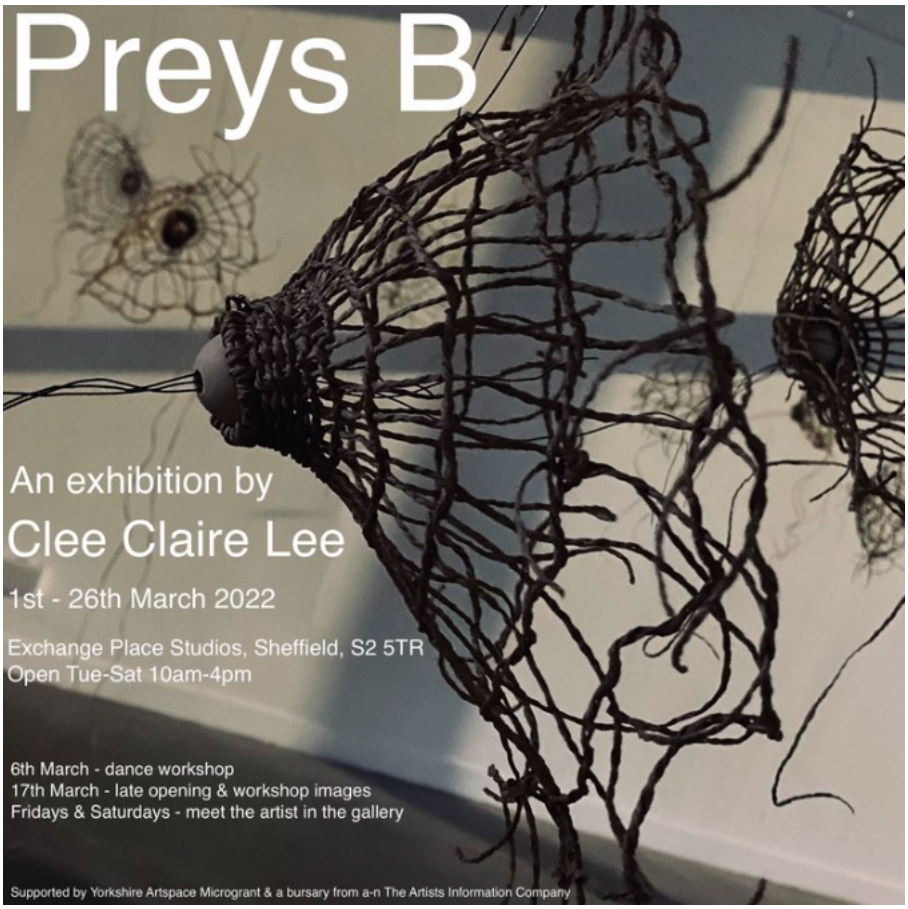

In resilient voice! *Preys B*, a muted chorus pulses with life

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> 'What are the words you do not yet have? What do you need to say?'
> Audre Lorde[1]

For a brief moment, the initial encounter with Clee Claire Lee's solo exhibition at Exchange Place Studios, is a benign restorative experience. An intricate installation of over a hundred modular structures suspended precariously from the ceiling invites visitors to step carefully through a gently wafting forest of delicately crafted objects, arrayed like a mass of whispery lace bonnets that might have been woven from spiders' webs. The neutral hues and organic materials evoke a 'natural' aesthetic that is both comforting and reassuring in these anxious times. The intense labour that has gone into the making of these objects is worthy of close attention and perhaps quiet contemplation is enough in its own right. But there is something slightly sinister and disturbing here too. What else is going on?

Resonating capacities long gone, some old wooden piano key hammers and an assortment of other randomly chosen objects find themselves trapped inside bits of basketwork. A red

[1] From Audre Lorde, 'The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action', first published in *Sinister Wisdom* 6 (1978).

plastic wire bleeds onto the floor. Objects are snared in fastidiously fabricated wire cages. Closer observation shows that each of the dangling hundred or so spiky structures is meticulously constructed to resemble a human throat. From each gullet, a tiny wooden bead of a mouth spews out a profusion of wire, cartoon-style, promising a mini-volcanic eruption of noise. This dis-abled chorus of objects is accompanied by an intermittent audio track: an old metal boiler casing mounted with decoy speakers conceals a throbbing mash-up of human voices muttering 'Let me know when you want releasing…'[2] Every so often, tucked away in a corner, a looped animation is projected onto the wall; a fleshy mouth bares its teeth, its stifled bark like an angry dog.

Over the last two years, Covid has made us all mute, dumbfounding us into submission, muzzling mouths, muffling voices. But there are more powerful historical and contemporary resonances at play here. If these muted objects are trying to speak, what are they trying to say? With its ironic nod to the rebellious handmaids of Gilead[3], Clee Claire Lee's *Preys B* can be experienced at many levels and is open to a range of interpretations. But it is important to get beyond the obvious associations, as it also resonates powerfully with gendered histories of silencing and muteness that traverse place and time, harking backwards and forward to the current day.

Sustainable materials, collaborative processes

Before addressing the silencing and noisy resonances of the work, the materials and processes involved in the artist's practice deserve some prior attention. Although an eco-aesthetic is not a primary motivation, the re-use of materials is a key feature and collaboration is always integral to Clee Claire Lee's working method. Although this is a solo exhibition, much of Lee's work emerges from a lengthy gestation of working through ideas collectively with other practitioners: visual artists, dancers and film-makers.[4] That said, the modular structures in *Preys B* were created through an intense laborious process which was solitary and involved many hours of close detailed work. Largely using a twining technique, rather than weaving, sometimes in combination with raffia, the web-like fabrications, forming *Forty days, one mile, a hundred voices*, were primarily made from a mile-long length of 'paper string' originally sourced from Japan. *Shifu* is the name given to the making of thread or string from *washi*, a Japanese handmade paper traditionally made from *kozo* (mulberry). For over 1,500 years, and with only a few refinements, traditional papermaking methods produced strong paper. This paper was spun into thread and the thread was then woven into *shifu* cloth used to make durable everyday garments. With the development of synthetic fibres, this ancient craft had almost disappeared during the first half of the 20th century but with the demand for sustainable materials and a resurgence of interest in

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[2] The audio track is a manipulation of the voices of Lee and Shirley Harris, Gill Crow and Gill Alderson from a 2018 collaborative project, *Syn-Aesthetic*.

[3] 'Praise be!' was one of the standard greetings amongst the Gilead residents in Margaret Atwood's feminist futuristic novel *The Handmaid's Tale*, originally published 1985 and celebrated more recently in the serialised version made for television, 2017-2021.

[4] *Preys B* builds on *Preys,* an installation that formed part of a group show at Bloc Projects, Sheffield, 2020. It has involved working on a voice recording with audio resumed from a 2018 collaborative project, *Syn-Aesthetic*. Gerry Turvey held a dance workshop within the installation and Rachel Smith collaged images from this workshop to create a slideshow which was projected onto the wall at the open evening event on 17th March. Creative filming of the exhibition is in collaboration with Shirley Harris.

artisanship, there has been a contemporary revival of the art of *shifu*.[5] The paper string used in Lee's installation is made from recycled paper. Another sustainable aspect of the installation, and indeed of the artist's practice more generally, is the re-use of materials. Frequently, Lee's installations re-deploy salvaged objects and dismantled things that she had previously fabricated, sometimes the result of collaborations with other artists. In this way, items such as a cherished chair castor, or the tiny galvanised mesh wire cage that was previously part of a collaborative piece in Material Voice's *Matter out of Place* [6], form an ongoing conversation in which objects speak to each other.

Gossip and 'bridling' the 'scold'

Notably, 'speech acts'[7], and the political implications of 'voice' and voicelessness, are central to Clee Claire Lee's whole body of work. In her own publicity for the show, the artist describes the work as a 'gathering of voices' and refers to those who experience marginalisation, discrimination and exploitation. There are many ways to approach notions of voice but there are particular references within the exhibition to gendered and misogynistic histories and contexts. For me, the exploration of these discourses is powerfully at play in *Preys B*. These themes were underlined by Lee's one-off durational performance in the exhibition space, in which the artist sat speechless and motionless for her entire exhibition opening event, her face covered and head encased in a specially constructed mask. Whilst there were resonances with the multisensory participatory art objects worn in performances by the Brazilian Lygia Clark in the Sixties[8], Lee's mask more specifically referenced the 'scold's bridle' or 'brank', known for its use in 16th and 17th century Europe. As no information about the nature of the performance was provided prior to the open evening, it is interesting to note that visitors reacted in a range of different ways. As evening drew on, dark shadows fell across the walls from the installation, creating a tense atmosphere of anticipation. For some, the event was a powerfully moving one; others felt uneasy, commenting on the strange disturbing nature of the performance and found it 'difficult to read', not knowing whether anything further would 'happen' or if the artist would stage some kind of action at some point. Many were astonished by the endurance, composure and stillness demonstrated by Lee, who herself remarked on how she felt a strong sense of both absence and presence throughout her self-imposed 'bridling'.[9]

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[5] See Hiroko Karuno, *Shifu: A Traditional Paper Textile of Japan*, 2016 available at http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/tsaconf/977 and Daphne Mohajer va Pesaran, *Kamiko, Washi and Takuhon-shi: Making paper clothing in Japan*, 2020 https://www.emkp.org/kamiko-washi-and-takuhon-shi-making-paper-clothing-in-japan/

[6] Clee Claire Lee is part of the artists' collective Material Voice. Material Voice's *Matter Out of Place* exhibition was held at Yorkshire Artspace, Sheffield, 18 June to 10 July 2021.

[7] Ideas relating to 'speech acts', the active, performative nature of utterance, are associated with the philosopher J.L Austin, but have since been developed and critiqued by others, notably Jacques Derrida and Gilles Deleuze & Félix Guattari.

[8] See Cornelia Butler/Luis Pérez-Oramas, *Lygia Clark: The Abandonment of Art, 1948-1988*, MOMA New York, 2014. One of her multisensory masks can be seen here, Adrian Anagnost, *Presence, Silence, Intimacy, Duration: Lygia Clark's Relational Objects,* 2017

[9] Anecdotal feedback from audience members was received and collated after the event and was provided by the artist by email 21 March 2022.

It is important describe in some detail the nature of this fearsome form of legalised punishment. Although there were earlier references to the bridling of women, the first recorded use of the 'scold's bridle' was in Scotland in 1567.[10] The barbarous contraption consisted of bands of iron, sometimes painted in gaudy colours. Generally, a protrusion of metal was attached to the inner part of the iron hoop and, once fitted, the bridle was locked into place, preventing the wearer's speech. The spiked 'bit', measuring up to 3 inches long, held down the tongue and reached to the back of the throat, causing retching or vomiting. Designs varied: the Stockport bridle was fitted with 9 iron pins with sharp points 3 on the upper surface, 3 on the lower, 3 pointing backwards; the Forfar version, pierced the tongue and roof of the mouth. Even the least barbarous brank could shatter the teeth or break the wearer's jaw as most often the 'gossip' was tugged through the streets on a lead whilst being whipped.

This vicious form of public humiliation, was imposed with the support of a law (proclaimed in 1547) that forbad women to meet together to talk. Silvia Federici has highlighted the gradual denigration of the term 'gossip' which originally referred to a close female friend. Its meaning shifted through the 15th century as, in literature and songs, women were increasingly chastised as quarrelsome and aggressive, as 'getting out of their rightful place'. By the 16th century, women's status and social position had deteriorated to the extent that women, largely older and poor, were frequently attacked as 'scolds', primarily becoming a feminised unlawful offence. [11]

In the late 16th and the early 17th century there was also great concern about women 'running out of control' by, amongst other things, defying husbands, rioting and challenging priests. The preoccupation with women's behaviour in the period is reflected in such writings as Shakespeare's *Taming of the Shrew*. There are cases in England where the victims of the bridle were involved in social and political protest or, as in the case of Quaker Dorothy Waugh, in dissenting religious movements. [12] Accusations of voracious sexuality and witchcraft frequently went in tandem.[13] Indeed, Federici argues that the suppression of women and women's sexuality through witch-hunts facilitated and constructed a capitalist patriarchal order that has continued into the present.[14] She reminds us that accused women were not practicing members of pagan cults but largely peasants who resisted oppressive and impoverishing developments arising from capitalist domination.

> Witch-hunts served as a regulating tool used to maintain a hegemonic political-economic system, where women's bodies became "privileged sites for the development of power-techniques and power-relations."[15]

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[10] The Museum of Witchcraft and Magic claims the earliest reference to a bridle worn by a woman may have been made in the 1380s by Geoffrey Chaucer. Serious scholarship cites various references and dates but commonly cites 1567, as does Silvia Federici in *Witches, Witch-Hunting and Women*, 2018, PM Press, Oakland.
[11] See Chapter 5 in Silvia Federici, *Witches, Witch-Hunting and Women*, 2018.
[12] See https://www.lancastercastle.com/history-heritage/further-articles/the-scolds-bridle/
[13] Federici, p. 38.
[14] Although it was primarily women who were accused of witchcraft and were victims of the bridle, there were also cases of men suffering the same fate.
[15] Federici quoted in Anna Colin (ed) *Witches, Hunted, Appropriated, Empowered, Queered*, Maison Populaire, 2012, p.11

Whilst such objects were outlawed for use in the early 19th century, there is an account of the scold's bridle being used as late as 1856 in Bolton-le-Moors in Lancashire. Remarkably though, the crime of being a 'scold' was not dropped from the statute books in Britain until 1967.[16]

Rebellious silence, radical rudeness, WWNBS!

In the 1970s, as scholars have shown, the figure of the witch underwent a decisive revival and a resurgence of interest amongst activists led to the investigation and rewriting of obscured histories. Indeed, with individuals such as Starhawk and groups such as W.I.T.C.H (Women's International Terrorist Conspiracy from Hell), the witch became a symbol of feminist and gay struggles in Europe and the US. For some, the witch had become a figure of sexual empowerment: the appropriation and recuperation of the bridled 'gossip' had been initiated. [17]

Through the 1990s, Federici testified to a resurgence of witch-hunts, particularly citing cases in Africa and India, but violence against women more generally has certainly not diminished, with the systematic violation of women's rights taking place every day across the world. Alongside this, there has been a 'speaking back'. Silence itself can be a rebellious tool of protest as demonstrated by Saudi women who, in 2017, filmed themselves silently walking the streets at night without male companions as part of their struggle for the right to drive. Elsewhere, spurred on by the #MeToo movement, women have reclaimed noisiness and are challenging power through 'radical rudeness'.[18] Recent cases, such as Sarah Everard's murder and the heavy-handed police response to the mass vigil in March 2021, have renewed campaigns against violence against women.

So, to return to *Preys B* in the light of all this, Clee Claire Lee's installation resounds with references to multiple histories of resistance to silencing. The choked chorus she has created pulses with life and speaks up for talking back. Furthermore, the artist offers a final gesture that underlines this. In resilient voice, *Preys B* offers a real-time opportunity to think about speaking out in *Release your voice*. This de-installation event at the exhibition space 11am-2pm on Tuesday 29th March invites participants to do just that, to find the words, whatever they might be. So, what are the words you do not yet have?[19]

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[16] See https://www.nts.org.uk/stories/hold-yer-tongue

[17] See Note 15 and Anna Colin (ed) *The Witching Hour*, Le Quartier centre d'art contemporain, 2014, exhibition catalogue and Isabelle Stengers and Philippe Pignarre, *Capitalist Sorcery, Breaking the Spell*, (orig. French 2005, English trans. 2011) on the reclamation of witchcraft.

[18] The concept of 'radical rudeness' recently re-emerged as a tactic in Uganda. Also see this commentary on a recent feminist art exhibition in Kyrgyzstan https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/odr/fateful-feminnale-an-insiders-view-of-a-controversial-feminist-art-exhibition-in-kyrgyzstan/

[19] See notices at www.cleeclairelee.com