

Edwin Burdis

Interview with Elinor Morgan

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Edwin Burdis 'UIB', Photo: James E Smith

I meet Edwin Burdis in the upper hall at Primary, a studio complex in a Victorian school building in Nottingham. The right hand wall of the space is clad in eight foot mirrors that start at the floor, the other three walls have long, narrow windows from chest height to the room's very tall, arched ceiling. Six large un-finished plywood structures sit around the space with tools and offcuts of wood in between.

An atonal piece of music is playing on the radio when I arrive. It's theatrical, swooping voices remind me of Edwin's operas which have collaged scores composed with found audio and elements performed by friends and collaborators. Both 'The Fruit Machine', made and exhibited at Wysing Arts Centre in 2013 and 'MegaDairyPigFarm', shown at Max Wigram in 2012, were sound works integrated into large paintings that continued the narrative and imagery of the audio.

Edwin Burdis works in sculpture, painting, performance, music and more recently video. He has been making music and performance since the 1990s and with a number of other artists he is a member of the band Long Meg. Edwin is currently the second artist in residency within Primary's programme 'Multiple Points in this Crude Landscape'.

EM: For your latest work, a video titled Light Green and Dark Grey (2014) you went on a number of journeys and collected music from around the country. That reminded me of the way that Cecil Sharp collated vernacular and traditional sounds to make a cultural archive or how Benjamin Britten used colloquial language in his operas. What are you working on here at Primary?

EB: Being invited to work here with in this a big space, time and budget has enabled me work on this idea that I have had for a while: you know there's this theory that England will turn into a series of islands as the sea level rises? I thought, let's move forward 4,000 years. Nottingham is on a hill so now it's an island called 'Rottingham Pig'. So I wrote this story about this incident on the island that talks about their social set up, sexuality and race. Around this island there are these sentinels called 'happy drone lighthouses'. They are basically computers but no one has computers any more. It isn't the apocalypse or anything- it's just so far into the future that things have totally changed. But these things are still about- they're like Roman remains from the past that hasn't happened yet. They talk. They're like oracles or the Internet. People go to them and give them fruit and they give advice in return.

I guess it's connected to childhood. Looking back there are loads of films I used to like where there was a thing to find and they had to ask for advice on their quest. But that's a really old idea isn't it? It was also just putting a bit of magic into stuff. These (gestures at the large, bent plywood structures around us) are going to be very colourful and big. There will be a sound piece that goes with them, like 'The Fruit Machine'. And I am making a film but that will only be shown online because I think it's better to show films online. There is a physical space for physical things and a separate space online that has its own rules.

EM: Your work often references and utilises pop culture and its devices. Last time we met, you gave me 'Jurassic Park' (1993)... I loved it. What are you reading at the moment?

EB: People laugh at me when I say how good 'Jurassic Park' is... I'm glad you liked it. It's really good when it talks about all of the scientific stuff isn't it? Have you seen 'West World'? It's a 70s cult classic- a precursor to 'Jurassic Park'. I'm reading two books: 'The Hunt for Red October' (1990) which is a Tom Clancy book, a huge American best seller. All of his books have been turned into films with Harrison Ford in. I've read it a couple times. It's set in the Cold War. Maybe I like it because it's set at the time of my childhood. And it's about submarines. No, actually, it's about sailors and all of the mad systems of the American and Soviet military- stuff that men get up to. The other book is 'I Fellini' (1995). That is just Fellini on this huge rant about making films and food.

EM: Like sci-fi, your work often uses narratives that are slightly disconnected to the present, projecting us into a close, but separate landscape or time frame, to convey a message. Long Meg's songs and your paintings use a pop, cartoon style to express things about consumption and

inequality in a way that is not didactic. How much of a political message do you want the show at Primary to have?

EB: It's not political like 'The Fruit Machine'. That was very much about greed and how we're all fucked. Having said that, when I sent the story to Niki (the Curator at Primary) he ran it by some people here and one of them said, there's a problem. I thought people might object to the fact that the main character is a female who has a male slave and they're called 'boy toy bitches' - it's real cheesy sci-fi stuff - but it wasn't that. It was about race. There's a bit where people smear mud on themselves and someone was concerned that it would appear racist. I hadn't thought of that at all but as soon as someone said it - typical me - I started to really push that element of the work. So it has become a bit about race. The narrator is now this old friend of mine who is a black Londoner who has a very particular voice and there's a girl I've filmed who's from India. As a young man someone said to me, 'it's all gonna be brilliant in the future because we're all gonna be brown.' At the beginning of the '90s everything was going to get better: race relations, sexism, war. Which actually reminds me of this Ursula Le Guin book, 'Lathe of Heaven' (1971) where everyone turns grey, but anyway. It was all going to get better... but it's just got worse.

EM: Is the work influenced by this location and Nottingham or is this a narrative that would have come about if you were working elsewhere?

EB: I think it's very influenced by being here and the feeling around here. I can't necessarily articulate it all yet. Things are quite desperate; the poverty feels different to London. It's more static. There's a gated community up the road that is one of the richest areas in the Midlands and Primary sits in between that and some of the poorest areas in the country.

Some of the patterns I am using have changed since being here from looking at the skylines and how much red brick there is. There's all the historic stuff too: Nottingham was once the capital of the country. The glory that once was... It's all seeping into the work. And I am doing some filming here so physically there are bits of Nottingham in the film. I want to film the spaces where the countryside meets the city.

EM: The music in this new work and the feature-length film that you have been making over the last year is all newly recorded. Why is that important?

EB: Yeah, parts of 'The Fruit Machine' were recorded but in the work for Primary I am just doing it all. Nothing is sampled... Except there's a massive a capella of Beyoncé. Before it didn't matter where it had come from, but now I feel like I should make it or at least it should be made. I don't know why it feels important now. I have just made this rule.

EM: I wonder, then, if you are interested in things being made by *your* hand? Is making the work a way of authoring it, or does it just feel good to be doing it? Would you object getting these sculptures fabricated?

EB: That's a good question... No. Someone else would make them better. I think I should do it. I think it will be great when they're done if I can say, yeah, I did that. I am enjoying it. It's been a procedure. I work in bouts. It's easy to draw, make music, or film in bouts but physical labour is different. I have to make myself stop and sit down. You can't work for 8 hours non-stop. I'm aching all over. I have found that quite weird.

EM: The sculptures and the sound system will occupy the space but the features of this room will remain as they are. Do you think of it as an environment? Are the pieces all one work or can they exist separately?

EB: They are all one work but like everything I do, things can change. These 16 paintings I made as part of 'MegaDairyPigFarm' were recently split up and they look a lot better. They're really strong on their own.

Some of the sculptures have voices. (We walk around the space, Edwin pointing at different structures.) This one would have been standing but now it's fallen. It talks as if it's upset. It's like a fallen angel. The others ignore it. This one is the height of the room. This one is a dinosaur footprint. This one will have patterns like a Venetian toilet.

EM: This feels like a real celebration of making. What will you work on next?

EB: After this I want to spend 3 years making a film. It's a vampire film but it isn't about vampires. It's about sanity. It's a group of people who believe that they're vampires and it doesn't say if they actually are or not. And there's this other person and he's in love with one of them so he has to believe too. It's about belief.

I'm not actually that interested in Alejandro Jodorowsky or his work but there's a documentary about him wanting to make a film of Dune. He got lots of different artists and thinkers together and got them to produce all of this stuff, but the film was never made. He talks about how Dune was one of his best films, because he failed; he never made it and he says that's the point. He says you've got to be ambitious to the point where you can fail. And that's what I want to do next: I want to spend 3 years making this film. I am learning a lot but it feels obvious, like this is what I should be doing now. Shall I show you some of the film?

EM: Yes please.