

Interview – Eliza Garnsey

Written by E-International Relations

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This interview is part of a series of interviews with academics and practitioners at an early stage of their career. The interviews discuss current research and projects, as well as advice for other early career scholars.

Eliza Garnsey is a British Academy Postdoctoral Fellow in International Relations at the University of Cambridge and a Junior Research Fellow at Wolfson College Cambridge. She is currently an Honorary Associate at the Centre for International Security Studies. Eliza's research focuses on art and visual culture in international relations and world politics, particularly in relation to human rights, transitional justice, and conflict. Her book *The Justice of Visual Art: Creative State-Building in Times of Political Transition*, has recently been published by Cambridge University Press.

What (or who) prompted the most significant shifts in your thinking or encouraged you to pursue your area of research?

I'm thankful to have encountered many scholars who have encouraged me to pursue my research into International Relations and art. Most particularly, I've been incredibly fortunate to have worked with Duncan Bell as my PhD supervisor and postdoctoral mentor. His expert critique and infallible advice about academic life have been invaluable. In one of our first meetings, I remember him saying that I should "think big". These simple words really sparked my imagination. Two weeks later I jumped on a plane to Venice, to research the biggest art exhibition in the world (the International Art Biennale). He also challenged and supported me to pursue my unorthodox ideas about images and writing styles; I wrote my thesis in the style of a three-act play, with a standalone volume of images as an extended visual essay.

At the beginning of my research, during my masters year, I was introduced to the work of Roland Bleiker, Emma Hutchinson, and Rama Mani. The work of these scholars on visual politics, emotions, and art and post-conflict justice, enabled me to see the possibilities ahead and gave me the confidence to pursue my research, knowing that there was space for my thinking about art within IR.

How have discussions about the relationship between art and politics changed in political theory and International Relations?

Foremost, they've increased! For instance, when I wrote the literature review in the first year of my PhD, there were really only a handful of scholars working specifically on transitional justice and the arts. Over the course of my PhD the amount of literature on this topic proliferated and is continuing to do so (much to my delight). Despite the relative long-standing aesthetic turns in political theory and IR, art has often been perceived at best as an analogy of politics and at worst as a distraction from politics. But this is definitely changing. In broad terms, discussions about art and politics in political theory and IR have substantively shifted from considering art as a representation of politics to acknowledging art as a site and form of politics.

What role can art play in transitional justice?

The sentiment, agency, encounters, and spaces created by visual art open up new political possibilities which

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empower and support transitional justice. Art positions seeing, speaking, listening, and creating as important actions in transitional justice. Art enables individual and collective identities to be imagined, tried out, challenged, and created. Art is a radical form of political participation in times of transition. I make these arguments in my book, *The Justice of Visual Art*, by exploring the relationship between transitional justice and art in South Africa in two key spaces. At the national level, the Constitutional Court of South Africa is focused on justice and *founded on* art. Artworks are incorporated into the architecture of the Court and the building also houses a large art gallery. When establishing the most significant institution to emerge out of South Africa's transition from apartheid to democracy, judges were not on the sideline as mere future inhabitants of the courtroom, but rather they were on the frontline pushing and prioritising art to be at the heart of this justice institution. The close relationship between visual art and the Court establishes an important precedent. Art is fundamental to the appearance, understanding, and provision of justice in South Africa and of South African justice at the highest judicial level. At the international level, the South Africa Pavilion at the International Art Biennale in Venice is focused on art, and *the founder of* a new form of transitional justice. South Africa's participation in this key space of cultural diplomacy re-establishes the state's membership of the international community. Art is critical to how South Africa engages in international relations by asserting its successful transition while acknowledging that justice is ongoing.

How can art be a form of political participation?

Art is a radical form of political participation because it creates new critical spaces of political recognition and representation. Art can elucidate rights violations, articulate trauma, and acknowledge individuals and communities in ways which are unavailable by, or more effective than, other means. Take for example Hoda Afshar's video artwork *Remain* which documents the experiences and struggles of a group of stateless men who have been left in limbo, to languish on Manus Island, Papua New Guinea, after the Australian government closed its Manus Regional Processing Centre. In a recent piece, I explore how *Remain* is one of the only available avenues open to these men to document their experiences of violence and to communicate the harm caused by Australia's punitive immigration system, particularly by the policies and practices of mandatory detention of all people seeking asylum and the offshore processing of asylum seekers who arrive by boat.

Artistic representation can enable a better understanding of what can be seen and said, who has the ability to see it and say it, and how it is possible to know and do politics in different ways. In "On Representation(s)", I look at three artworks which were exhibited in the South Africa Pavilion at the International Art Biennale in Venice. These artworks draw attention to remembering, recording, and restoring violence as key acts of representation in post-apartheid South Africa; capturing how the pervasive practices of discrimination and violence live on within the state. By doing so, they provoke a questioning of what it means for the artists to represent the claims of a citizenry in flux; claims which are in tension with those being made by the state at a global exposition.

You've written about the term "visual jurisprudence" in an article and in your recent book. Can you explain the term and how it can shape how justice is understood and enacted?

The term 'visual jurisprudence' broadly means the philosophy of the visual in law. It's most commonly used to refer to visual evidence or visual arguments used in legal proceedings, such as when photographs or CCTV footage are used as evidence. I argue that visual jurisprudence is much broader than this conception. It is about conceiving justice as much as it is about its procedural provision. In other words, visual jurisprudence revolves around how visibility affects the thinking of law not only by engendering belief and understanding inside the courtroom, but also by engaging the moral imagination outside the courtroom. By moral imagination, I mean the ability to imagine situations which arise out of real-world challenges and experiences.

In the context of the Constitutional Court of South Africa the presence of the art collection is a unique instance of a large body of artworks being closely connected to, and blended with, the value and practice of justice (two tenets of jurisprudence more generally). The art collection of the Court is central in challenging and forming the bodies of knowledge that shape how justice is understood and that shape the appearance of justice in South Africa. That is, the Court's visual jurisprudence both engenders belief in, and understanding of, foundational human rights, at the same time as it engages the moral imagination in the pursuit of these rights.

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Take for example one of the most well-known artworks at the Court, called *The Blue Dress*. In a recent article, I argue that this artwork contributes to the reimagining of human rights culture in South Africa in several ways. *The Blue Dress* is a symbolic reparation which recognises the harm suffered under apartheid. It is an alternative record of women's experiences of sexual violence; experiences which are largely absent from the official truth and reconciliation commission record. And, it is a form of judicial consciousness which keeps knowledge of past rights violations alive so that a different future can be imagined.

What are you currently working on?

In this very moment I'm working on keeping two small humans alive (on maternity leave with a new baby and a toddler)! When I return from leave in a few months, I'll be back to my postdoctoral research project which is developing the concept of visual jurisprudence; a new theory of art and justice, particularly in relation to human rights.

There are two main parts to my postdoctoral research, which will feed into planned book publications. One part explores the relationship between art and justice at several courts, including the Hall of Justice (Den Bosch, Netherlands), the Supreme Court of Justice of the Nation (Mexico City), as well as the Constitutional Court of South Africa. These courts house large visual art collections which address human rights violations in different ways. The content, location, and trans-national exchange of artworks at these courts have important implications for the provision of justice; drawing attention to how international relations seep into these courts through the artworks. This comparative work is based on periods of participant observation fieldwork at these courts, which I completed recently, that included interviews with judges, artists and people who attend the courts.

The second part of the research focuses specifically on the gender-related dimensions of refugee status, asylum, nationality and statelessness of women as experienced under Australia's immigration policies and practices, particularly mandatory detention and offshore processing. Women in detention are subjected to legal and bureaucratic frameworks which force them into unsafe living conditions and expose them to physical and emotional violence and trauma. This part of my research explores whether there are aesthetic and creative ways to engage the experiences of refugee and asylum-seeking women with a view to elucidating rights violations, designing reparative responses and influencing change.

What is the most important advice you could give to young scholars?

My advice is to research what you're passionate about and to take intellectual risks; even if you encounter resistance along the way, try not to be disheartened or change your research to conform to 'mainstream' agendas. This is especially important for trans-disciplinary scholars who often get push back from journals and publishers about not being the right disciplinary fit. This is just gatekeeping (it's unhelpful, and frankly it's boring). Challenging boundaries and prevailing thinking brings about exciting ideas and opportunities. If you get push back against this kind of research, it probably means you're doing something right. So, go forth and shake up the orthodoxy.