

FACULTY OF THE HISTORY & PHILOSOPHY OF
MEDICINE & PHARMACY

2021 Celebrating the bicentenary of John Keats' death



For the month of February, the Faculty Manager will be running interviews with some special guests.

We begin this issue with Elaine Duigenan.

Why does Keats' work and life still resonate with so many today? We delve into how he inspires and more.

Elaine Duigenan *A Photographic Artist*



MF: Tell us a little about yourself?

ED: I am a photographic artist based in London. I tend to work with objects and still life, always in an experimental way.

I rarely use a camera but since the late 90s have pioneered the use of a flatbed scanner for the making of detailed images. My work has been used as an example of this technique by the V&A and I have work in their national collection. I started investigating plant material when I had a garden in 2016 and was making a series of work connected to Karl Blossfeldt. He made a seminal photographic study of plant specimens in the 1920's. I have spent the whole of this year scanning and pressing flowers/plants and the collection is growing!

MF: What connected you to Keats and where has the inspiration come from for the exhibition?

ED: Initially I was connected to Keats because my partner and I simply shared a passion for the story of John and Fanny Brawne. We would go to swim in the pond at Hampstead Heath and then after sit in the garden at Keats House. I loved watching the plants change with the seasons and harboured a desire to do some kind of project. Chance favoured one day when I met the curator and asked if I could be an artist in residence. It developed into a funded residency and for the latter half I was supported by Arts Council England.

It has been the strangest time as Covid hit when I was due to get started but as my focus was the garden, I was lucky to get enough access and I could also get to the heath.

Initially I wondered why John Keats's poetry and letters displayed such knowledge and connection to flora and was fascinated to realise that it was his apothecary training that embedded the imagery in his work. I also live in Southwark and have felt a connection to Keats through proximity to Guys Hospital and The Old Operating Theatre.

Keats was amongst the very first students to be examined under the terms of the Apothecaries Act of 1815. One of the perks of training were fair weather forays to the heath on herborising trips that allowed study of plants in situ and was a break from otherwise squalid conditions.

Throughout lockdown I found that the simplest varieties of plants connected the most. For example, Keats loved violets and also made poignant references to daisies. Shortly before his death, Keats's friend Joseph Severn, reported to him that the Roman cemetery was strewn with daisies and violets and this prompted Keats to say that he could already feel them growing over him. The last thing he saw in the room where he lay was a coffered ceiling with a Roman daisy/flower motif.



My residency has a number of outcomes including a unique installation in the house to mark the bicentenary of Keats's death (February). There is also a series of images called 'Laureate' through which I aim to show the complex feelings Keats had around success and failure. In one kind of image I crown Keats with floral 'coronas' like the classical statues of the past that he so admired and in the other I show him with flowers over growing which alludes to his fear of dying in obscurity. Most people think that the mask was made after death but in fact it's a life mask; so again I enjoy this confusion in the overall theme of recognition and obscurity.



By working with pressed specimens, I aim to contemporise a historic process, oft associated with women and craft and I imagine Fanny Brawne alongside and pressed into this fabric of memorializing and devotion. Many of the specimens used have direct connection to Keats words or episodes in his life. Some were collected from his garden and grave.

MF: I understand you've crossed paths with our President, Briony Hudson before, tell us more?

ED: I have often made work that intersects with biomedical history. In fact it was during a residency at The Hunterian Museum (RCSEng) that I first met Briony and distinctly remember her warmth and energy. I've had a longstanding connection with The Hunterian and initially made work with Hunter's animal specimens. It was followed by a fantastic Wellcome funded project with Simon Chaplin called 'The Dreadful and The Divine' which delved into the extraordinary collection of surgical instruments. I've continued to work with Wellcome Collection on numerous projects to this day.

MF: What is your next project?

ED: I have numerous projects on the go and am constantly finding fresh inspiration and ideas. One thing that is permanent is my focus on plants. It's a huge study but what particularly interests me is how the story and image of women is bound up in the metaphors we have been allocated by history. I am interested in unpacking what might be termed floral feminism – watch this space!

MF: How can people connect with you?

I would be delighted to hear from anyone especially with a view to possible collaborations/residencies. A residency allows for relationship, depth and detail, all things I value. Social media wise I am most active on Instagram and you can find a 'behind the scenes' web page for my work at Keats House via

<https://elained.myportfolio.com>

Website: www.elaineduigenan.com

Email: elaineduig@aol.com



MF: Thank you to Elaine for an insightful interview and a fascinating look at Keats' life.

We have two more interviews coming up with Professor Sean Hughes and Dr Noel Snell.

If you would like to join us for this year's Keats Memorial Lecture, to mark the exact bicentenary of Keats' death on 23 February 2021 [click here](#). The Keats Memorial Lecture has been organised in association with King's College London since 1969, [click here](#)

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*Yours affectionately
John Keats.*