

Yarn and Yarn  
Peter Fillingham, *Basil Dress*

By Tacita Dean

Ten years ago, when I was clearing out my parents' house in Kent, I gave Peter Fillingham a jacket and coat that once belonged to my grandfather, Basil Dean. Basil died when I was twelve. As children, we knew very little about him, other than he was somewhat famous and connected to cinema. The day he died, my parents were hosting a drinks party. We answered the phone to guests enquiring if the party would still be going ahead, which it was. Bemused, I remember going round to the neighbours and learning that he had died from the television. My father only told us formally after the party was over, such was the dysfunction and disappointment in that familial relationship. Nevertheless, my grandfather's coats found their way into my father's wardrobe so he, too, must have done some house clearance in his time. They were good quality and fitted Peter perfectly.

Much later, visiting Peter in Hastings, I saw he was not wearing the coats but had instead regaled them with coloured cloth and other bits and pieces. They felt similar in spirit to the suits the Pearly King and Queen wear in the East End of London, our cockney royalty. I asked Peter if he knew anything about ENSA, the organisation that Basil had founded. He said he didn't but would look it up.

Entertainments National Service Association, acronym ENSA, or more colloquially known as 'Every Night Something Awful', sent out performers to entertain the troops, both home and abroad, during the Second World War. Acts ranged from stars like Vera Lynn, Gracie Fields and George Formby to street troupes, variety artists and seaside entertainers, and later launched the postwar careers of many of Britain's beloved, often working-class, comedians like Kenneth Williams, Frankie Howerd, Spike Milligan and Peter Sellers. Research into ENSA set Peter on a journey that led him to stories of the Pierrot troupes and other performers: people, subjects and ideas that already infused his practice.

Peter has always been attracted to a particular human vernacular, kept most alive in the English seaside town. Most of his life has been spent on the southeast coast of England amongst fish and chip shops, greasy spoon cafes, military parade grounds, bandstands and village halls. Towns, where once the English working class went on holiday - before package deals tempted them abroad, that are now run-down and culturally disenfranchised. Born under the shadow of the mast of HMS Victory in Portsmouth, Peter's work has its roots in these places although he has equally drawn inspiration from postwar European art and spent time living in Paris and Rotterdam. Growing up in Deal on the Kent coast with a Royal Marine bandsman father and an Indian mother, his visual language took form from the weathered bunting along the seafront, the car boot sale and the visual slapstick of the charity shops and penny arcades mixed in with his Anglo-Indian Roman Catholic homelife.

But Peter's work is equally rooted in sculpture. It is his world and his language. He taught it in art schools and is a passionate proponent of it. His perspective is always fresh, inventive and inspiring. His working materials are more often from the street than the art shop. He favours the abandoned and forgotten and the tactile, which are re-purposed and re-contextualised into sculpture. There is a strain of entertainment in the work too, not necessarily performative, but in its theatricality and how socially inclusive his installations can often be, and how he brings people in. He finds substance in the Christmas baubles and tinsel of life, and in the hokey cokey of human experience.

Thinking about Peter, I realise how much he loves *yarn* and *yarn*: not only threads, fabric and colour, but also that he loves to talk and tell stories. He is a confluence of the oral traditions of both his parents, and of high and low art. His sculpture might appear improvised or jerry-built but this belies a deeper structure and purpose beneath his decisions. Despite the casual playfulness of some of his artworks, Peter is also quite a formal sculptor. There is rigging and weave in his process, as well as a great deal of humour and playfulness, camaraderie and spirit, sometimes mixed with a touch of whimsy.

I'd heard about Peter before we met. When we eventually did, he was collecting Derek Jarman from the train at Ashford Station. He was one of a small group of friends who looked out for Derek when he was in Dungeness. Something of Derek's pantomime spirit and mischievous energy rubbed off on Peter (or vice versa). Something of the visual exuberance too. Peter and I met again a while later for a group exhibition in Rotterdam. Unlike others, including perhaps myself, who might shy away from notions of Englishness, Peter resists any cultural embarrassment; he sees something more persistent and deeper in the tropes and traditions of seaside England and he is right that our timidity is increasingly ceding territory to the far right. "Soon nostalgia will be a thing of the past", he told me recently on the phone.

The title of his exhibition, *Basil Dress* has its origin in humour; it was the term used to describe the military uniform, or battle dress, that Basil Dean insisted ENSA entertainers be allowed to wear to legitimise their role in the armed forces and equally to protect them from being shot as partisans, if caught in enemy territory. But at the end of the war, ENSA performers were not invited to march in the Victory Parade of 1945, which left many feeling excluded and bitter. Despite the risks they took and how hard they worked, and the pleasure, joy and distraction they brought to the troops, they were still ultimately outsiders: non-establishment figures, destined to stay on the fringes. Perhaps, this is why the Pierrot troupes and performers of ENSA struck such a chord with Peter and why he chose to title his Basil jacket sculpture *Fruit Salad*, a term of endearment used by veterans to describe their medals.