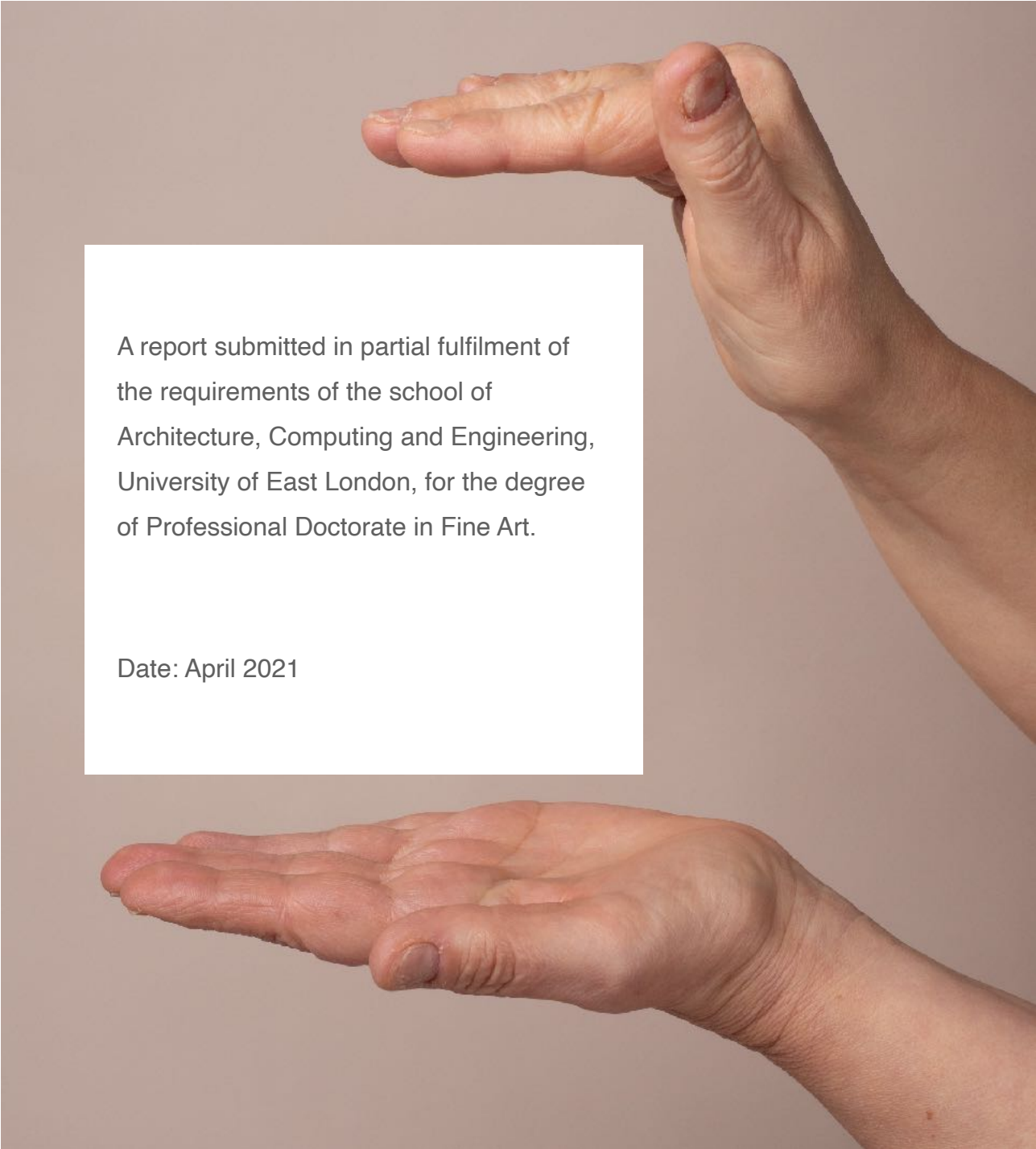


# Groom / Consume / Repair

**Sue Withers**

Student Number: 1629710

A photograph of two hands, palms up, against a neutral, light-colored background. The hands are positioned one above the other, with the fingers slightly spread. The skin appears aged and wrinkled. A white rectangular box is overlaid on the left side of the image, containing text.

A report submitted in partial fulfilment of  
the requirements of the school of  
Architecture, Computing and Engineering,  
University of East London, for the degree  
of Professional Doctorate in Fine Art.

Date: April 2021

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*For all the women in my family, whose concerns, choices and interests have shaped my thinking: especially my mum Nora, my sister Ali, nieces Lauren and Gemma; Kitty and Dolly, Mary, Vera and Helen, Jo, Sarah, Ruby and Clara, Debbie and Vina, Cathy, Laura, Bella and Rachel, Marietta, Karen, Lizzi, Susi and Belinda.*

# Abstract

Spanning printmaking, photography, video and sculpture *Groom / Consume / Repair* explores the construction of female identity through consumerism; the pursuit of perfection, acceptance or visibility through the acquisition of possessions.

This report reviews the evolution of my creative practice since graduating from a Fine Art degree in Leeds, through postgraduate study in printmaking at Wimbledon School of Art and subsequent activities as a freelance artist and curator. The main focus of the report examines the key tensions or contradictions which emerged as central concerns during the five year practice-led research enquiry on the Professional Doctorate in Fine Art at the University of East London.

Informed by a range of contemporary feminist art practice, there is particular focus on the work of Janine Antoni, Mika Rottenberg, Mona Hatoum, Sarah Lucas and Sylvie Fleury.

The research examines the influence of class and the dangerous or transgressive qualities of that which is often considered frivolous: colour and fashion. Alongside analysis of the cultural associations conveyed by materials, tensions were revealed between the need to conform and the capacity to subvert the societal expectations of women's appearance.

The power of fetishism is considered, and the theories of both Sigmund Freud and Karl Marx have contributed to the emergence of central themes; the idea of woman as both consumer and the consumed, and the revealing of the repetitive, hidden qualities of labour on which consumerism relies. Alluding to the processes involved in the manufacture of products and the maintenance of display, the preservation of order over self and surroundings is also explored.

The influence of minimalism is acknowledged, specifically the use of the grid to suggest order or control. Addressing the excesses of consumerism through references to minimalism and the use of found objects reveals the connotations of what we value, and what or who, we discard.

The evolution of a sculptural component to my practice as a visual artist led to the recognition that exhibiting is a form of research activity, as necessary to development as time spent in the studio. An approach which can embrace the speculative or unsettled as productive, and allow the unforeseen to become a catalyst for progress.



# Introduction

The title of my doctoral research, Groom / Consume / Repair, alludes to the endless cycle of shopping, grooming and housekeeping, where capitalism has positioned women as consumers of the world's resources to adorn, beautify and decorate.

Following a review of my work and professional practice since graduating from a degree in Fine Art in the late eighties, the main focus of this report is the development of my practice throughout the five years of the doctorate programme. Four key tensions or contradictions have emerged as central concerns, and while these frequently overlap I have used these paradoxes to title those sections where this focus seems more apparent.

In Conform / Subvert I discuss work from the earlier stages of the doctorate to examine the influence of class, the transgressive qualities of colour and the role of the body in my current practice.

The importance of fashion image-making is introduced, but further explored in Consumer / Consumed. The work in this second section investigates more directly the idea of woman as both consumer and the consumed, acknowledging the influence of fashion in more depth and considering the power of fetishism. The significance of minimalism is also examined, specifically the use of the grid to reference order or control and cultural associations conveyed by materials.

Order & Repair / Disorder & Disrepair describes work which makes visible the repetitive and hidden qualities of the labour on which consumerism relies. Alluding to the processes involved in the manufacture of products and the maintenance of display, the preservation of order over self and surroundings is explored. Investigating the ephemeral qualities of materials connected with grooming practices introduces more recent work and considers the appeal of cuteness.

The final section Surface / Depth continues to explore fashion image-making, focusing in particular on cosmetic and jewellery advertising. The tension between adornment or the superficial surface, whether cosmetics or carpet, and the abject, unreliable body is examined.

The gap between submitting the report and the Viva exhibition has been addressed by the inclusion of an additional section, Conclusion / Exhibition, which explores the curatorial strategies employed and reflects on the work presented.

As my practice expanded to include sculpture and video, several theories of fetishism influenced the development of my work. This is particularly the case in relation to commodity fetishism, where Marx observed that social relations between people are perceived as economic relations among objects and Freud's ideas of sexual fetishism where desire is transferred from a suitable sex object to a substitute.

The work of anthropologist Daniel Miller has significantly informed my understanding of consumer culture; the gendering of shopping as an activity and the various roles our possessions might play in our lives.

Teaching printmaking, research skills and professional practice to undergraduates in 3D Design Craft, Fashion, Graphic Design and Fine Art, in addition to all pathways on Foundation Diploma, my interest and enthusiasm for all forms of creative practice are long-standing. Influenced by a wide range of predominantly female artists, my recent work has also been stimulated by advertising, animation and fashion. An exhibition at the Barbican, *The Vulgar: Fashion Redefined* was especially important, where the observations made by psychologist and essayist Adam Phillips prompted me to re-evaluate the transgressive qualities of fashion.

Exploring the tension between minimalism and the excesses of consumerism, the use of found objects, humour and the everyday, the artists to which I have repeatedly referred are Janine Antoni, Mika Rottenberg, Mona Hatoum, Nicole Wermers, Sarah Lucas and Sylvie Fleury.

Although many of my references reflect my own age and circumstances, an early incentive for the work was gained through my students. Working at a college on the borders of the Essex and the East End, the cohorts I taught have been diverse, in class, age and ethnicity, but the stereotypical 'Essex Girl' construction of female identity remains deeply rooted. I was shocked to realise that societal pressure to package oneself for the consumption of others had significantly increased. Social media and the impact of 'reality' TV programmes such as *The Only Way is Essex* give the impression that a cosmetically or surgically enhanced glamour was not only possible, but expected. Younger artists such as Amalia Ulman, Emily Perry and Rachel Maclean explore various aspects of this territory, and have influenced many aspects of my research.

# Personal and Creative Context

## 1985–88: BA Fine Art

The politics of representation was an underlying interest throughout my degree, specifically concerned with the representation of women in art, literature and the media. Influenced by the work of Helen Chadwick, Mary Kelly, Nancy Spero and Sonia Boyce, I concentrated mainly on large scale photographic screen prints and a series of smaller collographs, which aimed to reference frescos whilst exploring the role of Eve in the *Fall of Man*.

Despite being made in 1972, John Berger's observation that women have '*been born into an allotted and confined space*' still seemed especially relevant. The cost of such confinement being a splitting of the self, so that we are constantly watching ourselves and monitoring how we appear to others.

*'From earliest childhood she has been taught and persuaded to survey herself continually. And so she comes to consider the surveyor and the surveyed within her as the two constituent yet always distinct elements of her identity as a woman.'* (Berger, 1972: 46)

The writing of Laura Mulvey, Griselda Pollock, Judith Williamson, Marina Warner, Rosalind Coward and Susan Brownmiller underpinned my attempts to analyse the construction of female identity, and to examine the work of Cindy Sherman, the subject of my thesis.

After graduating I was keen to develop a more flexible visual vocabulary. I felt restricted by figurative imagery, but found it hard to make much sense of the abstract images I made myself. A vocabulary that could explore the things that concerned me, some of which seemed peculiarly female, but was also capable of leading me into more universal topics, all the major themes: birth, life, love, sex and death. At the time I had two distinct influences: American abstract artists such as Eva Hesse, Cy Twombly and Robert Motherwell, and graphs, maps and satellite pictures, the means by which visual information is catalogued. Like photography, it seemed that such images were seen as objective and therefore more 'real' than an image made by an artist.

I was also interested in the way women are associated with nature, so used the chine collé technique to collage maps into prints from collograph plates, made with sand, leaves and grass. Man-made images of nature in contrast to the imprint of the organic matter itself, this work was still somehow related to the body, almost as if the earth were a metaphor for the self; fossils, erosion, fecundity and barrenness, echoing the cycles of the body.

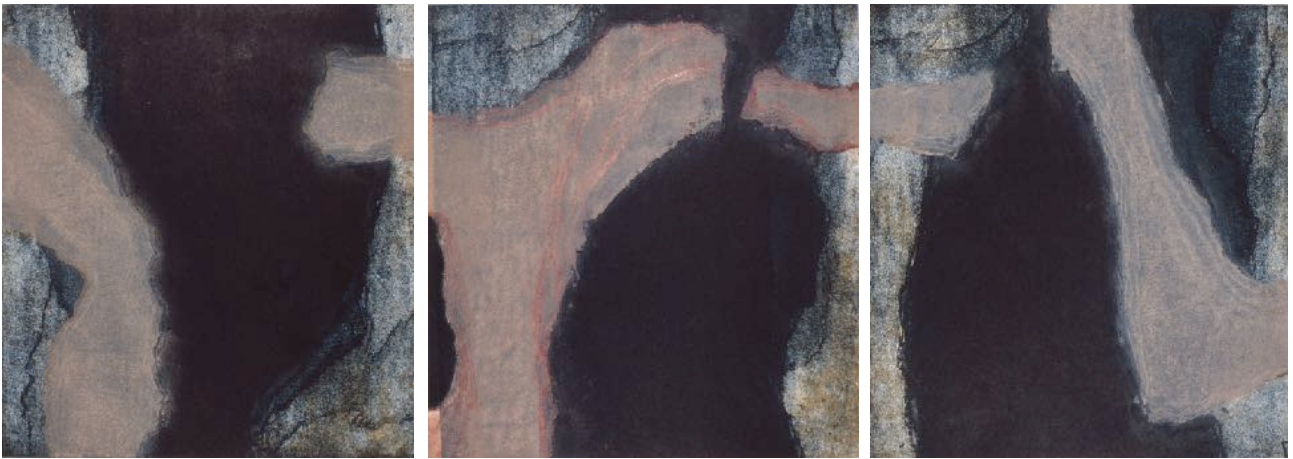


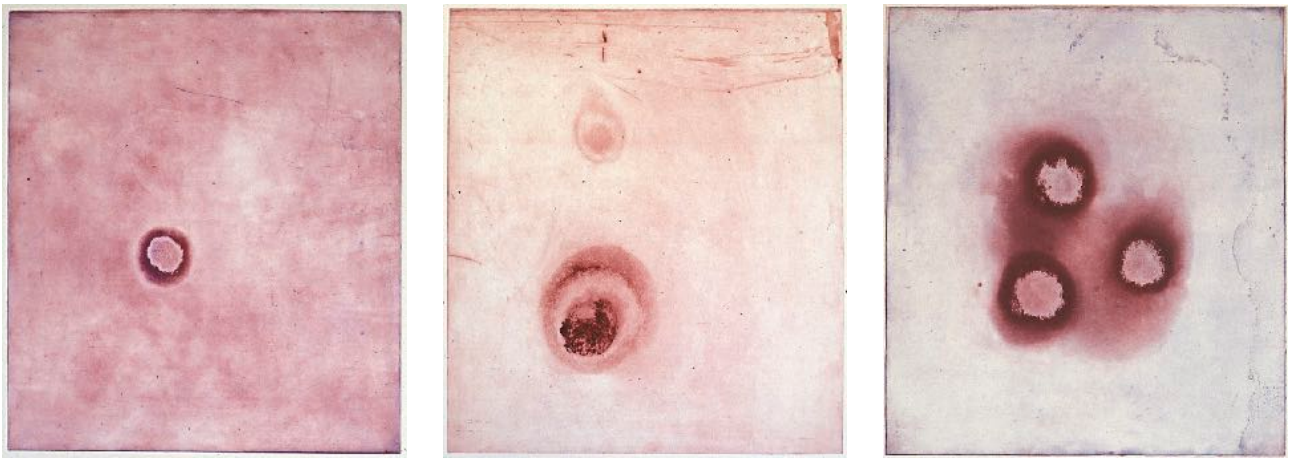
Figure 01: Sue Withers, *Pelvis* (collograph) 1992

In 1991 I spent two months in Rome. It was exciting to experience a different culture, and somehow liberating to exist as an outsider, where one could not be expected to fully grasp the subtleties of social norms and expectations. It gave me the confidence to let go of a literal approach to meaning in my work and let the process of making images evolve. I started combining ink and varnish mono prints with collographs and collage, using torn card to suggest both bones and land.

Although I admired work by artists such as Marc Quinn and Damien Hirst which used real bodily fluids and carcasses, the element of representation, of illusion, was important to me. I wanted the images to suggest blood and mucous, because often such substances aren't so easily identified, meaning the work requires information not readily apparent through looking at the image, in order to be fully understood. As I searched for the imagery which would communicate my intentions, I returned to the writing of Susan Griffin, especially *Woman and Nature: the Roaring Inside Her* (1978) and *Pornography and Silence: Culture's Revenge Against Nature* (1981) and the work of Susan Hiller and Mary Kelly.

### **1992–1995: MA Fine Art; Printmaking**

During the three years of the postgraduate diploma and MA at Wimbledon School of Art, I made images intended to describe aspects of the body: impressions of both internal structures (cells, blood, growths) and external elements (cuts, grazes, wounds). My work was influenced by high technology images produced for scientific research. Ultra sound and computed tomography scans of the human body, microscopic slides, x-rays and satellite pictures. I was interested in the body as a vehicle through which life is perceived (the skin as the boundary which defines the body, the edge of one's self) and in the way both science and art are responsible for visualising previously unseen aspects of our

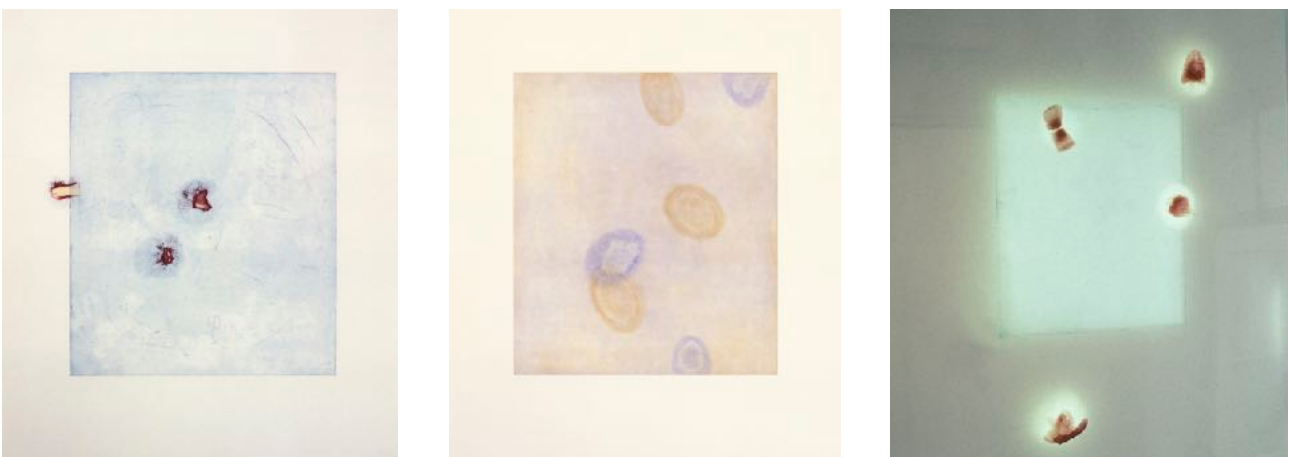


Figures 02, 03, 04: *Sore* (etching, drypoint) *Wound* (etching, drypoint) *Raw* (etching, drypoint). All 1994

bodies. Working mainly with intaglio printmaking (concentrating on etching and experimenting with the effects of different acids on various surfaces) I used a combination of aqua-tint, spit-bite and dry-point to create images which evoked bruises, sores, scabs; marks on the skin's surface. The image of the bruise interested me, an image of contained pain, controlled violence. The skin isn't broken, it's internal damage.

The work made was often stimulated by events in my life, sometimes very personal experiences. During the MA I realised that there was an element of empowerment in making these images. A place to put all those feelings which are not acceptable, which as a woman aren't supposed to be expressed: anger, hatred, and desire.

I didn't want the images to be bound to a literal representation of the body. So I chose to work on a size which seemed to be the largest possible imaginary fragment of the body, the biggest stretch of skin with no edges. Experimenting with galvanised steel, initially



Figures 05, 06, 07: Sue Withers *Leech* (etching, drypoint and mono print) *Germ* (etching, drypoint) *Spore* (drypoint, mono print) installation detail. All 1995

because it was cheaper than zinc, the combination of the layer of zinc bitten to reveal the steel underneath seemed to reinforce the idea of a damaged skin.

In my final year I combined these methods with mono-printing ink and varnish on both sides of the paper to make translucent images referring to microscope slides. My interest in skin became part of a more general concern with the boundary between the inside and the outside, and using light as a means of exploring that boundary. I wanted to create a sense of the body's interior, as if these images represented an imaginary space inside the body. They are concerned with both fertility and disease, with the microscopic and the macroscopic, which led me to the paintings of Gwen Hardie and Mark Francis.

### 1995–2006: Artists' Multiples, Collaboration and Curating

In 1995 I co-founded Proof. It was initially set up as an artist-run print facility, providing support and equipment to enable artists' to publish their work in small limited editions. From 1998 to 2006 I curated and exhibited collections of artists' multiples, showing regularly at the London Artists Book fair and East London Design Show. Consequently, the work shown frequently played with the audience's expectations of what one might find at a direct selling design show or comments on consumerist culture.



Figure 08: Moller & Withers, *A Commemorative Stamp* (artist's multiple) 2002

My own work at this point centred mainly on a series of hand painted 'editions' of small battery-operated light pieces, which I called *germlights*. Each edition was titled to suggest disease, disgust or decay as an attempt to frustrate their seductive, decorative qualities. Although I never felt that this work was truly resolved, it did lead to some commercial success. An early collaboration with Andrew Moller was more satisfying. *A Commemorative Stamp* was prompted by discussing Cildo Meireles' *Insertions into Ideological Circuits: The Coca-Cola Project*, (1970) with a student and wondering what form a contemporary intervention could take. Referencing Marcel Duchamp's rectified



readymade, *L.H.O.O.Q* (1919) we created an edition of rubber stamps designed to allow the user to print a beard and moustache on British bank notes.

I have always wanted to show work in which I was interested, and perhaps didn't see in commercial galleries. Moving to a live/work apartment in Southwark in 1999, meant there was the space and opportunity to organise exhibitions. [Appendix 3] The first exhibition was *motor show* which included work by Hayley Newman and Brian Catling. My role was mainly as facilitator, administrator and catalogue designer rather than curator, but I very much enjoyed the collaborative nature of the project and was keen to continue to include this in my practice.

A fascination with the way meanings can be affected by the context in which art work is experienced led to the consideration of other non-gallery spaces. I was interested in the issues surrounding public and private funding, the politics of the exhibition space from big institutions to non-gallery spaces, the way in which 'tastes' are shaped and an artist's 'success' is measured, and how contemporary art is represented both by PR bodies and the media. I see curating as a possible means of exploring and exposing these structures which sometimes seem hidden from both the artist and the audience, but inform and underpin the art world.

### **2003–2016: Pedagogy and Participatory Art Practices**

In 2004 I completed a Graduate Certificate in Learning and Teaching. Studying at CLTAD transformed the way I felt about learning and teaching, and continues to stimulate and inform my art practice. In part it helped me to articulate what I had instinctively felt education should be. I had not anticipated being excited by David Kolb's experiential learning cycle, by the role of emotion in learning and Abraham Maslow's theories of motivation. I had not expected to discover a passion for education and for exploring how people learn which equaled my passion for fine art. Consequently, the relationship between pedagogy and contemporary fine art and curatorial practices became central to my thinking.

Nicholas Bourriaud's *Relational Aesthetics*, a student trip to Tino Segal's *This Progress* at the ICA (2006) and an increase in my teaching responsibilities (or lack of time in the studio) stimulated an interest in participatory models of art practice. Influenced by the writing of bell hooks and Paulo Friere, social inclusion and the role of emotion in learning became key themes, which coupled with Lave and Wenger's analysis of situated learning



Figure 09: FBA Year 10, *Never Be Who They Are* (screen printed placards) 2013

and communities of practice led me to consider how I might combine the different areas of my work as an artist, curator and educator.

In 2013 I was invited to be an artist-in-residence at Frances Bardsley Academy for Girls (a local school, awarded specialist in visual arts status in 2004). The original intention was to create work in response to the Brentwood Road Gallery's exhibition *The Suffragettes and the Art of Social Change*, but it became clear that facilitating students was the school's priority. An earlier, somewhat unresolved collaborative project created in a pre internet / smartphone age *Are You Listening to Me* became the stimulus for a project using placards to spell out the statement generated and agreed by the year 10 cohort.

### **Grooming and Housekeeping**

My practice at this time was developing by making scans of used depilatory wax strips, plucked eyebrow hairs and dustballs. I created a series of digital images reflecting the pressure to conform to 'standards' of grooming and housekeeping, activities where I often feel that I fail to measure up, hence the reference to grids and graphs.

Initially, using Adobe photoshop and InDesign was merely a means of ensuring that I could continue to make work alongside full time teaching, but the potential to easily duplicate, repeat and alter scale, led to a sizeable collection of images and many variations. The seemingly endless possibilities of working digitally becoming as overwhelming as the endless cycle of grooming and cleaning. The high resolution scans looked very similar to pencil drawings, and interested in the idea of drawing as a record of the time spent observing, I became more aware of how the duration of labour is often hidden in work made digitally. This also seemed to echo the hidden qualities of the time spent on house work or grooming. The titles explored file-naming conventions and the terminology of the software used.



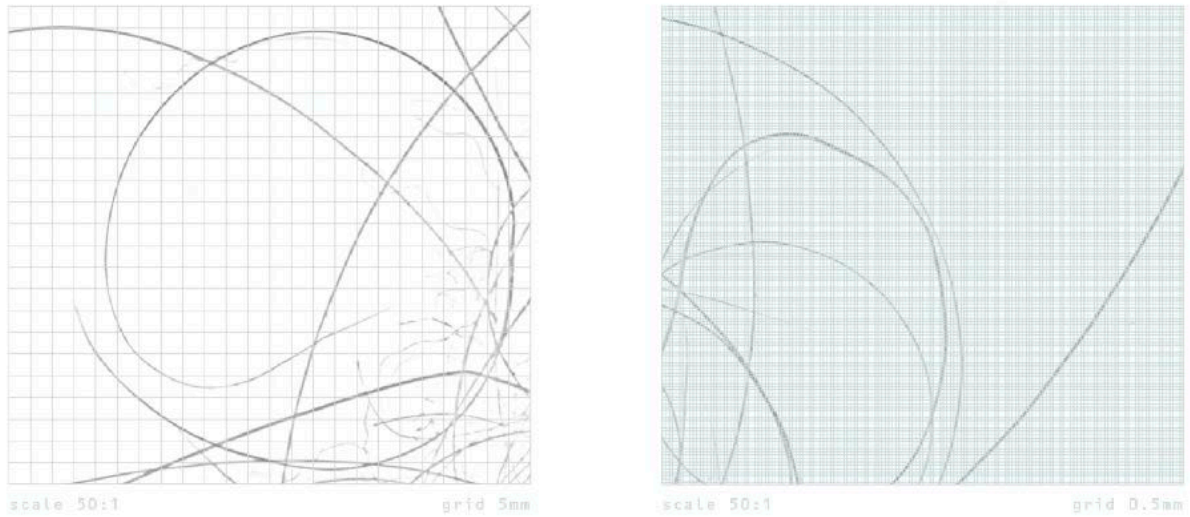


Figure 10: Sue Withers, *vacuum/threshold\_v03 (i)* (inkjet print) 2007

Influenced by minimalism and the references to geometry in the work of Donald Judd and Sol LeWitt, the work was considerably informed by the concerns of Mona Hatoum and Janine Antoni. I was interested in achieving an economy of expression, in seeing how few marks could be made to create an image which communicated.

## Creative Practice and Theory

I am concerned with the construction of female identity through consumerism and the pursuit of perfection or acceptance through the acquisition of goods. The accumulation and disposal of 'stuff' seems an inevitable consequence of the endless cycle of shopping, grooming and housekeeping, where capitalism has positioned women as consumers of the world's resources to adorn, beautify and decorate. I aim to explore how age, class, education and gender shape these rituals and aspirations, how much one needs to conform or subvert to remain visible. Encouraged to consume in order to be consumed, women are seen as both the adorned and the adornment.

In 2001, Michael Landy's systematic destruction of all his possessions in the former C&A building on Oxford Street (*Breakdown*) felt like a near perfect expression of anti-consumerist anxiety. It is so easy to empathise with the desire to rid oneself of all possessions, and yet to imagine doing so is almost terrifying. Seeing Song Dong's *Waste Not* at MOMA in 2009 provoked a similar response, but from an entirely opposite perspective. How easy to keep everything when you have had so little, yet how overwhelming.

In *Missing Out: In Praise of the Unlived Life*, the psychotherapist and essayist Adam Phillips explores the idea that we exist within two parallel lives, the one to which we aspire and the one that we actually inhabit. He claims that '*affluence has allowed more people than ever before to think of their lives in terms of choices and options — we are always haunted by the myth of our potential, of what we might have it in ourselves to be or do*' (Phillips, 2013: xii)

Seeing shopping (the gathering of goods and services) grooming (the maintenance of personal order) and housekeeping (the maintenance of domestic order and disposal of the discarded) as the means by which we indicate these aspirations or construct the life we are not living, I have been examining my own accumulated evidence. The use of found objects seemed an appropriate strategy to address consumerism. Whether valuing the discarded or well worn items or acknowledging those whose potential was never fulfilled, using what was uncovered as raw material felt both pragmatic and significant.

## 1. Conform / Subvert

I have come to recognise that many of my past and current preoccupations have been triggered by the values, and in some cases, obsessions, of my mother. Both my parents were raised as farmers, but my mum was keenly aware of her lower social status. Proud of her grammar school education, she was somewhat ashamed of her background, and so, to my rebellious teenage self, seemed unnecessarily house proud and overly concerned with the opinions of others. Obsessed with dusting, it was really important that her home and her family were presentable, and therefore considered respectable.

An exhibition at the Barbican, *The Vulgar: Fashion Redefined* (2016) and Lynsey Hanley's account (*Respectable: The Experience of Class*, 2016) of the ambivalence felt by those for whom social mobility was encouraged through education, led me to understand the restrictions of aspirational working class respectability as the context for my mum's concerns. And that which contravenes this context is dismissed as vulgar or inappropriate.

In an interview recorded for the exhibition, milliner Stephen Jones explains.

*'When I think of the vulgar, strangely enough I think of my mother, not because she was vulgar, but because she came from very much the class and the sort of social standing that was infused with the post war mentality. So for example, if she saw somebody carrying a crocodile handbag in town, she would've thought that was vulgar because crocodile handbags were only for the country'.* (YouTube, 2017)

This deepened my interest in systems of classification and measurement and the following or ignoring of rules, whether governing dress codes or social behaviours, and how these contexts seem to shift depending on one's age, class and gender.

In the exhibition catalogue, Adam Phillips compares this construction of vulgarity to the suggestion of Mary Douglas in *Purity and Danger* (2015) that dirt is matter out of place. It is context which defines value and acceptability, and as the context shifts through age and expectation, so do the rules of dress and behaviour. A pair of ripped tights on a teenager is recognised as a sign of rebellion, on someone middle aged it seems a sign of neglect.

If we fail to conform does that mean we have failed to demonstrate our ability to take care of ourselves? And if we cannot take care of ourselves, then we cannot take care of others. The inability to maintain order over one's surroundings signals a deeper chaos.

*‘Every time a stranger comes to my door I worry that they are glancing past me at the grubby porch, and sofa covered in dog fur and thinking, ‘that woman has lost control of her life’ (Penny, 2015: 49-50)*

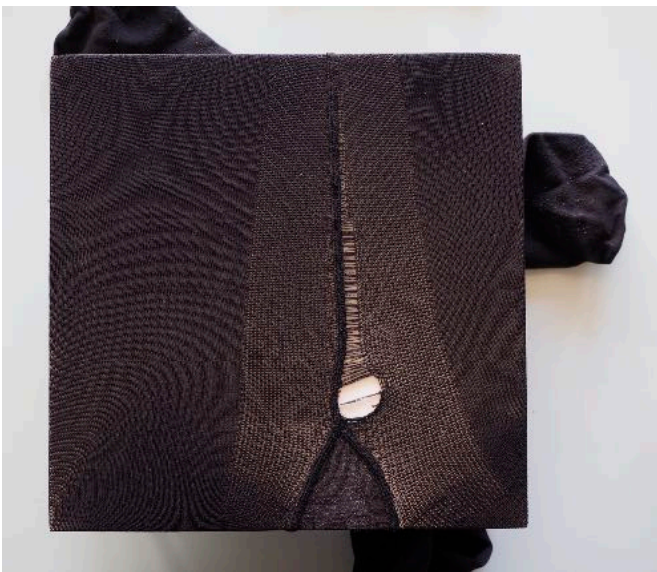
I am interested in how our relationship to material possessions has changed in the last thirty years. As a student I could not afford to buy clothes from the high street, so would make my own from cheap (and often inappropriate) fabric or buy from jumble sales or charity shops. Consumerism needs us to value perfection, newness, so mending and darning can now suggest a choice, a decision not to participate in fast fashion. Aiming to find a way to refer simultaneously to both the unkempt body and the slovenly home, and keen to make use of the range of ‘materials’ I had managed to accumulate, I started stretching worn out tights and cardigans over a collection of gesso coated panels (commercially manufactured as a support for painting).

### **(W)holes**

*‘It is all about freedom, really, and being proud of the holes in your jumper.’*

Corinne Day (Davies, 2010)

Accepting imperfection and valuing its beauty is central to the Japanese aesthetic of wabi-sabi. Described by Leonard Koren *‘as a beauty of things imperfect, impermanent and incomplete’* Kintsugi (golden joinery) or Kintsukuroi (golden repair) seems to be a physical manifestation of this idea. This method of repairing ceramics, where the damage



Figures 11, 12: Sue Withers *Untitled* (Inkjet print) and *W)hole: Mustard Mirkin* (Inkjet print) 2018

is valued as part of the history of the object and the repair is made visible using lacquer corresponds to the use of mending and darning as a means of valuing the worn and imperfect.

Interested in fabrics, in rips, tears, rents and holes, I also looked at Boro, a Japanese technique for making textiles from scraps and Sashiko, a form of decorative stitching intended to reinforce areas of the garment and make it more hard wearing. Although the repeat patterns and grids seemed to impose a satisfying order on the mended area, I was more interested in translating the idea of golden repair, and exploring the strategy of using something 'precious' to convey value. Initially I saw the wool-filler used to 'darn' the holes as an equivalent to the gold lacquer, but I became more interested in revealing the holes, unadorned or reading the wool-filler as hair, unruly and difficult to control.



Figure 13: Sue Withers, *(W)hole: Yearning Yeller* (Inkjet print) 2019

I was interested in the contrast between the solid geometric structure and the yielding, less substantial forms of the tights or cardigans, and in response to the colours and textures of the materials being tested, I was keen to explore the potential of these compositions using a coloured backdrop. The panels are supported by tin cans, the cardigans and tights are stretched out using pegs, much like tape, pegs and pins are used to arrange the garment on a model. In some images, the pegs have been left clearly visible, as a way of revealing



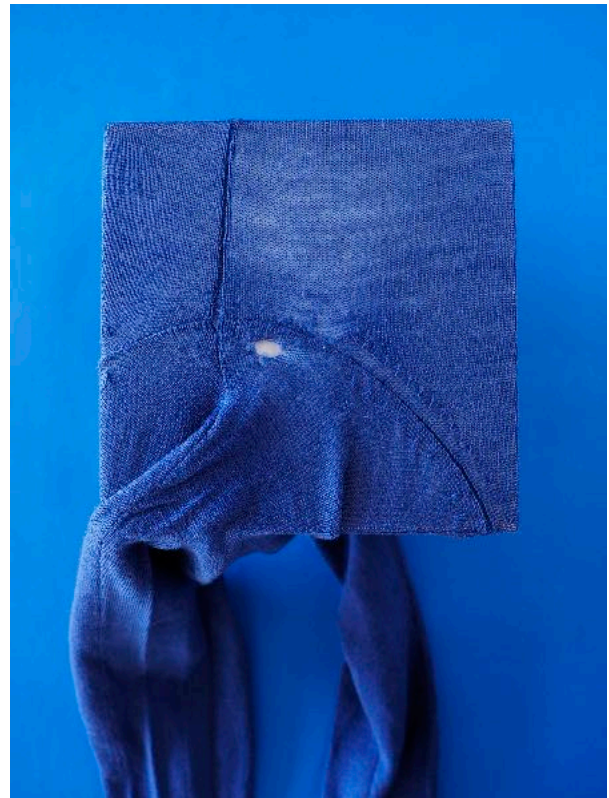
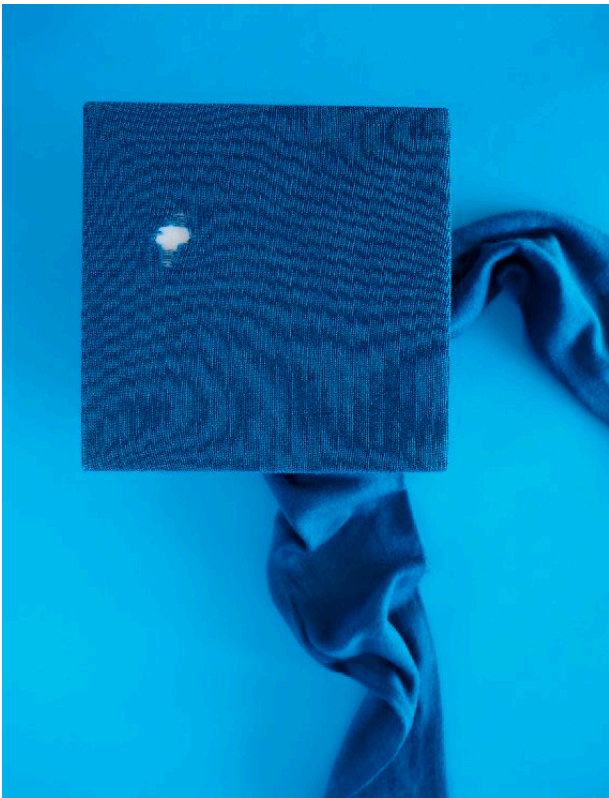
their means of production. Seeking a composition which hovers between minimal abstraction and a kind of humorous, forlorn or erotic anthropomorphism, some seem reminiscent of Roger Hargreaves illustrations of the *Mr Men*, while others echo the scene in *The Piano* (Jane Campion, 1993) where Baines is bewitched by the hole in Ada's stocking. Stretched and exposed in order to be examined, the colours contrast with the white panel beneath which seems to stand in for the body. The solid geometric structure denies the potential for the objectification of an expanse of actual flesh, and frustrates the fetishism aroused by it.

In *Chromophobia* David Batchelor equates Mikhail Bakhtin's account of the self-contained unity of the classical body with the aggressively 'minimalist' whiteness of the domestic interior of an art collector, a space which clearly resembles a typical contemporary white-cube gallery. As Batchelor explains:

*'This space was clearly a model for how a body ought to be: enclosed, contained, sealed. The ideal body: without flesh of any kind, old or young, beautiful or battered, scented or smelly; without movement, external or internal; without appetites. But perhaps it was more perverse than that; perhaps this was a model of what the body should be like from within. Not a place of fluids, organs, muscles, tendons and bones all in a constant, precarious living tension with each other, but a vacant, hollow, whited chamber, scraped clean, cleared of any evidence of the grotesque embarrassments of an actual life. No smells, no noises, no colour; no changing from one state to another and the uncertainty that comes with that; no eating, no drinking, no pissing, no shitting, no sucking, no fucking, no nothing.'*  
(Batchelor, 2000: 19)

Using different tones of one strong colour draws attention to the evidence of wear, the unravelling ladders or holes. When printed on heavyweight matt paper, the white area lacks printed colour suggesting that the hole is real, as if, somehow, there is a hole in the printed image.

In some images I set out to reference a recurrent fashion styling trope, which insists on dressing models with cardigans as if they were some kind of leg covering, but realised that this had already been achieved. If the gessoed panel is the body, then the cardigan sleeves become the limbs, legs or arms depending on the composition. The titles refer to the idea that the imperfect or damaged must be embraced in order to become complete, so *hole* becomes *(w)hole*, and simultaneously attempt to evoke the naming of cosmetic items.

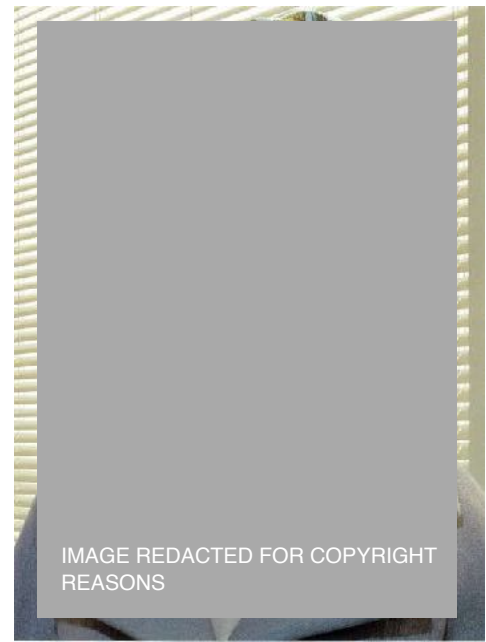


Figures 14, 15: *(W)hole: Can Can Cyan* (Inkjet print) 2018  
*(W)hole: Swaggerin' Sapphire* (Inkjet print) 2018

The success of these images contributed to a significant shift in the way I viewed my use of photography, and led to a more conscious consideration of aspects of photographic practice that I had previously disregarded. As a solution to limited studio space and COVID restricted access, photography has become a means to 'sketch out' sculptural ideas, whether making digital collages or documenting the results of assembled objects and materials. The biggest shift has been to embrace the photographic image as the end product.

While reflecting on this new work, I also began to realise the extent to which fashion photographers had been an influence. In the first year of the programme, I had looked at Juergen Teller's portraits of Vivienne Westwood, and in the second year it was the words of Corinne Day on which I focused.

I first became aware of the work of British fashion photographer, Miles Aldridge through his retrospective at Somerset House in 2013, *I Only Want You To Love Me*. Highly stylised, glossy, glamorous and disturbing, it's no surprise that the darkly surreal films of David Lynch, such as *Blue Velvet* and the icy blonde heroines beloved by Hitchcock are



Figures 16, 17: Miles Aldridge, *Beige #4*, *Beige #9* (cropped)  
First published in Vogue Italia (2010)

acknowledged influences. As an undergraduate of the same generation they are influences I share.

*'These women aren't blank because they have nothing to say. They are blank because they're overwhelmed by their world. When somebody is thinking, they look blank'* Aldridge has said. *'Why are they at the sink washing up, or in the playground pushing a swing with no child in it? To me, the great moments in Hollywood are close-ups of a woman's face, thinking, and she's just realised that her whole world is wrong'*. (Garraat, 2013)

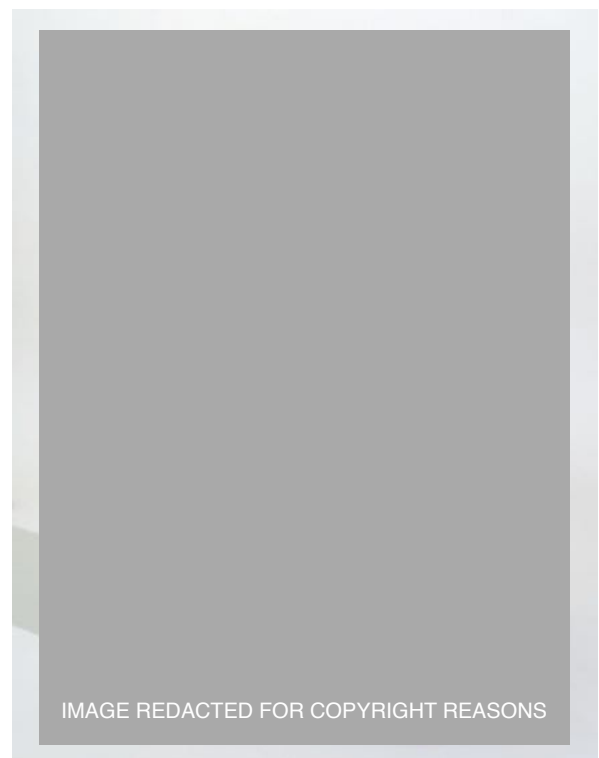
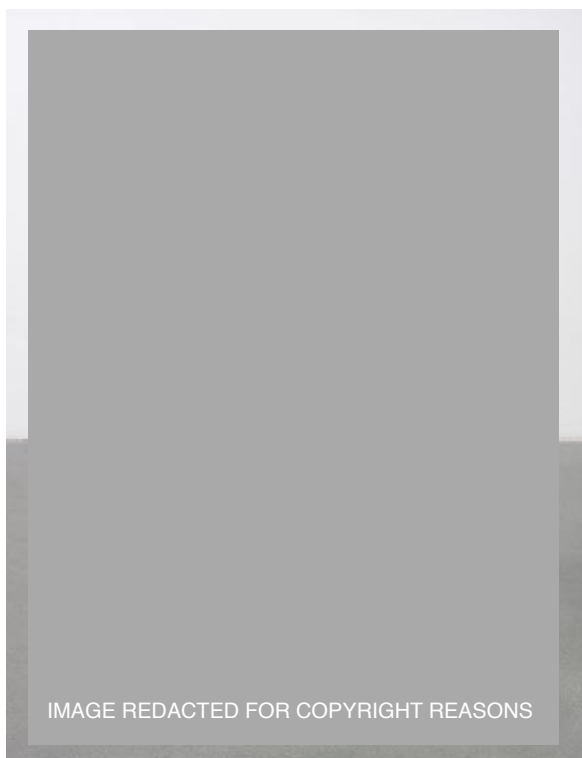
Often considered as a critique of fashion-driven consumerism, Aldridge's images straddle fashion and fine art photography, which has become increasingly common since Wolfgang Tillmans won the Turner prize in 2000. This use of colour is clearly not really specific to Miles Aldridge, but his work seems to encapsulate an aspect of fashion photography which I have found fascinating, and which has influenced the decisions that I have made when setting up shoots of the worn cardigans and tights. As an undergraduate I found it difficult to justify my interest in, and the expense of, fashion magazines. Despite writing my final year thesis on the work of Cindy Sherman, I felt unable to resolve the tension I perceived between fashion and feminism, so had not previously managed to develop strategies which directly refer to fashion image making.



Acknowledging the significance of fashion photography contributed to a more deliberate investigation into the impact of fashion on my thinking and making, and a revived awareness of the role of colour, as succinctly surmised by Batchelor:

*'... colour is made out to be the property of some 'foreign' body — usually the feminine, the oriental, the primitive, the infantile, the vulgar, the queer or the pathological. In the second, colour is relegated to the realm of the superficial, the supplementary, the inessential or the cosmetic. In one colour is regarded as alien and therefore dangerous; in the other, it is perceived merely as a secondary quality of experience, and thus unworthy of serious consideration. Colour is dangerous, or it is trivial, or it is both. (Batchelor, 2000: 23)*

My experiments with tights were less resolved than with the cardigans, but still seemed to have potential. Feedback from the doctorate showcase at the end of my first year had reassured me that working with tights 'had legs'. As a material, tights seemed capable of crossing boundaries and speaking to all manner of women. They could be cheeky, maybe even vulgar, and offered a wide range of material properties to explore: shiny, matte, plain or patterned, cotton, nylon or wool.



Figures 18, 19: Sarah Lucas *Suffolk Bunny* and *Pauline Bunny* (both 1997)

When I first saw enlarged British tabloid pieces of Sarah Lucas *Seven Up*, *Shine On* and *Sod You Gits* (all 1991) at the Saatchi gallery in 1993, I found it very difficult to accept that

re-presenting images from popular culture that objectified women, albeit super-sized and in a gallery, was an effective feminist strategy. In hindsight, and viewed from the perspective gained through Hanley's account of social mobility, I have a more sympathetic understanding of a strategy which, perhaps, attempts to use a visual language of popular culture as a means of addressing a wider audience.

It took me some time to value the crude humour and vulgar seediness of Lucas' work, it was the sculptures *Au Naturel* and *Two Fried Eggs and a Kebab* which enabled me to fully appreciate the confrontational challenge that such work is made by a woman. The bunny series also resonates. Brutal, beautiful and forlorn, these and the later, more abstract *Nuds* use tights and stockings, to allude to flesh and fetish, and manage to speak about the body, particularly the objectification and fetishisation of the female body and constructions of 'sexiness' without providing a display of female skin for the consumption of the viewer.

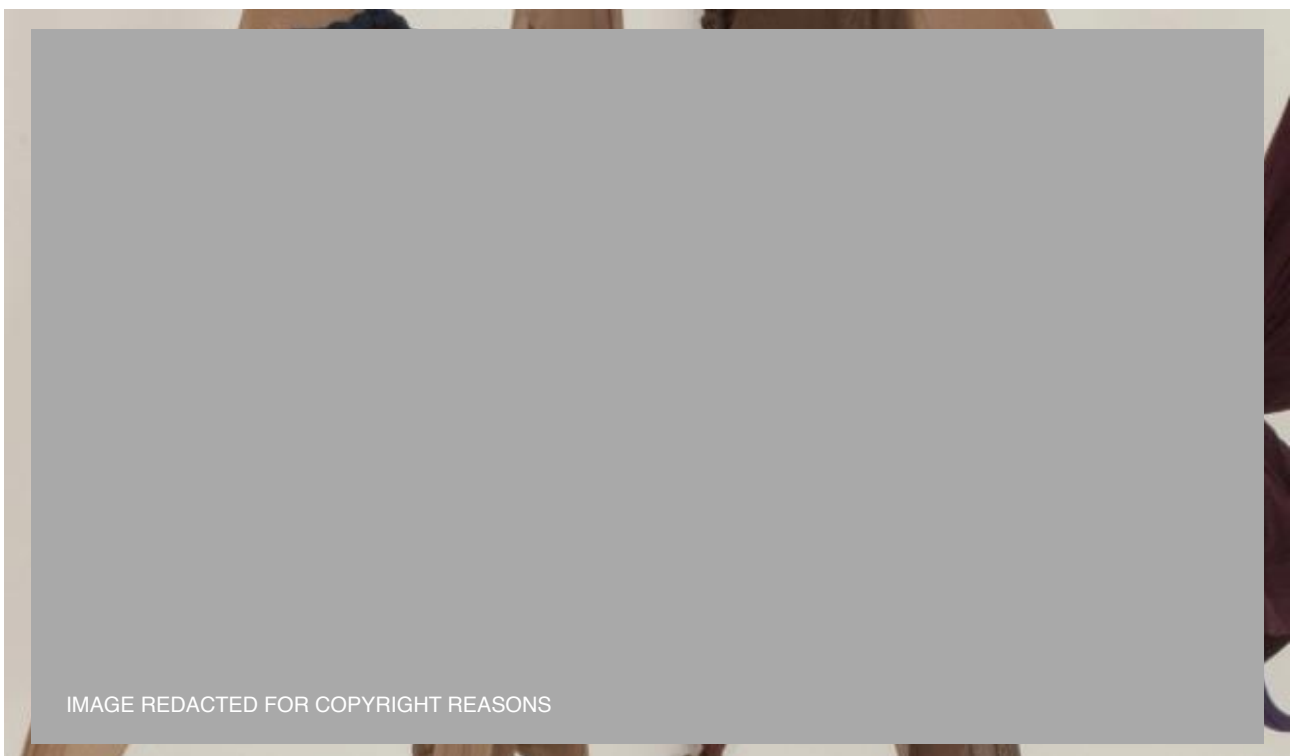


Figure 20: Senga Nengudi *R.S.V.P Reverie "C"* (2014)

Aiming to thoroughly explore the potential of tights as material, and the way in which they had been used by other artists drew me to the work of Senga Nengudi, an African American artist whose work encompasses installation and performance. The *R.S.V.P* series made in the mid-seventies, for example, functions partly as an installation in which a performance takes place, but includes more discrete wall-based sculptural forms. Using

nylon tights which are stretched, twisted, knotted, filled and weighed down with sand, both the colour and material of the work are strongly suggestive of the female body.

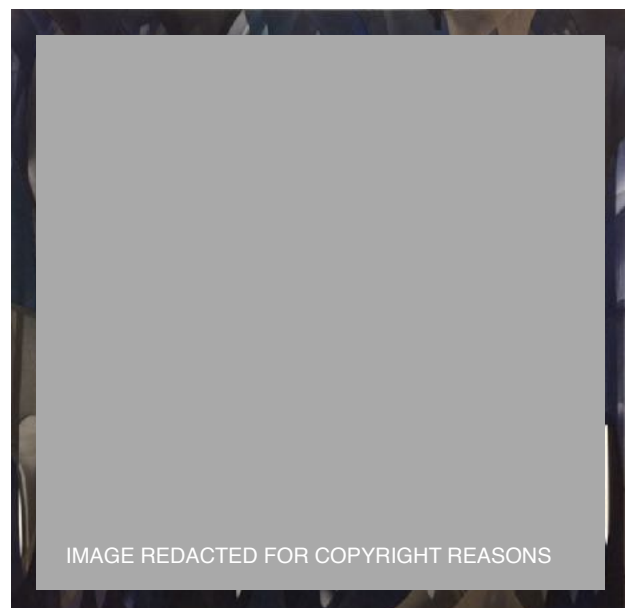
Reflecting on the changes sustained by the body through pregnancy, Nengudi explains:

*'I am working with nylon mesh because it relates to the elasticity of the human body. From tender, tight beginnings to sagging...The body can only stand so much push and pull until it gives way, never to resume its original shape.'* (Odita, 1997)

Nengudi has also remarked upon the impact of practicality on the development of this series, acknowledging that a lack of funds led to work that could be easily hung and transported. *'I liked this idea that a woman's life is in her purse'*. (Sherlock, 2015)

In her review of Nengudi's show at White Cube (2014) Amy Sherlock implies that the delicate, flesh-like folds of R.S.V.P knowingly allude to Sigmund Freud's suggestion that the handbag operates as a symbol for female genitalia, but follows with a more interesting interpretation. Seeing the purse, or handbag, as an equivalent of Freud's Mystic Writing Pad, she claims it as a *'...a model for the layers of the psyche — in which bodily neuroses, economic worries, sexual desires and racial complaints sediment, like the dust that gathers at the bottom of a bag, in the depths of the unconscious.'* (Sherlock, 2015)

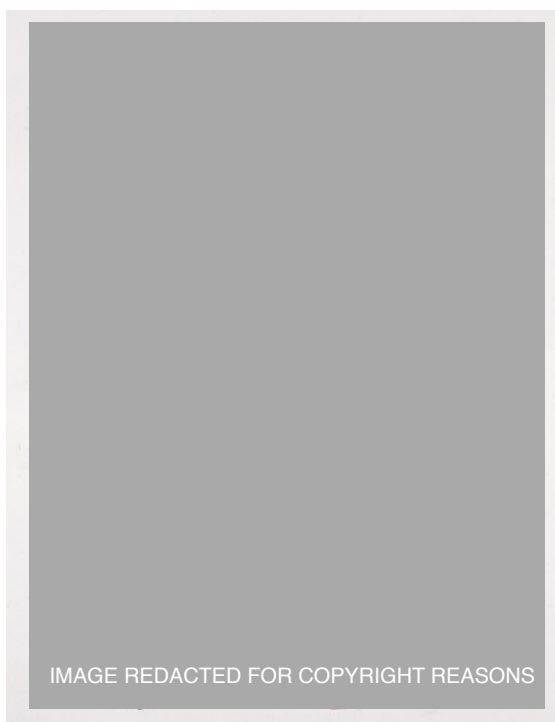
Nengudi sees the female psyche as more resilient than the body, a quality also apparent in the work, so just like the tights, the *'psyche can stretch, stretch, stretch and come back into shape'*. (Moma.org, 2018)



Figures 21, 22: Turiya Magadlela, *Sipumelelo 1* (Mixed media) 2016  
*Theta Tati I (Say what you need to say Thati)* (Mixed media) 2017

Aesthetically more resonant was the work of Turiya Magadlela, a South African artist, who also works extensively with tights and textiles from correctional facilities, such as sheets and uniforms. Her visibility increased when she won the FNB (First National Bank) Art Prize at the Johannesburg Art Fair in 2015. Using accessible, common fabrics stretched across wooden frames, she relies on the emotional connotations to articulate aspects of her personal experience and Black South African history.

I'm drawn to the formal, abstract, almost architectural qualities of the compositions, which remind me of the collages of Nicole Wermers. I haven't seen Magadlela's work in real life, but viewing online is also a sharp reminder of how much can be achieved in a short time. Through limiting the choices and focusing on a few components to exhaust all possibilities, numerous variations can be made, using many different colours. Although they inevitably speak of skin tone and flesh, they also suggest highly decorative webs or gossamer-like traps.



Figures 23, 24: Nicole Wermers *Untitled (Glascollage)* 2001-2001  
*Untitled (Perle)* 2005

Embracing the elasticity, and determined to exploit the sculptural potential of the materials led me to an increasing use of fishnet. Unable to attend *Gossamer* (2019) at the Carl Freedman gallery in Margate, I researched the exhibition online. It included work by Lucas, Sengudi and Magadlela, as well as Louise Bourgeois, Man Ray and Allen Jones. I was

drawn to the photographic work of Daido Moriyama and Polly Borland. Moriyama's close-up, abstracted images of legs covered in fishnet, employ the stark contrast of colour between flesh and net, to emphasise the grid. The endless curves and clefts encouraging a lascivious gaze. In Borland's series *Morph* the intriguing tangle of body parts and wadding seem more transgressive, almost grotesque. The show was confirmation that using tights as a material was a rich source of associations. Additionally, the work that I found most engaging, that most resonated with my own intentions, embraced a minimal and abstract aesthetic, one that was less concerned with directly referencing or covering the body.

## 2. Consumer / Consumed

Through the references to minimalism made in the work of Mona Hatoum, Sylvie Fleury, and Janine Antoni, the geometric solidity of the gesso panels emerged as a starting point for more sculptural work.

Hatoum's practice encompasses performance, installation, photography and sculpture, making reference to the body using hair, soap and furniture. Exploring the role of personal history and the subversion or critique of systems and institutions, Hatoum frequently uses maps and globes in her work. As a Beirut-born artist of Palestinian origin, living in exile, her maps are predominantly concerned with the fluidity and instability of borders, but perhaps, also of power structures.

The increased size of domestic tools in the sculptures '*Grater Divide*' (2002) '*Dormiente*' and '*Paravent*' (both 2008) three human sized steel graters, suggest the 'architecture' of domesticity as a harsh and potentially damaging prison.



Figures 25, 26: Mona Hatoum, *Light Sentence* (Installation) 1992

I had been hugely inspired by her work since seeing *Light Sentence* at the Serpentine gallery in 1993, which felt powerful, political, poetic and deeply moving. In this piece, a single, slowly moving, naked lightbulb was suspended in the middle of a cage of wire frame lockers, in a darkened room; the shadows rose and receded, imprisoning and then, almost, releasing, the viewer. Drawn to such economical means of expression, I made work prior to the doctorate using the ordered framework of a grid to reference judgement and control. As Hatoum explained:

*'I liked the minimal aesthetic because of the economy of form and the emphasis on the material reality of the work. At the time, it felt important to use the language of minimalism*

*but also to fill it with signs that refer to the world outside, as opposed to keeping it non-referential.*' (Masters, 2008)

The reference to grids and architectural elements is also present in *Kapan*. An installation created especially for *You Are Still Here* (2012) Hatoum's first solo show in Turkey, *Kapan* consists of five cage-like structures, manufactured from steel reinforcing rods, each containing a hand-blown form of red glass. Fluid, fragile and bulbous, the forms seem reminiscent of internal organs threatening to seep or burst from their confines. In her 1979 essay, Rosalind Krauss highlights the "antinature" significance of the grid: '*Flattened, geometricized, ordered, it is antinatural, antimimetic, antireal. It is what art looks like when it turns its back on nature*' (Krauss, 1979: 50).

The flexible grid of a fishnet enclosure, part container, part constraint perhaps belies this view. Dependent on context provided by the wearer, fishnets can be both the symbol of low class seduction or the sign of rebellious youth. When the context of a wearer is removed, the colour of the fishnet seems more significant, more apparent, yet still manages to speak of class, no matter how incongruous the other elements.

In referencing the body, Jaleh Mansoor claims that Hatoum '*performs the paradox that the disavowed body and that which disavowed it, abstraction, are a structural couple. Abstraction, formal and political, becomes a means to demonstrate that "life" is only ever politically mediated.*' (Mansoor, 2010: 68)

### ***(Alien) Ballsy, Ballcock***

The idea of inanimate objects seeming to have characters and personalities had been discussed on several occasions during seminars throughout the second year. Although captivated by this aspect of the work of others, this was new territory for my own work.

The manufactured, mass produced 'perfection' of the white panels are intended to suggest minimal sculptural forms, the flexible grid of the fishnet enclosure, part container, part constraint revealed by the spherical form of the balls.

*(Alien) Ballsy* seemed most anthropomorphic. Initially the tights were chosen to closely match the tennis balls so that the formal, sculptural qualities could be considered. The addition of two balls trapped beneath the net covering the panel seems to suggest both eyes and breasts, as well as a constraining containment of the scrotum, and phallus and perhaps, even a game of some sort.

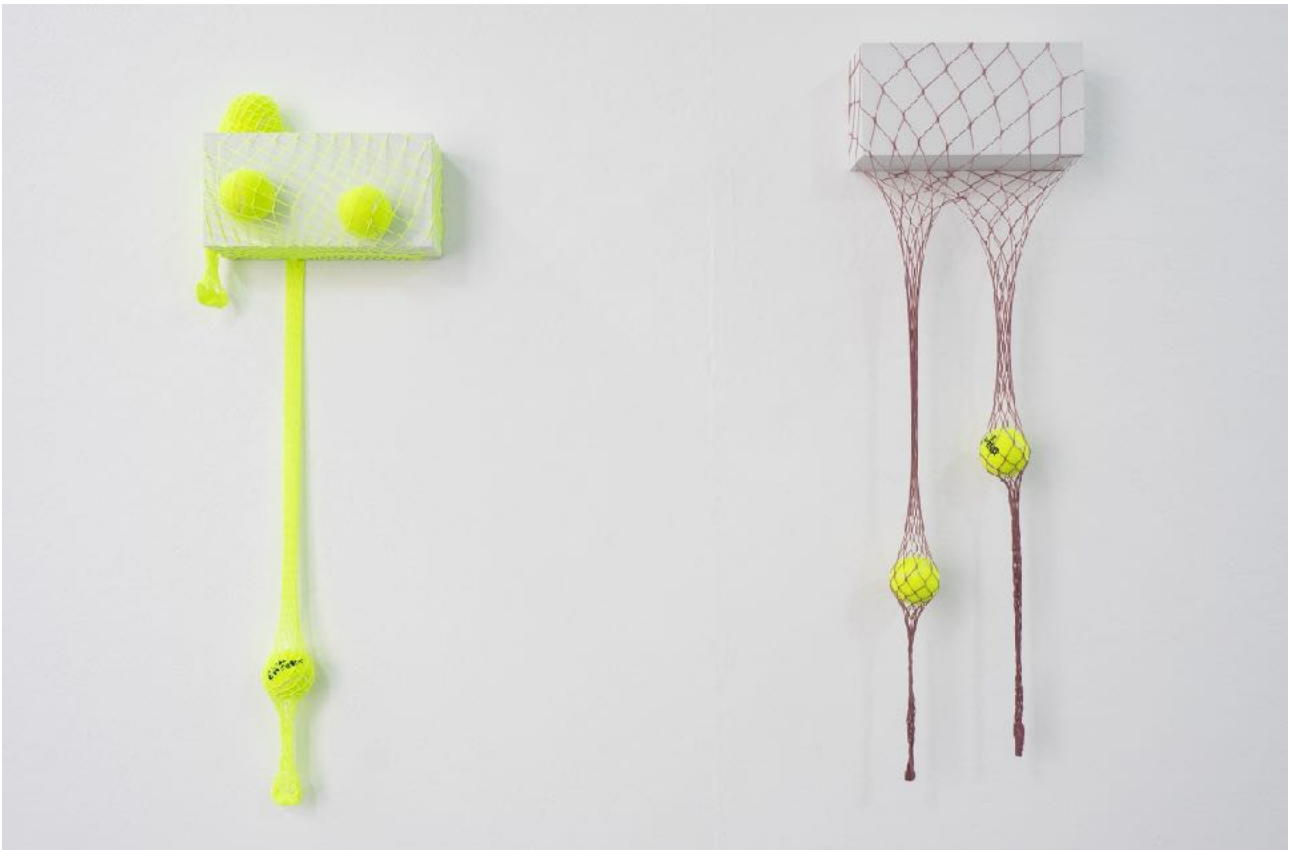


Figure 27: Sue Withers (*Alien*) *Ballsy* and *Ballcock* (Panels, tennis balls, fishnet tights) 2018

Prior to hanging the work, it had been observed that *Ballcock* resembled the kind of high cistern often found in old public toilets, which influenced both its position on the wall and title. It seems quite forlorn, with its sagging crotch and the realisation that the ‘perfect’ finish of the gessoed panel is actually scuffed and grubby with age. The balls are caught somewhere in the middle, frustrated. Conscious that this work I had made was still very much attached to the wall, rather than occupying any floor space, I began to consider the context of the retail environment — a space with which I was very familiar, having worked in both high street fashion and specialist art materials stores.

Sylvie Fleury explores superficiality, the fetishisation of brands and consumer objects. Whether in the form of installation, video, readymades or traditional sculptural techniques such as bronze casting, her work deals specifically with issues of gendered consumption. In readymades, such as *Dazed (Fatal Attraction)* in which the shopping bags and contents are purchased in whichever city the work is shown, or the *Chanel Shopping Bag* cast in bronze and painted to replicate the original bag, the viewer’s desire to inspect, to unwrap or even to know, the content is frustrated. As Fleury explains: ‘*I was thinking about the dichotomy of making things while there are already so many things being done. Too much*





Figures 28, 29: Sylvie Fleury, *Dazed (Fatal Attraction)* 2007, *Chanel Shopping Bag* 2008

*stuff everywhere. And then there's the notion of sharing. I guess that was present in my first piece, the Shopping bags.'* (SUPER PAPER, 2017)

I am fascinated by packaging. It holds so much promise. Willingly seduced by a carefully considered combination of type, colour, form and material, if there is no discernible difference in the content, I am always drawn to the most aesthetically satisfying package, whether supermarket own brands or non-essential luxury goods, such as perfume. Packaging seems to encapsulate the tensions created by contemporary consumerism, successfully creating desire and guilt simultaneously, as we become increasingly aware of the unnecessary, wasteful use of the resources needed, not to protect and transport, but to market the product.

The references to packaging in Fleury's work seem to specifically address a female viewer, acknowledging the psychological complexity of the relationship between the consumer and the consumed. In the *Vital Perfection* and *Slim Fast* multiples, as in the *Chanel Shopping Bag*, desire, anticipation and expectation are stimulated by the 'packaging', only to be seemingly thwarted by the fact that there is no content. Echoing Andy Warhol's *Brillo* boxes, *Slim Fast* re-presents a product largely marketed to women, as a solid wooden block, perhaps revealing the impossibility of the quick fix solution, its solidity stubbornly denying access to the 'magic' powder. In *Vital Perfection*, the dimensions of the empty fur-lined box rely on the well-worn trope of popular culture, that all women obsess over shoes. The 'perfection' of the title, however, perhaps remains intact, as, with no actual product, the viewer can continue imagining the perfection of the shoes which should be so luxuriously protected. Referencing both utilitarian and luxury packaging, these pieces



Figures 30, 31, 32: Sylvie Fleury, *Crash Tests* 2001-2010

seem to stand for the female body (box being slang for vagina) and simultaneously reveal methods used to control the female body.

Fleury also employs performative gestures, the *Crash Test* 'paintings', for example, are glossy metal panels which she dents and scratches, literally crashes into with a car to damage the perfect surface. The shiny, gleaming surface of the car spray paint functions as a reference to nail polish, referencing earlier work such as *Skincrime2 (Givenchy 601)* a crumpled car, spray-painted with a glossy pink Givenchy nail polish.

Sharing similar formal concerns, Janine Antoni exhibited *Gnaw* (1992) at the Whitney Biennial. Two 600lb cubes, one of chocolate and one of lard were 'sculpted' using her mouth to remove pieces. The resulting mouthfuls used to create heart-shaped packaging for candy from the chocolate and the lard was mixed with beeswax and pigment to form lipsticks. These were exhibited in glass cases resembling retail display alongside the more conventional gallery display of the cubes. The work has been seen as an aggressive attack on minimalism, which emphasised manufacturing processes and geometry to erase the mark of the artist, but Antoni's intention was more playful.

*'I was thinking of the cube'* Antoni has said, *'as kind of a cliché of minimalism, just as lipstick is a cliché of women and beauty. For me, it's not so much a critique of those issues as this idea of play, of using languages to make new meaning.'* (Wilson Lloyd, 1995: 13)

Fleury's *Eternal Wow on Shelves*, explicitly references the work of Donald Judd. It seems playful, like Antoni's *Gnaw*. If a patriarchal order can be represented by the formal precision and manufactured perfection of Judd's iconic 'shelves' then the sagging, organic forms constantly threatening to spill over the edge, at first sight appear as ungainly, unwelcome blots. Up close they are as perfectly finished as the shelves on which they

rest, perhaps in recognition of the value of the imperfect, of the organic body over the rectilinear geometry.



Figure 33: Sylvie Fleury, *Yes To All* (Installation) 2005

'YES TO ALL' is a recurring phrase in Fleury's work. Existing in several forms including Swarovski crystal encrusted mirrored signage, an edition of gold-plated garbage cans and a photographic, mixed media piece incorporating oil, shellac and sediment of electrolysis, it is more usually realised in neon. Taken from a PC prompt to select a command, the work seems to simultaneously critique the ever-increasing desire of the consumer and the post 1990s liberal feminist idea that consumer choice equals empowerment. The viewer is compelled to define what might be meant by 'all' and to imagine the consequences of saying yes. In her exploration of the impact of consumerism on contemporary feminism, Laurie Penny is also concerned with 'the power of yes'.

*'Contemporary pseudo-feminism is all about the power of yes. Yes, we want shoes, orgasms and menial office work. Yes, we want chocolate, snuggles and straight hair. Yes, we will do all the dirty little jobs nobody else wants to do, yes, we will mop and sweep and photocopy and do the shopping and plan the meals and organise the parties and wipe up all the shit and the dirt and grin and strip and perform and straighten our backs and smile and say yes, again, yes, we will do it all. Yes, we will buy, more than anything we will buy what you tell us we need to buy to be acceptable. Yes, the word of submission, the word of coercion and capitulation. Yes, we will fuck you in gorgeous lingerie and yes, we will make you dinner afterwards. Yes, yes, yes, yes, yes!'* (Penny, 2011: 65)

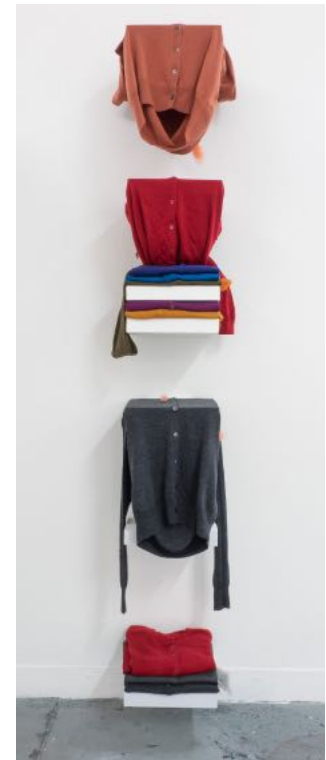


Figure 34: Sue Withers, *Eternal Chore Undone* (Shelves, cardigans, wool-filler) 2019

### ***Eternal Chore Undone***

This is a wall-based sculpture, which evokes the reality of the minimal domestic or retail interior. A scaled down, retail version of Donald Judd, the title acknowledges the work of Sylvie Fleury. Whether abject, discarded and dishevelled or tightly squashed, the cardigans become a way to speak about ageing. Worn out, patched up, squashed to fit in a small space in a bid to conform to the expectation of the neatly folded pile or hanging from the shelf, arms flailing.

### ***Trainer totem***

As it is becoming clear that wrapping paper often contains materials unlikely to decompose quickly, the Japanese practice of fabric wrapping – Furoshiki – has been more widely adopted as an environmentally conscious alternative.

Intrigued by the highly coded rituals and etiquette surrounding the practice of gift-giving, I had already begun using tights to wrap a variety of objects. In *Trainer Totem* brightly coloured tights, some fishnet, stretched and tied around shoe boxes, the branding clearly visible, form a precarious tower. This was my first free-standing sculpture, and I had expected to need some means of joining the boxes to stabilise them, but was happy that this was not necessary. The instability and the fact that it might need to be rebuilt, echo the labour of retail display which has to be continually ‘repaired’. The colours are strong,



Figure 35: *Trainer Totem* (Trainer boxes, tights) 2019

maybe even brash, and attention-seeking, in keeping with sportswear, but the tights themselves are an incongruous contrast.

The work of anthropologist Daniel Miller has also influenced the way I understand our relationship with possessions and the objects with which we choose to surround ourselves. Consumerism, clothing, possessions and domestic interiors are all analysed in *A Theory of Shopping* (1998), *Stuff* (2010) and *The Comfort of Things* (2008). In *A Theory of Shopping* Miller draws connections between shopping and sacrifice through the performance of rituals, arguing that both ‘represent a key moment when the labour of production is turned into the process of consumption. In both cases the fear is expressed of mere mundane or materialistic consumption and the rituals are designed to ensure that goods are first used for reaffirming transcendent goals’. (Miller, 1998: 73)



Figures 36, 37: Sue Withers, *Plum Token* (Panel, tights) 2020  
*Modest Token* (Panel, tights) 2019

### ***Tokens***

In the nineteenth century, concern about the commodification of modern life and the rise of consumerism took as its focus the kleptomaniac and the prostitute. Mary Louise Roberts explains how these two cultural types ‘*encapsulate the double relation women held in the nineteenth century to the new consumer culture. In the “specularized” urban culture of arcades, boulevards, and department stores, woman was inscribed as both consumer and commodity, purchaser and purchase, buyer and bought.*’ (Roberts, 1998: 818)

Many complex ideas I was striving to understand seemed to come together in the image of a pair of tights tied around a ‘box’: how the identity of woman as consumer had been constructed; Daniel Miller’s view of shopping as sacrifice; the Kleptomaniac and the Prostitute; and notions of ownership, debt and obligation explored by Marcel Mauss in *The Gift* (2002). The body is evoked when anything is wrapped in tights, but in *Tokens* the hollow geometric form remains unyielding: solid, yet not even complete, a shell, purporting to be a solid. The used tights flaunt the evidence of their wear, the holes and ladders, and the contortions necessary to create the satisfying, decorative bow, often leads to the display of their crotch.

Recent iterations of this imagery use white balloons filled with sand, resulting in unlikely swellings straining against the laddered tights. Prompted by the anatomy distorting designs of Georgina Godley’s 1986 *Lumps and Bumps* collection and Rei Kawakubo’s ‘*Body Meets Dress, Dress Meets Body*’ (S/S: 1997) my initial plan was to explore the



formal qualities of the materials, such as stripes or possibly more fishnet. I also wanted to try something simple, yet attention-seeking to compete with the interior of Eastbury Manor House, an Elizabethan building where a group show was planned for 2020. Currently, although the tights are well worn, they are clean and freshly laundered, partly, I think, in tribute to working class aspirations of respectability, but also as an attempt to elicit humour from this absurdity, rather than disgust.

I was also looking again at the work of Amalia Ulman, an Argentinian artist exploring class, gender and sexuality, whose series *Excellences & Perfections* featured in *Electronic Superhighway (2016-1966)* at the Whitechapel Gallery. Three years after graduating from Central Saint Martins, she constructed a fictional character via her Instagram account.

*'Money, boredom, malaise, addiction, self-esteem, surgery'* Ulman describes the narrative as *'the provincial girl moves to the big city, wants to be a model, wants money, breaks up with her high school boyfriend and wants to change her lifestyle, enjoys singledom, runs out of money, maybe because she doesn't have a job. Because she's too self-absorbed in her narcissism, she starts going around, seeking arrangement dates, gets a sugar daddy, gets depressed, starts getting into more drugs, gets a boob job because her sugar daddy makes her feel secure about her own body and also pays for it. She goes through a breakdown, redemption takes place, the crazy bitch apologizes, the dumb-blonde turns brunette and goes back home, probably goes to rehab, then she's grounded at her family's house'*. (Do You Follow? Art in Circulation 3 (transcript), 2014)

Interested in middle brow aesthetics and consumerism as visualised through social media, the selfies are complemented with artfully arranged plates of food and faux feminist statements. The three month social media performance confused those who knew her, who found it difficult to separate her from this fictional character, who seemed to be promoting regressive physical ideals.

I had discussed the commodification of art work with my original supervisor, so had been aware of the paradox inherent in creating work concerned with consumerism. Feedback during a recent work in progress seminar re-ignited that discussion, and I began to consider how the work could be re-inserted into the cycle of consumerism, and what strategies could be employed to enable the work to maintain some form of critical distance. The idea of selling work made from old, worn and discarded tights seemed to offer some potential, reiterating their status as fetish while claiming the prestige of art object. I also wondered whether using smell (see Section 3: 50) might offer an opportunity to disrupt the



Figures 38, 39: Sue Withers, Instagram Art Product Shots (Photograph) 2021

cycle. Having become increasingly aware of the ‘requirement’ for female artists to be displayed alongside their work, especially on social media, I made a series of images to display the *Tokens*.

While I was trying to gain further insight into the relationships between feminism, fashion, sexual fetishism and commodity fetishism, a paper analysing the trend for ‘homeless chic’ in the early 2000s prompted further fashion-related reading. In *Transient Vague: The Commodification and spectacle of the vagrant other* Aidan Marie Moir refers to Caroline Evans’ idea of fashion as ‘a discursive construction, which enables the articulation of particular social identities so that we can comprehend and navigate the intricacies, tensions, paradoxes and ‘horrors’ of society. Moir’s analysis of the trend for homeless chic reveals fashion as the platform which ‘provides popular culture with the narrative framework to negotiate these changes in visual culture and public discourse’ (Moir, 2013: 202).

Evans believes that ‘Fashion with its affinity for transformation, can act out instability and loss but it can also, and equally, stake out the terrain of ‘becoming’ — new social and sexual identities, masquerade and performativity’ (Evans, 2012: 6)



Along with fashion photography, fashion-focused museum exhibitions had long been an influence on my visual imagination. Having struggled to find a strategy to make reference to fashion, and believing that attempts to satirise haute couture were unlikely to succeed, I felt I was finally able to embrace fashion as discourse in a way that makes sense for my evolving practice.

I wanted to find systems by which to organise or classify the objects or elements I could use to weigh down, or otherwise manipulate tights and other discarded clothing. The *Systema Naturae* method of categorising animal, mineral and vegetable kingdoms seemed well suited to a world determined to utilise anything and everything, living or dead, to enhance and preserve its construction of beauty. Consequently, I was eager to visit the *Fashioned by Nature* exhibition at the V&A.

From the use of real birds to create earrings and decorate hats, to carefully appliquéd jewel beetle wings, there was plenty of evidence of the fashion industry's use (or abuse) of resources. On the V&A website, Katy Canales writes that these exhibits are '*reflective of a period when the natural world was plundered to supply fashionable consumers unquenchable appetite for animal products. Materials such as ivory, tortoiseshell and feathers were transformed into jewellery, hair combs, pins, brushes, hats and fans. Fashion had a huge impact on the natural world. Between 1800-1850, the UK's annual ivory imports increased from 119 to 458 tonnes. In 1878, the UK alone, imported over 30 tonnes of tortoiseshells.*' (Canales, 2019)

Also interesting was the work of Diana Scherer, a German artist working in Amsterdam, who explores 'man's' desire to control nature using photography, sculpture and root weaving, where she trains the roots of plants to grow in lace-like patterns. The project, *Exercises in the Root System Domestication*, has also developed into innovative material research for a new and sustainable textile, hence her inclusion in the V&A exhibition. I find this both fascinating and disturbing. At first it seems like the very worst excesses of consumerism, the idea that all the resources of the world can, and should, be pressed into the service of fashion, that we should even force the roots of plants, usually hidden and seemingly unruly, to grow into some new form of adornment. And yet, the innovation is compelling, and if truly sustainable, perhaps desirable or even necessary.

I was especially drawn to a piece from Jean Paul Gaultier's, *Russia Collection* (Fall/Winter 1997), a dramatic full-length gown, apparently made from a complete leopard skin. Like an animal skin rug, the source of the material has not been concealed. The head, legs and tail

are still apparent; and yet, this skin is made entirely of beads and embroidery. (Although, it was almost certainly created by hours of hidden, female labour.)

The tension between woman and animal continues to interest me. Both are viewed as 'other' and yet the dominance of human status is indicated by the use of animal products to decorate the home and adorn or enhance the body. I had been exploring the use of animal skin patterns on textiles and the connotations of the fake or artificial. As I continued to search for ways to incorporate such ideas, the fur-hat-in-container experiments below seemed most successful. Capturing a cute animal likeness, one being a curled up cat, the other the rather windblown, dishevelled head of a rabbit, they echo both the '*If it Fits, I Sit*' memes of cats in containers, and the moment of mistaken identity, cat or hat, in the SpecsSavers commercial.



Figures 40, 41: Sue Withers, Sculpture tests; Fur hats in containers, 2020

They clearly resemble Meret Oppenheim's *Object* (1936) affirming the significance of fur in surrealism and the power of fur as fetish. Johanna Malt explains that the power of the surrealist object, like the readymade, lies in the use of mundane or everyday manufactured objects which relocate '*a commodity into a new context in order to comment on the status of both that commodity and the realm of art into which it is allowed to irrupt.*' (Malt, 2004: 113). She claims the introduction of the body is particular to the Surrealist object: '*Even when not actually present in an object, the body is alluded to, raising those questions of presence and absence which have been addressed in terms of the uncanny, but which are also raised by fetishistic disavowal*' (Malt, 2004: 113)

For Freud, velvet, fur (and perhaps carpet) stands for the pubic hair of the mother, witnessed in the shocking moment when the child realises she has no penis. However,

viewed from the perspective of a classification of matter, fur, and indeed, fake fur, takes on other meanings. As Malt writes: '*Fascinating yet repellent, they [fur, feathers and hair] mark the eroticised territory of the object, but they also represent a peculiarly ambiguous category of matter. Fur, feathers, and hair are as close to live flesh as dead matter can come.*' (Malt, 2004: 120)

Although my own use of such materials is often more prosaic, while attempting to more fully understand the impact of sexual fetishism on Surrealism, I was drawn to Malt's analysis of Salvador Dali's *Buste de Femme Rétrospectif* (1933) and her exploration of the categories of matter transgressed. The contamination of edible materials and the use of materials such as fur, feathers and hair, not only refer to the absent, dead body from which they came, but when worn cause confusion '*between animal and human categories of matter*'. (Malt, 2004: 119)

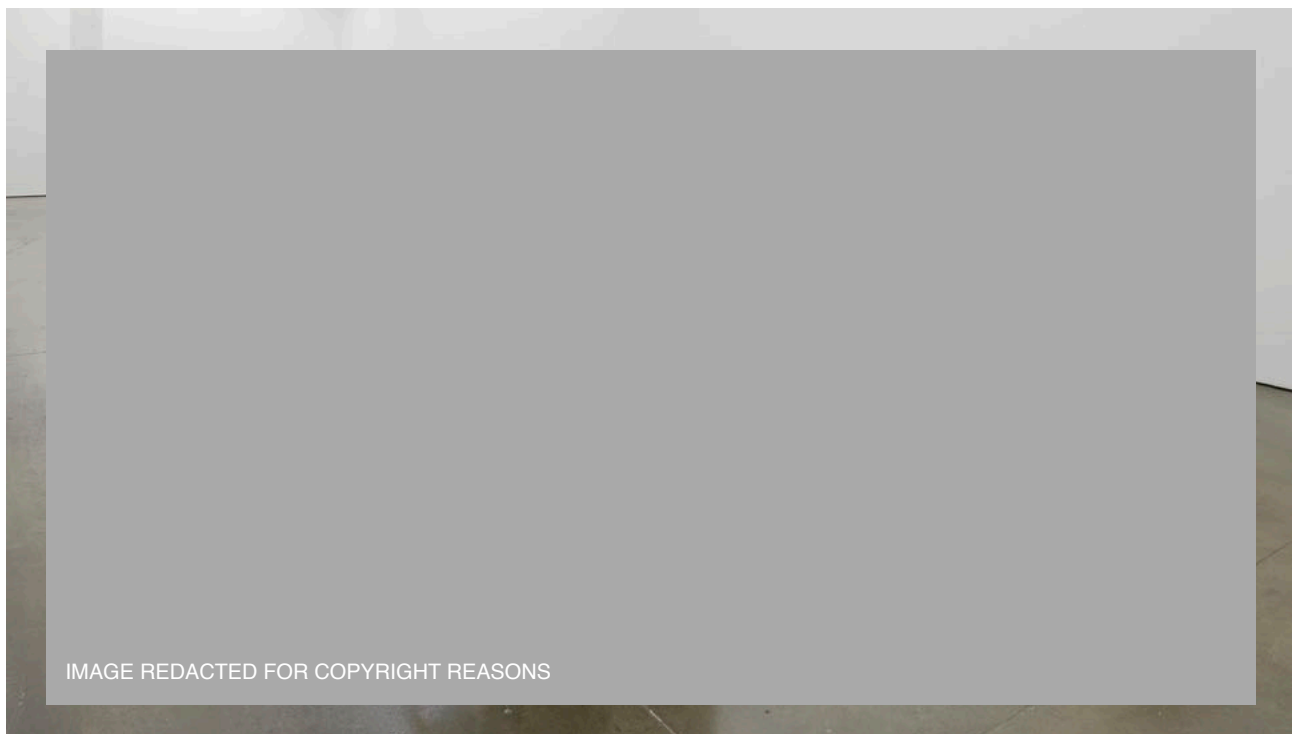
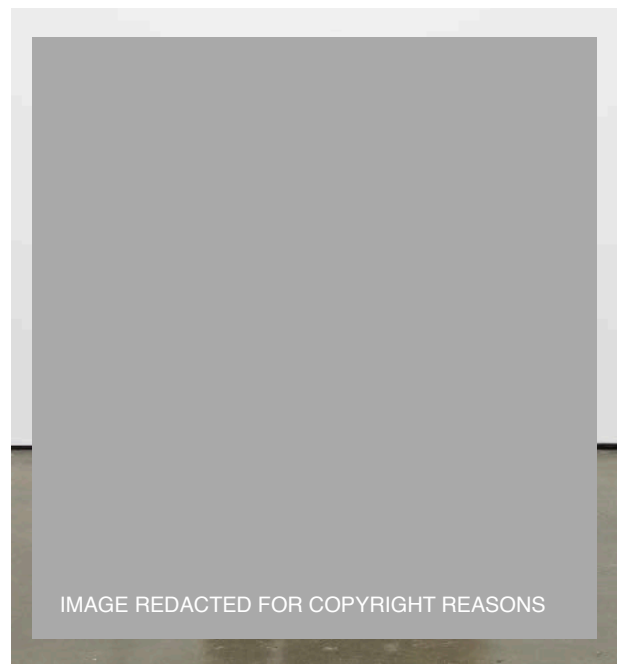
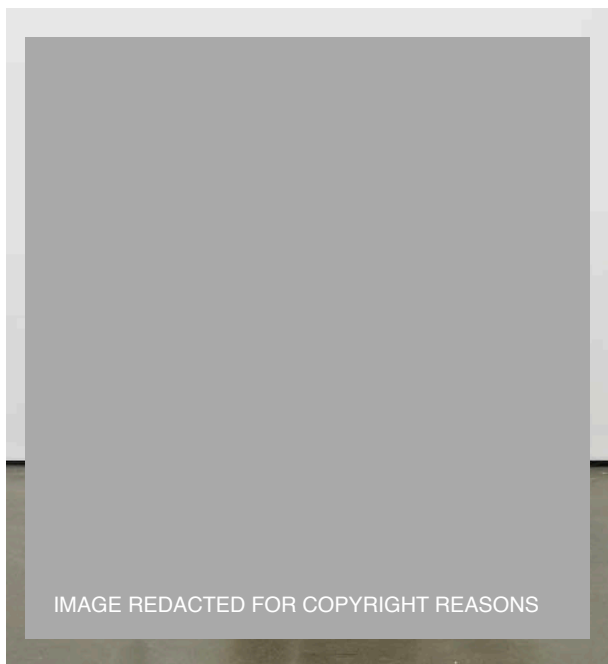


Figure 42: Nicole Wermers, *Infrastruktur* (Installation) 2015

Also relevant is the use of fur and furniture in the work of Nicole Wermers. A German artist working in London, she was nominated for the Turner Prize in 2015 for the exhibition *Infrastruktur* at the Herald Street gallery, an installation of two bodies of work: *Untitled Chairs* and *Sequence*, a series of ceramic reliefs. The installation of chairs, permanently claimed by the fur coats attached to them, seems simple, playful, almost accidental, rather than deliberately constructed. On closer inspection, the coats have been re-lined with silk



Figures 43, 44: Nicole Wermers *Untitled Chair – CSFZ-0* and *Untitled Chair – FXR-1*, 2015

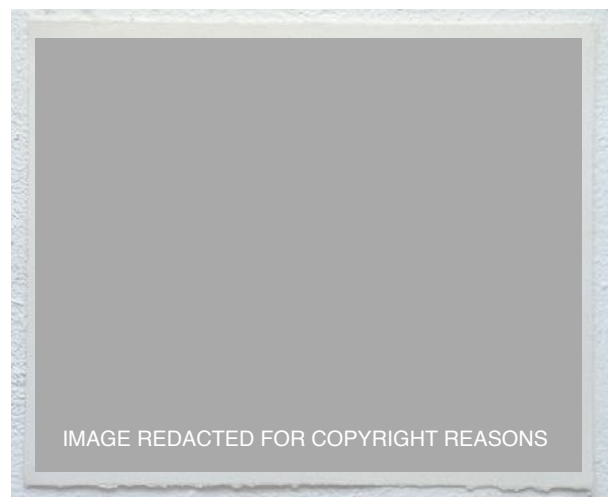
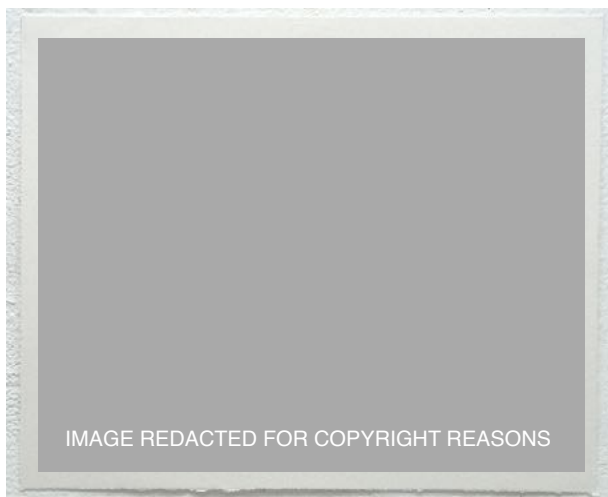
carefully chosen to match the upholstery of the seat, forming a seamless hybrid of chair and coat. Central to Wermers' work is the way in which we navigate public space, and I find the arrangement of these 'dressed' chairs both fascinating and somewhat repulsive. The garments suggest the occupants of the space are all female, and indicate an entitlement born of wealth and privilege.

The Tate described the installation as having '*adopted the glossy aesthetics and materials of modernist design and high fashion, alluding to themes of lifestyle, class, consumption and control*'. (Nicole Wermers Turner Prize 2015 – TateShots | Tate, 2015.) Wermers, however, often downplays the references to luxury and status, citing the fact that many of the second-hand coats were made of lamb or rabbit, costing no more than £40, and claiming '*the mass appeal of fashion has diluted the association between fur and social class*'. (McDermott, 2018)

I'm not convinced by this assertion, which led me to consider how visual or materials associations might be nuanced differently between cultures. It seems possible that the connotations of using real fur in colder, northern European countries would differ to those in the UK. And perhaps this could also be the case for the Marcel Breuer *Cesca* chair used by Wermers, which to a UK audience suggests art galleries or expensive hotel lobbies. Unlike another mid-century design classic, the truly ubiquitous Robin Day polyprop chair seen in British schools, town halls and other public spaces.

Invited by the *Agency of Visible Women* to respond to the theme of *Policy Making* for an exhibition to celebrate International Women's Day (See Appendix 4) I was eager to make use of a collection of paper carrier bags. Preoccupied with age, repetition and work on paper, I found myself drawn to work by an earlier generation of women artists.

Dora Maurer, is a Hungarian artist whose work spans film and photography, painting, sculpture and performance, with much of her work breaking down simple actions, so the viewer can see the work as action, rather than as a depiction of action. *Hidden Structures* is based on a folding exercise she used with students, exploring 'repetition of movements, seriality by drawing, object-making with different materials'. Minimal changes in the horizontal and diagonal folding are recorded by the graphite rubbing.



Figures 45, 46: Liliana Porter, *Wrinkle* (Photo-etching) 1968

Argentinian artist Liliana Porter's *Wrinkle* is a portfolio of ten photo-etchings, plus colophon sheet and a mock interview text by Emmett Williams. A sequence, or record of action, the images document the transition of a sheet of paper, from crisp rectangle to crumpled sphere. It also seems to communicate something about fetishism, and led me to consider the way some artists' materials and processes are fetishised, whether oil paint, film or paper. The photographs deliberately and carefully display the torn edge of the paper, torn so that it resembles the deckle edge of a mould or hand-made paper. An indication of quality, as is the weight, or thickness, of the paper which the viewer can discern by the depth of the plate embossed in the sheet. In contrast, the printed images are of an increasingly crumpled sheet of standard machine-made office paper, and so it seems to be assigning value to the mundane and everyday, whilst playfully undermining the seductive material qualities of the art object; it's all just paper.



Figure 47: Sylvie Fleury *Palettes of Shadows* at Thaddaeus Ropac (Installation view) 2019

Sylvie Fleury's recent paintings deliberately fetishise the perfectly stretched canvas, the smooth, unblemished surface of the paint, and the extraordinary craft skills required to construct such a complex set of intersecting stretchers. Frequently referencing work by the champions of the Light & Space movement, Minimalism and Pop Art, Fleury affirms that she has '*often turned toward American Minimalist art because it abounds with machismo and emblems of good taste*'. (Lempesis, 2018). These pared down, scaled up renderings of make-up palettes are no exception, and are intended as a feminist counterpoint to *The Shaped Canvas*, an exhibition at the Guggenheim (1964) which aimed to explore a more sculptural approach to the painting surface.



Figure 48: Sylvie Fleury *Private shadow - Camera Obscura*, (detail) 2018

Undisturbed by any surface branding, the size, colour and pearlised pigments of these paintings seem to reveal each brand through the iconic shape and composition of the compact.

*'I've always wanted to transform reality, to transform everyday objects'* Fleury has said, *'That's perhaps why I am interested in fashion. Fashion trends reflect our time, but also produce codes that I've always wanted to appropriate and play with'*. (Sylvie Fleury I Hypnotic Poison, 2019)

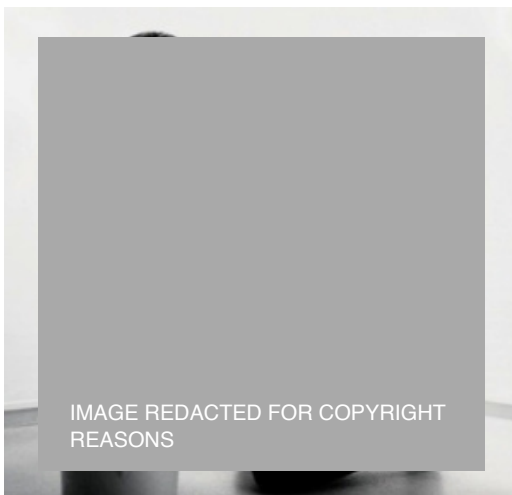
Despite being aware of the industry's significant contribution to the economy, and its impact on our aspirations, I realise now that I had unwittingly internalised the view that fashion is frivolous and trivial, just as colour is dangerous and unnecessary. Given fashion's interrelationship with capitalism as one of its 'dream images', it may also be dangerous, as recognised by Elizabeth Wilson:

*'Capitalism maims, kills, appropriates, lays waste. It also creates great wealth and beauty, together with a yearning for lives and opportunities that remain just beyond our reach. It manufactures dreams and images as well as things, and fashion is as much a part of the dream world of capitalism as of its economy.'* (Wilson, 2009: 14)



### 3. Order & Repair / Disorder & Disrepair

Feminist theory has underpinned my approach since the mid eighties, and so defines the context of my current interests. In *Beauty and Misogyny* (2005) Sheila Jeffries, frustrated by the U.N's western bias in defining harmful cultural or traditional practices, argues that many of the accepted beauty practices of the West should be reconsidered. Recalling the radical feminism of the 1970s, as espoused by Catherine A MacKinnon and Andrea Dworkin, Jeffries notes that MacKinnon called consciousness-raising the methodology of feminism, where women '*identified the pressures within male dominance that caused them to feel that they should diet, depilate and make-up.*' (Jeffries, 2005: 1) Several decades later, Jeffries contends that current beauty practices have become ever more brutal and severe, a concern shared by contemporary feminists such as Laurie Penny in *Meat Market: Female Flesh under Capitalism* (2011) who argue that late capitalism continues to marginalise and control women's bodies.



Figures 49, 50: Janine Antoni, *Loving Care* (Performance) 1993

Janine Antoni explores traditional art making activities of painting and sculpting using her body and everyday, mundane rituals such as bathing, chewing, mopping and sleeping. Her hair is the mop for *Loving Care*, her mouth is the chisel for *Gnaw* and her eyelashes the paintbrush in *Butterfly Kisses*. The experience of making the work becomes visible, and is intended to provoke an empathy for the process in the viewer, as Antoni describes:

*'When you are with my objects you are with something I have, literally, been intimate with. The work doesn't necessarily reveal anything personal. You come to understand the work through your own body'* (Horodner, 1999)

Antoni also chooses materials for their cultural significance and references to an earlier, male dominated period of American art in the performance *Loving Care*. Soaking her hair from a bucket of Loving Care 'Natural Black' hair dye, she 'mopped' the floor of the gallery, gradually forcing the viewers out of the space. Simultaneously recalling the action paintings of Jackson Pollock and Yves Klein's *Anthropometry* paintings, where, rather than paint the model, Klein wanted to paint with the model, Antoni's aim was '*to be the model and the master at the same time*'. (Vimeo, 2017)

Re-examining Marx's theory of value prompted an interest in the hidden nature of much female labour, which I began to explore through video in *(Un)Necessary Labours*. This work uses repetition to the point of absurdity, whether connected to grooming and ideas of self-care, housekeeping or the maintenance of the retail environment.

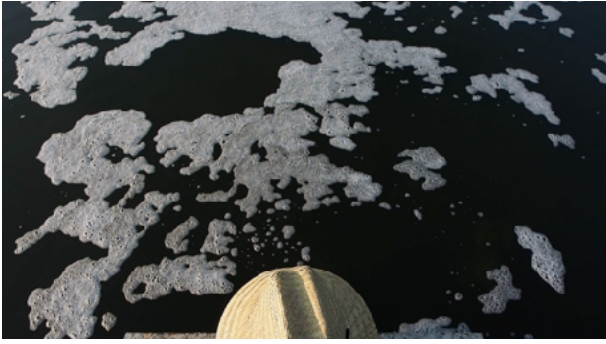


Figure 51: Sue Withers *(Un)Necessary Labours: I* (Video still) 2019

### ***(Un)Necessary Labours: I (The Bubble Maker)***

Despite the fact that for many people in the world, clean water can be almost impossible to access, the bubble bath remains a favourite trope of Hollywood films, advertising and Instagram, and is often presented as a guilt free indulgence, an almost essential ritual of feminine self-care.

*(Un)Necessary Labours: I* is a 13 minute video exhibited as an endless loop of futile activity. From her position at the edge of the frame, the bubble maker's absurd attempt to



Figures 52, 53: Sue Withers *(Un)Necessary Labours: I* (Video stills) 2019

fill a tranquil, rural expanse of water with bubbles evokes the labour of a less industrialised time or place. Echoing the cycle of accumulation and disposal, of grooming and housekeeping, where capitalism has positioned women as consumers of the world's resources to adorn, beautify and decorate, her repetitive actions seem almost comic. The ridiculous and extravagant futility of her endeavour alludes to the psychological and environmental costs of consumerism. And yet the hypnotic quality of the drifting, dissipating bubbles, like shifting landmasses, seem to offer space to contemplate.

***(Un)Necessary Labours: II (The Cardigan Folder)***

Employing a white square as a template, the cardigan folder attempts to maintain order over an endless procession of unruly cardigans. Smoothing, buttoning and tucking in the unkempt, transgressive tufts, the cardigans are folded into conformity. The constant



Figure 54: Sue Withers *(Un)Necessary Labours: II* (Video stills) 2019

refolding and rehangng of the merchandise in fashion retail, mirrors the ceaseless repetition of housework. With only the sleeves of a similar garment visible, the cardigan folder's hands are unadorned, limiting identification, but perhaps suggesting an internalisation of the misogynistic social structures which encourage women to police the appearance and behaviours of themselves and each other.

*'It is also much simpler to dismiss shopping as merely the extrudance of capitalism. The melodies of shopping are constantly denied by the dominant discourse that view this labour of women as mere superficiality and unwarranted desire which, without any of its own creativity or responsibility, merely sings the tunes (or more likely the jingles) that commerce has composed for it.'* (Miller, 2009: 153)



Figures 55, 56: Sue Withers *(Un)Necessary Labours: II* (Video stills) 2019

Inspired by Daniel Miller's observation, I had originally intended to devise a soundtrack to reference some short form of music, similar to a jingle or the repeated phrase of a DVD menu or video game, something repetitive and mind numbingly annoying. As the clatter of the buttons hitting the work surface received positive feedback, I decided to embrace this version for the doctorate showcase (2019) where it was shown as a 20 minute looped video. In contrast to the soft material of the cardigan, at first the sound is unexpected, the source not immediately apparent. Also positive was the response to the way the lighting of the coloured knitwear seems to reference the depiction of opulent fabrics in painting.

This is not yet as successfully resolved as *(Un)Necessary Labours: I*, so I am still exploring ways to work with the repetitive nature and unending form of the task. Using the incongruity of applause for the successful completion of a menial, usually hidden task (hidden in plain sight in the case of retail) has met with some success. I was also considering whether some borrowed logic could apply to the order in which the cardigans appear. Initially, the silence followed by applause suggested snooker, but as I was also

looking at slowing down some sequences, it seems to more closely echo gymnastics. The cardigan twisting, almost somersaulting, through the air and the finally folded cardigan equivalent to the attempt to 'stick' a landing.

As further ideas occurred, I revisited the work of Mika Rottenberg, an artist who explores the complexities of contemporary capitalism. Absorbing and idiosyncratic, her films focus on the labour of women and the use of the body as a process of production. Often featuring bodily fluids such as sweat and tears or the growth of hair and nails, Rottenberg maintains that she is not seeking to create something bizarre; she is simply pointing out how bizarre reality is. As Efrat Mishori explains:

*'In Rottenberg's work tears produce dough and a sneeze produces a rabbit. If a commercial can convince us that eating spinach will tone our muscles, Rottenberg will go even further and make us think that steamed allergy tears descending down a worker's immense body can raise dough to the size of a mountain.'*

(Rottenberg, Hsu, Williams and Mishori, 2011: 88)

In her video work *Mary's Cherries* (2004) three women, in small, separate spaces form a production line. Two use an exercise bike to power a UV light, which 'grows' the nails of the third at super speed. The nails are then harvested and the clipping dropped to the labourer whose task is to manipulate it until softened. In the final stage the softened nail clipping is (trans)formed into a maraschino cherry.

I was really looking forward to her show at the new CCA gallery at Goldsmiths. There was a lot to consider, but I was immediately drawn to *NoNoseKnows* a video installation exploring the creation of cultured pearls in China, which included some pearl-encrusted bunnies in a sort of makeshift stock room. Bunny Glamazon is a fetish performer who has appeared in other Rottenberg work, with a Pinocchio-like nose whose growth appears to be stimulated by allergies rather than lies. Surrounded by flowers, a fan (operated by a pulley system and powered by a worker seen elsewhere) blows the flowery magic of a bouquet into her face, causing her nose to grow, pulsate and eventually sneeze. Each sneeze produces a plateful of noodles or pasta. Elsewhere Chinese women operate various stages of the production, from splitting shells, to prising out and sorting the pearls. This is a darkly humorous combination of documentary and fiction, which contemplates and reveals often hidden forms of labour, as Rottenberg has described: *'I think in my work I try to give shape to the way things are made and consumed, which has become so vast*

*as to become unimaginable. If we actually comprehended the insanity of it, I think people would probably behave differently.*' (Kennedy, 2015)

Acknowledging that she operates as a storyteller, despite her disregard of the narrative conventions of fairy tales, her work is informed by a Marxist theory of labour, value and the means of production. For Rottenberg: *'The driving force of capitalism is fiction. It thrives on a form of storytelling that inflates the importance and value of objects and it works like a kind of magic: "if you buy this, you can become this".'* (Rottenberg, Hsu, Williams and Mishori, 2011: 16)

Using film and photography to explore identity, class nationalism and gender, Rachel Maclean also investigates the fictions of capitalism. Seductive and disturbing, her work references fairy-tales and popular culture, using green screen and electronic soundtracks to create ambitious and elaborate narratives. I first saw *Feed Me* at TBCTV, a pop-up show at Somerset House, which like much of her work, makes use of emojis, emoticons and other aesthetic tropes of social media and contemporary digital culture. Playing every role herself, her work shares common ground with both Cindy Sherman and Mika Rottenburg.

As much as I enjoy the complex narratives of both Mika Rottenburg and Rachel Maclean, my aim is more simple. I use repetition in the *(Un)Necessary Labours* video work to make visible the endless cycle of labour involved in grooming, in maintaining order over ourselves and our surroundings, slowing the pace to make space for reflection, or to highlight absurdity.



Figures 57, 58: Karla Black *At Fault* (Mixed media installation) 2011

My interest in the processes and products used for grooming and self-care prompted me to explore further ways to work with bubbles and other ephemeral materials. Having successfully found a way to work with soap bubbles, I was encouraged to investigate the use of other grooming related materials and processes in more depth.

The pastes, powders, oils and gels used by Karla Black, a Scottish sculptor, seem precarious or unstable. Influenced by Melanie Klein's observations of the intuitive, ever changing, prelinguistic relationship young children have with objects, the materials used whether traditional chalk and sugar paper or face powder and soap are not intended to convey meaning. Fragile, impermanent and pastel-hued, the sculptures have been described as 'almost objects'. In an interview for Artslant, Daniel Barnes characterises her work as speaking *'of contingency and impermanence, as if to defy the greed of the art market with a material illustration of the fragility of all existence. But what is important for Black is the materials, over and above meanings, which are strictly not representational and aim to communicate beyond language. The result is a form of sculpture that invites — even compels — the viewer to experience the world in terms of the pure materiality of shape and texture, unhindered by both language and traditional representation. The works are site-specific and are often simply discarded after the exhibition has finished, giving them a certain existential precariousness which is mirrored in their compositional fragility.'* (Barnes, 2011)

To use the products associated with grooming and self-care such as soap, make up, deodorant and fake tan for their material qualities alone, with no regard for any other cultural associations, seems liberating, if not entirely possible. I enjoy the ephemeral nature of Black's work, the precarity and instability seems to undermine the more obviously commercial aspects of the art market. However, unlike Black and Wermers, I





Figures 59, 60: Sue Withers Video test; Soap, 2021

need to acknowledge the cultural significance of objects and materials, perhaps to mitigate or minimise, rather than deny, their power.

Having experimented with make-up, used cotton pads, and previously, depilatory wax strips, I turned to a collection of soap ends. These had been discarded when they got too small to use, rejected for their scent or because they were too harshly abrasive or, more shamefully, because I couldn't resist the allure of something new.

The knobs of soap fill the frame, evoking rocks and pebbles. As the pressure of the water increases, the smaller pieces move with the flow of the water and the sound of the downpour intensifies. Although currently this video is in the first stages of development, the early associations seem rich with possibility. From coastline erosion to concerns with domestic drains and what we might be inadvertently contributing to the water supply.

I had been investigating ways of working with smell for some time. As a significant component of the luxury goods industry, perfume seemed a productive area to explore. It is simultaneously an affordable entry point to a luxury brand lifestyle and the epitome of the 'Emperor's New Clothes' approach to value. From the way language is used to describe perfume, to the packaging, advertising and marketing, and the way consumers are accosted by the perfume sprayers in department stores, it seems a rich source of associations.

I hoped *The Perfume Shop*, a small group show at The Ryder gallery, might offer some insight. The work ranged from Clara Ursitti's *Eau Claire*, a scent made from her own vaginal and menstrual secretions to *Apocalypse* by John Thomson and Alison Craighead, which was based on the olfactory materials detailed in The Book Of Revelation as it

appears in the King James Bible. Although the show was interesting, there was nothing there that especially resonated. Of the perfumes one was allowed, or able to smell, they were all too close to something that could conceivably be commercially available

More promising were a series of steel sculptures using perfumes by Roger Hiorns, a British artist working primarily in sculpture and installation. I've been fascinated by his work since I first saw *Beachy Head*, as the foam creating cylinders are collectively known, in a group show called *...comes the spirit* at the Jerwood Gallery (2000). Another work, *Seizure* (2008) covered the interior of a condemned flat in Southwark in copper sulphate crystals by filling it with 75,000 litres of liquid copper sulphate. The result was dazzling, transforming the everyday, the rundown and dilapidated into a brittle, spectacular crystalline grotto. Apart from the obvious connection between the foam and my bubble making, I appreciate the use of chemicals, the transformation of found objects and spaces, and the lack of control over the aesthetic outcomes generated by these processes. The steel sculptures were unfamiliar, so there were significant disadvantages to viewing such work online rather than in real life, but the description in Dan Fox's review of a show at Corvi Mora is intriguing and evocative.

*L'Heure Bleu (The Blue Hour, 2002) is a flat, rectilinear piece of steel, some two or three feet high, leant against a wall. A perfume - Guerlain's L'Heure Bleu - is sprayed on to the front of the panel, about halfway up. The expensive liquid (created in 1912 to evoke a twilight summer evening, and said to represent the mood before World War I) dribbles towards the floor and stains the metal, as if an animal has demarcated this territory with its signature scent. The panel narrows to a smaller square at the top — it almost suggests a human form, which would place the perfumed area at about groin level. (Fox, 2004)*

Questioning why he finds himself crouching in the gallery to smell the steel, Fox concludes that something almost perverse is being played out here, a game in which the rules of attraction involve subjugation and submission.

I find this combination of an unforgiving, geometric sheet of steel, the stain and the scent really powerful, but I was also excited by the use of perfume to guide the behaviour of an audience. In the 2019 showcase I had aimed to contrast the smell of chlorine or bleach with something more 'natural' or earthy, to evoke the lake. Unable to successfully resolve a way to safely and reliably include chlorine, I settled for impregnating the wooden slats of *Bleacher*, a functional sculpture/bench, with the smell of grass.



Figures 61, 62: Sue Withers *Dolly* (Stool, balloons, rubber gloves)  
*Pearl* (Stool, balloons, perfume oil) 2020

I had also been experimenting with some deflated balloons, initially seeing them as alluding to ageing. Attaching them to stools, udder-like, I tried using fake fur hats and carpet circles to create some kind of hybrid ‘animal’. Although I relished the implied casualness of a hat left on a stool, it was too reminiscent of Wermers’ *Infrastruktur* and I became more interested in frustrating the inclination to sit. The potential to combine these separate lines of enquiry came in 2020, with an opportunity to exhibit (Appendix 4) and another (virtual) residency (Appendix 2) which prompted an intense period of experimentation, using fully inflated balloons, sand-filled balloons and inflated rubber gloves.

Motivated by Maclean’s use of memes and emojis and the vinyl texts and silhouettes in Ulman’s *Promise a Future* (2013) and *Babyfootprints Crowsfeet* (2014) I had begun researching the notion of cuteness in more depth during my third year of the doctorate. In the darkness of winter, while following the increasingly disturbing behaviour of politicians in both the USA and UK, and the ensuing acrimony spread across social media, Sheri Klein’s observation in *Art & Laughter* seemed to shed some light.

*'There is a social function to viewing the cute and nostalgic; we can be diverted to something more pleasant, kinder, gentler and more hopeful, while distancing our melancholic tendencies'* (Klein, 2006: 120)

Somewhat late to the appreciation of cute cat videos, I couldn't quite comprehend my fascination with a recent TV advert for *Whiskas* cat food. Despite often finding anthropomorphism incredibly irritating, I was completely compelled by this, and yet simultaneously, repelled. It features a kitten voiced by a child, which combined with the tag line *feed their curiosity* seems to equate the needs of cats and children, almost as if they are interchangeable. Later in the same chapter, Klein quotes Daniel Harris on the interplay of cuteness and pathos: *'The element of grotesqueness in cuteness is deliberate...the grotesque is cute because it is pitiable, and pity is the emotion of this seductive and manipulative aesthetic'*. (Klein, 2006: 112)

In an effort to understand the appeal of a re-discovered collection of flock rabbits and curious about the power of 'cuteness' to both attract and repel, I had tried to introduce it into my work. I attached false eyelashes to some of the bunnies, adjusting their colouring, making them greyer, older, with spray paint. After seeing the pearl-encrusted rabbits at Mika Rottenberg's show at Goldsmiths CCA, I was less keen to try the false nails and clam shells I had planned to use, so decided to test something more food related. I covered several with desiccated coconut, making eyes from glacé cherries in an attempt to evoke some similarity with an English Madeleine cake. A coating of pink sugar was prompted by the discovery of more flock rabbits in a different pose and images of sugar mice I came across when researching candied peel and other traditional festive confections. I was reminded of how food-related terms of endearment such as 'honey', 'sugar' and 'sweetie pie' are used as diminutives, which I had first encountered in Rosalind Coward's *Female Desire* as an undergraduate, and began to see 'cuteness' and 'sweetness' as related, as theorised by Coward: *'sugar-based foods have never been integrated into our diet. Sweet foods are almost invariably served as separate courses, like puddings, or cakes, not integrated into the main course. And sweets and confectionary are bought and consumed separately from essential nourishment. Sugar-based foods are consumed by an affluent and exploitative society as symbols of inessential luxury, as evidence of wealth and power'*. (Coward, 1986: 91)

A comment on an Instagram post of my work in progress mistaking the balloons for bubblegum made me wonder whether smell could be used to evoke a nauseating



sweetness, in some way analogous to the unbearable cuteness of the *Whiskas* kitten. Considering the open and well-ventilated nature of the space, it was reasonably successful.

Although it made installing the show a bit more stressful, I was pleased with the portability of work made with flat pack stools and inflatables. And despite numerous tests in the weeks before, it also left open the possibility of making something unexpected. As the balloons are a relatively new element, I've yet to fully explore their potential or analyse the reason for their use, but there is scope in their frivolity. Celebratory, attention-seeking, not necessarily childish, a container for air, they may also be regarded perhaps as a more tangible form of bubble. Using the smell of candy floss and bubblegum has encouraged me to continue earlier tests of coating inflated balloons with edible materials such as desiccated coconut and sugar. The process of making and exhibiting these sculptures seems to echo the cycle implied by my doctorate research title; the grooming or preparing of the work to be presented, the consuming or viewing of the work whilst on show and the repair necessary to maintain the work during the period of exhibition.



Figure 63: Sue Withers, *Dotty* (Stool balloons) Installation view at Between Walls 2020

## 4. Surface / Depth

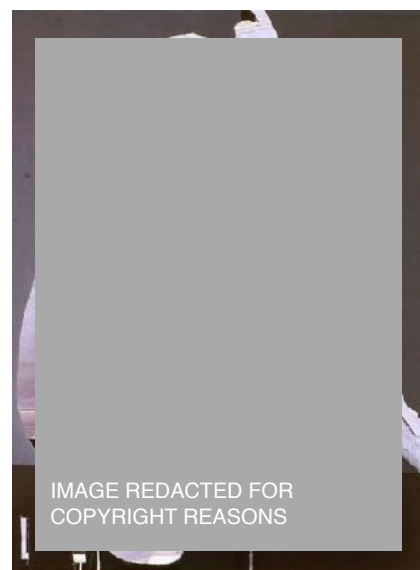
In her essay *The Other Side of Venus. The Visual Economy of Feminine Display* Abigail Solomon-Godeau maintains: 'One of the most conspicuous features of commodity culture is its sexualisation of the commodity, its eroticisation of objects, which in turn inflects, if not determines, the psychic structures of consumer desire' (de Grazia and Furlough, 1996:13)



Figures 64, 65: Sue Withers *Untitled* (Collage) 2019

Eager to confront an unmanageable collection of fashion magazines, I returned to collage, a method of image making which I had used extensively in the past. I contemplated imposing some kind of system such as those adopted by Angus Fairhurst or Nicole Wermers, but eventually settled into a more intuitive method of selection, returning to each issue as new thoughts occurred. I hadn't previously realised the prominence of jewellery advertising, but as an indicator of frivolous excess, such images seemed fitting. Avoiding direct references to the body, I limited these to hands and the occasional collar. I had been considering hands for some time, in connection with ideas of manual labour and as a vehicle for false nails. Initially I was looking for luxurious or decorative materials, such as velvet and lace, or the product of animals; leather, leopard skin, snakeskin, feathers and fur, and anything which suggested hours of painstaking labour like beadwork, embroidery, quilting or sequins. Using as a base, artwork previously rejected due to the quality of print or paper, the resulting collages function a bit like sketches, being a way of working out potential juxtapositions of materials and forms. Combining images of decay and disrepair

such as old banana skins or laddered tights with the shiny, sparkling fragments of fashion advertising, these were a starting point, rather than destination.



Figures 66, 67:

Angus Fairhurst *Three double pages from a magazine, body and text removed* (Collage) 2004

*Three pages from a magazine, body and text removed* (Collage) 2003

Manipulating similar source material, Angus Fairhurst systematically and repeatedly extracts the model, and the text, from fashion magazines and billboard posters. Reconstructing an image through layering several sheets, the absent body disclosing nothing but glossy, luxuriant surfaces, which in turn reveal glimpses of other absent figures. The technique is simple, visible and easily understood as reinforced by the title, yet capable of prompting something accidental, an uncovering of unexpected juxtapositions. As described in a Meliksetian I Briggs press release:

*'His work might be read as a metaphor for disconnection and alienation in our hyper-connected society, but it never loses its human qualities — beautiful, absurd, ironic, witty and melancholic, yet hopeful and optimistic.'* (Meliksetian I Briggs, 2016)

An earlier work, *When I woke up in the morning the feeling was still there* (1992-96) is a series of four screen prints. A man in a suit, holding what appears to be a blank white canvas, stands in an artist's studio. These photographic images are black and white, a mis-aligned coloured square printed over each canvas. Aiming to *'play on the mis-alignment of the hard form and the notion of feeling, both physical and emotional, which is something you cannot be so sure about'* (*'When I Woke Up in the Morning, the Feeling Was Still There'*, Angus Fairhurst, 1992 | Tate, 2002) my initial interest had been in the





Figure 68: Angus Fairhurst, *When I woke up in the morning the feeling was still there* (4 Photo-screen prints) 1997

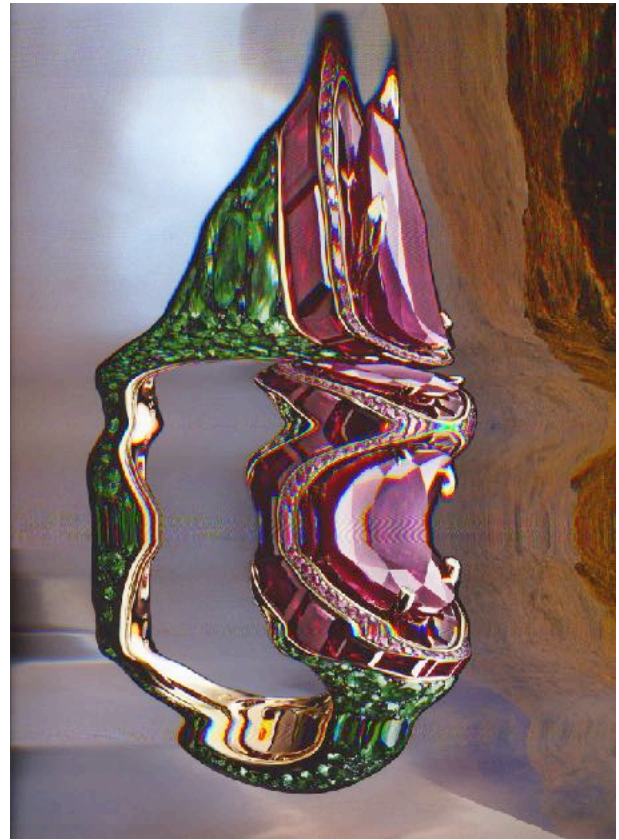
sequence, or almost repeated image. Since re-reading Bachelor's *Chromophobia*, I had become far more concerned with the transgressive qualities of colour, and had been considering the circumstances in which colour could transgress. In spilling over the edge, not fitting, or conforming, to this black and white world these coloured squares are not constrained by their allocated space. Neither can the 'feeling' be contained by art.

A study of shopping in North London (Clarke and Miller, 2002), concludes that anxiety over potential social embarrassment is a significant factor in determining what people buy and how they dress. Later, considering changes to fashion in London, perhaps a result of this anxiety, Miller observes: *'it's as though somewhere there is a vast hole through which colour and print is leaking out, leaving an increasingly grey, brown and black world of clothing that makes for a drab, colourless environment, only partially compensated for by a few exceptions such as sportswear and the little red dress'* (Miller, 2010: 35)

Although this description of London does not strike me as entirely accurate, it did prompt me to acknowledge such behaviour in myself. Despite having a wardrobe bursting with print and colour, in moments of difficulty, stress or insecurity, the darker, more sombre colours seem more comfortable.

Fairhurst's use of notes or text, often issued as instructions is also interesting, with references to adding, subtracting and repeating made visible in his collages. They recall other methods intended to stimulate, or review creative working methods, such as Brian Eno and Peter Schmidt's *Oblique Strategies* (1975) or Richard Serra's *Verb List* (1967-68). Described by Serra as a series of *'actions to relate to oneself, material, place, and process'*, following advice from an earlier seminar, I had composed my own list to guide

the process of making and prevent the paralysis of overthinking; *to adorn, to display, to fix, to neglect, to stretch and repeat.*



Figures 69, 70: Sue Withers, *Untitled* (Collage Scans) 2020

### ***Collage Scans***

Having rediscovered this strategy while writing my annual report, at the beginning of the pandemic lockdown I assembled the fragments selected for collage on the scanner bed, dragging them back and forth across its surface whilst scanning — stretching and repeating.

The initial images have an aspect ratio approximating an A4 scanner bed, and to some extent I judged whether they were successful by the composition in that format. But as ‘virtual’ exhibiting opportunities took hold, I tried cropping the images to an aspect ratio more suited to viewing on a monitor, which immediately makes them more landscape-like.

The results were sometimes surprising, not entirely within my control, and perhaps most importantly, only existed as digital files. A month or so into lockdown, fairly certain there would be no exhibition for which to prepare, I couldn’t muster any enthusiasm to make anything with material qualities that would be lost in the virtual world. With the majority of my recent work locked in the UEL studios or on show at the Beecroft gallery in Southend,



Figure 71: *Untitled (Collage Scan)* 2020

making new work which had no reason to exist outside of the virtual sphere seemed to offer some re-assurance.

At the end of the academic year I had determined that using found objects was a means of anchoring my work to the everyday, and aiming for a light touch that seemed almost nonchalant, was a way of revealing the process of production. These seemed almost in opposition. Now I can see more connections, and I recognise the visibility of small details like blurred text or the separating colours and interference patterns created by this method of scanning as clues to the source of the image. Realising that to preserve the glowing, back-lit quality the work needs to remain digital, I am currently reconsidering some scans as moving image, acting on recent feedback to exploit the tension between depth and surface.

Using fragments of jewellery advertising several of the images evoke the shiny, gleaming surfaces of the luxury retail environment. They also remind me of Roger Hiorns' grotto-like *Seizure* – an unassuming space transformed by a glittering coat of copper sulphates crystals.



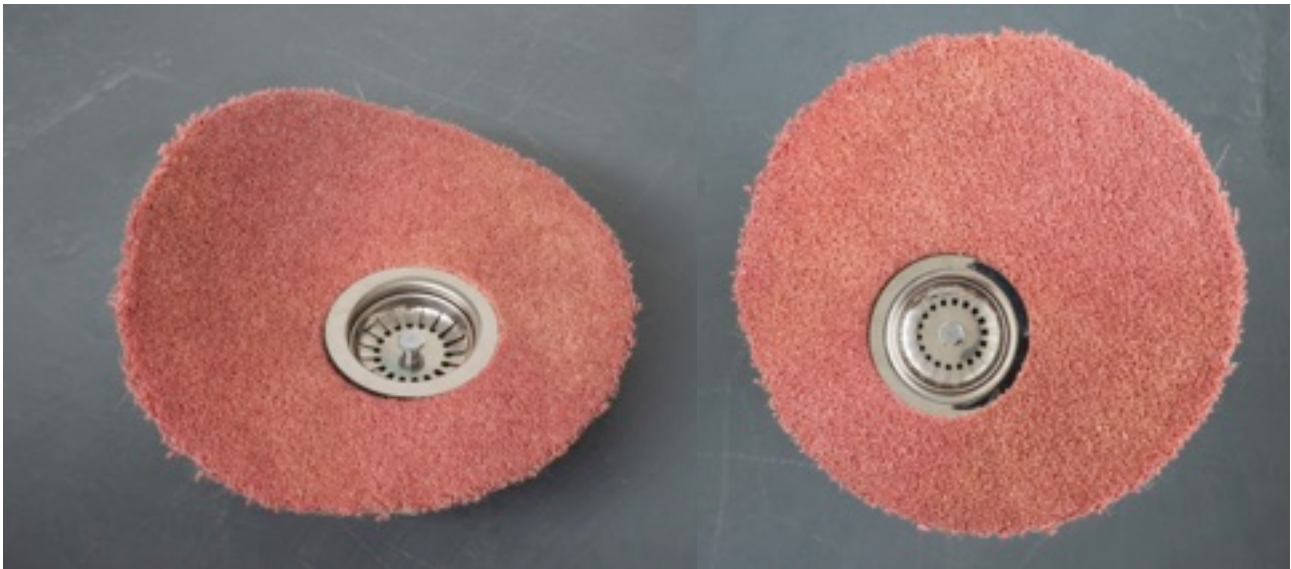


Figure 72: Sue Withers, Sculpture tests; Carpet Circles. 2019

Since the Summer Lodge residency in Nottingham (July 2019) I have been working with carpet. The Axminster carpet factory was one of the largest employers in the area where I grew up, so the fact that I find fitted carpets oppressive seems almost disloyal, but effectively locates my age, education and class origin. Fitted carpets are a sign of respectability, conformity, even luxury when chosen in pale, difficult to maintain colours.

Reminiscent of hotels or show homes, the cut circles of pink carpet were initially tests to explore material combinations. I experimented with materials and processes which contravene the rules of carpet care such as chewing gum, hair or plumbing hardware, staining and bleaching, or incongruous materials like wire wool and hairnets. The carpeted wooden platforms, although of equally unclear intention, felt more decisive. Their solidity is very pleasing, and seem to suggest retail display, but also something much seedier. Placed on the floor, the carpet seems to function as a way of claiming space, the circles perhaps indicating personal boundaries. As platforms they suggest an invitation to participate and interact; the participant is turned into the spectacle. Whether with plug holes, handles or bicycle racks, I'm hoping to encourage an imagined participation, directing the way a body might be expected to interact.

Having created a 'necklace' of chewing gum on one sample, I am considering other, orally manipulated, materials such as bubble gum or boiled sweets. I had also hoped to make a necklace of snail trails, but have not yet found the right materials. Although I haven't fully resolved why I think of these as necklaces, it's partly about suggesting contact with the skin, offering an opportunity to explore the tension between adornment and disgust.

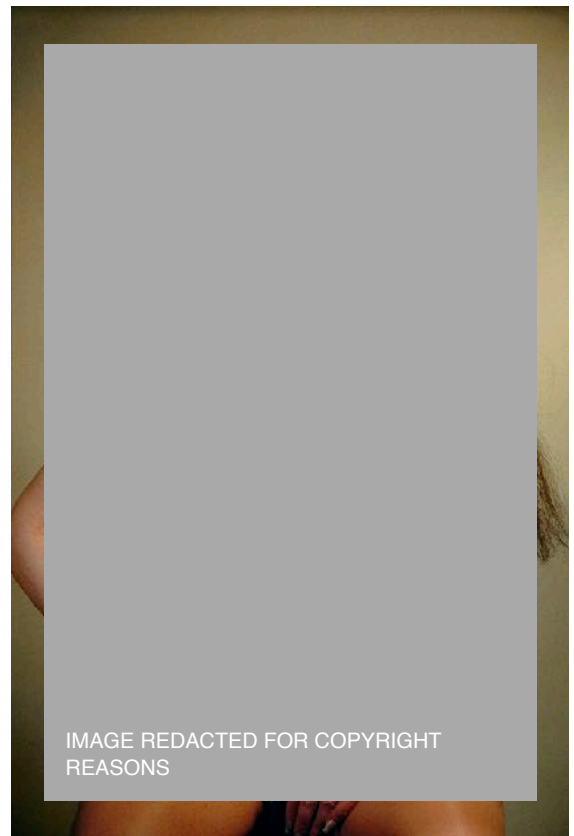
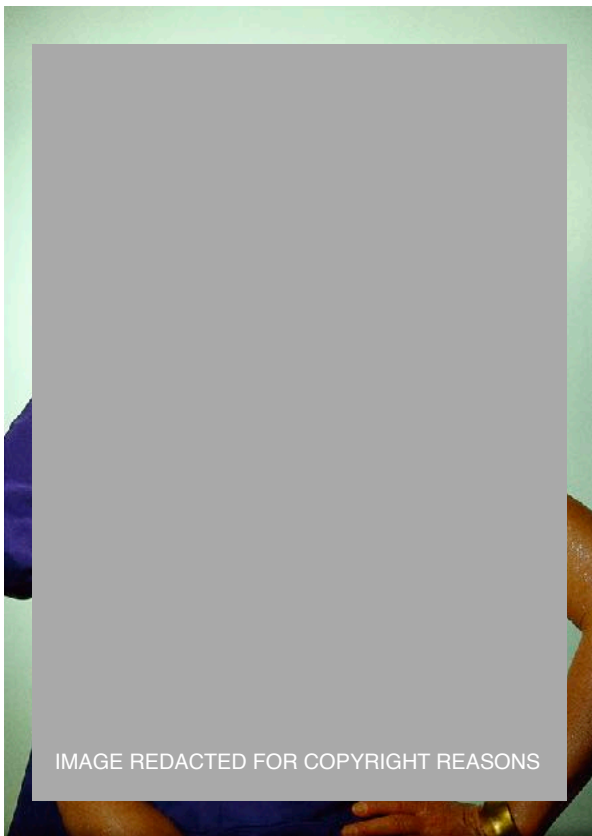


Figures 73, 74: Sue Withers, Sculpture tests; Carpet Platforms. 2021

Using photography to investigate possible manifestations of the platforms, these recent tests are more concerned with gently proposing the abject, rather than directly employing the evidence of the messy, female body. While clearing the house of my partner's mother, I came across a cloth covered waste bin. Discovered in her bedroom, it seemed an unlikely choice and at odds with her usual design choices. A perfect match for the pink carpet, the golden glow of the waste bin's interior suggest a makeshift chamber-pot. It makes reference to minimalist sculpture, but a version softened by curves and velvet. The gold cube cover and box of tissues provides the means with which to dispose of, or clean up, any offending fluids.

Alluding to bodily functions, and the increasingly unreliable ageing body I revisited the work of Cindy Sherman and Sarah Lucas in an attempt to define my own intentions. Having researched Sherman extensively as an undergraduate, I looked again at some of her earlier work. Writing about a series from the mid to late eighties, Laura Mulvey contends that the work *'suggests that, although both sexes are subject to abjection, it is women who can explore and analyse the phenomenon with greater equanimity, as it is the female body that has come, not exclusively but predominantly, to represent the shudder aroused by liquidity and decay.'* (Mulvey, 1991: 148). She describes the work from this period as coming *'close to depicting the Kristevan concept of the abject: that is, the disgust aroused in the human psyche by lifeless, inanimate bodily matter, bodily wastes and the dead body itself.'*

A recent series which I saw in her show at the National Portrait Gallery, resonates more, perhaps because these photographs deal with ageing, or with poorly executed attempts to use make up to correct perceived flaws. They seem to speak of adornment as a cover of



Figures 75, 76: Cindy Sherman *Untitled #400* and *Untitled #355* (Chromogenic prints) 2000

mortality, aspiring to ideals of beauty which conform to indicators of supposed good health; a healthy tan, perfect teeth or luxuriant hair. I am now less interested in the *shudder aroused by liquidity and decay* than I was as a younger person, perhaps because the middle-aged, menopausal female body, no longer considered valuable for the purpose of decoration or reproduction, is already apt to provoke disgust.

According to Imogen Tyler, in her essay 'Against Abjection' (2009) '*Kristeva theorises abjection in distinctly phenomenological terms, associating the abject with all that is repulsive and fascinating about bodies and, in particular, those aspects of bodily experience which unsettle singular bodily integrity: death, decay, fluids, orifices, sex, defecation, vomiting, illness, menstruation, pregnancy and childbirth.*' (Tyler, 2009: 3) Tyler's concern is with the social consequences of living as a body that is identified as maternal and abject.

The violations of the boundaries between flesh and food, between self and other, in the work of Sarah Lucas, can be brutal. She frequently employs the language of misogyny, but in some work there seems to be no escape from the hostility. In *Chicken Knickers* (1997) the raw chicken flesh leaves no doubt that this body is to be considered meat.





Figures 77, 78: Sarah Lucas *Chicken Knickers* (Photograph) 1997  
*Au Naturel* (Mattress, melons, bucket, cucumber, oranges) 1994

In the 1996 Vanessa Engles documentary *Two Melons and a Stinking Fish*, Lucas talks about the tenuous quality of humour. *'It's very important to have a light touch in the way I handle materials, not in what the subject is but in the way the materials are handled. I can't stand it when I see heavy-handed art or things, that have been made to death because I think it destroys the humour.'* (Two Melons and a Stinking Fish, 1996: 47.18)

In *Au Naturel* (1994) the same misogynistic language is employed, but somehow the absurdity of the melons, the bucket, oranges and cucumber provoke humour. It's as if the lightness of touch she seeks materially, sometimes slips into a visual or symbolic heavy handedness. Although the intention is to expose the savagery, the 'joke' somehow remains at the expense of women, as she appears to recognise: *'Well, in the same way that people use humour all the time to be able to do something with things that are hurting... Humour is not about being nice or having a good laugh, especially. But it is about being able to cope with something that maybe is almost impossible to reconcile yourself to.'* (Two Melons and a Stinking Fish, 1996: 47.18)

This echoes Hannah Gadsby's analysis of her use of self-deprecation, on which, she explains, her own comedy career has been built. In her stand-up show 'Nanette' Gadsby deconstructs the mechanisms of comedy as she is performing them. Her material covers growing up in Tasmania, and the impact of being gay in a country where this was still illegal until 1997. It's clever, funny and profoundly moving.

*'Do you understand what self-deprecation means when it comes from somebody who already exists on the margins?'* Gadsby asks, *'It's not humility. It's humiliation. I put myself*

*down in order to speak, in order to seek permission... to speak. And I simply will not do that anymore. Not to myself or anybody who identifies with me. And that story became a routine, and through repetition that joke version fused with my actual memory of what happened. But unfortunately that joke version was not nearly sophisticated enough to help me undo the damage done to me in reality. Punch lines need trauma, because punchlines need tension, and tension feeds trauma.'* (Nanette, 2018: 40.26)



Figures 79, 80: Sue Withers *Product Shot Stock Hands* (Photographs) 2021

I had been looking again at false nails, hoping to find a way to utilise them in my work. Increasingly interested in the materials that are 'cast off' in the process of grooming, I had been thinking about whether discarded false eyelashes or false nails had the same power to repel. And while I was wrestling with how to articulate the role of the object in my work, I kept coming back to Kristeva's phrase; *I spit myself out*

As a child I was a persistent nail biter, a habit which was a source of great shame to my mother, whether due to the lack of control indicated, or because bitten nails don't look 'nice'. Attempts to break the habit were made, from painting foul tasting liquid on my nails to bribes or rewards offered for achieving the desired appearance. By chance, I noticed a

Brian Eno tweet, a proposed action from his and Peter Schmidt's collection of *Oblique Strategies* – *Look closely at the most embarrassing details and amplify them.*

Intrigued by the availability of stock images from photo libraries intended to display any product, I made a series of images intended to echo their strange composition, drawing attention to the female caress of so many advertising campaigns. The damaged, un-manicured nails and colour of the backdrop frustrate their potential for commercial use; the hands add no value, and would be difficult to separate from their background. The empty space left by the absence of a product seems similar to the space created by the carpeted platforms, a place for the viewer to imagine their own participation.



Figure 81: Sue Withers *Royal Hoopla* (Carpet, fringe) Detail, 2020

As an extension to considering carpets, curtains have also become interesting, due to their potential to reference both the domestic and theatrical. I particularly enjoy the way in which curtains can transform a space, especially temporary decoration such as those made of lametta. Attempting to refer to glamour, in the light of the theatre it sparkles, but in daylight, becomes something far less spectacular, trashy, even tawdry. Curtains seem similar to the platforms, in that they suggest a space where something might happen.

I especially enjoy the making of exhibitions, relishing in particular the challenge of including something untested or not yet finished, as the pressure to meet the deadline can often result in unexpected solutions. Installing a basketball hoop for *Research Space*



Figure 82: Sue Withers *Royal Hoopla* (Basketball hoop, ruffle scarf, foil) Detail, 2020

(Appendix 4) before receiving the materials I had planned to use was a way to embrace that uncertainty and provoke the unforeseen.

### ***Royal Hoopla***

The basketball hoop was positioned as close to the standard height as was possible in the space, intended to suggest something aspirational or out of reach. The hoop is not immediately apparent; it is hidden, or 'gussied up' by a frilly gold ruffle, and supports a shiny red, absurdly festive spherical decoration.

Theatre is suggested here, but it is distance rather than lighting which makes the cheap and flashy appear magnificent. The colour combination might have regal connotations, enhanced by the complex honeycomb construction of the ball, a kind of self-absorbed ruff. A circle of red carpet trimmed with gold suggests a place for celebrity. Attention is drawn to the space in between the hoop and the carpet, but the carpet simultaneously seems to invite and prevent the viewer from occupying the space.





Figure 83, 84: Sue Withers *Celebrity Hoo-ha* (basketball hoop, feather boa, satin cord, balloon) Installation view and detail. 2020

### ***Celebrity Hoo-ha***

In October 2020, a group show (*Between Walls*. Appendix 4) provided another opportunity to exhibit. The derelict space allowed me to explore another trope within fashion photography where the opulence of embellished party frocks is emphasised by a neglected, run down interior.

*Celebrity Hoo-ha* employed another basketball hoop, adorned with a casually arranged feather boa. An extended, basketball net, made from thick red satin cord contains an oversized balloon. Swollen, caught in the grid of the net, the teat-like opening of the balloon is displayed, the decorative closure perhaps echoing a nipple tassel. An anthropomorphic, almost puppet-like quality is evoked and while superficially the materials might appear luxurious, the feather boa is forlorn, less than abundant, and the net is incomplete.

References to sport, from those completely absorbed into the world of fashion such as trainers, to the use of basketball hoops and balls, and allusions to gymnastics have been present since the second year of my doctorate. They appear suggestive of competition, which is manifest differently, depending on the context. *(Un)Necessary*

*Labours II (The Cardigan Folder)* alludes to a socially constructed rivalry where women compete to conform. Or more prosaically, the reference to retail might evoke the pressure to meet daily sales targets. In *Royal Hoopla* and *Celebrity Hoo-ha* the basketball hoops are positioned out of reach. They are goals, where the actual substance of the goal has been obscured by accessories and adornments. Just as consumerism requires us to value newness, capitalism demands that we admire competition.

## **5. Conclusion / Exhibition**

At the time this report was completed (April 2021) the space in which I was to exhibit was still yet to be determined. It also seemed that much of the work was still 'in progress' as I had not had opportunity, or reason, to manifest many of these pieces physically.

I had used the previous showcase (2019) to test how I might combine video projection with wall-based or sculptural work in the same space – and how different elements might work together across several spaces to create a coherent exhibition.

The projection of an early version of *(Un)Necessary Labours: II (The Cardigan Folder)* struggled slightly against the artificial light, and with nowhere for a viewer to sit, it felt like a retail space. Enhanced by the lighting and the slight discomfort of such spaces, the ghostly projection could be seen as analogous to the repetitive labour, carried out in plain sight, but yet unseen. Occupying an adjacent space, *Eternal Chore Undone* a wall-based sculpture was almost hidden from view, but eventually revealed a possible source of the cardigan folder's labour.

Inspired by the corridors, and hidden workspaces in Mika Rottenberg's *NoNoseKnows* (2018) I was keen to explore more challenging, or disconnected spaces to produce a coherent exhibition. The use of light or sound to lead an audience through corridor-like spaces in Lis Rhodes exhibition at Nottingham Contemporary *Dissident Lines* (2019) and the Tate Modern show of Steve McQueen (2020) had prompted further ideas, which I had intended to investigate for the 2020 showcase.

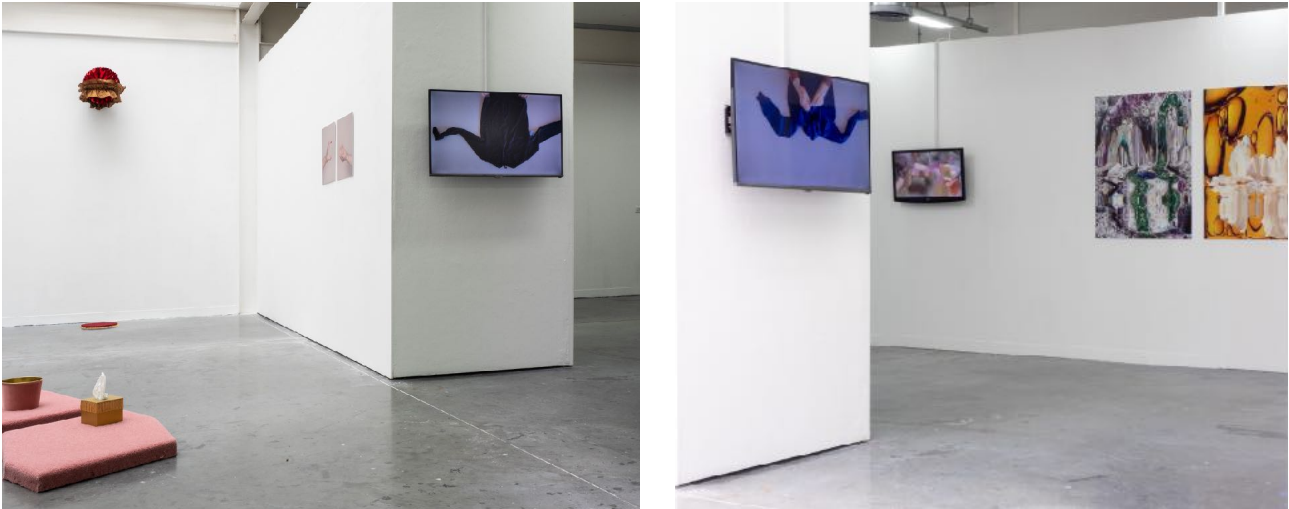
### **Viva Exhibition**

The themes explored in the preceding sections of this report underpin the work exhibited, but as observed in the introduction, the contradictions emerging as central concerns frequently overlap. The staging of the exhibition did not attempt to follow the same structure as the report, but embraced these intersecting, or converging, contradictions to build a sense of excess through an accumulation of objects, images, and video.

To accommodate the different requirements of specific works, the exhibition consisted of several spaces; a darkened space for projection, a day-lit space to emphasise the texture of the paper, and therefore the holes, in the prints of worn-out cardigans and walls high enough to place sculptures based on basketball hoops at the regulation



height, whilst maintaining spaces appropriate to the domestic, human scale of the work. Pieces were positioned throughout the spaces to increase a sense of repetition, to encourage a kind of circular or looping path, in subtle acknowledgement to the experience of retail design, where the exit points remain hidden.



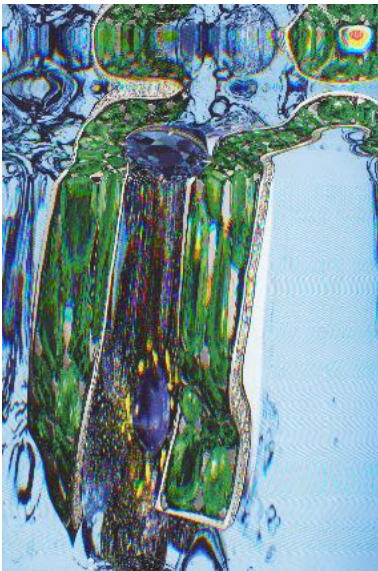
Figures 85, 86: Installation views, Viva Exhibition, UEL, 2021

### ***Curatorial Strategies***

The position of *(Un)Necessary Labours: II (The Cardigan Folder)* was central to resolving the placement of individual pieces within the three spaces.

Having shown an earlier version as a projection, I had decided a TV monitor would be more appropriate – holding an equivalent space to other wall-based work. At approximately 30 minutes long, and awkwardly positioned in a space where it might be slightly uncomfortable to stand for the duration, this repetition of a mundane chore could easily be overlooked, intentionally echoing the idea of women's labour being hidden in plain sight, whether in the retail or domestic environment. The sporadic ripples of applause, building rhythmically to a crescendo, were designed to reclaim the attention of the audience. Located roughly in the middle of the three spaces, it was easily accessible from anywhere in the exhibition.

In contrast, *(Un)Necessary Labours: I (The Bubble Maker)* was shown as a projection, commanding both space and attention, to encourage the audience to witness the duration of this labour. An awkward and somewhat disconnected space, which increased a sense of dislocation from the other, perhaps more public spaces. Labour hidden behind the scenes, rather than in plain sight.



Figures 87, 88: *Supersized Luxury Slippery Surface #06*  
*(Un)Necessary Labours I: The Bubble Maker* Installation view, Viva Exhibition, UEL, 2021

Echoing the repeated plunging activity of the bubble maker's colander, *Supersized Luxury Slippery Surface # 06* visually affirms the connection between the adjacent exhibition spaces, and the ideas explored.

### ***Supersized Luxury Slippery Surfaces***

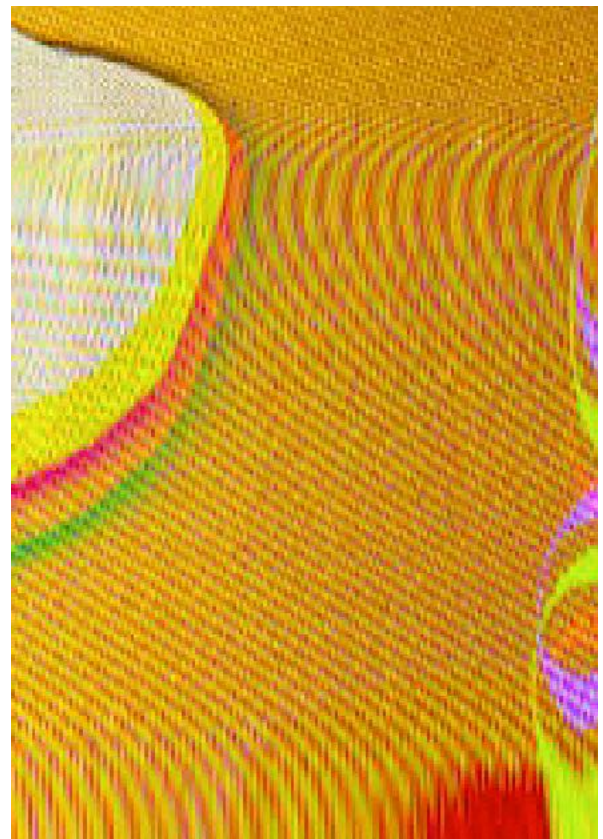
Chosen from several possible options, the *Supersized Luxury Slippery Surfaces* selected for exhibition focused on images that referenced the use of natural resources to make what might be considered to be unnecessary luxury goods.



Figure 89: Installation view, *Supersized Luxury Slippery Surfaces #01–#05* Viva Exhibition, UEL, 2021



Made during lockdown, when I could not conceive of any reason for making something material, these scans were not made with the intention of printing, so file sizes were therefore small. Choosing to print them at a larger scale, I increased the size of the files in a way that emphasised the pixels. This is the digital equivalent of the Ben-Day dot used in four colour separation, large-format poster printing, where the image appears to be a seamless, full colour photograph at a distance, but is revealed to be separate dots of cyan, magenta, yellow or black when viewed closely. Although this digital equivalent uses considerably more colours, the tension between the means of production and the illusion is the same. The illusion collapses and the glossy, seductive surfaces of consumerism are undermined.



Figures 90, 91: *Supersized Luxury Slippery Surface #02*  
*Supersized Luxury Slippery Surface #02 (close-up detail)* 2021

Interference patterns are created by dragging the printed material across the scanner bed, the trace of which is visible through the distorted edge of the magazine against the black void of the scanner 'space'. Advertising slogans, clearly visible as type, yet stretched beyond the point of legibility, reveal the action used to transform the source material, the performative gesture used in the process of transformation.

The titles reference the aggressive upselling strategies of fast food and draw attention to the dissolving, or 'slippery' fantasy of fashion advertising imagery.

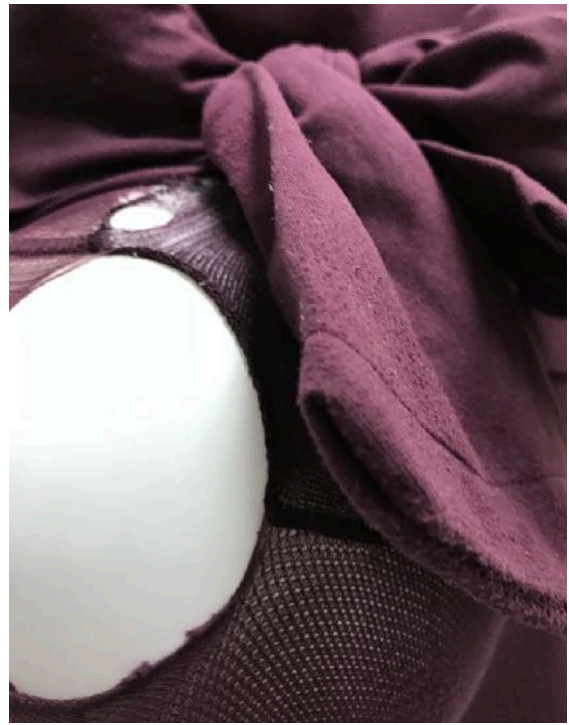
The trace or evidence of activity had been a longstanding interest in my printmaking practice, whether scans of used depilatory wax strips, plucked eyebrow hairs and dust balls or intaglio prints made from aluminium plates marked only by the environment. Objects and materials bearing the traces of wear, the evidence of neglect or ageing, such as the laddered tights and cardigans, or the scuffed and grubby gessoed panels (*Alien Ballsy*, Section 2: 28) continued this approach throughout the doctorate.



Figure 92: *Supersized Luxury Slippery Surface #06*  
(Un)Necessary Labours III: *The Bubble Maker* Installation view, Viva Exhibition, UEL, 2021

Displayed on a small, unassuming monitor in the same space, and operating as a kind of companion piece to the bubble maker, the never-ending downpour of *(Un)Necessary Labours: III (The Soap Rinser)* seems to emphasise the grotto, or cave-like qualities of the images. The lumps of worn-down soap evoke rocks or uncut gems, providing a connection to the precious stones, the froth and foam. An audible tension created by the very short loop echoes the visual tension in the images.





Figures 93, 94: *Yellow Token*, *Plum Token II* (Detail) Viva Exhibition, UEL, 2021

On other walls, the luxuriant feathers and strong colours of the wall-based token sculptures (*Yellow Token*, *Plum Token II*) contrast with the worn-out tights and deflating balloons, as does the rich scarlet, satin cord with the forlorn feather boa of *Celebrity Hoo-ha*. The space is suggestive of aspiration, and an opulence built on a rapacious use of the world's resources, undermined by the abject qualities of materials or the exposure of the process.

### ***The White Cube and the Retail Space***

The influence of minimalist sculpture on interior design has seen the aesthetic of the white cube gallery space frequently co-opted by high-end retail. As so many of the former are commercial galleries, the function of these spaces is often similar. It seemed appropriate to display work concerned with consumerism in a space that draws on the common purpose and aesthetic signifiers of art galleries and retail. This is specifically explored through the sculptures *Eternal Chore Undone* and *Trainer Totem*. (Figures 95, 96).

Playing on the use of plinths to display trainers, to elevate value or status, also provokes a further conflation; the gallery or museum space seen as a non-secular equivalent to a church or chapel. Daniel Miller's reference to shopping as sacrifice ties in with the idea of the shopping mall as a temple of consumerism, a '*Cathedral of*



Figures 95, 96: Installation views; *Eternal Chore Undone*, *Carpet Face*, *Trainer Totem*, *Royal Hoopla*, Viva Exhibition, UEL, 2021

*Commerce*, as the Woolworth Building in New York was known. The natural light of the atrium space quietly underpinned this allusion, revealing the aspiration of *Royal Hoopla* to be less than spectacular. Mirroring the placement of *Celebrity Hoo-ha* in the space adjacent, *Royal Hoopla* was similarly out of reach, but positioned to draw on the conceptual, aesthetic and material relationships between the carpet-covered floor-based sculpture *Waste Products (Platforms 1 & 2)* and a pair of *Stock Hands Product Shots*. (Figures 97, 98)

The clean, white interior of the white cube gallery space, as described by David Batchelor in *Chromophobia* (2000) and discussed earlier in this report (Section 1: 18) suggests asceticism, an austere, disciplined denial of the messiness of the body – a messiness particularly pertinent to *Waste Products (Platforms 1 & 2)*.



Figures 97, 98: Installation views  
*Royal Hoopla*, *Stock Hands Product Shots* and *Waste Products (Platforms 1 & 2)*  
*Plum Token II*, *Yellow Token* and *Celebrity Hoo-ha*, Viva Exhibition, UEL, 2021



Like the *Stock Hands Product Shots*, the implied abjection stops short of provoking a visceral disgust in the audience, aiming instead to play on the tension between politeness and awkwardness, and to seek humour in absurdity.

All three pieces explore a space left empty, an awkward invitation. The platforms seem to invite participation but are slightly too small. The offered space is too cramped or too precarious for comfort and imagined participation becomes awkward or untenable. A space unsuitable for a full-grown adult.

### ***The Epic and the Domestic***

The work made is deliberately domestic in scale – initially as a pragmatic response to my working circumstances – but embraced to reaffirm the relationship to the mundane and every day. Concerned with predominantly female pursuits, even the duration of the endless, looped repetition of the *(Un)Necessary Labours* seems resolutely non-epic. The labour of maintenance, whether grooming, housekeeping or the care of retail display is unlikely to be seen as noble or courageous, corresponding instead to the view outlined by Ursula K. Le Guin in her 1986 essay *The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction* (2019). Expanding on the anthropologist Elizabeth Fisher's contention that a bag, rather than a weapon, was probably the first human tool (1979) Le Guin argues that the novel is the container of the stories of people, not tales of the heroic in which women rarely fit.

# Professional Practice

## Joint Exhibitions

2020, ***Between Walls***, Safehouse 1 & 2, Peckham, London

*Co-organised and curated with Ali Darke*

2020, ***Policy Making***, Beecroft Gallery, Southend-on-Sea

2019, ***Research Space***, Way Out East, University of East London

*Co-organised and curated with Paul Greenleaf*

2019, ***East London Artists***, Annual Doctorate Showcase, University of East London

2019, ***MARCH***, The Brentwood Road Gallery, Frances Bardsley Academy, London

2018, ***East London Artists***, Annual Doctorate Showcase, University of East London

2017, ***Open Event***, Havering College of Further & Higher Education, London

2017, ***East London Artists***, Annual Doctorate Showcase, University of East London

## Publications

2021, *An Hour*, ***JAWS*** (Journal of Arts Writing by Students) Issue 5:3

2020, ***Crossing Conceptual Boundaries***, Volume XI

## Residencies

2020, ***Swifts***, Online, Virtual Artist Residency

2019, ***Summer Lodge***, Nottingham Trent University, Artist Residency

## Conferences / Presentations

2021, ***Cultural Manoeuvres***, University of East London, Online

*Organised and participated in panel discussion - Virtually (Im)Possible II*

2020, ***Research is Open***, University of East London, Online

*Organised and participated in panel discussion - Virtually (Im)Possible*

2020, ***Speaking from the Margins***, University of East London, Stratford Campus

*Presented (Un)Necessary Labours: I*

## Teaching

2016 - 2018, Senior Lecturer (0.6) Havering College of Further & Higher Education

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[www.suewithers.org](http://www.suewithers.org)

Over the last four years, the doctorate programme has enabled me to navigate the transition from full time educator, and return to working full time as an artist. Having spent nearly twenty years working in Further & Higher education, when changing circumstances allowed me to reduce my teaching hours and responsibilities, I was eager to take the opportunity to review and reinvigorate my practice.

The structure and regular deadlines of the first year succeeded as anticipated. Having to be accountable outside of my paid employment, made making time for my own work an equal priority. I thoroughly enjoyed researching and writing the proposal, and felt like I was beginning to find an artist / academic voice that felt authentic.

The second year was more challenging. Repeated re-structuring at the college had increased the demands on lecturing staff, so maintaining equal priority for my own work became more difficult. In January 2018 I spent four rewarding days in Nottingham, helping a fellow artist/researcher install work at the Backlit gallery, and attend the accompanying symposium. It was great to be working on something practical, and to have my enthusiasm for installing exhibitions re-confirmed, despite the damp and the cold. Volunteering in this way helped to establish connections with the other artists involved in the project, and later led to two residencies (Appendix 2).

The development of my work shifted significantly in my third year, after an application for voluntary redundancy was eventually approved, and I was free to focus. My identity as an educator and as a manager, as someone who had a voice within an institution had dissipated. Despite feeling slightly adrift, it seemed essential to allow myself the time and space to enjoy this period of uncertainty, and allow new opportunities to emerge. Midway through the doctorate, I was both reviewing the past and looking to the future, as I adjusted from ten years of working full time. I resisted the compulsion to seek new employment, aiming instead, to explore what could be done to establish a practice which could be sustained beyond the doctorate.

In March 2019, I was invited to participate in a group show at the Brentwood Road gallery, to celebrate Women's History month (Appendix 4). Although the exhibition was not expected to be an opportunity to sell work, there was some interest expressed in one of my prints, *(W)hole: Can Can Cyan*. I found this encouraging, and began to consider other, more viable commercial opportunities as a result. Having researched London based art fairs, I had hoped to show at The Other Art Fair in 2020, but delayed this plan due to the restrictions of the pandemic.

In addition, positive feedback from supervisors and a range of visitors to the Doctorate Showcase (2019), prompted an increasingly proactive, and more visibly productive phase. Completing a ten day *Summer Lodge* residency in Nottingham in July 2019 increased my confidence, resulted in establishing stimulating and constructive connections and led to a new body of work (Appendix 2). It also reminded me that working within a short time frame has the capacity to stimulate productivity, so when the only opportunity to show in the *Way Out East* space was within three weeks, we eagerly accepted. Organising, publicising, making new work and installing the *Research Space* exhibition was very beneficial; especially, as it turned out to be the last opportunity to exhibit for some time (Appendix 4).

Having resolved to accept every opportunity available, I showed *(Un)Necessary Labours: I at Speaking from the Margins*, the UEL Winter Conference (Appendix 3). I had not previously considered the possibility of showing art work in the context of a conference, but realising these open calls now featured regularly in opportunities listings, I was determined to submit to the UEL version. It was an interesting experience, resulting in productive connections made with other researchers. Considering the impact the context had on the work was useful, as when viewed as a screening, rather than in a gallery, the audience is obliged to witness the labour. Receiving feedback from a non art world audience was encouraging, and provided valuable insight into which aspects of the work resonated. Although not presenting, I also attended *Play with Purpose* at Luton School of Art & Design in March, to support peers, network and gain a better understanding of what such events might include; having previously only contributed to conferences concerned with pedagogy.

When it became apparent that there would be no showcase at the end of my fourth year, I found it hard to articulate the way in which the pandemic and the experience of lockdown had permeated every aspect of my work and my life. I needed to analyse what seemed to have been lost, so together with other members of the doctoral cohort, started to discuss what the lack of an exhibition meant. Building on the idea explored in the *Research Space* show, that exhibiting was research activity, I co-ordinated and organised a submission for a panel discussion at the UEL Summer Conference, *Research is Open* (Appendix 3). Aiming to consider the material losses and virtual gains of the online exhibition, *Virtually (Im)possible* was the beginning of a 'conversation' which would continue throughout my final year.

Motivated by this discussion, and two other presentations from the conference, a fellow artist/researcher was determined to exhibit in real space again. Having identified a space we could hire, she invited me to co-organise and curate *Between Walls* (Appendix 4). Planning and publicising an exhibition in such uncertain circumstances was strange, but rewarding. As it would only be open for four days, our initial plans had included a series of events; presentations of papers, discussions between participating artists, performances and readings, with which we hoped to increase our audience. Unfortunately, it quickly became clear that we would need to restrict, rather than increase, the numbers visiting, so we considered whether any of our proposals could be broadcast or made accessible online by other means. Although unachievable on this occasion, it did expand the possibilities for future events.

In August 2020 I was invited to participate in *Swifts: A Virtual Residency* (Appendix 2). Focused on developing art practice through a supportive communal structure, this intensive 3-day residency brought the participants 'together' via online platforms for conversations, thinking and listening, while working independently within our individual studios. It was a carefully structured experience, which aimed to work with the spirit of Nancy Kline's 'Thinking Environment'. We met three times a day, with a clear, but subtly different intention for each meeting. A brief, reflective text and an image charted each artists progress on the daily blog hosted by a-n (The Artists Information Company). Whilst I had no firm expectations, I was still surprised by how such a short residency could be so productive, stimulating and enriching.

With further attempts to exhibit thwarted by more lockdown restrictions, another period of intense production and reflection was provoked by deadlines for presentations, written reports and opportunities to publish. A call out for reviews of books or exhibitions from JAWS (Journal of Arts Writing by Students) provided the motivation to finally submit some writing for publication. A review seemed achievable, and writing about an artwork which did not appear compromised by being experienced online felt relevant to my own anxieties about the loss of the material world (Appendix 1).

An invitation to propose a session for Cultural Manoeuvres, (a UEL programme of presentations by practitioners) provided an opportunity to extend the discussion put forward by the *Virtually (Im)possible* panel. I was keen to examine the particular problems of working with sculpture and installation, through conversation with another artist/researcher. Unsure whether he could be available on the day, we decided to pre-record

our contribution. I had little experience of working with audio, so editing the results of several conversations with images of our work to create a 10 minute video, was pushing the limits of my knowledge (Appendix 3).

Although many of my plans were frustrated by the pandemic, the shift to life online brought unexpected opportunities. No longer limited by geography, some forms of collaboration or participation have become more accessible. As I continue to readjust to what might be the longer term future, I'm still processing what, and how, I need to adapt. If work will be more frequently experienced online, then this will change, to some extent, what is shown.



## Summary

Developing my practice within the supportive, yet challenging, structure of the doctorate programme has encouraged me to manifest ideas through sculpture, video and photography, alongside the more familiar territory of printmaking. Functioning in a way that was similar to my experience of living in Rome; it has enabled me to find a creative, psychological space not governed by internal rules or societal expectations.

Explaining the influence of Karl Marx's theories on her work, Mika Rottenberg said: *'I was attracted to the poetic way he describes a person producing an object, as this relationship between a subject and the external world. Marx's definition of labor is a process between a person and nature.'* (Hudson, 2010)

I found Rottenberg's approach both exciting and liberating; prompting me to engage with the words of theorists and critics as stimulation for creativity, as much as to provide a theoretical framework. While I enjoy the discipline of writing, and the insight gained through written reflection and analysis, I value the process of making to reveal connections not yet consciously realised.

In 'A Theory of Shopping' (2009) Daniel Miller insists: *'Commodities do not have meaning, in that neither relationships nor identity are a form of language. Rather they are meaningful — they come to matter as means for constituting people that matter'* (Miller, 1998: 152)

Assembling combinations of found objects and leaving space for the audience to imagine their own participation, can be seen perhaps, as a way of constituting these 'people that matter'. Many of the themes I explore have been inspired by the concerns, choices or interests of the women in my family. So some pieces have become both a way of conjuring those individuals, and a means to consider how societal expectations surrounding women's appearance is affected by age and class.

Photography and video have also become central to my practice as a means of documenting a 'performance', whether recording actual activity or setting up an arrangement of temporarily 'dressed' panels for the camera.

As my method of working with found materials and objects evolved, I recognised that the exhibition space was often my only opportunity to physically realise some sculptural ideas. Understanding the exhibition as a site of research — as necessary as the studio — has encouraged me to embrace the speculative or unsettled as productive. So whether aiming

to include a work which was not fully resolved in the studio, or working with materials which remain unpredictable despite extensive testing — such as balloons — the unforeseen becomes a catalyst for progress.

The installation of the work in response to a specific space, while not practice-defining, is as significant a part of my practice as the individual components; whether video, sculpture, prints or photographs. Articulating the space becomes a way to both discover new relationships between these separate elements, and to guide the experience of the audience.

The shift to virtual space during the pandemic seemed to conflict with this emerging sculptural practice which appeared to be dependent on the material world. However, by acknowledging the need to respond to a space, I was encouraged to view the various online platforms as individual spaces, each with its own character or architecture to address.

Although not a primary reason for developing work in a wider range of media, I am conscious that working in this way expands the opportunities available, and corresponds with my intention to build a practice which could be sustained beyond the doctorate. While the themes I explore will inevitably shift in the future, re-using found objects or cast-off materials in several different forms reduces both the amount of material consumed and the space required to store the work. For instance, one worn-out cardigan or laddered pair of tights can exist simultaneously in sculpture, photography and video.

Seeking an economy of form and driven by the (re)discovery of ‘found’ materials from my own archive rather than a uniform aesthetic, ideas are explored in parallel, often remaining in a state of ‘incompleteness’ until an approaching deadline prompts a ‘solution’. As it is not always possible, or appropriate, to act immediately upon the insight gained during this period, future work will focus on the areas of research described in the report, but not included in the Viva exhibition.

I had continued to research different methods of dispersing smell; impregnating the found materials used in sculptures and adapting plug-in air fresheners. As I searched for suppliers of ‘perfume’ oils smelling of bleach and other domestic cleaning products, I realised that my specific interest was to evoke smells of the chemicals used in grooming practices; nail polish, nail glue and the acetone of polish remover, the ammonia in hair dye or the acrid scent of fake tan.

I am as excited by sculptures where the smell is a byproduct of the materials used, such as Helen Chadwick's tower of rotting waste (*Carcass*, 1986) and chocolate fountain (*Cacao*, 1994) or the metallic trace of the iron filings in Mona Hatoum's *Socle du Monde* (1992–93) as by installations where the smell has been specifically created. Recent examples of the latter include Michael Pinsky's *Pollution Pods* (2018) which emulate the pollution of London, New Delhi, San Paolo and Beijing, and Anicka Yi's changing scentscapes in her Tate Modern installation *In Love with the World* (2021).

Fascinated by the connotations of using perfume to mask the odour of the body and the psychological power of smell to conjure the memory of people or places, I aim to explore the potential of the olfactory sense to undermine or underpin what can be seen or heard, and to draw or repel the attention of the audience.

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## **Links to Artwork**

*(Un)Necessary Labours I: The Bubble Maker* [video] Available at: <https://vimeo.com/391467043>

*(Un)Necessary Labours II The Cardigan Folder* [video] Available at: <https://vimeo.com/475430770>

*(Un)Necessary Labours II: The Cardigan Folder (Soundtrack Test)* [video] Available at: <https://vimeo.com/402549809>

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- Crossing Conceptual Boundaries. Volume XI (Cover image and accompanying text).

## Appendix 2: Residencies

- *Swifts; A Virtual Residency*. (Images and text published on a-n blog, link to a-n blog)
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## Appendix 1: Publications

# JAWS

(Journal of Arts Writing by Students) Issue 5:3. Exhibition Review

### An Hour

*An Hour* was an online performance by Alison Ballard and Martin Lewis on November 27, 2020. Hosted by Radar, at Loughborough University, it was commissioned to celebrate the launch of the Institute of Advanced Studies' programme focusing on time.

Aiming to reveal the tension between time as subjective experience and time as objectively measured, seven performers, or 'counters', attempt to accurately count time for an hour. Silently counting the seconds, marking the passing of each minute aloud. Time as lived, Henri Bergson's 'real duration' (*durée réelle*) is exposed, in contrast to mathematical time as determined by calendars, clocks or timetables. The task requires the full attention of the performers. While it may be difficult, and possibly more demanding for those performers switching between first and second languages, it is a period of intense focus, rather than a test of endurance.



Figure 99: Alison Ballard & Martin Lewis (2020) *An Hour* ©AlisonBallard

We are in a video meeting. The visual environment is familiar. On the screen of my laptop seven rectangles form a symmetrical but incomplete grid. The performers are the only participants with their cameras on. One performer's count seems uncannily accurate. I know this because the clock of my laptop is visible. Another is incredibly slow. At one point

almost eleven whole ‘minutes’ behind the first. In solidarity with the performers, I enter full screen mode, obscuring the clock from view.

For a moment, some counters seem to slip into a synchronized rhythm, where the length of a minute seems mutually agreed. Voices almost overlapping, I begin to recognise the sound of individual counters. Not just their voices, but also the quality of their audio. A deep, resonant baritone from one, a slight echo from another. A discordant choir divided over the number of minutes passed.

The relationship between performer and audience is perhaps less evenly balanced than if we were experiencing the performance in a shared physical space. With cameras off and mics muted, there is no immediate feedback from the audience for either performers or the artists. None of the performers has used a virtual background, so this invitation into someone’s space is not reciprocal.

The quality of silence is different online, prompting me to imagine the experience taking place in the material world. The audible presence of bodies settling, preparing for the performance to begin. The effort to maintain an appropriate silence, where every rustling movement seems to be amplified. The stifled cough, or the perceptible shift of focus when the attention of the audience is no longer held. We are invisible and silent in this shared virtual space, giving no indication of whether we are fully participating.

Escaping full screen, I check the clock.

I sympathise with the performer who seemed to be counting so accurately, whose pace has now increased. Does this eagerness to complete the task indicate fatigue or a need to end the scrutiny of others?

Poetic and prosaic, an ephemeral memorial for each minute passed. Recalling the marking of others passing, this counting aloud seems analogous to reading aloud the names of those who died during disaster or atrocity. The solemn discipline and concentration of the performers evokes the memory of the inscriptions on the walls of the Pinkas Synagogue in Prague. A record of the 78,000 Bohemian and Moravian holocaust victims and designed by Czech artists Václav Boštík and Jiří John, each name and date is meticulously hand painted. Visible evidence of time spent, as a means to honour the dead.

Ballard and Lewis have often collaborated, and in 2015, they won the main prize at the Nottingham Castle Open for their work *Wasted Labour. An Hour* skilfully combines Lewis’

interest in repetition and duration, and Ballard's exploration of what it means to be present, to experience something in real time.

At a time when artists are wrestling with the implications of restricted opportunities to exhibit, and we are all occupying online space more frequently, this performance utilizes the architecture of an increasingly familiar online space without compromise and offers the audience a space of quiet contemplation. While lockdown restrictions might have subdued the sound and pace of the world outside, our online spaces seem busier, more demanding, and so to experience intentional silence during a video call seems rare.

The audible, inconsistent marking of time passing creates the sense of an expanded or continuous present. A sustained period of being 'in the moment'. Bergson used the analogy of listening to music to explain duration. He argued against viewing the passage of time as linear, proposing instead a fusion of past and present where '*the whole produces on us the effect of a musical phrase which is constantly on the point of ending and constantly altered in its totality by the addition of some new note*'. The past progressing into the present, moments which '*melt into and permeate one another*'. (Bergson, 1913: 106)

Later, I learn from Ballard that the potential to be seen as characters, as if in a soap-opera, was the aspect the performers found most unsettling. Early screen tests and iterations of the performance focused entirely on the subjective experience of the counter. An artwork for one, a single person performance shared only with the artists recording the event. In this version, it is the audience member whose experience is solitary.

Like many, I feel that my relationship with time has changed since the first UK lockdown. Simultaneously stretching out endlessly with little to differentiate the days and racing at implausible speed towards an increasingly uncertain future. As a field of study, the perception of time encompasses cognitive linguistics, psychology and neuroscience, and our own subjective experience can be affected by numerous physiological, environmental or psychological factors. Anxiety, boredom, depression and fear can all have an impact, and partially explain why the pandemic has shifted our perception of time. Video conferencing from the same surroundings can mean that all experiences start to blur into one, but an hour spent witnessing other people attempt to count the minutes felt both pertinent and significant.

Bergson, H. (1913). *Time and Free Will*. London: George Allen & Company Ltd

# Crossing Conceptual Boundaries

PhD Annual Yearbook New Series Volume XI Winter 2021, Cover image

A peer-reviewed graduate publication. School of Social Sciences, UEL, UK

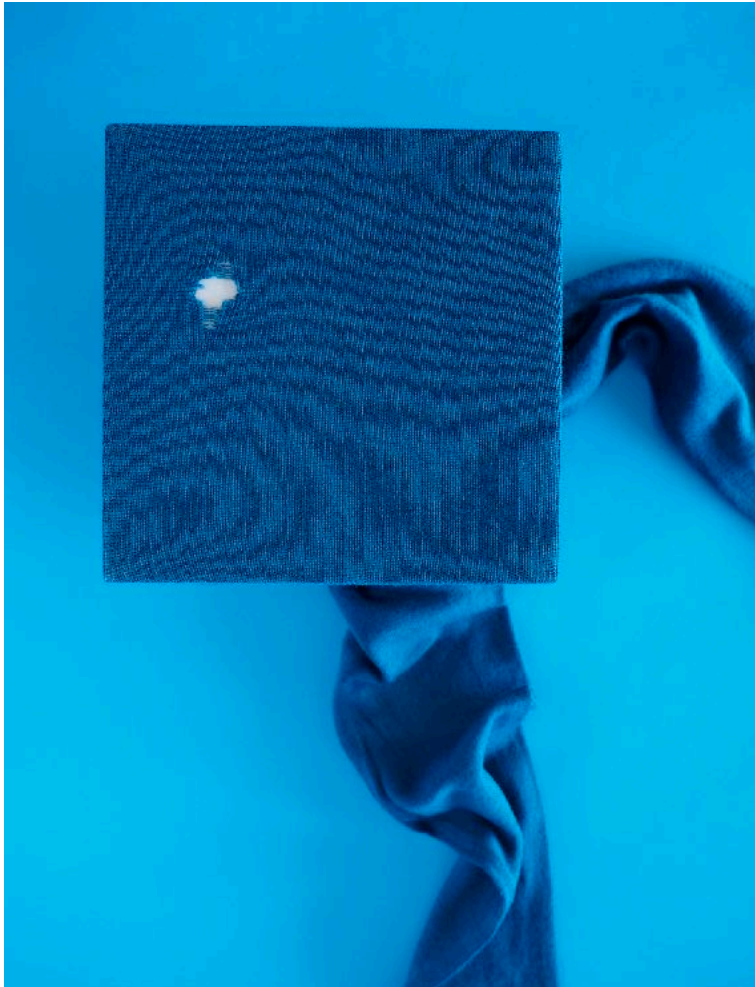


Figure 100: Sue Withers *(W)hole: Can Can Cyan*, 2019

## *About the cover image*

Influenced by fashion photography, the Japanese aesthetic of wabi-sabi and practice of Kintsugi these images were intended to celebrate imperfection and value the evidence of wear and ageing. The panels are supported by tin cans, the cardigans and tights are stretched out using pegs, much like tape, pegs and pins are used to arrange the garment on a model. In some images, the pegs have been left clearly visible, as means of revealing their means of production. Seeking a composition which hovers between minimal abstraction and a kind of humorous, forlorn or erotic anthropomorphism, some seem reminiscent of Roger Hargreaves illustrations of the Mr Men, while others echo the scene in *The Piano* (Jane Campion, 1993)

where Bains is bewitched by the hole in Ada's stocking. Stretched and exposed in order to be examined, the contrast between the solid geometric structure and the yielding, less substantial forms of the worn-out tights or cardigans, draws attention to the unravelling holes and ladders. Although shabby and threadbare, they are clean and freshly laundered, partly in tribute to my mum and working-class aspirations of respectability, but also as an attempt to elicit humour from this absurdity, rather than disgust. In the words of photographer Corinne Day, 'It is all about freedom, really, and being proud of the holes in your jumper'.

## Appendix 2: Residencies

# Swifts: A Virtual Residency

Online, August 2020

[Link to a-n blog](#) (Chambers, 2020)

Virtual Art Residency with Louisa Chambers, Victoria Lucas, Danica Maier, Olivia Penrose Punnett, Lucy Renton, Sue Withers



Figure 101: Sue Withers, Sculpture test

### DAY 1

Thinking about bubbles, bobbles, balls and balloons, searching for the unanticipated, the ridiculous or extraordinary amongst the familiar and commonplace.

I'm enjoying the tension between the inflated, the deflated and the gravitational pull of sand filled balloons, but need to play more with scale to find something unexpected. The udder-like sand filled forms seem too polite, and need to be more pendulous, more extreme.

I had been planning to work with some furry hats, but instead came across a collection of bobble hats. The combination of the woolly bobbles protruding from both the top and underside of the seat, the hats 'worn' by balloons seem more satisfyingly incongruous, so some progress, perhaps.

Later, I finally taught myself to blow a bubble-gum bubble, first in the conventional way, then using a balloon pump. Time well spent!

### DAY 2

Thinking about things that are worn out, frayed, tired or deflated, the mesmerising iridescence of bubbles and the shiny, sometimes trashy, glamour of foil.

Reclaiming the studio from the accumulated clutter, I found gorgeous, glittery marbles, many deflated balloons, a bag of hardened giant marshmallows, a box of dried tangerine peels, each carefully removed to remain whole - curling and petal-like.





Figure 102: Sue Withers, Sculpture test, 2020

on order, but plan to try some other materials tomorrow. More constructive playing with bobble hats, balloons, and Birkenstocks in socks. Finally, a pair of tired, deflated and dirty balloons and sparkling marbles in a soap dish.

Rediscovered a selection of desiccated fruit and vegetables including one apple, two blackened bananas and a divided red cabbage. Having used fresh oranges and butternut squash in earlier work, I wanted to explore something rotten or decomposing, so now need to consider all three states.

Tested a pleated kitchen foil 'collar' on a basketball hoop, but rather than spectacular and aspirational, it seems too domestic. It maybe more successful with the chrome hoop



Figure 103: Sue Withers, Sculpture test, 2020

glamour of the Met Gala. Seeking elements of the natural world, I planted some cuttings, one in a balloon, one through the hole in a stool. Fingers crossed, hoping for growth.

### DAY 3

Thinking about all the things I've been avoiding thinking about, and realising how necessary it is to just play with materials for a few days. A strategy to avoid over-thinking, a time for discovery.

This time spent with other artists has been a time to cherish. Many conversations revealing shared interests or concerns, and provoking new possibilities. As the world outside begins to intrude, I struggle to articulate how much I needed this time.

Prolonging the playfulness for a while longer, a basketball hoop bedecked with a once luxuriant feather boa. The pleated foil 'collar' is more promising with the chrome hoop, although perhaps leans too far towards a budget 1970's sci-fi aesthetic, than the



# Summer Lodge

Nottingham Trent University, July 2019

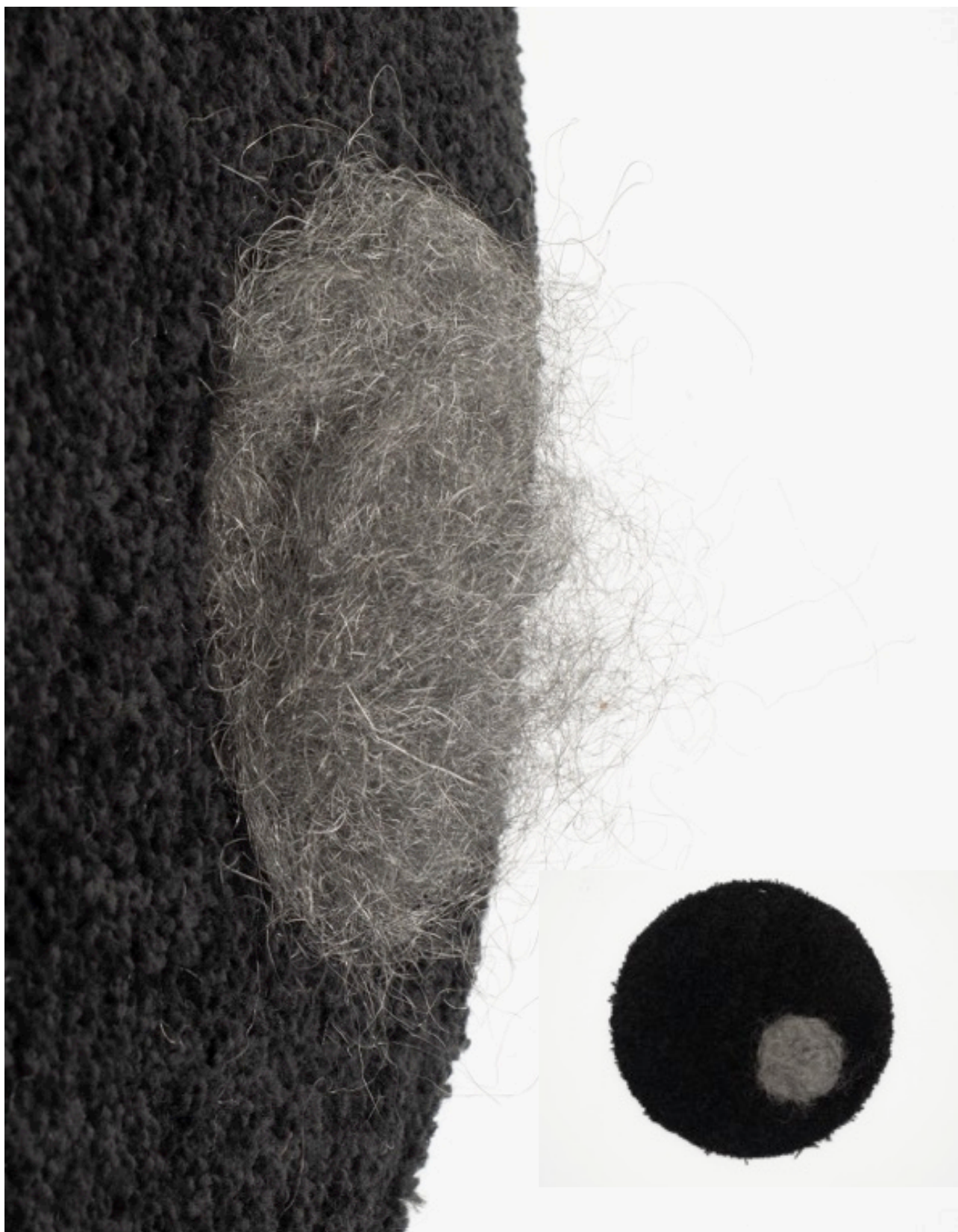
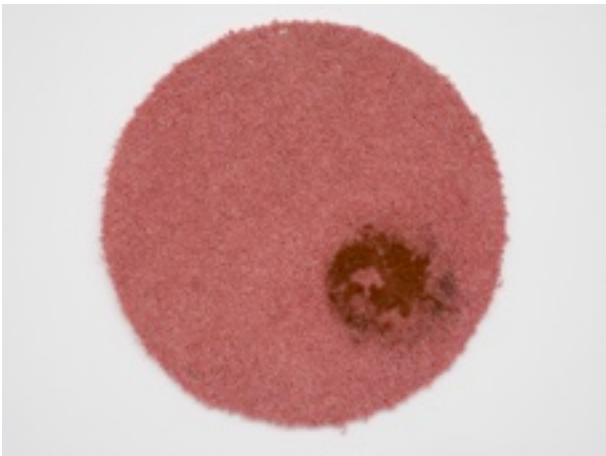


Figure 104: Sue Withers, Sculpture test; Carpet Circles. 2019



Figures 105-110: Sue Withers, Sculpture tests; Carpet Circles and Platforms. 2019



## Appendix 3: Conferences / Presentations

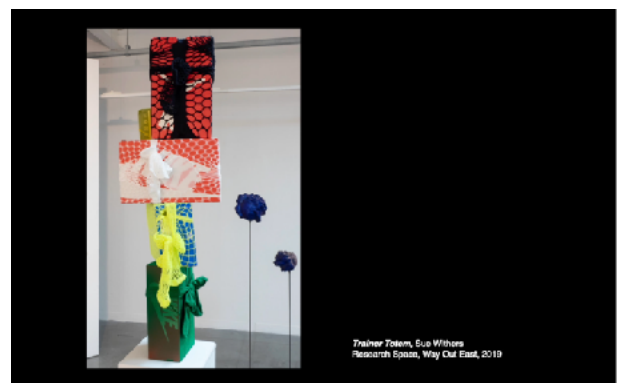
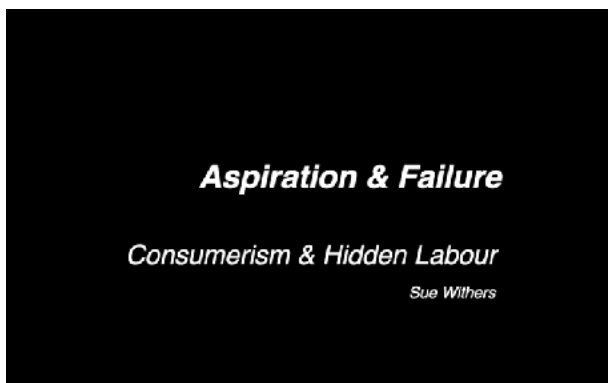
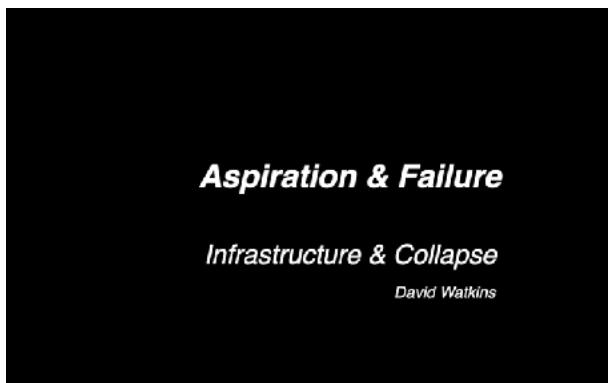
# Cultural Manoeuvres

A panel discussion, University of East London, Online, February 2021,

Link to [recorded broadcast](#) (Darke et al, 2021)

Link to [video](#). (Watkins and Withers, 2021)

*Aspiration & Failure*; a discussion between David Watkins and Sue Withers



Figures 111-116: Sue Withers & David Watkins (Video stills) 2020

# Research is Open

'Think Aloud' panel discussion, University of East London, Online, July 2020,

UEL RESEARCH CONFERENCE



**RESEARCH IS OPEN**

09.00-18.30 THE VIRTUAL COFFEE ROOM: SMALL TALK, TECH SUPPORT, AND NETWORKING SPACE

09.30-11.00 OPENING REMARKS AND KEYNOTE

11.00-12.00 UNDERSTANDING C-19 I

11.00-12.00 ADVANCES IN STEM I

11.00-12.30 THE UNDERGRADUATE EXPERIENCE

11.00-12.30 WELLBEING AND MENTAL HEALTH

11.00-12.30 GLOBAL CHALLENGES: CONNECTING CONTEXTS

12.00-13.30 STAMP WORKSHOP PART 1

12.00-13.30 MUSIC AND PERFORMANCE

12.00-13.30 PROFESSIONS AND RESPONSIBILITIES

12.30-13.30 THINK ALOUD: INTERVENTIONS IN CRIMINAL EXPLOITATION AND YOUTH CRIME

12.30-14.00 SUSTAINABILITY AND DEVELOPMENT

13.30-14.30 THINK ALOUD: RACE, IDENTITY AND INCLUSION

14.00-15.00 CREATIVE JOURNALISM AND THE TRAGIC IMAGINATION

13.30-15.00 IDENTITIES AND REPRESENTATION

14.00-15.30 STAMP WORKSHOP PART 2

14.00-15.30 GLOBAL CHALLENGES: CREATIVE APPROACHES IN TIMES OF CRISIS

14.30-15.30 THINK ALOUD: VIRTUALLY (IM)POSSIBLE

14.30-15.30 THINK ALOUD: DEVELOPING A MINDFUL COMMUNITY AT UEL AND BEYOND

## THINK ALOUD: VIRTUALLY (IM)POSSIBLE — THE MATERIAL LOSSES AND VIRTUAL GAINS OF THE ONLINE 'EXHIBITION'. (14.30- 15.30)

**Facilitator: Karen Raney**

Sue Withers, Ali Darke, Andrew Moller, Christian Groothuizen, David Watkins, Paul Greenleaf, Ralph Overill, Ruth Jones, William Bishop-Stevens

We would like to discuss the impact of moving to a virtual world on the material, or phenomenological, aspects of experiencing art. We will be considering the challenges faced by artists attempting to re-locate this experience of an exhibition; to explore what we could gain, and how we might mitigate what has been lost.

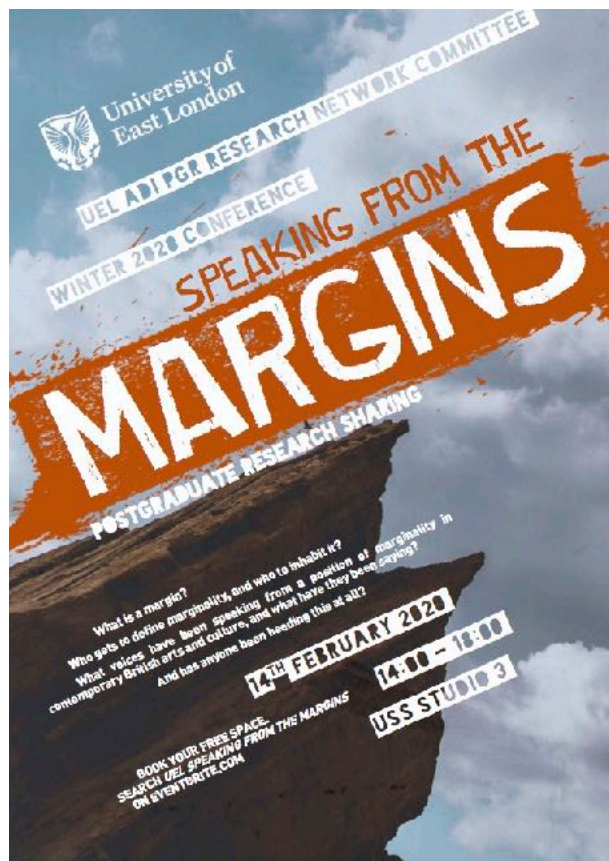
For researchers on the Professional Doctorate in Fine Art, the loss of the annual Doctorate Showcase could be seen as the equivalent of losing access to a laboratory.

For an artist, the exhibition is as significant a site for research as the studio. For those working with sculpture and installation, the exhibition might be the only opportunity for an idea to be realised physically. It is a point of evaluation, a moment to assess how effectively the work presented resonates with an audience.

Figure 117: Research Conference booklet, 2020

# Speaking From the Margins

Presentation, University of East London, Stratford, February 2019



## PANEL TWO:

### LANDSCAPE, LABOUR, LOSS: MARGINALITY AND MOVING IMAGE

#### Ralph Overill – *Projecting on the Margins*

Ralph presents his recent practical research involving the marginal landscapes that they have frequented: from daily commutes to wandering walks and skateboarding expeditions. Ralph's approach draws upon recent work by Mark Leckey and Mark Bradford as they explore projection – the presentation of an image on a surface/a mental image viewed as reality – as a tool to investigate the fears, imaginations and memories we superimpose onto these non-places. What monsters – imagined or remembered – flicker in the edges and borders of the landscape?

Ralph is a third year part-time student on the Professional Doctorate in Fine Art Course at UEL, with a research title of 'Monsters and Margins'. Ralph is a practising artist, associate editor of the Journal of Arts Writing by Students and works as a printmaking technician at Havering College.

#### Sue Withers - *(Un) Necessary Labours: The Bubble Maker*

*(Un) Necessary Labours: The Bubble Maker* is a 13-minute video which invites the viewer to consider the marginal, hidden nature of female labour. From the edge, her absurd attempt to fill the water with bubbles evokes labour of a less industrialised time or place. The drifting, dissipating bubbles suggest the cycle of accumulation and disposal, of grooming and housekeeping, where capitalism has positioned women as consumers of the world's resources to adorn, beautify and decorate. Previously exhibited as an endless loop of futile activity, the opportunity to show this in conference conditions compels the viewer to witness her labour.

An artist, curator and educator, Sue studied Fine Art in Leeds, and completed an MA at Wimbledon School of Art. Her practice includes printmaking, photography, video and sculpture which examines the construction of female identity through consumerism and the pursuit of perfection, acceptance or visibility through the acquisition of goods.

#### Paul Greenleaf - *I Will Become More Powerful Than You Can Possibly Imagine*

A film exploring the haunting legacy of the M11 link road that cuts through Leytonstone, East London. In 1994 the final evictions took place in Claremont Road ending a significant road protest campaign. Following the demolition of over 300 houses, the A12 (M11 Link) road opened to traffic in 1999. Taking its name from the protestors' slogan on the final house to be demolished, 'I Will Become More Powerful Than You Can Possibly Imagine' captures fragments of spectral radio transmissions featuring testimonies from former residents that continue to occupy the landscape.

Paul is an Audio/Visual artist, part-time lecturer in photography BA (Hons) UEL, and a 3rd Year (part-time) Doctoral Researcher in Fine Art at UEL. With his research proposal 'Illusory Truth and Atemporal Artefacts in Photographic and Audio/Visual Art', Paul is investigating the idea that we are living in a dislocated era, where knowledge and experience are remembered and envisioned at the same time. Paul works with pictures and sound artefacts that trigger memories of lost futures and are fated to outlive us.

Figure 118: Research Conference booklet, 2019

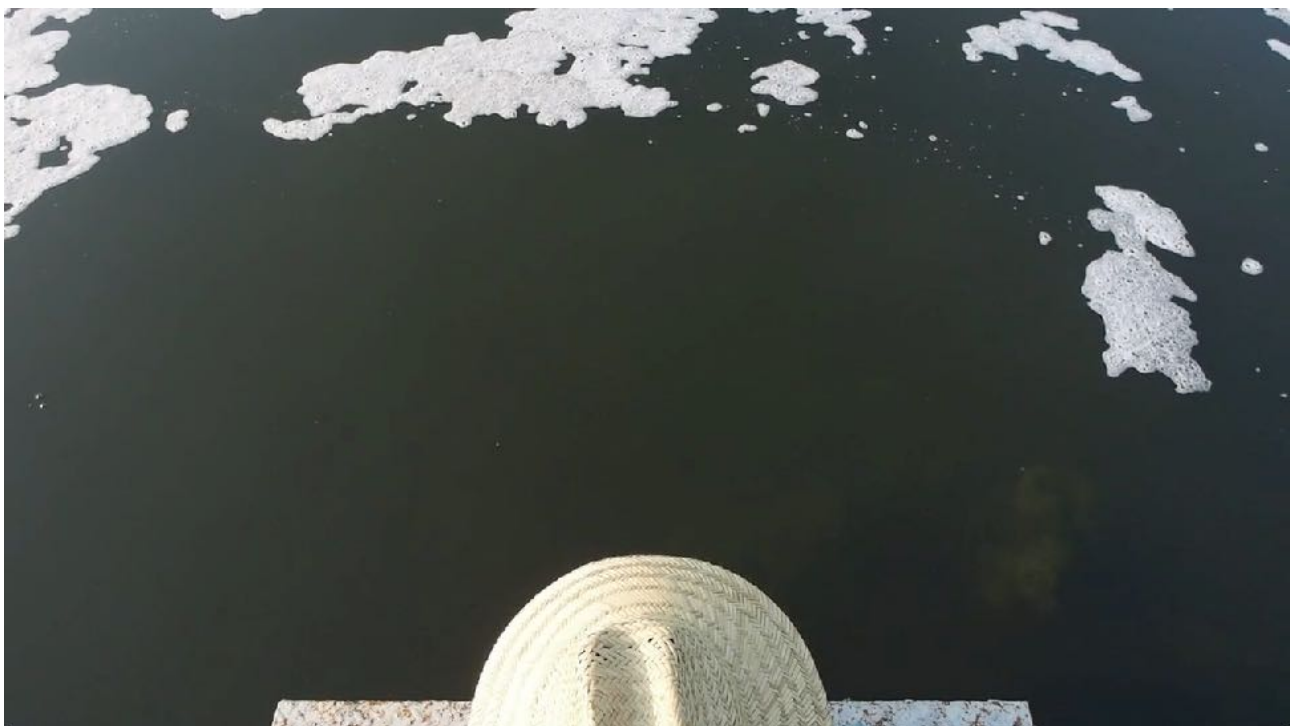


Figure 119: Sue Withers, *(Un)Necessary Labours I* (Video still) 2019



## Appendix 4: Exhibitions

# Groom / Consume / Repair

Viva Exhibition,  
University of East London, June 2021



Figure 120: Sue Withers, Installation view, Viva Exhibition, UEL, 2021





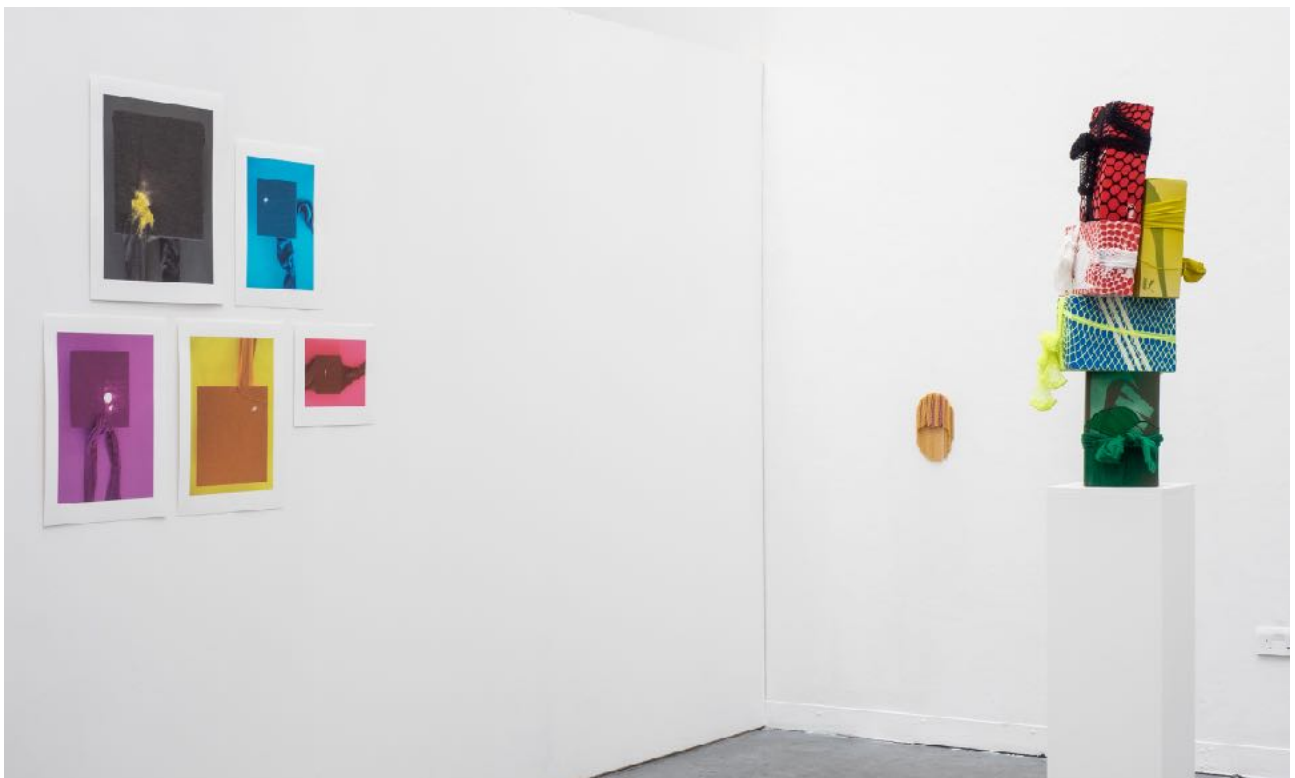
Figure 121: Sue Withers, Installation view, Viva Exhibition, UEL, 2021



Figure 122: Sue Withers, *(W)hole: Magenta Moonwalk*, *(W)hole: Overreaching Ochre* and *(W)hole: Flamingo Flip* (Inkjet on Somerset) Viva Exhibition, UEL, 2021



Figure 123: Sue Withers, *Eternal Chore Undone* (Detail) Viva Exhibition, UEL, 2021



Figures 124, 125: Sue Withers, Installation view, Viva Exhibition, UEL, 2021





Figures 124-126: Sue Withers, Installation view, *Carpet Face* and *Trainer Totem*  
Viva Exhibition, UEL, 2021



Figures 127,128: Sue Withers, *Royal Hoopla* (Details) Viva Exhibition, UEL, 2021





Figure 129: Sue Withers, Installation view, Viva Exhibition, UEL, 2021

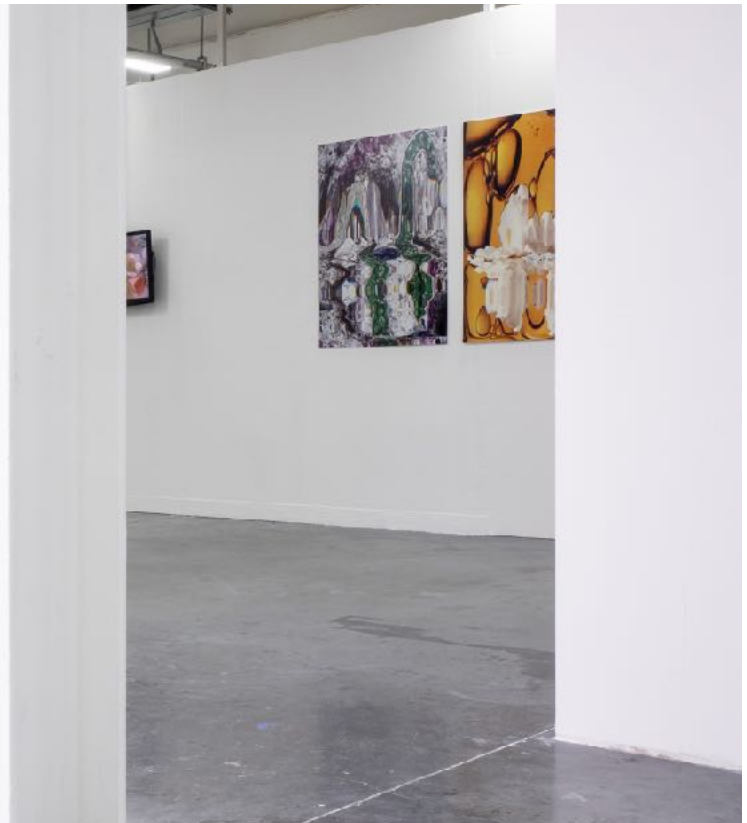




Figures 130,131: Sue Withers, *Stock Hands Product Shots #01 and #02*  
*Waste Products (Platforms 1 & 2)* Viva Exhibition, UEL, 2021



Figures 132, 133: Sue Withers, Installation view, Viva Exhibition, UEL, 2021  
*Waste Products (Platforms 1 & 2)*



Figures 134, 135: Sue Withers, Installation views, Viva Exhibition, UEL, 2021





Figures 136,137: *Plum Token II* and *Yellow Token* (Detail)  
Installation view, Viva Exhibition, UEL, 2021

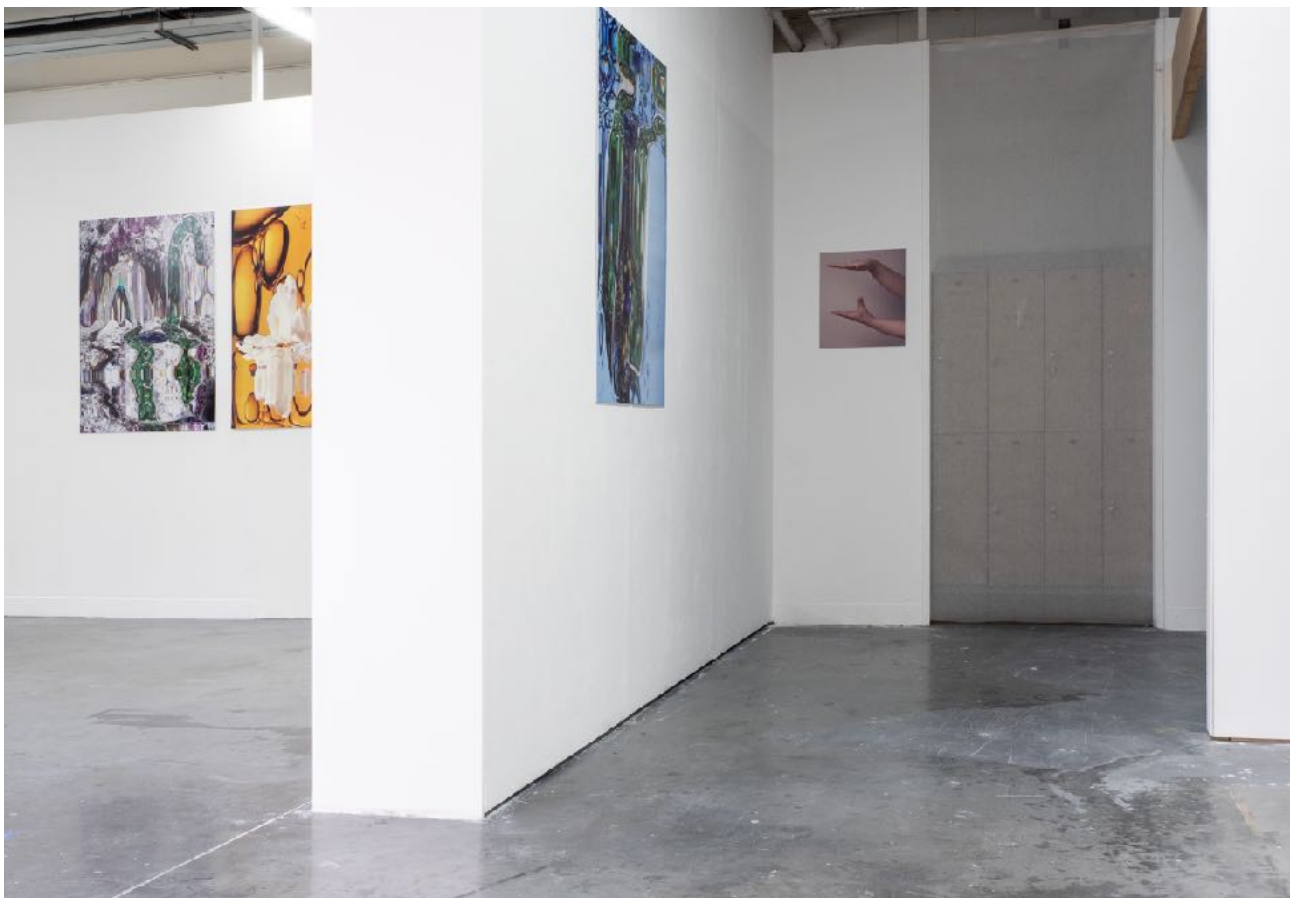


Figure 138: Sue Withers, *Plum Token II* (Detail), Viva Exhibition, UEL, 2021





Figure 139: Sue Withers, *Celebrity Hoo-ha*, Installation view, Viva Exhibition, UEL, 2021



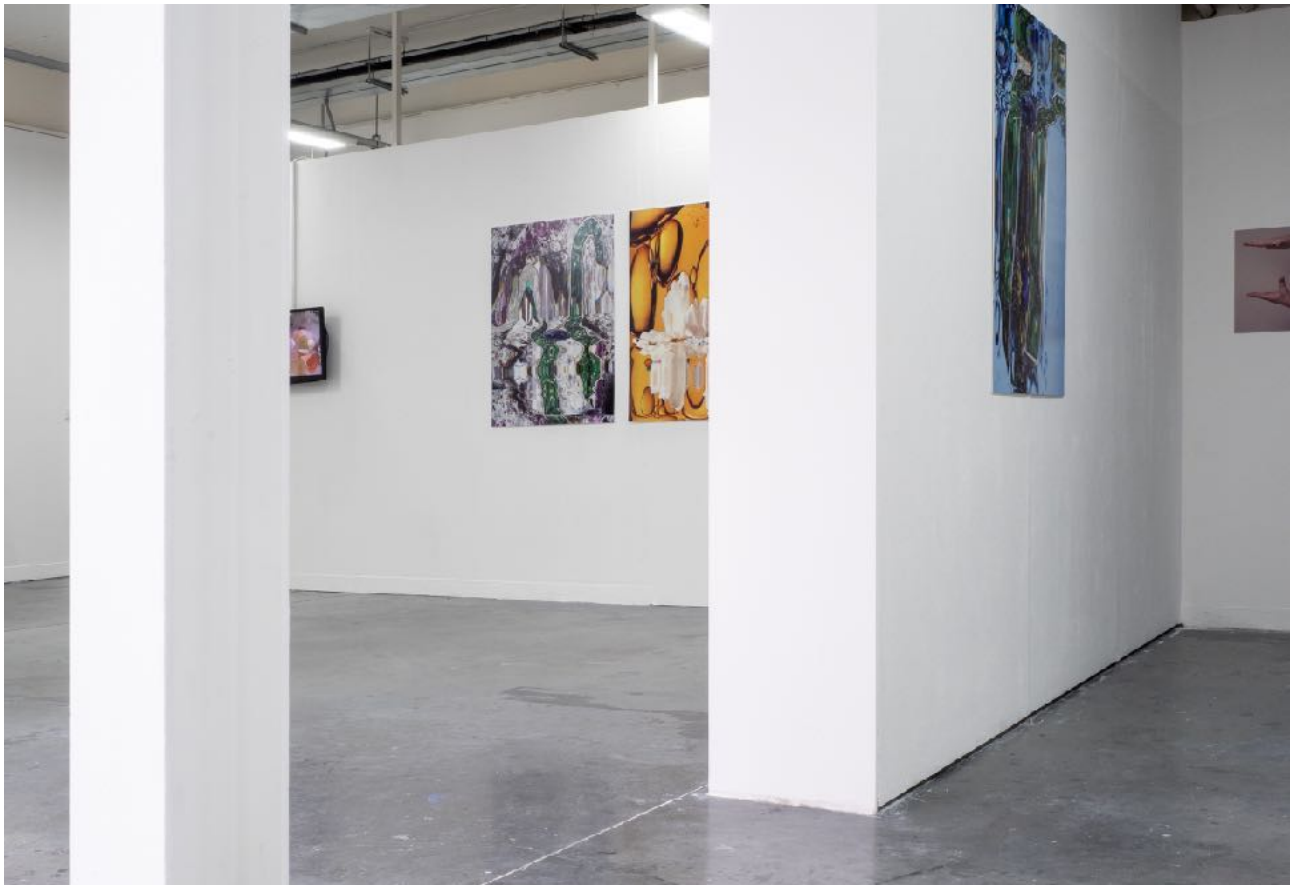
Figures 140, 141: Sue Withers, Installation views, Viva Exhibition, UEL, 2021



Figures 142, 143: Sue Withers, Installation views, Viva Exhibition, UEL, 2021



Figure 144: Sue Withers, Installation view, *(Un)Necessary Labours: I (The Bubble Maker)*  
Viva Exhibition, UEL, 2021



Figures 145, 146: Sue Withers, Installation views, Viva Exhibition, UEL, 2021





Figures 147, 148: Sue Withers, Installation views, Viva Exhibition, UEL, 2021





Figure 149: Sue Withers, Installation view, Viva Exhibition, UEL, 2021

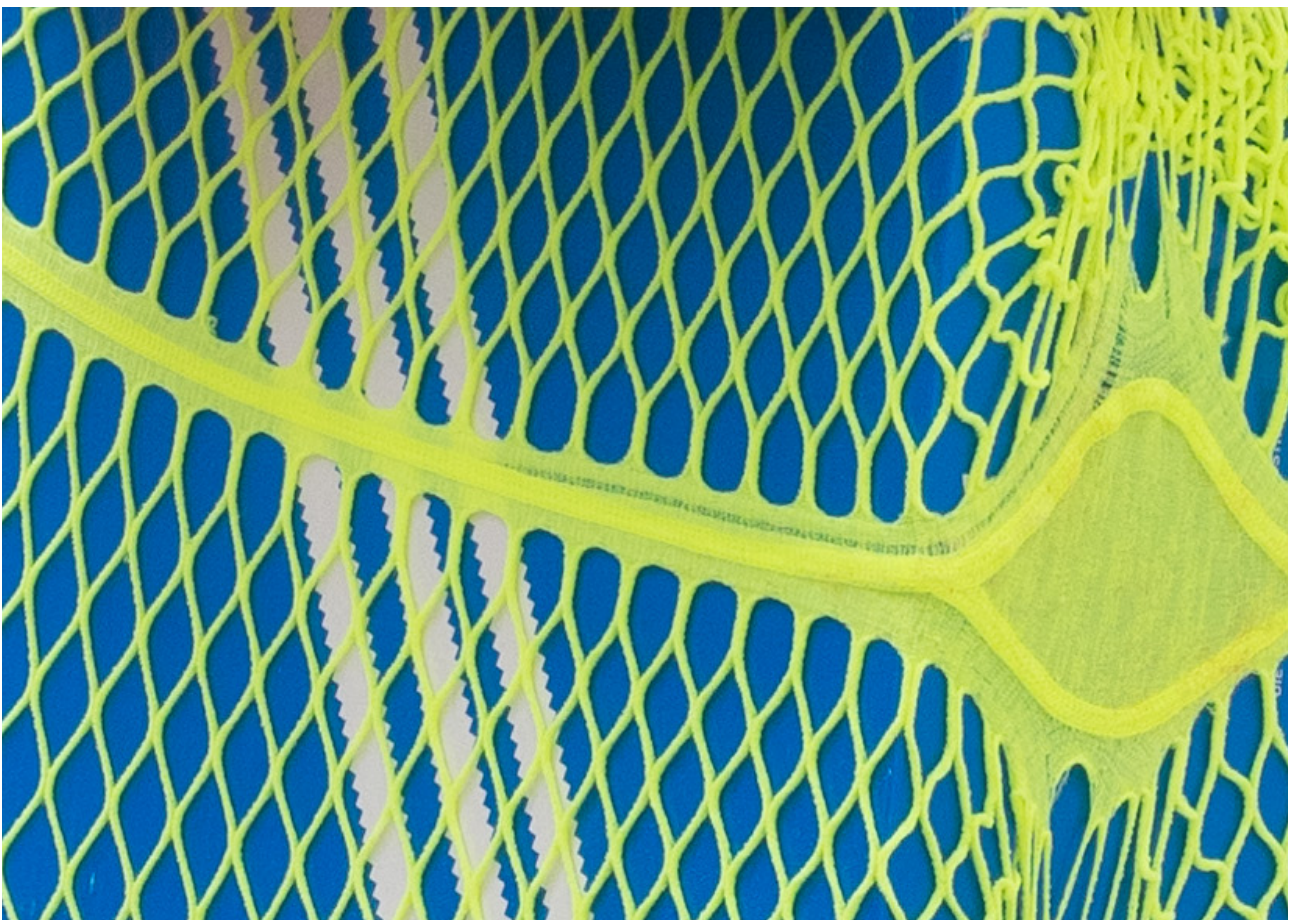


Figure 150: Sue Withers, *Trainer Totem* (Detail) Viva Exhibition, UEL, 2021



Figure 151: Sue Withers, *Alien Balls*, Viva Exhibition, UEL, 2021





# Sue Withers

University of East London, June 2021

Figure 152: Sue Withers, *Exhibition Guide; Front Cover*, 2021



[www.suewithers.org](http://www.suewithers.org)  
[sue@metaproof.org](mailto:sue@metaproof.org)

The title **Groom / Consume / Repair** alludes to the endless cycle of shopping, grooming and housekeeping, where capitalism has positioned women as consumers of the world's resources to adorn, beautify and decorate.

The research examines the influence of class and the dangerous or transgressive qualities of that which is often considered frivolous: colour and fashion. Alongside analysis of the cultural associations conveyed by materials, tensions were revealed between the need to conform and the capacity to subvert societal expectations.

The power of fetishism, and the theories of both Sigmund Freud and Karl Marx have contributed to the emergence of central themes; the idea of woman as both consumer and the consumed, and the revealing of the repetitive, hidden qualities of labour on which these capitalist fictions rely.

Addressing the excesses of consumerism through references to minimalism, the use of found objects, humour and the mundane, uncovers the connotations of what we value, and what or who, we discard.

The evolution of a sculptural component to my practice led to the recognition that exhibiting is a form of research activity, as necessary to development as time spent in the studio. An approach which can embrace the speculative or unsettled as productive, and allow the unforeseen to become a catalyst for progress.

Figure 153: Sue Withers, *Exhibition Guide*; Back Cover, 2021

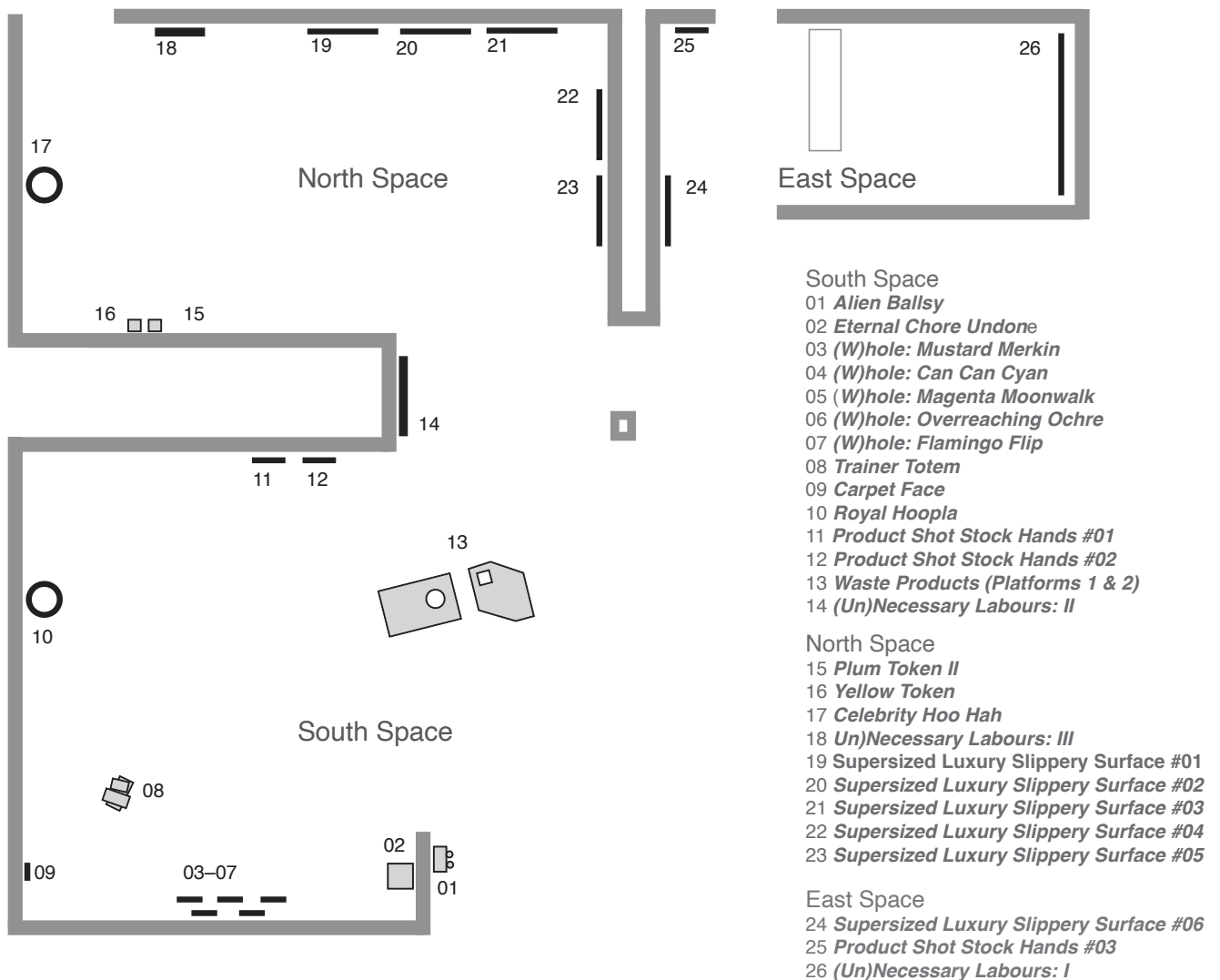
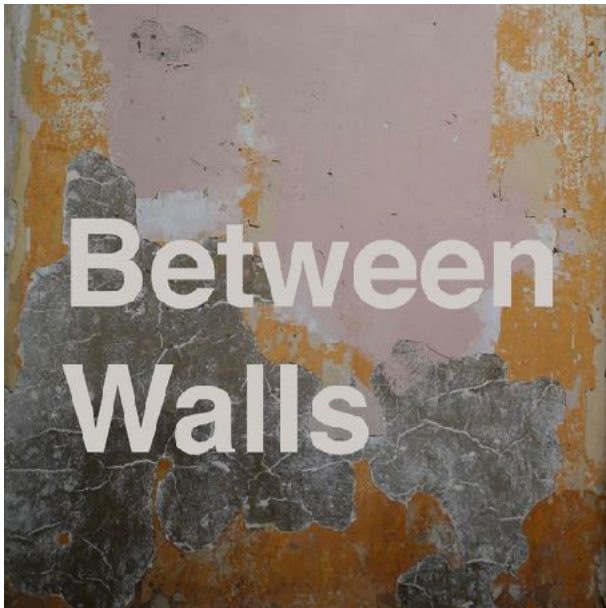


Figure 154: Sue Withers, *Exhibition Guide; Plan and List of Works*, 2021



# Between Walls

Safehouse 1 & 2,  
London, October 2020



Figures 155, 156: Online publicity materials for *Between Walls*, 2020

Link to full [Press Release](#) on Eventbrite page (Research Space, 2020)

**Between Walls** is an escape from the online and digital spaces into which we have recently been squeezed. We are resisting exhibiting in the virtual environment in favour of the real; real space, real time and real experience.

With new works from Ali Darke, Andrew Moller, Carmen Alemán, Christian Groothuizen, David Watkins, Paul Greenleaf, Ralph Overill, Ruth Jones, Sue Withers and William Bishop-Stevens.

Exhibiting together through their connection to the Fine Art Professional Doctorate at the University of East London, each artist has missed the experience of the physical exhibition, a form of research vital to the development of their artistic practice. Loose affinities exist between their individual interests and the works shown, but it is the necessity of material engagement which has truly brought this group together.

Link to [Exhibition Review](#) in The Sunday Tribune Online (Roper-Evans, 2020)



Figure 157: Sue Withers, *Celebrity Hoo-ha* (Basketball hoop, feather boa, silk cord, balloon) 2020



Figures 158, 159: Sue Withers, *Royal Hoopla* (Basketball hoop, ruffle scarf, foil decoration, carpet) *Pearl* (Balloon, stool, perfume oil) 2020





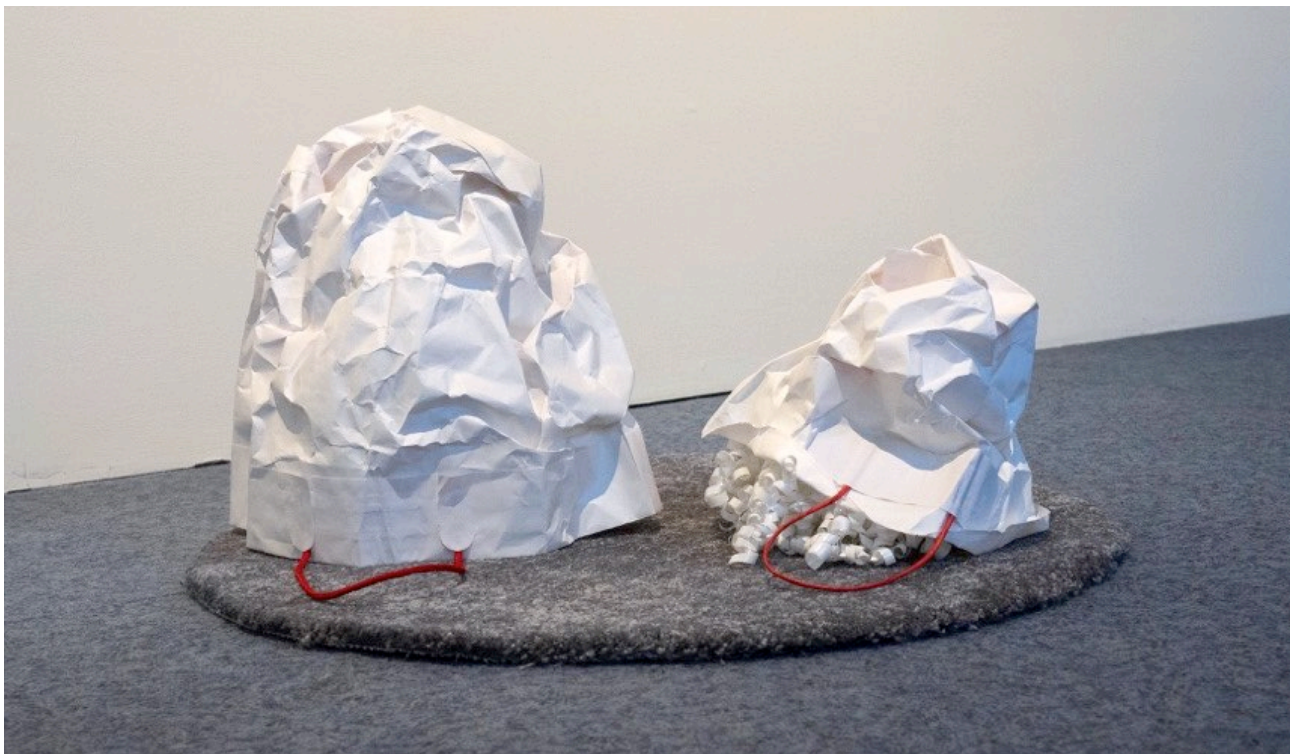
Figures 160, 161: Sue Withers *Live / Stock* (Balloon sculpture installation) 2020

# Policy Making

Beecroft Gallery,  
Southend-on-Sea, March 2020



Poster: *Policy Making* ©Ruth Jones



Figures 163, 164: Sue Withers, *Untitled 1 & 2* (Carrier bags, carpet, balloons) 2020



# Research Space

Way Out East gallery,  
University of East London, November 2019

**Fine Art Professional Doctorate**

## Research Space

**Exhibition 15 - 28 November 11.00 - 16.30**  
**Opening 14 November 17.30 - 21.00**

Embracing the practice of exhibiting as research activity, nine artists from University of East London Fine Art Professional Doctorate show work in progress.

---

**WILL HUGHES-JONES  
ANIMISM AND ABSURDITY**

Using non-verbal animation, pattern, abstraction, collage and hand-drawn illustration, Hughes-Jones explores the idea of animism as a way of understanding the world. His work is a celebration of the natural world, and a critique of the human condition.

**KEVIN GRIFFIN  
PRESENTED REALITY**

Kevin Griffin's work explores the concept of reality as a series of interconnected events. His work is a celebration of the human condition, and a critique of the human condition.

**KEVIN GRIFFIN  
MONSTERS AND VAMPIRES**

Kevin Griffin's work explores the concept of monsters and vampires as a way of understanding the world. His work is a celebration of the human condition, and a critique of the human condition.

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**ALLIANCE  
THE FETTERED LIFE OF REAGENTS**

Alliance's work explores the concept of the fettered life of reagents. His work is a celebration of the human condition, and a critique of the human condition.

**CHRISTOPHER GRIFFIN  
RESEARCHING COMMUNICATING**

Christopher Griffin's work explores the concept of researching communicating. His work is a celebration of the human condition, and a critique of the human condition.

**ANDREW MILLER  
HUMANISM AND EMERGENCE**

Andrew Miller's work explores the concept of humanism and emergence. His work is a celebration of the human condition, and a critique of the human condition.

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**EMILIO PAULI  
THE FETTERED LIFE OF REAGENTS**

Emilio Pauli's work explores the concept of the fettered life of reagents. His work is a celebration of the human condition, and a critique of the human condition.

**KEVIN GRIFFIN  
MONSTERS AND VAMPIRES**

Kevin Griffin's work explores the concept of monsters and vampires as a way of understanding the world. His work is a celebration of the human condition, and a critique of the human condition.

**ANDREW MILLER  
HUMANISM AND EMERGENCE**

Andrew Miller's work explores the concept of humanism and emergence. His work is a celebration of the human condition, and a critique of the human condition.

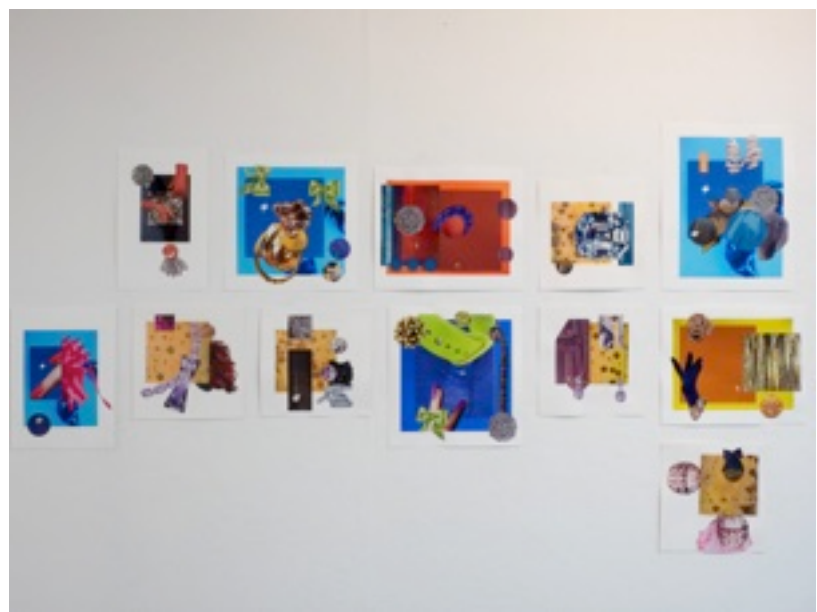
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Way Out East Gallery • Friday, 15 November 2019  
College of Arts, Technology and Innovation  
4th Floor, 4-5 University Way  
London E16 2ND

Open on 15th  
www.wayouteast.co.uk  
www.uel.ac.uk



Poster: *Research Space* ©Paul Greenleaf



Figures 166-168: Sue Withers, Installation views, 2020



# East London Artists

Annual Doctorate Showcase,  
University of East London, June 2019

## EAST LONDON

## ARTISTS

**Fine Art Professional Doctorate Showcase**

Carmen Aleman - Will Bishop-Stephens - Marc Coker - Ashley Davies  
 Ali Darke - Anna Fairchild - Xiaolong Fang - Mikey Georgeson  
 Paul Greenleaf - Chris Groothuizen - Christoph Hadrys - Ruth Jones  
 Shinwook Kim - Ralph Overill - Kostas Panagiotakopoulos  
 Lucy Renton - Kevin Warren - Sue Withers

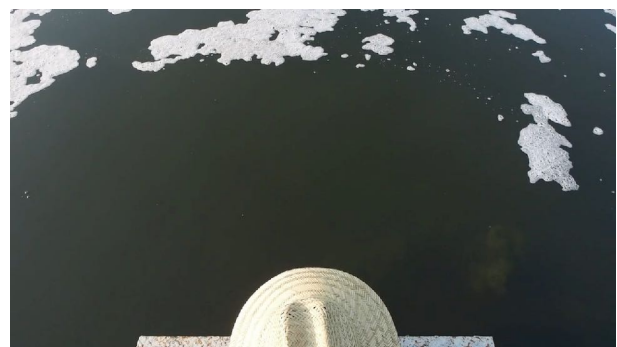
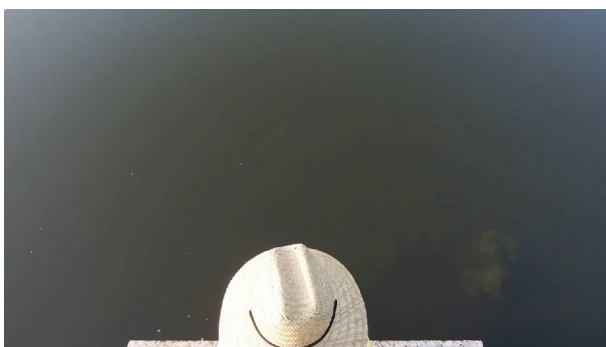
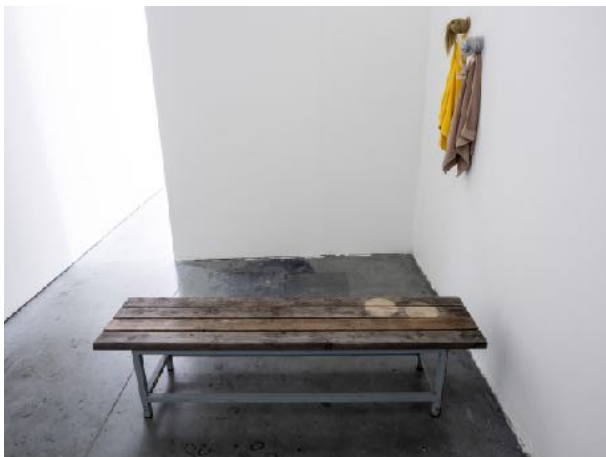
**Opening** 13/06/2019 6-9pm    **Exhibition** 14/06/19 - 16/06/19 11am - 4.30pm

College of Arts, Technologies and Innovation  
 Architecture and the Visual Arts  
 AVA Building, 4-5 University Way  
 London E16 2RD  
 Cyprus, UK  
 www.uel.ac.uk

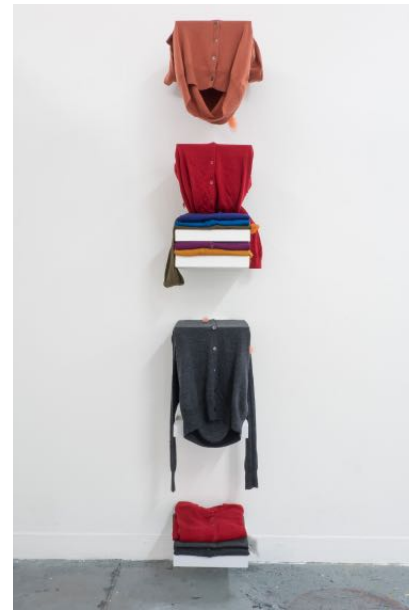


**University of  
East London**

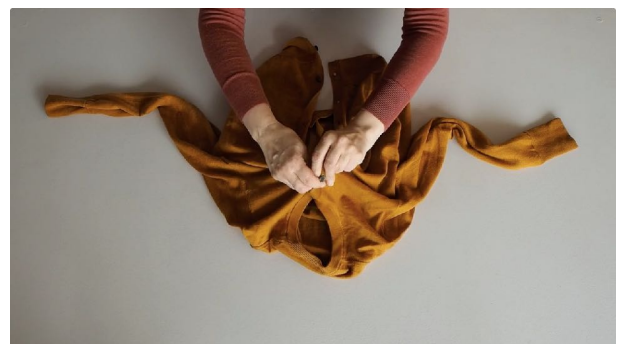
Pioneering Futures Since 1981



Figures 170-175: Sue Withers, *(Un)Necessary Labours I*, Installation views and video stills, 2019



Figures 176, 177: Sue Withers, *Eternal Chore Undone* and *(W)hole: Overreaching Ochre* Installation views, 2019



Figures 178-181: Sue Withers, *(Un)Necessary Labours II* Installation views and video stills, 2019

# MARCH

Brentwood Road Gallery,  
Frances Bardsley Academy, March/April 2018



Figure 182: Exhibition Poster



Figures 183, 184: Sue Withers. Installation views, 2019

# East London Artists

Annual Doctorate Showcase,  
University of East London, June 2018



Figures 185-190: Exhibition Poster, Sue Withers, Installation views, 2018



# East London Artists

Annual Doctorate Showcase,  
University of East London, June 2017



Figures 191–195: Exhibition Poster, Sue Withers, Installation views, 2017