



Art

Interview

'We live in heavy times': David Dimbleby on making an art show with his daughter - and why the BBC 'lost its will'**Nadia Khomami**

During lockdown, the TV anchor and his artist daughter Liza expressed their fears by sending each other drawings rather than letters. As the exhibition this inspired opens, he talks about his favourite themes - war, torture, death - and why the BBC needs a full reset



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It is difficult to separate events of great national significance from the voice of [David Dimbleby](#). For decades, the broadcaster was the BBC's anchor for its coverage of historic milestones,

I from US president Richard Nixon's visit to Britain in 1969 to the funerals of Diana, Princess of Wales and, most recently, the queen. He has also been the voice of Remembrance Sundays at the Cenotaph - and helmed no fewer than 10 general elections.

On the night of the EU referendum, it was Dimbleby who spoke those fateful words to the nation: "The British people have spoken and their answer is, 'We're out!'" The scion of a media dynasty and one-time owner of nine local newspapers, he presented BBC's Question Time for 25 years and interviewed almost every prime minister in modern history.

▲▲ *The BBC doesn't have any appetite for art. And nobody has an appetite for television - nobody watches it!*

David Dimbleby

So I'm surprised, when the figure who has so often relied on words to tell us stories about the world, says there are human experiences that defy language.

"There's a kind of blandness about the coverage of war," says Dimbleby. "We know what the reports will be from Gaza or Ukraine. In a strange way, we're kind

of inured to it because we've heard it so often - the bodies blown apart, the people screaming. Everything becomes just another fact: a bomb fell, five children were killed. But drawings can say things that the obvious reporting and pictures can't."



🖼️ Frances Hodgkins, *Mother and Child*, pre 1937. Photograph: Towner Eastbourne

It's a cloudy, late summer afternoon when I meet Dimbleby, now 85, at the Towner gallery in Eastbourne, where he is guest-curating an exhibition with his daughter, the artist and writer Liza Dimbleby, 56. Entitled [Drawing the Unspeakable](#), it features more than 200 works that communicate experiences that are beyond words, from disasters, war and displacement to mental illness, grief, loss, memories and dreams. It also marks the end of Dimbleby's 10-year tenure as chair of the gallery.

When I arrive, the veteran journalist is looking every inch the off-duty news man in a green linen shirt and braces. As he shows me around, he regales me with intriguing tidbits about the gallery and the artists on show. He is exactly as he appears on TV - warm and personable, relaxed yet slightly grand. His anecdotes range across generations. One minute, he is discussing the gallery staff's lunchtime swims in the sea; the next, casually recalling WH Auden's inaugural lecture at Oxford during his first year of university.

Wait, I say, you were present at that lecture? He shrugs and smiles coyly. "Yes, Auden had just been made professor of poetry."

Dimbleby's experience and knowledge materialise frequently over the course of our conversation, but it's when we're sitting with his daughter in the gallery conference room that he seems his most curious. The exhibition was inspired by the pair's exchanges during lockdown when, instead of sending letters, they chose to post drawings. "Drawing is really immediate," says Dimbleby. "It's direct, quick and straight from the heart or mind. It has a vividness and power that we liked."

"Dad always wrote letters and drew for my children," says Liza, who lives in Glasgow and is a lecturer at art schools and universities in Scotland and England, as well as a teacher at the Royal Drawing School in London. "During lockdown, there was no point in writing news of the weather, so we sent drawings to keep each other going."



📷 Andrzej Jackowski, Study for Portrait of Dr Groddeck of Baden-Baden, 1978. Photograph: © The Artist/Towner Eastbourne

How did they choose the show's theme? "There was so much going on," says Liza. "Not just in our lives with people dying [Dimbleby's brother, the sculptor Nicholas Dimbleby, died of motor neurone disease earlier this year] but also in the world with wars. There was this sense of being in unspeakable times." They wanted to equip people with the confidence to treat the visual as its own language, one that can hold complex feelings and take you out of the "argument-rebuttal-argument-rebuttal" cycle of speech so prevalent today.

“Drawing feels like a necessary resource for people right now,” Liza continues. “But it can be very devalued. Even in exhibitions, people gravitate to the text first because they feel nervous or uncertain about looking at the work. But every child draws before they can write. You see before you can process language. [The French poet] Baudelaire said genius is recovering the childlike vision - and this show is about getting back to that. There are no rules.”

Among the contemporary and historic artists included in the exhibition are David Bomberg, Emma Talbot, Tracey Emin, Louise Bourgeois, Barbara Hepworth, Madge Gill and James Gillray. Accompanying each drawing will also be a written dialogue between David and Liza about the work. I ask David if he feels a particular affinity with any of the themes. “Torture. War. Death.” That’s pretty heavy-going stuff, I say. “Well, we’re living in pretty heavy-going times.”



📷 ‘Dad always wrote letters and he always drew for my children’ ... David Dimbleby and Liza. Photograph: Sarah Lee/The Guardian

His favourite work is an untitled charcoal drawing from Peter de Francia’s 1969 series *Disparates*. “It’s the most brutal picture of a general sitting at a table with a glass of wine,” he explains. “Opposite him is a semi-naked woman with her legs apart. And then you notice, at the top, there’s a prisoner, completely bound, trussed up, hanging like a chandelier from a hook on a chain. It just summed up the horror and mayhem of our times. In every dictatorship, from Putin’s Russia to Chile and Argentina in the old days, casual cruelty has been used to enforce the leader’s will. Until, mercifully, their turn comes.”

There are some standout works from unknown artists, too, including several drawings by a group of refugees in France, who document their traumatic experiences. “I was so moved when I saw them,” Liza says. “One is of these stick men in rubber boats, but it’s really vivid. We see all these horror photos, but it’s so powerful to have someone drawing, with their own

hand, their crossing. It's like Goya's series *The Disasters of War*. Underneath his drawings of horror - that figure hanging from a tree - he'd simply write, 'I saw this.'

Liza is one of Dimbleby's three children with his first wife, the cookery writer Josceline Dimbleby. Although she comes from an eminent broadcasting lineage, it is art that ignites her. Dressed in T-shirt and Converse, she clearly enjoys debating each work with her father.



📷 'A lot of his drawings come from the unconscious' ... *Family*, 1969, by Ken Kiff. Photograph: Ken Kiff Estate/Towner Eastbourne

One artist central to the exhibition is Ken Kiff, particularly his 1969 drawing *Family*, which depicts a bride and husband ripping apart a third person. In the accompanying dialogue, Liza explains Kiff was “in psychoanalysis and so a lot of his drawings come from the unconscious”. David says: “Terrible mistake to be in psychoanalysis.” Liza replies: “That’s what you think. But for a lot of artists, it’s very generative.”

David, who now lives near Eastbourne in rural East Sussex, says his decade at the Towner has been “a refreshing change” from broadcasting. Having previously made forays into the arts by hosting the BBC series *A Picture of Britain*, celebrating British and Irish poetry, music and landscapes, and architectural follow-up *How We Built Britain*, is he now feeling inspired to do more?

“I’d like to,” he says, “but the BBC doesn’t have any appetite for that at the moment. Nobody has an appetite for art. Nobody has an appetite for television - nobody watches it!” As someone who has twice put himself forward to be chairman of the BBC, and once as director-general, it’s clear David has concerns about its future. The BBC, he says, seems to have “lost its will”. It’s under “terrific pressure from Netflix and Disney and all those people who are not only draining away their audience, but also the money and talent. They have smaller and smaller budgets.”



David Bomberg, *The Family (Study for Ghetto Theatre II)*, 1919. Photograph: Ben Uri Gallery and Museum/Estate of David Bomberg/Ben Uri Collection

He hopes the BBC will respond with a full “reset”, focusing on its World Service, news, politics and the arts. “The argument has always been, in my lifetime, that you have to do lots of popular stuff to bring audiences to the serious stuff. I don’t think that’s actually ever been true. People didn’t come to Monitor [an arts programme hosted by one-time BBC grandee Huw Wheldon] because they’d watched Top of the Pops. You have to work out what entitles you to

take money from licence-payer or taxpayer. And it's not that you do *Strictly Come Dancing*, because anyone can do that. You must offer something unique, something streamers won't touch. I think the BBC has to go through a big cultural change."

We talk about other big cultural shifts, including the way we now consume information. Much of it comes from social media - and much of it is untrue, which has huge consequences. In this day and age, could there ever be another [David Dimbleby](#)? He laughs. "It's a very interesting question. Is the day of the anchor over? In the arts, I would say certainly there's still a space for it. But with news? It's difficult."

Before I leave, Dimbleby has a question for me. "Do you draw? You should make a drawing of this interview." I'll give it a go, I say. "We might even include it in the exhibition," says Liza with a laugh.

- [Drawing the Unspeakable](#) is at [Towner, Eastbourne](#), from 5 October to 27 April
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