

# CultureCast

## Episode 8



(Start of episode)

(Short introductory sound effect)

Male voiceover- CultureCast- the podcast from Tyne & Wear Archives & Museums.

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**Gill Scott:** Hello, and welcome to Culture Cast. My name is Gill Scott from Tyne and Wear Archives and Museums. In this episode I'll be learning about the touching story of the real lives behind two of the objects at South Shields Museum and Art Gallery. We'll also be hearing from one of the artists featured in the Hatton Gallery's "The Long Dark Exhibition". First up though, Rob McIver takes a trip to Sunderland Museum and Winter Gardens to have a look at their "Collected Fragments" Exhibition.

(Funky Music Sample)

**Rob McIver (RM):** Hi, I'm Rob McIver. "Collected Fragments", which opened in Sunderland Museum and Winter Gardens in October, features the work of a number of international contemporary artists who share an interest in collecting. Some of the artists are on the autistic spectrum and the relationship between this and their interest in collecting and ordering is explored in the exhibition. Filipino-American artist Jeffrey Sarmiento invited me along to have a look at "Collected Fragments" and to tell me about the work that he was commissioned to create for it.

**RM:** Hi Jeff!

**Jeffrey Sarmiento (JS):** Hi Rob!

**RM:** Thanks for asking me along today. Tell me a little bit about the exhibition.

**JS:** Well, as you know, the exhibition is called "Collected Fragments" and in it a number of artists have used various approaches to coming to an understanding of taxonomy in collection. Whether that it is through something that they are compelled to do or through something that they are doing consciously, it usually takes on the idea of mapping, collecting and very intense observation.



**RM:** And you were actually commissioned to produce some work specifically for the exhibition?

**JS:** Yes, that's right. Shauna Gregg, who is the Keeper of Fine and Applied Arts at Sunderland Museum and Winter Gardens asked me to participate in "Collected Fragments" about a year and a half ago and she offered to open

up certain collections to me. She happened to mention that there was in fact an ethnography collection, which, with my work being about cultural identity in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, was a perfect fit. So I spent several months taking a look at 700 odd objects which are in the basement of this museum, trying to come to an understanding of what these objects might mean today.

**RM:** So, let's go and have a look at it!

**JS:** Great.

(sound of footsteps)

**JS:** Right, what you are looking at here are three cases. On one side I like think of this case as the historical side of my exhibition. Some of the real objects from this ethnography collection are in there. Most of these objects are in fact objects from New Zealand, African spears or ceremonial objects among other things and some early records on where they might have come from. And then on the right you are looking at a case of objects made in glass which describe how the objects are cared for, looked at and analysed today. Some of the researchers who work here are looking for markings which might help us to identify some of these pieces. It might give us an idea of its origins.

In the final case is the work itself which is entitled "Ossify", in which I actually create a replica of a Maori paddle. In it I've interlaid, in layers of white and clear glass, images of the collector himself, Edward Backhouse, a decorative element which is originally found on the Maori paddle and some of the text from a newspaper article which describes the origin of the Sunderland Museum itself and how this object might have entered the collection.



I like the idea that an objects itself consists of more than what you might actually imagine, for example what that piece of wood might be. By fusing

the images with it you get a sense of past and present and also of the idea of a foreign object becoming local. So this object in fact now belongs to the city of Sunderland and in certain ways it's like I am a Filipino-American artist, I try to relate to myself becoming local or to having a sense of belonging to the City.

**RM:** Looking around the rest of the exhibition, do you see any other objects on display you can relate to?

**JS:** Well, in fact I feel like I have a strong connection with almost all of this work because some of it is very labour-intensive and incredibly observant. Just like the piece that dominates the centre, another commission piece by Karsten Bott, is a just a collection of contemporary objects to create some kind of archive. So tens of thousands are stacked on top of each other in shelves. In this way I think he is trying to describe or understand the world around him in a way that we all as artists or people in fact are.

**RM:** Collected Fragments is showing at Sunderland Museum and Winter Gardens and closes on January 3<sup>rd</sup> 2010

(Funky Music Sample)

**Gill Scott (GS):** I'm here with Adam Bell, the Assistant Keeper of Social History at South Shields Museum and Art Gallery. Adam, before we get started, just tell us a little bit about your role and what it entails.

**Adam Bell (AB):** I look after the collections in South Shields Museum and Art Gallery. That involves cataloguing them, documenting them and also generally helping to make sure that they are preserved for the future.

**GS:** And you also carry out various pieces of research on the collections. Now, you've got two fascinating things here that you are going to talk about today. Just talk us through.

**AB:** I'd like to talk about two little pencil and ink drawings we have in the collections. The interesting thing about them is that they depict gravestones.

**GS:** Do we know anything about who these gravestones belonged to?

**AB:** One gravestone is to George Marshall who died in 1851, aged 25. The other is to his brother William, who also died aged young, 23 years, in 1852.

**GS:** What's the background story to George Marshall?

**AB:** The gravestone of George Marshall is in many ways most interesting because you can see at the top of the gravestone is carved a little lifeboat and at the bottom of the gravestone it says, "George Marshall, who was saved out of the lifeboat, December 4<sup>th</sup>, 1849."



**GS:** And do we know anything about this lifeboat?

**AB:** Well, on that date in 1849 there was a terrible disaster called the "Providence Disaster", just off the coast of South Shields. At the time, the life boat "Providence" capsized whilst it was attempting to save the crew of the brig "Betsy". And tragically, of the 24 men, who made up the life boat crew, only four survived. These men were tremendously courageous. It was actually estimated that of the 20 in the lifeboat crew who drowned that night, between them they had saved 450 lives in the previous eight years. George Marshall was one of the men who were saved that night, but tragically, just two years later he died at young age. I undertook some research and I found out that George and William Marshall were brothers and they both worked as Tyne pilots.

Tyne pilots helped to guide ships in and out of the river Tyne. And of course, at this time, the Tyne was a very busy river, particularly with the coal trade to London. Tyne pilots traditionally manned the lifeboats and this how George happened to be on the lifeboat "Providence" on that night.

**GS:** But as you say, rather tragically, it was only two years later that George Marshall actually died. Do we know what the cause of death was?

**AB:** George Marshall died aged only 25 and his brother William also died young, aged 23. I discovered that they both died of Tuberculosis, or what was known at the time as “consumption”.

**GS:** And was that a common disease for that time?

**AB:** Well, you have to remember that in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, South Shields was a rather dirty, unsanitary place and disease and early death was not uncommon, unfortunately.

**GS:** So where were the two brothers buried?

**AB:** They were both buried at St. Stephen’s Church, which is at the Lawe Top in South Shields. Most of the Tyne Pilots lived around the area of the Top and St. Stephen’s was known locally as the Pilot’s Church.

**GS:** And you can still see their gravestones there today, I presume?

**AB:** I’m afraid not. At some point in the past many of the gravestones were cleared from the churchyard in St. Stephen’s, so unfortunately, they are not there today. But thankfully they can still be seen here on display at South Shields Museum.

**GS:** In the form of the pencil-and-ink drawings. Interestingly enough, I have noticed there is another feature on the tombstone of William Marshall that is quite interesting.

**AB:** If you look at William Marshall’s tombstone you’ll notice that some of the wording isn’t quite right. For instance, the word “sacred” at the top and also a little below that, the word “memory”. These are either misspelled or they have letters missing. This has led me to think that possibly the artist was



illiterate or maybe not fully literate.

**GS:** Do we know who drew them?

**AB:** Well, we don't know for sure, but it would be my guess that it was possibly a grieving relative, maybe the mother or a sister, who drew them to keep them as a little memento of their loved ones.

**GS:** They are very poignant reminders. So, Adam, where can we see these drawings today?

**AB:** You can see them on display at the "Changing Faces" gallery in South Shields Museum. The gallery tells the story of South Tyneside from the Bronze Age up to the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

**GS:** That's excellent, thank you very much Adam.

(Funky Music Sample)

**Michelle Cotton (MC):** Hello, my name is Michelle Cotton. I am the curator of the exhibition "The Long Dark" which is a group show of nine artists practicing internationally and it's all contemporary art.

The exhibition is premised on the idea of medievalism and the medieval period as something which is revisited, or an idea of that history that is revisited at different points over time. Particularly it takes John Ruskin's essay "The Nature of Gothic" which discusses Gothic architecture and its significance in relation to changes in industry in the 19<sup>th</sup> century as a starting point for exploring quite politically based ideas.

The work in the exhibition encompasses various different media, including sculpture, painting, photography and etching. Many of the works combine traditional hand-processes of making art that are familiar from crafts as well with more modern industrial materials and techniques.

Bernd Ribbeck, who is one of the artists exhibiting in the exhibition, is here to talk briefly about his own work.

**Berndt Ribbeck (BR):** For my work, my interest in early modern architecture is very important. I am rather interested in, for example, modern church architects, who create between the idea of modernism and building with concrete and steel in an original way on one hand, while on the other hand creating churches which have to be spiritual places



This strange mixture between modernism and traditional buildings is a field which interests me. My work in general is mainly abstract, but there are always architectural shapes in it. In this exhibition there are two water-colours which play with those architectural elements. Yes. this is one thing I am interested in.

Another thing is abstraction which is related to spiritualism, so that's also something that's influenced my work as well and helped me to develop my own kind of abstraction. When I started working on my pieces I produced them in a way which made them look older than they are. It's like finding objects which could be made 80 years before or today. They are jumping out of normal time relations. This gave a more freedom to act as an artist, to do what I wanted to. This is very important for me personally and probably also for the show considering Ruskin's approach to medieval art and ideas of crafting and producing artworks and architecture.

**MC:** The Long Dark is at the Hatton Gallery and it opens on Friday 4<sup>th</sup> December 2009, and closes on the 20<sup>th</sup> February 2010. The exhibition is an 'International Three' touring exhibition supported by the Arts Council of England, Institut für Auslandsbeziehungen, The Elephant Trust, Newcastle University and Tyne and Wear Archives and Museums.

(Short funky music sample)

**GS:** Thanks for listening. The next CultureCast episode will be out in February 2010.

With thanks to:

Jeff Sarmiento  
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Berndt Ribbeck

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