A Conversation with Rachel Gadsden

Mark Tschaepe

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Rachel Gadsden is a British visual and performance artist whose internationally exhibited work explores universal themes of fragility, resilience, survival, and hope through a practice that bridges mainstream and disability art sectors. Her art is deeply informed by her own experience of living with a chronic hereditary lung condition and visual impairment, including the use of a syringe driver that administers medication at frequent intervals, and she employs expressive, psycho-geographical methods to examine human vulnerability and embodied life. Gadsden holds a BA (Hons) in Fine Art from Wimbledon School of Art and an MA in Fine Art from City and Guilds of London Art School, and her career has included major residencies and commissions such as serving as the first contemporary artist in residence at Hampton Court Palace since Holbein and creating Unlimited Global Alchemy, a cross-cultural collaboration presented during the London 2012 Cultural Olympiad. Her work often engages participatory processes with marginalized communities, and she has received numerous awards and honors, including an Honorary Doctorate from London South Bank University, in recognition of her contributions to art and disability culture. Currently, she is a PhD researcher at Loughborough University. More information about her work may be found on her website: https://www.rachelgadsden.com

Rachel was kind enough to chat with me over Zoom on 2 May 2025. The discussion has been edited for length, relevance, and clarity.

Rachel Gadsden: My name is Rachel Gadsden, and I'm a visual and performance artist. Originally, I came from a background of theatre so that obviously has had quite a significant element to my practice. And I studied method acting. And I say that because it has quite an important effect on how I've evolved as an artist as well, and I've also lived with a very serious medical condition all my life. And so once you are resuscitated a lot, you have a very clear understanding of your mortality and your life and your life expectations. Now I may live quite a long time due to incredible medical support. But that whole sense of my body, and how I want to express myself as an artist is because of the phenomenological. It's almost an expressionistic feel I have for living my daily life. and it transcends itself into my work. But I began very much as a formal figurative artist because, like many young people, I wanted to prove to myself that I was really good at art. And people relate to really good art with really good skills. In fact, we know it's nothing to do with that. But at the point I wanted to learn all the skills I needed to learn, and when I started losing my sight it was, although I'd done lots of expressionistic work, it just gave me the freedom to say, "Hang on a minute". I can just do what I want. and I'm going to do what I want." So, it's become really physical, visceral, phenomenological.

Mark Tschaepe: In *Body Consciousness.* Richard Shusterman says, "Somaesthetics centers on the soma as a site of knowledge, action, and aesthetic appreciation. It is concerned with the critical study and meliorative cultivation of how we experience and use the living body, or Soma as a site of sensory appreciation, or esthesis and creative self-fashioning." I want to ask you; there's this distinction that's often made between the body as object and the body as subject. Soma brings those things together, so it doesn't artificially separate them, and I am interested in how you view your work as honoring that combination of both body as subject and body as object.

Rachel Gadsden: Well, I know I do. It's quite interesting to think of how I would describe it in terms. In fact, when I started looking into somaesthetics it just all was language that completely describes what I know I've been doing for a very long time, but may not have had the articulated voice to be able to express that.

We don't think about our bodies at all unless they start being broken; and then we become extremely aware of our bodies. If you can't breathe, you become very aware of the fact that if you don't have breath, you're not going to stay alive, and all of those sensations, and on a very corporeal level. To some degree, it's been something that's so unconscious within my practice because it's just what I experience every single day. But also I'm incredibly interested in the whole sense of the human condition. And unless I look outside the human condition, then how can I look inside? So, it's that journey backwards and forwards, and even to some extent looking how the body sits within the whole world context. I am completely trapped in this whole sense that we're all a living, breathing entity, and we all survive or don't survive. As a subject, obviously thankfully, all the time and then, now I have lost some sight. I wonder what I'm drawing, because I almost feel I do all of my work without actually seeing through my eyes, although I can see some things. But it's a very distorted, blurred view. And so, even if I'm drawing something which isn't me, I am creating art. To separate the body from the subject becomes more and more difficult because it's so close together and intertwined, and has become more and more so, and then doing a live, performative work. It is just one whole thing together, but they are both because if somebody's viewing the world, the body is subject or the body has a phenomenological sense. I don't think I'm articulating it very well, and probably more trying to express a sensorial feeling of what I think it means. If that makes sense.

Mark Tschaepe: It does. I wanna talk a little bit about this notion of the world as body, because one of the ways I've seen your work described, especially some of the earlier work you did is as psychogeographic. I want to talk a little bit about the idea of atmosphere and sort of a somasthetics of atmosphere, and how that plays into your work, because it seems as though your work is acknowledges that context has everything to do with the body, that the environment has everything to do with the body. I'd like to hear more of what you have to say about that, because it seems so important to your work regarding where your work is coming from and what your work is expressing and what it's commenting on.

Rachel Gadsden: When I started, you know, I obviously went to art college and started creating art and deciding how I want to describe the world! It was at a moment where any form of disability, or any form of work that really started to express your own sense of the human condition became very difficult because it was almost like, "You're being a victim, and you're not expressing an outward thing. This is just about therapy." I very quickly decided that this wasn't a platform that I wanted to start getting in discussions about being a victim, because I've never felt that I'm a victim. and I thought it was more. It was quite an aggressive approach. So I started going out out into the world, and I used to find people. I'd go on long journeys, and I'd walk to marketplaces wherever and just wandering around, and then maybe looking for somebody

that could become my subject, and then I would approach that person and talk to them and say, "Tell me about your life. I'm an artist. I'm really interested. I've been watching you for a while." There's something very narcissistic about being approached by an artist and being asked to be painted, or something like that. So, I was going out into the landscape, out into places. I went to a marketplace once, and I ended up actually telling a story about a very famous circus performer who had spent time in a prisoner of war camp in Japan, and this whole quite horrific story unfolded. That wasn't necessarily the depth of the story I wanted to tell, and so I became very interested in that outward thing, and how we exist, and and how art exists in the bigger picture. I did come across psychogeography, and I was always interested in the fact that it isn't necessarily a static time. And now there's these layers of time and layers of of a space. It's hard to explain, because I'm not a religious person. So it's not that it's coming from that bigger place. I work a lot with very religious people. But it's not how I find my work, but more just so aware of the atmospheres, so they became part of the work. Then I finished art college and started doing residencies, and I did a big residency in an old derelict coal mining region in a big powerhouse, and I saw the whole mind is this sort of living, breathing entity. From there I went in to start making a huge body of work in old derelict asylum hospitals to tell the stories of the people who had been incarcerated. It was almost like the building was the living, breathing thing. People were the living, breathing thing. It sort of wasn't separated. In all of that, I'm also discussing my own human fragility and my own sense of survival, which was always probably underpinning the work, and I don't think I necessarily at that point thought about it too much on an intellectual level. It was very much just going on the journey and being really open. And now I can't separate any of those things. I've always done a lot of research, and I think maybe I've spent a lot of time on my own in hospital or in oxygen tents a lot when I was a child on my own. So there's always been that thinking mind going on all the time. What's this? How can I interpret this?

Rachel Gadsden – Trapped 2 Walls "Live Art" Performance, Loughborough University, UK, 2024. Still Photograph of Rachel Gadsden. Photo credit: Tim Hayton

How can I survive this? I also wanted to know how other people survive, and then that led to commissions to go abroad and work in some very challenging places where the whole sense of survival is very difficult for everybody, whether it's conflict region or whether it's working in a township where many people have HIV/AIDS, and how they manage to survive those circumstances with poverty and other social conditions that are very difficult. So, it's all intermingled and can't ever be single a single thing. It comes from that bigger picture.

Mark Tschaepe: You have done work in South Africa. I also did a lot of work in South Africa at one time.

Rachel Gadsden: Oh!

Mark Tschaepe: You had a presentation in a show called *Ubuntu*. One of my papers that was published over 10 years ago is on ubuntu, so it was interesting to me that there was this crossover even there between us. What comes to mind is this notion of community and various communities and the importance of embodiment in terms of community. I was wondering if you could talk a little bit about any thoughts you have with regard to somaesthetics and community because somaesthetics, I think, sometimes gets misinterpreted as if it's just about the individual. But I think through your work there's this real importance of community that comes through, and I'd just like to hear you speak about that in terms of whatever you have to say.

Rachel Gadsden: I think you're completely right. As soon as I came to somaesthetics, it was also the sense of the community. If you if you have a medical condition and an intense medical condition, it's not something I'm going to keep going on about, but you cannot survive on your own. So, I have had at different times all sorts of intervention. So I'm reliant on a community, whether that's a medical community or the support to just get from A to B, and also understanding that from a psychological point of view, if you are just completely on your own, your ability to be able to survive those circumstances is very hard. and having other people around you enables you to sort of get out of yourself, and actually sort of see things in perspective. In fact, it's a very strange story, how I got to South Africa. I knew the Olympics were coming up in the U.K. I knew there were going to be some very major commissions, and I was competitive enough to decide that I wanted to go for one of these, and I'd gone to an exhibition, and I saw a body map which I'd never seen before, and was really taken by these bodies, and I knew one of them that the person was surviving something I wasn't quite sure what they were all about, other than they were body maps, and I thought that these were maybe more psychological stories, people dealing with their mental health issues. Anyway, I decided that whoever painted this, I had to find this person, and I didn't know where to find them.

I did loads of searching on the Internet. I also wrote hundreds of emails all over the world. "Have you heard of Nondumiso Hlwele I want to find this person. Do you know her?" And then, after about 4 months, this email popped in. "Somebody's told me. You're looking for me. I'm from Khayelitsha Township, Cape Town ". And that was the starting point of my story that I wanted to tell as part of the commission for what I submitted for the Commission for the Olympic games. One of the very interesting things is that when all of them were collected together as the Bambanani group, and when they came together, or when they first began to get treatment from Medecin Sans Frontieres, before they could even start [FH1.1]treatment, they had to tell somebody that they were having treatment, which none of them wanted to do, because they didn't want to admit their circumstances. Very difficult, it still very is challenging. They had to start sharing with that another person, which really intrigued me. Because again, it's not just you. It's about a bigger thing. Obviously, as they got to know each other as a group, that became the most important thing, and they were a living, breathing entity together. I came across your work. I think it was yesterday or the day before, because I was looking lots of things up, and it

was like, "Oh, my God! You understand all this too and that sense of community efforts. Sadly, many of us have lost that. It doesn't exist as a hypothesis in many communities. But once you start going to much more fragile communities. not necessarily the warring ones, where they're not going to speak to you, and you're not going to speak to them. But the ones in those different groups support each other in a really massive way. and that's something that, as I've gone around working on these different projects and with these community groups, how empowering it is to see that they look after each other, and actually breathe together and live together and support each other and survive because of that. That's all part of the somaesthetics hypotheses as far as I'm concerned.

Mark Tschaepe: Could you talk a little bit more about body maps, what those are, and what's so striking about them?

Rachel Gadsden: Yes, they're really interesting. I hadn't really come across them before. I can't just this minute remember the person who started using them, but it was in Birmingham, in the U.K in the 1960's, and some psychologists and psychotherapists were working with mental health patients and saying to them, "Well, you know, let's talk about what's going on," and they'd say, "I've got so much pain. I've got so much pain", and they would pull into their body. And the psychotherapist said, "Well, is that the pain in here? Where is this pain?" It was very hard for people to articulate, and going back 40-50 years ago, it was even more difficult for people to express things in an emotional context. I think one day someone suggested, "Let's just get on the floor, and I'm going to draw around you. This is going to be our body. We're going to start talking, and you're going to start telling me what hurts or what doesn't hurt, or where you sense those things that matter." It became a storytelling process. Through that process, it's your own body which you can't draw yourself. We can draw some of it. I draw some of my body. You would quite often see me outlining. It's almost a sense of saying, "Yes, I do still exist. I am still here." But it's pretty impossible to draw around yourself completely, so somebody else must do it for you. So, it's again that parallel. It's about sharing the story. And then that map outline, which looks a bit like the outlines you get when there's been a criminal act, and police come and draw around the dead body, which is a bit strange to have the two going together, but the body map becomes the vessel for you to tell your story in whatever way you want to tell that story. With the Bambanani group, they were used by Cape Town University to tell the stories of the individuals who were surviving HIV/AIDS through their medical treatment, then administering the treatment because they were the only ones that did. It was 1990 before they did that.[FH2.1] A lot of people had died already, and they became sort of like the the catalyst to go into the community and say, "Look, look at my body map. This is my story and my survival story." They'd done these beautiful maps. "Would you like to do your map, and let's talk about you?" It was obviously a healing therapeutic process of understanding the body and what they were going through. I think it's really interesting, because even when I work with many of my friends in South Africa, there were some of the individuals that would never, ever mention HIV/AIDS. They would say tuberculosis, but they would never mention, because obviously with any illness or anything, there's certain stigmas that arise. I don't walk into a room ever with my white cane. In fact, the only thing I'll use my white cane for is in my artwork. It's not because I have any issues about having a sight problem myself, but it's because of other people's perceptions. "How can this person who's lost sight be an artist? Did she really do that, or is she doing it?" You know, it's those sorts of questions, and I understood that for the Abenani group or my individual artists, that they felt the same. So, I think the body maps tell another story, an important story, and there are many of them that are beautiful. And that's something you've touched on, because it's not about trying to frighten people or terrorise people through your art. It's about trying

to draw them in. In fact, my Master's degree really was all about that. How do you tell one of these epic stories in history without repulsing everybody, you know. If you want to make work that considers the notions of the holocaust, for instance, if you create some very tragic looking images, nobody can bear it. We can't bear it. Nobody can bear it. So how can you? You need to tell that story or the current story that's going on in Israel and Palestine. You know, it's a very, very tragic story. How can you tell those stories? And that was what I really was concerned about, because I think I felt I needed to tell. I needed to discuss something about those contexts in my work. For me, beauty and the other reason I loved the word, somaesthetic, was because of the word aesthetic. It's critical. It's about pulling people into the work. and they'll see the pain and the tragedy, or the hope and survival. But if you can't get them into the work., then you, as an artist or philosopher, or anything, you aren't communicating.

Rachel Gadsden Creation I 2025. Mixed Media & stitching on Fabriano Paper 300gm, 70cm x 100cm. Photo credit: Rachel Gadsden

Mark Tschaepe: For you, now, where is your story going? In terms of your art. I have looked over the trajectory of a lot of the stuff that you've done, and there's a story there, and it's gone through evolutions and touched upon different things. You've highlighted various aspects of different communities, and, as you said, different tragedies and things that are very personal and things that involve community. What about now? Where are things going now for you in terms of your work, especially regarding the expression of embodiment.

Rachel Gadsden: When Covid arrived, I was told in the January before it really become something we all knew about. I don't think it was even called Covid, but because of my medical condition. I was told, "You're going to be locked down from today," literally the beginning of January, and it was very shocking, and you know I think I'm going to lose my salary. I'm self-employed, so it's not that I've got some salary that will pick up somewhere. I was supposed to be going abroad on lots of projects. Then I decided I may consider doing a PhD, which had sort of been at the back of my mind, but not necessarily, because obviously I'm practice based and didn't want to just be in books for the next five years, or whatever. But I did, for various reasons, find an interesting angle into how I could create my PhD that would be relevant. Then I realized I didn't even know you could do it by practice all those sorts of things. I thought, "Well, I must do something that has an authentic approach. I am going to use all the things that I draw upon,. and the work will become much more. My experience, my life. All those other things are there. But it will be much more honest about my survival and my everyday survival." So, the exploration has been about looking at artists who have also lived with chronic illnesses and chronic disabilities, and what journeys they've gone on as artists, and how the disability has brought richness to the work. Not because disability makes you anything better or worse, or anything like that, but it just brings another voice to to a subject, and I very much believe every voice has to exist. Otherwise, we don't have a democracy, or we don't have a 'we.' We can't exist if all the voices aren't heard. It's disaster. I've gone much deeper into my own sense of story as opposed to that outward story, but every week I get antibodies that are donated by between 10,000 and a 100,000 people. Now I have a consideration that I don't exist on my own, and I'm surviving because of the generosity of all those people who decide to give plasma. I almost feel that I've become swept into this Gaia experience of survival. If everything's possible, it's sort of been a freedom. It's been another incredible freedom. So, I think anything's possible.

Mark Tschaepe: Are there any artists that you think other people have to know about? You talk about the importance of voices being heard. What are some of the artistic voices for you, that people should go out and look up their art?

Rachel Gadsden: I mean, there are many artists, all the expressionistic artists that I was always drawn to at the very beginning. But of course I had that thing about wanting to learn particular skills. The voices that have spoken to me, I mean, there are some very famous ones, but the ones that often that I I touch upon are people that don't necessarily have a huge status but are creating incredible work that brings another dimension. And I mean, there's various artists. Recently there's a fantastic performance artist called Martin O'Brien; who has lived with cystic fibrosis all of his life, and he does some really quite extreme performance work.

He does very graphic performances where he shows the treatments and all the challenges, really pushing the lived experience context to a wide extent. He's a gay man, and touches on queer identity as well. There's lots of elements around that. The violence that occurs through medical treatment. Really interesting work.

Somebody everybody knows is Frida Kahlo. Everybody knows Frida Kahlo. But in fact, Frida Kahlo's deeply important work is often the work that people haven't seen, and it's the brave work that she was making at a point where she was telling very deeply resonating stories about

her own lived experience, at a time when no work was made like that. It's almost grown into being very contemporary art that we all look at. A lot of her medical notes have been released recently, and I've seen exhibitions, and you get that sense, "Why does somebody who have a condition make work like that? What is the gravitas of that work?"

If there was one person who set me on the journey, it was Francis Bacon. When I was about 18, I went to an exhibition. My first one. I didn't go to galleries at all because I grew up abroad, and my parents didn't really know anything about that, so we didn't do that. I walked in. It was *3 Figures at the Base of the Crucifixion*. It's the famous one where you've got those distorted heads, violent breathing, screaming out and teeth. I just remember thinking, "This artist can't breathe. I just know that this artist has probably got something like me, and this is his experience, and this is what he does." I liked his work. I like the sort of the violence that exists within some of the work, the physical violence, the viscerality as well. You know the whole sense of that. You almost feel like you want to eat some of it sometimes, it's really almost as if you are experiencing the art through your throat, as opposed to just you looking at it through your eyes.

Sophie Pretorius, archivist at the Estate of Francis Bacon has done a lot of research because his [Bacon] medical notes have been donated to the Francis Bacon Estate, and she was on the radio one day and said that this was Francis Bacon's experience, and most people knew that maybe had a breathing problem, but not to the extent of his situation, because he was also living at a time when to admit you had anything wrong with you was not macho. Also, he was a gay man and certainly didn't want to show anybody that he had any weaknesses, but she [S. Petrorius) told us the story, and I began to realize he had the same medical experience as me. He was treated at the same hospitals as me. Maybe there's something here that I need to investigate his work, and I'd always been under the impression that the violence in the work was not necessarily to do with his masochistic gay experiences. It was much more to do with something else that was much deeper within him. Then I began to sort of think about how types of violence affect you, and how that might make you express your art or draw your artwork. That was the basis of my PhD at the beginning, but it's gone much further as you go through these. It gets bigger, and then you've got to get small again and so that's almost not relevant. It's much more about what it is that I'm bringing to my work. "Why do I make these performances? And why do I make performances that are fully accessible?" That's obviously to do with my own experience. If somebody's blind and they come to my performance, they aren't going to see anything that I've painted. So, what can I do within that performance to make the blind person know exactly what I'm saying? I then work with composers and work closely with different artists that I believe understand what I want to be expressed, and we work together and create the narratives that way. It's the same if somebody's deaf making sure that if there's a narrative, how are they going to appreciate that narrative? In a video, it's easy: you put in captioning. But how do you do that when you're on stage? And do I want sign language? There are many amazing BSL interpreters who are positioned on the side of the stage interpreting, but I want the interpreter be embedding within the performance? If I'm doing it live, they must be part of the performance. How does that fit into it? I suspect that ultimately my PhD will focus much more on those elements because that's that little bit of extra knowledge that I'm bringing to the subject.

Mark Tschaepe: What for you is one of the most important takeaways that you want people to get from your work, especially about experience and somaesthetic reflection.

Rachel Gadsden: I think that if somebody walks out after looking at my work or out of a performance, that they take a deep breath, and just say, "Life is really precious, and I'm going to try and move forward and live it in the best way I can, because it's so fleeting, and even if we live a hundred years, it's not very long. How can I live? You know, if I am a very unhappy person, how

can I find a way to try and just look outwards and see things slightly differently?" I work with lots of people who have very severe mental health problems––I'm not asking for people to be happy, it's not about that, but I hope they can find some sense of being able to live comfortably in their state. Then I feel that maybe I'd done something. Yeah.

Rachel Gadsden - PostHuman "Live Art & Sound" Performance, University College London, 2024. Still Photograph of Rachel Gadsden. Photo credit: Maria Meyers