

OUT OF PLACE

an exhibition *for* the Cambridge Leper Chapel

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Suddenly, as if a strange offspring of my imagination, detached from and out of place in the present day world, yet next to a busy main road, a rail line, and an industrial park, solitary and humble, the Leper Chapel appeared to me one evening.

A small iron gate separates the small green field, where the Chapel stands, from the road. To go to it you have to open the gate and go down some steps. The Chapel is below the main road. To see it you must turn your eyes downwards.

Was it a whisper rising from the Chapel which made me turn my eyes to see it? Faint like a light breeze through the grass surrounding it, yet persistent in its battle against oblivion: “I also am here if you just turn your head and look beyond the noise. I have not ceased existing.”

Cambridge is full of historic buildings, yet this Chapel appears surprisingly incongruous – because it is *in an unexpected place*. No other historic buildings support its existence. It seems a forgotten piece of history trapped in the continuous movement of a city which is constantly expanding around it.

I knew nothing about it when I first saw it. The opposite in every way of the soaring grandeur of King's College Chapel which is so dominant in Cambridge, the isolated unassuming Leper Chapel is not in the main tourist guides. When I learnt its history, everything about it made complete sense to me.

The Leper Chapel *could not have been different*. Therefore it has a perfection in its solitude and incongruity, a powerful archetypal symbol of the state and status of those who have been cast out.

This ancient building, which seems out of place today, was originally a chapel for the internally displaced, the outsiders of the community, the symbolically dead.

The state of being out-of-place has been transferred from those for whom the chapel was built to the building itself, as if the building itself has taken on a state of existence which carries and impersonates the absent inhabitant.

The small field in which the Chapel stands must originally have been countryside, outside the city but close to a main road leading in and leading out.

The city now surrounds the Chapel. But it is exactly the sense of 'countryside' that is still present and which keeps the Chapel isolated from the city – as though still 'cast out' from it.





For me, the place stirred something on the unconscious level. I felt a need to engage in a conversation with it – to come to terms with my own unspoken ghosts, to confront and make sense of my own history. It was as if many things slotted together and converged for me.

Concepts and images such as ‘the outcast,’ ‘the exile,’ ‘the stranger’ have been in my unconscious mind since childhood, before I even had words for them.

My father was born in Smyrna, now Izmir, a member of the Greek community there which was ethnically cleansed in 1922, forcibly cast out from what had been a multicultural city. The Greeks of Smyrna, those who survived, fled to Greece, refugees who were often treated with hostility as outsiders by local society, even seen as a threat until they either integrated or left again – as in the case of members of my family who later emigrated to the USA or to England.

I was born in Thessaloniki. This too had once been a multicultural city, with large Slavic, Muslim and Jewish communities. When I was born those people were mostly gone, their communities expelled or transported in the ethnic cleansing that followed the 1912-13 Balkan Wars and the genocide of the Second World War. Yet I could feel their presence – their presence in their absence – in various areas of the city when walking among certain old buildings. A city and its buildings never forget its missing people, their sudden, abrupt, unchosen absence lingers, like ghosts.

Now, decades later, having left Greece myself to live in England, afterwards returning to Greece and then leaving again, going back and forth in a permanently unsettled way, the concept of *belonging* to a society or community continues to occupy me. I wonder continuously about the meaning of *the stranger* and its implications in everyday life.

This came to a crunch a few years ago when, for the first time in my life, I was singled out as an unwanted 'stranger'. My husband and I were targeted by the mayor of the island where we lived, who filed a criminal complaint against us for defamation and 'spreading false news' (a crime in Greece) in an attempt to stop our environmental activism. He also publicly claimed – falsely – that we were only occasional 'visitors,' not residents, that we offered nothing to the island, and that we insulted the 'true' residents. Although all his accusations were baseless and fabricated, all this, of course, led to hostility from others.

Having been put in the position of the 'stranger,' the 'outsider,' the 'enemy of the people' and being suddenly subjected to hostile behaviour by local people with whom we had had amicable relations for decades, I experienced how painful and distressing a separation from a community can be.

Art is a *way of being* as well as a means of expression of feelings and thoughts. It is also a *way of fighting*. So, alongside a long, complex legal battle resulting from the above, I started a series of paintings to explore the issues of the 'outcast,' the 'other,' and of expulsion from a community.

When I arranged to have an exhibition in the Leper Chapel, I originally thought of exhibiting these paintings as relevant to the history of the place. Whether one is expelled from a community to prevent the spread of a disease, or for reasons of racial or ethnic prejudice, or for political reasons, the 'expelled' is seen as a threat and is placed in the position of the 'stranger,' *thus allowing a group of people to define themselves as 'community'*.

I abandoned the idea of exhibiting these paintings, however, because the pictorial elements – the landscapes, colours and the light, which for me were inseparable from the experienced circumstances and events – had no connection to the actual space. Although the Leper Chapel is powerful enough to throw new light on and bring new meaning to those paintings, I felt that I would miss the opportunity to explore and discover what

drew me to this space to start with. It would be to ignore the whisper rising from the Chapel which had made me turn my head to look at it.

Therefore the paintings that are included in the exhibition have all been painted over the few months prior to it, and painted not only for this particular space but as an integral part of the installation.

I came to believe that what moved me in relation to this space was the *absent presence* of people who had been cast out from wider society, as the persistent whisper I heard rising from the Chapel that had made me look at it to start with. As though a river were buried in a tunnel, with a road then built on top of it, but in the nights you can hear its water flowing.

As I had experienced in my home city, Thessaloniki, you can never be wholly successful if you violently remove someone or something from a place, because you cannot simultaneously erase the gap left behind.

The 'gap' brought into being by sudden enforced absence fascinated me. I had long been trying to find ways to depict it in art. My aim was not to create an image of, for example, an absent person in the way one might do with old photographs or other remaining traces, such as a personal possession of some kind, with the viewer's imagination then 'filling in' the absent body or the absent person. I wanted to find ways somehow to portray the gap itself in its intangible existence.

I have previously exhibited works in buildings with historic significance, because the soul of the space itself contains memories of the past. I try to use such spaces so that my work, whether costume-sculptures, or an installation, or two-dimensional painted canvases, enters into a dialogue with the still present past and the far from 'empty' space itself.



Part of my exhibition of costume-sculptures in the Yeni Tzami (New Mosque) in Thessaloniki. The Yeni Tzami was built in 1902, before the ethnic cleansing of the city, for the Dönme, the community of descendants of Jewish converts to Islam, some of whom remained crypto-Jews. Neither insiders nor outsiders, the Dönme epitomised the 'mix' of old Salonica.

The Cambridge Leper Chapel has offered me the perfect space to go back to this exploration, the opportunity to draw upon past research in such a way as to bring many aspects of my previous work together.

I re-visited some ideas I had developed in the past, when, alongside my work as a theatre designer, I also constructed costumes which could stand on their own, independently of a performance, like sculptures of the characters – choosing fabrics and colours to construct the role as an archetype, or rather to construct the ‘shell’ of a role without the presence of the actor. For example, instead of constructing a costume to be worn by the actor in the role of Clytemnestra or Medea, I constructed a sculpture of the archetypal Clytemnestra or Medea out of fabric.

I saw costume itself as the ‘skin’ which contains a role, a character and perhaps even the whole story of that character, something which is able to represent and in a sense *contain* the absent person, as the empty skin left by a snake still ‘contains’ the absent being.

Images opposite: past work



costumes for Kytenmistra



When I embarked upon this project and started reading background information about the Chapel, in particular concerning its original function as part of the Leper Hospital and hence the topic of leprosy, I was determined to avoid creating 'illustrations' of historical facts or themes. That history mattered nonetheless. It mattered in the way it was still somehow present. I was looking to find a scrap, a fragment from which I could draw out something universal, while simultaneously establishing a relationship to the history of the place through a kind of dialogue with it. But not just an idea. It had to be a *material* stimulus.

One of the versions of the ritual of separation refers to a 'garment of humility'. There is an ancient association of sack-cloth with humility, as well as with penance, abasement and poverty. What we know as sack-cloth today is not the material referred to in the Old Testament, but in its coarseness it seems to carry the same associations. It is also open, like a skin that breathes.



For the main figures of the installation in the Leper Chapel I have used strips of sack-cloth to create forms which resemble human bodies, or rather the rib cages of human bodies, many of them, one next to another to form a bonded group. I conceived this group of figures as a 'chorus' – as in ancient Greek drama, a group of people not just with a common cause or interest but sharing a common identity.

These forms are empty inside, they are defined merely by their 'skin'. They evoke human presence, and at the same time paradoxically, they represent the absence of that presence.

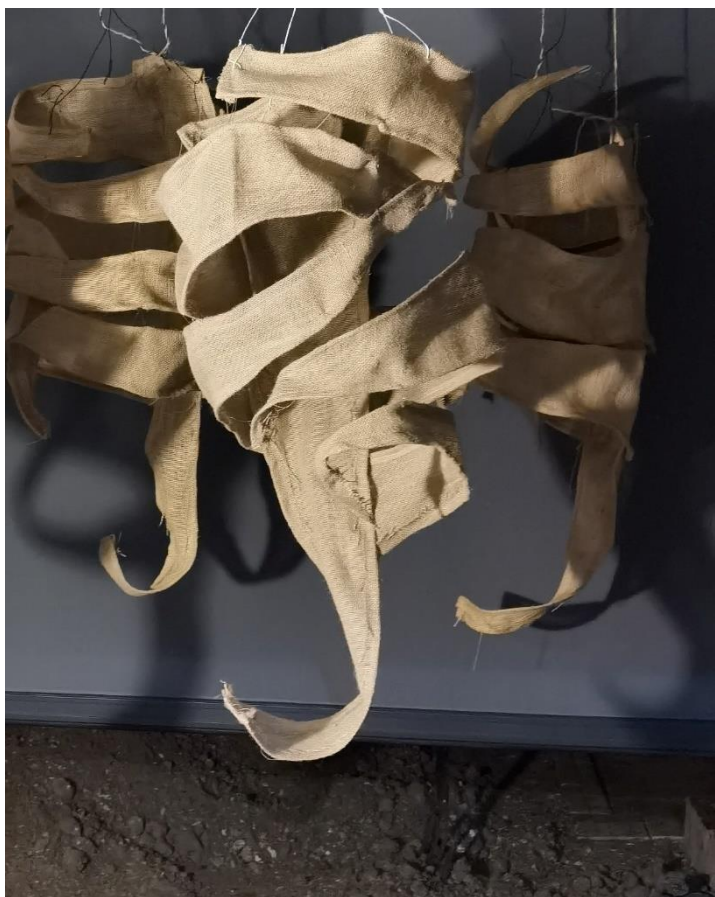
The figures fill the Chapel and can be seen as representing those who were once present in it, having been cast out of the wider community. But for me this group of figures represents all humanity in a spiritual sense – as sharing a basic common fate. For sack-cloth itself is a powerful archetype combining humility with a sense of imminent decay. It, or something like it, was used by various religions in ceremonies related to mourning, separation from the earthly, the renunciation of one state of existence to transition to another level.

The figures of the installation are light in weight, suspended and moved by the slightest breeze, yet the sack-cloth of which they are made carries the symbolic weight of earth. Beneath each form there is a small pile of earth.

The abstract 'rib cages' also recall the coils of DNA.

The paintings have been conceived as parts of the installation, even though the group of figures can stand alone. My goal is to create and facilitate a dialogue between these parts and also with the space of the Chapel. The idea of dialogue, be it between the separate figures of the installation or between different elements of the exhibition, including the space in which it takes place, symbolises for me the dialogue between present and past, presence and absence, and is an integral aspect of the exhibition.

The performance too has been conceived in the same way, as contributing to the same dialogue.



Installation figures in preparation

For this exhibition I started a completely new series of paintings, departing from any narrative or symbolic content in my past work, using different materials and developing a new visual language taking into account the sculptural forms of the installation. My intention is that these two elements complement and engage in a dialogue with each other. The fragmented faces I have painted are to be seen by the viewer through and alongside the sculptural forms, which are also fragmented. The unframed paintings – reproduced in the following pages – have also been conceived to appear as though emerging from and simultaneously receding back into the ancient Chapel walls.

I chose to use raw cotton material for the canvases, to echo the rawness of the sack cloth. The material is not primed, which allows paint to be absorbed by it, or to seep through it, rather than sitting on top of it, and thus it merges with and permanently stains the fibres.

I have also used soft pastels to draw human faces merging with and emerging from each other, receding and coming forward in a continuous interplay of absence and presence.

The fragility and the impermanence of existence which nonetheless somehow endures through time are the themes running through and connecting the paintings with the installation. After all, it was a ‘persistent whisper’ which drew me to this Chapel in the first place.

I asked Richard Spaul of *in situ* for a collaboration because I thought that a performance taking place within and around my installation would add a further dimension, juxtaposing the actual presence of the human body to the 'empty' human shells made out of rags. I imagined that a person (both a 'spectator' and a performer) standing among these figures would be able to engage in a communication with them. Richard was at the time exploring the human voice with a group of *in situ* actors and he proposed doing a performance related to voice. I immediately found the idea of human voices travelling through the empty figures of the installation fascinating – and very relevant to my own ideas and intentions.

Perhaps even as the 'whisper' I had heard.

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