

A radically joyful nature

As Monster Chetwynd unveils two new UK commissions, *Elizabeth Fullerton* speaks with the Zurich-based artist about social bonding, the beauty of moths and the subtle subversion of orchestrating infectious fun





British artist Monster Chetwynd is known for epic, celebratory, DIY performances that draw on literature, nature – bats are a recurrent motif – mythology and popular culture and use joy as a radical social tool. Her anarchic practice incorporates painting, installation, sculpture and film. With homespun costumes and sets, she works collaboratively, spinning exuberant, life-affirming sense out of chaos. Born Alalia Chetwynd in 1973, she changed her name to Spartacus – under which she was nominated for the 2012 Turner Prize – then Marvin Gaye, then Monster, in 2018. That year she plastered Tate Britain’s neoclassical façade with gigantic slugs and transformed the National Galleries of Scotland’s paintings with papier mâché moths and salamanders. Chetwynd recently unveiled a new work for Art on the Underground in Gloucester Road station and has a new commission at Mount Stuart, Bute, opening in June – Art Fund supported a related workshop on Earth Day as part of The Wild Escape.

Elizabeth Fullerton: How did you arrive at your distinctive practice of combining collaborative performance with social commentary?
Monster Chetwynd: I did a BA degree in Social Anthropology and Ancient History at UCL and was exposed to lots of the wonderful strategies that communities have to enable social bonding. I wanted to experiment with these different behaviours. It may sound like ‘Oh my God, here comes a frightening cult leader’, but, actually, all that I did was make fancy-dress parties. Organically, I started developing a troupe of people around me who also found it interesting. I set up elaborate environments in a domestic space with a theme and worked with different people for months on costumes and theatrical sketches. It does work; when those people meet later they have a very good connection and will cross the room to talk to each other. I was just literally trying to make more human-bonded fun happen. I was invited to nightclubs and theatres and then very quickly I was invited to make the same kind of events happen in galleries.

EF: Were you resourceful as a child?
MC: Resourceful is a key word. I was brought up travelling. [Chetwynd’s family moved frequently when she was a child; her father worked in the military and later as a path finder for doctors in Afghanistan, and her mother was a production designer in the film industry.] In Pakistan I was left with a Zoroastrian family for months and with Chinese-heritage Malaysians in Kuala Lumpur for a long time. So I have been brought up with exposure to different ways of living. I had a childhood that wasn’t in any way stable and, as a result, I don’t have a lot of the conventional templates. On the positive side, it made me extremely resilient and totally comfortable anywhere. I wouldn’t look for permission from anyone, and if I couldn’t afford what I wanted, I would make it out of paper and pretend.

EF: The DIY aesthetic and the desire to build communities at the core of your practice clearly have their roots in your background. How did you approach the Mount Stuart commission?
MC: It’s a place that has so much rich culture crammed into it on many layers so it was difficult at first. Then when we went for a walk around the grounds and I noticed this understated structure, like a small column, that announced that local people were recording the moths that came to the island. As I researched it, I discovered the moths are phenomenal. They’re such sensational colours. The elephant hawk moth is a mixture



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Monster Chetwynd

Previous spread and above, left: Monster Chetwynd and work in progress from *Pond Life: Albertopolis and the Lily*, 2023; below, left: ‘Monster Loves Bats’, installation view, Konsthall C, Stockholm, 2021; facing page: *TEARS*, performance, Art Basel 2021

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between moss-sludge green and bright pink, shaped like a Harrier jet. Another one is the ermine moth, which is white with black dots, fluffy as anything. The kitchen tiger moth has managed to outwit bats with its own clicking noise that can damage the bats' radar. Basically, they're exotic, glamorous, gorgeous moths, so I decided I'd like to work with them. And it feels important because it's green politics and all the things I care about. From that, lots of ridiculously elaborate and fun ideas have spiralled out.

EF: Have you always liked moths?

MC: When I lived in Malaysia I saw some incredible lantern flies, and they have amazing noses. They're literally half the size of their body with a red bobble on the top. I'm not trying to endlessly sing for the ugly but I do seem to always like an underdog. Also, because I have a really big nose, when I see an animal, like a proboscis monkey or tube-nosed bat, or these wonderful lantern flies, I do feel a pang of sympathy. Every time I've been to a natural history museum, I've always looked at the moths. I made a series of panels for a show at National Galleries of Scotland with these rather splendid moths on the front that I made in cardboard and painted. Three works in a similar style will be shown inside the house at Mount Stuart.

EF: And you're going to build a 'moth hub' that will be used as a moth research centre?

MC: I'm showing *Folding House* from the 2011 'British Art Show'. It's made of old windows that were being thrown away and it folds up to be more like a stage with a platform. It works well as somewhere to stand and discuss ideas.

EF: Will there be a performative element?

MC: I want to make costumes like chrysalises, the transitional phase of the moth cycle when they look so disturbingly like armour or alien, and to make a procession, almost imagining the moths as superior beings from another universe. I'm not going to hold back. We might even put bits of cocoon action in the amazing marble swimming pool at Mount Stuart too.

EF: Will the procession be the performance?

MC: Not exactly. For the last 15 years I've done this dance between making films and making

performance, but my soul prioritises the live moment. At the same time, I'm aware filmmaking enables people who are not at the performance to feel included. So, we're going to have a fun, playful time making a film which will be like a lock-in with three different schools, moth people and Mount Stuart people. There will be two professional dancers, the procession of chrysalis aliens and flights of fantasy. We're going to make something happen with a tiny film crew and me, then that film will be screened at a later date.

EF: What's the role of improvisation for you?

MC: The grit in the oyster normally comes from something I'm angry about or that hasn't had much attention. Then I'll talk to people around me. Within an hour or two, with each person we'll develop a conversation all the way through to action to do within a five-minute bracket. When you leave that meeting you'll know what you're doing when you get to the performance. Then I'll rehearse with maybe four different groups to that level so you get up to 20 minutes of action. There's a lot of spontaneity because it's only rehearsed for an hour or two. Within the first 20 minutes it's very stressful because people are only just working it out and there's no cohesion. But then audience members who stay start seeing this repetition and smoothness of organisation and confidence building. So there's lots of fun layers and confusion, and lots of room for people thinking it's abject and walking off.

EF: Is it that the magic often then just happens?

MC: Oh my God, yes! And it's allowing room for that. It's my favourite thing. I feel like a king for a day within the performances because it's what I crave in life and would like to happen more.

EF: Your performances are always upbeat. Do you find joy a more effective tool than sadness?

MC: I do work with joy. I have a lot of energy, it seems. And I'm very driven to make things happen, which connects to the whole thing about the name, and Monster being unstoppable, engulfing and tenacious. I am interested in psychology and the difficulty that everyone faces within capitalism and the question – whatever regime you're under – is anyone helping to boost morale? A lot of the time I become angry, which is a wonderful fuel. A book I always reference is

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Left: Monster Chetwynd and Esther Teichmann, *Phantasie Fotostudio II*, 2018; facing page: *Lanternfly*, 2018, installation view, Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art, Edinburgh, 2018-19

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Mikhail Bakhtin's *Rabelais and His World*, because it's about unstoppable human innate joy and humour, things that I super-relate to. And radical laughter. I totally relate to working for Dionysus [god of wine and pleasure] towards joy and frivolity and moments of carnival.

EF: Fun can be subversive...

MC: I'm definitely 'political covert' rather than 'political overt', but at the same time I'm not just paying lip service with the radical fun, it can deepen a wedge. I'm doing an amazing project in Poland with children at the moment, which does make you feel like you're helping unconservative qualities to blossom, even in a tiny little pocket.

EF: You are also bringing radical joy to a disused platform at London's Gloucester Road station. What was the genesis of *Pond Life: Albertopolis and the Lily* for Art on the Underground?

MC: When I started reading the local history

I was amazed to learn a lot of money that funded Exhibition Road and the museums nearby came from ticketing sales from entry to Crystal Palace [built to house the Great Exhibition of 1851]. I used to go to the museums on my own as a child after we moved to London but I never knew Crystal Palace was linked to the area. Then I dug deeper and started understanding the history of [gardener and designer] Joseph Paxton, who built it. I found it really moving that he came from a dirt-poor background and just through positive opportunism continued all his life to do amazing and innovative things. And the more I researched the lily, the more excited I became. The giant waterlily inspired, to some extent, the need to make bigger glasshouses because it grows at a ridiculous speed – 20 or 30cm a day.

EF: How did you translate the story of Paxton and the lily into a large-scale art installation?

MC: I came up with the idea of five sculptures of

lily pads that are 4m diameter discs, like massive pennies or coins. The Underground platform has arches the whole length, so there's this nice rhythm. I made the sculptures out of cardboard and now they've been cast and will be in plaster going along the 2m x 80m platform. There are also lots of amphibians and underwater creatures and it's as if they are admiring the inspiring structure of the lily. Paxton famously stood his daughter on a lily pad as a promotion, because they have this incredible distribution of weight through their veins and the way they use air bubbles and water. They have little chambers below their flat surface. It's very clever.

EF: There's a darker element to this story relating to the British Empire. How did you navigate that aspect of it?

MC: It's been super-difficult because the colonial aspect is completely wrapped around it. Why did the lily come to Britain? It's from Guyana.

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Above and facing page: Tate Britain Winter Commission: Monster Chetwynd, Tate Britain, London, 2018-19

The person who found the lily was actually employed to map the territory. The lily was given to Victoria and the Latin name was *Victoria regia* at the time. It's now *Victoria amazonica*. I developed a film to tell the story as well because I didn't find the sculptures on their own were enough.

EF: Your film *Who Named the Lily?*, which was shot by artist-filmmaker Margaret Salmon, will be in the ticketing area upstairs. I love that it's narrated by a fact-hungry witch.

MC: I've tried to make it the biography of the lily rather than of Paxton, or dead white men. I developed a persona of the fact-hungry witch, which is just me being an investigative journalist dressed in a diamond leotard with a painted-on trompe l'oeil cleavage and a shaggy, ridiculous old wig that I've made. I really feel that you don't have to assume authority comes from a certain place and that you can be asking just as valid questions if you're wearing a leotard.

The fact-hungry witch is looking into the history of why the lily is linked to this area and to Crystal Palace. I've also developed a treasure hunt with Transport for London down the underground tunnel to the museums.

EF: You seem to have come into your own with these types of multilayered projects that have a political underpinning.

MC: I just love them. When I was much younger I would be put in these group shows with people who I had absolutely no connection with. But now I'm being invited to create these projects where I couldn't be more interested.

● *Pond Life: Albertopolis and the Lily*, to May 2024, Gloucester Road Underground Station, London, art.tfl.gov.uk

● Monster Chetwynd commission, Mount Stuart House & Gardens, Isle of Bute, from 10 June. mountstuart.com, 25% off with National Art Pass