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Artists wander in British woods and bring back more than ticks

By **Andrew Stephens**

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In the Wiltshire woods not far from the house where they stayed for a residency in 2019, Melbourne artists Sonia Leber and David Chesworth went tramping through the glorious green undergrowth. They loved their walk that day but later discovered they were covered in ticks. Art has its costs.

It didn't stop them: pressing into diverse landscapes with their cameras and equipment is what Leber and Chesworth do, investigating natural and human-made phenomena with the acute and curious eyes and ears of scientists, naturalists or even philosophers – always on the hunt for the hidden or the undiscovered (except ticks).



Back home in Melbourne, Sonia Leber and David Chesworth continue to listen up. JUSTIN MCMANUS

During the weeks of their residency, their roving was coupled with an enormous amount of filming, including camera-time with three field recordists who are also fascinated by the aural. There they are in the resulting film *What Listening Knows*, pointing and gliding their specialist gizmos around them, revealing sounds we might otherwise ignore, drown out or be completely deaf to.

Even though the film is a visually stunning work, Leber and Chesworth put an enormous emphasis on investigating what we hear and how we listen. As they say, the film imagines listening as if it – rather than vision – were our primary sense. What would that be like?

As a result of the project, Leber and Chesworth are bringing their work to a broader international audience, showing the film at Messums Wiltshire, an extraordinary art space near the town of Salisbury, set in a 14th century barn. In centuries past, the Shaftsbury Abbess would use the barn to receive tithes – a sort of tax on produce – from the locals. Now it houses the gallery space where Leber and Chesworth's film is showing (it can also be watched – and heard – online).



What Listening Knows, by Melbourne artists Sonia Leber and David Chesworth, at Messums Wiltshire.
STEVE RUSSELL

Johnathan (Johnny) Messum, the founder of Messums Wiltshire, commissioned Leber and Chesworth for the inaugural residency after seeing their work several years ago. He says the residency program is part of his continuing interest in presenting Australian perspectives within the arts.

“There is a great deal of nuance to contemporary Australian art that is world class in areas of environment, race and identity as well as creative positivity,” he says.

Apart from Leber and Chesworth, Messums has shown several other Australian artists such as Atong Atem and Daniel Agdag across the Messums suite of galleries recently, including at their branches at Mayfair in London and Harrogate in Yorkshire. Atem has recently attracted much interest, showing in the National Gallery of Victoria’s Triennial, while Agdag has been showing his work overseas exclusively for the past five years. His first solo show at Messums, *States*, was in 2019, followed by *Radio Silence* earlier this year. He always jumps at the chance to show internationally.

“While we do live in a digitally connected world, where my work has gained a modest online following, it doesn’t quite compare to an in-person experience, in an environment where people can truly be absorbed in the detail and narrative of my work,” Agdag says.

Likewise, Leber and Chesworth, who are known internationally for their experimental film/audio installation work, the “in-person” factor is crucial not only in the making of their art but in the viewing – inside the former barn, *What Listening Knows* is presented on three

huge screens, with suitably impressive sound quality to match.

What viewers encounter – in the flesh and online – is an extraordinary mix of arresting tones and rhythms. The Salisbury cathedral choir can be heard mimicking the sound of planes passing over the forest canopy, for example.

“A lot of the sound doesn’t correspond with what we see on the screens,” Chesworth says. “So, it is about revealing something that is not necessarily visible.”

Staying in a cottage some distance from the Messums barn, Leber and Chesworth explored, filmed and recorded sounds during their residency. The entire region is historically significant, with human-made remnants from the Stone Age to the Roman era. Some of these remnant earthworks remain mysterious – stone circles, human-made hillsides, and other “lumps and bumps” in the ground.



Sonia Leber and David Chesworth, *What Listening Knows*.

“When you encounter them, you don’t know if it is a recent occurrence or ancient history – if it is person-made or natural, if it is ancient geology,” Leber says. “It is actually quite intense when you go into a new place. What we like to do is be prepared but extremely open. Ultimately, when you are open, you can make the work – you don’t hit so many blockages. This whole process was one of discovery.”

It was a good year for projects – before Wiltshire, the pair followed scientists around the Northern Territory, amid red earth and punishing heat, examining the increasing aridification of the area. In Wiltshire, they might have been seduced by the picturesque greenness, but they have instead framed this world unexpectedly.

“Wiltshire is an everyday place for some people, but not for us,” says Leber. “That creates an expressive space. We are our own operators, we do it all ourselves, they [cameras, microphones] are our eyes and our ears. We are ready to capture so we can react to that initial confusion, wonderment or fascination of not quite understanding a space.”

Leber and Chesworth describe their camera-work as choreography – and the way the camera moves for them (and the viewer) is critical to the overall impact: the mobile camera can dive into and out of the micro or the macro, creating relationships that would have been the province of editing suites with earlier technology.



A field recordist at work in Sonia Leber and David Chesworth's *What Listening Knows*.

Likewise, the strong aural presence throughout the film manages to be many things at once, tying together the three concurrent screens.

“We wanted to get away from being driven by the ocular,” Leber says. “We wanted to have what we call an ‘acoustic consciousness’ to the camera. You can twist and tilt and flip and don’t have to keep the horizon locked in; you can use the mic to trail a particular sound. Something fixed and solid can be destabilised and float.

“The camera becomes an extension of your arm.”

***What Listening Knows* is at Messums Wiltshire until September 5; see it online at messumswiltshire.com**