

Arts



From sounds to vision

Now in its second year at the Aldeburgh Festival, 'Snap' unites local but world-class artists. Rachel Spence went to visit

Given how most artists are shielded by a coterie of assistants and PR aides, it comes as a surprise to discover that Maggi Hambling is to pick me up in person from Saxmundham station. When I step out of the train on to the platform, the Suffolk-based painter – comfortably dressed in donkey jacket, paint-daubed trousers and trainers, her gem-blue, Kohl-rimmed eyes gleaming under silvery curls – is unmistakable. More striking still is her car: a vast Chrysler saloon that Hambling has had remodelled to suggest a vintage gangster motor.

Hambling's expressive portraits, sculptures and seascapes may have made her a legend of postwar British art but few would consider her a contemporary artist. That modernist lineage makes her presence this morning even more surprising. Here to ferry me to a preview of her latest work, our destination is *Snap*, a contemporary exhibition whose roots are grounded in the conceptual practice that Hambling has always shunned.

Now in its second year – or, as organiser Abigail Lane puts it, “in a second album situation” – *Snap* is part of the Aldeburgh Festival of Music. It was launched by Lane, an artist herself, in collaboration with artist Sarah Lucas. Though key members of the Young British Artist generation, both Lane and Lucas have abandoned urban living for the serenity of rural Suffolk. They were not alone; other artists to make permanent or temporary bases there include Ryan Gander and photographer Juergen Teller (who showed at *Snap* last year).

Today, the shady, reed-fringed Suffolk wetlands that once captivated Constable have offered refuge to such a remarkable line-up that *Snap* can bill itself as an exhibition of local artists yet deliver art of top-class international quality. Participants this year include conceptual painter Glenn Brown, who went to school in Suffolk; Matthew Darbyshire, who attended Ipswich School of Art; artist/composer Brian Eno who lives in the Suffolk town of Woodbridge, as well as Ryan Gander.

It is that regional focus that allows for the inclusion of Hambling, who was born in Suffolk, and moved back there in 1998. “It’s an unlikely group,” admits Lane, when asked why she chose to widen the parameters beyond her cutting-edge peers. “A Ryan audience is not a Maggi audience,”

Countrymen Clockwise from top left: 'L'Age d'Or (green)' (2012) by Gavin Turk; 'A Happiness Inside My Pocket' and 'Nazareth' (both 2012) by Glenn Brown; Ryan Gander's 'This Place is Everything' (2012); 'Desert Wave' (2012) by Brian Eno



she continues, juxtaposing Hambling with the 36-year-old Gander, renowned for his ludic, ephemeral puzzles. “But then Maggi’s doing something completely out of character and that’s exactly what *Snap*’s meant to be about.”

Hambling’s new work is a departure in every sense of the word. As *Snap* unfolds through the semi-derelect Victorian buildings of Snape Maltings, whose renovated concert hall has been home to the Aldeburgh Festival since 1967, the pristine galleries to which the painter is accustomed are nowhere to be seen.

Instead, she ushers me into a warehouse scored with rusty girders and encrusted with pigeon droppings. In the centre, an orgy of sounds – gurgling, crashing water, terrible yet ecstatic cries, a sensual love poem – emanate from a stone vent in the floor. Above it, one of Hambling’s seascapes – a waterfall of leaping blacks, greys, whites and sparkling Fragonard pink – appears like a vision summoned out of the watery depths.

Hambling freely admits that the installation “is the first time I have ever made anything like that”. Yet she had long been fascinated with the Bacchanalian rumbles made by the seawater as it smashed against the underground sluice at nearby Thorpe Ness. Having failed several years ago to record it herself, she leapt at the chance to work with *Snap* production manager Tom Taylor, whose technical expertise is responsible for the chill clarity of the recording.

Such serendipity is a leitmotif at *Snap*:

the result, perhaps, of Suffolk’s singular genius loci. “I had wanted to make a piece about Orford Ness for a long time,” says film-maker Emily Richardson, who used to holiday in Suffolk as a child and moved to Woodbridge five years ago when she had her first baby. “It’s a really mysterious place,” she says, of the decommissioned Ministry of Defence site. “There were all sorts of rumours about it. People used to say it was full of nuclear arms, or Chinese prisoners of war.”

For *Snap*, Richardson has projected photographs of Orford Ness on to the far wall of a junk-filled scrapyard against a soundtrack of bird calls, radio broadcasts and eerie winds. As you gaze at the sinister, moss-slicked interiors and desolate flatlands, the ghostly squeaks mingle with

Snap’s size and setting foster dialogues: between modern and contemporary, between the art and the landscape

more sonorous cries from Hambling’s installation on the other side of the alley, as if the younger artist has invented a dark, post-modern sequel to the painter’s romantic odyssey.

Unlike the vaster, more impersonal biennials and triennials that are so ubiquitous these days, *Snap*’s intimate size and evocative setting foster a plethora of such dialogues: between modern and contemporary, between one work and another, and between the art and the landscape itself.

For example, Matthew Darbyshire and his collaborator Scott King have created a series of identical installations, entitled “Ways of Sitting”, which juxtapose mischievous texts (a fake diary of Jackson Pollock suggesting that he secretly longed to draw Disney characters) with aperture-like openings that frame two more dignified permanent residents at Snape Maltings: the “Family of Man”, a sculpture of gauche yet graceful stone figures by Barbara Hepworth, and Henry Moore’s sinuous “Large Interior Form”, both of which stand on the lawns near the concert hall.

With music as Snape’s presiding deity, it’s little wonder that sound installations

play a key role this year. Still a work in progress when I visited, the presence of Brian Eno’s composition *Iceland* – never released before and honoured with a room of its own – is a coup for Lane.

Yet to attain Eno’s iconic status, Suffolk-based artist Mark Limbrick has produced a work that outstrips the older master in visual wit at least: he has run a wire between two sculptures of old-fashioned phonograph trumpets so that the ambient sounds produced as it vibrates appear to emanate from their vintage throats.

Yet again, these felicitous conjunctions are accident rather than design. Liberated by *Snap*’s bespoke character and perhaps her own artistic anima – Tracey Emin once said Lane “could show the contents of her fridge and it would be fantastic” – Lane has deliberately shied away from imposing any kind of brief on the participants.

The result is an occasion for artists, emerging and established alike, to experiment. Most ambitious, perhaps, is the walled garden created by May Cornet, a 37-year-old artist based in Suffolk for the last three years. Inspired by the sight of ferns struggling to grow out of bricks piled within one of the Maltings’ deserted courtyards, she has transformed the space into a garden for wild flowers – “I wanted to use them because they are normally invisible” – whose roots flourish without an inch of soil. “All the experts told me that the project was impossible,” she says cheerfully. “So I thought: let’s go!”

Lane claims that as far as she is aware, no art was sold at *Snap* last year: “It’s not commercial at all,” she says. Indeed, rather than a glossy, invitation-only private view, the launch day is open to all.

As so much of the contemporary art world is hijacked by a multimillion-pound global industry, *Snap*’s singular balance between homespun style and world-class substance seems even more precious. Ryan Gander – en route to the five-yearly *Documenta* in Kassel, Germany, while we shivered in the Suffolk drizzle – summed it up with a work that resembled a fake billboard. Gazing out over Moore’s hieratic bronze to the mirror-still reedbeds beyond, his poster is emblazoned with the slogan: “This Place is Everything.”

'Snap', Snape Maltings, Aldeburgh, Suffolk, opens today and runs to June 24
www.snapaldeburgh.co.uk

Life of a Cinna

The experiences of a minor Shakespeare character are the focus of a new play at the RSC. By Sarah Hemming

As dramatic characters go, Cinna the poet has a pretty rough time of it. He makes his entrance in Act Three, Scene III of Shakespeare’s *Julius Caesar*. A few lines later he’s dead, torn to pieces by an angry mob. Shakespeare, with customary mastery, takes just one incident to demonstrate how crowd hysteria can tip into mob violence.

Actor and writer Tim Crouch decided to rescue Cinna from this brief existence and give him a play of his own. The result, *I, Cinna (the Poet)*, premiered by the Royal Shakespeare Company next week, gives audiences a chance to meet the man before the murder.

“Cinna is a small person who is caught up and killed by world events,” says Crouch. “I think the play turns on that scene: without it, it would be very different play.”

In *I, Cinna*, we meet the poet inside his home before he makes the fatal decision to step outside. Crouch takes up Shakespeare’s seminal examination of regime change and considers it from a different perspective, encouraging young audiences (11 and over) to consider the relationship between words and action.

Taking someone else’s minor characters and giving them more substance demands a combination of detective

work and audacity on the part of the writer, however. Crouch had to extrapolate from the handful of lines the character has in *Julius Caesar*.

“You search the text for clues,” he says. “We know he’s a bachelor. I sense he’s superstitious because he has a sense of foreboding. I try to cover as much as I can from the little clues in the play and then I go free – so I think what he might be writing about, for instance. And bits of Shakespeare come into the play. He performs an augury on a dead chicken and inside the chicken there is no heart. In *Julius Caesar*, Caesar orders an augury and they can find no heart in the beast. So I’m trying to make connections to the bigger stuff in *Caesar* but bringing it down to a very domestic level.”

For Jude Owusu, playing Cinna in both this play and the RSC’s current *Julius Caesar*, Crouch has helped him put meat on the bones: “He’s written a perfect back-story for me.” Cinna is not the first Shakespeare character to whom Crouch has given a louder voice. His earlier works include *I, Peaseblossom* (liberating the servant fairy from *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*), *I, Caliban* (imagining how Caliban feels at the end of *The Tempest*), *I, Banquo* (examining Banquo’s experience at the hands of Macbeth) and *I, Malvolio*, in which the much-

mocked steward from *Twelfth Night* gives vent to his feelings.

All the works started out as children’s shows, but Crouch has found that some appeal to adults as well – particularly *I, Malvolio*. In *Twelfth Night*, the steward suffers for our entertainment, as he is tricked into wearing ghastly fashions and believing that his mistress is besotted with him. *I, Malvolio* is, says Crouch, “a meditation on how much an audience enjoys cruelty.”



Centre-stage Jude Owusu plays Cinna the Poet in both 'I, Cinna' and 'Julius Caesar'

Malvolio and Cinna join an honourable list of characters that have escaped the confines of their original drama. Most famous, perhaps, are Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, the courtiers from *Hamlet*. In Tom Stoppard’s playful, philosophical spin-off, *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*, the two characters are centre stage, trying to puzzle out what is happening in the original drama, while Stoppard touches on questions of free will and determinism. Chris

Lambert’s *Edmund, Son of Gloucester* examines the reasons for Edmund’s wicked behaviour in *King Lear*, while the playwright David Greig brings several characters back to life with *Dunsinane*, his sequel to *Macbeth*.

Some characters are so big that they simply demand more drama – Shakespeare created his own spin-off (*The Merry Wives of Windsor*) to accommodate the appeal of Falstaff, and the fat knight has gone on to appear in several operas and a novel by Robert Nye. Others scarcely feature in the original, yet their fate catches the imagination of subsequent writers. Howard Barker’s *Seven Leers* explores the reasons for the absence of the queen in *King Lear*. Sharman Macdonald wrote *After Juliet*, a drama about Rosaline, the girl we never meet but who plays such a huge part in Romeo’s daydreams until he unceremoniously drops her for Juliet. One play at this year’s Edinburgh Festival (*Lady M*) considers the view of the lady-in-waiting in *Macbeth*.

Revisiting characters is a playful act of creativity, and in *I, Cinna*, Crouch will invite the audience to play the game with him. All students watching will be given a pen and paper and encouraged to write poems during the piece and finally to give an account of Cinna’s death. This will take place not only during each live

performance, but in hundreds of secondary schools simultaneously via an interactive webcast on July 2.

“There will be a three-minute sequence while the audience just writes,” Crouch explains. “That’s something I’ve never experienced in theatre before. I’m excited about the idea of an act of theatre triggering a parallel creative act of writing.”

He adds that pursuing one character’s experience of the drama can shed interesting light on the original play. Working on his play about Banquo, for example, he noticed that Banquo’s death is a turning point for Macbeth: “Macbeth doesn’t go mad when he kills the king. He kills his best friend and then he starts to lose it.”

Above all, he hopes that his pieces offer younger audiences routes into the original plays. “My passion is for the stories and the characters of those plays, which I believe inform how we are now, how we talk to each other and how we can shorthand our understandings and meanings. Those archetypes are so deeply embedded in our culture. There’s a need to keep Shakespeare alive in young people’s minds.”

'I, Cinna (the Poet)', Swan Theatre, Stratford-upon-Avon, June 13-July 6. Webcast to schools on July 2.
www.rsc.org.uk