

T H R O U G H A N
A R T I S T ' S E Y E :

**F E L I C I A B R O W N E
& T H E S P A N I S H
C I V I L W A R**

An exhibition of paintings and poetry responding to
the life and work of British artist Felicia Browne.

Through An Artist's Eye creative collaboration:
Sonia Boué - visual artist, and **Jenny Rivarola** - poet.
Including a commissioned work by artist **Katie Taylor**.

Curator: **Sarah Mossop**.

Academic partner: **Professor Tom Buchanan**.

Funded by Arts Council England, and supported by **Instituto Cervantes London** and **Surrey County Council**, with additional support from **All Saints Weston**, **Cañada Blanch Centre**, **International Brigade Memorial Trust**, **Marx Memorial Library**, and **Tate Britain**.

Copies of original works kindly donated by **Jim Sproule** (son of **Elizabeth Watson**) and **Deborah Sproule**.

Design: **Nick Wood**.

Photography: **Philip King**.

FELICIA BROWNE :

THROUGH AN ARTIST'S EYE

In the summer of 1936 Felicia Browne undertook a fateful road trip to Spain, arriving on the eve of the Civil War. A committed anti-fascist, she enrolled in the Republican militia to join in the defence of Spain against Franco's military coup. Tragically, she was to lose her life on her first mission: in coming to the aid of a fallen comrade she succumbed to enemy fire.

She is notable as the first British combatant to die in this conflict, and as its only British female fighter.

She was also an alumna of the Slade School of Art.

Her close friend and fellow artist, Elizabeth Watson - and later the Sproule family - became the guardians of Felicia's letters and drawings.

Through An Artist's Eye honours Felicia's memory and introduces audiences to the history, drawing on surviving letters and her sketches of the period.



Katie Taylor
Inert, 2016
merino wool and salt
8 x 6 inches

C O N C E P T

Felicia's artistry flourished amidst the chaos of those early days in Spain. She captured vivid portraits of civilian life and militias on the Spanish streets on the eve of war. Her drawing practice was a constant in her life, while her sculpture practice appears to have been less so. A graphite pencil or charcoal stick would have been infinitely more portable and accessible to a busy and well-travelled activist than a sculptor's tools.

The volume and quality of the surviving sketches show us that her political engagement didn't diminish this aspect of her creativity. Deeply conflicted about her creative purpose, she famously chose activism above her own professional development as an artist - yet her drawings demonstrate her commitment to her craft and her remarkable eye.

Jenny Rivarola and **Sonia Boué** are daughters of Spanish Republican exiles and bring their own legacy to the project. Arriving at a series of **seven key stages** - which mark Felicia's origins, her politicisation and her trajectory to Spain - they have created paintings and poems which guide the viewer on a multi-layered narrative journey.

Sonia Boué makes close reference to the sketches, and uses Felicia's materials - graphite and charcoal - on painted boards to evoke the energy of her lines. A number of paintings contain visual 'quotations', transposing and interpreting directly from this rich primary source material.

Jenny Rivarola draws on the sense of character and drama in Felicia's writing. Exuberant and learned - Felicia's own poetic sensibility and erudition have proved inspiring. Jenny's influences for the work include poet and Republican icon Federico García Lorca. Phrases and allusions from the letters are incorporated in the poems.

Textile artist **Katie Taylor** works with traces of memory and loss. Her piece for the show draws on the final known photograph of Felicia taken before her departure for Spain.

SARAH MOSSOP

CURATOR'S VIEW OF A CREATIVE COLLABORATION

For me, curating an exhibition is an intuitive and creative process in itself. There are deliberations about spacing the artwork, decisions about the scale and style of text, allowances made for light and shade, concerns about being respectful to the content and consideration of how the exhibition will impact on the viewer. Most importantly in the case of this exhibition, there has been the added dimension of making decisions collaboratively to ensure the artist and the poet are satisfied that the resulting exhibition presents their work sympathetically. Of course, they could have done it for themselves, but often another 'eye' sees things from a new and enhancing perspective.

Through *An Artist's Eye*, the exhibition and wider project, presents a fresh viewpoint into the life and work of Felicia Browne through Sonia Boué and Jenny Rivarola's meticulous research, culminating in an act of homage in paintings that incorporate significant objects, poems and events.

Presenting work of this kind in a church (a place dedicated to someone who died for others), at least in its first public showing, has the added poignancy of being a celebration of another life sacrificed, in this case for a commitment to social justice.

In researching Felicia Browne's work, and seeing at first hand her accomplished sketches, many made in charcoal, Sonia has been inspired to extend her own technical range by using charcoal on top of paint, echoing Felicia's mark-making.

The idea of an echo recurs throughout the exhibition: in the structure of responding to Felicia's life in seven stages; in the pairing of poems and paintings; in the referencing of imagery from Felicia's drawings in Sonia's paintings and her choice of objects for the assemblage element; in the sourcing of descriptions from her letters in Jenny's words. A parallel and compelling narrative emerges, and one that draws attention to an overlooked artist, at the same time as bringing new audiences to a contemporary creative collaboration.

SONIA BOUÉ

ARTIST'S PROCESS

Felicia Browne has caused something of a revolution in my artistic practice. My work is usually abstract, but a close study of her sketches inspired me to explore new ground. Mesmerised by the fluidity of Felicia's lines and her ability to conjure a portrait from a rapid sequence of gestures, I was drawn to make allusions between her works and her life. For example, her study of a nude (1928) could 'stand in' for Felicia as a witness to the rise of fascism in Berlin - as well as make reference to her sculpture practice. The reworking of original studies has been a way of 'getting to know' her artistically speaking. My work on the paintings for the project has often felt like a conversation across time.

Paintings for the earlier of our seven stages are relatively controlled analytical pieces. By stage 4/ Paris, my sense of Felicia nearing the tumult of war is reflected in looser brushstrokes and a greater reliance on texture and abstraction. In the later panels, I focus on the emotional landscape revealed in Felicia's letters, while also making reference to her Spanish sketches in stages 6/Barcelona, and 7/Tardienta.

I was greatly encouraged by the opportunity to hold an exhibition of process works at my studios in Oxford. Felicia proved a compelling figure for viewers, and it has been tremendously enriching for me to work so closely with her drawings and letters in collaboration with Jenny Rivarola.

JENNY RIVAROLA

A BRIEF GUIDE TO THE POEMS

In writing this collection, I drew on Felicia's honest and startling letters from England, Paris and Spain - in which she provides great insight into her state of mind at key moments of her life.

I chose the quotes (all from the letters) at the top of each poem to provide an extra dimension - so that you, as readers, can hear the voice of Felicia coming through.

In most poems I have used the first person - with some poetic licence - to imagine what may have been her attitude to the events unfolding around her. In the first (Milbourne Pond) and part of the second (Berlin), before we really know Felicia, I have used the second person. And the final poem, which describes the afternoon of her death, is entirely in third person - presenting the scene in a more distant way.

Pointers to each poem:

1/ Milbourne Pond - reflections from contemporary Weston Green, linking what was going on around me with thoughts of Felicia's birth, rebellious nature and untimely death.

2/ Berlin - setting the context for her years studying sculpture in the city, during which she developed her strong political convictions.

3/ London - as a scullion, she encouraged her fellow workers to fight for their rights.

4/ Paris - reflecting her disorientation when left alone to wander the streets on Bastille Day.

5/ Border - linking her feelings of trepidation on arrival in a new country, with her frequent discomfort beside travelling companion Edith Bone.

6/ Barcelona - describing the prevalingly optimistic mood in the city as war breaks out and her frustration at having to wait for a role.

7/ Tardienta - drawing on Lorca's *Llanto por Ignacio Sánchez Mejías* in which he records the death of a bullfighter at five in the afternoon. Accounts suggest Felicia's party set off at two, so I have exercised poetic licence in keeping this time throughout the poem for greater dramatic impact.

SEVEN STAGES

1/ Milbourne Pond

Felicia was born in Thames Ditton, London in February 1904, and the family home The Elms still stands, overlooking Milbourne Pond. Inspired by this picturesque and tranquil location we considered the juxtaposition of Felicia's birthplace with that of the chaotic tumult of her death in Spain. In the painting for this stage, *Birthplace of a Rebel*, Sonia Boué suggests an innate quality in Felicia, determining many of her life choices.

2/ Berlin

Sessions at the Slade School of Art (1921-1928), were followed by a period of time in Berlin studying sculpture and stone carving (1928-c.1932). This marked a seminal moment in her political awakening. Here, she witnessed the rise of Nazism, which proved a profoundly disturbing and decisive experience. She later maintained her links with Berlin and supported Jewish refugees in flight from Nazi Germany.

3/ London

Felicia left her work and tools behind her in Berlin when she returned to London, and became involved in anti-fascist activities through membership of the Communist Party. She also maintained a studio in Billericay and struggled to resolve a creative conflict. Felicia's principles didn't allow her to use her creativity to "hack for £s" as she put it, but she was yet to find her artistic identity.

Her abiding interest in working people is reflected in the studies which appear in her sketchbooks as early as 1925. Before leaving for Spain she took a job as a 'scullion' in a tea-shop. Appalled at the long hours and poor working conditions of the women workers, she attempted to improve their lives through unionisation.

4/ Paris

In July 1936, Felicia and her friend Edith Bone (a fellow communist) set off on a car journey via Paris to Spain, under the surveillance of MI5. Felicia was reported to have been wearing a "grey costume and a black beret."

Tensions in the friendship emerged, and Edith abandoned Felicia to stay with friends on arrival in Paris. Thus Felicia found herself alone. Her inner turmoil is expressed through the stand-out phrase of her letter from Paris: "I knowing no-one have nothing to do but wander savagely about the place..."

5/ Border

Some days later, they continued their journey across the Pyrenees to Spain (significant as the border over which Republican Spaniards subsequently fled from fascist Spain in February 1939). This stage is key in the history of the conflict. The hairpin bends which characterise the landscape, the claustrophobia of their blue Austin coupé, and Felicia's fear of Edith's "berserk" driving foreshadow the dangers ahead.

Earlier in their journey, their GB plate fell off, but "Ed" simply attached it with a rusty wire. The inevitable occurred and Felicia reports that, once in Spain, Edith "murdered" the car, though the two women were unhurt.

6/ Barcelona

Their arrival in Barcelona in mid-July 1936 coincided with the street fighting that marked the start of the Spanish Civil War. Once more, Edith abandoned Felicia, for the opportunity to act as photojournalist. Insisting that she could "fight as well as any man", Felicia enrolled in the Republican militia. Her final letter reveals her joy at the conviviality of the barracks and at meeting old friends. She had found the longed for opportunity to contribute.

7/ Tardienta

Felicia was killed in August 1936, on a mission to intercept a fascist munitions train on a railway bridge near Tardienta (Aragon). The group was ambushed by fascist fighters, and Felicia was fatally wounded; her selfless impulse in coming forward into enemy fire was to administer first aid to an injured comrade. Her body was never recovered, but her sketches were brought back to England. Her drawings were shown at a memorial exhibition in London in October 1936.

1/ MILBOURNE POND

*“I know what it is to drown in the
well-upholstered family household”*

1

A crow straddles square air around the reeds:
a baby in its paddling pool
looking, making a splash
then repeating.

2

Sky is full of the possibility of summer
and clouds are lace around a pale cot.

3

*On a February day new life
was tucked under an arm,
vulnerable as tomorrow,
tough as the ice on Milbourne Pond.*

4

*You were born too late for leaves,
too soon for catkins
on the oak outside your house.
Always the non-conformist.*

5

Dragonflies leave a bright
streak of themselves above the water:
rebel blue trams
on a circuit of green stations.

6

Two small girls
hide and seek
shrieking in the reedy breeze.
Gypsy. Patsy. Excited by you?

7

A dog like a teddy bear
accompanies a girl with a lead
and a neighbour snips and arranges
a hedge as though it were a child's head.

8

Your iron gate sighs open.
Eyes laugh at the window
as a plane is suddenly diagonal behind the roof
and away to Spain.

9

Black suits with regret in them
float past the camellias
and a magpie descends from a chimney stack
on an invisible zip wire
to watch the funeral.

10

The crow rocks back
and takes off over the oak
as a train moans into Esher station.

11

On a blue plaque Surrey afternoon
it's General Sir John Lambert
they remember
on the house where you were born.



Milbourne Pond. *Birthplace of a Rebel.*

2016

mixed media on board

20 x 24 inches

2/ B E R L I N

*

Great, sinister and fate-heavy
Berlin opens itself.
And you go in.

Steam trains thrust on strong elevations to Potsdam.
End-to-end trams carry agitation
and cigarette smoke to factory gates
wheeled shut
on starving faces of shame.

Where Mies van der Rohe's less is more
in lines and glass – and art
says it like it is or will be, sharp and brutal.

In that erotic capital of contradictions
where Brecht and Grosz hold a mirror:
there – you are sculpting yours.

While mannequins outstare police
polished in their helmets, Aryan
boys are being groomed for jackboots.

Oh yes, those yes men will march
with 'common good' wrapped
in a swastika.
The self-appointed will glide
in shining convoy. German pride has found its host.

And good men in long beards and long coats are fleeing
round corners. Lies are being taken
for truths. And you, preparing yourself.

And in your hand and on your heart:
I am a Communist.

* No letters from Felicia's years in Berlin survive, so I have chosen to leave a blank line here to reflect this



Berlin. *Witness.*
2016
mixed media on board
20 x 24 inches

3/ L O N D O N

*“So much to be done getting the girls
to fight”*

It's Doll, Rose, Kit and Gladys I think of
and young Margery, seventeen,
hands coarse as lobsters –
one on the splintered brush
the other on the filthy rag
bent like stiff crabs looking
for morsels under tin shelves.

It's the sound of crusted pails
edging, scraping the stone
flagged floor I mind –
because I know the five-in-the-morning
pain of pale faces and long labour.

I see sweat on the rim of the kettle
whose song has dried to hoarse
and pouring that scalds
and shouting that scolds.

Yet there's so much to be done and sung for
as we slug and thwack and peel
the skin off spuds

that I, for one, would not be in any other job in the world.



London. *Scullion with a Red Wedge.*

2016

mixed media on board

20 x 24 inches

4/ P A R I S

*“Never go to an entirely foreign city
entirely alone”*

Paris swirls around my head,
a city full of other lonely cities.
And I am less than one left
to wander savagely about the place.

Place Denfert Rochereau is a carousel.
Bastille Day marches to the band
along the rue de l'Arrivée.
Renoir umbrellas are up and down like tuba keys.

I can see the music through the rain
like an impressionist destiny.
But when I ask *What am I?*
the fairground pony only knows to stare
with his glass eye, a rod thrust through his belly.

The pony, the train with no coal,
the car with a siren to nowhere,
make a kaleidoscope of Vlaminck
and an accordion practises richly on my soul.

And behind the weeping glass *Le Monstre*
is a sideshow twitching from his tinny tomb
waiting to expose a ghastly truth –
lonely as a toad with no hole.



Paris. *Wandering Savagely.*
2016
mixed media on board
20 x 24 inches

5/ B O R D E R

“Ed’s immediate proximity destroys any vestige of nerve I may yet possess”

I am her passenger,
our Austin coupé held together
by chicken wire from Calais.

For miles our cock-eyed GB plate
has clung for its life
and hoped for a future.

I am dizzy now, as the wheels
that turn and snake
towards Port Bou.

We have crossed the border –
or she has and I with her,
blinded first by sun-white sea

then by her fury at nothing I can
grasp, devastating and human.
As I blink the sea recedes

and now a hairpin flashes
a spectre of new land in steep
dry tufts and scrub. I know

almost nothing of this place.
What is its tongue? Mine
dares not speak beside so much.



Border. *Criss Cross.*
2016
mixed media on board
20 x 24 inches

6/ B A R C E L O N A

*“For a foreigner existence is suspended
for the time being”*

As men in forage caps
tipped on the side of unshaven heads
go tramping the trenches by Estanco Poblet
something is moving
a movement is smiling

as they play tunes with their rifles
across shoulders
and smiles are imagining
something of greatness
they may carry with them

and Lenin and Stalin are watching
from the Hotel Colón
supervising gatherings of walls
by lottery stands
where something may be won

but never-winning stubs lie
where buses are resting
at odd angles to the advancing street
and cigarettes of chance are being shared
lest something be forgotten

and girls are wondering
at hot windows
and geraniums through railings
are rallying and saluting
then waving away the hot air with *Adiós*.

And I, a foreigner;
am only waiting
and watching the wind passing through the trees
peaceful as hell.



Barcelona. *Street Fighting.*
2016
mixed media on board
20 x 24 inches

7/ T A R D I E N T A

*“No uniforms or rifles so everybody
looks like pirates”*

A stork drifts to a clock tower
somewhere close
and folds its shredded paper
wings, black tipped.
The lands are ready to crack.

An iron bridge threads a railway
to the *Sierra de Alcubierre*
and sees far behind to the plains.
The day is throat-hot. It sticks
at the appointed minute:
at two in the afternoon.

At two in the afternoon
grass is too crisp to send a warning.
Sweat on the living makes rivulets
that are parched on an outbreak.
The *sierra* listens for the engine
at two in the afternoon.

At two in the afternoon
ten hearts forget their rhythm.
At two in the afternoon
the jaundiced plain is breathless.
At two in the afternoon

At two, at two, at two, at two.

In the flash of a crack
and the thought of a pause for a comrade,
came silence
peaceful as blood.

The stork from its tower
is rising, rising, rising.
The *sierra* is a line of bullies
mocking, mocking.

And the only truth is the night will be black
as a sack of coal on the train
that came at two in the afternoon.



Tardienta. *A Bridge Too Far.*
2016
mixed media on board
20 x 24 inches

FURTHER READING AND SOURCES

Professor Tom Buchanan: The Impact of the Spanish Civil War on Britain: War, Loss and Memory
(Sussex, 2007), Chapter 4, The lost art of Felicia Browne.

Tate Britain: online access to the film Felicia Browne: Unofficial War Artist, and the archive
www.tate.org.uk/who-was-felicia-browne

Felicia Browne on Spartacus Educational: an online account of her life, plus primary source material
spartacus-educational.com/WbrowneF.htm

Through An Artist's Eye: online blog artistseyecom.wordpress.com

Sonia Boué: www.soniaboue.co.uk

Jenny Rivarola: www.blurb.co.uk/b/1188023-homecoming

Katie Taylor: www.kmtaylor.co.uk

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My particular thanks also to **Professor Tom Buchanan** for his unstinting and generous help with research for the project from its earliest moments as an idea in embryo, and to **Sarah Mossop** for her ever-keen eye and her supportive and sympathetic style of curation.

Without **Jim and Deborah Sproule**, we would not have been able to bring to light further examples of Felicia's drawings. They have been extremely generous in forwarding scanned images from their collection. Stepping back in time, it is to **Elizabeth Watson**, Felicia's close friend and confidante, that we owe a debt of gratitude for her guardianship of the letters and drawings. Her children, Lin, Felicia and Jim Sproule subsequently carried the baton for Felicia, from whence the Tate Britain Felicia Browne archive derives.

My thanks thus also to **Rebecca Sinker**, Curator of Digital Learning at Tate Britain, for introducing me to the archive and inviting me to take part in the short film, *Felicia Browne: Unofficial War Artist*, part of Tate Britain's *Animating the Archives* series. Our conversation during the making of the film was the genesis of this project.

I've been fortunate in corresponding with **Reverend Peter Marshall** and **Daphne Alcock**,

Felicia's nephew and niece, who have been most generous with their time and interest in the project. They brought a unique personal dimension to our understanding of Felicia and her family.

Artist **Katie Taylor** has been a stalwart - both in administration and design. It's also been a joy to see her commissioned piece for the project growing on the knitting needles, and observe the kernel of an idea come into being as a work of textile art.

Museum Learning Specialist, **Miranda Millward's** early contribution to structuring our Arts Council application was key to a successful outcome, and could provide a gold standard model for access support to neurodivergent artists.

Simon Haynes and **Hugo Tickler**, our filmmakers, have dedicated their time and expertise to the project with grace and immense skill, as has **Nick Wood** in booklet design and **Philip King** in photography. I'm indebted to all four for their unquestioning goodwill.

My final thank you is reserved for my family - in the broadest sense - whose unconditional support for the project has been its bedrock. My father, grandparents and great grandmother - exiled from Spain in February 1939 (at the close of the Civil War) - remain a constant inspiration.

Ours was a history entwined with Felicia's, although it was almost buried and largely unspoken. It's therefore been a great personal privilege to assist in the work of bringing her narrative to public attention through the medium of art.

The project has been most notable in attracting goodwill gestures - I call this the 'Felicia effect'. She was, as her teacher L.S. Stebbing observed, "gifted beyond the ordinary and capable of an unusually selfless love." She has drawn us all in.



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