

Sally Madge

Nowhere better than this place

Saturday 28th January - Saturday 25th February 2023

Newcastle Contemporary Art (NCA)

High Bridge Works, 31-39 High Bridge, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE1 1EW
Newcastle upon Tyne

www.visitnca.com

www.sallymadge.com

This retrospective exhibition celebrates work from the late 1980s onwards by renowned north-east artist Sally Madge, who passed away suddenly in November 2020. It showcases aspects of a rich, diverse contemporary arts practice embracing collage, assemblage, mixed media sculpture, photography, installation, film, and performance combined in highly original ways in all manner of hybrid projects. She is perhaps best known for ground-breaking installations, including a critical tribute to Luis Bunuel and Salvador Dali's classic surrealist film *Un Chien Andalou*, a collaboration with a pet gerbil repurposing a repository of accumulated knowledge, and a long-lasting project 'rearranging the beach' which combines outlaw architecture with collective environmental art. However, although her work appears to defy categorisation, certain consistent principles as well as notable patterns of progression can be discerned. Bold, surprising juxtapositions deploy unusual, scorned or otherwise discarded or neglected material skilfully crafted and grafted using innovative techniques reflecting ideas drawn primarily from personal resonance and daily life, seasoned with characteristically mischievous wit and wisdom to draw in and delight while also unsettling and challenging viewers. Meanwhile, surrealism, psychoanalysis and avant-garde, conceptual and live art, along with radical movements in philosophy and pedagogy, are prominent among many inspirations and influences. Nonetheless, close attentiveness and direct sensual responses to whatever immediately came to hand, eye and mind were always starting points in Sally's artistic process.

The displays are organised according to themes that preoccupied her and function as site-specific elements weaving together disparate media and imagery linking surface content to norms and narratives which shape understandings of what has value as 'art'. Broader questions asked concern how the meanings we ascribe to experience are swayed by social, cultural and institutional arrangements that limit and discipline us – which change and crystallise over time but are felt as inevitable, natural elements of the world and identity. Sally devoted much energy to pondering, manipulating, and creatively expressing the outcomes of and mismatches among these notions and phenomena. In developing distinctive approaches to making art, and in offering such vibrant ruminations on the impulses and actions involved, she hoped to nourish reinvention and reimagination in the practice and reception of artistic activity as well as wider society.

It should be noted that the motifs described below are somewhat arbitrary, and in fact regularly recur elsewhere in a trajectory impossible to sum up so neatly – and other significant strands in Sally's art activities are not represented at all. Nonetheless, this structure offers a means to grasp abiding directions of travel in what might otherwise seem a bewildering body of work. And given her penchant for recycling and reprocessing material wherever salient, these sets of traces, remnants and records of previous ventures may be viewed as a constellation of installations knitting together most deeply felt motivations.

'Romantic fictions' tackles subjects related to personal life and power relations in vivid expressions of visceral, sensual, social and emotional existence. Often, in Sally's hands, the codes and rules prevalent in culture concerning childhood, education, the family, gender, intimacy and identity are unhelpful, even damaging fantasies. Rather than reliable guides to understanding who we are and how we might live, these systems achieve coherent authority only by suppressing or ignoring the messy reality of being human. However, in line with her radicalism and steadfast feminism and in opposing narrowly prescriptive methods used in teaching art, for instance, Sally resisted aesthetic or philosophical resolution. These playful and forthright acknowledgements of the pleasures and pains, complications and contradictions inherent in each case signal a process of working things out for ourselves. In that regard, early installations counterpose bodily urges in striving for creative expression against pedagogies which curtail as much as encourage it. In one example, a video anthology reveals Sally painting then kneading clay on the floor and a toddler's rapt attention to her large abstract easel. Subsequent tales of childhood play complicate comforting nostalgia, rendering intense bonds between youngsters and cuddly toys in the artist's adult indulgence of her inner childlike queen/mother; subsequently exploring more ambiguous connotations in a ghostly toy museum tempered by baleful reminders of early years troubles and aftermaths. Also positing inextricably internal and external social relations, perspectives on sex and gender suggest the artifice of feminine masquerade and taint high fashion with lower carnality, while sentimental clichés of courtly romance clash with lusty imagery and music and accounts of flirtation and abandon. A video homage to Bunuel and Dali's cinematic landmark *Un Chien Andalou* then combines surreal animation, live action and exemplary archive tunes conjuring a dream universe of yearning and dread.

Later live art collaborations with Carole Luby offer poignant and riotous assertions of gendered maturity alongside feminist passion. The toll of domestic endurance is highlighted in the exhausting production of nurturance and cream teas, or an increasingly chaotic delivery of daily bread as viewers in off the street creatively and conversationally digest food for thought – and, finally, carnivalesque stand-up overturns male privilege in a chainsaw massacre of toys for boys. The artists' creative process manifests in real time in these happenings – their inhabitation of installation spaces inviting direct involvement and privileging tangible collective experience over solitary reflection, so that distinctions between art and life begin to blur.

The emphasis on bodily as much as mental and social experience persists throughout Sally's work. Since a dislocated and often isolated childhood of exploration and den-building in remote woods and coastlines, she would compulsively forage for, collect and play with anything capturing her attention wherever she found herself. The installations covered in **'Human and other animals'** follow the fascination with natural environments in all their biological and mineral (and often 'synthetic') glory and our full physical embeddedness, as animals, on this earth – and animalistic allusions and remains feature in much of her work whatever its focus. The displays mingle with collections and assemblages of material as preferred paths of aesthetic investigation and creation, again offering treatments and critiques of systems of knowledge which claim to tell truth about the world but strictly circumscribe engagement with it.

Subjects tackled include the fates of wildlife impacted by human dominance contrasted with discourses in the humanities and environmental sciences as well as the arts. In a rural gallery, avatars of the owl evicted during barn conversion and its prey along with a bronze-cast cowpat lurk among haystacks amid citations concerning heritage management and countryside romanticisation; elsewhere, the urban economy is encapsulated in a former dry-cleaning establishment with the squalid lair of a feral pigeon at its centre. Other works focus on the disruption of avian habitats resulting in adaptations to and colonisations of human space, presuming the perspectives and assuming the autonomy of birds tangled in the nets of our attitudes and activities. In another enterprise, a pet rodent deconstructs an encyclopaedia for its own purposes, manufacturing a new home from the arrogance of evangelistic rationalism – components of which are then reconstituted in artworks as if by magical transubstantiation.

Further skewed contemplations of natural history are influenced by museum conventions and origins in colonial 'cabinets of curiosities' plundered from foreign parts. Intimate scenarios see visitors to London's Freud Museum commune with a freeze-dried wader exhumed from its coffin, or when Sally installs herself and granddaughter in one of the Great North Museum's many large display cases housing taxidermy and ecosystem pastiches. Meanwhile, problematics of memorials and monuments condense in the true tall story of a wild brown bear enlisted in World War 2's Allied forces, represented on film by a bear-suited actor rooting through wreckage at the Scottish Borders demobilisation site. With an even broader remit, a horde of mixed-media sculptural grotesqueries infiltrate stacks of learned tomes at Newcastle's Literary and Philosophical Society, twisting biological matter into the tragedy and wonder repressed or disavowed by the conventional camouflage of officially certified storytelling. In a performance clad in fur, feathers and bones with a backdrop of texts from critical theory, Sally then expounds alchemical formulae conjuring alternative real, symbolic and imaginary universes before ballroom dancers sweep in for a rousing Viennese waltz.

Sally chose the designation '**Nowhere better than this place**' for her lifelong love of shorelines and coastal margins, and it is site-specific in the more general and expansive sense of immersion in indeterminate liminal zones. In this instance, work in areas between high and low tides – 'readymade', rather than contrived by installation – generated an enormous output, with only a taste on view here. The erosion of demarcations between lived experience, creative imagination, and orientation to place and space is now nudged towards a logical conclusion of fully-fledged inhabitation – and, while the most well-known work was, in part, collectively accomplished, the majority is characteristically and idiosyncratically individual. A range of small pieces, produced routinely in response to particular stimuli and scenes, accompanies collections of beachcombed low-brow archaeology which prompted compulsive sketching, experimentation with, and contrasting treatments of marine themes. The items shown stem from time spent at seaside around the UK and Europe, and a sizeable proportion arose from a special bond with Lindisfarne – itself sometimes an island but, at other times, not.

Shelter marks a sea-change in Sally's practice, yet its chequered 15-year lifespan began as no more than serious play. With preliminary beach efforts scuppered by officialdom, an anonymous drystone hut gradually acquired shape, substance and driftwood roof on a rocky hinterland before unheralded demolition by a nature reserve manager. Over seven years, word of mouth and virtual myth and fame had accrued far and wide, with multitudes of passersby refashioning the décor and filling dozens of visitor's books. Throughout, and once rebuilding was complete in 2011 with health and safety duly addressed, the site continued to serve as venue for friends and family and outdoor studio, hatching and realising plans for artwork shown elsewhere alongside typical torrents of sketching, collaging, sculpting and collecting. Major collective arts programmes and events raised the public profile further until destruction by arson in 2016.

The arrangement of material here provides a sense of the atmosphere at the site hosting broad spectra of creative activity, including the Scatter assemblage from massed rotting flotsam and jetsam fabric scraps rescued from near, far and wide, cleansed and stitched into painterly tapestries. An early idea to clothe a geodesic dwelling – hence the dome, also symbolising the Shelter itself – was supplanted by a brainwave that the cushions could denote the dissolution of unknown objects across the oceans followed by unlikely healing and a revitalisation of home comforts. Notwithstanding powerful historical and contemporaneous resonance with dramas and catastrophes of diaspora and migration, this microcosm of human geography likewise suggests the relatively mundane displacements many of us have known – as, certainly, did Sally. And if our fragments dispersed during a lifetime can be reunited, then these objects radiate profound empathy with all kinds of personal and communal trials and tribulations which might be transformed into ambivalent beauty, reconciliation, and even transcendence via the artistic imagination.

The progress of Sally's practice culminating in these projects reinforces her insistence on potential unlocked when rigid, reified differentiations are dissolved: between the political and geographical, human/animal, mind/body, cognitive/emotional, conscious/unconscious, individual/social, adult/child, material/conceptual, life/art ... The resulting work testifies to a restless quest for ways to passionately grapple with our angels, demons, and other down-to-earth everyday concerns. This show aims to reveal the confluence of interests, experiences, skills and subject matter which animated her in scrutinising our shifting and contingent existence as living creatures dreaming, creating and organising ourselves and each other. And perhaps nowhere better epitomises this vision at full scale than the site-specific mega-installation and arts community institution at Sally's legendary den, studio, and all-round inhabitation in Newcastle – a blend also gestured towards in the gallery, with a 'snug' library for viewing, reading and meditation along with space for play and discussion around a 'kitchen table' as in her own most hospitable home.

Tom Jennings

(from an essay entitled '*Installations, Institutions, Inhabitations*', available at: www.visitnca.com)

'Romantic fictions' features material and records from the following exhibitions and projects: Limits of the Container (1990), Listen With Mother (1991), No Trace Without Resistance (1992), Self Portrait: Who We Are (1994), Putting My Foot In It (1994), Slippery Blisses (1996), Transitional Goods (1996), Bed of Roses (1999), Handmaiden (1998), Can You Feel It? (1998), Replay (1999), Underdog (1999; with Sam Hooper), Risky Plenitude (2015), Film Stars (2016), and, with Carole Luby: Labour Intensive (2008), Late Shift (2009), and S.C.U.M. (2009).

'Human and other animals' includes items from: Hot House Cold Storage (1994), Below the Scenes at the Museum (1994), Heart of the City (1995), Free as a Bird (1998), Gerbil's Guide to the Galaxy (2005), Bric-a-bracollage (2008), Bird in Hand (2011), Just Visiting (2012), Souvenir (2013), Fictions (2013), Stuff of Dreams (2013), Always Look on the Bright Side of Death (2014), Out of Place (2015), Ars Longa Vita Brevis (2015) On the Gut (2016), The Pecking Order (2016), and Still Life (2016-2017), as well as Nests and other 'nature table' collections.

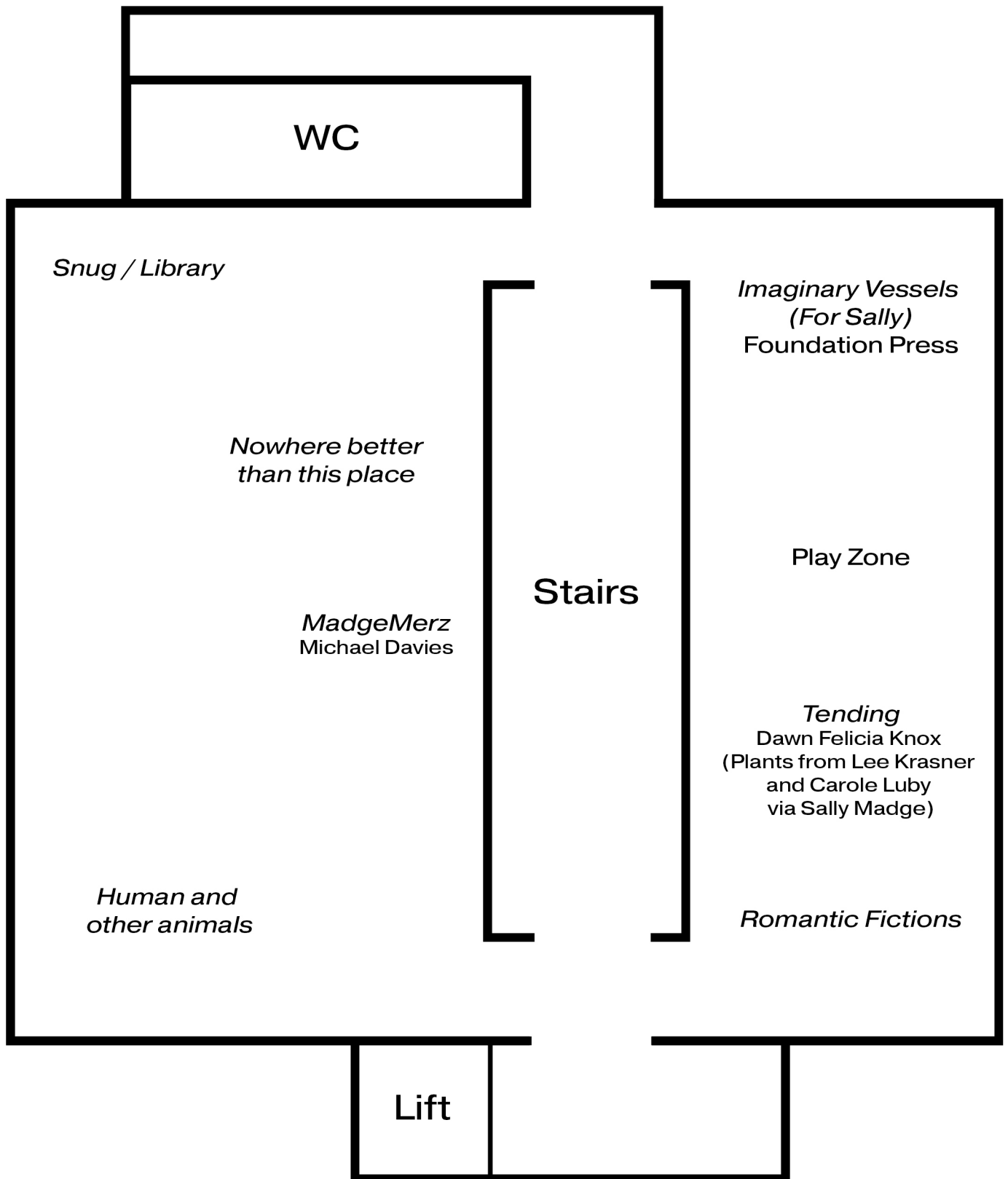
'Nowhere better than this place' presents a range of material on coastal subjects and work associated with the Holy Island of Lindisfarne, Northumberland, including: Shack (2001-2002), Shelter (2002-2016), Holy Smoke and Holy Shit (2005-2006), Flotsam Fandango (2007), Hot Charcoal Drawings (2013), Shelter Museum (2014), Granfer (2014; with Adam Phillips), Return to Sender (2014), and Scatter (2017-2020), interspersed with driftwood art, paintings, sculptures, beach-fired pots, sketches, films, assemblages, found objects, and photographs of shelters and environmental art made over the years. The Scatter cushions were finished by Sara Braithwaite and Paula Blair and Paula also made the fabric panels. The geodesic dome and 'MadgeMerz' wall – recalling the work of Kurt Schwitters, a touchstone for Sally – were conceived and constructed by regular collaborator Michael Davies.

'MadgeMerz' by Michael Davies and 'Imaginary Vessels (For Sally)' by Foundation Press were commissioned by NCA for this exhibition. More information about these projects and the artists can be found on www.visitnca.com.

Thanks also to Amy and Lucy Madge and everyone who loaned items from their collections and helped in preparing for this exhibition and associated events, which were organised and curated by the Sally Madge Research Group: Richard James Hall, Michelle Hirschhorn-Smith, Tom Jennings, Dawn Felicia Knox, Helen Smith, and Judy Thomas.

Special thanks to Irene Brown (Newcastle University Fine Art Department) for loan of vitrines, Baltic for loan of plinths and Star & Shadow Cinema for help with AV equipment.

Gallery Floor Plan



Events

Tues 7th Feb, 6:30pm:

Claytopia / Pedagogic Practices: How did Sally facilitate?

Facilitated by Foundation Press and Dr Judy Thomas, Assistant Professor in Fine Art, Northumbria University. This tacit workshop explores processes of making, facilitating, learning, creating and community. The session welcomes artists, educators and facilitators and involves making a mess, tea and scones and conversation.

Sally modelled authentic and progressive teaching practices; her approaches were contemporary, political, lived and experiential. With an unknown outcome, this session collaboratively examines Sally's pedagogic practice by exploring ideas of utopia, process, materials, community, provenance, ownership and play.

The session will involve working with clay so participants are advised to wear clothes that can get messy.

Tues 21th Feb, 6:30pm:

Feminist Practices: What Do We know About How Sally Made Work?

A Conversation exploring how women artists make work between and about our domestic and professional spaces.

What do we know about how Sally made work? Did she move between her domestic spaces and professional spheres like many artists do? How did her home, her kitchen table, allotment, studio, workplaces, exhibition venues, favourite places in the landscape all contribute to her artistic process and subjects for her work? What might we understand more fully about our own and future artist practices that also transcend these different physical, social and political domains?

NCA is delighted to welcome two amazing women to ground our conversation in their research and curatorial practices: Dr. Patricia Zakreski, Senior Lecturer in Victorian Literature and Culture, Exeter University and Dr. Caroline Gausden, writer and discursive curator based in Glasgow. Currently, Development Worker for Programming and Curating at Glasgow Women's Library.

Please go to **www.visitnca.com** to book your free ticket for the events