

The Journal of the Sylvia Townsend Warner Society

Quiet Revolutions

Amanda Chambers^{1,*}

How to cite: Chambers, A. 'Quiet Revolutions.' *The Journal of the Sylvia Townsend Warner Society*, 2015, 16(1), pp. 53–67. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.14324/111.444.stw.2015.09>

Published: 01 June 2015

Peer Review:

This article has been peer reviewed through the journal's standard double blind peer-review, where both the reviewers and authors are anonymised during review.

Copyright:

© 2015, Amanda Chambers. This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (CC-BY) 3.0 <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/3.0/>, which permits unrestricted use, distribution and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited • DOI: <https://doi.org/10.14324/111.444.stw.2015.09>

Open Access:

The Journal of the Sylvia Townsend Warner Society is a peer-reviewed open access journal.

*Correspondence: info@amandachambers.co.uk

¹ Independent scholar and multi-disciplinary artist

8

Quiet Revolutions

Amanda Chambers

Introduction

Amanda Chambers is a multidisciplinary artist. The primary focus of her work is making connections to the past through an exploration of both found material and imaginary concepts. She is often stimulated by textual and archival sources and has worked with some of the most significant museum collections in the UK, including the Bodleian Library, the Natural History Museum and the Britten and Pears collection at the Red House in Aldeburgh.

She has a BA (Hons) in Fine Art and is a Fellow of the Royal Society of Arts.

Her interest in Warner and Ackland began in 2013, and last year she produced a first series of works inspired by their lives.

What was the initial catalyst for your project?

I read *Lolly Willowes* on recommendation some time ago and found it charming. But perhaps because I am drawn to historical subjects, it is often the author's back story that appeals to me. Inspired by Sylvia's first novel I was soon aware of the extensive material surrounding her life and work, especially her own vivid and elegant diary.

Thanks to Claire Harman's works and the various edited publications including *I'll Stand By You*, the moving account of their relationship in letters, I became absorbed in the domestic sphere of Sylvia and Valentine's life together. This very much formed the initial catalyst for the project.



Figure 8.1 Amanda Chambers working in her studio

What was it about STW and VA in particular that you found interesting?

I suppose I found an embarrassment of riches. I felt I had struck gold with their story. Sylvia and Valentine's life together had a kind of operatic quality to it, set against the backdrop of literature, politics and war, and with an incredibly tender personal story at its core.

I immediately found the landscape of their domestic lives was a place I wanted to inhabit in some way.

I was also inspired by the strength of character both women showed in every aspect of their lives, whether in their literary or political pursuits or the way they faced their personal challenges. This idea of 'resilience' would later emerge as a theme in my work.

The differences between the two women felt very marked. And yet I liked how their respective strengths and vulnerabilities found a balance and how their 'roles' often reversed.

Despite the painful disparity in their literary success, I was conscious of this interplay and how the relationship navigated difficulties. This was particularly evident in the late 1940s when the prospect of a three-way relationship with another woman, Elizabeth Wade White, seriously threatened to damage their partnership beyond repair. This became another key theme in the work.

The fact that Sylvia and Valentine were not on the popular historical or literary map was also interesting to me and, later, perplexing. How had such rich and important lives escaped the media and heritage radar? But I was also somewhat relieved as I could find my own way into their story without too much baggage.

What was behind the title, *Quiet Revolutions*?

I loved the idea of two very driven women being quietly industrious in revolutionary politics in rural Dorset, but also living openly in a partnership that was unconventional.

It also worked well when I considered how clay is formed and 'resolved' on the potter's wheel.

What research sources were important to you?

Apart from the published works, I visited the Dorset County Museum Archives on 20 August 2013, then managed by Dr Morine Krissdottir and Judith Bond. This was an important moment in the development of the project as I had begun to uncover the depth and scale of the material – and this was daunting. You can sometimes have too much of a good thing and I was struggling with the process of refining key themes.

The visit to the archives helped to clarify my path as it underlined the need to spend more time with the subject and engage on a deeper level, even if this meant having additional material to deal with later on.

Archives are important in my work, not only as a valuable repository of information but because they can offer a tangible connection to an otherwise elusive past. The sensory nature of handling diaries and observing handwritten material is crucial to finding the human story behind the ‘subject matter’.

A good example of this came when Judith found a tape recording of Valentine’s voice for me to listen to. Valentine was apparently in the habit, in later life, of recording her thoughts on tape (she loved gadgets), and this one dealt with her views on Catholicism. The recordings form part of a series of five cassettes made by Valentine between 1966 and 1968,¹ and thanks to them, I now knew what Sylvia meant by Valentine’s ‘viola’ voice.

Morine then made a request to see an item that was held deep in the stored collection and had not been seen before. Out of the wrapping came a multi-coloured garment, now starting to fade and deteriorate, made from patchwork fragments. It was a ‘smoking jacket’ attributed to Sylvia and hand-sewn as a present for Valentine. She describes its making in a letter of 4 April 1937 to Elizabeth Wade White:

I have finished Valentine’s patchwork coat of many colours, and she looks most beautiful in it, and I gaze on it with quite as much pride as ever Anne Bradstreet on her bed-hangings; feeling very much as she did, obnoxious – but still aware of the carping tongues which might well say – in my case – that I could have done it quite as well and in half the time by pen.²

I loved this glimpse into their early life together and to see, first-hand, an example of Sylvia’s many creative talents.

On the same trip I also visited the villages of East and West Chaldon, still reassuringly small and reclusive, hidden in a chalk valley



Figure 8.2 ‘Valentine’s patchwork coat of many colours’. Photograph: George Wickham. Courtesy of the Dorset County Museum.

near the Dorset coast. Many of the landmarks lovingly noted by Sylvia and Valentine still exist, among them the Sailor’s Return pub and the ancient barrows known as the Five Marys. Only Miss Green’s cottage (their first home, later bombed in the Second World War) is missing, and the bungalow in its place sadly offers no clue to the romance of its predecessor.

But despite the deep sense of time standing still in Chaldon, handling archival material and hearing the recording of Valentine’s voice, I still had that odd, nagging feeling that touching the past could be elusive.

How did the texts inform your work?

Sylvia's diaries were my primary inspiration. They not only provide an insightful record of the era but also capture the life of a true Renaissance woman – her creativity, vitality and the way she rushed at life, embraced it – very much as she hurried to Valentine on their first night together or shocked her friends by running naked into the sea. Even in the depths of grief, the diary is still life-affirming and this is a great testament to her writing and her strength of will.

I went back many times to the diaries, not only to build an image of Sylvia but also of Valentine. I was initially surprised how much of my own work was focusing on Valentine until I realised it was precisely because Sylvia was the main published source, and Valentine, inevitably, her subject.

Valentine's own memoir *For Sylvia* was also valuable, as it filled in some important gaps, especially from her own early and troubled life.

I was delighted by *I'll Stand By You*, the account of their letters to each other, which Sylvia had stipulated should not appear until long after her death. As a result, this correspondence was not published until 1988 and did not appear in Sylvia's edited *Letters* in 1982. It forms a critical part of the story, offering a deeper insight into their intense need to connect and be together. It also represents another striking example of Sylvia's strength of will as it was compiled in the direct aftermath of Valentine's death and later edited into its published form by Susanna Pinney, one of Warner's literary executors. Sylvia also wrote a moving 'linking narrative' to weave the correspondence together.

Later, I became aware of *The Akeing Heart* by Peter Haring Judd, which emerged after I'd started the project, but because it focused so specifically on a theme I was developing (the Wade-White triangle), I delayed reading it to allow my own responses to emerge independently. It now represents an exciting resource for future study.

But the moment I had been waiting for – that elusive bit of magic that exists when we stumble upon something ordinary and unassuming but which contains such potency that we are immediately transported to the past – came with Sylvia's letters.

On writing to Llewelyn Powys in 1933, she signs off:

Valentine is rattling in the hall. The rattles are increasing in volume and imperativeness, in a moment I shall have to depose the cat and obey that summons.³

Somehow Valentine, referred to in Sylvia's 'real time', suddenly popped vividly through into my own dimension. It was a memorable and rare moment.

How did you begin to develop the pieces?

I made the decision to concentrate on the lives and not the works to help focus the project.

I could have taken strands from Sylvia's novels and Valentine's poems but I felt a strong pull toward their relationship – and there was a unity of subject matter there, as I could deal with both of them together.

I came back to several key moments, such as the prospect of the three-way relationship with Elizabeth Wade White. The pieces *Impasse* and *Assent* deal directly with this. I wanted to show in a very simple way how there had been some accommodation of the situation, but that in reality it could never be sustained. Both titles came from phrases used by Valentine and Sylvia to describe the hopelessness and then the eventual resolution of the matter.

I also wanted to consider the dual aspects of Valentine's strength and vulnerability, and in particular her struggle with alcoholism, which, incredibly, she kept secret from Sylvia for nearly 20 years. *Impulse* focuses on her initial dependence and *Inured* considers her bravery and how the ordeal shaped her.

Reconstruct deals with the overwhelming image I have of Sylvia as a pragmatist. There are countless occasions where she seemed able to



Figure 8.3 *Impasse*. Hand-thrown three-spouted tea pot (7 × 17.5 cm)



Figure 8.4 *Assent*. Dissected hand-thrown three-spouted tea pot (7 × 17.5 cm)



Figure 8.5 *Impulse*. Oxide print on stoneware clay inside hand-thrown dissected stoneware bottle (6 × 20 cm)



Figure 8.6 *Inured*. Oxide print on stoneware clay with hand-thrown dissected stoneware bottle (21 × 20 cm)



Figure 8.7 *Reconstruct*. Oxide print on stoneware clay (15.5 × 10.5 cm)

employ effective solutions to problems, not least in her private life. She appeared to have a very deep-rooted resourcefulness, one that could nurture both the creative and personal strands of her life. Without it, the incident with Wade-White could have been disastrous.

Sylvia also kept two diaries in 1970, the year after Valentine's death. This seemed another poignant example of how, despite the depths of grief, she was still 'managing' situations.

Valentine had bought her a printed diary for 1970 which she kept up alongside the more reflective entries, often for the same days, that she wrote in a lined notebook. Claire Harman describes these 'double-diaries' in her introduction to Warner's journals as the 'other life' of Sylvia's bereavement, 'the more intimate diary seeming as if it were written *underneath* the conventional one, as if it were a lower skin of the same form'.⁴

As a multidisciplinary artist what made you concentrate on ceramics?

It was through ceramics that I had my main breakthrough with the project.

I had been developing pottery within my practice, and working with clay gave me an exciting new language to explore connections to the past. I like the way pottery contains a human imprint, a charged quality – and I began to see how Sylvia and Valentine's life might emerge from it.

I began making teapots and was really excited about their construction. I also started to think about their function – not just practically, but emotionally: the teapot at the centre of a house, of a daily routine. I loved the idea of a teapot becoming dysfunctional.

I had also developed a technique of printing onto clay using ‘wet’ photocopies before they are heat-sealed. The image would be applied to damp clay like a transfer, but due to the oxide in the photocopy toner the image would withstand the heat of the kiln, resulting in a sepia-toned appearance, as seen in *Impulse*, *Inured* and *Reconstruct*.

You also produced a short video, *Canticle*. What inspired this?

It’s a really short piece but it surprises me how many symbols occur in it.

It says something to me about the nature of devotion and how both women were at once driven and conflicted by their passions – emotional, secular and religious.

I already had my core images of Sylvia and Valentine and had started to project video images onto them. Very early on I was using footage of World War II aeroplanes flying over Sylvia.

Later, I projected a waterfall over Valentine and she appeared to be immersed in it. This reminded me of Sylvia, in her diary, likening Valentine’s embrace to running water.

The loveliest thing of all is how, with bowed head embracing me, her arms and neck pour from those narrow shoulders, like a smooth torrent of water limbed as it falls over a rock.⁵

It wasn’t until I started experimenting with the footage and reversing it, that the aeroplanes seemed to retreat from Sylvia. This chimed well with an anti-war message but also had a hint of magic. Reversing the waterfall over Valentine appeared to plunge her into flames. Although unsettling, this image seemed to reflect the cycles of conflict and turbulence in her life.

What do you hope audiences will take from the work?

I would be very happy if it prompted people to look at Sylvia and Valentine more closely.

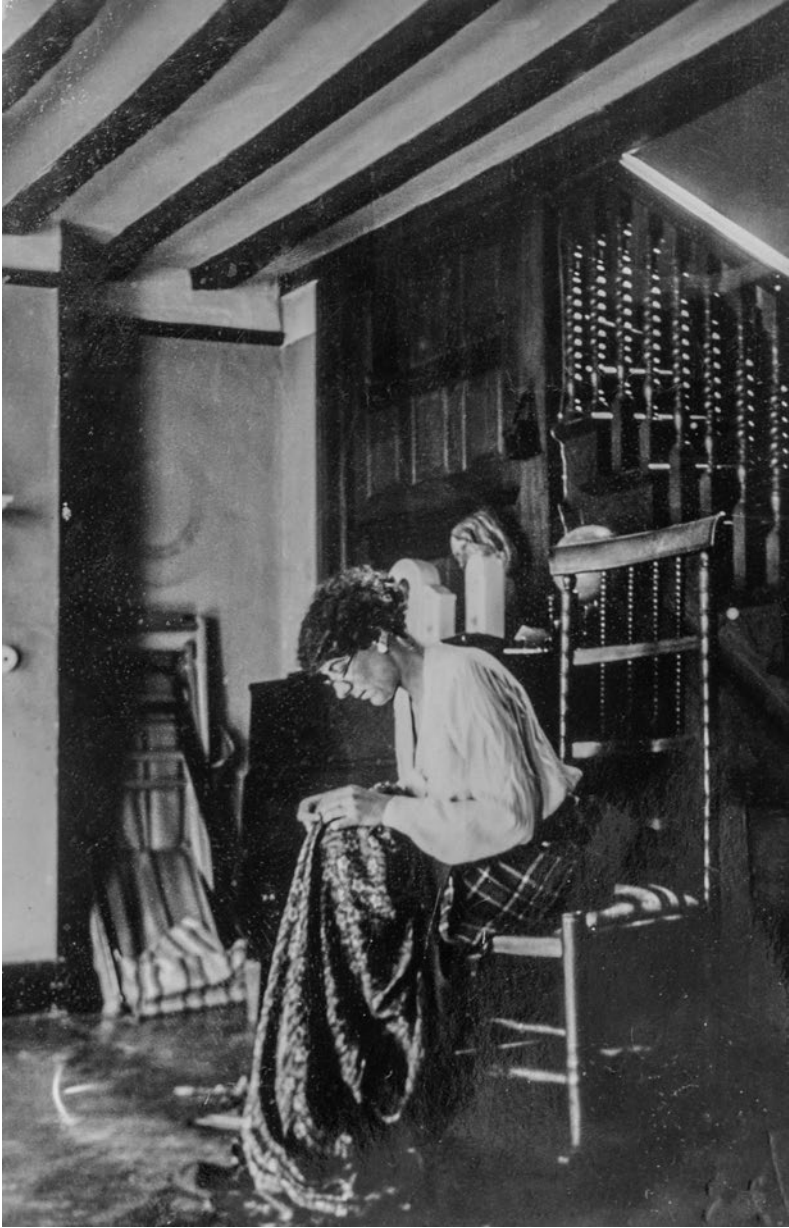


Figure 8.8 Sylvia Townsend Warner. Courtesy of Dorset County Museum



Figure 8.9 Valentine Ackland. Courtesy of Dorset County Museum



Figure 8.10 Screengrab from *Canticle*: STW and planes

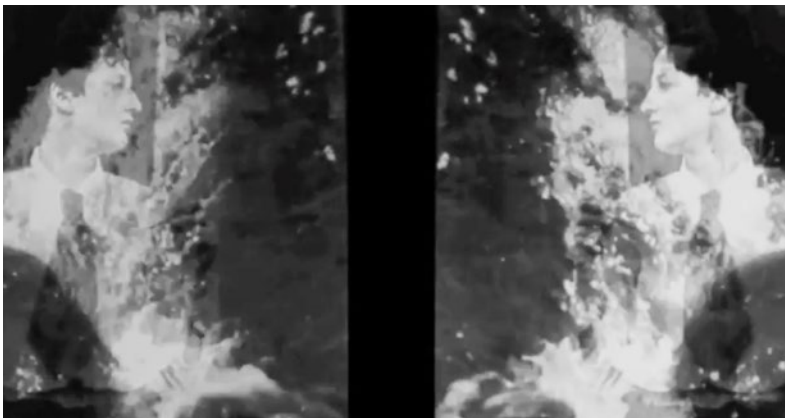


Figure 8.11 Screengrab from *Canticle*: VA dissolve

So many aspects of their lives, from their artistic and political pursuits to the relationship itself, are inspiring and empowering.

There is also a sense that Sylvia has been seriously overlooked from a literary point of view, so the benefits of her work reaching a much wider audience would seem to vastly outweigh the negatives of her becoming too popular.

I also feel from a research point of view there is a wealth of material to explore.

At one point I contacted the National Archives for information on the MI5 investigation that was instigated due to Sylvia's and Valentine's membership of the British Communist Party. There is a fascinating set of documentation that illustrates the nature of this surveillance, including

the typed observations of the local police sergeant in Chaldon assigned to check up on their ‘movements’. The case was later thrown out.⁶

Are you planning further pieces?

I do feel that this is a first phase of work. I liked the idea that dramatic, large-scale themes could be dealt with by small-scale pieces. In fact, the smaller the physical pieces became, the easier it was to tackle the big issues. But I am also interested in looking at new techniques and perhaps larger-scale works.

One moment that has stayed with me is the key event in Sylvia’s early life, pre-Valentine, when she took a solo trip to the Essex marshes and had a ‘rite of passage’. This experience in the natural world directly informed the drama in her early novel *The True Heart*, and feels like a pivotal stage in her journey as a person and as an artist.⁷

I am also interested in the role of music in Sylvia’s life. It is such a rich thread, beginning with her editing work on *Tudor Church Music* and her early attempts at composition, and continuing with her later connections with Vaughan Williams, Benjamin Britten and Peter Pears, and Paul Nordoff. A lot of this activity is rather overshadowed by her reputation as a writer but it’s all intriguing.

Will the pieces be exhibited?

Quiet Revolutions is in development as a future exhibition and the work is featured in *Ceramic Review* 279 (May–June 2016), pp. 34–6.

Selected works are available to view online at www.amandachambers.co.uk and limited edition prints are available on request at info@amandachambers.co.uk.

Notes

Images of Sylvia Townsend Warner and Valentine Ackland are reproduced by courtesy of the Dorset County Museum. Photographer credit (ceramics and studio portrait): Max McClure.

1 Valentine Ackland cassette tape recording, transferred to CD.

Drawer K, Warner-Ackland Archive, Dorset County Museum, database item 5088.

2 Peter Haring Judd, *The Akeing Heart* (New York: Peter Haring Judd, 2013), p. 42; correcting ‘I half the time’ to ‘in half the time’.

- 3 *Letters of Sylvia Townsend Warner*, ed. William Maxwell (London: Chatto & Windus, 1982), p. 27; to Llewelyn Powys, 3 October 1933.
- 4 *The Diaries of Sylvia Townsend Warner*, ed. Claire Harman (London: Chatto & Windus, 1994), p. ix.
- 5 *Diaries*, p. 72; entry for 19 October 1930.
- 6 See Judith Bond and Mary Jacobs, “Nefarious Activities”: Sylvia Townsend Warner, Valentine Ackland and MI5 Surveillance, 1935–1955’, *The Journal of the Sylvia Townsend Warner Society* (2008), pp. 40–58.
- 7 See Warner’s unfinished essay, “The Essex Marshes”, *The Journal of the Sylvia Townsend Warner Society* (2007), pp. 10–13.