

**A Conversation between  
Dr Sarah R Key & Prof David Manley  
8<sup>th</sup> June 2010**

**DJ:** Can you tell me about *The Archaeology of Warren's and Other Habitats*?

**SK:** The idea for the title came originally from a book called *The Archaeology of Rabbit Warrens* which is a factual book about the history of rabbit behaviour and the changing relationship between human beings and rabbit keeping in the UK. My interest in it as a title that has been adopted and transformed is as a starting point or opening for creativity - and this feeds into a multi faceted set of relationships and ideas. Firstly, the suggestive qualities of what 'an Archaeology' of a world inhabited by something 'other' might be. The term 'other' for me certainly allows for an imaginative opening for the anthropomorphic creatures that inhabit the paintings to start to take shape. In this sense the paintings become *another habitat*; an embodiment if you like of how the imagination itself is also *another habitat*. So there is a poetic feel to the way I try to take an idea and let it develop in an intuitive and open way to allow new and different images to emerge. Secondly, there is the word and idea of archaeology itself: Meaning the study of past human societies by their material remains - and what I really like is the suggestive qualities of transplanting such a homocentric scientific activity onto an imaginative, irrational and psychological landscape: Painting. Content in painting is fundamentally a process of excavation and display, not unlike archaeology. Finally there is the wordplay that relates to both a sense of place and a sense of identity in the positioning of an apostrophe in changing *Warrens* to *Warren's*. *Warren* (like *Walter* in the *Walter's Attic* body of work) becomes a character with whom I can begin to form an imaginative relationship. I find this incredibly helpful to the creative process.

**DJ:** The painting *Nellie and Julie* seems to relate to the earlier work in *Walter's Attic*. Can you tell us about them and what is happening in this picture?



Sarah R Key, *Nellie and Julie*, 2010, acrylic on canvas, 152.4X121.9cm

**SK:** This painting is taken from a photograph, of two dogs on a stage wearing capes, which captured my imagination because of its absurdity. I have placed them into the formal space of a painting. Nellie is in a state of carefree abandon; Julie is afraid, cautious and quite rightly reticent. She appears to me to be looking out at a world that doesn't make any sense and is certainly not rooting for her. This is a good example of my work in the sense that it is a picture that is not without humour, but is also not a happy picture. That's kind of where the work is at in essence; attempting to absorb, transform and regurgitate the absurdities of life. But most importantly the paintings fundamentally don't trust human beings to deliver this message. Anthropomorphically, I like the idea of an ostensibly human ethical code being transplanted into the beings that inhabit the paintings, staring out of the pictures through *their* eyes – quite often in a somewhat accusatory manner. So the dreamlike quality of the paintings also has a political foundation that underpins and motivates them.

**DJ:** Tell me about the three portraits we can see: Who are they, and can you tell us something about how they relate to one another?



From Left to Right: Sarah R Key: *Harrowdown Hill*; *If We Were Boys*; *Down the Liffey*: Each made 2010, 122 x 91 cm, acrylic on canvas

**SK:** These paintings have moved on a step from using found images of characters from another time, whether that's the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century or an earlier period: Although the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century has a particular resonance for me because of Modernism. These pictures feature the bodily forms of James Joyce and Franz Kafka as young boys, and then to upset the method a little, a fictional image from the cover of the novel *Austerlitz* by W G Sebald. Obviously these choices are not accidental and carry with them rich seams of content and association. I like the idea of the author becoming entwined in the character of the work they make; of authors who are inseparable somehow from what their work comes to represent. And whilst literature per se is not a major influence on the work (if not only because I am not a great reader) it is a huge inspiration for how concepts can become narratives, embodying notions of creativity that transcend the boundaries of fiction and autobiography. The common themes for me are those of transformation, memory and melancholia. I conceived of these three pictures as a triptych I suppose, but as each picture developed it became apparent that as individual paintings they needed certain things to happen within them in order to be self sufficient. It's important that with most of the paintings there are ideas raised by their internal relationships that involve the viewer in asking questions rather than being given an answer. So there is a deliberate and evocative openness to what the pictures are asking. Ultimately I hope that they have some sense of timelessness about them.