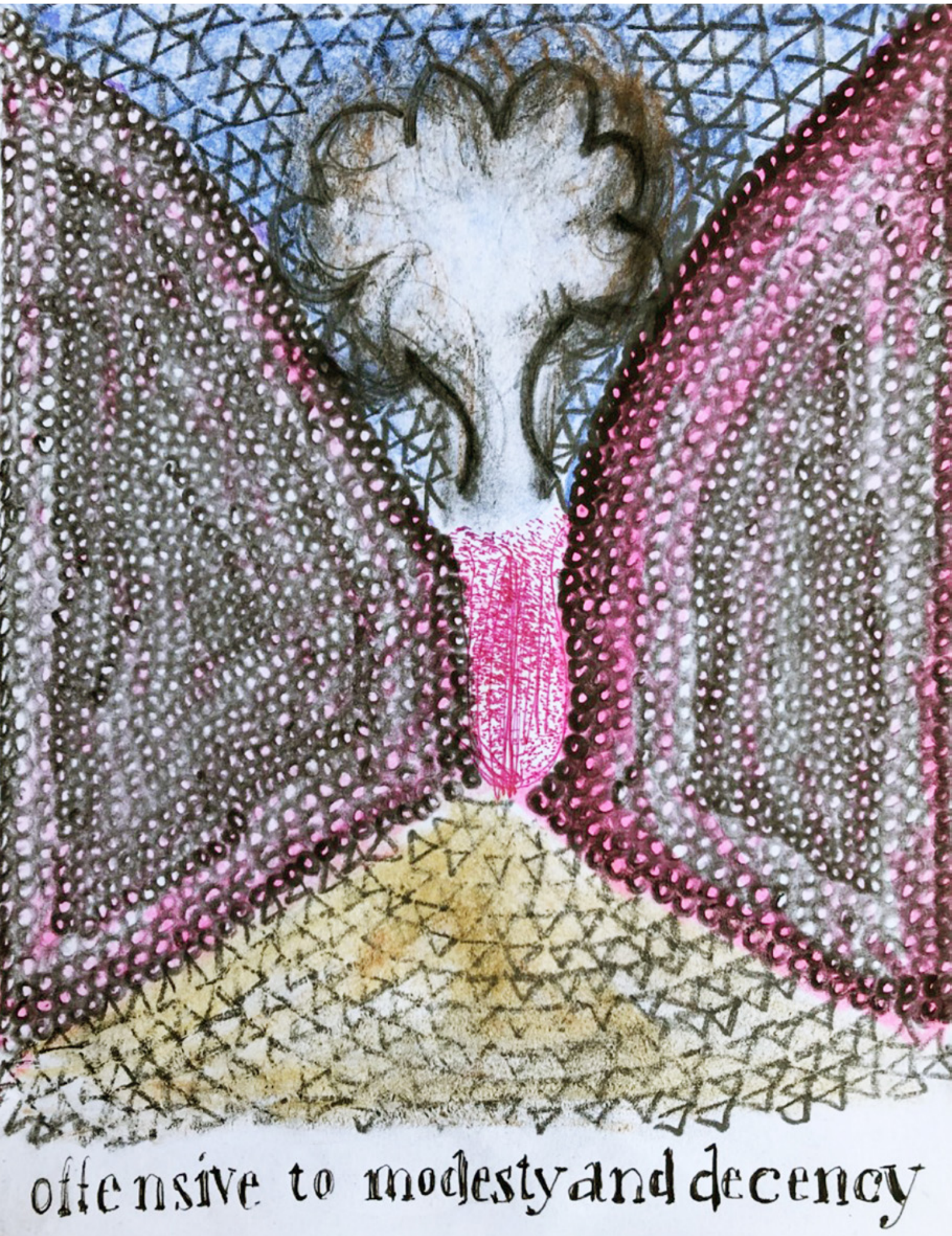
Artists Newsletter
Issue 2/4
Supporting Visual Artists since 1980



Nicola Bealing, *Let water form its lament*, 25x25cm, oil on wood, 2019.

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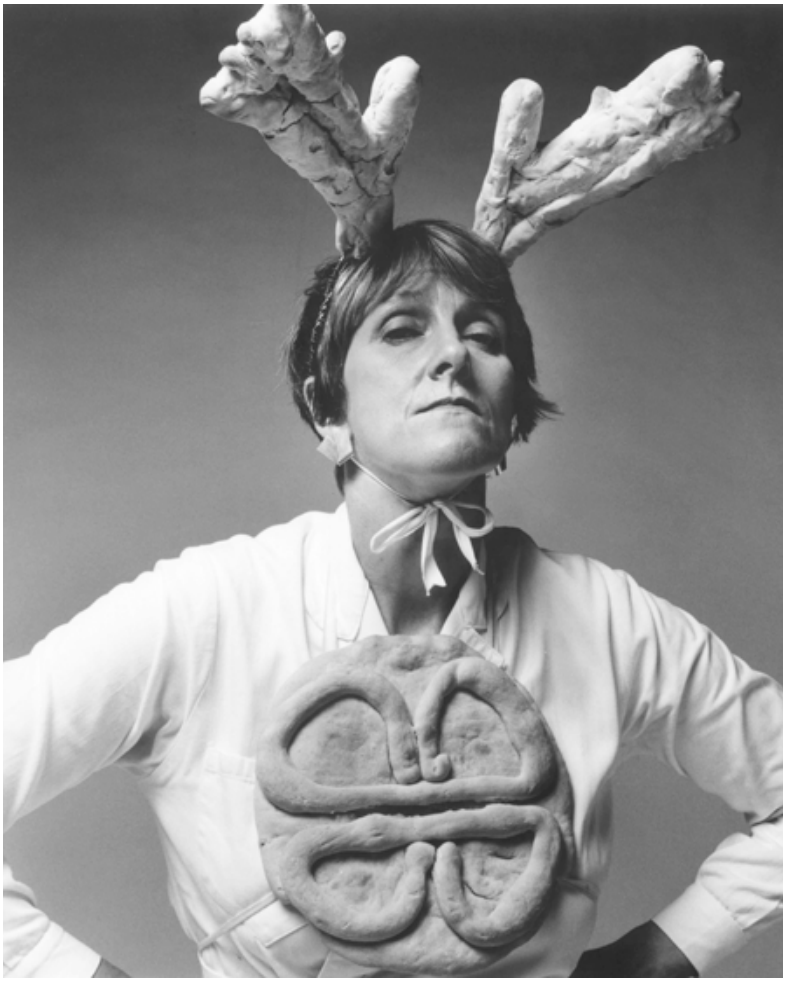
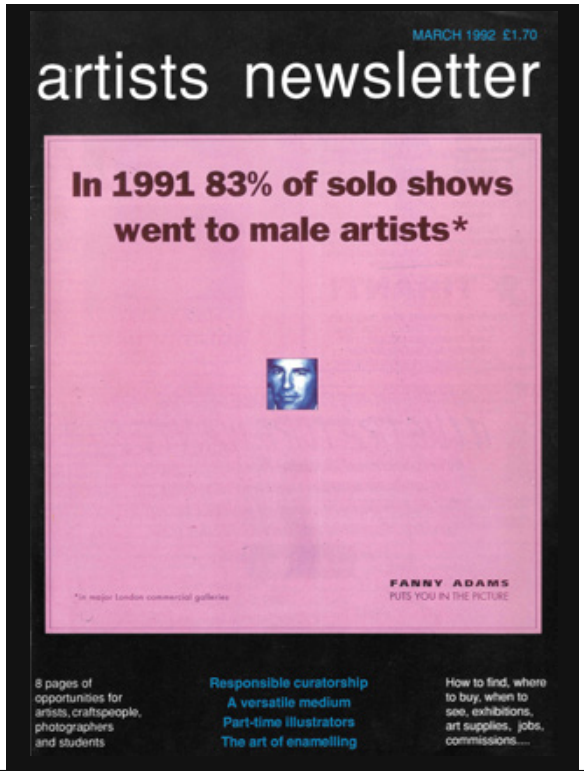


Bobby Baker, *Cook Dems*, 1990. Photo: Andrew Whittuck

Editors' Introduction

Artists Catherine Bertola and Rosie Morris, this issue's guest editors, explain how the barriers women artists face have inspired and shaped Artists Newsletter #2.



▲ Cover of Artists Newsletter, March 1992

This publication presents a public space to, without apology, make the female voice louder. It gives a platform to women artists and writers, highlighting less visible, marginalised and precarious practices.

When discussing initial ideas for this publication, our references ranged from the 18th century Bluestocking Society to the contemporary feminist art collective Guerrilla Girls. We were drawn to examples of women working collectively and collaboratively to support, nurture and lift one another.

Yet, as we read aloud Guerrilla Girls' 1988 poster, 'The Advantages of being a Women Artist', we found ourselves laughing, ironically, at how some of the statements still ring true, four decades later. That got us thinking: what needs to be said now, and how might we draw on a-n's own 40-year history, and in particular – with this being the second of four Artist Newsletter, each reflecting a decade of a-n's life – the 1990s.

Our research saw us delve into a-n's archive, taking that particular decade as a starting point to ask: what has changed since that time? Our own differing experiences of the '90s recall a period when it was the norm for women to be treated as objects (remember *American Pie*?) or conform to a "ladette" system in order to compete; a culture in which the idea of feminism was largely unspoken.

A little about us. We first met on a drizzly day in August 2020. Catherine was being interviewed by Rosie for her publication Artist/Mum, sharing her experience of motherhood and the impact it had on her as an artist. With 10 years between us, it was disheartening to feel that nothing had shifted, that the difficulties we faced were the same. Motherhood is a huge factor, but by no means the only barrier women artists face. The interview sparked subsequent conversations and a mutual desire to advocate against unconscious bias and underrepresentation of women artists today.

The November 2020 launch of the Freelands Foundation annual research report, into the 'Representation of Female Artists in Britain During 2019', convinced us that it was important to bring the voice of its author, Dr Kate McMillan, into this publication. We asked her to present the facts about the current landscape for women artists in relation to the '90s in which she trained, but couched in her own lived experience as an artist.

With five more commissioned texts from writers, curators and art historians, plus two intergenerational conversations between artists and three artworks offering contemporary responses to the Guerrilla Girls' posters, we have sought to give voice to some of the barriers that women artists face, as well as looking to how we might challenge and confront a system that often feels stacked against us.

We hope this Artists Newsletter will offer confidence to women artists to speak out and realise that discrimination in all its guises is not isolated but endemic. We also hope to prompt those working with artists to continually check the decisions and assumptions they are making, and the support and opportunities they offer. Perhaps, out of all the chaos of the last year, there is an opportunity to rethink the structures that are available to us as artists, curators, gallerists and art writers.

Curating, nurturing, supporting

a-n CEO Julie Lomax introduces Artists Newsletter #2

Cover of Artists Newsletter, March 1995

From its beginning, a-n has questioned accepted ideas around who makes art and how. In its first decade, the 1980s, issues around class, race, sexuality and gender were ever-present in Artists Newsletter, brought into sharp relief by a political climate fuelled by social and economic conflict. From the miners' strike to nuclear disarmament, women were front and centre, challenging the status quo. In contemporary art, too – the first fight for many women artists being the battle for visibility in a male-dominated art world.

In the 1990s, of course, those issues didn't go away. In fact despite appearances – Rachel Whiteread becoming the first woman to win the Turner Prize in 1993, the first all-female Turner Prize shortlist in 1997, Tracey Emin – the lot of women artists remained pretty dire. As the cover of the March 1992 Artists Newsletter incredulously states: 'In 1991, 83% of solo shows went to male artists'.

For most women artists, positive change was happening at a snail's pace; any progress that was made can be measured by acts of kindness and sharing by women in the arts. In this issue, Isabel Castro Jung says, "my experience is that every time I share, everything multiplies". There were many women 'sharers' and 'multipliers' who taught, curated, wrote about and nurtured the careers of women artists: Jill Morgan and Sarah Edge, curators who placed radical feminism at the heart of their programming at Rochdale Art Gallery; Phyllida Barlow, artist, whose incredible legacy from over 40 years teaching in art schools is immeasurable; Gilane Tawadros, the founding Director of Iniva, Institute of International Visual Arts, which importantly gave a sense of place and a platform to artists of colour; and the women gallerists Jane Hamlyn, Sadie Coles and Maureen Paley. Reflecting on the period, it is also impossible not to recall the great and very unexpected loss of Helen Chadwick, an exceptional and generous artist and teacher whose radical issue-based practice continues to be a source of inspiration for women artists today.

This was also a time defined by digital technology, and in 1991 the World Wide Web was a new radical cartography occupied by early-adopting women artists and cyber feminists. Artists Newsletter championed radical practices and women artists throughout the 1990s, featuring exhibitions such as 'Intimate Distance', a group touring exhibition in 1991 with work by Maxine Walker, Ingrid Pollard, Mona Hatoum, Sutapa Biswas and Zarina Bhimji.

As this issue's guest editors Catherine Bertola and Rosie Morris have pointed out, the period was also the era of 'ladette' culture and the deafening klaxon 'girl power'. Some might argue that contemporary art had its own lad/ladette moment with the YBAs. At the same time, there were important female artists who bridged the '80s and '90s with their thoughtful, challenging work. Artists like Lubaina Himid and Bobby Baker, for example, both of whom are featured here as part of a-n's '40 Years 40 Artists' series of interviews by art writer Louisa Buck. (For more Q&As with artists spanning a-n's 40 years, visit www.a-n.co.uk/an40).

This Artists Newsletter is the second in a series of four publications, presented as part of a-n's 40th anniversary celebrations. Catherine and Rosie have drawn on a-n's '90s archive, personal experience as mothers and artists, and a wealth of contemporary research, activism and art to create a rich exploration of where things are now for women artists, and where they need to be. As this publication makes clear, there is much work still to be done – a-n remains committed to the challenge.

Contextualising the statistical landscape

Re-visioning cultural ecologies of care

Artist and academic Dr Kate McMillan, author of the 'Representation of Female Artists in Britain 2019 Annual Research Report' commissioned by the Freelands Foundation, considers today's landscape for female artists, reflecting on her own lived experience to consider what a flourishing cultural ecology could look like.

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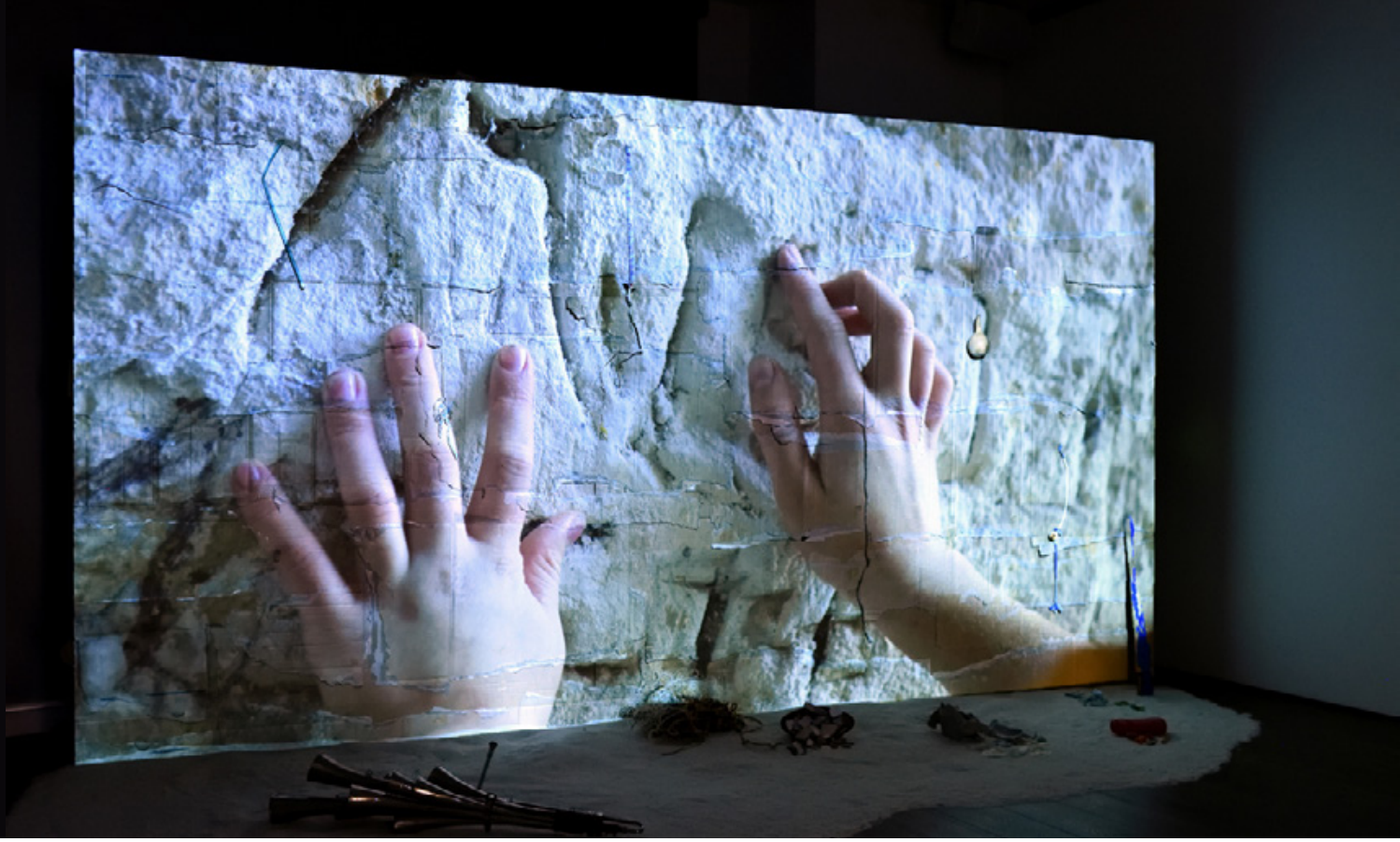
Kate McMillan, *The Past is Singing in our Teeth*, performance, mixed media, 2018.



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Kate McMillan, *The Lost Girl*, installation detail/still, 7.15 minute HD projection onto cardboard, beach sand, found debris, two-channel sound developed in collaboration with James Green, 2020.

Many of the female artists I speak with testify to the impact of gender on their career trajectories. Key themes emerge: unwanted implicit/explicit sexual advancements in their early careers; the impact of class and financial circumstances on their ability to withstand precarity; the devastating impact of having children and its toll on both personal and social freedoms and advancement; and finally, the invisibility that marks their middle years. If a woman can withstand these gendered obstacles over a lifetime, they may be lucky enough to experience a resurgence in their very late career.

Artists share with me their experiences of micro-aggressions, innuendo, misplaced words and lost opportunities, which in and of themselves don't seem much. It feels almost neurotic to mention them, they tell me. Younger artists often haven't noticed yet, or are able to dismiss specific incidents as singular or insignificant. But the accumulative effect of small things is witnessed in the data I have been collecting and analysing over the last five years.

The annual Freelands Foundation report on 'The Representation of Female Artists in Britain' which I author, forthcoming research on gender inequality in London commercial galleries and a current project I am co-authoring (with Dr Lauren England) on the impact of COVID-19 on female artists, have become platforms that evidence what most of us already know – that our gender is one of the most defining aspects of our career journey. Despite the depressing gender disparities uncovered through the research I undertake, there is also an enormous relief in these numbers – they bear witness to our lived realities across the UK and the world.

In the early '90s during my BA, I undertook a module called Feminism, Spirituality and Art. I recall standing up in the seminar and declaring that my gender had not impacted my life. Of course, this was ridiculous – even the fact that I was at art school was by its very nature, gendered. Then, as is now, more than 65% of art school students were women[1].

This module was run by the only lecturer with a PhD in the school, Dr Ann Schilo (she was called Dr Frock by her colleagues). It was one of the few times in my undergraduate degree that I was ever consistently shown work by female artists.

At the time I felt incredibly despondent about my career choice, and I recall bemoaning the pointlessness of my hard work to my stepfather. I pointed to the fact that most people couldn't even name one female artist. He was genuinely perplexed and reassured me that my tenacity would change everything. His naivety is a lovely memory, and I think of it often. Of course, he didn't realise that it wasn't about having tenacity – centuries of female artists had had tenacity. It was about a systemic discriminatory view that women are unable to produce great art, and an historical canon and art market that continues to reinforce this view.

I was born in Britain in 1974, four years after the 1970 Equal Pay Act. Now, 50 years later, the gender pay gap in the UK is still 15.5%[2]. For many female artists, this is reflected in the anecdotal experiences of watching their

male peers miraculously succeed and surpass them. In global art centres such as London, where there are arguably many more opportunities for artists, one thing is certain: the art market is no friend of the female artist. As my most recent Freelands Foundation report notes: 'Of the 112 artists whose works were sold in the three Christie's evening sales in 2019, only 14 were women.' Unfortunately for many, these statistics reinforce the idea that good artists are more likely to be men.

When I was seven, my family moved to Australia. Growing up as a woman required constant resilience and resistance. It was, and still is, a deeply masculine culture, in part due to the disproportionately male population after the British invasion in 1788. For every three men there was only one woman well into the 18th century[3]. The development of explicit sexism as a result of this social context, had endemic consequences. Yet this also meant gender inequality was far easier to name, and this had direct impacts on social policy and progress. Partial women's suffrage was granted in 1902, decades before the UK and other European nations[4]. Importantly, this experience taught me to speak up and fight.

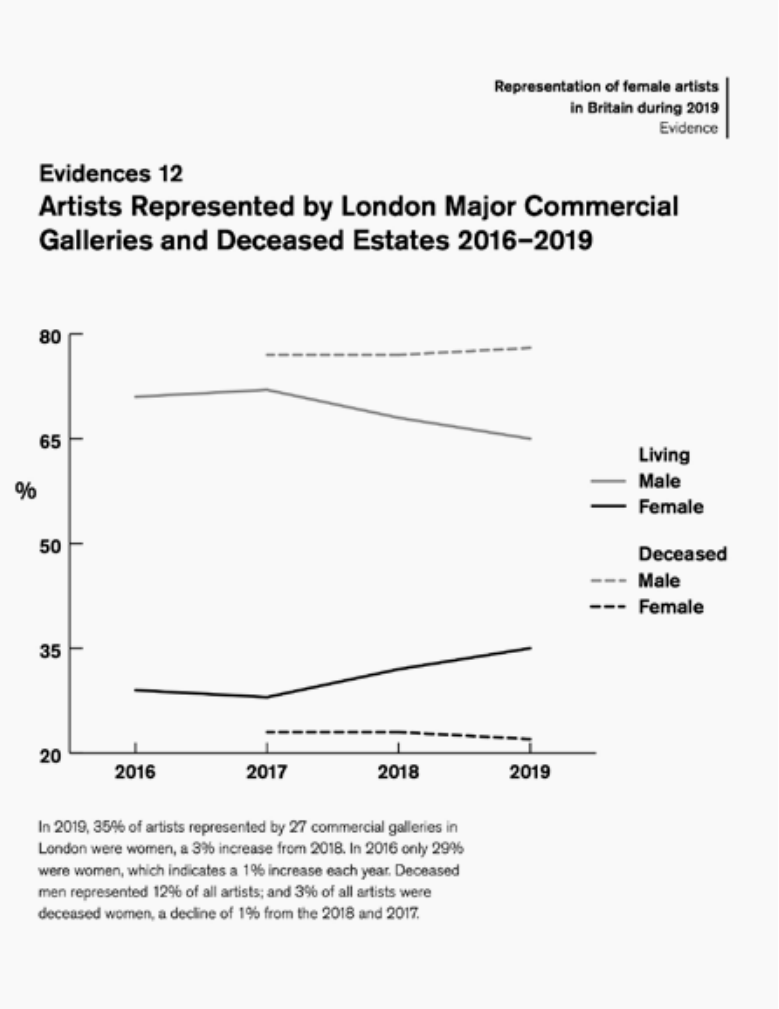
I realised, particularly after moving back to Britain in my late 30s, that, by contrast, it is much harder to fight something you cannot see. Sexism operates very differently in the UK – it is hard to call-out and intersects with class in particular ways. This often renders systemic sexism slippery and difficult to pinpoint. I quickly realised that the insistence on providing my 'title' for every single document, was also a way to ascertain my marital status and locate me according to my relationship with men. Never have I been so grateful for my doctoral degree.

Those early years after moving to London with my partner and three young children were really difficult. We had very few connections and opportunities for work. Looking back, had we predicted just how hard those first few years would be, perhaps we would not have come. One of our steepest learning curves was to confront the startling influence of the commercial sector on the cultural ecology of the global north. At the time I was completing a large-scale project called 'The Moment of Disappearance'. It was a five-channel film projection and incorporated a new score written by Cat Hope, played and recorded by the London Improvisors Orchestra. The production was fully funded and included a pretty decent publication. I contacted dozens of organisations who I thought may be interested in presenting the work after its debut at Carriageworks in Sydney. Almost no-one responded to my email.

However, a director of a well-known UK museum agreed to speak with me over the phone. He told me that it was highly unlikely anyone would pick up my show without support from a commercial gallery. I was grateful for the advice – more candid than anyone had been before or since – but I was also deeply shocked, mostly by my own naivety. I also began to consider what the long-term implications of this were for the cultural ecology. Amidst dwindling arts council budgets and a government hostile to the true value of the arts, what did this reliance on the commercial sector mean? How does this affect the institutional legacy of our cultural organisations?

My interest in statistics was first prompted by an Instagram post from Lisson Gallery for the inaugural opening of their New York gallery in 2016. A widely anticipated solo show by senior (and recently 'discovered') artist Carmen Herrera was programmed for their first exhibition. Yet the social media post, titled, 'just a few of our artists', displayed a group of a dozen or so men, with Herrera in the middle. It was shocking by anyone's standards. Jerry Saltz reposted it with the title 'It's a Sausage Party at Lisson!'. His post was removed the next day, and in a private message with Saltz where he justified the removal, he told me that Lisson do in fact represent many great female artists. Giving Saltz the benefit of the doubt, I went to Lisson's website and found that of the 51 artists they represented at the time, only 11 were women.

After this I fastidiously recorded the gender ratios of over 100 London commercial galleries and repeated this



Evidences 12, Artists Represented by London Major Commercial Galleries and Deceased Estates 2016-19. Courtesy: Kate McMillan, Freelands Foundation and Gorm at Bullet Design

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Kate McMillan installing, 2018, for the Rohkunstbau Festival, Scloss Liberose, Germany curated by Mark Gizbourne, 2018. Photo: Jan Brockhaus

again in 2019. There was barely a 3% improvement over three years, even amidst the #metoo movement, with an average of 28.29% in 2016 and 31.2% in 2019[5].

Fortunately, we have moved on from when very few female artists were represented in museum and gallery programmes. However, it is dangerous to assume progress is linear, as we have already seen declines in recent years, after a brief spike in 2016. There is also an assumption that women who have progressed to senior roles in the arts are allies. My research into commercial galleries suggests that women are as poorly represented by female-led galleries as they are by male-led galleries. What is a far larger determining factor, is profitability. The larger the gallery, the less women on the books.

Living with the details of these statistics in the forefront of my mind has required some mental adjustment. The long-term effects of working in a sector that is statistically unlikely to support you has been exhausting at times. I often joke that growing up in my family of origin has prepared me for the constant rejection of the art world! Jokes aside, there is some truth to the cut-throat environment that defines success. All artists, men included, have to endure the precarity and unpredictably of the art world. An artist's ability to weather these conditions is a big indicator of success and failure. Therefore, it is important to recognise that the appalling gender inequality in our sector is part of a large system of oppression.

Our challenge is therefore bigger than simply replacing the canon of art history with a fuller and more accurate picture of historic creativity and endeavour – although that is certainly part of it. Challenging the very insistence of canonical thinking seems to be even more essential. An artist's contribution is more than simply achieving a place in the cultural memory and history books of nations. For this year's Freelands report, Hettie Judah's essay concluded with a quote from one of the artists she interviewed. They noted that 'the secret is that this is the best life. Fucking hard work, but full, messy and beautiful'. I believe that within this statement lies a vision for the future.

What if the truth of an artist's life could be revealed? What if precarity could be communicated, without the mythology? What if the months, sometimes years, of being unable to make work could be told? What if the compromises, mistakes and poor choices could be spoken about honestly? What if fictitious descriptions of singular genius, bereft of all of life's complexity, were not so intrinsically linked to opportunity and success? What if the daily juggle of life, of mothering, of pulls from all directions didn't need to be concealed by the perpetual falsehoods of uninterrupted days in the studio playing genius? What if these conditions were celebrated as a path to creativity and empathic thinking? What if the art market believed in the 'full, messy and beautiful' lives we actually lived? Better still, what if the State did, and consequently we were not franticly running from poverty all the time? What if the art world was not simply a mirror that reflects and amplifies the injustice faced elsewhere?

There needs to be a deep systemic re-evaluation of the hierarchical and exclusive nature of our sector. Gender is one part of that puzzle. We must question the constant need to evidence growth on a planet drowning in things we don't need. At what point does the outpouring

of artistic 'product' differ from all the other luxury goods? Is it possible to slow down, make less; and by default, include more? What is missing is not more art, but more difference. Many artists know that the real value lies in the creative life itself.

What would a flourishing cultural ecology look like? I think women are at the centre of a new type of life – the market just hasn't put a price on it yet. Women are living and creating healthy, nurturing creative ecologies all around them. They are not just making objects to be bought and sold; they are writing poems, having conversations, growing food, walking and singing, collaborating and connecting with neighbours. During COVID-19 they are disproportionately our teachers, nurses, relatives, friends and neighbours ensuring we are ok in these grim and deadly times. Our communities, ecosystems and homes need deep-healing, and the lives of our female artists provide us with many clues about what a restorative future might look like. Looking at the statistics for our sector should remind us of the deep imbalance we have been taught to tolerate and compel us to transform the creative ecosystems we live in.

Dr Kate McMillan is an artist based in London. She works across media including film, sound, installation, sculpture, and performance. Her work addresses a number of key ideas including the role of art in attending to the impacts of the Anthropocene, lost, and systemically forgotten histories of women, and the residue of colonial violence in the present. In addition to her practice, McMillan also addresses these issues in her activist and written work. She is the author of the annual report 'Representation of Female Artists in Britain' commissioned by the Freelands Foundation. Her rece nt academic monograph 'Contemporary Art & Unforgetting in Colonial Landscapes: Empire of Islands' (2019, Palgrave Macmillan) explored the work of a number of first nation female artists from the global south, whose work attends to the aftermath of colonial violence in contemporary life. McMillan is currently a Lecturer in Contemporary Art at King's College, London. Between 1982 and 2012, she was based in Australia. More of her work can be viewed here: www.katemcmillan.net

[1] McMillan, K (2020) 'Representation of Female Artists in Britain'. Freelands Foundation p 13.

[2] ONS UK Gender Pay Gap (accessed 4/01/2021)

[3] Grosjean, P (2018) What Australia's convict past reveals about women, men, marriage and work. (accessed 18/01/2021)

[4] Aboriginal peoples were not given the vote until 1967, and racial violence and oppression intersects with gender oppression in devastating ways. Antoinette Braybrook discusses this here: Australia's Violent Crisis

[5] McMillan, K & England, L (forthcoming) 'Gendered Futures in Contemporary Art', Cultural Trends

Nicola Bealing, *The Devil Out-witted by a Woman*, 80x100cm, monoprint, 2018. Bealing was one of the artists interviewed for an essay featured in the annual Freelands Foundation report.

Her hair, like histories, flattened, ironed and erased, 29x37cm, watercolour, gouache, pencil, pencil crayon on paper, 2016.

Jade Montserrat is an artist based in Scarborough, England. She works through performance, drawing, painting, film, installation, sculpture, print and text. She is the recipient of the Stuart Hall Foundation Scholarship which supports her PhD (via MPhil) at IBAR, UCLan, and the development of her work from her black diasporic perspective in the North of England.

Her Rainbow Tribe project – a combination of historical and contemporary manifestations of Black Culture from the perspective of the Black Diaspora – is central to the ways she is producing a body of work, including *No Need For Clothing* and its iterations, as well as her performance work *Revue*, that was presented as a 24-hour live performance at SPILL Festival of Performance (2018). Solo exhibitions include The Bluecoat, Liverpool, (2019) touring to Humber Street Gallery (2019). Commissions include Art on the Underground Winter Night Tube cover (2018) and the Future Collect project with Iniva and Manchester Art Gallery (2020).

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To touch the soul of others

In the first of two intergenerational conversations, we asked artist Clémentine Bedos to select an inspirational artist with experience practicing in the 1990s. Bedos chose Isabel Castro Jung, who she shares a studio with in Staffordshire Street Studios, London.

Bedos begins the conversation with a heart-opening meditation inspired by Tantra in order to calm the nervous system and connect deeply through slow synchronised breathing, a looping palm-to-heart touch and a soft gaze.

▲

Isabel Castro Jung with Clémentine Bedos, *The Impossible Kiss* (part of Covijo-99 project). Photo: Thom Bridge

Clémentine Bedos: Firstly, what is the most important thing for you to communicate through your art?

Isabel Castro Jung: To touch the soul of others – that's what I'm trying to do.

CB: I believe in the power to manifest our vision and our desires and I think this conversation has the power to do so. So I want to ask, what is your vision of an ideal society or world?

ICJ: Wow, this is big! One of my ideals is true equality. I wish for a world where the way we engage with each other does not depend on concepts of gender, age, race or class. I wish for a world where diversity is accepted as natural, a world where we nourish genuine empathetic and caring connections. I like to think of society as a chain: a chain is only as strong as its weakest part!

CB: I recently went back to re-reading Hannah Arendt; her thought on the 'banality of evil' resonated with me in this strange period of time. I wanted your view on what this inspires in you?

ICJ: I think weaknesses are revealed in times of crisis. For example, in the structure of society and I think on a personal level as well.

From a very early age, I found art as a tool to navigate and reflect on what was happening to me. When I have days where I really struggle with the situation, I stick to my practice and devote myself to it. I take anxiety and transform it, trusting that what comes out of it will make sense at some point.

That's why I like teaching art as a tool. For me art is a way to imagine a different world, maybe a better world.

CB: As old structures fall apart, it feels like we are being asked to reconstruct things in a different way.

ICJ: My experience is that every time I share, everything multiplies. I share ideas, work, food, cakes. Happiness multiplies and the work becomes richer and it bounces back on the people who participate.

CB: I'm really learning that from being around you. I initially studied law and philosophy, where people talked about money and territories, and I expected art to be about sharing. When I arrived at Goldsmiths everybody was in competition. It's been really refreshing to see your generosity and how you trust life to bring what you need.

ICJ: It took me some work to get there! The world can be scary. I'm not mixed race like you but I'm mixed culturally. My parents come from very different countries, Germany and Spain. There were two languages, and I learned English and French. I began to see that having differences doesn't divide, it enriches. I also think this feeds a better understanding for each other.

CB: What were the biggest obstacles in your life that led you to become the best version of yourself?

ICJ: One obstacle was definitely that I was a bit odd. I have been made to feel that something was not right with me, and I really struggled with that.

I also think I had a blind spot. My parents would teach me that we are all equal. I didn't understand that in the world I might not be considered equal or be discriminated against because I am a woman or a migrant. Internally I would never feel any less, but it was painful to realise I was not considered equal. It also made me work harder and insist more. Resistance in the end made me stronger.

CB: I love that you learned how to become a stonemason.

ICJ: When I applied to university in 1993 I chose painting, and I didn't get accepted. I was determined to reapply. Meanwhile, I wanted to use my time in a beneficial way, to become economically independent, so I chose an apprenticeship in stone carving because stone is the toughest! And it was really tough! [laughs] There were only four girls, and we had to deal with so much prejudice, but it was also fun and I learned a lot.

Through that experience I became super experimental, cutting mirrors and making strange sculptures. In 1995 I applied to university again and they took me straight away. This time I went for sculpture.

Clémentine Bedos, *Contagious Hystories*, Goldsmiths degree show, 2017.

▼

CB: I've never seen this part of your work?

ICJ: I would start to stick mirrored triangles together, creating kaleidoscopic points of vision, and I called them stars.

I then had the chance to work with La Fura dels Baus, an experimental theatre company from Barcelona who became quite famous through the 1992 Olympic Games. Their shows were crazy, doing immersive theatre at the end of the '80s! I thought it was amazing: music, performance, objects. I got what I was about.

Then when I started to study with Joan Jonas everything started to make sense. I want to create work that people can't withdraw from just because it's sticky or challenging. I want to engage people, and I think in a performance you create an energy that comes over people like a wave.

CB: I feel like people are conditioned to skim through things, especially now with social media. Through my work I try to resist that, for example by having a 10-minute walking introduction. You need to go through the transformational process with me, and it's not going to happen in two seconds. I think it's really important to find tools and strategies to hold the audience.

ICJ: That's what I like about your work, you challenge the viewer to make the effort. In digital works everything can be very easy and upfront, but yours is not. It's like you are hiding in plain sight, and it's so strange, but it's so intriguing at the same time. It's like a veil. Your images are slow, which is not what we're used to, they are mystical and layered, they need a closer look, an active spectator.

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Isabel Castro Jung, *Anemoi*, H2O, performance film and photography, solo show at ABA Art Lab, Palma, Spain, 2011, and Spain Now Festival, London, UK, 2015.

CB: I'm glad that it comes across. I'm very aware of how art can objectify and I hate this feeling of being fixed in an identity. This comes from the experience of being a so-called 'métisse' and being queer and being continuously othered and sexualised. I think the camera's lens, as much as the act of drawing, can be very violent tools in how they objectify, and I'm trying to subvert that.

The goal for me is to create connection and intimacy, but if you don't work for it then you are just taking. How do you challenge a person who is in the habit of consuming? It's easy to say that's not a good attitude but how do you transform this habit ? How do you create and re-present new modes of relating?

ICJ: It's making things that challenge the viewer into another way of (re)acting. Maybe that's educating, but also giving a new vision. When I studied, my mentors advised me to make things that people can relate to. What is the context of the work and does that resonate in other people? If it resonates in other people then you connect with them.

For me the question is, how can I be personal and at the same time connect to the audience? If it's just about me then why would I show it?

CB: Early on when we started sharing our studio together, we spoke about motherhood. I remember one of the first things you said to me was that you made a clear decision not to have children because of your profession.

ICJ: It is a personal decision to have children or not. I don't like how people think they can have an opinion on a woman's choice regarding such an intimate matter.

Childcare still falls very much on women although it is gradually changing. I think it is sad if a woman wants to have children and decides not to because she feels it can be an obstacle to her life or career.

I think we should be more aware that parenting happens in the whole society. Responsibility doesn't fall only on the biological parents or guardians. Children need to see a diversity of life's plans in order to make their own choices. I'm kind of a part-time parent when I teach and I think that's great!

CB: Do you think that identifying as female has an impact in the way you make and create?

ICJ: Absolutely! Most of my sculptures have dress shapes as a metaphor for the feminine. We spoke about the gaze and being objectified as a woman, so my dresses are shelters and the women in them become hybrid beings.

I've often heard the expression, 'women are strange'. I faced this idea of strangeness a lot when I was younger, and so started to make images responding to this idea. I realised that when I carry these sculptures around, the

physical experience is horrible, I'm restricted by the image, it's heavy and I have to invest a lot of energy to move. My movement becomes so weird, so heavy and clumsy, not at all elegant. So I start to break this received notion of the woman. I'm not satisfied with the position of being an object, I don't accept that women are seen as weak.

CB: I'm really interested in Tantra, the idea that through identifying with different energies or avatars you become them and empower yourself. Similarly, through your creations, your shelters or vessels, you're learning and transforming but also deconstructing stigmas and freeing yourself from them.

ICJ: Yes, I pick up that fantasy, convert it into something beautiful, like a golden cage, and then I say goodbye! I can choose not to be here, I can leave this shell behind. For me that is very liberating.

CB: It really struck me the first time I saw you performing in that dress, you gave it so much life, it was really powerful! We create things in the studio, but I believe through performance we animate these things, giving them soul.

I've just remembered you told me your life was about creating obstacles! You thrive through crisis and confrontation.

ICJ: Yes, for a long time I was like that, then I got a bit tired. In my 20s, I had so much energy I could not sleep. But energy is worthless if it is not channelled in the right way. I wish I'd have had someone to help me, but in the end I learned how to myself.

I read a book, *Red Grass*, by Boris Vian. In it there's a sentence: 'to fight does not mean to advance.' That sentence made something click in my head; things don't need to be hard.

Suddenly I had the funding to create this dress. I thought about what the right material would be. At first I thought of parachute fabric, and then thought of a sailcloth – a sail moves as it's hit by the wind, it speaks of migration and I relate to the feeling of not belonging to a place.

CB: I love this idea that we are shape-shifters, constantly moving. Patriarchy seeks by all means to immobilise women, it locks women down, even clothing restricts their movement.

ICJ: Here I wanted to make a sculpture that doesn't stay the same, that is always different, easy to transport and perform in. It's the first time I've made a sculpture that is around 20 kilos, which is nothing compared to the rest of my work.

When I started to do some improvisation with it so many things would happen. That is what I find so wonderful in the pieces, they guide you if you listen.

CB: For me this dress is like the sea, and you navigate beneath it, shapes form out of it and monsters emerge. Often we think about the sea as the subconscious and you explore all of these things. It's a fantastic piece, really.

ICJ: Thank you. When I made that piece it was one thing, and then we moved to the UK and my father died and that changed the piece again. I was there when he died and he had an oxygen machine which would make a sound, this rhythm; the air moving and then a beep to show the machine was working. I found it really hard, so I started to record that sound and used it at the beginning of the performance.

The fabric I'm lying under is the sea, but also it's a shroud. I start the piece with death. It was a very strong experience which I had to do because I was in so much pain. But what was magic was that people would cry, even though it was very subtle.

CB: Because the energy is there. That's why I really believe in that magic power of art – when it's authentic people feel it, especially in performance.

ICJ: Presence is very important.

CB: I think we should end it there because we can continue forever. It was so great to speak to you as always!

Clémentine Bedos (b. 1992) is a transdisciplinary artist with backgrounds in Law, Philosophy and Fine Arts. Bedos explores personal and cultural histories through a process-based craft and site-specific performance practice. Her experimental and research-based outlook focuses on embodied technologies, to emancipate oneself from trauma bonds and weave new forms of connections. In 2020, her work was included in many hybrid shows. Her performance, *The Emperor's New Clothes*, commissioned by Power Play biennial (Singapore) was showcased on Instagram connecting online communities across the globe. Commissioned by BALTIC, her study session on 'Tantra and Gaian thinking' was part of 'Gardening the Mind', a series of online events focusing on mental health.

www.clementinebedos.com
@clembedos

Isabel Castro Jung (b 1972) is a sculptor and performance artist. Her work explores how personal conditions can be materialised into an object, developing narratives around migration, heritage, gender and its influence on identity and belonging. Materials she works with include textiles, rubber, and ceramics, as well as repurposed and recycled garments and other objects. Her sculptures transform the performer into a hybrid being, activating the body as a vehicle for learning and experience, and challenging our views on the society and world in which we live. Castro Jung has worked on solo projects and collaboratively with visual artists, performers, dancers, choreographers and musicians in Spain, Germany and the UK. Current projects include ´Covijo-99´, a pandemic diary series of 99 artistic facemasks, and ´the Penelope Project' in collaboration with Helen David, which will be premiered at the LSE Women's library.

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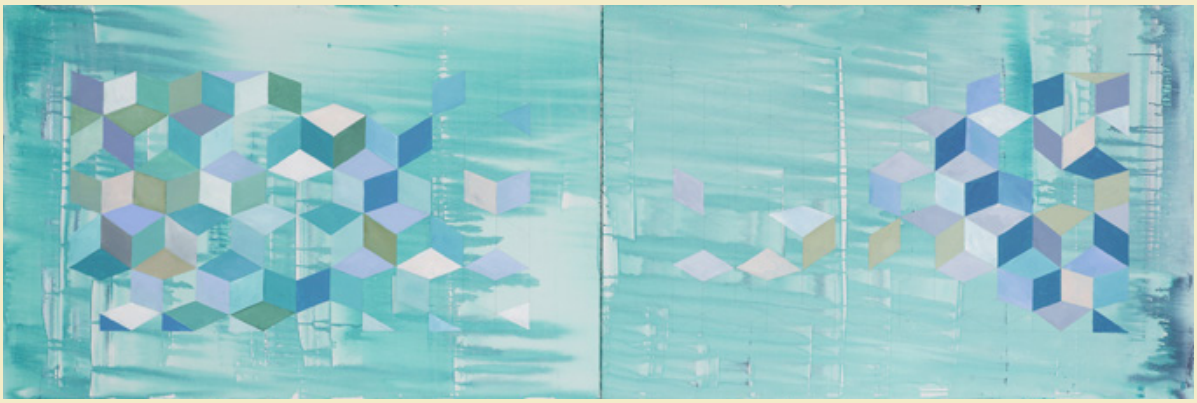
Lubaina Himid

Interview by Louisa Buck



Lubaina Himid, *Sea: Wave Goodbye Say Hello (Zanzibar)*, acrylic on canvas, 1999.

Lubaina Himid CBE, RA (born 1954, Zanzibar, lives in Preston) is an artist, teacher, activist and curator who creates paintings, drawings, prints and installations which celebrate Black creativity and the people of the African diaspora while challenging institutional invisibility. Alongside her artistic practice Himid has curated exhibitions to showcase underrepresented Black artists and was one of the pioneers of the Black Art movement in the 1980s, curating such significant shows as 'The Thin Black Line' (ICA, 1985). In 2014 Himid attracted international attention when she was included in the Gwangu Biennial and in 2017 she won the Turner Prize. Himid is Professor of Contemporary Art at the University of Central Lancashire.

What did the 1990s mean to you both personally and professionally?

The 1990s were a very difficult time for me. I was getting used to living in the north of England having been up here since the late 1980s, but feeling very cut off from what was happening in art galleries and studios in London. Early in the decade I worked as an exhibition officer at Rochdale Art Gallery with one of Britain's great feminist curators, Jill Morgan. I managed to learn a huge amount from this experience but when a teaching job came up I left the gallery and began to teach full time in an art department in Preston. In London this was an impossible scenario; in the 1990s no one but no one was giving black women jobs in galleries or art schools.

How did your work develop during this time?

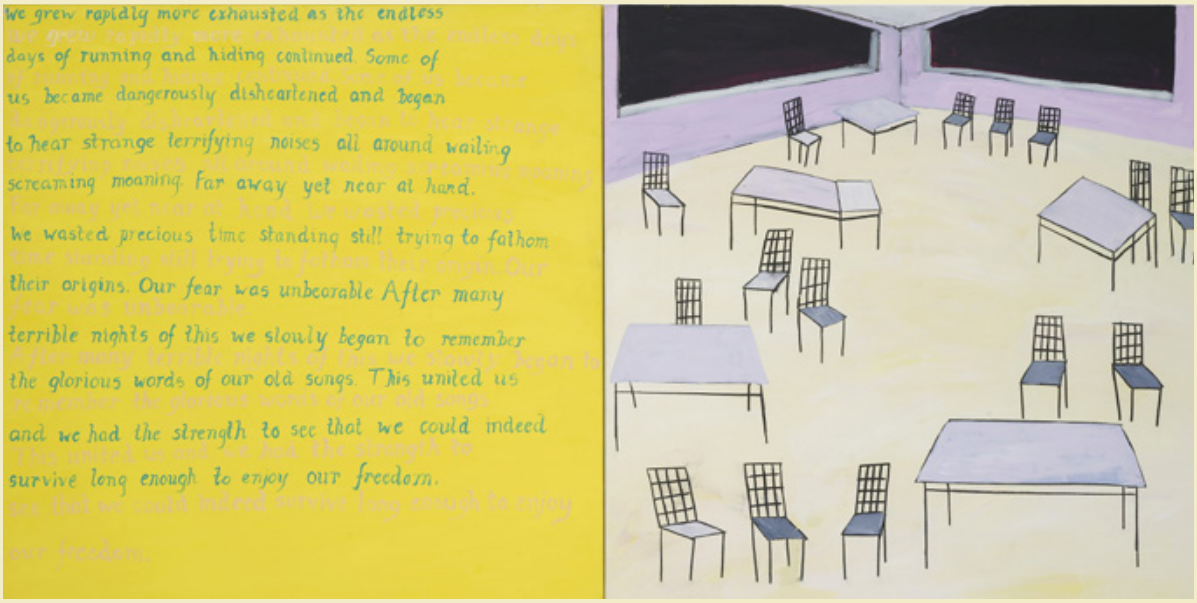
During this time, I made work every day, in the early morning before going in to teach, during the lunch break and as soon as I got home four minutes after leaving work. I taught in a building about 500 metres from my house and my studio was in the house. I built my whole life around making work. I made paintings, cut outs and works on paper. I filled sketch books and made copious notes. My shows included 'Plan B' at Tate St Ives (1999-2000); 'Revenge' at The Southbank Centre (1992); 'Zanzibar' at Oriel Mostyn (1999); 'The Ballad of the Wing' at Chisenhale Gallery, London, and City Museum and Art Gallery, Stoke-on-Trent (1989-90); Vernet's Studio at the Havana Biennale (1994); and 'Hogarth on Hogarth' at the V&A (1997). I became ambitious about making work in series and understood that I knew what I was doing.

Any key moments, turning points?

Key moments were probably the solo show 'Plan B' at Tate St Ives and 'The Ballad of the Wing' at Chisenhale. No one from the press was taking the slightest bit of notice of this work but it was getting steadily stronger. Working with Professor Griselda Pollock, who has taken such care to write intelligently about my work for decades, is possibly more crucial than anything that happened in the 1990s, but you have to be passionate about art history to really understand this.

How did you become aware of a-n? Why did you want to get involved?

I became aware of a-n because it seemed useful for my students. It gave them structure and an understanding of one, albeit narrow, branch of the world of art. I would pick up a copy from time to time if I was in London but it wasn't on sale in Preston anywhere and I never felt the need to subscribe. a-n certainly made the young artists outside London



Lubaina Himid, *Havana Nightschool (Plan B)*, acrylic on canvas, 1999.

who were just starting out more aware of the potential importance of their contribution to the wider culture, it highlighted useful grants and points of law relating to visual art.

What part did a-n play in your development and career?
I am not really aware of how it played any part in my career. I didn't know anyone who was writing for the publication although I was asked to write a frivolous piece on success, so obviously someone on the staff knew of my work. I may have written about public art for the publication but I cannot clearly remember doing so and certainly cannot recall it having any impact whatsoever. I do remember being on the cover but not a thing about the reason why or the image used. The article I wrote on success was probably fun to write but it wasn't a serious piece. Success for me now is simply being able to continue making new work and showing in beautiful venues. I was always interested in this of course, but reaching large audiences relies on large PR budgets and intelligent journalists who have time to listen to what artists are actually saying while being able to take time to look at the work properly and write considered articles.

How significant was a-n in raising the pressing issues of the time?
I seem to remember a-n raising issues about the non-existent rights of artists and the possibility of applying for residencies; it was certainly a place in which it was possible to read from time to time about small issue-based exhibitions taking place outside London.

Thirty years on what are the key changes for artists starting out now?
Artists starting out now in the UK have many of the same barriers to surviving that they always had. This country does not really have a commitment to the care of artists even when they are making work which relates to peoples' real lives. Those artists without a financial cushion of some kind are in more difficulty now with inner city studio rents being impossibly high and jobs in art departments being non-existent. However, if those same people are prepared to think collaboratively, work relentlessly and never ever give up, there is work to be had everywhere as the superbly valuable creative member of any number of teams across science, technology, engineering and the arts.

What advice would you give your younger self?
The advice I would give my younger self would be of course to do exactly what I did – the waitressing, the abandonment of theatre design, the leaving of London, being daring about the early curating, having no fear of failure, persevering with the agony of writing, starting the Making Histories Visible project, supporting other artists. In addition I would probably also tell myself that those 1990s wilderness years, when many art people couldn't be bothered to take my work seriously, were useful, despite the terrifying lack of money and serious draining of my confidence.

Read more 40 Years 40 Artists interviews online at www.a-n.co.uk/an40

Lubaina Himid, *Cover the Surface*, acrylic on canvas, 2019. Courtesy: the artist and Hollybush Gardens, London; Photo: Andy Keate

Lubaina Himid. Photo: Ingrid Pollard

I go break you

I'm gonna break you

I'm gonna break you

I'm gonna break you

I go blossom

21x29.7cm, watercolours, glitter-glue and holographic tape on paper, 2021.

Nicola Singh has a multi-disciplinary practice, encompassing solo and collaborative performance, film, photography, drawing and painting, and sculptural installation. She is currently focused on improvisation in spoken word, for sound and song, and in movement and writing – exploring ideas and states of self-representation and identity. She connects improvisation to notions of honesty and/or truth and to practices of listening. The work here stems from a period of flip flopping between studio improvisation and the page.

Selected presentations include Projections North East 'Artists in Cinema' commission with Helen Collard, Newcastle (2020); David Dave Gallery, Glasgow (2020); The Tetley, Leeds (2020); Workplace Gallery, Gateshead (2019); Eastside Projects, Birmingham (2018); IMT Gallery, London (2018); Jerwood Visual Arts, London (2018); Hongti Art Centre, Busan (SK) (2018); LUX Scotland, Glasgow (2017); BALTIC, Newcastle (2017) and New Art Centre, Boston (USA) (2016). She is Teaching Fellow in Fine Art for Leeds University and has a PhD titled 'On The Thesis By Performance: a feminist research method for the practice-based PhD' from Northumbria University (2017).

www.nicolasingh.co.uk

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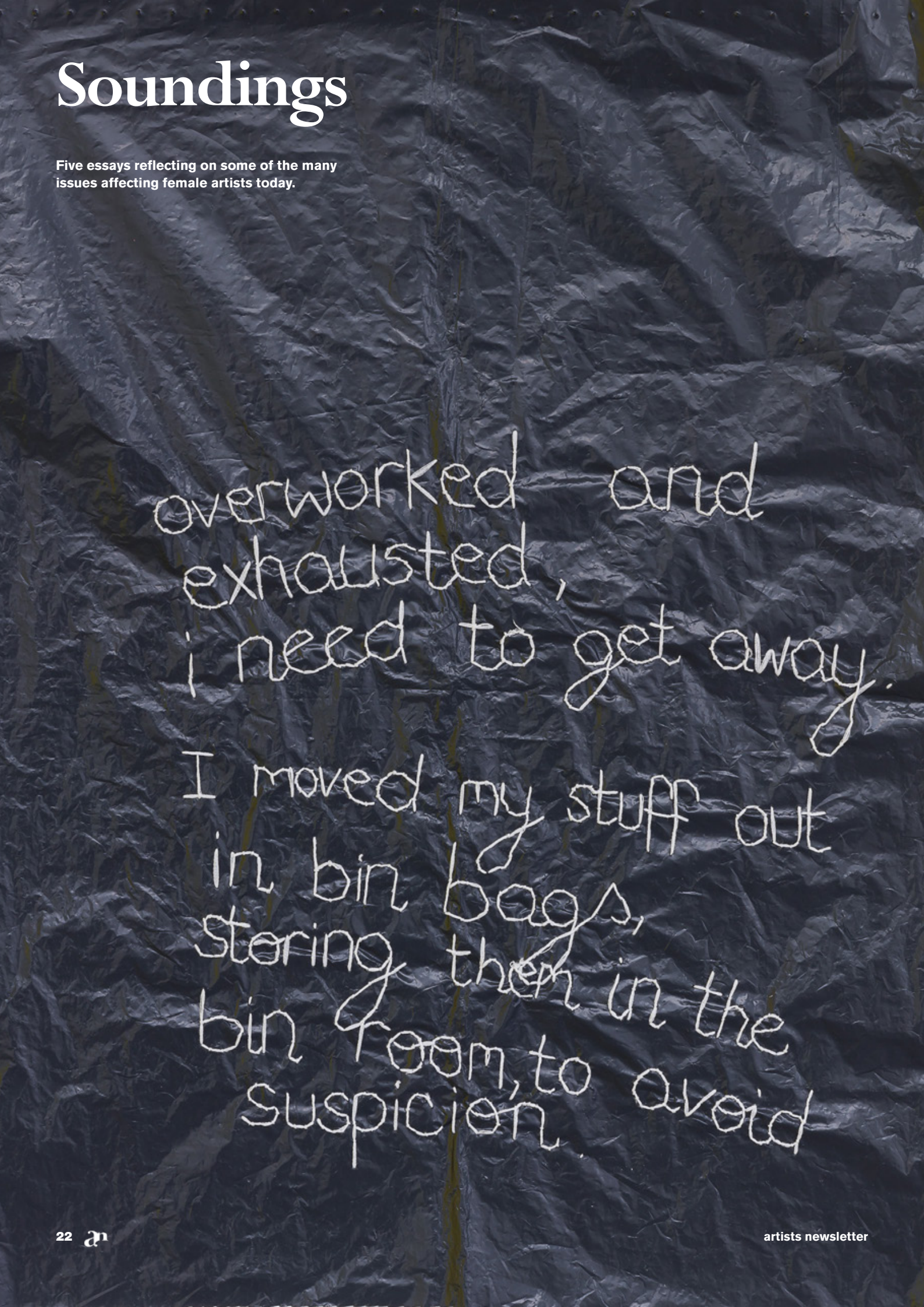
Soundings

Five essays reflecting on some of the many issues affecting female artists today.



History is personal: the personal is political

Curator Lucy Day explains her approach to developing projects that place issues of equality and equity at the centre.

I was listening to historian David Olusoga on Radio 4's Desert Island Discs this morning, during which he noted that 'history is personal'. This immediately reminded me of the political argument cited as part of rising feminist activism in the '60s: 'the personal is political'.

How this manifests in art practice by women has for the past 10 years been a key component of my curatorial practice. Increasingly, this has focussed on the (lack of) representation of women artists in the art world and how, as a feminist curator, I can work to address this discrimination.

In 2016 Eliza Gluckman and I co-founded A Woman's Place Projects with the urgent desire to ensure the message of equality permeates contemporary culture. The National Trust property Knole provided an extraordinary backdrop for our work. This 15th century country house in Kent, with its complex narratives and the powerful impact of primogeniture on its history – where women's voices if visible at all were predominantly heard through the stories of their husbands, sons, employers or family – allowed us to investigate a range of ever-current issues.

The project A Woman's Place South East & Knole (2017 – 2018) was the culmination of our ideas and research, that followed on from and coincided with significant changes in global politics, such as the snowballing rise of women-focussed campaigns including #EverydaySexism, #MeToo, Women's Equality Party, UK Feminista and Sisters Uncut, and complex discussions of intersectionality and trans rights. In the lead up to six artist commissions we led and hosted meetings and events, unpicking historical and current discrimination. A round table group met to look at the lack of Black women artists and women of colour in our national collections; Rachael House's Feminist Disco 'put the disco into discourse'.

Underpinning the Knole project were the personal, inherently political voices of the artists: Lubaina Himid, CJ Mahony, Lindsay Seers, Emily Speed, Alice May Williams and Melanie Wilson. Where Wilson's audio work mirrored contemporary stories of love, betrayal, class, gender and inheritance with those of 17th century Lady Anne Clifford and Lady Frances Cranfield, the complex, known lives of the aristocratic Vita and Victoria Sackville West brought into sharp relief unheard, stifled voices. Through Lubaina Himid's six paintings of Grace Robinson, a black laundry maid, previously known only as an inventory note, held space within the classical architecture of the historic Stone Court.

Divisions, disenfranchisement and inequity continue to loom large. Campaigns, including those cited earlier, and more recently Black Lives Matter, highlight the need for us to reconsider our curatorial approach to wider barriers inherent in society, and the art world. Our current projects are embedding key questions from the outset – a conscious checking in at every stage of the process. Our Precarious State explores women's experience of issues such as gender and sexuality, race, neurodiversity, mental health and learning disabilities, housing, education, borders and language barriers, underpinned and exacerbated by the environmental crisis.

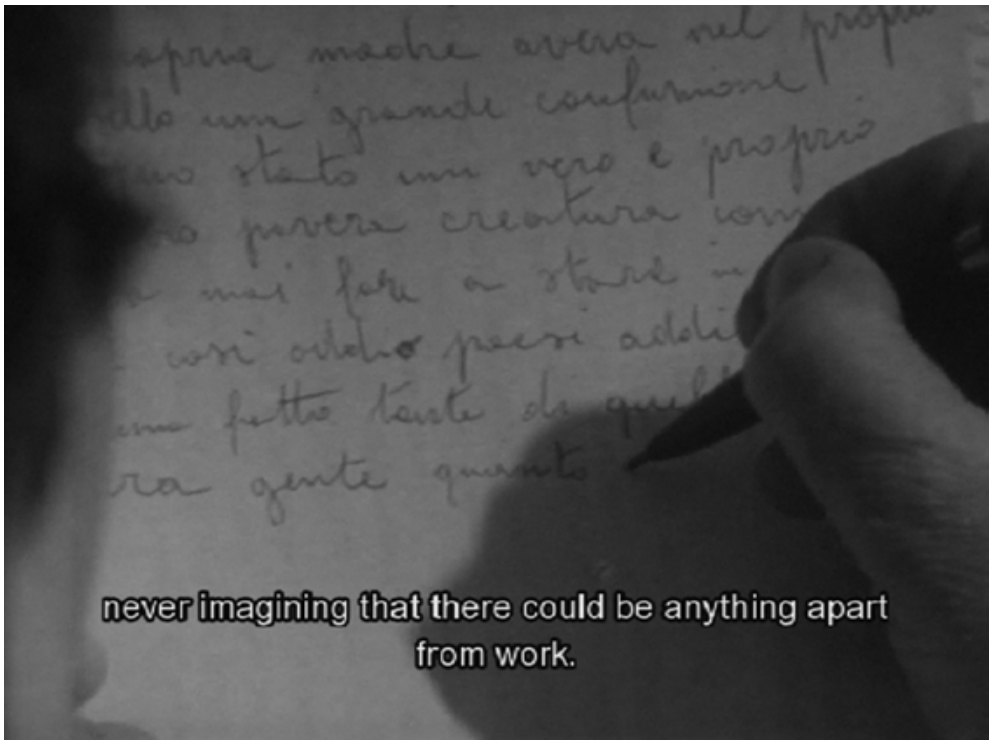
The current global pandemic has highlighted further the increased precarity for women, women artists, artist mothers. This isn't new, these discriminations have lain beneath the surface for generations. As artists, curators and producers our challenge is to collectively confront the systems and hierarchies endemic in our culture through proactive, creative, ambitious programmes that tread lightly on this earth. It is always personal, and always political.

Lucy Day is an independent curator, lecturer and arts consultant. In 2016 she co-founded and is now the Director and Curator of A Woman's Place Project CIC with Eliza Gluckman, as an umbrella for cultural projects that question and address the contemporary position of women in our creative, historical and cultural landscape.

www.lucyday.co.uk

▲ Rachael House, *Feminist Disco for A Woman's Place Projects*, 2017. Photo: Agata Urbaniak

◀ Aya Haidar, *Refuse I*, 60x45.5cm, embroidery on black refuse bag, 2019. Photo: Mark Blower



Adriana Monti, Still from: *Scuola senza fine (School without End)*, 1983. Courtesy: Cinenova

These struggles belong to all of us

Lydia Ashman reflects on structural inequalities and the ways artists have engaged with these injustices.

After work one day in early lockdown, I sat in my front room and watched *Scuola Senza Fine* (School Without End). Made in 1983 by Adriana Monti, the film is about a group of Italian housewives who, after completing an 150-hour diploma in secondary education, rediscovered their thirst for learning. With Lea Melandri, a feminist theorist and writer, they abandoned their chores one afternoon a week to study and write together.

The women's enquiries into fields like psychology, philosophy and linguistics opened up new perspectives on who they were, what they wanted, their position in the world. It was moving to see, in the latter part of the film, the women voicing their sometimes melancholy, often defiant, always candid and intelligent reflections.

The geographical realms of these women were small, like most people's have become during the pandemic. It seemed to me that they were looking for ways to feel connected and liberated within the limitations of their domestic spheres. As the daylight faded, sitting alone in my front room where I had spent much of the day, their experiences resonated.

I write this in January 2021, at the start of another national lockdown. Like the Italian women, we have become largely confined to our domestic settings again. Throughout the pandemic, many of the boundaries between our public and private experiences have been weakened or dissolved as we've conducted our lives via screens, at home. There are the sounds and sight of colleagues' children. Laundry drying in the background. The usually-invisible becoming visible; the unheard, heard.

The pandemic has been exposing in many ways, further exacerbating ingrained structural inequalities. Globally, COVID-19 has disproportionately impacted women. In the UK, a third of working mothers lost work due to a lack of childcare; of BAME women, this increased to 44%. Most workers in shut-down sectors are women. Financial insecurity and a greater domestic workload are factors for the reported deterioration in women's mental health.

Simultaneously, we are more aware of who we rely on to provide the majority of care work, education and our public transport. In the UK, more women than men are keyworkers, and women keyworkers tend to be in face-to-face roles, at a higher risk of contracting the virus. Gender inequality is interwoven with other manifestations of social injustice: keyworkers are more likely to come from a BAME background or have been born outside the UK than in other sectors. They are normally paid less than the average national income.

The pandemic has further revealed the ways in which the art world is entangled, and sometimes complicit, with these structural inequalities. Demands for transparency, accountability and change have increased and become louder: industrial action by some of the least securely em-

ployed Tate staff this summer, when they were threatened with redundancy; calls for institutions to respond to Black Lives Matter beyond superficial, performative actions.

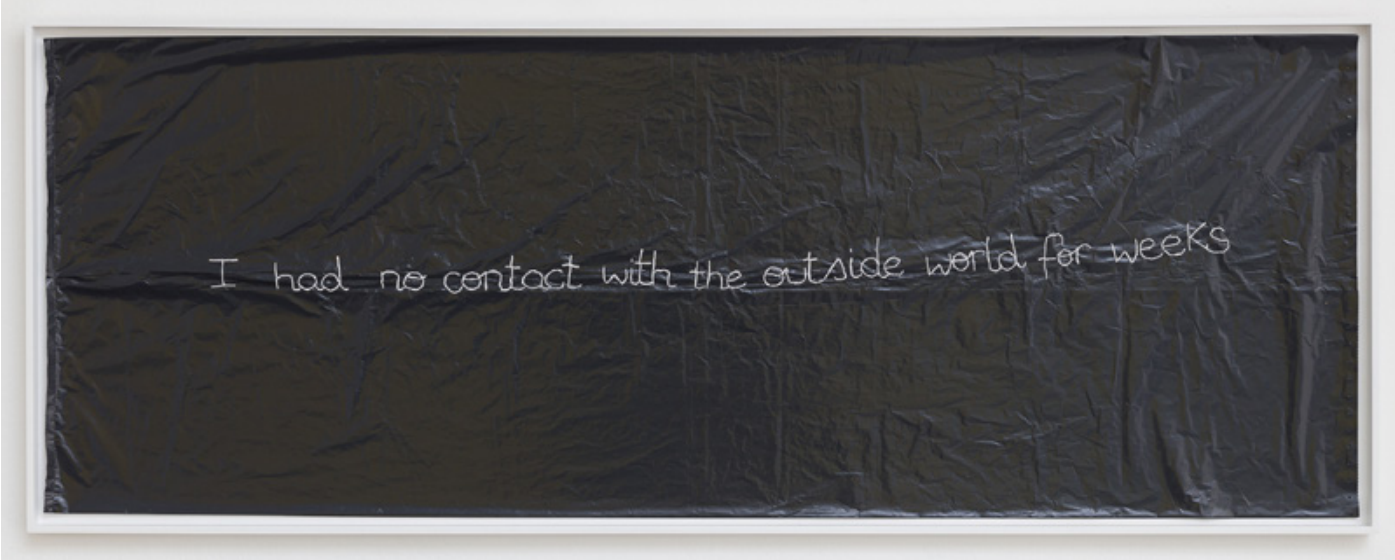
Like the women in *Scuola Senza Fine*, solidarity and platforms for expression are ways in which artists have engaged with these ongoing injustices. In 'Out of Service', an exhibition from 2019 by Aya Haidar at Cubitt Gallery, where I work, the artist explored the domestic realm as a political site. Over nine months, Haidar had conversations with campaign groups, community organisers and cultural workers who focus on domestic and immaterial labour. Then, from her home, she embroidered phrases around stains and marks on dusters, cloths and bin bags.

For most people, the loss of freedom to leave their homes was something they experienced for the first time last March. For others, it's a more permanent state of being. Domestic workers are often confined to their workplace, often also their home. They are another largely invisible and precarious workforce. In the UK, migrant domestic workers' settlement rights were eroded in 2012. Globally, 72% of the workforce, of whom 80% are women, lost their jobs during the pandemic. Haidar's work contains fragments of stories of isolation, of wishing to escape, of survival. Embroidered on a black bin bag are the words: 'I had no contact with the outside world for weeks.'

The pandemic has exposed deep divisions and injustices, while emphasising that it is some of the most economically and socially vulnerable who often undertake the invisible, undervalued labour we rely on. Artists can offer a space within which we can coalesce, form communities and platform underheard voices. When this is premised on dialogue, on togetherness – like we see in Haidar's work and the group of Italian women – we realise how much we need each other; how much these struggles belong to all of us.

Lydia Ashman is a writer and programmes art projects in social settings with artists, young people, teachers and community groups. Her work focuses on creating situations which enable dialogue and exchange, accommodating different models of learning. She is currently the Schools and Young People Programme Manager at Cubitt Artists. Together with Ania Bas, she co-organises knowledge exchange project, The Walking Reading Group. She is based in London.

www.somethingilearnt.co.uk



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Aya Haidar, *Refuse III*, 45x118cm, embroidery on black refuse bag, 2019. Photo: Mark Blower

Time to tip the scales

Orla Foster on why too many women in the arts are still stuck on mute, and what institutions could do to address this.

Sometimes it feels as though women are still queuing up for their pass to the art world. While hardly lacking in numbers, female artists remain disproportionately overlooked and underpaid, their contributions less celebrated than those of their male counterparts. Less exposure means less fanfare at auction, and so the cycle continues. If art institutions want to do more to amplify female voices, they need to address what might be muffling them in the first place.

As Dr Kate McMillan states in the opening essay to this publication, female artists are still chronically underrepresented by commercial galleries. For artists balancing additional commitments such as caring responsibilities, or earning a living alongside their practice, this can mean scaling down projects and diluting ideas. It's a far cry from the received perception of the "successful" artist: confidently networking, and seemlessly moving from exhibition to exhibition, commission to commission.

In an economy where many are juggling several hot plates instead of concentrating on one, it's hard to block out the noise. Self-doubt can be rife. This is true of other disciplines too. I write about art, but I don't exactly feel anointed for the task. Sometimes I'm embarrassed about my CV, worried the patchwork of writing commissions and admin amount to a career that is less 'portfolio', more 'piecemeal'. A hobby. You can convince yourself your output is less legitimate than the image of a person with a singular vision: unrestrained and unlimited by time, they are able to while away whole days in the studio until inspiration strikes. But it's really important that institutions aren't tempted to assume the same, and instead place equal value on artists who aren't able to singularly pursue their practice.

In the wake of the Black Lives Matter and #MeToo movements, galleries are beginning to rearticulate their position. Many have scrambled to publish codes of conduct demonstrating their commitment to becoming more inclusive and to drive out toxic behaviour. Some have also implemented access riders, encouraging artists to freely communicate their needs and outline potential obstacles before the start of a project. Perhaps, instead of just token gestures, these steps are indicative of a willingness to collaborate, to continually review and critique their own operations.

Unsurprisingly, younger, more DIY organisations tend to be best at this. Take Junior High in LA, a non-profit cooperative arts space whose mission is to provide a creative platform for those outside traditional power structures. Rather than performative handwringing, the focus here is on inviting people to curate their own shows and events, without the need to appease any gatekeepers. While their tone is breezy, the question undergirding Junior High's mission is serious: "If wealthy white men take up the most space, whose needs do you think take precedent?"

We're already knee-deep in manifestos, so I don't mean to add another to the pile. But if art institutions really want to make their spaces more inclusive, they need to be prepared to show more solidarity with the artists they work with, and become better attuned to the competing demands they might face. They need to be able to show more flexibility and understanding around the issues which may be hindering an artist's ability to produce work — and also their ability to believe in it.

Orla Foster is a writer based in Sheffield whose work focuses on art in the North. She is also the author of the poetry zine Lovely Little Nutmegs.

www.orlafoster.com

▶

Nicole Whitted, *Silent*, 2020, a digital art series published by Junior High the Magazine in October 2020 by Junior High.

Green Feminisms

Catriona McAra dwells on eco-feminist renewal and the importance of reclaiming wildness for feminist art making.

Samantha Sweeting, *Bestilalia*, 2008. Reproduced with kind permission of the artist

For me, lockdown hibernation has led to a greater awareness of green politics. As a curator suddenly without an exhibition space, I found myself on the outside, longing for the mountains, offering my energies in alternative ways to support as many creative women as possible. The artists I have been writing about reclaim a sense of wildness and often feature the animal as a metaphor for survival instincts.

Over the last decade, my curatorial practice has been shaped by the work of the artist Leonora Carrington (1917-2011), known for her animal paintings and stories of hyenas who disrupt coming out balls and rocking horses that come to life. In 1970, Carrington wrote a feminist manifesto called 'Female Human Animal' in which she called for a greater action from women in shaping the future of our planet. Many have commented that her eco-feminism seems more topical now than ever. It provides something of a role model for contemporary artists.

Linked to this, I have become fascinated by Donna Haraway's idea of touching animals as a way of communicating with the non-human, and have been writing about sculptors like London-based Kate MccGwire who recycles discarded bird feathers in detailed and labour-intensive ways. I have also been working on a book about Glasgow-based conceptual artist Ilana Halperin who shares her birthday with an Icelandic volcano. Both MccGwire and Halperin are mid-career artists with slow-burn, long-term intrepid natures, and the ability to combine an environmental awareness with something tender, epic and beautiful.

Locked in my house, I have found myself re-watching footage from performance installations, particularly those of Samantha Sweeting and Hannah Buckley. Sweeting has lived with abandoned animals in a rural farmhouse in the mountains and complements her artistic practice with working on a farm in east London. Meanwhile, Buckley's most recent solo performance *The Mountain and Other Tales of She Transformed* (2019) featured weather systems (using dry ice and a soundscape that references bees and the wind) and explored the closeness between the wild intuitive aspects of women and wolves. Interestingly, both Sweeting and Buckley combine their choreography with readings from Clarissa Pinkola Estés' feminist study, *Women Who Run with the Wolves* (1992). Though both Buckley and Sweeting have tended to perform solo (anticipating the isolation many of us are experiencing now), the backdrops to their performances are where a sense of green community can be found. I like how Buckley describes her practice as "feminism as a female command of space," e.g. collaborating with artist and set-designer Nicola Singh on activities for her audiences, using chalk drawings on blackboards to represent the mountain. And how intoxicating that Sweeting has also collaborated with costume designer Nichola Kate Butland on a donkey-head for *Bestilalia* (I never imagined life without you) (2008), a performance that uses the 'Donkeyskin' fairy tale and charcoal drawings to express inner instincts.

Revisiting these artists reminded me that Carrington similarly thrived on collaboration, whether in painting, theatre designs or cooking with friends. It is to such ecosystems and models of mutual support that we must return in the months and years ahead to ensure such green feminisms continue to flourish.

Dr Catriona McAra is University Curator at Leeds Arts University. Her forthcoming books include *Ilana Halperin: Felt Events* (MIT, 2021) and *The Medium of Leonora Carrington*.

www.catrionamcara.com

[1] Donna Haraway, *When Species Meet* (London and Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 41-42.

[2] Jessy Tuddenham cited by Hannah Buckley (2019): www.hannah-buckley.com/choreo#/the-mountain/ Accessed 25 January 2021

I work in fragments

Hettie Judah reflects on the artworld's attitude to motherhood, and shares quotes from 12 artists.

I'm a writer, not an artist, but negotiating the artworld as a – for a long while, single – mother over the last two decades, I know how little its structures have been formed or adjusted with the needs of parents in mind. The transactional, networky business end of art work often takes place in other people's leisure time – early evening private views, weekend gallery circuits, foreign jaunts – outside nursery and school hours. Art in the fair-fattened 2000s and 2010s acquired a carefree patina of leisured glamour that felt far removed from the gooey, encrusted chaos of young parenthood.

Terms like 'emerging' have become popular, helping to promote the belief that an artist's career assumes an inevitable 'onwards and upwards' shape once their work has been recognised. This fiction, so reassuring to pennywise collectors, ignores a messier reality in which artists have good years and difficult ones, periods in which they can focus on work and periods when other concerns intrude; that a working life will likely be uneven and many paced.

Trying years and periods of slow working are inevitable for artists with parenting responsibilities. More so if they are parenting alone; more so if their children require special care; more so if they have more children; more so if they do not have a supportive partner; more so if grandparents are not on hand to help with childcare; more so if they're also struggling financially; more so if they've had to deal with the trauma of fertility issues, miscarriages or still birth; more so if they suffer post-natal depression or burnout; more so in a pandemic year.

Few of these mothering matters are much discussed in the broader culture – the archetype of the capable superwoman lingers stubbornly – but the corporate world has at least been forced to engage with and accommodate caregiving through maternity and paternity leave, job shares, flexitime, paid holidays. Little of this supportive structure is available to artists.

There have been a number of valuable studies conducted into gender bias in the artworld – among them the Freelands Foundation reports into the Representation of Female Artists in Britain. None, as far as I could see, counted maternity as a modifying factor in an artist's career. (There has, of course, been other research on art and motherhood, and there are excellent organisations dedicated to discussing, addressing and publicising the issues artist mothers face.)

Last year, Dr Kate McMillan (see pages 5-9 for her contextualising essay) invited me to write an essay on the impact of motherhood on artists' careers: it has since been printed alongside her 2019 Freelands Foundation report in a publication concluding five years of research. If it had not been for a degree of enforced idleness imposed by the first 2020 lockdown, that essay would likely have featured the experience of only a few artists. As it was, with time on hand, I put out an open call that was widely shared, and ended up interviewing over 50 artist mothers from around the UK.

I am deeply grateful to those artists for the openness with which they responded to my questions: I have heard tales of heartbreak, frustration, self-doubt, exhaustion, wasted talent and bleak resignation. Emotion sometimes seemed to explode out of these women's stories, simply because they had not spoken before about the impact being a parent had on their work. Discussion of motherhood had become something of a taboo for artists. I was often left in tears after the interviews, and felt a responsibility to share these women's stories, and to try to make what difference I could.

It remains worth saying, boldly, that there is so much motherly love underpinning this research. For many artists, motherhood has been a revelatory experience. For some it has even suggested new directions. For all of us it is a central part of our identity. To point out the structural shortcomings of the artworld is not to complain about being a parent: it is to indicate urgent, necessary change in order that the art we see includes a greater breadth of human experience.

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Existing on small islands

▲

Nicola Bealing, *Let water form its lament*, 25x25cm, oil on wood, 2019.

"The gnarly mid-career issue: by the time an artist emerges, blinking, from the tunnel of child-rearing, IF she has managed to maintain an artistic voice and career during that time, she will no longer fit into the bright-eyed category of 'emerging' artist and is unlikely to have had time to become 'established', as some of her male peers will now mysteriously be."

Nicola Bealing, Cornwall, artist, two children aged 20 and 18

Soundings

Candida Powell-Williams, *Venus Vesica*, 120x80x20cm, ceramics and mirror, 2020.

"Before having children I worked in numerous low-paid jobs: in some ways I've exchanged the hours I used to spend in these jobs for childcaring. Before children, as a zero-hours worker, I could take periods of time away from work when I had a show to prepare for. Now, regardless of the urgency of my work, I can't due to childcare – my work can never take precedent over my partner's fixed shifts [as an A&E doctor], so inevitably I have less time than I need. The pressure on time is our greatest challenge as a family. However, I work from home in a studio we built in the garden, which has been transformative. I work most evenings, particularly as my partner also works late and night shifts. It isn't a big space for making sculpture. I have had to adapt my practice, working on a smaller scale, but storage is basically out of the question. But I have found that only doing childcare and my artist practice has given me more focus. I never had as much focus when I worked multiple low-paid, distracting jobs."

Candida Powell-Williams, London, artist, two children aged five and three

"Motherhood greatly impacts both positively and negatively. My children are very inspirational and creative which makes it very difficult to neglect them. When projects are upon me or I have a deadline, it is very difficult to juggle all. To be honest, I lost a lot of opportunities. Once people found out that I was pregnant, the distancing started happening. There were no conversations: just a lack of communications and offers. I was seen as not creating work or not being able to create work. When I have told people I was creating and I could participate in exhibitions, I was either seen as lying or telling half-truths."

Rezia Wahid MBE, weave artist and teacher, London, four children aged 11, nine, six and three

Rezia Wahid, home studio and weaving documentation, 2020. Photo: Khaled Hakim

I spent several months glancing with my head and eyes to my left, while driving past a strange pink hotel courtyard that had three peacocks in. Sometimes they were there, sometimes they were not. I started to do it religiously. The glance became more sophisticated and sharp. The blue and the green of the peacocks were always a blur. 'Wind down your window.' I said only a few times. It was private. A collection of the speed of the colours of blue and green. I thought about it since like what seemed forever. Thought and thought about it forever too.

'Peacocks Piece/Peace', 2018 – 2019

◀

Sarah Boulton, *Peacocks Piece/ Peace*, text printed in CONTINUUM: Collected Happenings and Writings, 2019.

"When Moss was young, after I'd put him to bed following a long day of solo parenting, I'd stay up late making, working, reading, thinking, applying for things. It was a beautiful time actually! But I burned out quite badly as a result and am now having to rest more. I work in fragments. On odd evenings. It impacts my relationship. It makes me easily forget what I am working on because the time spent doing it is so fragmented, which leads to more doubt and less awareness of my own focus. I think I take myself less seriously now.

"I was invited to work with a gallery and it dissolved after many months of talks. It would really have been a huge deal for me. A huge boost and a much-needed level of institutional support. I believe the conversation broke down because I was not showing my face in London enough. Because I had not been active enough in the meantime. Because my name had lost momentum. It was all true to be honest. My having become a mother was mentioned in relation to all of this. I don't think people want to see motherhood in this negative and incapacitating light. I honestly think it's just something they don't go near. It's less safe. For instance – how would I have done an install? Who would pay for the childcare? What if my name continues to fade for a few years while I have another child?"

Sarah Boulton, North Devon, artist, two children aged three and under one

"In an unsaid sort of way, I did feel a bit sidelined at first. I never understood the notion that you could not be a great artist and a mother at the same time. It didn't help that various people commented in the media about this. I remember going to a gallery in its early days and taking my work along in the bottom of a pushchair and being made to feel very eccentric, rather than simply as an artist trying to get their work there in the most practical manner."

Joanna Kirk, London, artist, two children age 21 and 18

▶

Joanna Kirk, *On A Headland of Lava Beside You*, 138x196cm, pastel on paper on board, 2014

Soundings

"The emotion needed to work, the contact with my thoughts, can require solitude. I crave, and need, solitude. And work can be all-encompassing, draining. Neither solitude nor full immersion are easy to access when you are a mother. And the emotional strength to work, the intensity of mind, can either be at odds with the headspace to soothe, to remember others' needs. Or sometimes it can all come from the same place, and the mothering can drain it a bit.

"I do think artist mothers face particular challenges. They rarely have the kind of money that can allow them to buy the time they might need. Paying for time needed to do speculative work, work that might not sell, or not be sold for months or years, is hard to justify. Men, or women without children, often have more of their time to play with, and can juggle money and their own work more easily."

Catherine Kurtz, Kent, artist and writer, two children aged 21 and 18

▶ Catherine Kurtz, *Torn II*, 21.5x17cm, oil on board, 2013.

"I think as a mother you don't put yourself out there as much as you might. When your children are small, it's easy to drown in dreariness and sweatshirts, and the 'golden hour' of schmoozing' at galleries is the holy trinity of supper, bath, bedtime in houses with small kids. Even then, because I had a large family, there the older ones still needed help with homework, and talking. I could have tried harder, but it's so easy to lose confidence that you have anything to offer."

W.K. Lyhne, London, artist, five children aged 28, 26, 20 and (twins) 19

▲ W.K. Lyhne, *Hallowed be her name*, 150x220cm, oil on canvas, 2016.

▼

Anna Perach, *Seven Wives,* performance documentation detail, 15 min, 2020.

"Before I had my son I took some time to incubate ideas in my mind before giving them form. Now there is a sense of urgency to produce works during the time I have in the studio, not waste precious time on wondering.

"My experience is that motherhood is considered to be a bit taboo in the art world. It is accepted as if the artist 'sold out' or joined the bourgeoisie. It's often met by others in the art community with a mix of underlying feelings of rejection, jealousy, or both."

Anna Perach, London, artist, one child aged five

Emma Franks, *I Dream Of Flying Away*, calico, ink, fabric, pigeon feathers, 2020.

"I don't think society takes artists or mothers seriously, so being an artist and mother is a double whammy! I have definitely struggled with being taken seriously as an artist and this is something which is common from talking to other artist mothers I know. I often hear from people, 'Oh, are you still making art?' and it always implies that what I do is a hobby even though I have been an artist for 18 years. Being a mother and an artist takes a lot of motivation, commitment and organisation but that is not recognised by people I meet, even those in the art world. Working from home, isolated and not being taken seriously as an artist, has definitely had an impact on my confidence and I've not applied for grants, projects or prizes."

Emma Franks, London, artist, three children aged 19, 15 and 13

Fern Thomas, *For a Spell*, video still, 2020.

"In my experience, being the primary carer means having to be present most times. What's for food? Where are we going now? What do we need to take with us? When working (more so before children) I inhabit a dream space, it is like an upwards moving space that exists up above my head – but being with children brings you right down into the present, right down to the ground, where they are. It means that the small moments I may have for a thought are often punctuated and the idea doesn't have time to expand or develop because then I am having to help a small person onto the toilet. Even when I have support from the grandparents (two days a week) I am playing catch up with the domestic tasks, or house admin. My ideas exist on small islands, possibly never allowed to meet up.

"I have definitely flat out not bothered to apply for opportunities because of my caring responsibilities. Most of the time I feel that I am letting myself down and the organisation down that I am working with because I am not able to work to the same capacity as I could before children. I find it frustrating and feel to be at fault even though it is mostly circumstantial."

Fern Thomas, Swansea, artist, two children age six and three

Daniella Norton, *Is this the Sea*, oil and acrylic on canvas, 2019.

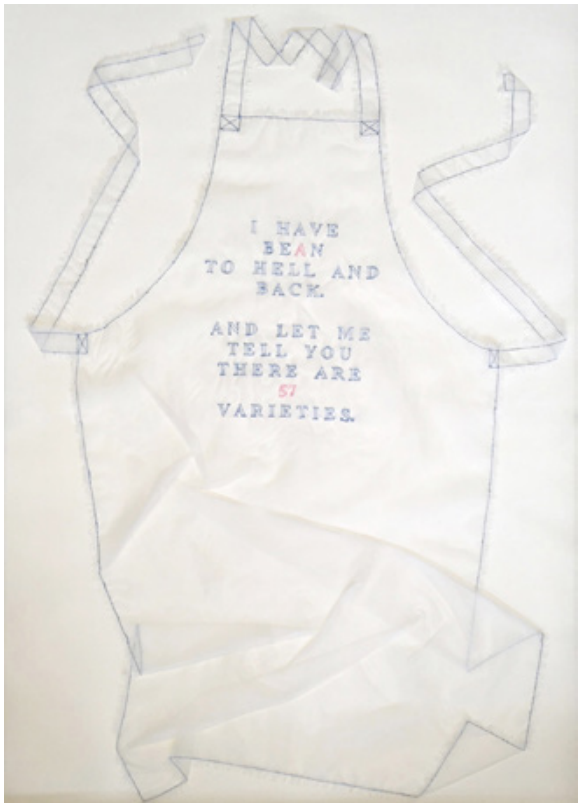
"I am often offered teaching work but usually cannot take it up because of childcare commitments. I have no family nearby, and my son cannot attend standard childcare provision. I have always wanted to apply for residencies, but very few (if any) offer places to stay with your child or are willing to consider making it possible for your child to be with you. I would love to attend private views and friends' exhibitions in London but lack of childcare or my particular situation means I generally can't attend things which would be fun, make me feel included, and provide the good networking opportunities which all artists need (and not just being lumped together with other parent artists as sometimes happens at events). Not that I have anything against other artists who are parents/mothers but I don't want to be categorised in that way."

Daniella Norton, Brighton, artist and educator, one child aged 10

"Selfish is a word given about artists. Selfish is not what a mother is supposed to be. Why 'selfish'? To do what you are good at? What does that even mean?

"I thought I had picked a partner who considered our creativity equal. I felt an incredible creativity and energy after giving birth for the first time: I was the hunter-gatherer and the nurturer. It seemed 'normal,' as everyone told me I was the 'strong' one and there was a bit of a thing at the time to be a 'Superwoman' (I bought into that.) Things started to unravel after the third child. I was burnt out. I asked my partner what I should do: he bought home an apron as a present to me. Enough said."

Jenifer Corker, East Sussex, artist and jewellery designer, three children aged 26, 25 and 23



Jenifer Corker, *End of a Relationship* (triptych), embroidery on silk organza, 2008-2020.

Cunts, This was not. Love, 2021.

Martina Mullaney is Programme Leader for Fine Art at the University of Bolton, and in the process of completing her Ph.D by practice at the University of Reading supervised by Dr. Rachel Garfield. Her research looks at the Missing Mother from the canon that is art history and feminist art. Her practice challenges established forms of art on maternity. She graduated with an MA in Photography from the Royal College of Art in 2004. She won the Red Mansion Art Prize in 2003, and has exhibited with Yossi Milo Gallery in New York, Fraenkel Gallery, San Francisco, Gallery of Photography, Dublin and Ffotogallery, Cardiff. After the birth of her daughter she initiated the project Enemies of Good Art in 2009, a multi-disciplinary project interrogating motherhood as experience in the art world.

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We. All Marys. Now. Not hailed. Were
we never. Whores we were. Debasement
under higher. Power. Not the plan. Under who's.
Fucking name. Fucking us. Fucking us Up. Fucking and
Off. Again. Bleedin hearts my. Broken beautiful sorrows.
Left to fester. Roam. Disappear her. Cunts. This was not. Love

To swim against the stream

In the second of our intergenerational conversations, 2019 Fine Art graduate Bethany Stead meets for the first time with Caroline Achaintre, who trained in the 1990s, to talk about lockdown, craft, class, confidence and sustaining an art practice.

Caroline Achaintre, *Choppers*, ceramic, 2019. Courtesy: Arcade London and Brussels and Art : Concept, Paris; Photo: Andy Keate

Bethany Stead, *Leggy Pot*, metal, plaster, cement and paint, 2019.

Bethany Stead: I've admired your work for a long time, and I feel an affinity with your practice, mainly through the materials that you choose to use, the relationship between drawing and object within your work, as well as the animalism and carnivalesque subject matter. I myself make ceramics, textiles and drawings, using animalistic textures and forms to explore my own inhabited experience in a female body and how I navigate spaces.

First of all, though, how have you been during lockdown? Have you been able to continue with your practice?

Caroline Achaintre: It's hard at the moment, there aren't any borders between time. On the one hand, I function really well, my studio is two streets away so that's really convenient and I've been able to go there continuously. I work in Germany as a Professor, and used to go over once or twice a month, but thanks to the internet it is still possible to teach, so in both functions I can still exist.

BS: Has lockdown changed the way you've made work?

CA: Not really, I think I'm quite slow in reacting to my circumstances. When I go somewhere on a residency, it might take a year till I feel it seeps in. I think it will definitely have an effect, but it might take a while to be visible. And yourself?

BS: I think this year has definitely changed the way I work. It has freed up so much more time than I had after I first graduated in 2019, to work on my own practice and make applications because of being furloughed. But at the same time it has affected productivity because I need social interaction.

I sometimes deal with feelings of guilt in pursuing my work, I feel aware of my privilege and it can feel self indulgent. I try to counteract this by working with communities or working with people. Have you ever experienced this?

CA: I grew up in Germany and you feel guilty for many things, but funnily enough, no. I mean you might make some money with art, but on the other hand you're producing things that no one necessarily asked for in the first place, and I think we actually make a huge contribution to society.

In the beginning, I was like everyone else, struggling to survive. I had a job, and then I had a child. It was a real struggle to even facilitate being able to go to the studio and I had to make sacrifices. Now it's easier, but I don't have any guilt in that sense.

There have been big discussions about whether the art system is relevant in these Corona times, but it's definitely important for being a complete human being, for exchange of thoughts, for escapism or political issues. Art is a very important part of society.

▲
Bethany Stead, *Bourgie*, digital drawing, 2020.

BS: That's true, I think I need to get over my feelings of guilt. I don't know if this is too personal a question to ask, but do you now earn a living from just your art?

CA: I do now, but it's not like I'm living a luxury lifestyle. I've definitely had those moments where you feel like you're in the wrong queue, and how is this going to end? But once it becomes easier, you appreciate it even more.

For quite a few years, I only did visiting tutoring when invited. I applied for a professorship three years ago, and I now have a class in Halle, which is next to Leipzig. I did teach at Goldsmiths for a year full time before that, and I really enjoyed the way of teaching, but there was too much admin. I had so many great colleagues who either don't earn enough to live off, or had to work so much that they had no time for their artwork. The academic system in Germany is a bit different and frankly, it's also better pay.

BS: How long did it take you to start making a living from your art?

CA: Maybe seven years. I finished my Goldsmiths MA in 2001, I had my daughter in 2006. I was showing loads, but in 2007 things started to pick up more in terms of selling work.

BS: You have spoken about being a blacksmith, before studying art for five years. How did you come to be a blacksmith, and what made you switch?

CA: I was born in France, and grew up in Germany. After school, I decided to go traveling – the idea of university felt like a tower. When I was traveling, I met the son of a blacksmith; I was really impressed by this guy, he made his own tools and forge. I was already thinking about learning a craft skill so I could do something with my hands. When I came back to Germany, I looked for an apprenticeship, and after a two and a half year apprenticeship I moved to Berlin and worked for another two and a half years for a really great company. I liked the physical engagement with material, but I realised I couldn't express myself artistically. And this desire grew and grew. So I eventually decided to apply to art school, and left all that behind me.

BS: You try to not place your work within a context of craft. I wondered why, because you were a crafts person before you were an artist?

Caroline Achaintre, *Paso Doble*, hand-tufted wool, 2020. Courtesy: Arcade London and Brussels and Art : Concept, Paris. Photo: Andy Keate

CA: When I learned blacksmithing, I realised that there is a morality around craft, how things are made and how they are not made, what's right and what's wrong, and this can really put a burden on material. As a young student I just wanted to experiment with every single material or non-material. At the time I was influenced by artists like Pipilotti Rist, and wanted to get rid of all this materiality. I went to Chelsea College of Art in the mixed-media class, but affinities come back, and I ended up working with material anyway. At Goldsmiths I was making small drawings that talked about the uncanny, angst, emotions and ambiguity in character. I wanted to bring this work back into the space, having made large-scale installations before. The interest in the uncanny and Sigmund Freud is the reason why I started using wool, so it was a 'conceptual decision' to use a domestic material never a craft decision, and then of course, I fell in love with it.

I'm not anti craft, that makes no sense. I'm attracted to things that are manageable, materials that are accessible and tactile, I like the work to grow in my hands. My way of understanding art making is to work through something without always having all the answers for your questions. You answer questions through a making process.

BS: When I make work, I choose materials because of the materiality and because I like handling them. But a major reason why I engage in craft and craft theory is to do with the relationship between craft and class. This is one of the main barriers that I feel I face, it's something I think about all the time and explore through my work. I wondered if you think about class within your work?

CA: When I say domestic and normal, then I guess it is about class in some way. But it's very British, relating things to class. I don't know if middle-class people feel like they have to make work about the middle class because it sounds boring already. When I did my teaching training I realised how everyone here holds on to their class, especially people who see themselves as working class.

BS: What have your main barriers been as a female artist?

CA: Again, I never tried to think in those terms, but of course it has always influenced my decisions. As a blacksmith, it was really hard to find an apprenticeship because it was a very male profession. That was definitely a struggle. I chose the apprenticeship because I was attracted to the way of working, but I'm sure it added to the fascination to swim against the stream, to work in a profession that is very male dominated. Maybe I wanted to prove something.

As an artist, I started working with wool, and wool is so loaded. First, it's so connected to feminist art from the '60s, people still think it's a feminist material and I always rebel against that. I'm not sure if that's what people want to hear.

When I started in 2001, it was still seen as being a feminist statement. People automatically pigeon-holed it and saw it as a bit old fashioned, or as a craft material. It was hard to find my own standing. At the same time there were male artists, like Enrico David and Michael Raedecker, working with textiles and it was much easier for them, they didn't have the whole agenda.

I think I was quite lucky, even if I didn't make the big bucks, I did manage to work with commercial galleries. I think in the commercial sector, there has always been a huge difference in representation. Institutions make a lot more effort now to make sure it's equal. I'm glad that things seem to move in the right direction. Everyone has to learn, we are all learning, women as well as men, about being aware and conscious of fairness and equality. What about you?

BS: Really similar. I chose to be a sculptor, as a reaction against wanting to be classed as feminine. I wanted to make large-scale sculpture, I wanted it to be scary and evoke disgust. But then, no matter what, it would always be described as domestic. I knew in the back of my head that it was domestic, in some way, but it's not what I was thinking when I was making it.

CA: Are you referring to the material? Because I've seen a sketch of yours, these huge, big feet and legs, I would never think about the domestic. Is it just because of the clay?

BS: I think it's because I make a lot of drawings of the sculptures inside rooms. I also reference furniture that has animalistic features. So I understand why and how my work is described this way, but there are some words that I don't think about and would like people not to use to describe my work. I recently got into needle punching. I love how quickly you can create an image and how it feels like a different way of drawing, but I almost feel that it will be taken less seriously because it's womanly and people might only see it that way.

One of the things that I have experienced throughout my art education and since graduating is the lack of women's voices, especially at art school. There was a massive proportion of female students over male, probably 20% male and 80% female. It would always be the males that would speak out in group critiques or lectures, it didn't leave a lot of space for women. I don't know what it was like when you were in art school?

CA: I think it was a better mixture than you describe, I remember it being half and half student and staff wise.

What I do remember – and it really saddens me when I think of it – is when I started working with ceramics I had no access to a kiln and I'd never worked with clay in my life before. So, I started going to community classes, and I really noticed that the elderly female makers would make themselves small and put themselves down. It reminded me of the lack of confidence in my mother and grandmother.

I know that lack of confidence can be passed on, but it's also possible to try to break it. Teaching in Halle, my class is called Textile Arts, but you can do whatever you like. I do have a higher percentage of female artists, but they are all really strong modern women with a strong voice. I have this big hope that all of us, as maybe mothers or educators, can somehow break the cycle. I think that's something to aim for.

BS: Did it take you a long time after leaving art school to build your confidence to talk about your work?

CA: I was never confident to speak about my work, but at one point I agreed to always give a talk whenever I was asked. I think if it doesn't come naturally you can work on it.

I remember talks where I had an almost out of body experience, and then I realised I only need to talk about what I do all day long and other people find that interesting. Sometimes you're so used to yourself, you forget about that. I'm still nervous every single time, but the beautiful thing about listening to people or seeing people talk is that it's not just what comes out of the mouth, it's everything around them.

BS: One last thing to ask: if you could go back to yourself starting out, what words would you give to yourself to help you persevere? I find it really difficult to constantly be putting all my energy into funding applications and jobs that I don't even really want, but that I need to be able to pay the bills and have an art practice.

CA: I think the thing is to always hold on to the practice itself. No matter how much you have to work, if you have a baby, or have to juggle 10 things at a time, really make sure you hold on to the making, because that's the only thing that's going to pull us through, the love for the work itself. I think this has to be the motor.

So, stay positive keep making, whenever there's a minute, even if it's just a really small amount of time.

Caroline Achaintre was born in Toulouse (FR) in 1969. She was raised in Fürth (DE) and, after training as a blacksmith, completed degrees at Chelsea College of Arts, London and at Goldsmiths, University of London. Achaintre has exhibited at international Museums and Institutions that include: Fondazione Giuliani, Rome, IT (2020); MOCO, Montpellier, FR (2020); Belvedere Museum, Vienna, AU (2019); Palais de Tokyo, Paris, FR (2018); Dortmunder Kunstverein, Dortmund, DE (2018); FRAC Champagne-Ardenne, Reins, FR (2017); Museo de Arte Precolombiano, Casa del Aalbado, Quito, EC (2017); BALTIC, Gateshead, UK (2016); Tate Britain, London (2015); Castello di Rivoli Museo d'Arte Contemporanea, Turin, IT (2014). Forthcoming solo exhibitions include those at: CAPC Musée d'Art Contemporain, Bordeaux, FR and Kunstmuseum Ravensburg, DE.

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Bethany Stead (b. 1995) is a sculptor and ceramicist fascinated by materials and techniques associated with traditional craft and folk art, some of which have a long history of being laborious to manipulate, and are associated with a particular class, sex or gender. She graduated from Newcastle University in 2019 and now lives and works in Newcastle. Recent exhibitions include the forthcoming 'Open Submission', BALTIC, Gateshead (April 2021), 3rdwave.cargo.site (2020), 'Manifestations', Conny Art Festival, Co. Durham (2019), and 'Newcastle University Degree Show', Copeland Gallery, London (2019). Stead is part of 'The Collective Studio 2020 – 2021' at The NewBridge Project, Gateshead.

www.bethanystead.com

Bobby Baker

Interview by Louisa Buck

Bobby Baker (born Kent, 1950, lives in London) is an artist and an activist, producing work that challenges preconceptions about domestic life and mental health across a range of disciplines and media, most notably performance. Over four decades her works have included dancing with meringue ladies, baking a life-sized version of her family out of cake, and making a series of diary drawings charting her experience of psychiatric treatments. Following an AHRC Creative Fellowship at Queen Mary University, London she was awarded an Honorary Doctorate in 2011.

▲

Bobby Baker, *Drawing on a Mother's Experience*, 1988. Photo: Andrew Whittuck

What did the 1990s mean to you both personally and professionally?

I would say the '90s was absolutely the most productive, intense, crazy period of my career. And it was kind of wonderful. But it was also the period in which I cracked up, and now with hindsight I can look back on that time with a degree of insight and realize what was going on. One of the things that underpinned it for me was that we had these two children and my ex-husband Andrew and I were both in the creative industries and very affected by the financial crash in the late '80s. We really struggled financially and nearly went bankrupt, and though my work was massively booming in terms of bookings and growing notoriety I wasn't very regularly or well paid. I'd started to fall apart by the mid-'90s and I cracked up by 1997 – with all these different things going on, it was pretty hardcore. I got labeled as being disordered when in fact it was my life that was impossible. The whole psychiatric profession which I hold responsible for this labeling of anyone having a bad time as being a problem rather than there being a problem in their lives, I see as being deeply misogynistic.

How did your work develop in that time?

I'd say it's just the way it's progressing now. I do the one show and then that leads to the next subject, and very often working in a different form because it gets boring doing the same thing one after the other. The stress of that time actually made me hugely productive because the only way I could get the income coming in was by

Bobby Baker, *Displaying the Sunday Dinner*, 1998. Photo: Andrew Whittuck

having new ideas and making new projects all the time. So I became a sort of machine for producing shows. I had this great mission to make work about everyday life and a woman's domestic lot, and I got such an incredible response to *Drawing on Mother's Experience* in 1988 that I came up with the idea for the Daily Life series. This was five shows over a ten-year period which started with *Kitchen Show* and opening up my kitchen to the public in 1991. I came up with the idea that it had to be a Domestic Quintet, which was partly in response to the grandiose trilogies produced by male artists in that era. So it began with *Kitchen Show*, then the second was a spiritual journey in a supermarket in the form of a lecture, and the third a huge installation at the South Bank about women's health. The fourth, *Grown Ups*, was about evil in a primary school and it took four years to get together because it was so difficult; and then when we finally got to *Box Story* it was just the best ever because it resolved the whole subject. That was a show about misfortune and how to survive it.

Any key moments or turning points?

I suppose I can't speak specifically because there were so many small steps. What I would say is that it was very difficult to understand at the time what turning points were. It's only when you look back on them and think how pivotal certain decisions were with what goes on. *Kitchen Show* in 1991 was the biggest step I'd ever made, apart from an edible family in a mobile home in 1976 when I made a life-size family out of cake in my prefab. I think the other shows were a strange sort of journey and I would say what I learned was so complicated and so gradual that when I look back on it, I couldn't be brief about it. But I think that what came out of it, and what's behind every single thing, was trying to find the best way to communicate, to the widest audience possible, a set of ideas that was mostly extremely complicated about everyday life in a way that people could take it any way, they could take it at face value or they could see the intellectual side. It was about communication with people, so it couldn't be in an art gallery. I wasn't against art galleries, it's just that the ideas wouldn't have fitted in there and so they had to be in different settings like shops and schools and whatever.

How did you become aware of a-n?

Looking back I was constantly guilty about a-n because I so wanted to subscribe to it and then I would subscribe to it, and then I'd fail to re-subscribe to it, and it's that thing where you've got kids and a chaotic life and then you feel all guilty and 'did I pay for it or didn't I pay for it?' Quite honestly in my 40s during the 1990s I was so intensely overworked and sleeping so little I was just never aware, so when I got a review in a magazine, I'd quite often missed it, I didn't know, or it was a blur.

How significant was a-n in raising the issues of the time?

I knew it was a good thing, and I'd read it whenever I could, but it was always in this chaotic way. I longed to be more involved, I always felt very lonely because, although I was in the live art world, a lot of them came from theatre and I just couldn't relate to it. They were great people, but there weren't in a way my people. I really missed the visual arts, I missed people who understood where I came from and what the references in my work were, and I felt that a-n was that. And I felt almost outside it and quite desperate at times, because I didn't know how to be part of it. And that's gone on until quite recently, feeling on the edge and a bit clueless.

You've featured in a number of a-n features and reviews, most notably in a live art feature in 1992 that flags up your 'Cook Dems' for Fanny's Big Ball. Was that something significant for you or was that something that just happened to be popular?

I remember I got the commission to do Cook Dems in 1990 from Glasgow City of Culture. It was a cookery demonstration to go anywhere. The idea was that I could pop up out of a cupboard wherever I was and demonstrate how to improve your status. So I made this outfit and I baked bread antlers to improve the status, breast pizzas to protect you against attack and insult and a bread ball/board skirt to add glamour. We initially did it in the Strathclyde region in all these strange women's centres and they just had no idea what was going to happen and I'd just ping out of this cupboard in this ridiculous kitchen and do a proper cookery demonstration, like Fanny Craddock.

30 years on what do you think are the key changes for artists starting out now?

During the '90s the gallery scene changed, but it hadn't really changed. Tate Modern wasn't there and galleries were quite closed to those who went to them. What's so exciting now is that we have these huge public spaces, they're like modern temples where people do go and see art – but it wasn't like that in the '90s, was it? It was so elitist in some sense, you had to understand the language to see the work, and I think performance art in galleries is performance art for the cognoscenti very often. I'm interested in work which is just in a space, that people can just happen upon, both of which they do now manage to do in Tate and it's really exciting. I also think now there's a huge youth cult – to focus on young people can be an advantage but is rather piecemeal. I feel there's quite a lot of pressure on young people but also a lot of support and excitement about their work. I suppose 30 years on there's more visibility and pressure for people. But that also means there's more opportunities. Ask me in another 30 years and I'll be objective. It also seems much more competitive now, but maybe it always was. When I was young there wasn't any focus on you being young and emerging or anything, you just got on with it.

Bobby Baker, *Cook Dems*, 1990. Photo: Andrew Whittuck

What advice would you give your younger self?
I would feel entitled to be an artist. Right at the core of it, I always knew I wanted to be an artist, from when I was tiny, but I wouldn't feel entitled. Does that make sense? I would just think, 'Yeah, I can be an artist. I can be this and it doesn't matter if I'm middle-class or a woman or a mother. I am allowed and I am entitled'. That's what I'd say. I'd be kind. I'd give myself more interesting support I suppose. I think seize everything but try to resist the pressure that you have to know what you're doing.

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Louisa Buck is a writer and broadcaster on contemporary art. She has been London Contemporary Art Correspondent for The Art Newspaper since 1997. She is a regular reviewer and commentator on BBC radio and TV. As an author she has written catalogue essays for institutions including Tate, Whitechapel Gallery, ICA London and the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam. In 2016, she authored The Going Public Report for Museums Sheffield. Her books include Moving Targets 2: A User's Guide to British Art Now (2000), Market Matters: The Dynamics of the Contemporary Art Market (2004), Owning Art: The Contemporary Art Collector's Handbook (2006), and Commissioning Contemporary Art: A Handbook for Curators, Collectors and Artists (2012). She was a Turner Prize judge in 2005.

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Front cover: Jade Montserrat, *Offensive to modesty and decency*, highlighter pen, fineliner, pencil, pastels and charcoal on paper, 2014.

Back cover: Nicola Singh, *Flower at hands, head, heart*, 21x29.7 cm, felt-tip, watercolours and holographic tape on paper (double sided drawing), 2021.

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