

Hernease Davis:

Hello and welcome to the Project Space, a podcast featuring some of the remarkable artists who have participated in the Project Space Residency here at the Visual Studies Workshop in Rochester, New York. The Project Space Residency has served both regional, national and international artists for many years, providing a studio space and access to VSW facilities. I'm Hernease Davis. I'm a visual artist and the assistant Curator of Education and Public Programs here at VSW. For each episode, I will be in conversation with artists to discuss their background, their practice, and how the Project Space Residency has impacted their works.

In this final episode of season one, I'll be speaking with artists Ligia Bouton. Ligia was an artist in residence at VSW in August of 2022. I recorded our conversation in the Project Space towards the very end of her residency. Ligia and I had numerous conversations throughout that month and a very engaging final studio visit with our MFA students, faculty and staff prompted me to record a conversation with her before she left. Ligia thoughtfully used the building and our archives in her multifaceted approach towards making work that is in response to and in conversation with a very important historical figure in the history of astronomy.

In the portion of our conversation about music, you'll hear Ligia reference a very key interaction with Tara Nelson, who is our Curator and Director of Public Programs here at VSW. You'll also hear me reference the work of Moyra Davey, and I'll make a correction of myself, you'll hopefully remember this when you get to that part. But I refer to a piano composition that debuted in Moyra Davey's 2014 exhibition at Murray Guy Gallery. That piece was composed by David Lang and is titled "Ornament and Reproach for Moyra Davey". I've included a reference link in the show notes. And I have a sound disclaimer. Since we recorded our conversation in the Project Space, there's a bit more echo and street noise than usual. The Project Space has great acoustics. This is the final episode of season one, but it is the first of two interviews with Ligia. I look forward to sharing our follow-up conversation about how Ligia's work has evolved post-residency in season two of the Project Space Podcast. Without further ado, here is our part one.

Ligia Bouton:

So my name is Ligia Bouton. I am currently based in Amherst, Massachusetts. I am a little bit from all over. I moved there from Santa Fe, New Mexico where I was for a very long time and grew up kind of internationally. So I sort of think about myself as being a little bit from all over. My work is based in photography, in drawing, in performance, in sculpture, and it is often engaged in a dialogue with historical narratives. So I'm often drawing upon historical figures, biography of historical people that I'm interested in, and it's very research based. So I'm interested in stories that come out of science, out of literature, out of cultural histories. And my work is really in a process of conversation with those narratives and sort of discovery of how those narratives maybe are informing our present moment, they're informing my thinking about our present moment and how they might be able to cast light on where we are at the moment.

Hernease Davis:

Great. Yeah, because I actually have been wondering about how you would characterize your work because we're in the studio at the moment surrounded by your work. And this is something that is not what I had planned for our conversation. So I'd planned on asking you after your residency was over to talk to you about the work. I like some time to synthesize what artists have made, what they've been making, and to be able to come up with some questions about their time here and where things have shifted. And sometimes artists need some time to think through those things. But also there's quite a bit

of work that has been filling out the space here. So I'll say, yesterday you really graciously opened up your studio space to some of our students, faculty and staff, and showed us what you were working on, gave us a run through of what you've been making and it was so fulfilling.

Or there's something that I thought was just really, really curious about the amount of work that you've done here and conversations that we've had, I guess like a couple of weeks ago before you had made a lot of this work. And so I didn't want you to leave without talking to you about it. And also I really wanted to talk to you about it around the work because it feels to me the way you have organized the work, there are sections that I can see where things have been perhaps related to, and we can talk about that as we go through. But there also is this really wonderful experience of being surrounded by it and then coming in and then seeing the flow of your process and how it has, I use the word manifest. How it has manifested, to me is it's very wonderful. So I want to start where we started yesterday with you explaining a little bit about the historical character that you're focusing on and as much as you would like to share about how your focus on her has spread out into the work that you've made.

Ligia Bouton:

Great. Okay. So in 2020 I was awarded a Smithsonian Artist Research Fellowship to do research at the Harvard Smithsonian Center for Astrophysics. And part of my proposal for that work was to look into the work and research of Henrietta Swan Leavitt, who was an employee there from 1903 to 1921. She came to the observatory there to be what was called a computer, which was a woman... So they were hiring women at that time to work in the observatory to assess and look at the glass plates, the photographic plates that they were taking from the telescopes at night. So the men would be up at night in the observatory taking the photographs, and then they needed people to assess all of this data that they were accumulating on these glass plates as photographic data. So they hired women because they were cheap labor. And one of the incredible things that came out of that was that because it was this group of women who was looking at those glass plates, they were the ones that made the incredible discoveries.

And Henrietta Swan Leavitt had, in my opinion, this incredible eye for detail. What she was seeing on those plates, and I've spent now many hours in the Harvard Observatory looking at the plates that she was looking at, what she was seeing is just amazing and these very, very small changes. So what she was studying is she was studying variable stars. So stars that are blinking, are getting brighter and dimmer over time in consistent periods. And the particular kind of star that she ended up looking at was something called Cepheid variable. And it was something new at that time. And this is around sort of 1912, 1913. It was something new, there were a couple of different scientists who were looking at this kind of star, but she really was the person who started to map these stars to figure out where they were, how many of them there were, what their brightnesses were, what their durations were, how long it took for them to cycle through from being dim into being bright again.

And with this information suddenly around 1912, she figured out that there was a very particular relationship between the brightness and the duration of these kinds of stars. And with that single piece of information, she was able to then make this leap and create this idea that with that information we could measure distances in the universe. And I can sort of fill out more about that. It's a sort of whole lesson in physics in and of itself. But this incredible discovery, she wrote about it in this very simple paper that she wrote in 1912. It's not a simple idea, but she wrote a concise three-page paper that came out in the Harvard Observatory Bulletin in 1912 that really sort of changed the way that we look at our place in the universe. And I found this to just be super exciting.

There's something about her, as a personality, we don't know very much about her. She didn't keep a journal, she didn't write a huge number of letters or we don't have the letters that she wrote. So we have a few letters that she wrote to the director of the observatory and her notebooks and her

research. That is just these endless notebooks filled with her very neat, tiny handwriting and just painstaking detail about these particular stars. So there is a wealth of research that she did, but in some ways it's a little bit opaque. It's sort of hard to get at. And so because of the pandemic and my ups and downs with access to the Harvard Observatory and to their archives, really, when I arrived at VSW, [I] had all of this thinking and all of this research about Henrietta Swan Leavitt, about the Cepheid variable stars, about the work that she was doing. But I had no idea what I wanted to do with it.

And so I literally went at this month... and this is a sort of fun moment to have this conversation since this is sort of my last day here, but I went at this month with this idea of, "Okay, how many different directions can I go in? How many doors can I throw open?" And I kind of took this opportunity to have this very intensive period of time to just try to do that, to just open all the doors on this project that I could possibly think of and see what happened. And so I went in a whole bunch of different directions, as I just said. And so in the room around us is what I sort of think of in my mind is maybe five or six different directions that have started and that could move forward. And so in the last couple of days, I've been just writing a lot, thinking about what I want to do next and to how to keep it all moving once I'm not here.

Hernease Davis:

Yeah. Okay. One thing that stuck out yesterday, so in terms of the information that we have about who she is, this sort of imbalance is really fascinating to me. And kind of leads in the series of performance pieces that you've made where you've actually embodied her, kind of makes me think about this filling in, I guess in an imaginary way, perhaps gaps in who she is, but not necessarily her, but more so about you as someone who's very interested in her and not necessarily her, but the work that she's done.

Ligia Bouton:

Yeah. Performance has always been a part of my work. And that the idea of making objects that I'm performing in or with, so often making clothing or textile objects, fabric sculptures that I perform with is a way for me to explore in a really immediate way, these kind of difficult ideas that I'm having. So oftentimes I'm spending hours and hours in the studio sort of working on things or drawing or doing other sort of very time consuming tasks. And when I engage in performance, it's just immediate. I can get into that moment and be that person and have a different kind of experience. And so when I got here, I had been thinking about this one photograph of Henrietta Swan Leavitt. There are very few photographs. I said yesterday, I think there were two, but I think last night I was thinking, and I think there are three. But three-

Hernease Davis:

It's not a lot.

Ligia Bouton:

... photographs of this incredible woman. And in one, she is standing with one of the other women that she worked with who also was actually very accomplished in her own right. But they're standing outside the Harvard Observatory and she's wearing this very particular dress. And the dress seemed very like her. It's very practical, it's very plain in some ways. And I was thinking about the dress and the high collared lace shirt that she has on underneath and the way that her hair is. There's also something very particular about this woman, being an artist who has engaged in performance and put my body in front of a camera or in front of an audience occasionally, many times throughout my career, all of a sudden to

be older and to be at a different kind of phase in my own life, it sort of changes the way that I think about that relationship to the camera. I'm still wrestling with what that is.

But Henrietta Swan Leavitt, when she was doing this work, when she was working at the observatory, and then she actually died in 1921 when she was 51, which is basically the age that I am. And so I feel this kinship between my body and her body. And so I decided I was going to make a copy of this dress, and I got to VSW and I had this plan. I had brought my sewing machine, I had brought materials and I hadn't figured out what color I wanted it to be. It's a black and white photograph, all these different things. And I had all these different ideas about it. And suddenly I was thinking about how so much of her life was in this one small room at the Harvard Observatory, how she didn't travel a lot and how transported she was just sitting in a chair into these incredible realms of the night sky. And so I wanted to embody that somehow.

And so I had brought with me an old green screen backdrop that I've used in video pieces in the past. And I was here one Saturday morning and suddenly I was like, "Oh, I'm going to make the dress out of this green screen." So I made a copy of this dress from 1912, 1913, from this photograph out of the green screen backdrop and then trimmed it and put buttons on it and made the lace collar and the whole thing. And then got into it, made it to fit my own body and then just was sort of waiting to see what would happen. So I have been what I call playing in the dress. Here at VSW, there are some beautiful architectural features. The building is also from a similar time period, I believe.

Hernease Davis:

Yes, it is.

Ligia Bouton:

So it feels really appropriate to be wearing this kind of a dress. So I've been, yes, videotaping myself. But one of the amazing things, of course about that is that the minute you put it into a computer, I can key out that green and put anything else I want there. So I've been experimenting with putting my own photographs there of the Cepheid variable stars, which is one of the other directions I've been moving in. I've been thinking about all kinds of other things that I might put there in the future. And I feel like it's... as an object now, moving out of the studio here at VSW, back into my own studio and my own life and schedule and all that stuff, it's also an object I think that will continue to move the project forward because I can get into these more immediate spaces and work through some things in a little bit faster way in it.

Hernease Davis:

Yeah. There's something that happened yesterday, because I've heard you say, oh before, when you're describing where something kind of takes off, you go, "Oh, da da da da da." And so I thought about that. So I want to ask you about that later on. But also what I'm hearing and what I'm learning is that, and this doesn't have to be completely true, and of course correct me if I'm kind of wrong, what I'm gathering is that there is this beginning of an "oh!" and then there is kind of a synthesizing of what you want to do, but also a refinement of that process through time. Is that fair to say or?

Ligia Bouton:

Yes, I definitely think so. And I'm thinking about that process of refinement. I think there's that lovely sort of shape of any project, any research, any creative work where at the beginning you're just kind of moving outwards and outwards and outwards, and then you have to start to bring it in and think about

its focus or how to communicate all of these things that you've discovered. And I'm definitely not at that point in this project. I'm definitely at the kind of moving outwards point, which is super exciting and fun to be in that place. And I'm struck by the "oh", which is a linguistic tick that I didn't realize that I have but now I will think about it.

And I actually think that it embodies so much of what this month has been for me. I feel that I was really in that stage of research where, you're just on the surface when I arrived. And I feel like the whole process of being here has been about peeling back layers or pages and also thinking about being here. And I think the one thing that I want to talk about in terms of VSW is the lantern slide collection, which I had known about and thought a little bit about and thought about the relationship between this incredible... So here at VSW, I don't... How many lantern slides are down there?

Hernease Davis:

I would say easily thousands.

Ligia Bouton:

It's an incredible archive of imagery all on glass. And it has this intense relationship to me, to being in the glass plate archive at Harvard. At Harvard, there are 700,000 images of the night sky on glass plates in this one three story kind of section of the building, which is amazing. But the way that it feels and the light and the kind of ambiance of being in that space is I walked into the lantern slide room and I was like, "Oh, it's like that. It's like that." And then of course it is like that. It is another repository of information and learning on a glass substrate. And so I have just sort of fallen in love with the lantern slides and have been starting to think about how to use the lantern slide as an image to build my own imagery around this whole project.

So I've been working on making visual representations of the 25 Cepheid variable stars that are in Henrietta Swan Leavitt's seminal paper from 1912 in which she makes this connection and figures out measurement. And I have been photographing imagery from the lantern slides, images on the lantern slides through glass objects that I have blown or old glass objects that I have found. So I've been thinking about how the telescope is an object that is filled with glass and that all of these lenses that create the possibility of us seeing so far into space, but also capturing what was seen in that telescope, that particular moment onto a piece of glass, that all of that is made possible by the medium of glass.

And so it really felt like if I was going to make my own imagery of these stars that I needed to use glass and glass has been something that I've been interested in the past. I come to it recently, so I'm just always so aware of how terrible I am, how badly I'm doing with the... I've never worked in a material that's so technical. It is so difficult. So I'm sort of learning how to blow glass. I've been doing a lot of kiln form glass over the last couple of years as well. But I've been blowing these, they're kind of cheesy looking kind of glass balls that I blow.

Hernease Davis:

They almost have the look of perhaps ornaments.

Ligia Bouton:

Yes.

Hernease Davis:

But I would say ornaments that don't seem to have a clear idea of how to use them. And so they're kind of bulbous in the middle and it comes out to have these very long stems. So to me, there is this delicacy or delicateness to them, but also there are these sculptural or structural features that are made of colored glass that are wrapped around them. The more that I know in terms of how you're using them, the more it's almost like they're meant to be played with, but very carefully.

Ligia Bouton:

And I think that when I was blowing them, I started to figure out the things that I like. And I like it when it feels like that, a kind of decorative glass ball, but somehow gone wrong. It's sort of blobby and awkward and there's this weird stuff coming off of it. And it's all glass, but I'd like it when they get kind of misshapen. And actually now that I'm photographing through them, the more misshapen they are, the more strange they are on the surface, the more kind of weird they get, the better the image comes out, the more that I like what I'm getting in the camera.

Hernease Davis:

Does that lend to how you make the glass pieces?

Ligia Bouton:

It will now.

Hernease Davis:

Okay.

Ligia Bouton:

Cause I was thinking...

Hernease Davis:

It will from now on... That's really great to... But again, that comes with your experience with them and using them and getting to know their nature. And what you spoke about before, what it is that you like, not just in the shape or how they look physically, but also how they're interacting with the work that you're making photographically through them, which I think is really interesting. Because then you'll go back and think a little bit more or be, I would say, more mindful of the bulbous or the off-shapeness and what they can give you in terms of this refinement that I'm sort of thinking about.

Ligia Bouton:

So I feel like any new material, and especially one that's just so incredibly technical, I feel like I am playing and learning and just trying to get my head around the technical stuff that's happening in front of me until the point... and just, I'm trying to be patient and wait for the material to say something about what it can do. But of course, I'm not that artist. My work is so conceptually research driven that I need that to come into play as well.

And so again, I think to have this period of time to have the resources here, to take these photographs, to be in a place where I could really set up and just go at this material in a really intensive way, just gave back so much information to me about what the glass pieces will do. And at this point in time, I have this sort of moment of, I don't think that they need to be a part of the actual final piece at all. That they

really are a tool to the process of making these. And they do really beautiful things with these stars, especially in relationship to the image on the lantern slide.

Hernease Davis:

I think that's fascinating because when you think about glass in photography or even in terms of telescopes, it's not something that you really pay attention to, even though technically it is what is receiving or making it possible to view. It's very important, but it's not necessarily a part of the work. And so I think that is very interesting in terms of that element. But also, I just had the thought, you're adding lenses in a sense, you're shooting through this, but it's also... because I've been thinking about it as an overlay, which it is. It's a mediator, which it is. But also in terms of the glass piece of it. I'm very biased in thinking of this way because the way I use photography, I don't use any lenses. I'm lens-less.

And so I thought, you're adding lenses, you're adding in this other optical element, which I think is making glass visible in a way that I find very fascinating in terms of thinking about the optics of photography, but not in a technical optical sense of the word, but in terms of this... this is another word that came up yesterday, in terms of this wonderment or this wonder. It makes me very aware of the mechanisms of telescopes or of lens mediated objects. But the way that you're working with it, especially in the photographs that you're producing using them, and then shooting with the lantern slides, it's almost like this is... Yeah, you just don't need the objects.

Ligia Bouton:

Yeah. We've talked about that already. This idea of how much of our world is really mediated through this material, how much of our learning, how much of our experience of communication comes through the material of glass and how little we think about it or look at it. And it as a material, the minute that I start messing with it, the minute I start thinking about that idea of something imperfect that I'm trying to capture, how changed the imagery becomes. How quickly this material, we think of it as just being clear and we're simply seeing what's on the other side, and it's somehow helping us to see or capture that image.

But the minute that there's a dent or a change in color, or it loses its perfect spherical surface it, everything about what the image is underneath is changed. And it's so fascinating to me. And it just brings to the surface for me that idea of how much we're relying on this material and thinking that what we're seeing is the absolute truth, but actually what we're seeing is the thing that has been mediated through this material and is controlled by this material.

Hernease Davis:

Yes. One of the things that... So we both wear glasses. I wear glasses as well. I've been wearing my contacts quite a bit because sometimes I get tired of wearing my glasses because I have this very obsessive impulse to clean them constantly. Because noticing your glasses for me brings me great anxiety, and I have to make sure I'm always carrying around with me something to wipe them off. And this just popped into my head, just something that I thought of now and how frustrating that is and how obsessive I become with making sure that they're clean and making sure I don't notice them.

So to talk about imperfections in glass as something that is quite beautiful, but also can render some type of, I would say in this sense, it might be... If there is any anxiety in there, I would think of it as this mysterious anxiety around just what is it? What am I looking at? What am I supposed to see? And I really enjoy that abstraction and that tension with not really knowing and allowing your mind to kind of

wander. So in the early part of your residency, when I first started passing by here, and I looked at one of the images behind me of the... Can you say the name of the stars again?

Ligia Bouton:
Cepheid variables.

Hernease Davis:
Cepheid variables.

Ligia Bouton:
Cepheid variable stars.

Hernease Davis:
One of the Cepheid variables.

Ligia Bouton:
Yeah.

Hernease Davis:
And I said, it looks like the inside of an eye.

Ligia Bouton:
Yes.

Hernease Davis:
Or it looks like-

Ligia Bouton:
Oh, that's right.

Hernease Davis:
... an optical... one of those images that you get from the eye doctor when they are making sure that your optical nerve is healthy.

Ligia Bouton:
And they're taking the photograph of the back of your-

Hernease Davis:
Yes. But-

Ligia Bouton:
Yes.

Hernease Davis:

... distorted. And I knew that's not what it was, but I thought-

Ligia Bouton:

Oh, I love that.

Hernease Davis:

Yes. I'm like, "It looks like that, but it's not that." And I know it's not that, but that's what I see.

Ligia Bouton:

All of that is so interesting. I love how these conversations make me think also more about my own process and my own work. And I am a new glasses wearer. It's only been in the last year that I have really been wearing glasses.

Hernease Davis:

Oh, that's great.

Ligia Bouton:

And so I never even put that together, that this is... and I am also sort of obsessed with my glasses because I had been putting it off for so long that when I finally put my glasses on for the first time, I had that moment of, "Oh my gosh, wait, this is what it looks like?" So I need my glasses. And I feel that they make a huge difference. But I sometimes take them off on purpose because I sometimes am coming back to this idea of what is it that I'm actually seeing? What is my experience of the world? I don't know. That's really interesting. Oh, I'm going to spend hours thinking about that now.

Hernease Davis:

And so speaking in terms of glass as well, and also going back to this moment yesterday, we said, "Oh, this is a one-to-one of a glass plate that I believe that Henrietta Swan used in terms of her research to determine the distances of the Cepheid stars." And it is sort of bluish with these random dots all over it. And I didn't know what they were, but you bring us over to the table where there is this photograph of this, what I now know is a plate photograph. And you said, "I looked at this and I thought, oh, this is music." And it's not what I would have imagined coming from looking at this image of the glass plate that she used in her research. And so can you talk about that?

Ligia Bouton:

Sure. So it was one of my first moments at Harvard in the glass plates with the archivist there. She was showing me this plate. And these plates are incredibly important, they have incredible historical significance. A lot of the plates that Henrietta Swan Leavitt was looking at were taken in Peru of the Southern Hemisphere. And think about the distances that these pieces of glass traveled, these pieces of information. And some of them are just so slight, there is nothing on them. If you misplaced it and left it out and somebody came upon it, they would think that it was just a dirty piece of glass.

Hernease Davis:

Yeah, just dust, maybe speckled with something.

Ligia Bouton:

Yeah. They're so just barely there. And I was looking at this plate with the librarian archivist there, and suddenly I'm like, what does this look like to me? And the image that came to mind is it's like somebody had taken a piece of glass and spilled pepper across it. So they're just these little flecks. And I was thinking about that, and all of a sudden it was like, "Oh, it looks like a piece of music with the staff notation taken away." And that was really the first opening for me into the whole project. So I arrived here at VSW with that single idea basically. What if I took music notation paper and put it behind the glass and then simply transposed the notes? So that has been a huge part of this project. The idea of there being something on these plates that you can't see, I think is part of it for me, that she saw something that I can't see.

I have spent hours trying to figure out which stars she was looking at. And then once I have figured out small groupings of stars that she was actually looking at, I have looked at all the subsequent plates. They're now a hundred years older than they were when she looked at them. So there's a possibility that there's been information that's been lost. But there are some moments where she's seeing something, and I can see it in her notebook that she's seeing a fluctuation in light. One time it's the dot is slightly bigger and next time it's slightly smaller. But we're talking about dots that are the size of the head of a pin or smaller, and I can't see it. So she saw something that I can't see, and that always makes me think about languages that I don't understand or processes that I'm not familiar with.

And that there are people that you're sitting with... We all have these experiences where you're sitting with somebody and you realized that they see something in this that you don't see, and something is happening inside their brain, inside their body that I don't have. And so this idea of, what is happening on this plate that I'm not experiencing? And so this idea of, what if it's sound? What if it's music? What if the whole thing is a song and I can somehow, through a process, reveal that to myself? So I started to print photographs of the plates that Henrietta Swan Leavitt used, and I've been using an earlier sequence of plates that she was first invested in around when she first started at the Observatory, which was of Orion's Nebula. And I realize now, and I'm very open about this, that I gravitated towards those plates because the Nebula itself is beautiful. There's something in it that, you can hold onto it. I call it in these plates, it's almost like a stirrup. It's a step-up into the information.

For example, the later plates that she was working with were of the Small Magellanic Cloud, which is one of our neighboring galaxies. And it is literally just a little sprinkle of black dots. And so I just really had a hard time finding a way into those. And so the Nebula kind of gave me something to hold onto. And when I'm looking at it, I kind of see something that I can see. But I started to just transpose the music that I was seeing. I put behind it... so then I'm looking for structure. I know something about music but I don't know a lot. So how can I borrow a structure? So then I was thinking about Mozart as you would, and was thinking about the Queen of the Night from the Magic Flute and how... this is something that I'm really interested in, the Queen of the Night.

As a character she just gets a really raw deal in this opera. Her daughter has been kidnapped, and she is always angry and vengeful and just spitting fury as you would as a parent. And there's something about her that I just completely relate to. And yet in the narrative, she is really positioned as ignorance and emotional sort of excess and all of these things in opposition to the enlightenment and the light of that other world. And so both the female and the darkness is portrayed as kind of ignorance in relationship to lightness. And thinking about all the ways that has just been used culturally as a terrible idea. The Magic Flute is really an opera of the Enlightenment. And yet the Enlightenment now has been a cultural movement that has, yes, brought incredible steps forward in terms of science, technology, thinking, medicine, all these things, but also has been something that in the 20th century, fascist governments

used as a way to give legitimacy to their own ideas of cultural cleansing and genocides and all kinds of other things.

There's amazing writing about this by the artist William Kentridge writes about the Magic Flute in this way as well. And it's just really an interesting thing. So I immediately had this thought of, "Oh, the Queen of the Night. We're going to recast the Queen of the Night. We're going to give the Queen of the Night a totally different place." And so I took the orchestration from the most famous aria of the Queen of the Night from the Magic Flute, and I put that behind the plates, and then I started to transpose the music. I just broke every plate into four bars. And just literally, if in this space of this bar I've got six notes and these ones are really close together and these two are further apart, then these ones are going to be longer and these ones are going to be shorter, and I'm going to make it fit in the time signature of the Magic Flute and all that stuff.

So then I found a scoring software that I could use, and I transposed it, and I entered it all into the software plate by plate. And I get these files that I can play back based on the instrumentation. Ultimately, I'd love to hear live instruments play it, but I'm not even sure it's playable. At this point it looks to me like it's not really.

Hernease Davis:

Well, I would say that it is simply because of the format. It's on a staff, there's a key signature, and it's even laid out in terms of the orchestration. And I think it's possible because the notation is standard, it looks familiar. Also, that's something that came to mind yesterday. Wasn't sure if you were familiar, Moyra Davey also at one time made... and I had to think about what structure she used, but she also wrote a piece of music that was based off of, I think it might have been language, but something that wasn't musical that created like a randomized consortment of notes, but it was still playable. But in terms of the timing and the count, it's very hard. And I saw that work in her gallery and in New York City, and she had installed a piano and had been asking people, "Do you play the piano? Please play this piece." Because I think she also wanted to hear it being played. And I remember telling her, I'm like, "Where? This is really hard." Because it was written for piano and for two hands, very dissonant, but possible.

Ligia Bouton:

And I think there is that possibility in this, and I still sort of hold out hope. And then one of the other things that has come out of it is that then I was interested in the music notation as another language. I'm basically making a drawing in music notation of the glass of the photographic plate. And so then I started experimenting with those music notation documents. And so one of the things that I did while I was here is I took one of those, or two of them actually and punctured a piece of paper where all of the notes were lying. So I end up with a piece of paper that I had just inked over. So it's black, but it's filled with holes. And so I'm back to something kind of abstract. But then when I was looking at that as an object, it felt like it was also somehow musical or it was holding sound somehow.

So then I was thinking about ways in which we have created technologies that take this puncturing to then transpose it back into sound. So thinking about things like player pianos and roles and things like that. And one of the curators here at VSW, Tara Nelson, said to me, "Oh, I have this little music box that you can puncture a piece of paper and play it through the music box. And it's one of those sort of do it yourself." And so I actually took that object, or she gave it to me. I didn't take it from her, she gave it to me. And then, I took one of the original photographs and cut a strip out of it and punctured it with the little hole tool that came with that object and can play it now as a music box. And so there's something

about all of these different directions that really is about that idea of exposing something that's hidden there. It's like a code.

Hernease Davis:

Yeah. Okay. There's a lot that I'm thinking about in terms of this, thinking of this as a language, but also fixating, not fixating, but fixing and applying a structure and something that you have some knowledge of that... So I'm going to go back to you looking at these plates, a series of plates that... Oh my gosh, I always forget, I'm sorry. Because I call her Lake, but it's Henrietta Swan Lake.

Ligia Bouton:

Leavitt.

Hernease Davis:

I'm sorry, Leavitt.

Ligia Bouton:

Yeah.

Hernease Davis:

Henrietta Swan Leavitt. The plates that she would look at. and this realization that there's something that she sees that you do not see. Going to the series of plates that you connect with or that you're hooked onto, the ones that focus on the Orion Nebula, and going from there into a way of understanding or using a language or using something that you can see. So I'm going to make a huge loop around and eventually get to here.

Because what I find fascinating there is that there is this acknowledgement of, first of all, her expertise and acknowledgement of another person having a very different perspective, something that's so different that you cannot recognize, but you've recognized that there is that lack of recognition there. And then going into this dichotomy between lightness and darkness in the Magic Flute where enlightenment is the light and also male or was characterized as male. The other side is this darkness, this unknowingness, which was characterized as female and is something that, it's sinister, and it is to be feared or, you know, blah. What I see on these plates is darkness. And that's also how things are registered as something that she focused on. But also the choosing of the Orion plates, I see that that's something that you see.

And so in terms of this kind of relationship you have with Leavitt as a historic figure, but it's not... You have an interest in her and also in your work sometimes embody her, but they're also these, again, it's not necessarily about her, it's about her through you, but also you. So hopefully that makes sense. So in this choosing of the plates, I think that's something really wonderful to not necessarily be beholden to the most important plates, or I would say something that were the most pivotal plates that she focused on, but focusing on something that connects with you that you can see. But it's something that she also could see. But this is where perhaps there is some overlap, but also I would say an entryway in... that you also would say, an entryway in an understanding. And from there... Oh my gosh, I wrote these weird notes as you were talking.

So from there, in talking about transposing or superimposing on these plates on top of Queen of the Night, there's something really interesting about this way of working that I think also I'm seeing in terms of how you approach unknowingness, the lack of knowing or not knowing. And your patience with that,

your process around letting the work come to you or letting the work... or I don't even know if that's correct. It's like letting the work come to you or having these moments of just, I think about stillness, but I also mostly think about this period of not knowing, and it's sort of this period of darkness and how cultivating that is, or how rich that is. I think mainly about the patience that's needed for the type of work that you're doing and type of work that Henrietta Swan Leavitt needed as well. Yeah, I'm kind of rambling.

Ligia Bouton:

No. I think all of that is really interesting. And you and I have talked about this a little bit through the time that I've been here, that a lot of my work really touches on this idea of wonder. And wonder has at its core, a kind of not knowing, it's about being in a state of not really understanding. And the only part of what you said that I react to actually in the sort of negative way about, "Oh, it's not like that," is stillness or patience, because I actually think that for me, it's slightly terrifying. I think it's something that has driven us forward in a pursuit of knowledge, has been that kind of terror of being in a spot where you don't really understand what's happening. We don't like to be there. And it is something that I use in my work psychologically for myself, that drives me forwards because it's so hard to sit in that place and it's not a still experience for me, it's a very complicated position to be in.

And I think when I arrived that sense of not only not knowing what this research was about in a lot of ways - I still don't think I'll ever come to complete terms with that - but I also had no idea how I fit into this or where my place was. And so that provided an incredible amount of anxiety and kind of nervous energy almost to kind of push forward. To be honest, I don't know if that's something that Henrietta Swan Leavitt also experienced, but I think that I feel in her work, a kind of tireless pushing for something that she knew was there and that she didn't know what it was. Again, I know I said this already, but just this incredible attention to detail and focus. And so it's something that I admire.

And I see I'm interested in these moments, I think in all of my work, in all of these pieces where I'm sort of thinking about historical context and narratives, I'm interested in how suddenly I will see this moment where I feel a kinship to this person. I feel that this person... Is almost like I claim her, she is my ancestor, and I want to live up to that somehow, and I want to make good and do right by her. I think there is a similar place of like ... just endless tasks, to transpose the music, to blow the glass. All of these things are, is there's just a time consuming kind of work that has to be done, and then at the end you sort of hope that you get to something that is a little bit transcendent.

Hernease Davis:

Yeah, I really love that. So my final question is after we've spoken about all of this, and especially about this unknowingness, and can you say anything about where you are now and where you see the work going?

Ligia Bouton:

Yeah. So I have some big steps in front of me I think. I have a whole sort of second movement of the music that I want to get into, a sort of slightly different way of looking at the Small Magellanic Cloud glass plates and thinking about how to create music out of that. I've been thinking about that in terms of just one single plate and coming at it from all different directions and sort of undoing a kind of linearity or directionality that I had been using in the plates that I was working with in terms of Orion's Nebula. Lots of performance. I need to figure out how that dress really works and what I want to do in it. I might make more of the dresses. I think there could be more dresses. And that the green screen dress is just the sort of beginning, I think that's a possibility.

And then to be honest, I have a very hard time not using resources that are around me at any moment. I sort of soak up whatever is there, I recognize this as a part of myself. And so this series of images that I'm trying to make about the Cepheid variable stars, the 25 stars, I didn't finish. And part of it was that I ran out of glass that I had blown that I could use for them. And so I knew that I needed certain pieces of certain colors, and I'm starting to understand how that series is working. So I hope that I'm coming back at some point for a couple of days to photograph more after I have blown more glass. And I have all these notes now in my notebook that is like, "More bulbous, more weird, more red, more yellow." So I'm thinking about different sort of things that I need and different variations and how the photographs might come about.

And then those 25 stars, I'm trying, and have been experimenting while I've been here, with lenticular printing, which is something that's super fun, of course. So that they would, instead of presenting them as video or something else that flickers, that the image itself would shift as you moved around it. So it would have a time-based component. And I need to experiment more with that, experiment with how many layers of photographs. Right now I have one that's nine layers deep in the lenticular, so it's cutting it up into little tiny, tiny strips. And then you sort of see all nine variations as you walk around. It's sort of more as a nebulous kind of cloud. I've done a little bit of research into that kind of technology and the lenticular printers. The guy was like, "Yeah, maybe." I was like, "Can we do 160 variations?" And he was like, "I don't know. We'll see." So I have some technical things I have to figure out as well.

Hernease Davis:

Okay. Yeah, that's exciting.

Ligia Bouton:

Yes.

Hernease Davis:

Yeah.

Ligia Bouton:

Super exciting.

Hernease Davis:

Well, thank you so much, Ligia.

Ligia Bouton:

Thank you, Hernease.

Hernease Davis:

Yeah, of course. Yay.

Ligia Bouton:

Oh, amazing.

Hernease Davis:

This transcript was exported on Jan 05, 2023 - view latest version [here](#).

And there you have it. Ligia has shared helpful reference links with more information about Henrietta Swan Leavitt's work, as well as that of other early women computers at Harvard. I also encourage you to visit Ligia's website. All of those links are in our show notes. As for the Visual Studies Workshop, please visit us at vsw.org where we have information about the Project Space Residency, as well as our new slate of spring workshops. We have both in-person and virtual offerings. Our in-person workshops are 16 millimeter Handmade Film, Make Your Own World: Intro to Virtual Reality, Making Books, Muybridge Deconstructed: 16mm to Still Image, Small Gauge Film Projection, 16mm Filmmaking and Video Preservation.

Our virtual workshops are Make a Flatgame, Coding for Artists and Poets, and I, Hernease, will be leading a virtual photo critique called When Artists Go In. VSW members receive a discount. And the link for those are also in our show notes. So keep following us on Twitch and Instagram [@thevisualstudiesworkshop](https://www.instagram.com/thevisualstudiesworkshop). And feel free to send me an email at herneasedavis@vsw.org. And this podcast is funded in part by the New York State Council on the Arts with the support of New York State Legislature. And thank you so much for listening to this conversation with Ligia Bouton. Stay subscribed for season two in the new year. In the meantime, please take care. Bye.