

Small repairs

“The past and the present are after all so close, so almost one, as if time were an artificial teasing out of a material which longs to join, to interpenetrate, and to become heavy and very small like some of those heavenly bodies scientists tell us of.”
— Iris Murdoch, *The Sea, the Sea*

Don't be fooled by the politeness, it's there for a reason. Maintain a handshake for long enough and it will soon become uncomfortable. The gesture connects bodies and intentions, the pressure of flesh against flesh a reminder of the thinnest of boundaries separating innards and air, thoughts and actions. The surface counts, without it there is no protection and no reveal. 'Bodies Undone' seems very much about the reveal – of making-processes and personal narratives – and of facilitating a different view on the familiar. Inferences to a range of respectable pursuits and traditions, from high art to high fashion by way of high tea, serve to direct the viewer into a series of outcomes that could never have been planned for and may have only come to light as a result of taking risks and allowing things to unravel.

There is a whiff of doom about the idea of coming undone, for it could imply ruin, a plan derailed, a loss of control or the giving away of too much. Also, a body undone is, potentially, quite a grisly prospect, while thinking of it as a living object that can be dressed and undressed pulls one into many associative alleyways: from the crime-scene to the bedroom. However, the notion of an unfinished state encompasses growth, specifically when it comes to making – the sense of a continuing evolution that resists fixed readings. The idea of a gift with loose wrapping seems an apt metaphor here in the

way it frames aspects of human nature – the capacity for joy, boredom, disappointment, deceit. Collectively, these associations describe a curiously vulnerable position for the maker and all find a home, at points, in the practices of the four artists here.

A banana bunch of infant fingers making the peace sign; porcelain digits delicately extending into a rubberised wormhole; the impressionistic autopsical examination of a glove; or the bird flipped by a cartoon everyman in perpetual torture, the hand is everywhere in this exhibition. And, of course, it's implicit within the making of the works, for there appears to be little technological distance between viewer and object. Most of the works have been created at human scale therefore one can imagine feeling, wearing, using, even making them – if lacking the technical specifics (and the skills) the job might require. Material processes offer visceral bridges into candid narratives exploring complex and sometimes contradictory emotional responses to particular life events, as well as issues of self-image and identity.

The body is often described in art in terms of its objecthood but, as a cultural site linking many disciplines and branches of thought it might be imagined as protean territory that is never 'done' and cannot be mapped in a singular fashion. In the connective tissue between the humanities and the sciences are innumerable individual human stories, feeding different forms of study and, down the line, re-informing collective experience. It's the gristly interstices between the knowledge of what we are (complex biological machines, thinkers, workers, creators, friends, lovers, baby makers) and the experiences that shape who we are, which appear of particular interest to Sarah Gillham, Mindy Lee, Susan Sluglett and Paul Westcombe.

Printed, painted, stitched, cut, worn and handled to the point of being loved into something entirely new, Lee's latest works are likely to leave the viewer with questions about what they are (part-textile part figurative painting, with a nod to Matisse's cutouts), and who has made them. Standing in front of them, it's possible to imagine how this exhibition might have come about – with bodily evidence permeating every soft, often radically deconstructed layer. The artist has worked with her young son, J.A.L-B, to create this ongoing series exploring the changing state of their relationship: from ship-in-bottle to separate entities. At first spec, there is something distinctly modish about these once ordinary items of clothing, mostly things worn by Lee during or after pregnancy. Imagine Comme des Garçons does Mothercare, for they certainly wouldn't look out of place at a niche catwalk event. It seems improbable that something so obviously mass-manufactured might be afforded the means to convey the pleasure and the pain of both parenting and creative production.

It's difficult to describe this collaborative practice without making it sound like art therapy. Anyone who finds it impossible to throw away the effects of those they love will likely envy the sense of catharsis (or emotional growth) that must come as a result of working with treasured items (and those they pertain to), rather than simply archiving them; out of sight, out of mind. The process is led by the materials: the physical properties/limitations of the fabrics and the results of the "play-paint games" Lee has set up for J.A.L-B, which she then responds to. The sense of freedom this appears to bring, to both parties, is palpable. Some artists spend their lives trying to return to a state of unselfconscious making that most only ever possess as children. J.A.L-B's use of colour and line is often exquisite, gifting his mother with some fortuitous

material possibilities. Tender in the manner of an embroidery sampler and riotously colourful like a protest flag, the beauty of these works lies in Lee's ability to make visible the passage of domestic time and all of its vital ordinariness.

While Gillham also works intuitively and experimentally with materials, it is Sluglett's exploration of loss and the history of an important relationship that most clearly resonates with Lee's collaborative project in progress. The need to possess the objects of others in order to make sense of one's feelings for them, is particularly key in this case, as Sluglett has been living and working with the belongings, in particular a shoe collection, of a recently deceased and very dear friend. She describes their meetings and the evolution of their friendship, as akin to the *dérive*, Guy Debord's notion of the unplanned (urban) journey. There is certainly the sense of an open and unscripted investigation in play when taking in her studies of these personally valuable narrative props, beautifully observed in charcoal and plaster.

“I have danced with Hamish in kitchens and sitting rooms across London. In the 90's, before legislated curfews, we danced in the streets, late into the night, following the last remaining rogue float, during the Notting Hill Carnival. We danced on the Cycladic island of Sifnos where his bronzed beauty seemed to bring life to ancient Greek myths. We partied and danced on a boat travelling down the River Thames; in nightclubs and bars and, in the summer of 2016, at Fete de la Musique in Paris, where I danced with Hamish in the streets of the Marais.”

Sluglett's visual handwriting in charcoal imbues her drawings with the poignancy of a love letter. Her crisp delineation of pairs of boots in space highlights the absence of anything inside them, while the smudged spaghetti strands of open

laces appear as if recently unthreaded, waiting for hands to do them up. As with Lee's maternity wear, stretched and limp with the effort of having had to fit around a growing bump, Sluglett's physically very present but incredibly fragile casts of male boots bear the evidence of wear: impressions of feet and the scuffs and rips as a result of many dancing miles. In some instances, the boots – think Vince from the Boosh, he was clearly a stylish man – appear to have been taken apart, as if to get closer to the earthly evidence that remains and to catalogue every detail. Roughly hewn suture lines of black thread in the seams of these shell-like structures appear as distinctly mortal repairs. The archaeological echoes of this spectral procession reflect the artist's forensic approach, as well as her sensitive material translation of personal effects.

Gillham's sculptural reconfiguring of found stuff, similarly to Sluglett's material enquiry, is concerned with the previous lives of her chosen objects. Aspects of their associative histories, particularly in relation to the history of craft, informs the means through which she might "reanimate" them. The artist has recently been working with ceramic pin-cushion dolls. As stand-ins for the female form, they have been altered in ways that speak of its objectification, but also reflect facets of the artist's own experiences. En masse, these 'women' appear as if willingly captive subjects trapped in an endless cycle of self-improvement. Caught mid-movement in an elegantly ludicrous dance, their forms speak of improbable body ideals for women that are constantly shifting, as 'body work' becomes an increasingly normal part of everyday aesthetic maintenance.

However proper the purposes of their original design or how delicate her installed elements may appear, there is nothing precious about Gillham's means and modes of

(re)presentation. She puts her dismembered characters through a rigorous and rather brutal-sounding metamorphosis, embedding limbs in raw torn-off chunks of clay, applying slip to their surfaces, re-firing, re-glazing, and often then breaking them up and beginning the process again. Gillham lovingly retains many of their structural attributes, which brings a strange, by turns Stepford Wives and outright perverse, languidity to the violence implied. There are many ways to read her playful tone. The title of new work 'Into the cave', for example, might equally refer to ancient female biological ritual as the origins of Philosophy as male invention, or a metaphor for female parts. The pleasure comes, as with all Gillham's creations, from her uncanny treatment of matter; how the cracked glaze on an intestinal/umbilical snake body with an antique hand for a head reminds one of pre-masticated clusters of hard-shelled chewy sweets. You almost want get your teeth on them, despite the abject alien undercurrents, to confirm the texture.

The cartoon men in Westcombe's variably scaled and incredibly detailed drawings are also in the process of undergoing extreme transformation. Whether this is as part of a programme of punishment, or in pursuit of a fetish, it's a hard one to call. Disassembled, dismembered, possibly even disembowelled, they appear full of holes, doors and riddled with fleshy pipework from which they may then self-pleasure or self-feed, and that keeps them plumbed into each extraordinary scene. The artist likens the idea of his everyman trapped in a never-ending cycle to Nietzsche's theory of the eternal return, which posits that everything has already happened and we're living in endless repeat. The air of masochism, even if tongue-in-cheek, also extends to the making of these maze-like works, as he often draws directly,

in miniature, onto tube ticket receipts, used paper coffee cups and batteries. Whatever one might imagine is going [on?] in these images from the other side of the room, the reality is guaranteed to undermine expectation. There is no finding Wally.

Small-scale working became a necessary part of Westcombe's practice when he began taking jobs invigilating exhibitions, with drawing a means of passing the time. Art environments and hospital corridors, another job site, continue to feature in these works, as does the sense of a bored man railing against the system – you can imagine him making them in situ, underpaid and angry. But to focus on this is to miss the point and the joy. They may be pothole-dark and blisteringly satirical, but Westcombe appears to delight in his ability to act out any kind of thought or fantasy on paper. He describes his practice, which includes larger-scale wall and composite drawings – built like maps using grid references – as auto-portraiture. While, for convenience's sake, he often uses his own body as life model, this implies he is, in part, controlled by the need to make them. Certainly, without the sense of a personal, non-linear narrative within the outlandishness, as underlined by his deadpan, often self-deprecating titles, it would be easy to get caught up in the technical details. No danger, the title of his new work for the Blyth gallery, 74 A4 pages of composite drawing built around a breast-feeding baby with its visible eye sewn shut, is 'Our Tears Will Wet Our Bottoms'.

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