Fine art graduate revealed as 2018's Gillian Dickinson North East Young Sculptor winner

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Clare Townley, a fine art graduate from Newcastle University, has been revealed as the winner of the Gillian Dickinson North East Young Sculptor (GDNEYS) 2018. Born in Carlisle, Townley's work draws on interests occurring in and to the natural world. For her winning proposal, Townley is looking to transform a group of trees at Cheeseburn with a series of long, sinewy, sprawling sculptures, mimicking the garlands and vines found so often in the natural world; in sharp contrast, Townley will make her installation from knitted plastic, highlighting the impact it has on the environment.

Clare Townley, winner of 2018's Gillian Dickinson North East Young Sculptor, explains:

"My work looks at the grotesque nature of parasitism, combined with our rapturous, human endeavour to produce plastic and, subsequently, our tendency to ignore how we deal with it. Our interest in, and obsession with, plastic vacillates between how much we love and adore it, and how much we try to discard it. I want to hang a series of knitted sculptures in the trees; for them to appear both decorative and, potentially, invasive. The installation is sinister, yet light, and very much dependent on how the viewer processes it."

Townley has pursued art "diligently and doggedly" from a young age, studying a Foundation Diploma in Fine Art at Doncaster College before completing a BA (Hons) in Fine Art at Newcastle University, where she became interested in dystopic materials and storylines.

Says Townley:

"During my degree, I looked at how we currently are as a planet, and at things that might seem dystopic, but are happening in reality. My proposal for Cheeseburn is very much aware of the environment. It uses Cheeseburn as a utopic, pretty environment; one where we wouldn't usually see something so sinister, which makes us question our involvement in, what we do with, and how we process plastic."

As well as her knitted sculptures, Townley hopes to entice visitors with a swing made from the very same materials as the plastic parasite entwined within the trees.

Says Townley:

"I like the idea of having a swing, which plays upon that sense of childlike wonderment, and suggests an alternative to the grotesque scenario of the installation. I hope that visitors will engage with the installation, by playing with it; sitting on it, and thinking about it – hopefully in a fun way! I didn't want to be completely straightforward with the narrative, by suggesting that plastic is 'wrong;' hopefully, there are other options, where we can use plastic in different ways; it doesn't have to be seen as 'terrible'."

Townley was chosen as the winner of GDNEYS 2018, by a panel at Cheeseburn, consisting of: artist, Joseph Hillier; director of Cheeseburn Sculpture, Joanna Riddell; curator at Cheeseburn, Matthew Jarratt, and trustee for The Gillian Dickinson Trust, Alexander Dickinson, as well as taking into account votes made by the public in-person at Cheeseburn.

Over the last three years, the partnership between Cheeseburn and the Gillian Dickinson Trust, has seen young artists applying to be shortlisted for GDNEYS – an accolade that awards them £300 to develop a proposal in reaction to the unique environment at Cheeseburn. Shortlisted artists are then invited to explore Cheeseburn and supported to develop a (hopefully) winning proposal.

As the winner of GDNEYS 2018, Townley has been awarded £6,500 to develop her proposal into an installation, which will be sited at Cheeseburn Sculpture in May 2019.

Says Townley:

"I was ecstatic when I won; there was some very, very strong competition. I feel very humbled to have won, because it is an impressive accolade to have. I'm excited to start making my proposal and to see the whole process through, from developing my proposal to reality on a grand scale. Sculpture has a physicality to it; you are making something a reality, and literally putting something in the world. It really is impressive."

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Continues Townley:

“Winning the North East Young Sculptor of the Year award will, undoubtedly, boost my artistic career. Cheeseburn Sculpture is recognised, both nationally and internationally, as an outstanding venue for sculpture; having my work sited at Cheeseburn will expose my practice to a much wider audience.”

Matthew Jarratt, curator at Cheeseburn Sculpture, said:

“We’re thrilled to announce Clare Townley as the winner of the Gillian Dickinson North East Young Sculptor 2018. Townley’s installation explores both the beautiful and grotesque nature of plastic, and we hope that visitors to Cheeseburn will consider this conflict in a way that encourages conversation around plastic pollution. GDNEYS is an excellent opportunity for young artists in that we support them through the commissioning process: considering the artist’s brief; drafting a proposal and, ultimately, creating an impactful sculpture or installation.”

Joanna Riddell, director of Cheeseburn Sculpture, said:

“Townley’s sculpture draws parallels to the Dada art movement, as it responds to the horror of war, not in the sense of bloodshed, but perhaps in our current war with plastic. Situated within nature, this sculpture will be a statement of satire and absurdity. I hope it will evoke feelings of revulsion, perversion and a longing for the return to a long-lost childhood of innocence and security.”

Townley’s winning proposal follows on from Peter Hanmer’s ‘Plato’s Lair,’ and from the first ever winning installation, ‘Scurry’ by Dan Gough, in 2016. Townley hopes that visitors to her installation, which will launch at Cheeseburn in May 2019, will interact with, and form their own opinion on, plastic.

Concludes Townley:

“Centrally, the environmental aspect of the installation is important, but I want visitors to ask questions, and have conversations around, plastic – beyond it being a good or bad thing. I don’t want the installation to be too constricting; I want people to take away a sense of enjoyment… but, perhaps, to question why they enjoyed it.”

Townley’s sculpture will appear at Cheeseburn in spring 2019. Meanwhile, Cheeseburn’s programme continues through a series of special open weekends across the summer, where visitors can encounter Plato’s Lair by the 2017 North East Young Sculptor of the Year winner, Peter Hanmer, as well as over 60 sculptures by regional and international artists in the grounds of Cheeseburn Grange. Cheeseburn is next open to visitors on Saturday 30 June and Sunday 1 July, where they will be launching their first international sculpture exhibition by Chinese artist, Qi Ya Feng.

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Company Contact:

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Crystallised

T. 0191 691 1370
E. hi@crystallised.co.uk
W. https://www.crystallised.co.uk

Additional Contact(s):
Jane Imrie | jane@crystallised.co.uk

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