

# BETHAN HUWS

## A Marriage in the King's Forest

*A Marriage in the King's Forest* is a project Bethan Huws developed in response to a joint commission by Turner Contemporary and Stour Valley Arts and her encounters with the disparate sites associated with the two institutions: Margate seafront and King's Wood, Challock. Site research led Huws to Margate Winter Gardens, an Edwardian concert and function hall dating from 1911 which serves as an entertainment venue and host to local wedding receptions. Whereas the vernacular architecture of the seaside resort of Margate serves to domesticate and frame nature – the notion of 'Winter Gardens' is an obvious example of this –, the direct experience of the natural environment of King's Wood struck Huws as far more primitive, somewhere altogether more ancient. To draw out the elemental difference between the two locations, Huws decided to make a documentary film of a wedding reception in the Queen's Hall at the Winter Gardens and to screen it among a canopy of trees in King's Wood. This act of displacement gives the audience pause to consider the familiar grammar of the marriage celebration anew. Life cycles of contrasting scales are transposed, creating disparities in our experience of each. By marrying the two sites, a sense of distance tempers our reading of the film such that casual observation of the occasion gives way to anthropological scrutiny and a deeper contemplation of the social forms of ritual.

The film itself is an intimate portrait of the wedding reception of a young local couple, starting from the official photographs taken immediately after the exchange of vows through to the marriage festivities in the Queen's Hall. This record of the event represents a microcosm of local society through the enactment of a traditional rite of passage. The opening sequence of the film reveals the gathering of the wedding party, as we witness family members posing for photographs to commemorate newly forged bonds of kinship. The viewer is offered a discreet view of proceedings via cameras moving gently among the crowd, casually observing the social interaction of family and friends, alighting on unguarded moments as guests mingle outside before retiring indoors for the post-nuptial celebration. A fluid editing style crystallizes spontaneous contact between particular individuals amid the overall choreography of the event, glimpsing private subjectivities within public ritual. The hospitality of the reception marks the passage of transformation the wedded parties have undertaken within the wider social sphere, for better or worse. These oscillations between private and public, inward and outward perceptions, and between cultural and natural spheres (the Winter Gardens and King's Wood) indicate some of the enduring preoccupations of Huws' oeuvre as a whole, particularly the way she adjusts our conception of the social realm through subtle interventions, displacements and translations.

Such tactics are further deployed in two text pieces created for a pair of Victorian seaside shelters in Margate. On one of them, a text reads DO WE ACCUSE THE COOK OF NOT BEING AN ARTIST; BECAUSE SHE DID NOT MAKE THE VEGETABLES? SHE MAKES THINGS WITH HER VEGETABLES. The statement recalls Huws' ongoing interrogation of the role of the artist and the nature of the creative act in relation to everyday life, linked here to domesticity, thus circling back to the theme of marriage. The territory within which art might emerge is extended beyond the studio to the kitchen in order to question how we perceive the realm of art and the process of transforming raw material through creativity.

The text FALSE TEETH is installed on the windows of the Nayland Rock shelter, which looks out over the sands of Margate and is believed to be the spot where TS Eliot drafted key lines of his poem *The Waste Land* whilst recuperating from mental exhaustion in October 1921. 'On Margate Sands' he writes in 'The Fire Sermon', 'I can connect/Nothing with nothing/The broken fingernails of dirty hands./My people humble people who expect/Nothing.' The link to Eliot's poem is apposite to Huws' project – like Eliot, Huws seeks to yoke disjunctive voices, tones, locations, times, concepts, cultures and histories. However, the words 'False Teeth' were chosen for this site not in relation to Eliot (though, coincidentally, in the section of the *The Waste Land* titled 'A Game of Chess' there is a narrative about a woman who paid for a series of abortions from money her husband gave her for a set of dentures) but rather as a reference to the twenty-six windows in the shelter. This is approximately the number of teeth in the human mouth (excluding the wisdom teeth), and is also the number of letters in the alphabet. Huws makes this correlation between teeth and the alphabet to allude to the fundamental difficulty humans have in articulating themselves. No doubt Eliot found this in 1921 as he glanced across the bleak October seascape from the seats in the shelter, struggling to find form for his seminal work. Or maybe we can envisage our grandparents ('My people humble people') gazing out through those same windows, contemplating mortality. 'False teeth' may be a sign of growing infirmity, but there is also an absurd element embedded in the text – a clichéd image of old people ruminating and slurping tea through ill-fitting dentures, putting the world to rights to the accompaniment of the ebb and flow of the tide. Returning to the marriage theme, the flux of life's cycle is invoked here. While the anticipation and hope of the newly weds may be coloured by the inevitability of death, the promise of renewal is key.

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*Louise Garrett is an independent curator and writer based in London.*