

INTERVIEWS,
CONFERENCE REPORTS,
TRIBUTES

**AN INTERVIEW WITH OLIVIA LOMENECH GILL
(AND ELZÉARD LOMENECH GILL) ABOUT
STORIES, ART, AND (NOT ONLY) FANTASTIC
BEASTS**

Filip Krajník



*Olivia and (some of) the participants of new workshop
at the Prague Quadrennial, 2019. (Photograph: Martina Freitagová)*

FK: We are doing this interview at the Prague Quadrennial of Performance Design and Space. Can you tell us what your role here exactly is and how you got here?

OLG: Well, I came here on a train from nearly Scotland, from the Scottish border. (*Laughs*) I was invited by Pavel (*Pavel Drábek, a former member of our department, currently Professor of Drama and Theatre Practice, University of Hull – ed.*) because I did an alumni talk at Hull University and because... I am not quite sure actually why I've been invited here. I've been asking myself the same question. (*Laughs*) I was asked to do a keynote speech but I'm not calling it that. I just call it my talk or presentation. In fact, when the *Fantastic Beasts* book came out a year and a half ago, I made a presentation for the book-launch, it was my first time doing a Powerpoint presentation and I am not very good at editing so there are loads of pictures, it is quite a crazy slideshow! Basically it is a visual story partly about where and how I work and the journey of how I think I got to do this book *Fantastic Beasts*. When I met Pavel at Hull, he said, you ought to come to the Quadrennial, and I was so excited about the idea of coming back to Prague I said, yes please! And so I came. And also, as well as doing the talk, I said, well, if I am coming all this way, is there a chance to maybe do some workshops with young people or do something else while I'm here? So we've done a brilliant day working with Martina Freitagová from the amazing *Máš umělecké střevo?* (*an international platform for contemporary fine art and art education at primary and secondary schools, see www.umeleckestrevo.cz – ed.*) making cardboard birds with lots of great artists who turned up yesterday (*8th June – ed.*) and... (Olivia's son Elzéard wildly points at himself) Someone's trying to say that they came too. So I brought a ten-year old boy to carry the bags. (*Laughs*)

Do you see these workshops and direct contact with the audience as a natural part of an artist's job or is it something that you just personally enjoy?

I suppose some artists could say, well, it's time out of the studio and you ought to be doing your work and not travelling around, having a nice time, but for me, I love meeting people and going to other places is always nice. I don't really like going on holiday as such but if you have a reason to go somewhere to work with people, for me, that's the best way to explore places and it's just really exciting to come and be in Prague again and part of the Quadrennial. It's very nice to come to make contact with other people in the field of art even if I don't feel very qualified to be here. (*Laughs*)

In our e-mail correspondence before your visit, you repeatedly mentioned stories in the context of art. Do you see these two as naturally connected? Are there any stories or kinds of stories that you find particularly inspiring?

Stories are a really important part of my work and I kind of blame that on the fact that I did train in theatre. Even as a fine artist when I'm making a piece of work, there's often a story behind it. But I think that's not the case for a lot of artists because "narrative" is a bit of a dirty word or has been in the UK, so I'm possibly a bit different like that maybe because I'm self-taught, so I like to experiment with different techniques. For me, the techniques are a means to an end, my work is very simple, "analogue" as someone recently said, I like this word! Talking to students I realise that today's artists are growing up entirely immersed in the digital age and actually it is a bit of a revelation to them that someone can manage to work in such an "old-fashioned" way as I do. It's like not having a mobile phone, it just seems incredible to them. I am not at all clever or conceptual in my work, I am just driven as a normal person who is interested in stories of different kinds. It could be fairy tales or contemporary narrative, for example the story of what's happening at the moment with the migration, the movement of people. I wish, as an artist, I could do more in humanitarian terms.

I have seen on your website that you in fact are involved...

I feel like I am not really important enough as an artist to be able to have much influence and that's quite frustrating, nowadays I think one has to be a "celebrity" to possibly change anything, expect that celebrities are usually too busy being celebrities to bother much with anything else. I am waiting for somebody famous to get on a train rather than a plane, or make their own dress for the Oscars out of fair trade fabric and donate the equivalent of their designer dress to a good cause (this is my secret wish, I love making clothes even though I am not very good at it, and I made a "monster skirt" for the fantastic beasts book launch but unfortunately it was too big to fit in my suitcase to bring on the train to Prague!). I think the commodification of art frustrates me. Of course, as an artist I am lucky to be able to make a living doing what I do but it means one is dependent on people buying your work – I've never had funding, for example, to make my work, so I do really have to sell it to people – and so it's treading a fine line between making work that is important and finding an audience and a market for it. Since I work quite traditionally and figuratively, my work is never really "shocking" or confusing in the way that some contemporary or conceptual art can be, but I want to make work that is also, for me as a person, engaging with the real world. I don't know quite how to

An Interview with Olivia Lomenech Gill

do that. I think sometimes using folktales and stories and myth can be a good way to do that. Also, illustrating books is a great way to work, it is more democratic too.



Puck & the World by Olivia Lomenech Gill

Actually, I wanted to ask you about one particular story, and that is Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, on the basis of which you made a wonderful series of paintings and collages. Can you tell us more about them?

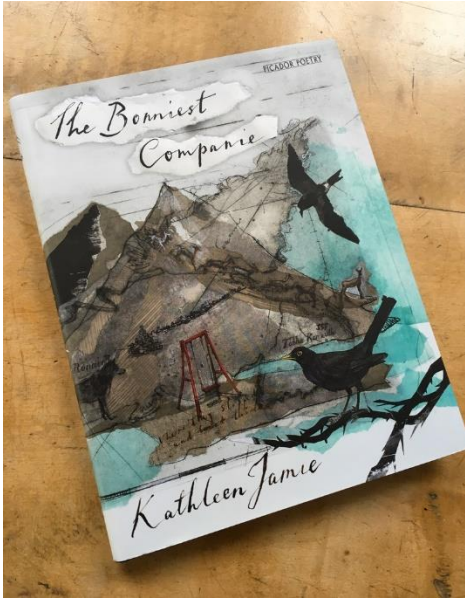
There is a very famous concert hall in the south-east of England called the Snape Maltings, in a small fishing village called Aldeburgh where Benjamin Britten made a music centre and a cultural place. As a result, there's a music festival every year and there's a very great gallery dealer, who used to run a gallery in London but

she's retired in Aldeburgh, and she does an exhibition every year to coincide with the festival. In 2017, she asked if I would do an exhibition of work to coincide that year, when *A Midsummer Night's Dream* was the theme. Benjamin Britten wrote *A Midsummer Night's Dream* opera, so I was listening to that. It's fairly close to Shakespeare, I suppose, but in fact *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is definitely not my favourite Shakespeare (even though my birthday is on midsummer's day, so I ought to really like it!). I'd much prefer to have done *Macbeth* or something like this, a bit more gritty. I am not actually a big Shakespeare scholar, unlike you, and I just find the play a bit weird and silly, let's just say it's not my favourite. But I made this series of paintings and did one large one of Puck holding the world as I like the quote "I'll put a girdle round about the earth" and I also included Oberon's flowers from "I know a bank where the wild thyme blows", which, in Britten's opera is absolutely magical, sung by a counter tenor. Often, when I'm doing something, I'm trying to learn how to do it, so this was the first time I'd painted flowers and I was quite happy. (*Laughs*) But it's probably not the way to be an artist, really.

I have to confess I know very little about visual art but what struck me about this particular series was the fact that your pictures represent both Shakespeare's dreaminess and playfulness, and, at the same time, they seem to be firmly set in our current reality and full of melancholy. Almost as if you wanted to subvert Shakespeare or maybe make him more relevant to modern audiences.

(*Laughs*) If I wanted to sound clever, like a proper conceptual artist, I would definitely use the word subvert. But I don't think so much about what I do, usually I have an image come into my head, certainly for the bigger works, I then draw it quickly in a sketchbook, work on it a bit and then work it up full size without 'further ado'. Also I work from life, so both of the paintings (*of Puck and Bottom – ed.*) are modelled on one of my sons so I suppose it wasn't intentionally melancholic but it is actually very difficult, and somewhat contrived to paint someone smiling, as we don't smile when we are relaxed which is maybe why many portraits look quite sober. Also, for me there are quite disturbing elements in the play which we often ignore perhaps, firstly the changeling, whom you never see but who is at the heart of the whole dispute upon which the whole play hinges, is an adopted Indian boy whose mother has died. Then there are the draconian marriage laws of Athens where women's rights are completely non-existent! But mostly it was perhaps the world of the forest, where things hide, a place of mystery, and a place where we play out our dreams at night, that interested me, so I tried to make work about that too.

Among the books which you have illustrated or made their cover, there are two volumes of Scottish poetry. Is that a coincidence, or do Scotland and Scottish literature especially resonate with you?



The Bonniest Companie by Kathleen Jamie, artwork Olivia Lomenech Gill (Picador 2015).

I think it's just because there seems to be a really good poetry scene happening in Scotland. I am just over the border and it appears that there is a lot of support for the arts and some very good independent publishing houses who do a lot of poetry. In fact, it was Kathleen (*Kathleen Jamie, author of The Bonniest Companie, for which Olivia created an artwork – ed.*), who asked me to do the first one. I can't remember how she found my work but I really like hers, so it was a very nice commission. I heard people say that poetry is difficult to sell (though I don't know why, poetry is my favourite!), so perhaps, because these books are less commercial, there is more creative freedom to do something a bit different?

Most of the participants in your workshops here knew you as the illustrator of J. K. Rowling's *Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them*. Can you share some secret information about how you got this job?

Actually I don't have the secret information because it's really secret. (*Laughs*) Everything to do with Harry Potter is a bit under wraps. I got a phone-call from the agent I work with, Alison Eldred, in between Christmas and New Year, when we had a friend staying and I was busy with household stuff, saying could I draw some dragons? I spent a day or whatever trying to draw some dragons...

Does it happen very often that someone calls you asking whether you can draw dragons and you say yes?

No. (*Laughs*) But from what I understand, the agent I work with was in contact with the person who was then in charge of the Harry Potter books at Bloomsbury and somehow she really liked the *Wellies* book that I've done for Michael Morpurgo

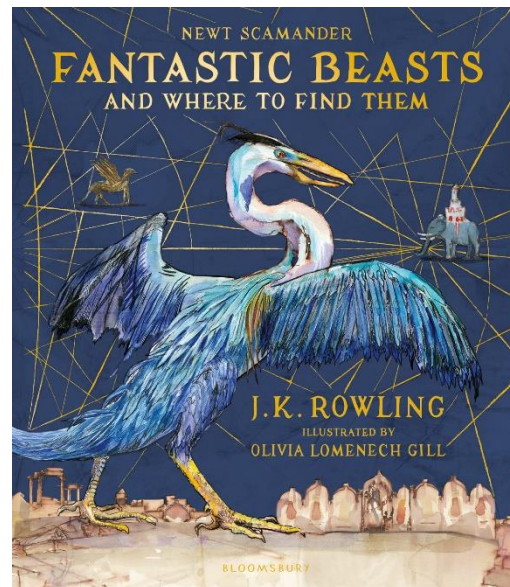
(Where My Wellies Take Me... by Clare and Michael Morpurgo, which Olivia illustrated in 2012 – ed.) and I think that was partly how it happened. Why they thought I was suitable for *Fantastic Beasts* when I've done the *Wellies* book I don't know because it's quite different but it's very nice that people are ready to take that risk because I am a bit of a risk, I'm not a proper illustrator... I'm not a proper artist either (*laughs*)... so I've always admired people who are ready to nail their colours to the mast and take a gamble. I think a lot of things have happened like that in my life, I am lucky.

I was surprised when you said at one point yesterday that you ultimately prefer to draw real things. Yet your illustrations are, by definition, very fantastic. Where did you find inspiration for them?

From real things. The ones I really struggled with were the ones that maybe came completely out of J. K. Rowling's imagination, but I would say eighty per cent of them are based on existing creatures in some form, whether it's a classical, mythical beast or a real animal and actually when you look at nature, real life, it is truly fantastic, you cannot make up anything better!

Did you have to do much research?

I did. I had to use more photographic material than I would like because of where I live, and even if you were to access lions or whatever else, you can't always get the bit that you need. But I was lucky to get to see real birds of prey because not far from where we live there is a really good centre so you can really get close and see them properly. I also got to see rhinos. Other things were actually around me, like the toad in the garden that I used for the Basilisks egg. Rather than thinking, well, I can't just get on a plane and go and draw this or find that, because there are some quite exotic things in the book, I tried to treat the limitations like an advantage. So, for example, I used my family and my garden, trying to exploit what



Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them
by J. K. Rowling, artwork Olivia Lomenech
Gill (Bloomsbury 2017)

I had all around me. Which is quite nice because it opens your eyes to ordinary things. The meaning of exotic is kind of all relative, isn't it? I think we are all a bit obsessed with travelling round the world now, to see things "over there", those of us who can afford to anyway, and sometimes we stop noticing what is going on under our nose, or the beauty of what is around us.

This is actually a question for Elzéard. How do your friends feel about the fact that your mum has illustrated a Harry Potter book? Do you brag about it?

ELG: No but some of my friends like Harry Potter so a few of them got the book and they said it was good.

Do they treat you as a celebrity because of it?

ELG: No.

OLG: Where we live it's very down-to-earth and we don't make fuss about things. Also I think that the *Fantastic Beasts* book is not so well-known. It's not Harry Potter...

But I would say that, with the recent films that were released under the label of *Fantastic Beasts*...

Yes, but people muddle up the films with the book so if you say you have worked on the book, they think it's the book of the film because maybe have been books produced of the screenplays, and even though they are not illustrated, it is quite confusing for people perhaps. The few times I have tried to take advantage of being the illustrator of *Fantastic Beasts*, it just hasn't worked at all because people are just disappointed you didn't do the film. (*Laughs*) But you can't really illustrate a film so I stopped at that point trying to explain what I've done.

So you illustrated the book only after the film?

I was working on the book it when the first came out. Where we live it's very easy to be cut off from things so I didn't see any Harry Potter films; I hadn't read any of the books before either but of course I read them when I got the job! When the first film came out and I said to the publishers, how does that work if I do something that is different from the film? – because first of all I hadn't seen the film and secondly the film is CGI and my work is not – and they said, it's fine, just do your own

thing. It's partly to do with the rights, I think, but the positive way to look at it is that the world of Harry Potter is so rich that you can have many different interpretations of it.

What is your next project and is there any chance to see your works?

My next project is with the same publishers, Bloomsbury, but they didn't want me to talk about it. But I can tell you that it is based on classical myth, with a strong female lead character with a relationship to some fantastic beasts! The writer is very good, I like her work and am looking forward to working on this new book.

When will we see it?

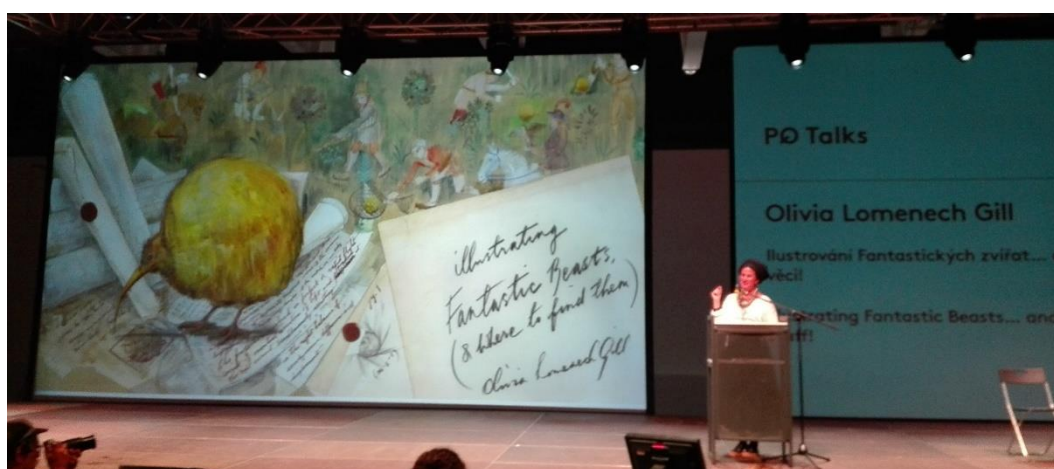
If I've still got the job, International Women's Day 2021.

The very last question: How do you like the Czech Republic and do you think there will be an opportunity to see you here again in the future?

I hope so! I love it, especially coming for a second time, I am enjoying it enormously. I bought my family here four years ago on the way to Bratislava to attend the International Biennial of Illustration, we came on the train that time as well and the youngest of my sons was only one year old, and because we are not really city people and because it was really hot, it was quite exhausting. Also, I don't really like being a tourist and we didn't know anyone and so it wasn't as much of a fun experience because we were just maybe a bit lost. We went to see some things that everybody goes to see, walked up Vítkov Hill to see the horse, explored the old town quite a bit but most of the time we spent looking for swimming pools! This time, thanks to the PQ and all the amazing people involved, we have got to make friends and be part of something. If I go somewhere new I always try and ask local advice, where to eat and what to see, and also, I don't have a phone, so I am dependent on asking people directions even, but everyone we have met has been so helpful and it is a nice way to meet people too. The only annoying thing is that I cannot speak the language, I try to learn some but it is hard because everyone is so good at English! I am very interested in the Czech puppetry because, working in theatre, I was specialising in puppetry and this is something the Czechs are best at. Art and culture are very strong here and the PQ is one of the best events I have ever been to. I love the whole history of the Czech Republic, all the different architecture, and the trains are great too. It's a history I am not very familiar with because

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I am quite ignorant about most things, also, I don't think the history of eastern and central Europe is something that is taught much in the UK which is a shame, but just going to different places and seeing different people, hearing a different language, I just love it. To be invited here was amazing and I hope I can come back, and bring my family back too. At the moment we are trying to 'exit' from Brexit Britain, and settle in my husband's homeland of Brittany in France, so we'll be a bit closer in some ways... *(Laughs)*



Olivia giving her keynote lecture at the Prague Quadrennial, 2019. (Photograph: Pavel Drábek)

Find out more about Olivia's work at www.oliviagill.com or follow her on Instagram at www.instagram.com/olivia_lomenech_gill.



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