

Interview

## Turner prize winner Charlotte Prodger on gender confusion, 'filthy' iPhones and solitude

Charlotte Higgins



▲ 'The iPhone is a filthy format - smeared and grubby' ... Prodger. Photograph: Sarah Lee for the Guardian

**Prodger's film *Bridgit* takes the viewer inside her head as she searches for identity both at home and in the Scottish landscape. She talks about her early working life, encounters in public toilets and fighting the label 'iPhone artist'**

If the annual Turner prize may be seen as a rough-and-ready barometer of British art and British preoccupations, this year's exhibition gives a fairly unambiguous reading of the cultural weather. Consisting entirely of work in film, video and moving image, it is devoid of those Turner prize staples of high jinks, daft humour and goofy provocation. Instead, its subjects include state-sponsored violence, fake news and the shattering limbo of being a refugee. One of the shortlisted artists, the multi disciplinary collective *Forensic Architecture*, uses techniques including investigative journalism to question the accuracy of an account by the Israeli police of a confrontation that led to two deaths in a Bedouin village in the Negev Desert. Another, *Naeem Mohaiemen*, has offered an oddly compelling film, lasting an hour and a half, centred on the 1973 Non-Aligned Countries conference, complete with archive footage of Madame Binh and Yasser Arafat. It is serious art for serious times, and feels completely right just now.

The winner, announced on Tuesday night, was the 44-year-old Glasgow-based Charlotte Prodger, for a delicate, multilayered, poetic film, shot entirely on her iPhone. Compared with other shortlisted artists, it might seem domestic, interior - but it is no less political and no less of the moment. Filmed around her flat as she recovered from surgery, and in Scotland's forests and on its simmering grey seas, it explores her own queer identity in a way that touches on deep history, wide-open landscapes and the politics of isolation and connection, separation and union, quoting from her own diaries as well as drawing on other texts such as Julian Cope's The Modern Antiquarian. When the prize was announced at Tate Britain in London, she sat completely still for a moment, stunned, while her proud dad leaped to his feet and cheered.

Delighted and shocked, she is still trying to take in the win when we meet the next morning. The £25,000 prize money will come in handy. "I'll be living off it - my rent, my studio rent, my living costs, my materials," she says. Like the others who were shortlisted this year, her kind of work is not easily commodifiable. She is certainly not one of the handful of artists making a mint from the globalised art market.



▲ A scene from *Bridgit*. Photograph: Charlotte Prodger/Koppe Astner/PA



In her acceptance speech, Prodger made pointed reference to Scotland's continued commitment to a free university education. Born in Bournemouth, she grew up mostly in Aberdeenshire after her father moved there to work as an engineer; her mother was a secretary and researcher. She left school with two highers - not enough to get her a place at university. She took a couple of vocational courses (including one in photography) and did a variety of jobs: "I worked in a sandwich shop, a jumper shop, in the Kodak lab in a branch of Boots in Edinburgh, in call centres, doing data input, cleaning." It was working as a life model at the Edinburgh College of Art that introduced her to artists and contemporary art. At 23, she got a portfolio together and applied to do art as a mature student. She studied at Goldsmiths in London and later, the Glasgow School of Art.

Her film, *Bridgit*, takes its title from an ancient goddess of that name. At one point a voiceover talks of the alternative names for the deity, which, it says, have shifted over time and place. Bridgit's is an unstable, contingent identity that nonetheless offers some hope of a matrilineal, non-patriarchal prehistory; later, the film refers to the theorist, artist and writer Sandy Stone, who, via working as a sound engineer, built her own computer and worked with the lesbian separatist label Olivia Records. At another point, Prodger describes being a teenager in Aberdeenshire, working in a care home in the early 1990s, taking acid and ecstasy in her downtime, while, unknown to her, [the musician and antiquary Cope](#) was ranging over the neolithic sites of her home county, thick with standing stones and stone circles, which he described as "bang in the middle of the Great Mother's heart". Prodger was trying to work out how to be a young gay woman; here were signs in the landscape that she had yet to read.



▲ A scene from *Bridgit*. Photograph: Charlotte Prodger/Tate/PA



The whole film, her most personal to date, seems to see Prodger searching for a place, feeling out of place, resisting being too carelessly placed. Her works, she says, always start with a sense of "how I want them to feel, rather than what I want them to do". With *Bridgit*, she wanted it to feel subterranean. It is certainly very interior: there is a lot of material about altered states, the effects of anaesthetic, a feeling of being out-of-body. A lot about the body, in fact. There is a passage where she records her experience of public-lavatory confusions - someone yelling "There's a boy in the girls' toilets!" in a night club; on a Caledonian MacBrayne ferry, a middle-aged woman hesitating on the threshold of the loos as she catches sight of Prodger, saying: "I thought I was in the wrong toilet there." These episodes appear in the film without rancour, but now Prodger says that such encounters "are just relentless actually. It's something that punctuates my life nearly every day now. It's pervasive - though I don't experience the levels of confusion that other queer people do. It's exhausting, making it OK for people. I'll be drying my hands and someone will come in and they will look embarrassed or ashamed. I feel for them. I want to make it all right for them. It's a structural problem when everyone involved ends up feeling embarrassed."

Bridgit is a change in direction for Prodger. It is only the second work of hers in which visitors sit in the darkness and watch a large single screen. Previously, she has made multi-channel works on monitors often positioned at head height, arranged almost confrontationally in space as a sculptural installation. Watching Bridgit feels like being in Prodger's head, or in her dreams. It opens with a view of her feet propped up on the sofa; the camera rises and falls in time with her breathing. You never see her whole body, or anyone else's. You might see a portion of her hand, or a bit of her furry hat. The self is fragmented into not just one subjectivity, but seemingly into several, offering the opposite of the certainty of a masculinist point of view. It reminds me of the Scottish poet and nature writer Nan Shepherd - a writer whom Prodger admires - saying that the better way to discover a mountain might be not to walk up it, but to walk around it, finding its secret places and crevices rather than its peaks.

This intense subjectivity, or series of subjectivities, arises largely from the way it was shot - on her iPhone. Despite its shiny, glassy, factory-made optimism, the iPhone is, she says, "a filthy format - smeared and grubby", almost an extension of her own body. She films all the time, as life goes on. Part of the split of her nature is a love of friends, and a desire for solitude - the phone means no crew, no hassle and complete privacy. At times Bridgit has a passing family resemblance to that most ubiquitous of domestic phone outputs, the cat video (a black cat huddles in the warmth and light offered by a desk lamp, Don Cherry playing in the background).



▲ Prodger with Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie and Tate director Maria Balshaw at the ceremony. Photograph: Victoria Jones/PA



She doesn't like, however, being labelled an "iPhone artist". "It's just not a thing for me," she says. "For me, it's just another format." In her time she has shot on everything from 16mm to HD, and has ransacked old TV footage from the internet. She is interested in playing with the possibilities of these different formats. Shooting on iPhone has coincided with making her first single-channel works, which is a case of form and content coming together (previous work using a 4:3 ratio rather than the 16:9 of the iPhone was more suited to being shown on TV monitors). In any case, she says: "I've moved through a number of different formats just because I'm 44 and technology has changed."

She is not into digital as such, and indeed, claims to be an utter technophobe. "I can't use WhatsApp, and I don't really know what the Cloud is. My girlfriend has to set everything up on my phone for me." At the same time, she enjoys working within the parameters and limitations of the iPhone ("I can't cope with a lot of options," she says), and will continue to use it for her next major work, which will be a film for the Venice Biennale next year, where she will represent Scotland. But she won't do so slavishly. "In the Venice film there will be some things that the phone won't be able to

capture, so I'll use video," she says. A rare hint of irritation enters her gentle, peaceable, musical voice. "I just sometimes think: 'Just stop talking about the iPhone.'"