

**MEDIA***Sound // Vision // Digital*Janina Ramirez and Shaun  
Greenhalgh in BBC Four's  
*Handmade in Bolton*

# Janina Ramirez and the triumph of 'slow' media

The medievalist's ubiquity on the BBC and her popular podcast reflect a thirst for in-depth knowledge. By **Ben Luke**

**Y**ou might have been forgiven for thinking that this autumn on BBC Four was Janina Ramirez season. First, in September, she presented *Raiders of the Lost Past*, a brilliant series about three archaeological finds made in 1939: the Sutton Hoo burial, the palaeolithic Lion Man found in Nazi Germany, the Olmec civilisation of Mexico. Then, three weeks after the last episode of that series, she was back on screen as a co-star in another new programme: *Handmade in Bolton*, directed by the critic and broadcaster Waldemar Januszczak, in which she challenged Shaun Greenhalgh, a reformed convicted forger, to recreate artefacts of the past – from a Visigothic cloisonné brooch, to a Palissy rusticware plate and an Islamic rock crystal vase.

"I never dreamt that [television] would be my pathway," says Ramirez. She was discovered by the BBC in 2009 through "complete luck and happenstance", after finishing her PhD in Anglo Saxon art, literature and culture at the Centre for

Medieval Studies in York (she now runs the History of Art course at the department for continuing education at the University of Oxford). She was a "piecemealing" medievalist, "working for peanuts" when a BBC researcher called her about a potential programme about the Anglo Saxons – she was the second Anglo Saxon art expert to come up on Google: "The first person was actually my PhD supervisor, and she was in Australia, so she couldn't take the call." Ramirez says she "burned [the researcher's] ear off for hours on the phone telling him everything I love about Anglo Saxon art". Months later, another call: "They wanted to put me in front of the camera."

She had only had a brief cameo on screen before and adds that she "didn't have a clue what to do", though she seems immediately accomplished as a presenter when you watch 2010's *Treasures of the Anglo Saxons* today. But Ramirez was among a number of academics and curators who began to present much of BBC Four's

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and BBC Two's output in that same era, including the classicist Mary Beard and the historian Lucy Worsley. It was a bold decision: being an expert in your field doesn't guarantee that you can be an effective communicator on television, so "putting the two together was a punt", Ramirez says. "They're giving people the platform to be passionate about the stuff they know. Not to just be a talking head that's handed a script, but to be truly invested in the programmes they're making."

And she has never been more invested, she suggests, than in those two most recent shows. "What you get in *Raiders* is absolutely pure me – there's no filter between me talking off-camera and me talking on-camera. I could tell the story I wanted to tell: the story of discovery, the story of excitement."

Meanwhile, *Handmade in Bolton* "has been a complete revelation", she says. "It's been possibly the most exciting thing I've worked on." Greenhalgh is a quiet on-screen presence: he does most of his talking through making, so Ramirez gives the programme an ebullient energy. She appreciates the way Greenhalgh is "teaching me about materials and techniques in the artefacts I've loved that go back thousands of years", she explains, adding that "to understand the skill and the craftsmanship, that's always been one step removed from my knowledge as an academic". Greenhalgh "is filling in those gaps", she says.

She calls *Handmade in Bolton* "slow TV", in the best sense, and feels the same about podcasts. *Art Detective* features Ramirez in discussion with a guest, mostly about one work per episode. "There are thousands of people out there wanting to develop their knowledge in a way that's properly informed," she says. "They want to go to a source they know is reliable, and they want to be taken on a journey that's slow: it could be 40 minutes, it could be an hour, sometimes my podcasts run over and I don't care. I'm not watching the clock – we're just two people talking and enthusing about an artwork."

The idea was partly inspired by her specialism. "Medievalists don't have a glut of things to look at. So often, you'll get one image that you work on for a year. And you just pull it apart bit by bit, so you become quite forensic about how you approach an artwork." The podcasts feature guests you might expect – Januszczak, well-known art historians like Martin Kemp – as well as less obvious art lovers like Philip Selway, the drummer from the band Radiohead. "I do them because I learn in the process," Ramirez says. "I make friends in the process, meet new people and share exciting conversations."

• *Handmade in Bolton* and Ramirez's *The Search for the Lost Manuscript: Julian of Norwich* are on BBC iPlayer until 12 November and 8 November. Her podcast Janina Ramirez: *Art Detective* is available on various podcast apps. Her second children's book *Way of the Waves* (Oxford University Press), and a *Ladybird* guide to Beowulf are available now

**Insta' gratification***Social media***Don't make a hash(tag) of it**

If a picture paints a thousand words, then the hashtag is the digital world's desire to essentialise it into just a few, consumable morsels. The hashtag is a way for people to follow something that is trending, or for others to find an image by happenstance, clicking through keywords of interest. And those words had better be good: simple enough that people remember them; special enough that they don't end up lost in the ether; and not so obscure that they're used once and then discarded.

Some events adopt the hashtag created by their followers, and in the process gain an affectionate nickname, like the Whitney Biennial's #whibi. Then there are those who try perhaps too hard to make their event trend online. The exhibition *Caravaggio and Bernini: Early Baroque in Rome*, which opened last month at Vienna's Kunsthistorisches Museum, is a perfect example. "Here's a little something for your Instagram and Facebook stories," reads the museum's website: "#barockstars". Is it the deliberate misspelling of baroque that makes one flinch when reading this? Or is it the at-odds pairing of a 21st-century hashtag gimmick with the gravitas of Old Master painting and sculpture?

Ironically, a lot of superstar artists on Instagram reject hashtags altogether. Ai Weiwei is one of the main proponents of this school of thought, often eschewing captions too (whether this is an aesthetic or content-related decision is hard to say). Damien Hirst isn't a fan of the hashtag either (he does, however, like to sound off in a caption). Eschewing hashtags is the ultimate sign of celebrity. The mentality appears to be: "If people want to find my work, they will."

Some hashtags, on the other hand, really do capture the imagination and become part of a movement. In 2016, the National Museum of Women in the Arts in Washington, DC asked the public online whether they could name five female artists, and when many couldn't they created the hashtag #5WomenArtists to spread the word on social media. Now it's an annual campaign during Women's History Month each March and other museums have taken up the baton too. This March, the Tate in London used #5WomenArtists to announce five major solo exhibitions of women artists for 2020-21. The National Gallery of Australia in Canberra has piggy-backed on the campaign with its own, using #KnowMyName, announcing that for five months in 2020 it will only show women artists in its galleries. Which goes to show, there is power to be found in that little cross-hatch character – if only you use it wisely.

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**Top of the pods***Podcasts // Radio*

Each month the host of *The Art Newspaper Podcast* highlights the best of recent episodes alongside other visual arts podcasts and radio shows

In the 11 October episode of *The Art Newspaper* podcast, we featured the Hungarian-born artist Agnes Denes as she opened her exhibition at The Shed in New York (until 22 March 2020). Denes is most famous for *Wheatfield – A Confrontation*, the 1982 work in which she planted and tended a two-acre field of wheat at the Battery Park landfill in Manhattan. It was an astonishing achievement which, Denes tells us,

"nearly killed" her. But it was a huge public success. "Visually it was easily understandable, conceptually it was an accusation of the misuse of land, the greed, the mismanagement of the world, calling attention to world hunger. It was about many, many issues we're facing."

Denes details the barriers she faced. "It was difficult to do," she says. "I got very little money from the Public Art Fund. I had to supplement it; I had to find volunteers. I felt obligated if they worked for me for nothing to feed them. So after working on the field all day, I went and made sandwiches for the next day."

One of the more unexpected aspects was fighting the obstructions of Joe, a mob boss whose advances she resisted. "Boy, he was after my hide," Denes remarks. Joe made her life miserable, stealing equipment, barricading the site and denying access to Denes's volunteers. In the end, though, they "harvested beautiful, healthy wheat, and it was the only healthy wheat in our

country because the wheat fields had been attacked by a wheat moth that year". She also created one of the great New York public art projects.

Denes would make a good guest for a new podcast that has already made quite an impact. *The Great Women Artists* is presented and produced by Katy Hessel, creator of the hugely popular account of the same name on Instagram. The first episode, an in-depth conversation with the Barbican curator Eleanor Nairne about her show dedicated to Lee Krasner, bodes well. Nairne is a passionate and eloquent guest, not only animating Krasner's life and work but reflecting fascinatingly on the intricacies of presenting her paintings in the Barbican's idiosyncratic spaces, and exploring the social and cultural forces that have shaped the curating of Krasner's work.

Reflecting on the Whitney Museum's 1975 Krasner retrospective, Nairne says: "When the Whitney's doing that show, and when other exhibitions of that kind

are being staged, it feels like what are sometimes called 'herstories' – trying to take women's stories and insert them into this largely white male history, rather than feeling like we might also be showing them because they're a great artist." She also describes "a hesitancy" among visitors about the motives behind showing women artists. "It's OK to say: we're doing this because institutions need to have better balance in terms of their programming, in terms of diversity, but we're also doing this because this is exceptional work and it needs to be seen."

• *Great Women Artists* can be found on various podcast apps. The Art Newspaper Podcast, produced in association with Bonhams, is available on the same apps and on our website

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