

**Dulwich Picture Gallery Youth Volunteer Interpretation Programme
Creative Conversation Transcript for *Reframed: The Woman in the Window*. 2 March 2021**



Discussing: Catherine Caroline Cathinka Engelhart, *The Artist in her Studio*, 1894

Photograph © Matthew Hollow

Participants

Jemima

Evan

Facilitator

(Facilitator)

Okay, so what's going on in this painting?

(Jemima)

Well, there's a, presumably a young lady. Who's an artist I'm assuming, and she's just created a piece of artwork over women's body. And I, I don't know, maybe she's analyzing her results or what she'd like to add to her. I'm not too sure.

(Facilitator)

What do you see that makes you say that she is an artist?

(Jemima)

I mean, she's in an art room and I can't really see what she's holding, but it looks like maybe she's making notes upon her art. I, I don't really know, but yeah. And I think she's wearing like, like clothes, which she'd wear maybe in that day and age, which you wanna get like dirty or you'd like to like use to do like creative work or something.

(Facilitator)

Okay. Thank you. And you mentioned the day and age, so, what do you mean when you say that?

(Jemima)

Assuming that like the 20 or 19th century? So I don't think she'd have, like, as like artists wear like jumpsuits or like clothing, which like can easily get mucky, but I think because she's a woman, she has to wear a dress and it has to be appropriate for the, social conventions at the time.

(Facilitator)

Thank you. Right. So, I'm just gonna paraphrase. So Jemima has identified this figure as potentially an artist because of the space and feeling that this space that she's within is an art studio. And you felt that she had sort of possibly just finished composing a work and that she was possibly sort of analyzing it or potentially writing notes because of what she's holding. You're unsure kind of what exactly she is doing, but thinking possibly sort of writing notes and you're placing this maybe in the 19th, 20th century and, you're saying that's based on the clothing that she's wearing and mentioning also that this sort of covering, so again, sort of feeding into this idea that she's an artist.

(Jemima)

Yeah, I'd also like to add, it's quite contrasting that if she has created this piece of artwork or a naked women's body, she's opposing that by wearing such like conservative clothing and meeting society's expectations of her, where she's like creating a complete opposite of what society would've thought as normal.

(Facilitator)

Okay. Thank you. So you are looking specifically kind of this, this figure of being a woman maybe at that time, thinking the social conventions of 19th, 20th century, which you, you feel that this is probably representing and the contrast between, the sort of naked form female form that she's possibly painted, alongside sort of how conservative is that the word you used? How conservative her dress is to meet the sort of norms of the time. Okay. Thank you.

(Evan)

My first reaction was that, was not that the lady was the artist. I think the artist would be someone else I picked up on that sort of contrast as well, with the painting of the naked or the nude woman and the lady. And I don't think that she would sort of be painting that and you sort of see the artist's coat or something draped back of the chair there. So I think the artist is outside of the painting and then this woman has maybe she's the model, maybe she's, an assistant and she's reading the letter or writing notes and has the window to help her see and illuminate the page.

(Facilitator)

Thank you. Okay. So we've got a different view here potentially. And you were saying the sort of first idea was that, that she wasn't the artist and that you feel that possibly the artist is outside the frame and you identified the, sort of this, this piece of clothing here as being maybe associated, and maybe a nod to the fact that the artist is, is elsewhere. You were also kind of similar to Jemima, looking at the contrast between the, the naked female form and the clothed figure here. And your idea is about who this might be, possibly an assistant. And that she is again, agreeing, possibly writing notes. And you have sort of drawn attention to the window, this large window in this space clearly providing enough illumination, for the studio. Okay. Thank you. So we've got different ideas here and what more can we find?

(Jemima)

I was gonna add to the window, half the windows are closed and the woman is like facing away from it. And then the previous artwork that we looked at, the woman in that painting, she was facing out into the, into the window. And I thought that it could also like represent kind of like the freedom that women had at the time and how like, back then women wouldn't have been able to be like free in the world and have jobs that they wanted and do things that they wanted to do. Whereas, because the piece of artwork that we looked at was made recently, or I don't know, the past, like 50 years or something, that woman was able to like have that freedom and be able to like, do what she wants with like limitations cause of the glass. Um, and so, yeah, I just picked up on that.

(Evan)

I like that idea. I think the idea of restrictions is quite interesting with the window. You've got that sort of curtain draped over the bottom part of the panes. And so I think that might be to stop people looking in as well. So it's to lessen the light in, but you can't really see through this window because the bottom part is blocked.

(Jemima)

Yeah. I was gonna come to that. Yeah. Because like, if she was the artist, what she's kind of doing, would've been like painting the naked woman

would've been quite controversial. And if people were gonna look in, they'd be like, oh, what's she doing? And so like maybe her covering, it could have been like an artist technique in general, but it could also mean maybe she doesn't want people to be like observing what she's doing. Cause she knows that maybe it's not like accepted as much.

(Facilitator)

Okay. So thank you both. So Evan, you sort of picked up on the idea of windows as remind me what you said about that windows as barriers?

(Evan)

Yeah. So it's to lessen the light in. But you can't really see through this window because the bottom part is blocked.

(Facilitator)

Yeah. Okay. So you've sort of picked out on this, this, covering at the bottom, base of the window and kind of this idea that, potentially you were saying Jemima, that it's there sort of more in a way, not to, for privacy of nude, but you are thinking possibly in terms of people outside questioning this, the female artist sort of painting something or the word used was controversial, the nude figure. And that, kind of curtain could be sort of hiding that. Yeah. Okay. So this idea of a window being...

(Jemima)

Like a restriction, I guess. Yeah. Cause I guess it's like a barrier from like the outside world and I think the window could like represent like this woman in the future would have those rights, I guess, and to do what she wants, but at the minute, because of the curtain, it's kind of restrained from her and she's not able to do what she wants.

(Facilitator)

Okay. So thinking about the representation of what this curtain could mean within a window, the possibilities, but the, for this woman at this time there's restrictions. Okay. Thank you. What more can we find?

(Evan)

You have the rest of presumably the artist paintings as well as one propped up there against the plant and also, in the back wall, there's a few, but you can't sort of make out any detail because the light is shining towards us. So the light from the window still blocking all that out. I mean, if we were saying about stopping people, seeing the nude figure, perhaps it's a bit ironic that the light from the window is exactly what's illuminating the picture of the nude, but we can't see the other paintings around. It's just our focus is on the nude as well as, as well as the woman writing in the window. Yeah.

(Facilitator)

Okay. So you've identified again, this idea that this is a studio identified further sort of painting is one propped up here, some up against the wall and the sort of irony of this, this idea of the sort of privacy of this window, the curtain on the window stopping outside, seeing the potential nude model all and the irony that actually it's the light from that exact window that is illuminating exactly that, that painting and that nude model, within this space. Yeah.

(Jemima)

There's also like quite a lot of plants around and I think like plants have like an association of like flourishing and growth and stuff like that. So maybe this is a space that the woman feels like she can grow in and like express what she really wants to do.

(Evan)

I'm not sure that the plants would grow that much if the windows so covered up, like it is at the moment. So, um, I don't know, these seem to be quite large plants that need quite a lot of light, especially the one in the foreground there. Um, so maybe the window's more open sometimes or the artist taking some Liberty in, in the depiction. Yeah.

(Facilitator)

Okay. So you are sort of wondering how well plants more survive in this space, ice considering sort of how dark it is because of the, light's kind of, restricted by the, we're not sure what this is, shutter, drape, and the sort of lower curtain. And wondering if that window is more open sometimes

or not, or it's simply the artist sort of adding in. So what did you say?
Creative license. Yeah.

(Evan)

Artists doing, taking their own Liberty and yeah.

(Facilitator)

Yeah. By sort of putting in the, the plants. Yeah. Okay. All right. What do we think this figure might be thinking about?

(Jemima)

Probably what she's doing at the moment. She like seems quite concentrated in, I'm not sure. I dunno what she's doing, but whatever she's doing, I think she seems quite concentrated. And like, she's like leaning on a surface, which like, I guess, shows that like, if she wasn't, if she was doing something, which was gonna be quite quick and like simple, she'd probably just stand or just, yeah, just stand and then quickly do it and then move on but because she's like chosen to lean. She needs to be comfortable, which shows that she'll be there for a long period of time doing what she's doing and because she's facing the artwork, she's probably just like analyzing it and maybe like the artist who painted this only caught her when she was looking down when she might have been looking up, like doing something else.

(Evan)

I agree. I think she's concentrated because she's facing away from the window. I think if the artist wanted to portray her more absentmindedly, it would be more common to look out of the window, but this interior space, which seems quite serious, you've got the artists, the palette and everything. It just gives an impression of like, severity and like concentration. And because she's facing inwards, looking down, we can't really see her facial expression. So I think the artist wants us to, have our own interpretation really of what she's thinking. But, she's definitely engrossed in, in her task, I think. Yeah.

(Jemima)

I'd also like to add how, there's quite a lot of clutter going on. She's kind of in her own little world while everything around her is very messy, not messy but it's very, like she could be doing something else to tidy the space or add to the room or whatever, because like the cupboard doors open and then the palette at the bottom is like open as well. So I guess what she's doing, it needs a lot of concentration and she doesn't have time to like close the door or tidy anything up.

(Facilitator)

Okay. Thank you. Okay. So thank you both. Back to sort of what you were saying, Evan, you agree that you feel that this is, sort of, she's concentrating. And you mentioned the fact that generally if somebody is sort of not focused on something, can maybe think their thoughts are elsewhere, that they might, and if there was a window that potentially they would be looking out the window and that you feel with the fact that her back has turned to it, that she's focused on, on this task, in front of her and you talked about kind of the, it being a serious space, and, a space for sort of focus. Yeah, perfect. And that you felt that her sort of posture and the fact she's looking down kind of fits in with that too. And then Jemima, you were talking about the fact that there's, it's a bit... disordered?

(Jemima)

Around her, yeah.

(Facilitator)

And you brought attention to the fact that this door is open. The cupboard is open. The sort of the, easel and palette is open too, and that the task that she's focusing on in a way is kind of, she's so focused on it that in a sense, she's not taking care of, maybe, this disorder

(Jemima)

The yeah. And it can also show how she's like, just finished the painting and it's very much like her. Okay. I've just finished my gonna relax now, or I'm gonna carry on with this task and I'll do that later. Or, yeah.

(Evan)

I think the, the sort of clock by her side reinforces that she's sort of timing her or she's keeping an eye on the time it's, it's focused when you're thinking your thoughts. You're not really taking account of the time.

(Jemima)

I mean, if like the clock was maybe next to her on her left side, instead of being on her. Right. I guess it would make more sense because if she was painting it, she'd be looking at the clock, but it'd mean that she'd have to turn around to look at the clock. Maybe it's trying to reinforce her, maybe she intended to, but because she gets so engrossed in her work and her artwork or what she's doing, she tends to not look at the time.

(Facilitator)

Okay. Thank you. So, were sort of, we were kind of, seems like we were sort of talking about this idea of being engrossed in something that, sort of, leaving things undone. And possibly also you talk about kind of, it looks as though this painting maybe has just been finished, is that right? That you, the things are kind of left open because maybe work has just been done. Yeah. And then you sort of brought attention to the clock. And, kind of why this clock is here.

(Evan)

I thought sort of facing inwards towards her, maybe she's looking at it. It seems the fact that it's, there seems she's sort of, sort of conscious of it. And so if, if you have a clock next to you and you are paying attention to what, to the time then that, that suggests you are, you're focused, you are, you're trying to work rather than losing the sense of time.

(Facilitator)

Okay. So this feeling that this represents sort of, a focus that there's something to be done within a certain amount of time.

(Jemima)

Um, I think I do relate to the figure. I think most people would because you are your own person in like a cluttered world, and it's all very confusing, but you're just like doing your own thing without kind of like observing everything that's going around. You obviously you do at some

point, but I think because there's so much, and everyone has like their own lives, you don't really see this significance in the fact that like, you're a singular person and like this whole massive world, there's like so many things going on.

(Facilitator)

Okay. Thank you. So you are saying that you do sort of identify and recognize something about this, this figure and relating it to sort of life now and possibly sort of how it feels sometimes, being a, sort of, a person within a world that is sort of where there is so much going on around you. And maybe that feeling of what that feels like.

(Evan)

Yeah, I think I, I relate to it on emotional level because we all try to concentrate amongst what we have around us. And there are times when we're really like into a task and feeling like we're, we are, we are doing something there, but I dunno this sort of antiquated feel of the painting sort of puts a distance with, between me and the painting, I think. And if we're looking at the window again, I quite like light spaces and to work facing the light rather than away from it. And yeah, I feel a distance, which I think is brought by the time difference in if we were, were speaking about, I think Jemima mentioned that being 20th century 19th, maybe, and our 21st century world, our houses feel quite different to, what's shown in the painting for me anyway.

(Facilitator)

Right. Thank you. And so you sort of, you say you relate in one level to this idea of kind of being one single person and, focusing in a kind of a world that's sort of busy around you, but feeling that you don't relate in terms of it's the time that it's representing, and you used the word antiquated. So the sort of, the decor and the, and that time gives a distance between you and the painting. And you talked about the, sort of the space itself. So our architecture nowadays, and the way we live our lives is, as you say, it's often bright spaces, light spaces, uh, facing the window, um, looking outwards.

(Evan)

I'm sort of left with a pensive feeling, sort of made to reflect a bit like the woman there at the window may reflect on like how I use the space, how I study, how I concentrate and it's, I don't think it's a, it's not a fun painting. It's not a painting you would really smile at or giggle at. It's more for me a painting that you would examine and look at, look at in detail and, the details are what matter.

(Jemima)

Kind of like wonder about, like, you don't really like... you just think about it, and you just wonder, like what she's thinking about or like what's going on and stuff.

(Evan)

Yeah. So it's quite a reflective painting. Makes you feel, makes you think.

(Jemima)

Yeah. I mean, I feel quite calm looking at it. Like it's quite just calming because there's a lot of things which I personally like, like I like plants, I like artwork and I, I like Victorian houses as well, so it's kind of very calming to me.

(Facilitator)

Fantastic. Thank you. So kind of you talk about sort of the feeling it gives you is sort of reflection on sort of maybe how you kind of live your life in some sense and then sense of reflection. And then you are talking about kind of, the enjoying certain elements of it because it contains things that you like yourself, aesthetically. So that's great.