

## Arts

Artist Annie Lovejoy left Stroud after her son, aged three, was killed by a car. Now she has returned with a haunting exhibition devoted to his memory. She talks to **Simon Hattenstone**

# Love letters to my dead child

**W**e're looking through a keyhole at a distorted photograph. "I hate that picture of Davin," says the artist Annie Lovejoy. I can't see a face, just a computer-generated blanchmange of colours and shapes, like an amorphous teddy bear. "Yes, there is a teddy bear there, but you must be able to see him. Here, look in the catalogue." And suddenly a little boy's face comes into focus. If you turn away for a second and look back it has turned into a teddy bear again. The image is clever, beautiful, haunting. Why does she hate the picture of Davin? "Because he's wearing the clothes he died in."

Davin died 16 years ago. He was three-and-a-half when he stepped into the road. The horrific accident is fixed in the memory of many people in Wotton. If they didn't know Davin themselves, most people knew people who knew he was. Wotton, near Stroud, is that kind of place — small, intimate, communal.

Back in 1982 Annie Lovejoy ran a sewing business, knocking out clever little things for children and theatres. After Davin's death, friends were hugely supportive. They arranged the funeral, helped look after her three other children, and organised informal services at the local Quaker Meeting House. But when Lovejoy tried to return to work, she found she couldn't. Every time she sat at the sewing

machine, she would see the accident again. She calls it an internal movie. "Right through the process of grieving the movie was triggered. I discovered through time that the best thing to do is cry, but at the time I couldn't do that. So the first thing I did was go away."

Lovejoy packed herself and the kids off to Portugal. Three months later she returned to Britain, moved to Bristol, and a new life to explore her first love, art. She lost touch with most of her Stroud friends. But now she is back, remembering her love, and her loss, with an exhibition called *Return*. She says it's a primarily a tribute, a thank you, to all the people who helped her at the time of Davin's death, but it would also seem to be part of her own healing process.

"The show could be sentimental and self-indulgent. In fact, it is anything but. Lovejoy has taken Davin's death and used it as a starting point for more abstract reflections on loss. Many visitors who knew Davin have told her they wanted to see more photographs of him, more evidence of his life. She told them that is not the purpose of her exhibition. "It's not about pictures of him, it's more to do with the idea of losing someone, how you may feel them in the wind or on the water." Anyway, says Lovejoy, it would have been impossible — after his death, she got rid of all the photographs of him, except for the one she hates that is morphed with the teddy.

The blood red walls of the Prema

Arts Centre seem even more shocking in the gentle country torpor of Stroud. It intends to shock — Prema may be rural, but it promotes the radical arts. Like Lovejoy herself, Prema believes that art, however difficult, should reflect and embrace the local community. It used to be a Baptist church, and battered grave-stones slump in its grounds. In front of the entrance lies a plot of tired, wilting daffodils. Sometimes it's hard to know where reality ends and art begins. The flowers are an exhibit called *Beyond Control*. "I couldn't depend on them to do what I wanted, which I think is quite significant, because I'm a real control freak." Why would a control freak hand over her fate to nature? Is she playing God? "No, not really, because you can count on nature to surprise you."

We're sitting outside, enjoying the cold sun and birdsong. Lovejoy is huddled into her leather jacket, warming herself with her roll-your-own cigarettes. Her body and voice are impos-

sibly girlish, her face handsome but weathered. "He was picking daffodils with his friend May just before he died. I suppose our life was an idyll. I'd be telling him not to pick too many. You know the daffodils hit their prime on the opening day of the exhibition and died the day after. *What is that about?*"

It's not the only spooky element of *Return*. Upstairs, past the flickering video memorial candle accompanied by the text, "An average of 10 people a day die in road accidents", there is a screen showing film of more daffodils. The screen reflects the flowers on to the wall around the window that looks over the hill to where Davin was killed. It forms a wreath around the window. Lovejoy says it's a coincidence she wasn't aware of. As the daffs weave and bobble, we hear the birds twittering like a Greek chorus and the constant hum of traffic in the background. The image is gentle and

life-affirming, but the noise is disconcerting. We're waiting for the screech of an accident which never comes. "I filmed the daffodil field for three days in a row. It was only when I got back that I heard the noise of the background traffic. That was painful."

Beside the front door, there is a spade dug into in a mound of soil. A tiny rectangle of steel has been cut out and replaced by a video screen showing 15 adults, a girl and a dog digging, straying artlessly in front of the camera, hugging and digging some more. We're never sure what they are digging (it turns out they are planting the daffodils.) The piece is entrancing — I can't help wandering back to check their progress.

The work is typical of the way that Lovejoy marries nature and technology. She says she hates the way she has been labelled a digital artist because of her work with computers — her art is more varied than that.

What does unite her work is its sense of place, its rootedness — in every sense. Previous projects include a 300-metre text sculpture in grass, *Watermark*. Another grass sculpture called *Pause* is literally a pause in the landscape. She says it is an example of her ambivalent relationship with technology. *Pause* alludes to video recorders and was produced when she tired of technology — although even then it was mapped out on computer. "Technology is seductive," she says, "but a lot of work you see using it lacks

content. I like to feel I use technology and there can be something emotive there." It's too cold now. She is shivering into her jacket and the wind has blown away her voice, so we go indoors to the exhibition. The main piece is a sofa topped with soil, and hotwater bottles are plopped on top like cushions. A web of roots covers them like a bird's nest. In the centre Lovejoy has cut holes that hold magnifying glasses over images, writings, water. To see into the bottles you are forced to kneel, to get a really good look you have to dirty your hands on the soil.

It's voyeuristic, tactile and moving beyond words. One bottle contains a teddy bear cut into wheatgrass. Next to it is a bottle with water bubbling over Lovejoy's text. The bubbles catch stray words. We see the one remaining, untouched photograph of Davin — his grandmother protected it.

He is with his friend, May, his back to us, wearing a rainbow-striped shirt, staring into a field, oblivious to everything. We can't see his face, but we somehow know it is expressing wonder. The accompanying text reads "It's 15 years later/your gran just sent a photo of you/I've never seen it before/you're looking through the gate/out to the field/to the path/to the road/that was to take you away."

Does the exhibition upset her? "No, not at all. It's been an amazing process. It's opened up communication I've not had for a long time, I've

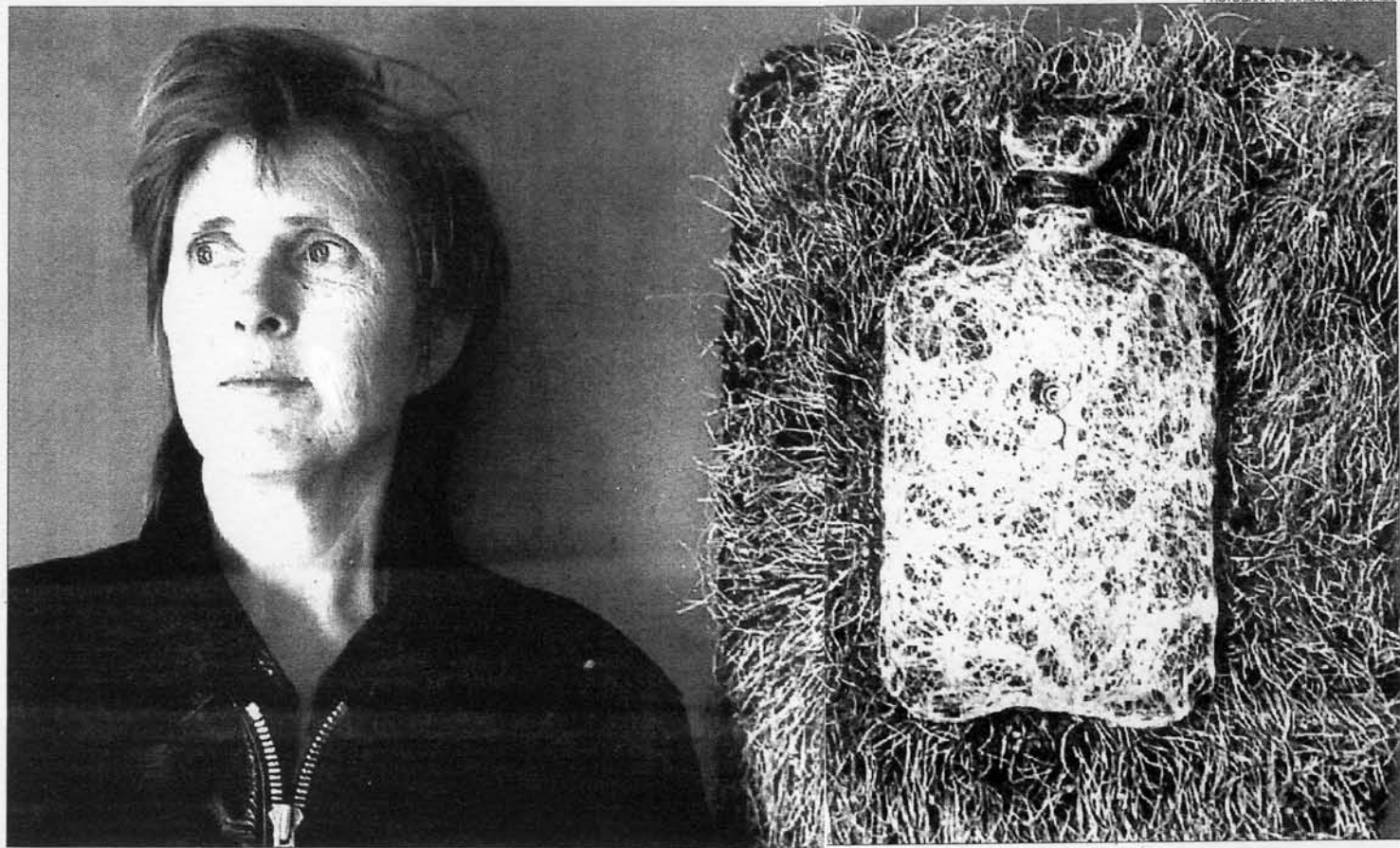
**Comforters... Lovejoy forces you to look at her water bottles up close, to get your hands dirty in the soil**

been sent images by people who have Davin's drawings, all sorts of stuff." She says *Return* is as much a celebration of life as about death. She points me to the black-and-white photograph of her pregnant friend, stunning in its size and starchiness.

So *Return* has been cathartic? She lights another roll-up and says that she's knackered, could do with a Guinness and when *am* I going to stop asking questions. "Yes, it's been cathartic in the reunion with things. I don't actually remember stuff that happened around the time — it's a traumatic amnesia. I don't remember names of people and events from the time. I'm finding things out, putting pieces of the jigsaw together. I think people who aren't familiar with the story of Davin or weren't there at the time relate to it with their own personal losses. But for me the most important thing is a sense of continuity, the fact that things do carry on."

Parts of *Return* are funereal. "Is that because the flowers are dead?" she says. "Yes, it is a bit. I suppose just using soil has those connotations, doesn't it?" Lovejoy says she is going to replant the dead wheatgrass and in a few days time the life/death cycle will turn again.

*Return* is at the Prema Arts Centre, Uley, Gloucester, till May 10.



PHOTOGRAPH: CHRISTOPHER JONES

This is a montage of Davin and a teddy bear. 'He's got on the clothes he died in. I hate this picture'

