

Women in Farming

Final Report

Jennie Hayes

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Overview

I spent time on Drywell Farm between September 2006 and September 2007, beginning and ending with the pony gathering. For most of that time, Louise and I were on the farm together, however, because I am local-ish I was able to go for the day when certain events happened (e.g. swaling, gathering) which Louise was unable to get to. There was a period over the summer of 2007 when the visits were less frequent – due to family illness on the farm, school holidays and illness in my own family. The main thing I missed then was hay-making but also perhaps some less intense working time in nicer weather which could have been good.

Louise and I were both juggling work and family commitments all year, however, I think we did, for the most part, invest the time where it was needed. This was no mean feat for Louise who frequently drove down at an unearthly hour in order to get to Devon in time for turkey plucking or some other event.

The project as a whole was an amazing opportunity, which has been great fun and hard work. Louise and I were both fundamentally concerned with producing something that was true to the farm and to Sue's life. I guess another thing we have in common is a certain level of perfectionism, which meant that we both spent a great deal of studio time towards the end of the project making ambitious pieces of work which we felt did the project justice. This meant that we put in far more time to the project than scheduled but I for one felt it was worth it. It was very important to me, as my first proper commission, that I produced work that was as good as it could be.

Some key outcomes for me

- The project has given me an opportunity to develop a significant body of work and explore in some depth a subject which interests me. This seems like a rare opportunity in the south-west, and the way in which AHA offers the brief but doesn't restrict on outcomes is wonderful for the artist.
- I've learned a lot about my working processes and learned (again) about how letting things go and trusting the process of working helps to create the work.
- I have begun to develop, through the project, a way of working that attempts to be true to the lives of those I am working with, without it being a community arts project per se, and without my views as an artist being the only one foregrounded. I am still wondering how much of a compromise that has involved (see below) but hope that the complexity of the relationship between my views and Sue's come through in the work. It was always important for me to respect Sue's life and work within my own practice. What would have happened if I had come across farming practices I disapproved of? I don't know, I didn't.
- Sue and her family's reaction to the work have been very important and I feel very touched that their response has been so positive. Sue's mother, Ruth, spent a lot of time reading the books from cover to cover at the private view. I

was moved that amongst the networking, chatting and general nonsense that private views encourage, this woman took the time to re-look at my own look at her life. She was moved to tears. I can't help but think (maybe romantically) that this subtle but deep dialogue through art contributes to our quality of life. The connections that are made through those new relationships contribute to our understanding of the world; mine, theirs and maybe even (if we're lucky) those who view the work.

- I've had some very positive feedback about the work, which has been great for me. Perhaps I can begin to think of myself as a photographer. Its prompted me to take my work more seriously (and maybe for others to view me differently too) and get things together like a business card and website.
- I didn't expect to connect with the animals in the way that I did on the farm, especially the sheep and the turkeys, which I loved. I think this has probably led to me adopting a dog, as Sue's sheepdog Meg was such a star. AHA therefore needs to take direct responsibility for the destruction of my glasses. I am typing this in a blur.

A few practical issues

I really valued:

- Support from Clare - for help with editing when my head was so full of options that nothing made sense any more.
- The relationship with Louise as apprentice artist. She didn't work as an apprentice in any way (thankfully), and I felt nervous about how I might support her, but I really did appreciate her quiet calm approach to everything and her creative thinking. I think one of the best things we did was the Good Mother piece, and I'm very glad we took the opportunity to work together, even though it was difficult to find the time to do so. I am still in awe of her amazing skills which really brought a high level of quality to the exhibition.
- Access to equipment - use of the AHA minidisk and especially the laptop (at a time when I had huge technical problems with my desktop computer) was vital.
- The flexibility of the project and the trust put in us as artists just to get on with it.
- Sue and her family – their open-ness to the project and ability to take on board all our ideas and discussions.
- The radio interviews I did with Sue were unexpectedly useful – it gave Sue and I a chance to evaluate the project through interview and was quite a nice way to round off the project prior to exhibition.

A note on being a (semi) vegetarian...

An extract from my diary:

I was recording the turkeys on minidisk when the slaughter-man arrived to kill the arthritic cow. Louise and I walked up to the pen where Sue was beginning to lead the cow. We'd not expected to be there for the slaughter as Sue had only called up the day before (or was it that morning?). We were both slightly shocked but I was exhilarated about being there for the kill. I didn't want to leave but was nervous of seeing my first death. There seemed to be a silence and that short time – maybe only two or three minutes – before the kill, assumed this strange significance. The slaughter-man prepared his gun. Sue gently separated the cow from the others. She kindly led and patted the cow towards the pen. I gave Louise the minidisk so my hands were free. I felt inclined towards anthropomorphic thoughts. I had a camera in my hand. I took photographs.

I was distracted by the slaughter-man telling us the shot would be loud. I wanted to be distracted. I took more photos. The kill was quick but the cow twitched for several minutes after the shot, while Sue stroked her neck. The slaughterman checked she was dead and looped a wire cord around her neck to drag her into the van, to join another carcass, tail twitching like it had feeling.

I felt less than I thought I would.

After this (as after every difficult scene) I withdraw to photograph something whimsical and non - challenging (the river, leaves stuck against the greenhouse, flapping bales). I'm working hard to make the event more significant than it feels.

I finish the work now, wondering if I've avoided the politics, stuck my head in the sand over life and death issues and shut the door firmly in my head on anything that made me uncomfortable.

I didn't want to produce a stereotypical view of farming based on the abattoir and the slaughter, I've seen those images and just because I haven't produced them doesn't mean I'm entirely comfortable with the farming process. But the project did have to be based on a relationship. For me, it would have been an act of betrayal to construct a view that *appeared* to show cruelty or gore. I kind of hope that the work is more complex than that... the death is in there but it's shown within a life that is more complete and complex. The relationship between the environment, the farm, the economics, the tender care of animals, which inevitably leads to slaughter, is not an easy one. Sue's desire for her animals to have a 'happy life' could seem at odds with the end product; but somehow it doesn't. Somehow it seems a lot more honest to do what she does, to invest her life in that kind of work and put beef on her table at night; the rest of us shut our eyes to the means of production and couldn't wring the neck of a turkey but will happily sit down to eat it at Christmas. I'm not comfortable with the killing of animals but I honestly can't say I felt distaste or difficulty with what happens at Drywell.

The radical vegetarian approach might have been easier somehow, and certainly less misunderstood: a black and white anti-slaughter view which allows no room for compassion or understanding for the farmer. I didn't intend to produce pro-farming propaganda. If I'd been based at Bernard Matthews, my work would have been quite different. I feel even more strongly that the way in which we farm animals is paramount. Drywell Farm is no factory and Sue no fat-cat farmer. The way in which

she lives her life is full of compassion and integrity. And history. I hope this comes through.

Jennie
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