Elizabeth Bernholz:

I had these really, really early experiences of seeing a shadow moving by the side of the bed; what I remember or perceived as a dog, a black dog.

Innes Smith:

One theory of the entire paranormal is actually just a sort of tilling of the soil. It's bringing that which is hidden to light. You know, something is boiling away underneath and it needs to be brought to our attention.

Mark Leckey:

Art at its best is supernatural, and you have to believe in it in order for it to produce its effect.

Laurent John:

Artists are antennas for new ideas and are fueled by worlds beyond themselves. The creative process can't exist in a vacuum. It exists in conversation with everything else.

I'm Laurent John. I work at Somerset House in the studios, and in this second series of The Process, we provide a platform for those conversations.

Each episode, we follow artists as they explore one idea from their practise to see where it ends up. We trace their journey as they talk to other thinkers about a question they're exploring at the moment and what it says about the creative process.

Elizabeth Bernholz:

My name is Elizabeth Bernholz and I'm a composer and musician making music under the name of Gazelle Twin.

Laurent John:

In this first episode, we join Gazelle Twin as she sits down to write her next album all about her long-held fascination with ghosts.

Elizabeth Bernholz:

So many stories are like hooded figures, hooded monks. The stuff that I love is just this bloke in contemporary sportswear running up steps of this basement pub, I think it was. I love that. I love the idea of ghosts in trainers.

Laurent John:

Elizabeth was commissioned to make a sound piece for the Horror Show Exhibition at Somerset House, co-curated by Ian Forsyth, Jane Pollard, and Claire Catterall.

As the show launched and she returned to the writing process, she found herself drawing on her fear of the paranormal as a sort of fuel for creativity.

Elizabeth Bernholz:

If I were to find a thread that ran through all of the albums that I've made since 2010, I would say that they're all connected by fear.

It's become a source. It's a very rich source to sort of stare your fears in the face and give them a face as well.

A lot of the stuff that I think about and sing about is deeply uncomfortable and troubling. Yet the process of putting that into some sort of allegorical narrative is something close to a type of therapy. I could even look at it as a sort of exorcism.

(Music).

Even if I'm trying to write an album about one thing, what comes out is something completely different. So I just go with that now. I kind of just dive into it.

In my last album, Pastoral, I performed in an amalgamated sort of jester costume and sang in various different voices, which to me reflected English identity that, at the time, I really needed to purge.

(Music).

I'm working on my new album now, which is very much from a place of childhood fear, and in the last couple of years, I decided that that album theme was going to be about ghosts.

So when Ian and Jane invited me to create a commission for the horror show, I was thinking quite literally about the idea of witchcraft and kind of researching into the history and the horror of witchcraft. And you could easily connect these two things together. You know, the early spiritualism was often focused on women who had the powers to channel these forces. So there's loads of connection between these two things.

Video clip:

All kinds of ills that ever may be. In Christ's name, I conjure you.

Elizabeth Bernholz:

But I mean, really, this album, I think partly it's taken me so long because it's so huge and I really am just sitting here just thinking, "God, what am I doing? What is it?" And it's messy. It's messy. You know, you can't tidy that up until you've gone through the process of this.

The paranormal is something I've always been captivated by since childhood, and there are things that I encountered in my first childhood home. As I've grown into an adult, that fascination hasn't really tired and it's only actually become more obsessive.

What I really want to explore in this podcast is, what happens when you take the paranormal seriously from a literal sense to find out more maybe about what was happening when I was a kid, but also in a lateral sense: how it can connect to culture and then back into my own process as an artist and why I make work.

I wanted to actually speak to somebody who works in the world of the paranormal, and through a Twitter contact, I've found Innes Smith, who is a paranormal investigator in real life and works for the Scottish Society for Paranormal Research.

Innes Smith:

These experiences, they are really exciting and they are really interesting, but they're scary. And so really, I see my main job is to take the fear out of it, if I can.

Elizabeth Bernholz:

I wanted to ask him about what he does and what he made of my childhood experience.

Innes Smith:

When I started off investigating the paranormal, I thought it was my job to decide whether something happened or didn't happen, something was real or not. But basically, I made peace with the fact that there's no way that I'll ever know. I'll never gather evidence of a sufficient quality and value to convince a sceptic. It's not that sort of an investigation. It's more like counselling. I describe myself as a ghost social worker.

Elizabeth Bernholz:

Yeah. Yeah. That's really interesting. It's really interesting, because it seems like just reading through some of the cases that you've been involved in on the SSPR website, just so many of them are happening in an environment where there's already some trauma or maybe kind of really high stress levels. And it's interesting to me how these things cross, but also, the work that you do is about mediating that.

For me, I've been thinking about the paranormal my whole life. I've always been interested in it from all angles. I'm someone that grew up in a house that was very much accepting of paranormal phenomena and where ghost stories and hauntings were kind of part of my childhood growing up. They were present in my first childhood home.

I had these really, really early experiences of seeing a shadow moving by the side of the bed in my parents' room, where I would end up each night. And I would watch what I remember or perceived as a dog, a black dog, moving around by the bedside on my side or on top of a wardrobe near their bed, but with no fear at all. No sense of fear until I was much older. So at that age, I would've been about three, four or five.

And then it wasn't until I was about 12 years old, I began to sort of hear stories about that from my brother and his experience of the dog in my parents' room, and then my father's experience of the dog that he felt on him in the night, growling at him.

I've never sort of stopped thinking about that and wondering what it could have been. So I was just wondering what it is you would do in that situation. Had we investigated it, had we called someone in like yourself, what would've been the process of that?

Innes Smith:

Well, essentially, it's my job just to speak to you, to gather an account. So going on, I would ask everyone in the house to keep a diary, a record of their experiences.

And also, we could explore some possible different interpretations as to what those experiences might be. You probably have looked into this and realised what a rich seam even the symbolism of the black dog is.

Black dogs traditionally are these sorts of phantoms that haunt lonely rural highways or paths. They could be nature spirits. Some people think they're malevolent with the red glowing eyes. Other people attribute to them sort of almost like a nature spirit. They're sort of essentially neutral; if you're nice to them, they're nice back. Even accounts of people out in the wilderness who are lost being led back to the path by a black dog.

So it's really interesting. And it's just like, maybe it's something about the building or the property itself that remembers that animal being there under particular circumstances and to particular people that kind of replays this memory of this animal.

But I'm going to put on my sceptical hat for a short period here. The fact that it was discussed amongst family members; always got to be careful about essentially planting false memories.

Essentially from a sort of psychological or a sceptical point of view, the idea is, it's like chicken and the egg. What comes first? The belief or the experience?

Sure enough, the people that believe more in the paranormal have more paranormal experiences in these places. And that's not a surprise. You'd expect that to happen. But the flip side is maybe the experiences come first. Maybe they have those beliefs because they have those experiences.

And the fact also that things will happen in a bedroom, the very place where people sleep; from a sceptical point of view, of course it's very easy just to dismiss all of these experiences as some kind of hypnopompic or hypnogogic experience, those liminal states in between waking and sleeping.

People say, though, this is the orthodox view or this is the way things are, but if you've had a so-called impossible or inexplicable experience, you're more open to saying, "Maybe there's another way."

And to tie it into macro political terms, there's way more interest in the paranormal during periods of political upheaval and change.

Elizabeth Bernholz:

Yeah, I really appreciate the insight. I think it's something that I'm only just coming to now is to start to think more critically, more sceptically, more scientifically and psychologically about how all of this stuff plays into experience.

And for me, the stuff that interests me the most is the stuff that happens in the least scary kind of situations possible.

So I think we've already hit on the domestic setting being one of the most common places for these encounters and experiences to happen. I'm just wondering if you have any ideas about why that might be.

Innes Smith:

Presumably the short answer is it's where people are. And the answer could be it's where the people are that are the experiencers, the witnesses. But it's also perhaps where ... If your argument is that ghosts are spirits of the dead, it's where people lived.

I think it's quite curious as well though, there seems to be a disproportionately high amount of hauntings that take place in corridors and stairways, which I always find really fascinating because people don't actually really spend that much of their life there. So I think there's something curiously sort of metaphorical that the ghosts themselves seem to be in this between sort of liminal space.

And there was a theory, it's probably one that lots of people are familiar with now, but basically this sort infra sound theory of haunting.

It was suggested by Vic Tandy that basically infrasound, so very low frequency sound, roundabout the sort of 19-21 hertz, that basically these low vibrations get funnelled along corridors, and basically it sort of interferes, bounces back and forth and creates these standing waves.

So this vibration builds up, and people that walk through this vibration have this unsettling feeling, because the idea is that 19 to 21 hertz induces a feeling of anxiety. And it also happens to be the resonant frequency of the surface of the eyeballs. So it can actually make you see things as well.

So there's that idea that sound can create ghosts.

Mark Leckey:

There's a sort of rational or scientific idea that hauntings are no more than some kind of low frequency.

The reason is noise. But I like both of those things. I like the reason is noise and it's supernatural. Do you know what I mean?

Elizabeth Bernholz:

Hmm.

It was really interesting to hear Mark Leckey's take on this infrasound theory.

Mark Leckey:

It's like, yeah, noise is supernatural.

That feeling, that's what I'm interested in is that feeling that gets produced. And I'm not interested in the explanation of it, I just value that experience, I guess.

Elizabeth Bernholz:

Mark is an artist and musician who works mainly in video and sound, often using samples or found footage, and he has a really fascinating take on magic and folklore.

I first got in touch with Mark a few years ago, and we were talking about a shared appreciation for the Jonathan Miller adaptation of Whistle and I'll Come to You on the BBC and just how terrifying that is as a piece of film, as well as sound design.

I really wanted to talk to Mark about the way he uses sound and sampling in relation to the idea of the paranormal, and in particular, an experience he had as a child, which led him to create the show O' Magic Power of Bleakness at the Tate Britain in 2019,

Mark Leckey:

When I was a kid of about nine, eight or nine, we used to hang around under this motorway bridge on The Wirral. So it was the M53, it's huge. So you're underneath it and it's this massive concrete edifice. And underneath it was an alcove, there was a slope, and you could go and sit under this alcove. And me and my mates would sit under there.

[inaudible 00:17:12]

And that's in the 1970s.

Jump to the mid-eighties and I was doing my English O- Level and they said, "Write a story, a composition about an early childhood memory." And I was like, "I know. I'll write about that time I saw a pixie under the motorway bridge."

[inaudible 00:17:36]

And basically, what I described was, I turned to my left, to my right, and there was a small figure at the end of this alcove and it was wearing the most kind of ridiculous, almost like in a mocking or ironic way, it was dressed as a fairy, as a pixie. It had a hat on with the bell on the end and the curly red shoes. It was like it was aware of its kind of ridiculousness.

In this story, I didn't think of it as particularly malevolent. Not a particularly benign entity either.

As I was writing it, I realised up to then I'd just stored it in my memory in the same way my sister got hit by a car, I fell through a neighbor's plate glass window; I saw a pixie, my favourite teacher was Mrs. Sheard.

And as I was writing this story out, I realised the impossibility of it and I broke the spell. Whatever belief I'd had in that story just evaporated.

And that was what the piece at the Tate was about, but I mean, I kind of used it as a device to be able to talk about class really. So it was more about that than it was about the supernatural.

[inaudible 00:19:37]

Elizabeth Bernholz:

I was really interested ... That mention of class, I was going to ask you about actually. Like the way that you talk about the relationship between folklore and class and how it's kind of relegated to something for sort of certain types of culture to put into a cliche or something kitsch or something kind of quirky.

And I feel like the same sort of happens with anything paranormal or supernatural. When you talk about it, people glaze over; not necessarily taken seriously, even though it can be something deeply terrifying that changes you forever or it can change your life.

So I don't really know what the question is. I suppose I'm asking what you think about the idea of those things being branded and not taken seriously.

Mark Leckey:

The problem for me is always speaking outside of your experience and trying to convince people who believe that their experience is universal, i.e the middle classes. And you have to convince them that there are other experiences in this world, that there's other kind of ways of comprehending the world.

And folklore, I guess, kind of binds those two things together. That's kind of what folklore is. I think you have to regard it in some way as yours and be quite possessive about it and it's made you who you are.

Elizabeth Bernholz:

Hearing Mark talk about the link between the supernatural and class was really fascinating, and it kind of made me think about how early spiritualism is related to feminism, and just how those other worldly practises enabled women to have a kind of powerful role in society where they were mostly sidelined.

So I wanted to ask Innes what he thought about that, as well, and how he thinks women might have been empowered by these beliefs.

Innes Smith:

There's actually swathes of scholarship on this because it's most certainly a factor from a sort of historical or sociological point of view, especially feminism and spiritualism.

So many of the leading lights of spiritualism were women. And funnily enough, the voices from beyond preached equality and justice for the oppressed.

I think what's quite curious, as well, though is girls and poltergeists. It's almost like poltergeists, it's an externalisation of suppressed rage that can so often peak at this onset of puberty, which is this unleashing of sexual energy that erupts and explodes and either causes these things directly, or for that matter, as was indeed sort of described in the Enfield poltergeist case, sort of leaks out of the family and then is essentially exploited by these entities that are essentially reanimated by this sexual energy.

And so there is that idea, this notion that somehow the more violent hauntings are essentially ... And this is one theory; that the entire paranormal is actually just a tilling of the soil. It's bringing that which is hidden to light.

Elizabeth Bernholz:

I'm seeing a relationship between this kind of idea of looping and trauma and PTSD loops in us. It loops in our bodies until we face it. And then there's this sort of idea that some types of hauntings are almost like this thing on loop, this kind of trauma on loop.

And I was sort of trying to connect that also to the way that you use video and sound and archive footage and things like that. And there's this kind of ... I feel like there's a connection between those three things maybe.

Mark Leckey:

I mean, I've read this ... I can't remember where I read this from. I wrote this down for this.

Trauma is a source of transcendence; talking about the idea that trauma actually is a kind of productive energy, I guess.

I'm not looking for transcendence. I'm looking for ... I like this idea of imminence, which is ... Transcendence is a kind of escape, it's a kind of exit, and imminence is to go everywhere, and to remain on this earth, right?

That kind of equation between that you can convert your trauma into something transcendent or imminent or whatever is kind of why I make art. I'd be hesitant to use the word trauma, but an endlessly repeated narrative, right? I feel that art can kind of expel.

I've got another line that I like. I really like this line a lot, which is, I was reading this book about islands and they talked about the ecology of an island, that it's kind of developed through what they called amplification by compression, i e, it's very small and tight and it gets weirder and weirder or stronger and stronger because it's amplified because it can't leave the island.

But I like that idea when it comes to making or thinking about these things. So what I do is I take these loops and I compress them and I try and amplify them until whatever magic they have or whatever hold they have on me is kind of destroyed or kind of-

Elizabeth Bernholz:

That's interesting.

Mark Leckey:

Like a self exorcism.

Elizabeth Bernholz:

Yeah.

(Music).

Mark Leckey:

You know, it doesn't really work, but it makes me feel better and actually stops me getting depressed.

Elizabeth Bernholz:

Hmm-mm. Yeah, I relate to that a lot. I think I definitely relate to the exorcism sort of thing.

And I didn't realise that music could offer up those possibilities, but ... Because I've always been drawn to art and film that's done those things, but not really so much music. And then it's just ended up being the way that I go about things too, and I think the idea of facing fear and giving it a face maybe.

The sort of audio work on O' Magic Power of Bleakness is really interesting. Because I think talking about sound in music is quite interesting in this context.

Mark Leckey:

I mean, it's interesting to hear you talk about art and books. You are drawn to them, but you didn't think ... You said something about, but you didn't think that you could do that in music. And I'm coming from ... I find this a lot at the moment. I'm coming from the other way; I'm finding I'm moving from art more towards music because I think music provides a way out of a lot of the problems of art.

I grew up with music and I had to learn art, and that's still a kind of problem for me is that art is always about a learning and it's about an academic learning in a way that music is not. It's both fascinating and also it does something to your body. So it affects you on an intellectual level, but also it's doing something to your body that's very pre-cultural.

Elizabeth Bernholz:

Yeah. It comes back to the rhythm, doesn't it?

Mark Leckey:

Yeah, exactly.

Elizabeth Bernholz:

It comes back to repetition and the connection that it makes with your body.

We both use samples in our work.

Mark Leckey:

Yeah.

Elizabeth Bernholz:

Could you see sampling as a form of haunting or as a kind of ghost?

Mark Leckey:

Yeah. I mean, definitely.

So the piece that I made that is all found footage is Fiorucci Made Me Hardcore. I made that in 1999. And a couple of years ago, I made a version of Fiorucci which is 'ghosted' or something.

And basically, I found the original VHS tape I'd made it on and I got two VCRs and I recorded onto another tape and then back again, and basically just dubbed it back and forth till it became almost destroyed, disintegrated.

Even if I watch Fiorucci now, it's like, you watch the stuff from the 1970s and most of them probably aren't here anymore, so you are literally watching ghosts. It becomes closer to something like The Shining or something.

Because I think it's something to do with sampling, which is about, you're using these moments, these concrete moments of time. And that's why they are haunted because they contain time.

Art at its best is supernatural and you have to believe in it in order for it to produce its effect. You can't be agnostic.

Elizabeth Bernholz:

So looking back on this podcast, it's really helped clear the fog a little bit for me in terms of revealing really strong connections between formative personal experiences, such as supernatural experiences, and how they can relate to much wider contexts: cultural contexts, psychological contexts.

And for me, this album about ghosts has ended up being a bit of an album about depression and maybe about feeling other throughout life. And I feel like maybe the supernatural has that quality, where if you feel othered in some way in life, I feel like the supernatural invites the kind of place to recontextualize yourself a bit, and how, as artists, we can spend our lives trying to make sense of that.

(Music).

Laurent John:

Thanks to Elizabeth and good luck with the rest of the album.

Thanks to Ghost hunter Innes Smith and to artist Mark Leckey.

If you're in London, the Horror Show is up for another few weeks until February 19th at Somerset House, and it's really worth checking out.

The theme music for the series is by Ka Baird, and music for this episode is by Gazelle Twin.

The Process is produced by Alannah Chance for Somerset House. And I'm Laurent John.

Speaker 6:

I've always known that AI erases, that AI doesn't see me.

Laurent John:

Next episode, we'll be looking at the culture of secrecy in AI with artist Morgan Quaintance-

Morgan Quaintance:

How can you work with AI when nobody's going to talk to you about it?

Laurent John:

... Asking who these technologies erase and looking at the effect on our collective memory.

Speaker 6:

There's a big chunk of human history that's lost and the technology is perpetuating that.

Laurent John:

See you next time.