinking, well, how ironic- I'd spent ages thinking about the moment this early 19th century woman suddenly died, and her deathbed, and this bed chamber, and here I was, in a much less glamorous bed, also in pain. The question of legacy, and this exhibition became very important to me – and this subject of dying was suddenly not abstract at all, but a very, very real thing. I went through a period of time to figure out if I would be around to do the exhibition, but eventually my situation became more stable. Dear Friend, was re-scheduled. Later, in Spring 2020 – the world started to realise health is in fact the centre of everything, many people became more aware of vulnerability, bereavement and acts of care as being at the centre of life. The years since 2018 changed my relationship to the project – deepened it – I became more aware of both Eliza’s and John Soane’s vulnerability and the private acts of care John Soane took in preserving his wife memory within the museum. John Soane’s relationship to his bereavement is so creative, I think it became a part of his aesthetic. He placed private allusions to Eliza all over the museum so that Eliza is everywhere and nowhere within the Soane Museum. So, I am so delighted at the new Eliza focused museum tour created for Dear Friend. I am hoping that my film, the museum tour, and events we have planned, give a fresh lens to think about the Soane, and that the subject now resonates differently, given our collective experience of the pandemic.

*And what about the title – Dear Friend - where does that come from?*

Reading through Soane’s letters I came across a reference to the family tomb. He made a model for that that’s in the Library at the Museum. Under the canopy of the model John Soane wrote in pencil a quotation from a now forgotten novella where a young man is addressing a portrait of his dead father…and it starts ”Dear Friend, I can no longer hear your voice…”. I immediately thought, that is the title of this work. That’s what generates everything: it is about the longing to hear the voice of Eliza, the need to hear the voice of the absent person.

*And what about the dust?*

I emphasised to Ed that mostly camera movements would be slow or quiet, with the odd flourish. And that even in static locked shots there would still be very small movements of light, shadow, and dust. I have worked with that language in my work for a while now.

I realise that some of are a standard thing in CGI - dust particles that form the atmosphere that surrounds objects.

Here the dust is part of the language of a phantom room that no longer exists, a kind of haunted room. I didn't want to literally show something ghostly. Dust of course is everywhere, and a kind of liminal substance. It comes from bodies, moves in and out of things, from plant to animal to mineral, in and out of bodies. There’s a lightness and fragility to dust. It is also a marker of time. If she resides anywhere, Eliza is in the dust.

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