



## Esther Rolinson: Artist

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Esther Rolinson makes remarkable light installations which have been shown national and internationally<sup>1</sup>. In 2016, she won the Lumen Prize Sculpture & 3D Award<sup>2</sup> and 1<sup>st</sup> prize at Art CHI Exhibition<sup>3</sup> for 'Flown' a cloud-like form made up of over 800 hand folded acrylic pieces illuminated with moving lights, developed in collaboration with artist researcher technologist Sean Clark<sup>4</sup>. At the heart of her creative practice is drawing itself from which sculptural works emerge into subtle and complex shapes<sup>5</sup>. The exhibition *Gravitate*<sup>6</sup> provided insight into her drawing practice illustrated by quickly rendered sketches to meditative works and large-scale drawings. The relationship between drawing and sculptural form is essential to the nature of the light and movement elements in the works. Her signature is clearly visible in the striking combinations of animated light which, with each iteration, over time, present the viewer with stimulating experiences that dwell in the mind long after the event. In the drawing process, she explores sensations, structures, movements and connections. She uses simple combinations of lines in repetition to build up complex forms. Her construction rules are a method of disassociating from conscious thoughts and allowing spatial patterns and movements to emerge. Her creative process moves through felt experience, into drawing, and eventually into three dimensional structures in varied combinations of materials. Digital technologies are a core part of her materials: the movement is created through animated light. She has always ranged through many different mediums from drawing and photography to sculpture and performance and digital technologies were a natural extension of this.

Esther's drawings and sculptural installations are systems of forms and movements that employ digital technology to realise her vision for the final works. Because she recognises the value of collaboration to her art, she is continually in dialogue with other artists, architects and lighting designers as well as computer programmers. In the 1990s, Esther joined the COSTART project<sup>7</sup> and in this emerging art-tech arena, she evolved an approach to digital technologies in her art which has continued to this day. She was quick to recognize how the sensitive nature of programming could be used to control light and movement and collaborated with a team of technologists in the design and construction of the system necessary to realise her artistic vision. The concepts and technological solutions were arrived at through a collaborative process in which hand drawings, computer generated images and prototype lighting behaviour interfaces played key roles<sup>8</sup>.

As an artist seeking new challenges, her ideas and outcomes feel ever fresh. What stands out is the consistency of her practice and the total coherence of the artworks that emerge. That process is open and exploratory, a continual search for the exact structure and materials to make extraordinarily evocative sculptural forms combining movement with light. Her drawing in particular involves a high degree of preparatory reflection-*for* action structured approaches that enable her to follow through in a fluid manner during the execution itself. Her interview below touches on these and other aspects of her reflective practice and the role of collaboration.

### Interview

*Q: Can you say something about your past and current creative work?*

E: I have always made things. A key moment was in finding my practice again as my children were growing. I had just two hours a week to myself. Time was so precious. I took away all the rules and expectations. I started with a little bundle of stones that Leon, my son, had given to me from the beach. I threw them on the plate and drew them and the next week I threw them again and so on. I worked with them in Photoshop and saw them as shapes and forms. They became the pieces 'Splinter and Thread'. I can see now that I was using a system to guide myself back into my work.

*Q: Do you have any sense of where the seed of a completely new idea comes from and what is coming next?*

E: I can't identify a seed for an idea as essentially all the works are part of a continuous path. My experience is that each wave of work comes from my whole self. In this I include my thoughts, memories, emotions and physicality. It is as if new work hovers in me for some time, maybe years, before I make it. When I do I use all the tools available to manifest it. I draw, think, make and discuss. I act out the work and see what happens!

*Q: What kind of materials do you prefer to use?*

I do not have a loyalty to any particular material, my approach is to find the best fit for each work. I try out all kinds of things to find out how they function. There is an effect or sensation that I'm trying to achieve and I am drawn towards a material that expresses that. This might be consciously or quite instinctively. I often buy bits and pieces of materials that I like but have no use for. When I feel that this material is right then perhaps it is the thing that starts to influence other aspects of the work. In any work, I find that something just lands as a fixed point. It might be a measurement or a material or something like that but it is something that is difficult to 'get around' and then it starts to mould the rest of the landscape.

Over the past couple of years my practice has become clearer to me. The work starts in drawings. Some are very measured, others are instinctive. In the drawings, I am uncovering structures and movements and at a certain point there is a clear place or object I can see to make. Then it moves into a different phase where I take the work out into the world. I need others skills to do this so there is always a collaborative relationship or team of people to negotiate. This expands the work to go beyond my own boundaries. I have started some new drawing. There is a comfort in paper and pencil after the intensity of making an installation and collaboration. I started drawing something and had a strong sensation of what I it was going to be, but what came out on the paper was completely different and I was surprised about that. When I have completed it I often recognise it to be an event or experience that I have had that has been transformed into an object. This is not premeditated and I do not know what will come next.

*Q: Why was it surprising to you?*

E: I was playing with an idea of what I want to make next and started to draw but it was not what I expected. I felt like the work was teaching me and that I had to let go of my ambition to achieve something. The work teaches you about itself and perhaps to let go of expectation. I try not to predict what will happen and wait for structures and patterns to emerge. To do this I have to quieten my mind.

*Q: Did you become aware of this surprise in the work afterwards or during the drawing itself?*

E: I had a sensation of wanting to draw this very 'softly' thing...very soft. Even the way I draw it, I sit close up against the paper on the wall, it's very quiet. I was going to draw very fluid shapes but they weren't at all and I started thinking this is something different. Sometimes I would say I am drawing sensations and following them rather than leading. I might even start with the conscious decision to use a method that repeats, but gradually conscious thoughts about people and all sorts of other things pass through and seem more distant. It's as if I am listening to them in an upstairs room.

*Q: Let's take the drawing: Do you consciously think about it in a reflective way?*

E: Initially, I allow myself to draw instinctively. As the work develops I start to reflect on it but from lots of different disjointed perspectives at the same time. Some might be practical about possible materials for instance or ways structures fit together and also sensations and memories. It is as if I am inside a puzzle and there cannot be coherent reflection until it is over and I am viewing it from a distance. Perhaps some parts of the process do not immediately benefit from scrutiny. As if too much attention will shape them before they come into existence. There is always time to ask why later and experiments that don't work are obvious. I find this more difficult in commissioned work as the reasoning is required up-front and that, for me, is creatively incoherent, it's a pressure.

*Q: Would you say that typically you reflect during the process?*

E: There's reflection when I set up a repetitive drawing and I question 'is this working? If I'm happy with it, I try to stop thinking and sink into the process. There is reflection up to a certain point then 'go with it'. There is also practical reflection: for example, I am doing a big pastel drawing...I have done a metre of it and I have decided the paper is too 'slippy' and I don't think it will stick to the paper so I'm not

going to carry on. Some things are difficult technically and require proper concentration. I might do a difficult drawing for a while and feel I can't do any more but instead of stopping I'll move on to an easy drawing. I generally feel the best forward is to treat them all as just a process, then at the end ask 'what do you think of this?' I ask my trusted people what they think and I get one or two comments. It does spur me on.

As my drawing process develops I notice different types of works. Some are measured and require concentrated effort. When I am setting these up I might try several different rules or techniques to establish a system of work and I'm reflecting very actively. When I can see the system works then I reflect less and sink into a more meditative process. Other drawings are easy and instinctive. I might use them to figure something out or simply as an activity to do in between working on the more difficult pieces. I also use these drawings as a way to settle my mind and come into a non-verbal space.

*Q: Are you aware of a viewer during your work?*

E: There is always a person that I am imagining or waiting for... someone coming along in the future to see what I am making them. This question also makes me consider why I make art. I am communicating in a way that I hope wakes up and speaks to senses in the viewer. I am sharing my sensed experience and am convinced that this is a common language that we have. I feel connected to them through the act of making. The audience seeing the work completes the process. This motivates me to find places of all kinds to exhibit my work.

*Q: Do you seek 'success' in any way?*

E: Sometimes I feel in a dilemma about the success I imagine. I want it and I know people enjoy the work but there is always the possibility of success or failure in the eyes of the viewer so it doesn't make any difference to the sense of success in me. The satisfaction in making work happens while you are doing it.

*Q: Would you say that you take risks?*

E: I take risks in numerous ways. I find being an artist requires the risk of sharing my personal self. Then there are everyday creative risks, perhaps to continue into a work to understand more although it ruins what you have already done, or to use a material in an unusual way. In making larger scale works there are practical risks when all the elements are brought together in the installation. I minimise these by testing out every aspect I can and planning. I walk through the process in my mind, the order of events and clarity about each person's role is important. Every installation, however rehearsed, will require responsive action and negotiation. It is important to have someone with me who knows my plan and helps to ensure everything is being carried out. I find an interesting relationship to risk in work made using a system. To use a system directs the possibilities, but it does not limit them. I find using a system serves to contain the experience of risk whilst paradoxically allowing me to take them.

I also experience risk in collaboration as I move from the security of total ownership into the tantalising expansion of the work through dialogue. The latter wins. I feel the risk is the trust in other people to bring what you've asked them to bring. There's risk in allowing them into your process and sharing with them. I feel like that is a risky sort of business and you've got to be prepared to give something away as well. I have collaborated with lots of people, much more before these recent pieces of work and with some people you can be really open hearted and they probably feel the same. You are reflective of each other I would say. But occasionally you can be open hearted and somebody else will just take most likely innocently because they are driven in their own process.

I have always worked with other people so I've needed to develop my approach; If I view the shared territory as a finite space then it becomes a battle ground, I can win but I, and most likely the work, are diminished by the process. If I view the shared territory as infinite then every outcome is possible and all ambitions can be met. I extend this concept to include to the audience. The work is an invitation to them to take up their creative ground.

*Q: Is collaboration with others important to you?*

To use programming like many other materials I need to collaborate. I work with other practitioners including manufacturers, artists, consultants and programmers. The dialogue can be on different levels and time spans. When I visit a factory or workshops I often meet skilled makers and thinkers. Creativity is in so many processes, but not necessarily recognised. I relish the moments discussing how to use tried

and tested skills, perhaps slightly differently. If the other person is curious and willing it is our shared enquiry that achieves the work. Collaboration can lead to the physical, technical and conceptual expansion of the work. There is risk in negotiating all kinds of things. It is not possible to predict how this will play out. The questions must always be: 'what does the work need?' not 'what is best for me?'

My experience is that I am not diminished by connection and there is no real loss of my creative space. If there is conflict I can negotiate or walk away and make something else. It is not possible to take art from me as a person, it exists in me. In my current collaboration with Sean Clark we are exploring our mutual interest in complex interconnected systems. Our current work is in deciphering movement patterns inside the drawings that can be brought back into physical objects through light movements. We have mutual interest viewed from different perspectives so we fit together well. At the same time our collaboration calls for 'right' boundaries where we identify our differences and work in our own creative practices to their fullest extent. For our overall system of collaboration to exist we must maintain our own core. I learn from the recognition of ideas in conversation and I hope to have a deeper understanding. I have also learnt to recognise the collaborative dialogue as only one aspect of a much larger field of work.

The collaboration requires you to 'step outside'. I feel that my part of the work is largely made in isolation through drawing. From there I project what it might become and develop an ambition for how this might happen. When I have carried out all that I can myself, I then engage with others. However, in working with Sean there is more cross over there is a more fluid sphere of influence I carry out the drawing process on my own but I am listening to many external influences from inside my own creative space. I see our conversation and the exchange in the hinterland between two private worlds. The desire to create immersive experiences brings me into collaborations. I have a drive to absorb the audience in the 'drawing' space with me, to envelop them in the experience. I aim to bypass decision making and thought so the viewer might float in the work like a river. The installations I make require such a variety of skills that I could not construct them alone. When the work is complete, I try to step away to allow them their space. The process for me is over and the work is no longer mine. There is a theory called 'relationship as teacher'. The premise is that the nature of the relationship teaches what you most need to learn and how to proceed in the relationship. I think this is a very good way to approach collaboration. Rather than pushing for a desired outcome you see what emerges. It may not be what you expect or find comfortable but it also might lead you to go beyond what you could foresee.

*Q: Is collaboration necessary for the digital technology side of your art?*

E: Digital technologies have been part of my practice from the outset. In the first instance, I am an end user of software to manipulate still and moving images. To use programming like many other materials I need to collaborate. I see digital technologies as the material that can communicate complexity. My aim is to find a subtle movement language derived from the instinctive rhythms and geometries in my drawings. In exploring physical sensations through drawings, I hope to reveal orders and patterns that can be sensed by the body. Programming has the potential to translate and evolve these patterns into behaviours to control light movements. Many philosophies point out that it is our entire experience that effects and is intricately connected to the physical world and that these connections are in constant motion. I see digital technologies as the fluid material that reflects this.

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1 <http://www.estherrolinson.co.uk/portfolio.html>

2 Lumen Prize Sculpture & 3D Award: <https://lumenprize.com/newsarticle/2016-lumen-winners-announced>

3 ArtCHI Award: <http://www.estherrolinson.co.uk/wordpress/flown-at-art-chi-2016/>

4 Sean Clark: <http://www.seanclark.me.uk>

5 Rolinson, E. (2018). (2<sup>nd</sup> Edition). Drawing Spaces. In *Explorations in Art and Technology*, Springer-Verlag Cultural Computing Series, pp 319-326.

6 Gravitare: <https://www.watermans.org.uk/new-media-arts-archive/exhibition-gravitare-by-esther-rolinson/>

7 COSTART: <http://lindacandy.com/COSTART/pdfFiles/COSTARToverview.pdf>

8 Candy, L. (2018). Making Light Sculptures in Suspended Space: A Creative Collaboration. In Candy, L., Edmonds, E.A. & Poltronieri, F.A. (eds). *Explorations in Art and Technology*, Springer-Verlag Cultural Computing Series, second edition, pp 309-318.