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The Body of Law: a public exhibition in Senate House

30 June 2016

Dr Judith Townend previews The Body of Law, an exhibition inspired by the legal world which is on show at the School of Advanced Study, University of London. Part of a public engagement programme by the Institute of Advanced Legal Studies exploring and promoting the humanity of law, the drawings and sketches, by artist and blogger Isobel Williams, depict proceedings at the UK's Supreme Court.

'I see nervous hands clenching and unclenching behind a QC's back, out of sight of the bench...', Isobel Williams once told me.

This observation of the barrister's hidden, physical gesture helps explain an unusual artistic interpretation of law that focuses on the 'human beings' in and outside court, and the smaller incidental details often unobserved in usual depictions of law.

Unlike most English courts, drawing may be permitted in the UK Supreme Court, and with the court's permission, Isobel Williams sits in the public seats drawing as unobtrusively as possible: 'you can make quite a racket dragging chalk across paper', she says.

Her images look quite different from those that appear in the British media, in television news bulletins or in national newspapers, which are typically sketched in pastel from memory. Isobel Williams, unconstrained by news agenda and distance, uses mixed materials.



In court this includes 'non-messy pens, touches of charcoal and Conté stick (not enough to raise a dust storm), pencil, watercolour safely applied with plastic water brushes'. After all, there's 'a beautiful carpet to be kept clean' in the Supreme Court. Away from the court she can be more expansive with 'tufts of sheep's wool dipped in ink'.

Typically, her images are small 'because of the constraints'. Not so for the hallmark work of her new exhibition in the second floor foyer of Senate House.

Using a crumpled and stained roll of white paper 'nearly' her height, Williams has cartoonishly depicted 'a distillation' of a barrister in *PMS International Limited v Magmatic Limited* – in which the Supreme Court considered the image rights of the Trunki children's suitcase. The piece is deliberately and markedly distinct from the rest of the exhibits, though these cannot be described as uniform either.

They include a sketch of Westminster Abbey from the first floor of the Supreme Court (during a break in a case considering the extent of the Terrorism Act 2000), in which the artist wonders how one would 'identify a terrorist among a group, and how to protect people from people'.



From memory, she has drawn *R v Gough* in Winchester Crown Court, 2015. The defendant Stephen Gough is better known as the 'Naked Rambler' (left). A second image shows his barrister Matthew Scott: 'on this occasion, the naked barrister', Williams describes. 'He cast off wig, gown and official court status when the Naked Rambler made a late decision to represent himself – which he was then not allowed to do, as he refused to cover himself in front of the jury.'

Other pieces include scenes from the School of Advanced Study itself: for example, Room 101 (not thought to be the specific inspiration for Orwell, although Senate House is said to have inspired his Ministry of Truth); the resident sound artist Hannah Thompson,



immersed in her work; and the launch of the Information Law and Policy Centre at the Institute of Advanced Legal Studies in 2015.

Strikingly, the 'most physical' of the pieces are interwoven by jute rope with pink tape, installed by her friends Fred Hatt and Anna Bones of Anatomie Studio: the tension of the rope 'reflect[s] the tension of the courtroom.'

This public exhibition will run to 30 July 2016. From the reception on the ground floor of Senate House, take the stairs or the lift to the second floor foyer to discover this important contribution to the opening of law to public audiences.

It forms part of the Institute of Advanced Legal Studies public engagement programme on the 'Humanity of Law', in which we open law and legal studies to a wide audience; itself a part of the wider public engagement work of the School of Advanced Study, sharing the process and product of humanities research in the UK and beyond.

To read a fuller Q&A with Isobel Williams, please visit her blog. Her initial reflections can be found at this [link](#).

Isobel Williams's exhibition of drawings, The Body of Law, was at Senate House, University of London, Malet Street, London WC1E 7HU (June-July 2016) as part of the Institute of Advanced Legal Studies' public engagement programme.

At the time of writing, Dr Judith Townend was director of the Information Law and Policy Centre at the Institute of Advanced Legal Studies, and responsible for a series of events at the School of Advanced Study in 2014–16 promoting the 'Humanity of Law'.

The Body of Law exhibition was hosted by the School of Advanced Study, and organised with the support of its cultural and public engagement research fellow, Dr Michael Eades.