

# GLADSTONE GALLERY

Corwin, William, "In Conversation with Sarah Lucas," *The Brooklyn Rail*, September 2011.

**BROOKLYN RAIL**  
CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON ARTS, POLITICS, AND CULTURE

IN CONVERSATION

## SARAH LUCAS with William Corwin

SEPT 2011

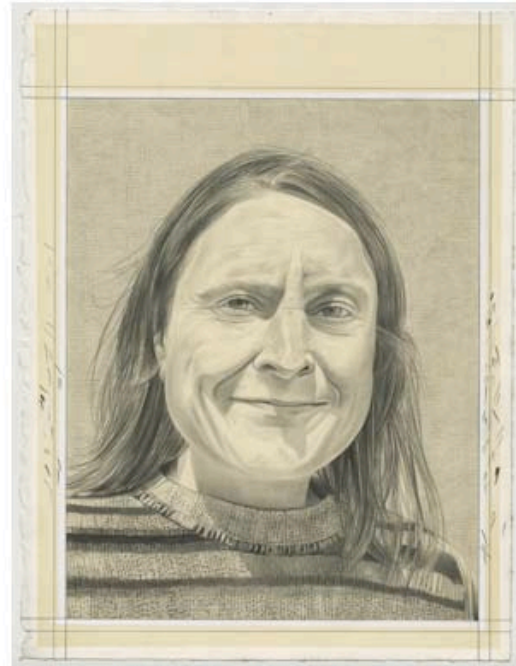
ART

by William Corwin

After a pub lunch of lamb kidney and sweetbread salad and with the cool breezes wafting in off the coastal Suffolk marshes, William Corwin sat down with Sarah Lucas on the back terrace of Snape Maltings, to discuss, over hand-rolled cigarettes, the process behind her first ever public sculpture "Perceval" and her current project/exhibition with Gelatin at the Kunsthalle Krems.

**William Corwin (Rail):** First could you talk about the genesis of "Perceval," which is included in *Snap*, curated by Michael-Craig Martin?

**Sarah Lucas:** "Perceval" is really my first and only, at the moment, piece of public art. I always found a lot of public art quite tiresome, especially public art in Britain. Not all of it, of course; there are some great things. Given that public art is really for everybody, it's not necessarily for sort of an art going public. I think "Perceval" addresses this quite well. He's basically a blown up mantelpiece ornament of a type that most people in England are quite familiar with—somebody in their family had one. He's a Clydesdale: It's a workhorse with a cart. Generally speaking, you'd find a barrel of beer or suchlike in the cart, because that's what these horses were doing. In mine there are a couple of gigantic, oversized marrows made of concrete. I think of marrows as being a kind of fertility symbol because of their phallic shapes. However, the piece came about really by accident. I'd had the horse and cart knocking around. It's actually based on my sister's, which she had when we were children growing up. She's got a sort of penchant for knickknacks. I can't remember what prompted me to ask her to get it out of her attic, but I must have had some harebrained idea that's gone out the window now. The upshot was that it was knocking around at my place and I'd put a couple of cast courgettes into the cart, just because they were around, something



Portrait of the artist. Pencil on paper by Phong Bul.

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I did without really thinking too much. One night Damien Hirst came back to my place, probably to continue a drinking session that had started earlier in the day, and he said, "You really ought to make that big," which he often says. He likes the Big.

So Damien left with the knickknack and took it down to the foundry that he was working with in Stroud called Pangolin. A couple of years later I got a call from them to say, "We've got the mockups done, come and see." I went down there and there it was, carved out of polystyrene, full size, with a full size horse, ready to go.

I've often said sculpture makes itself. I know it's not entirely true, but quite a lot of things do find their own way into the world—to some extent through my agency, but often, through the agency of other people as well. This was the case for all of us lot, so-called Young British Artists (YBAs).

**Rail:** Do you feel the emergence of your generation, the so-called YBAs, was due to a lot of collaboration between artists?

**Lucas:** Yes, we were an ever expanding bunch of artists, and to a great extent we were our own audience. People were organizing one-off shows in warehouses and some were running small galleries off the beaten track, doing things in empty shops and so forth. Also managing to get beer sponsorship and generally having a party. The scene was very energetic and buoyant, and that takes a lot of people.

**Rail:** Back to "Perceval."

**Lucas:** "Perceval" is a really funny artwork for me because he's not particularly typical of my work. As I said, it's the only piece of public art I've made and he doesn't cause much of a stir in the art world because there's nothing controversial about him, really. For the general public, I think, he's an object of great affection; he's really likeable. He's great to see in a rural environment like this.

The other funny thing about this is that shortly after the incident with Damien, I moved up to Suffolk. By the time "Perceval" came into existence I was probably already beginning to connect to a more rural environment. So he was a part of that, really. But again, it was an accident. Maybe that's what destiny is.

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**Rail:** As you mention, the materials in the piece are not typical of your work; you usually work with found materials. How did it feel to work with bronze?

**Lucas:** When it came down to it, the tricky thing was actually taking on how this sculpture was being made or sort of coming into existence, however you'd like to look at it. Obviously, there was the option of having it just look bronze, or to just do it in bronze or just do the marrows in bronze, or something like that. The marrows in particular became very important because they were the concrete element, and in a way, the real link with previous works. "Perceval," is, in a sense, a found object, albeit blown up. That, I think, is what alleviates him from the sort of heaviness and stiffness of bronze sculptures, which is something I've avoided. But it's not so much that I avoided it, it's that it hasn't been something particularly appropriate to me. The fact is that the horse is painted and does look like ceramic, so in a way it has a light feel.

Having said that, I haven't really thought of a way to extend that. Obviously I could just go out and find knickknacks I like, or something like that, but that doesn't seem to be the real core of it, so at the moment he's a bit of an anomaly.

**Rail:** So can we say he represents a sort of coming to terms with your rural environment, since you're born and raised in London? That he combines a kind of stereotypical vision of the country with a more serious symbol of fertility, the big concrete courgettes?

**Lucas:** Well, his timing was good.

**Rail:** In some of your more recent shows, like *Penetration*, you work within mediums that are more cast and more produced. Could you talk a bit about that show?

**Lucas:** I've always made works in plaster and concrete using a very rough kind of casting technique, beginning by casting some confusing bits of my body: arms and



"Perceval" by British artist, Sarah Lucas on loan at Aldeburgh Music. In the background Snape Maltings Concert Hall, home to world-famous Aldeburgh Festival. Photo courtesy of Anna Gelderd.

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stuff like that. In that sense, *Penetralia* is not a great leap in terms of material or method. *Penetralia* was actually the very first show I produced entirely here and about being here, in Suffolk; it was something I felt I had to do when I first moved up. I thought, who am I going to be if I'm here? I've always, as you say, used these found things, things that are quite urban. A part of my working practice is just knocking about, and if something catches my eye I might bring it home, and it kind of develops from there. I thought, if I'm here, I've got to use stuff from here, so the work has basically developed mostly out of sticks and stones, with also a quite hefty dose of the penis. The penis being my boyfriend Julian's, which also kind of particularly works because we were just embarking on our love affair at the time. It was great fun.

**Rail:** How did you broach the idea?

**Lucas:** When I first came up here, I thought, "Well I'll make a knob out of something." It's something I've always found useful and quite humorous. That's how the beer can penises came about. There are actually many of them in my work; it might be interesting to have a sort of knob exhibition some time. Julian, being Julian, is completely into that idea and is quite happy to have his knob out all the time. He's a sort of perv like that, I suppose. Doesn't mind being strapped up in plaster and stuff like that. It was a surprisingly scary thing in a way, not so much the making, but the presenting of the show, because I thought it needed the penis element again as a kind of link into my previous concerns. But also for a bit of that edge because I supposed most art-going publics really wanted a bit of edge, a bit of shock. I don't think it was a shocking sensational show in that sense but I think it actually did really connect with people. I was a bit apprehensive about it because I thought, this is actually something so different. It was part of me orienting myself to being here; now I've been here a bit longer, I don't feel the urgency anymore, but at that moment it seemed extremely important to do something with being here. It was almost sort of dishonest not to.

**Rail:** But there is a conceptual jump between a marrow or an aubergine and then the actual thing. What was the transition that took place then, from the conceptual to the real?

**Lucas:** It's a way of going about something. Julian and I just walk about the countryside; we'll see a bit of a stick that looks interesting and we'll pick it up. I

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very easily accumulate stuff. I suppose that was exactly the same as being in London. The main difference is how it resonates with other people in a way. Also, I suppose, with how it resonates with myself. When I was making those kinds of things and they didn't all have a penis to give them edge, their power had to come from somewhere else.

It's very difficult to remember all those things you were thinking, what was really going on, what you were really putting into something at the time. But it was almost a kind of mystical dimension. I feel that, very strongly, about the natural world especially, and even about finding an old bucket. Things acquire, accrue a kind of powerfulness to them. Something like a stone that has been there so much longer than we have. It's the same with art works. Art works, if they continue to exist, accrue more and more power to them, as well as perhaps a particular feeling of the people that they've lived with. And not just art objects, but all objects. I suppose I've got something verging on a belief in a spirit of things, a spirit of everything. I think it's kind of absurd to think that we're these conscious beings and everything else isn't. I think all things have consciousness in their own way. So I suppose it came with those kinds of ideas, really. But, like I say, they're not one the urban and the other the natural, or the one seemingly worthless or the one useful first place—like a tree. They don't necessarily contradict each other.

**Rail:** Talk a bit about the Nuds Cycladic show that you did at the Museum of Cycladic Art. I know it kind of grew out of your bunny sculptures and developed into this sort of human form.

**Lucas:** I suppose it's obvious to say they developed out of the bunnies because they use the same materials. But in a strange way they developed out of *Penetralia*. That was the next thing to come along. There is something very organic and branchy and sprite-like about them. You start making something, and it suddenly jumps to life and it seems so clear that you can't believe you didn't see that years ago. I mean, there is no reason why I shouldn't have done something



Sarah Lucas und Gelatin 2010, Photo: Sara Glaxia, Courtesy: Galerie Meyer Kainer, Wien.

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like that immediately after doing the bunnies. I do tend to jump around from one thing to another just for my own amusement. I like the change of materials. Enough fluff up your nose for so long and then you start to think, "Actually, I wouldn't mind dealing with something else for a bit." So that's one thing. But I think it also just depends how you have your point of view adjusted at any particular moment. I really think that having it adjusted into these trees, and the "branchiness," and the organic things, lead me to notice that about the Nuds. The first Nud was actually just a screwed up old bunny that had been in the back of a cupboard for some years. When I went through the cupboard and came across it, I suddenly saw something in it that I hadn't seen when I screwed it up.

**Rail:** How did the bunnies come about to begin with?

**Lucas:** The first bunny, actually a hare, was started around the time I had this shop. I decided to make a kind of the Tortoise and the Hare sculpture, which actually never worked out, so I abandoned it. I stuffed the tights to try and make a kind of hare's legs—it does look a bit like a hare's legs—and at the time it was stuffed with newspaper. There was something about those legs. I never worked out the tortoise bit and I just thought it was a bloody silly idea anyway, but there was something intriguing about the life-likeness of those legs, so I put them on a top shelf in my kitchen at the time. When I returned to it some years later I wasn't thinking of the tortoise and the hare; I don't know what I was actually thinking of, but I remembered the sexiness of these legs. Only this time I decided to stuff them with fluffy cotton. It was when I stood back and looked at them around a chair that I thought, "There's something so going on here." So it developed out of that, really.

**Rail:** I wanted to talk a little about the history of the shop that you founded with Tracy Emin. Can you tell that story?

**Lucas:** Yeah. I'd had a studio with, at the time, my partner Gary, for some years, although I've never been a massively studio-oriented person. It just seemed time to get out of there somehow. I'd met Tracy about six months before, around the time I had my first one-person show at City Racing. She was living in South London and she was just attending these private views at City Racing on a regular basis, and one time it was my show and I got to talking with her in the pub afterwards because she was really excited about it. I was very excited about it at the time, so

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that's how we met. A while later I decided I didn't want to be in the studio so I went to work in my home, I was living in quite a small apartment at the time. I felt after a while, "Oh this is not really going to work, I need some sort of a project." And got talking to Tracy about it, and we cooked up the idea that it would be nice to have a shop for a while. So we went and took a lease, a six month lease on a shop, just paid up front, and we thought we'd just take it from there.

**Rail:** Whereabouts was the shop?

**Lucas:** It was in Bethnal Green Road which is in Shoreditch, now an incredibly popular area. But it was quite run-down at the time. It was the beginning of things really kicking off there. Joshua Compston had his Factual Nonsense space and Gary Hume, Glenn Brown, and Richard Patterson had studios around. There was an all-night bagel shop at the bottom of Brick Lane which is still there, and had been there for years and years. That inspired us to stay open all night on Saturday nights. And that really, really made a difference. All kinds of people came by after whatever else they'd been doing on a Saturday night, then maybe got a bagel, and came to see what was going on with us. That was a part of how the whole thing unraveled, really.

**Rail:** What were you making in the shop?

**Lucas:** We actually opened with nothing whatsoever, and we just started making anything we could. We'd make a lot of badges, some of them just ideas of our own, some of them bits of cut out newspaper, or drawings, all sorts of things, and these were selling for 50 pence or a pound. Funny enough, at the time that little bit of money from just selling things to odd people kept us in beer money, kept us going from one day to the next. We were also

doing t-shirts and stuff like that. I was also making a few sculptures, tiny mobiles—you know, funny things. Basically we got there in the morning, opened up, sat around and made things. We decided not to do any publicity; we didn't take out any adverts or anything like that. It was Tracey's idea just to have little business cards, which we hand-wrote ourselves. And every time we went

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somewhere in the evening, an opening or a party, we'd hand these out to people that we liked. So the whole thing went through word of mouth. It was amazing really that it unraveled as quickly as it did and was as popular as it was. Strange people came in, one night three in the morning. Max Hetzler came in once, we never knew who would show up. That was the nice thing about having the shop, I suppose.

**Rail:** Lets talk about *Snap*, the exhibition here. What are you planning to work on?

**Lucas:** It's not exactly a curated exhibition. It was prompted by an idea by Michael Craig-Martin, who I met one night a couple of years ago now at a concert during the Aldeburgh Festival. This place, the concert hall at Snape Maltings, was established by Benjamin Britten and Peter Pears as a concert hall. It developed out of the Aldeburgh Festival which started originally in Aldeburgh, in the jubilee hall, which is a much smaller place that didn't belong to them.

None of the spaces are really purpose-built for showing art, so everyone has to work in an odd kind of space with an odd set of specifications, and some of the works will be outside. There's also a bit of an overlap with more musical or conceptual pieces of work: in my own case I've made a hanging sculpture which is going to be in the new concert hall that has a bar area that's quite high. It also has a mezzanine level, but there's nowhere really for having freestanding sculptures, because so many people need to mill about there. So I've made a hanging sculpture which is kind of a bunny-ish, Nud-ish thing. It also incorporates some garden loungers and is called "Loungers."

The nice thing about the space, as I said, is that you've got people milling about on the ground level so you've got to look up at it, but you can also go up to the mezzanine level and look down on it.

**Rail:** Are you going to continue along the Nuds pathway? What other projects do you have in mind?

**Lucas:** The other big show is with the Gelatin guys, Wolfgang and Florian. We're doing a big exhibition at a place called Kunsthalle Krems, which is about an hour



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outside of Vienna. I went to see it just in November; they asked me to do the show a couple of years ago. I said yes immediately because I fancied working with them. When they said it was their hometown, I imagined some tiny little thing, but it's this giant Kunsthalle. The show also features Bosch and some of Bosch's contemporaries because they have a collection of such works there, which they're allowing us to opt into the show.

**Rail:** Why did you want to work with the Gelatin guys? Do you feel on some level that their work aligns with yours?

**Lucas:** I met them through Franz West. From time to time he invites me to put some work in a show of his. On this occasion it was a show he called *Hamster Wheel* and it was part of the Venice Biennale, unofficially. It was the first time I'd met Gelatin, in person, and seen them in action. Our exhibition space was cut off from the main biennale by a large body of water. So they made boats and ferried people back and forth to our opening. Eventually we were shut down by the police, mainly for nudity. I like that kind of public spiritedness, I suppose, and irreverence.

**Rail:** What has the project ended up looking like? Did your sort of careful and considered working method work well with their style, which I suspect is kind of frenetic?

**Lucas:** I've always had an ad hoc element to my practice. Sort of running with the ball. In this case, I made all the work in the exhibition on site. They brought a lot of stuff and also a lot of people in to help: three girls to do casting and various blokes to do all sorts, plus a chef (also an artist). So we just got on with it. We did get together a few times over the previous year, but this was more about nurturing the spirit than having any fixed ideas about what we'd do. I was surprised, really, by the seriousness of the Bosch element. When the guys first proposed the exhibition I imagined a token Bosch. But it's lavish. The whole thing's pretty amazing, really.

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**Rail:** Did you end up taking Bosch into account in the project?

**Lucas:** It's about putting the three together. The parallels are already there—or not, as the case may be. That's up to you.

**Rail:** Can you give us a hint of what's next?

**Lucas:** Big Tits.



Sarah Lucas und Gelatin 2010, Photo: Sara Glaxia, Courtesy: Galerie Meyer Kalner, Wien.



Sarah Lucas, "Got A Salmon On #3," 1997, Courtesy Sadie Coles HQ, London.