

# Mirror Lamp Press

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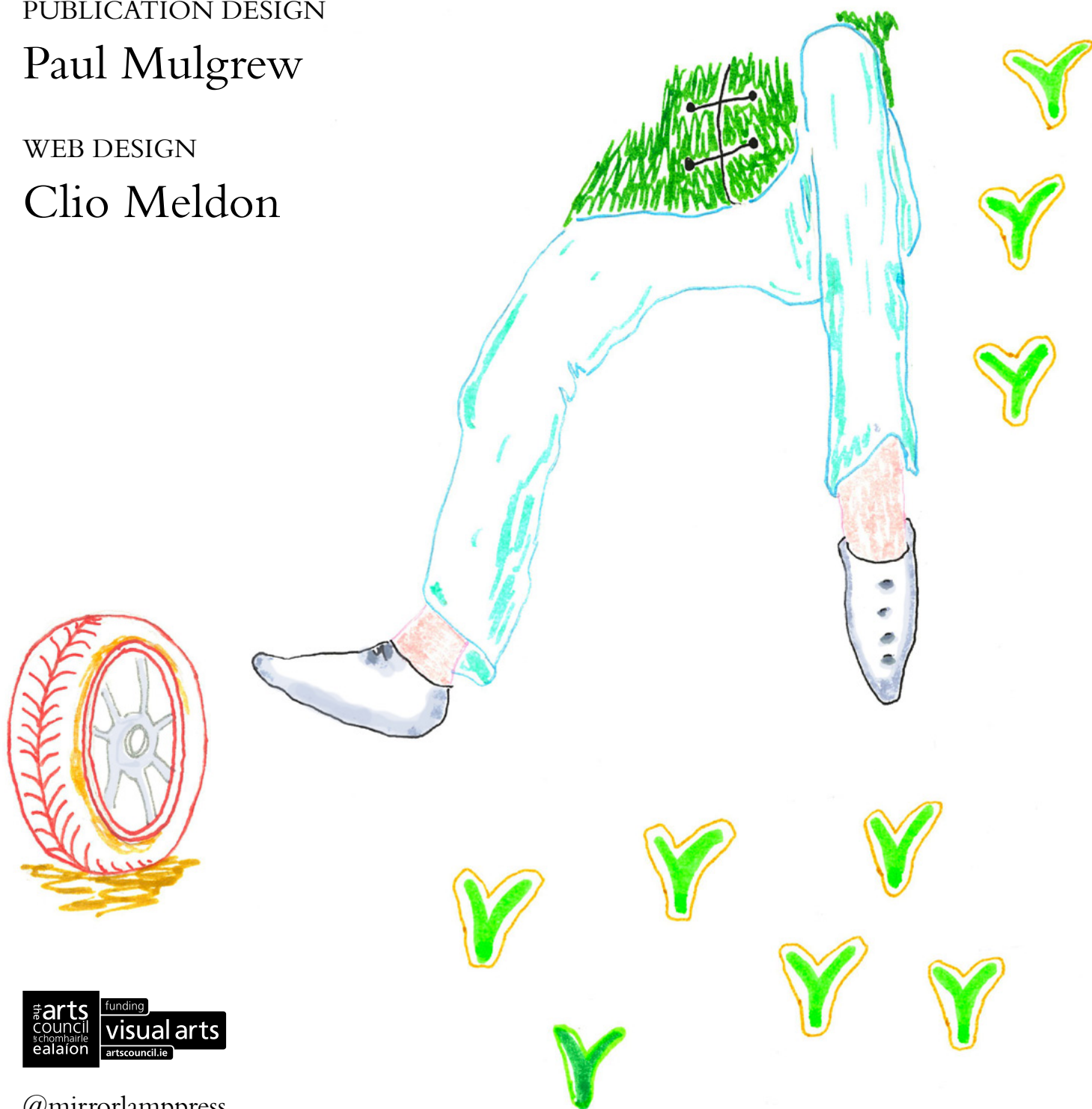
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## Darran Anderson

Darran Anderson is a London-based Irish writer. He is the author of 'Imaginary Cities' (Influx Press) and 'Inventory' (Chatto & Windus).

## Charlotte Jones

Charlotte Jones is a writer and researcher, based between Nottingham and London. Her interests centre on the novel, genre and the sociology of literature, especially histories of aesthetic forms and the roles these play in broader histories of knowledge. She is currently a Leverhulme Early Career Fellow at Queen Mary, University of London, working on a project about radical left literary cultures.

## Debi Paul

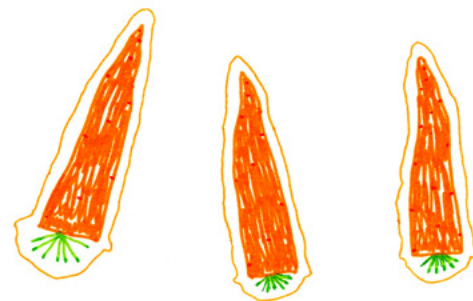
Debi Paul is a visual artist and curator; her practice is rooted both in performance and place, with a focus on the body. She often draws on/learns from site-specific communities of interest. Her work observes the connection between practice and philosophy and ideas that relate to the material world. The work aims to disrupt and challenge routine interaction with the familiar. Curatorial projects include; Living Balance; Caoimhe Dalton, Kate Fahey, Hazel Egan and Suzanne Walsh, Black Church Emerging Curator Award (2022); Home Bodies; Joanne Reid, Sibyl Montague, Jennie Moran at Glandwr (2021).

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Emily Cooper's poetry and prose has been published in the Stinging Fly, London Magazine, Banshee, Hotel, Poetry Ireland Review and Southword, among others. A recipient of the Next Generation Award and Literature Bursary Award from the Arts Council of Ireland, and a SIAP Award from ACNI, she has been awarded residencies by the Irish Writers Centre, Greywood Arts, Letterkenny Regional Cultural Centre and Sanskriti Kendra New Delhi. Emily's work is often collaborative with a focus on visual art and music. Her poetry debut, Glass, was published in 2021 by Makina Books and she is a contributing editor for The Pig's Back literary journal.

## Emer O'Toole

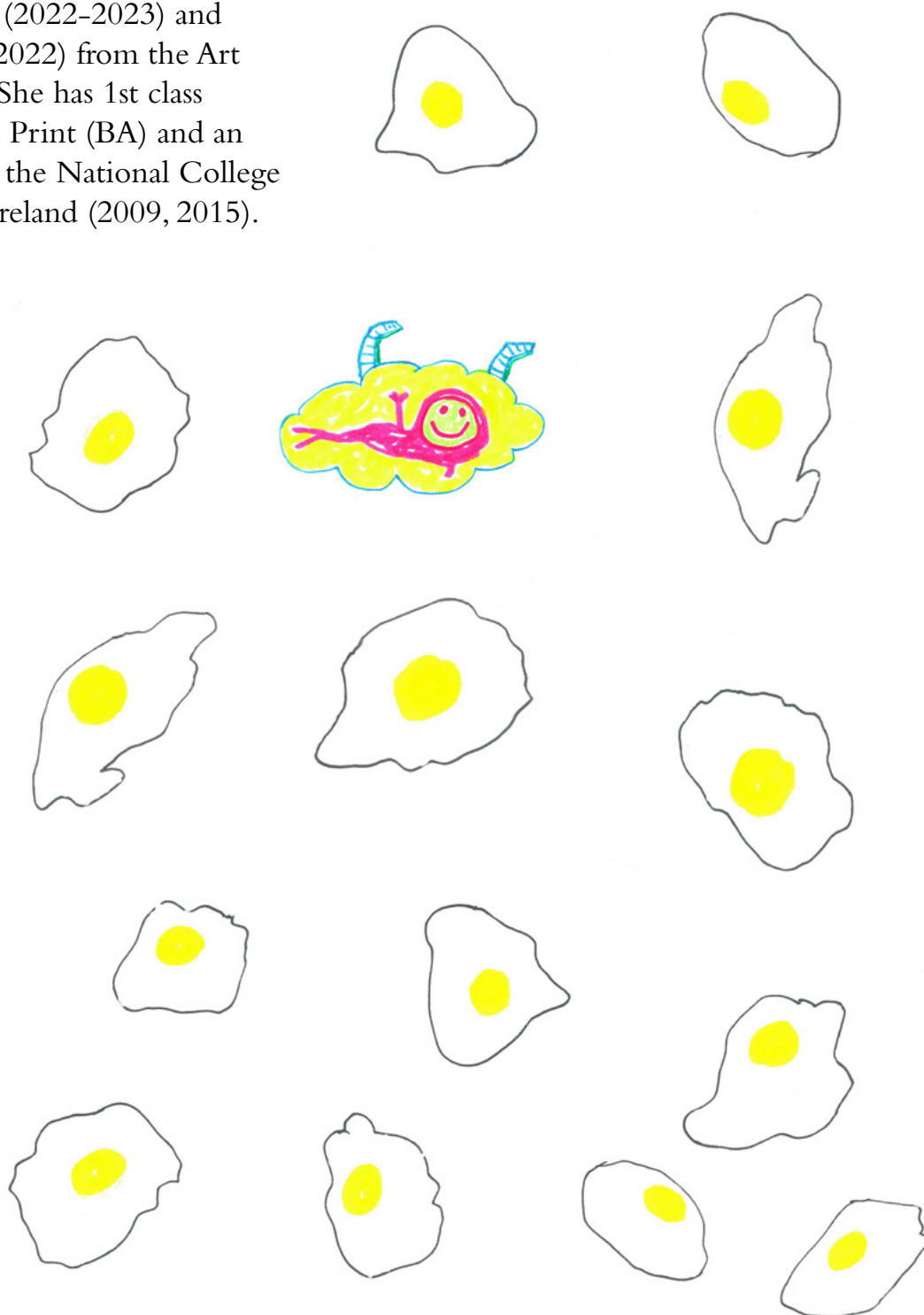
Emer O'Toole is Associate Professor of Irish Performance Studies at Concordia University, Montreal and author of the book *Girls Will Be Girls* (Orion: 2015). She's written for publications including The Guardian, The Irish Times, The Independent, The Conversation, Paper Visual Art, and *Somesuch Stories*. Her book on aesthetics and contemporary Irish theatre will be published by Routledge in 2023.





# Ella Bertilsson

Ella Bertilsson is a Dublin-based visual artist who weaves dark humour and absurdity into multi-disciplinary artworks. She is a studio artist at Rua Red until 2023 and is a recipient of the Visual Arts Bursary Award (2022-2023) and the Project Award (2022) from the Art Council of Ireland. She has 1st class honours in Fine Art Print (BA) and an MFA awarded from the National College of Art and Design, Ireland (2009, 2015).







Hello.

We are back with the fifth issue after a short (or maybe longish) hiatus, taken to regroup and consider our endeavours so far i.e. wait until the next round of funding after one of the editors uploaded the wrong funding application in a sleep deprived stupor. *Whoops!* In turn, we asked ourselves some existential questions as a publication that commissions malleable forms of writing and have made some minor changes. Each issue no longer follows a theme in the strict sense, yet we have retained our sections of *subject*, *object*, *verb*, *word* and *place*, allowing our commissioned writers to focus more freely on their own research interests within the remit of their section.

For *verb*, Darran Anderson looks at the process of erasure and fabrication through the act of salting the earth throughout history – or more specifically, pseudohistory – and the ramifications it might have today.

For *object*, Emily Cooper has written about a piano belonging to the German pianist Clara Schumann that once stood in the house she now

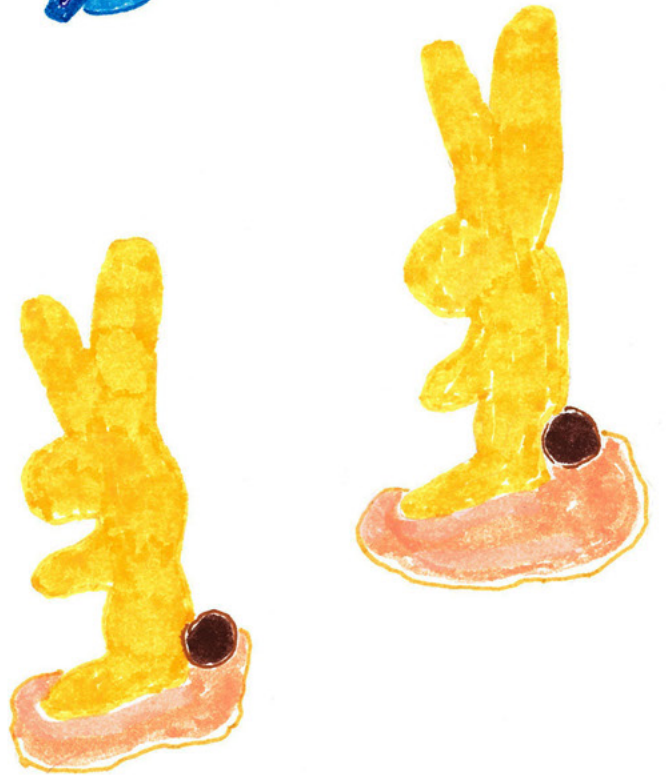
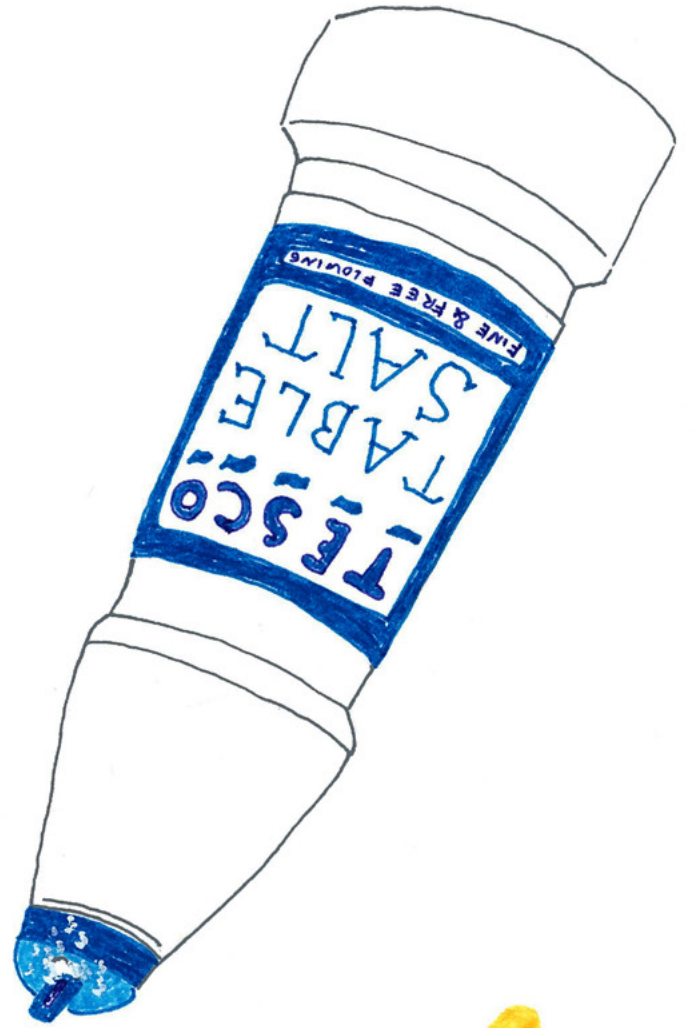
lives – the previous home of art historian Anne Crookshank.

For our *word* section, Charlotte Jones examines how ‘impasse’ has come to be understood. Jones unfolds the generative ways it speaks to an aesthetics of the present as a kind of animated suspension.

For *place*, Debi Paul’s inventive text considers the multiple functions of her home Glandwr, focusing on the recent exhibition *Where is George Bulfin?* along with the work it housed; that of Tanad Aaron, Jamie Cross and Florian Weichsberger.

For *subject*, Emer O’Toole has considered the inimitable Oscar Wilde and his philosophy of aestheticism, honing in on ‘Pen, Pencil, Poison,’ one of Wilde’s essays in which he writes a favourable biography of a murdering dandy, framing his life as high art. O’Toole highlights the uncanny symmetries between Wilde’s biography as it would unfold and that of the killer, asking if Wilde’s trial and conviction were a performance, and to what extent they can be understood as art.

We hope you enjoy the issue.



# Salting the Earth

*Darran Anderson*

Every morning, high above the rooftops of Rome, birds greet the dawn from the orange trees of the Aventine Hill, one of the seven it is built upon. It is easy to believe, in such light and chorus, that the city below *is* eternal as claimed, that it has always been and always will be. As with all cities, this is a tempting illusion but there is another archetype remembered in stories that surround it – Iram of the Pillars, Pi-Ramesses, La Ciudad Blanca, Firozkoh, Troy – the mighty city that has vanished.

Two thousand years ago, across the Mediterranean three days sailing from Rome on the North African coast, dawn rose for a final time over Carthage; the whitewashed buildings of the imperial capital casting shadows that would never be seen again. There were strange ships off the coastline. A man-made mist of smoke passed through the city, following the path of the Roman soldiers moving over the rooftops and through the streets, who fell every man, woman

and child they encountered and torched every building. History will record that every stone of the city was removed, the inhabitants slaughtered or sold off into slavery. The very ground upon which Rome's greatest rival had stood was sown with salt so that nothing would ever grow upon it. This is how Carthage vanished from the world.

The earliest mention that has been found however of the salting of the earth at Carthage goes no further back than 1873, first appearing in Volume 4 of *The New American Cyclopædia: a Popular Dictionary of General Knowledge*. This might be a small detail, noticed only by pedants, were it not for the fact that so much has been unearthed, from beneath the soil, the sand or the jungle, from someone noticing an anomaly. A hole left by a toppled tree, leading to the Lascaux cave and its paintings, is sniffed at by a passing dog. A well-digger's spade strikes something hard in the ground that happens to be the head of a terracotta soldier. A rock thrown by a Bedouin shepherd by the name of Muhammed the Wolf to scare a goat out from a cave shattered something inside that turns out to be a clay jar housing the Dead Sea Scrolls.

The past no longer exists, though we are surrounded by its wreckage. History, though easily mistaken, is not the past. It is not the story of the past but rather its stories. There is great power to be harnessed convincing people otherwise. Cursed and blessed that we are to be subjective creatures in an objective world, we are always prone to the temptations of storytelling, even to those of our own making, – selective editing, the burying of inconvenient truths, the fabricating of useful fictions – we speak in the conditional, the way the past should have happened rather than how it did.

A thought has been troubling me in recent days. After the fall of the Soviet Union, the West told itself, and believed, that history had come to an end. There were no alternatives to neoliberal capitalism, and all those at the forefront of progress and development needed to do was wait for the rest of the world to catch up with them. Places like Northern Ireland or former Yugoslavia were anachronisms. Their inhabitants were backward, locked in the past, clinging to outdated relics, embroiled in archaic squabbles. How could we not just move on from 1690 or 1798 or 1916? We were told it so often and convincingly, that

we came to believe it ourselves. Having now lived away for longer than I did back home, I have had a creeping realisation that we were not trapped in the past at all but rather the divisions of Northern Ireland were a harbinger of what was to come.

“History, Stephen said, is a nightmare from which I am trying to awake”, James Joyce wrote in *Ulysses*. One of the ways you might try and awake is through the Joycean route of exile, one that was necessary anyway for employment. Leaving Northern Ireland, I headed to the places I’d been told were centuries ahead. And, for a time, they seemed to be more civilised, for want of a better word, and less riven with animus and irrationality. Yet I gradually came to realise that here too in London, all over the West in fact, sleep prevailed.

Gradually, the nightmares returned in places I had not expected them to, like images developing in a dark room, and I could see, once again, a world where statues had more sanctity than human life, where flags had more value than swaddling blankets or burial shrouds, where suffering was abstracted into numbers and then nothing, where some children were born laden with poverty and original sin while respectable thieves and killers

could do no wrong. Here, again, was a world of sectarianism, blind faith, fallacies, scapegoats, puritan witch-hunts, us and them, divide and conquer, for us or against us. A broken world of icons and erasures, where even silence or sleep is no refuge.

The real nightmare of our history is that we barely know it. Through the distorting singular prism of ideology, we see the world as the ego wishes to see it and not as it actually, inconveniently, is. Its complexities, nuances, contradictions, when revealed, can undermine the prevailing stories and the power they impart. We were seldom told, for instance, how various Popes authorised the invasions of Ireland, including King Billy's, or that the forefathers of modern Irish Republicanism, the United Irishmen, had so many Protestants, and Ulster Presbyterians no less, in the ranks of their leaders. Those who benefit from stoking conflict between others reveal themselves in their shared opposition to anyone who calls into question their brutal and convenient binaries. As with any vampire, the ideologue fears mirrors.

‘What happened?’ is the imperative concern,



however disturbing or inconvenient the answers. It is this, and only this, that brings back to form, if not life, the dead – the comfort women of Korea and the raped of Nanjing, the starved of the Holodomor, Ireland and Bengal, the limbless of the Belgian Congo and the drowned of the Middle Passage, those sacrificed by Aztecs or in the Albigensian Crusade, the Armenians and Hereros and Nama driven into the deserts and on and on and on.

And to realise, amidst the wreckage of the past, the effort and risk it takes to change the tense to ‘What is happening?’ in a world where concentration camps still exist, in Xinjiang, and secret prisons thrive, from the Caucasus to the Levant to the Maghreb, and, perhaps, more slaves than ever exist, from the auctions of human beings in Libya to those who vanish onto ships in the Gulf of Thailand, and acknowledge that there are entire lands where children are afraid of the sky, where women cannot feel the wind in their hair, and even those who sow the earth fear what lies beneath it.

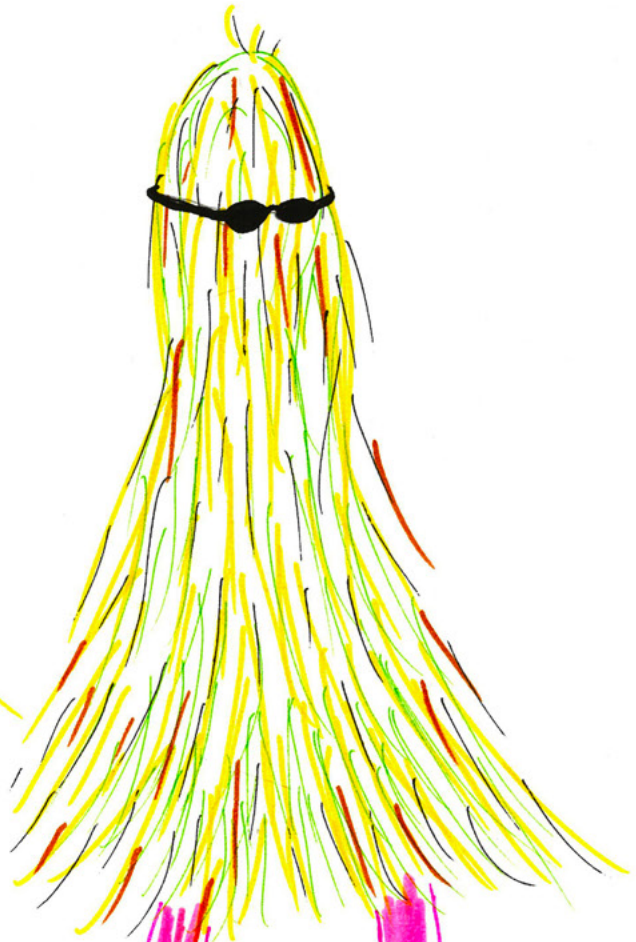
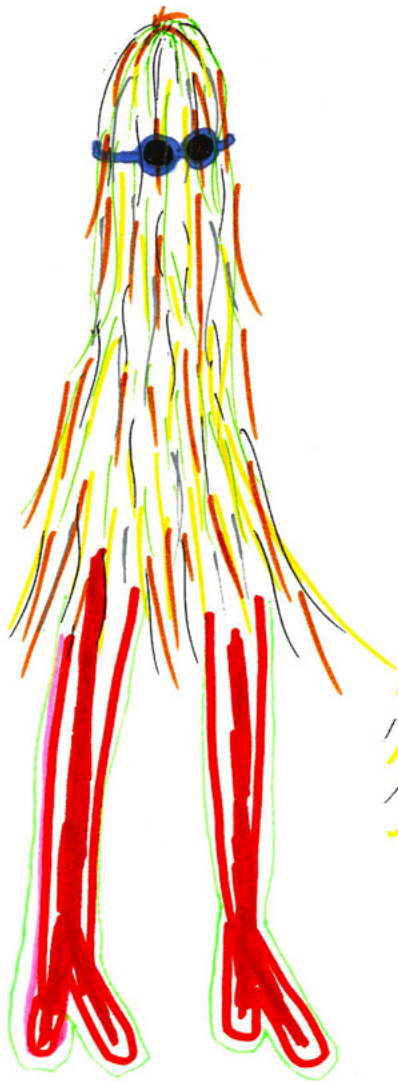
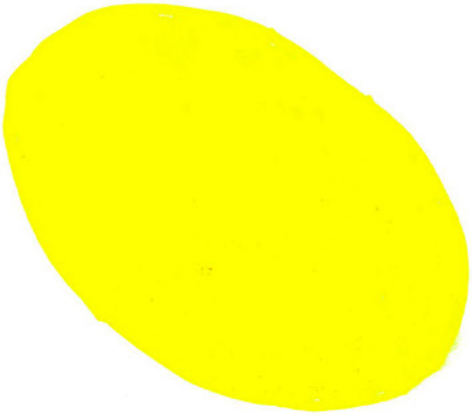
There is a proverb among the Shona people of Southern Africa – the tree remembers what

the axe forgets. It is true the world over that a wounding, whether personal or cultural, is not easily erased, as much as the perpetrators might want or even conspire to do so. So too, the earth remembers what the mind forgets. It defies the scattering of salt. It holds secrets and brings them back to light when conditions change. Nettles grow in abundance where there was once human habitation. When the droughts come, the geometry of buried foundations begin to scorch through the grass. When the rivers fall, the hunger stones reappear. “If you see me, weep” they say, if we choose to look. Cataclysms on barely imaginable earlier Earths can be read in layers of ice, soil and rock, epochs later. There are closer catastrophes – ships in the sand, cities in the clay, maps in fractures of bone that speak of murder even if the victims’ mouths have been filled with stones. A leathery book raised out of a Tipperary bog that sings in broken psalms, “O God, be not silent.”

Rather than erase or conceal, salt scars and preserves. It is a presence that points out a glaring absence. In this, it is a precious gift. It shows us, whether in the fabrication of language or the despoiling of soil, where to look and where to

start digging, to find what people, and even we,  
do not want to find.





# Impasse, in passing

Charlotte Jones

‘This is fine. I’m okay with the events that are unfolding currently.... Things are going to be okay.’ Our seemingly infinite capacity to tolerate what so obviously should be intolerable was the subject of the ‘This is fine’ meme, from KC Green’s 2013 webcomic ‘On Fire’, which features a dog sipping a drink while all around is engulfed in flames. What’s most unnerving is that, however you read the dog’s reaction (panicked paralysis? complacent inertia?), there’s no point at which the situation actually becomes intolerable. No breaking point or threshold is reached. ‘In the impasse induced by crisis,’ says Lauren Berlant, ‘being treads water; mainly, it does not drown’<sup>1</sup>. The dog turns impassively away.

*Impassive* derives from the Latin *passivus* (suffering) and refers – by the seventeenth century – not only to the absence of pain but also the absence of sensation more generally. Later, the word came to mean ‘unendurable, intolerable’. *Impassive* is closely related to *impassible*, which can also mean

‘incapable of suffering’ as well as ‘insufferable’. Over time, and in both cases, not having the quality of feeling pain borders on feeling too much pain. Samuel Johnson describes *impassive* somewhat differently in his dictionary of 1755, where he defines the word as exempt from the agency of external causes. *Impassive*, for Johnson, raises questions about freedom and sovereignty, as one not liable to being disturbed; impassivity becomes an ego-ideal in the so-called Age of Reason, a sign of one’s reasoned objectivity.

*Impasse* and *impassive* come to English via two different etymological routes, but I’m approaching *impasse* obliquely, through this available pun. This trespass in language discloses how *impasse* is registered only through the apparent denial and affective disavowal of its very existence.

In English, *impasse* refers to a road or path having no outlet, a position from which there is no way to escape. To have reached an impasse is to discover one’s way forward blocked, one’s progress halted. *Impassable* enters English in the sixteenth century, but *impasse* doesn’t appear until the mid-nineteenth, when the OED suggests it comes via Voltaire, who posits *impasse* as an alternative to

*cul-de-sac* in ‘Discourse to the Welsh’, where he satirises French for its vulgar idioms: ‘You hardly allow yourself to speak of a real ass in front of respectable matrons; and yet you do not use another expression to signify things to which an ass has no relation. Jerome Carré has proposed *impasse* for your dead-end streets; this word is noble and significant.’

Perhaps unsurprisingly, Jerome Carré is Voltaire himself. In a letter to the ‘Gentlemen of Paris’, ‘Carré’ introduces himself as the translator of an English play written by ‘M. Hume’ (the play is Voltaire’s *L’Écossaise*) when he pauses to offer an intra-linguistic translation for *cul-de-sac*, as if, living at an *impasse*, he has reached one with French itself. ‘Carré’ identifies himself as a native of Montauban, ‘living near the *impasse* of St. Thomas; I call *impasse*, gentleman, what you call *cul-de-sac*, as a street, I find, resembles neither an ass nor a sack. I beg you to use the word *impasse*, which is noble, sonorous, intelligible, and necessary’<sup>2</sup>. Following this history of the word, *impasse* invites mishearing, even mistranslation. Instead of using a figurative expression, Voltaire (as Carré) invents a new word, set to rid language of its metaphoric potential by calling for more

material connections between words and things. In this adaptation, *impasse* is a surpassing of language in which one moves around with a sense that the world is at once intensely present and enigmatic. Impasse opens up moments of suspension or non-spatiality in which we can no longer take our continuity in the material world for granted.

The notion of impasse is thrown around more and more these days in the wake of what could be said to be a global ‘crisis’ of democracy, where populist movements of the right, and to a lesser extent of the left, have begun to dismantle the very functioning of national and international parliamentary systems. Legislative stalemates, labour stoppages, government shutdowns, climate breakdown – there is, or so it seems, a kind of exhaustion of democratic possibilities, an ‘impasse’ reflected not only in declining participation by the public in what are purportedly its own decision-making processes, but in the very functioning of institutions that actively generate impasses of various kinds in the name of specific interests, precisely in order to limit or forestall other possibilities. The impasse of the present, in other words, is not simply equivalent to political



gridlock – it's built into the very concept of liberal democracy, a contradiction that can't be overcome from within the system that has produced it. What happens when futurity splinters as a path for passing through the present?

Here, I think of Rei Terada's glossing of impasse as 'a kind of barricade to create space for a world in which futility can no longer be a reason for not doing something'<sup>3</sup>. Impasse summons disruptive temporalities; it is not just a pause followed by a return to normality. It is break, a fracturing with the traumatic past. It refuses to allow things to be the way they always were. Sara Ahmed writes that, 'In stopping, something comes out'. An impasse suspends ordinary time, displaces and dissolves ordinary life, disrupting our sense of historical continuity in a way that can change, potentially, how we understand what being historical means. An impasse marks a point at which the unceasing reproduction of the status quo is brought to a halt, enabling one to sense both the contingency and the brutality of the conditions in which we dwell; it opens the possibility, though not the inevitability, of something else. It is an instrument with which to take stock of the horizonless of the historical present.

In 2016, a week after the GOP had appropriated ‘On Fire’ to make fun of the Democratic National Convention on Twitter, KC Green created a sequel. ‘Every bit of insane news piece and the political climate made this follow up happen’, Green told *The Verge*. ‘Everyone’s on EDGE. There’s a breaking point, and I think we’ll find it this year.’

If ‘This Is Not Fine’ plays out the breaking point scenario that guides fantasies of collective action and change, what it depicts is not so much transformation as self-castigation. ‘WHAT THE HELL IS MY PROBLEM’; ‘WHAT THE FUCK WAS I EVEN THINKING.’ Along with the fantasy of agency comes a feeling of grandiose culpability. The flames are put out, but any way out still appears impossible to imagine. Impassivity is replaced by destruction. There can be no question of finding one’s paths blocked or of establishing paths where there are none, because the ground on which such a route might be plotted has been obliterated. One cannot attempt to move through, around or out of this predicament.

Derrida points out the settler-colonial logic of

the way that impasse creates political ground by holding and dividing space when he compares aporia (from Greek, *aporos*, ‘impassable or untraversable’) to a desert: ‘What would a path be without aporia? Would there be a way [*voie*] without what clears the way there where the way is not opened, whether it is still blocked or still buried in the nonway?’<sup>4</sup> Language describes patterns and the language of traditional philosophical method (from Greek, *meta-hodos*, ‘meta-path’) talks in its sleep about settlement and expropriation, colonialism and racial capitalism, yet still so often comes to root for impasse when violent historical rupture is the alternative. In such moments, impasse usefully figures for liberal culture both holding one’s position temporarily and the potentially liberatory build-up of tension around a political fault-line.

Most of all, though, impasse assumes that everyone has a side of the line to be on, and wants one, or should. Simply to identify a given instance as an ‘impasse’ is already to determine the putative stalemate as a localisable phenomenon with legible parameters. Its appearance depends on history, power and territory at the cost of a ‘nonway’. But what would a ‘nonway’ look like?

Resistance? Counterforce? Mere powerlessness?  
‘There was no reason to let it last this long and  
get this bad’, reasons the dog. ‘Eventually...’

1. Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, London, Duke University Press, 2011, p.10.
2. Voltaire, *Oeuvres de Voltaire*, ed. Adrien-Jean-Quentin Beuchot, Paris, Lefèvre, 1831, vol. 41, p.551; vol. 7, p.20.
3. Rei Terada, ‘Looking at the Stars Forever’, *Studies in Romanticism*, vol. 50, no.2, 2011, p.280.
4. Jacques Derrida, *On the Name*, trans. David Wood and ed. Thomas Dutoit, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 1995, p.83





## Piano Piece

*Emily Cooper*

While moving into my current home a few years ago, I unearthed a sequence of photographs taken of the interior of the house. They were mixed in with documents and address books and diaries, inside a green plastic bag left in the corner of a room.

I can tell that the photos are old by the windows that are now doors and I recognise a blue and white porcelain urn sitting on a windowsill. It is from a painting by Alicia Boyle from the 1980's which I have already come across online. In fact, I can find most of the furniture and artworks in these pictures online – with their origin, age and value – through the auction catalogues of the estate belonging to the previous owner, Anne Crookshank, an art historian who founded the Art History department at Trinity College. Crookshank collected and inherited many artworks and artefacts from her childhood in India, her time as Keeper of Art at the Belfast Museum and many other positions and travels

around the world; all of which she gathered in this house when she retired. In the photographs, there is a portrait of a woman clutching her child, a pair of Victorian mahogany chaise longue upholstered with a silk peacock fabric, the marble bust of a ‘philosopher’ (no mention of which one) and many other antique objects. These pieces are all long sold and distributed around the world, replaced by us with much less valuable contents.

The photographs of the rooms are not populated. There are no people in the armchairs, no one is admiring the art. In one image a red plastic ice bucket, a bottle of Schweppes tonic water and a can of Coke have been placed on a tray on a side table: an inviting still life of hospitality. It is not clear who or what these photographs are for.



Looking through them, I am fascinated by one object; a piano forte that stands against the railings of the basement stairs. It is covered in an intricately patterned piece of fabric that is underneath a large Chinese pot, full of tall white lilies. It belonged to Clara Schumann, a German composer and concert pianist who in her time was highly influential and toured all over Europe. Her artistic success has since been overshadowed by the fame of her husband, Robert Schumann – whose work she tirelessly promoted before and after his death – as well as rumours about her close friendship with Johannes Brahms. The piano was bought in Germany and transported to Convoy House in Donegal in the mid 1800s, where it was played by generations of the Montgomery-Boyton family, and survived a house fire. Anne Crookshank stayed in the house as a child, played it through her young life and eventually was the one to inherit it. She later brought it to the house where I now live in Ramelton. Before her death, it was moved to a conservatory in England. I have never seen the piano in real life, and probably never will.





These photos bring to mind the pianos that populate Orhan Pamuk's memoir, *Istanbul*. Pamuk grew up in a five-story apartment building, the floors divided up to house different branches of his family. On each floor there was a piano, an example of western artifice that had been adopted in the years after the end of the Ottoman era. No one played these pianos, and they sat silent in each apartment surrounded by other objects (mother-of-pearl inlaid desks, snuff boxes, sets of silver) that had no purpose beyond forming a kind of in-house museum. The objects were meant to convey a sense of freedom from the

regime that had gone before, but instead created an environment of stuffy ornament that was not necessarily comfortable to live amongst. The reduction of these pianos to a symbol, rather than an instrument with purpose and the potential for art, is a curious act. It brings into question what a piano can symbolise in other contexts, and of course the inverse. A lack can have as much impact as a presence.

Pianos used to be common in Irish houses like my own. It was not unusual to see an upright in the good room, a selection of family photographs placed along the top. It was only recently that I remembered the piano in my maternal grandparents' home. It was always out of tune and only the eldest of the nine children ever learned to play. Musical aspirations fell to the wayside as the household multiplied. My mother told me that it was left to someone "more worthy" than her. My paternal grandmother bought herself a piano in her mid-eighties. She had already given away the original family piano to my uncle, causing a family dispute. She had lessons for the first time on this second piano and played well into her nineties, accompanied by her own operatic singing and vocal budgie, Joey. That

piano was left to a different uncle when she died.

On an artist residency last winter, I sat at a grand piano in the drawing room of a Big House in Monaghan. I was alone. The piano was beautifully polished and smelled of orange peel. I lifted the fallboard and began to play. There is something about the iconic image of a pianist falling into music that makes you think that your fingers will automatically fly across the keys. It always looks natural, as if piano playing is a movement built into the body like walking or having sex: if only you would sit down at a keyboard, your arms and fingers would know what to do. Unfortunately this is not the case and my piano playing abilities were curtailed when, at seven years old, my piano teacher suggested I start studying for my grades. Until exams were introduced to the process, I had enjoyed visiting this man in his London Victorian terrace, sitting at his upright with our backs to a bay window. We had no piano at home, so these lessons were the only contact I had with a real one. I refused to go back and the lessons ended quietly.

At the grand piano in Monaghan, I did what I could: simple and random chords of three notes,

moving between the ends of the keyboard. The room was filled with a clumsy melancholy. I felt a rush of pleasure, a deep breath of sudden freedom. I did not sleep well for three nights afterwards, waking often in the night to the sound of imagined footsteps on the staircase. I dreamt that I had interrupted the housekeeper on her rounds of the rooms; she pushed me out of the bed and I woke up. Perhaps by playing the piano I had trespassed beyond my place in the big Monaghan house, becoming overfamiliar and therefore unwelcome.

I have been looking for a piano to buy for our house. With limited funds and expertise, this has seemed an impossible task. There are a lot of pianos – they can be found in abandoned houses or in rows against the cold walls of second hand furniture shops – you would think it would be simple to find one, but most have been left unused for so long that they would need to be fully refurbished before they could be played again. There are other objects like this: cast iron radiators seize up if left to cool for too long, cars will become slow to start, even the mind will become less agile if you fail to engage it for long enough. All of these pianos were bought

originally to be played, but have lost their purpose as children grew up and technology developed to fill our time, leaving little need to occupy ourselves and others by playing instruments. I convince myself that a piano will warm the house; that the music will fill the rooms and make it feel like a home. Despite having never lived in a house with a piano, I am convinced of this idea. Living in an old building, you become attuned to its needs: the stone walls need to breathe, the chimneys need a fire to keep dry, the wood will swell and contract again as the weather changes. This is a house that needs a piano.



The next house on our terrace is an even older building called The House on the Brae. It is a large Georgian house with a beautiful tall fanlight window that lights a central staircase. It has been empty for many years, having fallen from private ownership by some fluke of inheritance to be owned by the town. When Anne Crookshank moved to Ramelton, there was a campaign to save this building and for a time it was occupied by a piano technician, Kieran Clarke, who opened a restaurant with his partner in the lower levels of the house. Clarke was enlisted to restore Clara's piano; it had been so badly damaged by both time and the house fire that much repair work was required. During their time in the house next door, Clarke installed a Bosendorfer piano and hosted piano recitals, inviting internationally known pianists to come and play in Ramelton. Clara's piano toured, accompanied by Clarke, around Ireland and was brought to the Schumann Festival in Manchester. It is hard to imagine how much music there has been in these houses, especially as they are now so quiet. The silence is punctuated by my podcasts and playlists as I wander from room to room, the dog barking and the occasional shouted conversation drifting in

the window from the street. Plans have just been passed to build a large new building in the garden next door and they will turn the old house into offices for ‘entrepreneurs’, replacing the staircase with a lift and painting over the murals that are in the restaurant downstairs. I assume there will be no piano.

Late one night I received a message from a friend asking if I would like a free piano. Thinking my powers of manifestation were suddenly working, I replied ‘yes, please’ immediately and began to figure out who I knew with a van. Over time the communication about the piano became vague, I had decided where I could put it, but my friend was being evasive. She said the piano belonged to her father and he didn’t know if it would work. She told me after a few weeks that he had brought out a tuner to look at it and he said it was unfixable. From time to time I wonder what happened to that piano, whether it was scrapped or if someone somewhere else is playing it. What happened to the pianos in Pamuk’s family home? How many pianos are there around the world rotting to leave only toothy keys behind?

Perhaps my preoccupation with the idea of a

piano is related to its relationship with honour and propriety. The pianos of Pamuk's Istanbul home were a marker of the family's modernity and progressiveness. For my grandparents, a sign of affluence and culture. Clara's piano demonstrated Anne Crookshank's importance: only someone powerful or connected could have an object with such historical importance in their home. Most of these pianos were handed down, willed to younger generations as a sign of preference, of hierarchy. At a point in time, what higher honour (after the house) would there have been than to get the piano? I'm not sure this is still the case. Pianos are heavy and hard to transport, newbuild houses are getting smaller, where would you put one? Who would play it? It might seem more of a burden than a gift these days.

Is my desire for a piano to do with curating an environment in this house that reflects an idealised version of my own life? One in which I am cultured and affluent, powerful and perhaps even worthy enough to have been the one to inherit the family piano. There are unavoidable problems with this endeavour: any piano I get will not have been inherited, it will never be as beautiful or as important as Clara's piano,



demonstrating that, in this house at least, I will always be the lesser occupant. I can't even play, so there is potential for this piano to be reduced to a symbolic object, as sad and purposeless as the ones in the Pamuk museum rooms. I know all of these things, but I still want one. I want to maintain an idea of a version of myself who can fall to the keys with certainty, to use my body in a way that it hasn't been before, to be someone who can afford to own something that I can protect and pass down.

Searching through the photos again I find another picture of Clara's piano, a newer digital photograph. The window behind it is now a door and Anne Crookshank is standing beside the piano, leaning on the ornately carved top, a glass tumbler with a finger of whiskey resting beside her hand. A girl is sitting on the stool, smiling up at her, perhaps about to play a piece, or maybe just finished. I feel glad to have this photograph: a small piece of evidence that the piano was played during its time in this house. Though this knowledge makes me notice its absence and the silence even more.





I always thought walls, were for  
storing letters

*Debi Paul*

I always thought walls, were for storing letters

Marking out hidden spaces  
and common places.

Laying down lines and layers for every day,

I am a house called 'Glandwr'.

Objects and letters have come in and out my front door. Some letters came from outside, some were written inside. New objects were made in me and things for repurposing were donated to me and just a while ago some artworks arrived to 'stay over' to live inside me for a little while.

Things have exited my insides. Most recently bits and pieces found after 'the lads' left. Some were fairly common things, objects discarded or left behind, some went to Germany on a plane. Others were a part of my ground, my sediment, my lovely terracotta baseline found when layers of squidgy grimy lino which lay atop me were lifted. The linoleum was sandwiched together as if it had been making a ma-ouldy gooey lasagna. A marble rolling around my floor looking for a home found one in Germany. Custom made no less; it slots right into that fine serene terracotta to find its balance, its home, sitting gloriously amid its original sediment, aptly called 'La casa nasconde ma non ruba'. A clothes hanger made in Germany, lived inside one of my cupboards maybe even before 'the lads' came. It has this writing stamped into its soft wooden back 'an Gearmain tír dheanta' (the German made land). Not so long ago it travelled back to its 'made

land' where an artist named Florian Weichsberger took it apart and freed it from its years of hanger responsibilities. Now titled 'Made and remade' he chopped it up giving its newly formed chunks a vibrant cord and the liberty to slide.

'The lads' came here to learn stuff, a day centre to begin anew. To eat together and sometimes to make together. Before that it was a domestic home. My name possibly belongs to a man named Eoin Glandwr although I don't know for certain yet. Hollow spoons hark a life that once was, meals shared, lunches given. Florian's double-sided paint brush floats, sits on my soft embossed sitting room wallpaper and it pricks into my skin. Looking closer, it's not a functional thing although it might have been once. Its middle is plastic but also marbled, leaving my mind in limbo in a curious mixture of fact and fantasy.

'The lads' painted my insides many times. A while ago a woman and her dog moved in. She paints my walls energetically, allowing previous painted layers to be visible, seen. The woman and her dog live inside me, morning and night. I look at the pink loop on the back wall of the sitting room; it has a lure, a desire, a lucky charm, a fetish bodily and surreal. These are Florian's DECONTEXT

artworks which lay alongside household staples. New tiles enrich the front of my bay. They travelled here from a room within me, leftover tester tiles from newer parts of the kitchen.

The forge of the lamp post outside has a swirl of steel, its metal foliage shares a patina created from the damp environment of being here for a hundred years along with me. I gaze upon it around 6.30pm each evening through my upstairs eyes. When lit, its crimson fire eases out a soft hazy atmospheric orange to warm the streets below. There's an artwork laying on my sitting room floor made with excitement by Jamie Cross. It's not a light even though to some extent it looks like one, it has a wiggling wandering cable. It's named 'Up the lane' it is an inquisitive work. I wonder whether the street light is ever curious about it? Cacti are in the kitchen, they have travelled overseas to be here. They hold a sensory court washed over by an avalanche of Styrofoam wotsits. It's called 'Post Ghost', a work of Tanad's. Do you remember those crunchy airy 80's crisps? So tasty. The lads loved them – melty, seriously cheesy baked corn snacks. Some of these styro-wotsits cling midair to a collection of household pointy cacti spikes. The cacti, I am told, have

travelled overseas from household to household. They sit in a cardboard box with rigid aluminium bookends, a solid line akin to the spine that binds a financial document. Its insides on the other hand are lined with a soft snug accommodating substance. It's an inlay made from a fine cork flooring material inscribed and carved out with flourishes denoting making time just as 'the lads' did. The cacti court now sit in the base of their box in front of a closed door to my office. The office was still an office when 'the lads' were here but then there were a lot of keys and concertina shutters that covered my downstairs backroom eyes. Eyes that now lay open looking into the back garden overlooking a place, where there used to be a little workshop which was also the boiler house. Now the office contains books, nails, measuring tapes, computers and artworks. Making is moving inwards.

A green mirror – a pool of oval – now sits atop the terracotta sediment bedrock looking back at the cacti or feet, whose feet? The artworks haunt me, connect me to my living memories. Tanad Aaron's carpet is called 'Reflector' it is Lapis coloured blue, crushed intense, regal, strangely warm, the colour of his old studio, also once a



home with domestic skirting. An electrical hole that pierced another house's skin is digitally drawn on the carpet, the hole follows its line in at the floor and out at the ceiling. (Lapis Lazuli can also help connect you to clarity, integrity, and intuition).

Lead in the grain / lead to the grain. The lead line, 'LEAD season' is the title, of which a wooden grain grows. An artwork made to resemble a common kitchen stool, made heavier, more permanent. Legs of lead that can splinter in an instance, resembling matches. This artwork of Tanad's is made from a sequoia tree; in its origin it was heavy enough to waltz. The wobble of the stool is light as a feather although it embodies the same footprint as that original sequoia redwood. On a tiny leg a love heart tattoo peeps a hello.

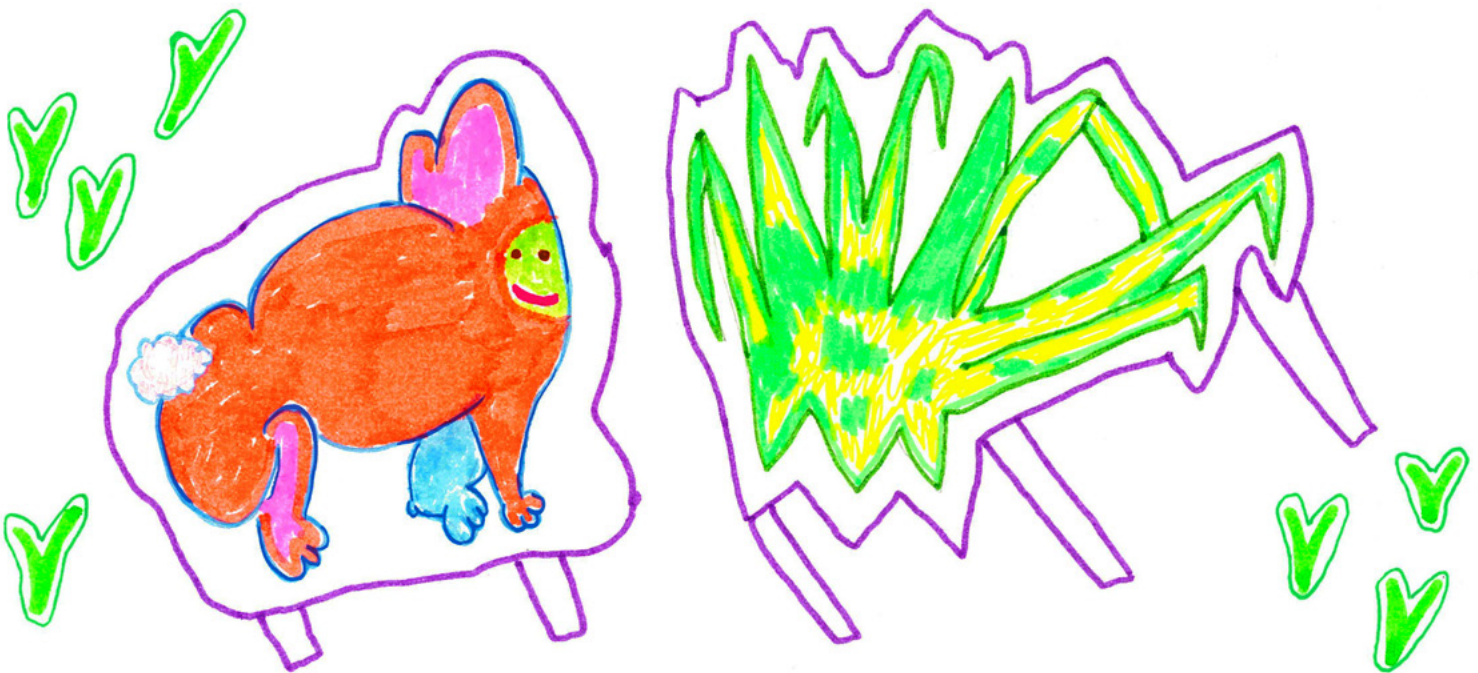
I looked over earlier today there were five men standing atop the village apartments, mending the roof with blow torches. I wonder if they caught that draft like pigeons sometimes do. Oh how it must feel to be swept up the side of a building, in the warm air current, to be outside your brick self. My landing is soothed by the tender ebb of movement, by the hearth of Jamie Cross's

apartment window. The artwork is called 'from the corner of my eye'. In another of his works the pause of autumn light is captured 'Take a break' is in the hallway. It is a magic thing which is rested up onto the remnants of patterned wallpaper, paper that George Bulfin pasted. It holds a light I only ever saw reflected in the narrow slots of the chapel, chapel of Isolde here in Chapelizod across the river each Samhain time.

These artworks will leave soon, scooped up by a portal off to somewhere else, maybe back to their artist's studios but their residue will remain along with the ghosts. This woman and her dog will stay on, what or who will they welcome next? I know they won't roll over me or cut my insides out so I trust them. How they and other visitors treat me in this current moment is moving, existing, growing as new magic is conjured.

Jamie's 'patiently waiting' is bolted into my front bay; it's a jacket casually flung, it's an armchair ready to rest. It is I - Glandwr, not I and not George Bulfin wherever he may be but I am happy as I always have been when humans and things/objects move carefully in and out of my insides.

*This is an imaginative text, called 'I always thought walls, were for storing letters' written by Debi Paul, curator of 'Where is George Bulfin?'. She has imagined her home, 'Glandwr' as a living entity who has welcomed her, her dog Poppy and the generous work of three visual artists, Tanad Aaron, Jamie Cross and Florian Weichsberger. 'The Lads' in this text are a reference to the men who attended Glandwr, a place which once was a day centre, a rehabilitation centre for men leaving the prison system. Glandwr is now Debi's home, also it's a space in which the exhibition 'Where is George Bulfin?' took place. It is a special place, a making space, a living space, a future place.*





# Oscar Wilde: The Critic as Performance Artist

*Emer O'Toole*

It's hard to get a grip on Wilde as he slipstreams through legal writ and public sentiment, as he furnishes the hinterlands of fact and fiction with his timeless eclectic taste. But here's something to know: he is fucking with you. Always. Because – and it's of this I want to convince you – he was a performance artist.

And, yes, I know I'm being anachronistic. Still, compare Joseph Beuys, dripping in gold leaf and honey, side-stepping through an art gallery and whispering to a dead hare<sup>1</sup> and Oscar Wilde, resplendent in britches, silk stockings, and flowing locks, parading down Piccadilly carrying a sunflower.<sup>2</sup> Asked whether he had really done such a thing, Wilde answered, 'to have done it was nothing, but to make people think one had done it was a triumph.'<sup>3</sup>

Performance artists fuck with you professionally. They insist you meet them in the autonomous space of art, only to razor slit stars on their bellies and say it's just pretend;<sup>4</sup> they ask you to watch while doctors carve up their faces and say it's self-portraiture.<sup>5</sup> And no one draws himself with more genius than Wilde. If it's a platitude to say he creates himself,<sup>6</sup> then it shouldn't be contentious to suggest he's all creation.

The painter has pigment and canvas, the photographer film and light, but for performance artists the medium is reality: bodies, time, consequence. Performance art is life aesthetically framed. It's art that won't be contained in its ambition for beauty and meaning: not by disciplinary boundaries, not by social expectations, and certainly not by so trifling a consideration as to whether anyone knows you're in costume.

Wilde's tragedy – his trials, his punishment, his death in exile – was an aesthetic intervention. How do I know? Because, to the extent that he tells anyone anything, he told us so.

And my caveat is important, because reading Wilde's aesthetic writing is like buying a season's ticket for a lecture series and arriving at the weekly venue only to find that the speaker never shows up. He has, however, cleverly curated the people who do.

'The Decay of Lying' is a dialogue between two characters. Cyril plays the foil, touting aesthetic orthodoxies of the Victorian age so that Vivian can subject them to delicious inversions. Vivian rails against his epoch's 'monstrous worship of facts,' which threatens to render art sterile and chase beauty from the land.<sup>7</sup> For Vivian, art does not hold a mirror up to life, as Shakespeare's Hamlet suggests. It only expresses itself. Life, however, may hold a mirror up to art, 'and either reproduces some strange type imagined by painter or sculptor, or realizes in fact what has been dreamed in fiction.'<sup>8</sup> And this – I will show – is just what happens to Wilde, his life manifesting not only the dreams of his fiction but also of his philosophy.

But what are those dreams? Vivian warns that Shakespeare's aesthetic ideas should no more be equated with those of Hamlet than should his moral sense be equated with Iago.<sup>9</sup> We're cautioned – elegantly, no pedagogical clunk here – against mapping Vivian onto Oscar.

Or, in another aesthetic dialogue 'The Critic as Artist,' a character called Gilbert blurs the binaries of analysis and creation, of reason and imagination, arguing that great artists are always exercising critical taste.<sup>10</sup> This time, Ernest is the fall guy, commenting – meta-eyebrow raised – that when the critic writes in dialogue he can create an imaginary antagonist to convert by absurdly sophisticated means. And Gilbert responds, 'Ah! It is so easy to convert others. It is so difficult to convert oneself.'<sup>11</sup> Again, Wilde hides from us. We're not allowed to know what he believes – if indeed he believes anything.

Still, I am not the first to remark the strange resonances between what Wilde writes and what comes to be. Neil Bartlett notes that though



Wilde did not meet Alfred Lord Douglas until 1891, Dorian Gray was imagined in 1890. Bosie was 'a fiction, one that already existed in his books.'<sup>12</sup> Or, Joseph Bristow writes that the fate of Dorian Gray, 'lying dead, a wrinkled husk of a man,' foreshadows Wilde's own punishment in Reading Gaol.<sup>13</sup>

For the late, great Alan Sinfield, these resonances are not uncanny; rather, they exist because 'Wilde's culture and his writing were propelling him, and all of us, towards the coherence that we observe in his life and writing; towards an image which as yet he could only intuit.'<sup>14</sup> And even in his aesthetic writings, where Wilde wriggles around, refusing to be pinned to anything as prosaic as a philosophical position, the coherence holds.

'The Truth of Masks' pretends firm footing. It's a neat response to pedants who don't like pomp and pageantry in productions of Shakespeare. It has some snappy aesthetic aphorisms that echo Vivian and Gilbert, and, it is, at first glance, in

Wilde's own voice. It feels as though we're approaching Wilde as fact instead of fiction. That is, until he concludes:

'Not that I agree with everything that I have said in this essay. There is much with which I entirely disagree. The essay simply represents an artistic standpoint, and in aesthetic criticism attitude is everything.'<sup>15</sup>

He will not be unmasked. Because Wilde is an artwork, and 'a truth in art is that whose contradictory is also true'<sup>16</sup>

But maybe you don't buy the 'Wilde is an artwork' shtick just yet. Maybe it's the case, as Declan Kiberd implies in his exploration of Wilde as Irishman, that Oscar simply lacks a sense of himself.<sup>17</sup>

And, I admit, it can be hard to accept Wilde's elevation of style over substance. It's frustrating. Really, Oscar? You can't mean it. Surely you, of all people, could wrap roses round staid sermon, could make whole gardens bloom if your blood

was up.

But if his blood's up, we're not to know it. When the war is between the beautiful and the earnest, Wilde will always be more serious about the trivial thing.

It's 'Pen, Pencil, Poison,' that pushes Wilde's worship of style to its limit. It's also this essay that I present as my hardest evidence.

'Pen, Pencil, Poison' delights in the life of the early-nineteenth century dandy Thomas Griffiths Wainewright. London's literary darling, Griffiths Wainewright was acclaimed as a writer, poet, critic, wit, and aesthete. Just like Wilde.

Incidentally, he also liked to poison people with strychnine that he kept in a bauble on his lemon kid-gloved hand. A flick of the wrist, a glimmer, a ripple. Oh my.

On murdering his beautiful sister-in-law, Helen Abercrombie, Griffiths Wainewright said, 'Yes; it was a dreadful thing to do, but she had very thick

ankles.’<sup>18</sup> A Wildean witticism, if a dark one.

Even then, the law didn’t come for the criminal; the criminal came for the law. With what Wilde calls ‘curious courage,’<sup>19</sup> Wainewright took the life insurance companies to court when they wouldn’t pay. And he lost.

Are we to pretend, then, that Wilde, ludicrously suing the Marquess of Queensberry for libel, did not recognize the curiosity of his own courage? That when his trusted friends – Robbie Ross, Frank Harris, George Bernard Shaw, and, doubtless, others – warned him not to do it, he simply didn’t hear?

When Griffiths Wainewright was wanted in England for forgery, he returned from the continent. He knew he was putting his life in danger: ‘Yet he returned. Should one wonder? It was said that the woman was very beautiful. Besides, she did not love him.’<sup>20</sup>

Wilde was forced to abandon his libel case against Queensberry. There was ample proof

of 'indecent' stacked against him, which the Marquess helpfully presented to the crown prosecutor. Wilde's lawyer urged him to leave the country. In France, they were less, well, English about such things.

Wilde wouldn't go. And in court, when asked to explain what Alfred Lord Douglas meant when he wrote, 'I am the Love that dare not speak its name,' Wilde described 'a deep, spiritual affection that is as pure as it is perfect.' Beautiful Bosie.

He was caught, tried, and exiled, which was 'to a man of his culture a form of death.'<sup>21</sup> Who? Griffiths Wainwright. Wilde's talking about Griffiths Wainwright.

His downfall only enshrined his genius. The aesthete supreme 'recognized that life itself is an art, and has its modes of style no less than the arts that seek to express it.'<sup>22</sup> And his biography is a masterpiece.

'To Oscar Wilde: Posing Somdomite,' read the Marquess of Queensberry's card, presented to

the porter at The Albemarle. I imagine Wilde particularly offended by the spelling.

And then comes the part of Wilde's story that makes no sense. Where was the wry, linguistic pique one might have expected? If a battle of words was to be fought, it would hardly be on the Marquess of Queensberry's rules.

Instead, Wilde chose to be tormented. 'My whole life seems ruined by this man,' he wrote to Robert Ross, 'The tower of ivory is assailed by the foul thing.'<sup>23</sup>

Instead, he chose a libel suit any fool could see he'd lose.

But consider this: the defamed huff, the legal strut masked not an excess of emotion but a trained artist's eye.

You can't deny the court transcripts read like literature.

Was not his habit of buying cigarette cases for boys rather an expensive one if indulged in

indiscriminately?

'Less extravagant than giving jeweled garters to ladies,'<sup>24</sup> Wilde answered.

And had he ever kissed a boy named Walter Grainger?

'Oh, no, never in my life; he was a peculiarly plain boy.'<sup>25</sup>

Consider: when he won the courtroom's laughter and lost his life, it wasn't a lapse, nor confusion as to which stage he held. It was a cultivated impulse; a mirror up to criticism; coherence in his life and art. It was the deadly serious expression of a trivial aesthetic philosophy.

The defamatory statement was not 'sodomite' but 'posing.' The hard labour that broke him was deeply aesthetic work. Wilde was so sincere, in the end, in his commitment to beauty that he not only lived for it but died for it.

'He recognized that life itself is an art,'<sup>26</sup> and his own a work of genius.

- 1 Joseph Beuys. *How to Explain Pictures to a Dead Hare*. Galerie Schmela, Dusseldorf, 1965.
- 2 This image was much parodied in Wilde's time, notably in the Gilbert and Sullivan opera *Patience*, in which the poet Bunthorne, who is based on Wilde, declares, 'Though the Philistines may jostle, you will rank as an apostle in the high aesthetic band, If you walk down Piccadilly with a poppy or a lily in your medieval hand.' Gilbert, W. S, and Arthur Sullivan. *The Complete Annotated Gilbert and Sullivan*. Edited by Ian C Bradley, Oxford University Press, 1996. p. 363
- 3 New York World, 8 January 1882, as quoted in Joseph Pearce, *The Unmasking of Oscar Wilde*. London: Harper Collins, 2000, p. 133
- 4 See Abramović, Marina, 'Star,' *Lips of Thomas/ Dear Stieglitz*. 1973. <https://www.nationalgalleries.org/art-and-artists/73907>
- 5 Orlan. Carnal Art. 1990. <https://www.orlan.eu/bibliography/carnal-art/>
- 6 Seeney, Michael. 'The Fictional Career of Oscar Wilde.' *The Wildean* 9 (1996), p. 39
- 7 Wilde, Oscar. 'The Decay of Lying,' *Intentions*. London: Methuen, 1891. E-book via Project Gutenberg: <https://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/887>, p.14
- 8 Ibid, 43
- 9 Ibid, 35
- 10 Partly in response to noted Victorian bore Matthew Arnold, who regarded the creative faculty as superior to the critical one.
- 11 Wilde, Oscar. 'The Critic As Artist,' *Intentions*. London: Methuen, 1891. E-book via Project Gutenberg: <https://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/887>, p.189
- 12 Bartlett, Neil. *Who Was That Man? A Present for Mr. Oscar Wilde*. London: Serpent's Tail, 1988. p. 196
- 13 Bristow, Joseph. 'Wilde, Dorian Gray and Gross Indecency.' *Sexual Sameness: Textual Differences in Lesbian and Gay Writing*. London; NY: Routledge, 1992. 61
- 14 Sinfield, Alan. *The Wilde Century: Effeminacy, Oscar Wilde, and the Queer Moment*. London: Cassel, 1994. p. 103



15 Wilde, Oscar. 'The Truth of Masks,' *Intentions*. London: Methuen, 1891. E-book via Project Gutenberg: <https://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/887>, p. 262

16 Wilde, Oscar. 'The Truth of Masks,' *Intentions*. London: Methuen, 1891. E-book via Project Gutenberg: <https://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/887>, p. 262

17 Kiberd, Declan. 'Oscar Wilde: The Artists as Irishmen.' *Inventing Ireland*. Harvard UP, 1995. p. 34

18 Wilde, Oscar. 'Pen, Pencil, Poison: A Study in Green,' *Intentions*. London: Methuen, 1891. E-book via Project Gutenberg: <https://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/887>, p.92

19 Ibid, p.87

20 Ibid, p.89

21 Ibid, p.91

22 Ibid, p.67

23 Qtd in Richard Ellman, *Oscar Wilde*. New York: Vintage, 1998, p.438

24 Linder, Douglas O. 'The Criminal Trials of Oscar Wilde Transcript Excerpts.' *Famoustrials.com*. UMCK School of Law, 1995. <https://famous-trials.com/wilde/342-wildetestimony>.

25 Holland, Merlin, ed. *The Real Trial of Oscar Wilde: The First Complete Record*. London: Harper, 2004, p. 207

26 Wilde, Oscar. 'Pen, Pencil, Poison: A Study in Green,' *Intentions*. London: Methuen, 1891. E-book via Project Gutenberg: <https://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/887>, p.67

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*Plenty of Shoes and Nowhere to be Going*, markers on Fabriano, 2022, 22.9 cm x 30.5 cm.

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*Floating Carrots*, markers on Fabriano, 2022, 22.9 cm x 30.5 cm.

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*Monster Munch Numbskull's Urge to Run into a Rabbit Hole*, markers on Fabriano, 2022, 22.9 cm x 30.5 cm.

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*Floating Eggs and a Happy Worm*, markers on Fabriano, 2022, 22.9 cm x 30.5 cm.

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*Kenney's Little Creatures Shiny Faces*, markers on Fabriano, 2022, 22.9 cm x 30.5 cm.

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*Fyra Bugg och en Coca Cola Cutout Collection*, markers on Fabriano, 2022, 22.9 cm x 30.5 cm.

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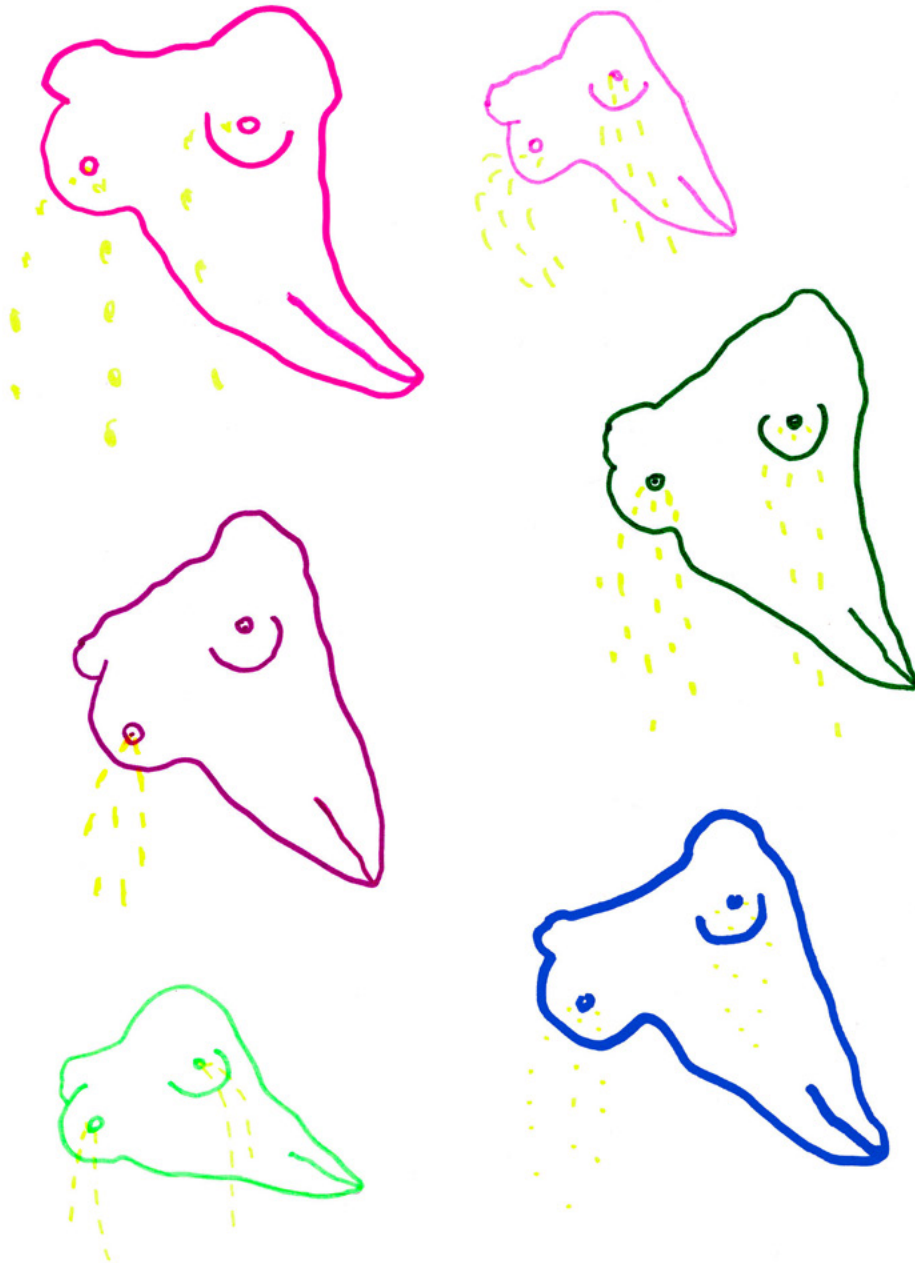
*Piggy Pig Pig's Butterfly Disguise*, markers on Fabriano, 2022, 22.9 cm x 30.5 cm.

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*The Giant Little Brother's Sick Dreams*, markers on Fabriano, 2022, 22.9 cm x 30.5 cm.

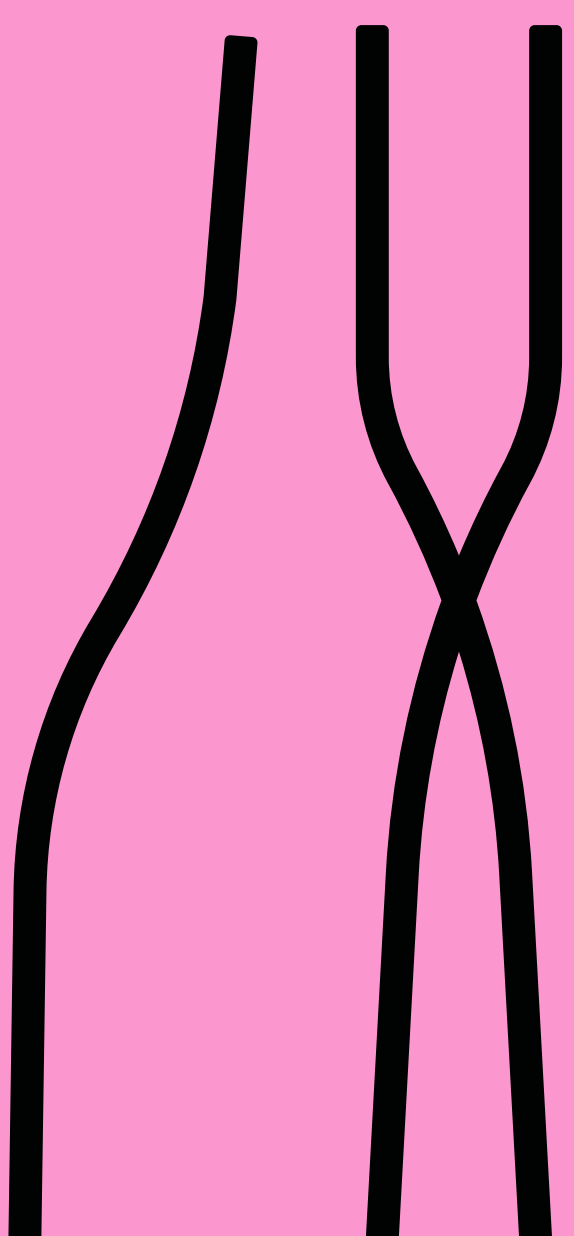
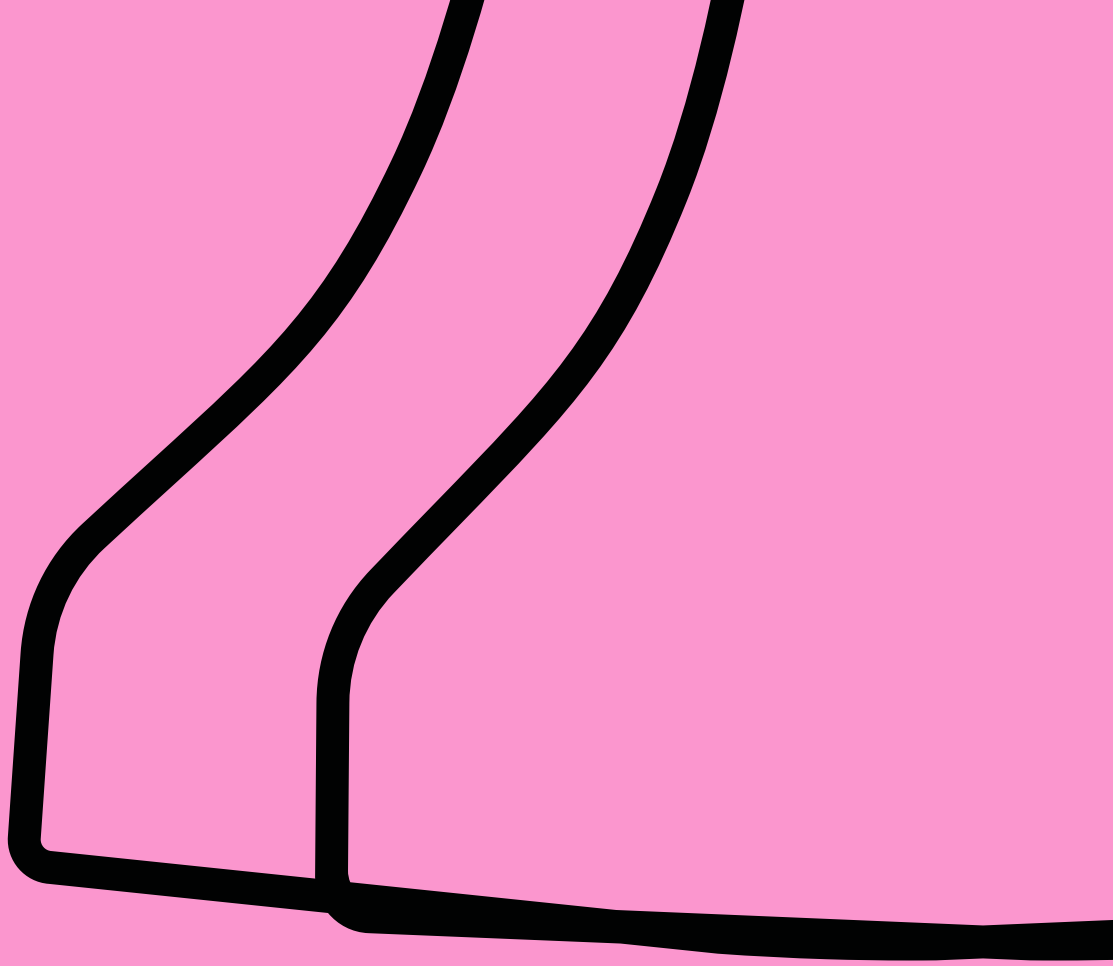
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*Floating Bodies*, markers on Fabriano, 2022, 22.9 cm x 30.5 cm.



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