

BARBER



HOME

LAURA
ONIONS

Our collection, your place

LAURA ONIONS

Laura Onions is an artist who makes prints from found archival and collected imagery. In her work she considers spaces that we create for ourselves and each other, particularly in relation to gender and feminist ways of learning. Using a painterly approach to printmaking, her work explores the ambiguous territory between abstraction and figuration that also seeks to loosen the processes of printmaking. She frequently looks to the history of art, obscuring and subverting dominant imagery found in the accepted canon to form alternate readings.

For this edition of Barber Home, Laura has produced a series of drawings responding to Charles-François Daubigny's etching, *Interior of an Inn* (1861), which is part of the Barber's works on paper collection.

Particularly taken with Daubigny's play with light and shadow, Laura has used pared down materials to explore the domestic landscape of her own home. The drawings make visible moments of familiarity and comfort, but also show the strangeness and insecurity we may currently find from these spaces. You can find the drawings displayed on our website.

Below you will find a conversation that took place from the separate homes of Laura Onions and Kirsty Clarke, from the Barber's Learning & Engagement Team. It explores Laura's drawings and their relationship to Daubigny's work.



Charles-François Daubigny

Interior of an Inn

France, 1861, Etching

Plate: 120 x 150 mm; Paper: 270 x 223 mm; Mount: 405 x 555 mm

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Laura Onions

untitled, 2020

Ink on translucent paper

CHARLES-FRANÇOIS DAUBIGNY (1817-1878)

Charles-François Daubigny was born in Paris in 1817. He trained under his father, the Neo-classical landscape painter Edmé-François Daubigny.

Early in his career, Daubigny restored paintings at the Louvre and spent a brief period under the tutelage of Paul Delaroche, member of the French Academy of the Arts. It was through etching that he first found artistic and financial success.

Daubigny was one of the leading members of the Barbizon School, which included such artists as Jean-Baptiste Camille Corot, and Théodore Rousseau.

The Barbizon School committed to painting from nature and the group were active roughly between 1830-1870. Working in Northern France, they practiced plein-air painting in and round the regions of the Fontainebleau Forest, just south of Paris.

Painting strictly from observation, Daubigny's use of lively brushstrokes to capture and give importance to natural light was a primary influence for a younger generation of Impressionist painters.

Other works by Daubigny in the Barber's collection include the oil painting *A Seascape* (1867) and four other works on paper showing scenes of rural France. These can all be explored through the collections pages on our website.

Today his works can be found in the collections of the Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam; The National Gallery, London; Louvre, Paris and The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, among many others.

KC: Why did you choose to respond to Charles-François Daubigny's *Interior of an Inn* for this edition of Barber Home?

LO: Well, when I first saw *Interior of an Inn* I was immediately drawn to its darkness. The lantern in the centre is the focal point, bright and illuminating but throws these very dark and ominous shadows - it's quite disorientating. It's only through spending time with the print that your eyes start to adjust to the light, and you notice you're in a hallway. There are shoes and a broom, these little remnants of human presence. I love how the mark-making is really loose but is also dense, making the print very rich, almost velvety. I think Daubigny has captured the texture of the light so that it almost flickers. You're first drawn into the light, but then lost in the darkness. I wanted to make a response to this contrast of light and dark within the domestic landscape we find ourselves in.

KC: Can you tell us more about your making process and what media you have chosen to use?

LO: I've used what I've had to hand, which isn't very much, without access to a print workshop or studio. So, I've used ink and a translucent paper that I had around the house. Responding to *Interior of an Inn* with limited materials has given me an opportunity to really test and exploit the freedoms and limitations of working with ink and this paper. Using drawing and photographs I have tried to capture and explore the changes of light within my flat, looking at little moments and places that I wouldn't normally pay close attention to. Non-spaces, in-between places, like the hallway or down the back of a cabinet or the arm of the sofa, these transient but intimate spaces.

I started to build up a series of these drawings that I have then played around with in a digital format and lay out. To curate a publication in the digital realm, removing the drawings from the material world. You glimpse different moments in time through these drawings as they are layered up, some are faded, there's not a singular view. It's quite fragmented; you don't get the full picture.

KC: Similar to the disorientation you experienced in Charles-François Daubigny's *Interior of an Inn*?

LO: The moving in and out of different perspectives and times of day, the casting of light and shadow and transition of interior and exterior all add to

a sense of confusion of where the viewer is.

KC: Your work captures these snapshots of time within the domestic landscape of lockdown. Can you tell me more about your use of the domestic setting to examine both public and private space?

LO: We have been forced to work within our homes, so our relationship to 'inside' vs 'outside' has drastically changed. Our homes would usually be a private space, but now they have become public as we invite our colleagues into our homes remotely and often.

So much of our time that would have been spent outside has now disappeared and we have become more restricted and confined. For many the outside has become a place of danger and the unknown, but that's not true for everyone. For some, the domestic space is a place of danger now more than ever and the outside is a place safety and refuge.

Both the private and public can be comforting and threatening spaces, as with Daubigny's print, here is a comfort in the light in the centre, but with light, large shadows are cast where monstrous things can hide.

So, with my drawings, I want to have quite a sharp contrast between light and dark. Using the actual texture and the surface of this translucent paper, so the black ink pools and flows over the page.

KC: It's like the darkness is sweeping over, and pools in unexpected places.

You mentioned these spaces behind chairs and cabinets, the gaps between curtains, the corridor these 'non-spaces'. Why have you chosen to highlight these unusual or often ignored spaces?

LO: There's definitely a feeling of isolation in Daubigny's print. The doors shut us off from human interaction. The only hints of life are through abandoned objects, conduits for human presence, traces of life. A broom left in the middle of the room and an array of shoes. So, I was quite conscious that I didn't want to use figures in my work, that furniture and the objects within the drawings would be markers of life.

I became aware of the proximity between objects, the closeness and the way that light touches surfaces. Trying to look behind or between to readjust the

attention to those gaps that hold something in space. Even though they are 'non-spaces', they are places of holding.

A hallway is a place of decision, where you choose which direction you want to go in, but in Daubigny's print the hallway is a space where we are held, closed doors excluding us from decision and freedom. Corona Virus is holding us in a 'non-space', unable to make choices and decisions as we try to seek out areas of familiarity.

KC: Your work captures snapshots of time. I'm never quite sure what time of day it is in your drawings. During lockdown, have you noticed your notions of time changed?

LO: I have found myself living within zones for different times of the day. So, that's where I work, that's where I cook and that's where I spend leisure time... I think the idea of leisure and time for leisure has changed. Leisure has become difficult - I can't concentrate on things, I can't read. So, things that you would normally find comfort in have become strange, almost alien.

KC: I love the looseness, in your brush strokes and mark making. Do you think that the looseness in your drawings are a reflection of our current times? Your inability to concentrate, time bleeding and emerging into itself?

LO: When etching, every mark is permanent. So even though there is a feeling of gesture and looseness, there's still rigidity in the image on the plate, but as it is run through the press you lose that sense of control. You don't know how it will turn out.

I don't have those facilities to hand, so painting with ink in a fluid way relieves a little bit of control that I might have during etching. I had a degree of control over the ink, but the way it moves and dries... it takes on its own agency, I could only guide it in certain ways. I wanted to bring in an etched gesture to contrast with the more fluid ink marks. I started kind of picking out details of my drawings and adding linear aspects, building up cross-hatching as though it were an etching.

It has made me think about the etching process in a very different way, reflecting on how we leave a mark and how much control or lack of control that we have, which seems very relevant to the way that we're living at the moment. There's a lot that we can't change, but we try and find things that are tangible that we can affect. It's an interesting to think about print

making through that lens.

KC: It's a beautiful way of thinking about 'messiness' and trying to control something that you can't. Printmaking is often considered to be exact, but there are often bleeds and smudges and differences in each impression.

LO: Even in the repetition of print making, difference is produced. In these drawings, I wanted to have an ambiguity about them because *Interior of an Inn*, has that feeling of ambiguity. You're not quite sure how you should feel in that space. I'm trying to capture a little bit of that with these drawings, because we've been thrown into a situation where our surroundings, even though they are familiar, become slightly strange.

KC: Do you think you would have chosen this work to respond to if we weren't in this crisis?

LO: That's a really interesting question. Perhaps I wouldn't. Because of our current situation the ideas of 'home' are in the forefront of my mind. Even though my practice does look at public and private spaces we occupy for domestic activities like reading, I'm thinking about it in a completely different way.

Artists respond to the situation that we find ourselves in to keep a record, trace time and to question our current experience. I think drawing is a brilliant way of getting to know and understand something. Responding to this print in the Barber collection has allowed me to reflect on feelings of isolation, lack of control and the passing of time during quarantine.

KC: What are you hoping the viewer will take away from your work?

LO: I'm hoping that the drawings will have a tangible feeling to them and that people viewing the work will be able to experience their materiality and physicality even through a computer screen. I want to draw attention to overlooked spaces that can perhaps offer a sense of familiarity or intimacy, but also reflect the current strangeness and darkness we are feeling; to allow the viewer to build connections by relating to their own surroundings.

RESPOND TO BARBER HOME

Go to a window in the place where you live. What can you see? How long can you spend looking out of the window? Try 5 minutes. Can you increase it to 10 minutes? What do you notice? Can you spend 15 or even 30 minutes looking out of the window recording what you see and observe?

Select a room or place in your house. Notice the light. Is it dark or light? Where is the light source? Are there any shadows? Can you record the change in light over a period of 3 hours? You could use drawing, photography, video or words.

Have you ever thought about the non-spaces in the place where you live? Take a look at the corners, the hallways, the spaces underneath, the gaps between furniture... spend some time looking at these spaces. Perhaps you'll be inspired to draw them, photograph them or maybe you'll just notice them next time you walk past.

Share your responses at #BarberHome2020

LAURA ONIONS

Laura Onions is an artist based in the West Midlands. She is a lecturer in Fine Art (with a focus on print) at the University of Wolverhampton and also a Programme Assistant at Grand Union, a contemporary art gallery in Birmingham.

RECENT EXHIBITIONS:

I am because we are, project in conjunction with The Haven, (Wolverhampton, 2019),
The Twin, Coventry Biennale, group exhibition (Coventry, 2019)
Art Licks, group exhibition (London, 2019)
GU Women at Modern Clay (Birmingham, 2018).

RECENT TALKS & RESEARCH:

Printing and Pedagogy, CASS Research Seminar, (London 2020);
Claiming Collective Spaces for Reading, Annual Association for Art History Conference, (Brighton, 2019);
Being Maker Centric: making as methods for Self-organising & Achieving Craft Impact in Local Communities & Economies, co-authored book chapter (2018).