

Elephant #31

5 Questions with Abigail Reynolds

Text by Robert Shore

When she became the third BMW Art Journey winner last year, Abigail Reynolds decided to use the prize to visit lost libraries on the Silk Road—a journey she undertook mostly on a motorbike. We spoke to her ahead of her new show at Rokeby Gallery in London.

You've been on a bit of a journey recently. Where did you go and why?

I have travelled along the Silk Road, beginning in Xi'an in China and arriving in Italy via Uzbekistan, Iran, Turkey and Egypt. I have been tracing sites of Lost Libraries—great libraries lost over time to conflict, natural disaster and simply time. The oldest of these was lost in 261BCE, and the most recent was burnt during the Arab Spring in 2011. I went because by travel you arrive at many unexpected observations and ruminations, beyond simply contemplating the meaning of a library from the studio. I am a big fan of all that a library stands for, and afraid that we forget how important they have been and still are.

I think you covered some distance on a motorbike. Where did you get the bike(s) and what attracted you to this mode of transport?

My sponsor, BMW, sourced the bikes locally. This was quite complicated, so I rode a motley assortment of bikes, including a World War II Chinese motorbike with a sidecar. I ride to my studio in Cornwall by motorbike, as it's the most efficient way to go along the Zennor road from St Just to St Ives. This practical decision brought me to what it means to ride a motorbike, which is to be intensely in the present, because of your vulnerability, and to have a heightened awareness of your body in the landscape. I wanted that intense and very precise experience as part of my long and arduous journey.

How did you document your travels? Is the trip itself the artwork, a bit like Richard Long?

I do think it's an artwork in itself, though I haven't framed it precisely in that way. I wrote a huge amount as I went, partly to make sense of the strangeness of crossing all those borders. I took with me a 16mm film camera, and I filmed all the sites, even though it meant getting arrested and having a lot of trouble with airport security. I'm working towards a film based on my journey which will be a montage using some of those clips.

How do works such as *Stele II*, included in the Rokeby show, relate to the journey?

In Asia and the Middle East I became intensely aware of screens. These took the form of barriers and gates, which I often had to circumvent, but also are an architectural feature, fitted over the windows, as modesty screens for women to look out to the street. The *Stele* works relate to this, and my general experience of destabilization on the road. The work contains two-way-mirror sections so the front and behind are confused with each other. The circular blanks refer directly, for me, to the missing papyri scrolls, rolled and stored in a latticework rather like *Stele II*, but as all the papyri from Herculaneum are carbonized and cannot be read, they remain as imaginative spaces to project into. Screens are always about projection.

What was the best—or most unexpected—part of your journey?

I fell off my Beemer on a mountain pass above Ephesus in Turkey and immediately went into a little private hammam to recover from the shock. Sometimes the hardest parts of any experience are also those heightened moments where you encounter something that is beyond the ordinary.

'Abigail Reynolds: Lost Libraries' runs at Rokeby Gallery, London, until 21 July. All images courtesy ROKEBY, London, copyright the artist. rokebygalleries.com



Magic Mountain, 2011–17 Birch plywood, coloured glass, book pages, 39 books, and leather and felt pad, 139 x 120 x 64 cm



Teaching a Stone to Talk, 1988, 2017 Endpaper, 19 x 12.5 cm



Stele II, 2016 Steel, acrylic and two-way mirror, 190 x 106.5 x 106 cm Edition of 3



Ephesus, Greece



The Helan Mountains near Yinchuan, China