JESSE DARLING
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Are You Tired Yet? Jesse Darling and the Personal, Political Condition of Exhaustion

BY ELIEL JONES
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The artist’s new show at Triangle, Marseille, explores mobility and its limitations

Jesse Darling’s first institutional solo exhibition in France takes place within a vast open room the size of an indoor sports court. The purpose-built 4000 square-metre gallery is situated within La Friche, a cultural complex in the heart of Marseille’s Belle de Mai neighbourhood. The facility hosts Triangle, a contemporary art non-profit organization whose director, Céline Kopp, has curated this show. Inside the gallery – named Panorama for its wall’s floor-to-ceiling glass panels overlooking the city – the metal-shell structure rattles. It is a windy day, but apparently all days are at this proximity to the Mediterranean Sea. The building is therefore a little tired, precariously holding together – and so, it might seem, is Jesse.
CREVÉ, the title of Darling’s new body of work, translates variously as knackered, exhausted, wiped out. In crude slang, it refers to something or someone being ‘fucked’ – broken, or punctured, like a flat tire. Throughout this exhibition, Darling literalizes the qualities of being ‘crevé’ through sculpture, installation and wall-based works. In doing so, they point towards some of the social and political realities that lead to the systematic inflicting of debility, by way of their own experience.

For the past two years, Darling has been affected by limited mobility caused by a neurological disease provoked by giving birth – something that they have recently begun addressing explicitly, in public. Their condition – which the artist describes as having initially partly paralyzed them and which is on-going in its inflicting of pain and illness – has impacted not only the way they live, but also the way they work. On the week of their opening at Triangle, Darling was suddenly hospitalized. The exhibition came together by delegation and in collaboration with Kopp and two local artists.

A fleet of paper planes made from folded aluminium are scattered across the gallery floor. The planes are stuck, not going anywhere, out of fuel. It does not go unnoticed that this room – with its tall windows and a loosely painted sky-blue line running across the top edge of its walls – looks like an airport departure lounge. The scenography is perhaps a reference to Darling’s requirements, as an artist, to travel, while simultaneously acknowledging the limits of their bodily and emotional capacity. Darling’s planes epitomize the uneasiness of the international art world’s normalized jet-set culture as both a privilege and a curse. As a port city, a gateway into France and Europe, Marseille has played host, albeit not always willingly, to immigrant communities from across the world. Though cruise boats and planes replete with itinerant tourists constantly arrive at and depart from Marseille’s shores, Belle de Mai, with its high immigrant population, is amongst the poorest neighbourhoods in France. Darling’s ground planes compel us to wonder how much of the local’s mobility remains stagnant – circumscribed by lack of economic power and/or documentation.

Literally confined are at least a dozen bouquets of bright yellow and white flowers installed inside two museum cases. Seemingly standing in for the artist at the opening, the flowers are fresh and voluminous, exhibiting their best selves. But in all their grace and celebration they simultaneously evoke their impending and inevitable demise. Visitors will bear witness to this gradual decay – and, with this gesture, Darling creates an entanglement with Felix Gonzalez-Torres’s portraits of lovers, friends and himself, for which he used stacked piles of variously wrapped sweets – ‘candy’ – as stand-ins for bodies going and, eventually, bodies gone. Torres’s “Untitled” (Portrait of Ross in L.A.), (1991) – in which visitors are invited to take a piece of the sculpture, reducing its size over time – was a form of symbolic healing for his partner, who was suffering from AIDS. However, with this work, Darling prevents the possibility of being given help. Instead, we are asked to endure with the artist – to sit, watch and reflect on an image of residual perishing.

This is less about refusal and more about Darling creating a space for recognition, if not also accountability. Exhaustion is a condition of capitalism – its scale of values, its drive for production and consumption, and the systems of power, inequality and exploitation that these engender. The art world is far from exempt from this; however, Darling’s exhibition at Triangle retains a sense of hope. This materializes not only through an interview between Kopp and Darling (made available as a printed handout and on Triangle’s website <http://trianglefrance.org/en/files/2019darling-jessecreveconversation.pdf> ), in which they unpack the context of making this show, but also through a series of leg and feet sculptures made out of steel rods and unfired clay that protrude out of the gallery’s walls. As if an extension of the building’s core structure, the lower limbs appear to be taking the literal weight of the exhibition. These forms recall previous works by the artist, where objects such as cabinets and chairs are symbiotically connected to cricked metal bars, at times also featuring crutches and walking aids. If Darling renders their sculptures bent, curved, often as stand-ins for unruly bodies, they simultaneously emphasize physical support mechanisms. Darling makes us think about dependence, not as a form of exchange or labour, but as an intrinsic part of what makes us human beings. If we are all only ‘temporarily abled’, as American philosopher Eva Feder Kittay wishes for us to understand, change or reparation will not only come in the erasing of the conditions and systems that lead to a state of being crevé. We must also come together to create structures of (inter)dependence – ones that allow us to flourish, rest, work and care, as much for ourselves as for others.


ELIEL JONES
Eliel Jones is a writer and curator based in London, UK.
Ballad: a slow, sentimental song, or a medieval poem accompanying music and dances, of unknown authorship and passed on orally as part of folk culture. The term Jesse Darling chose for the title of their Tate Britain show, The Ballad of Saint Jerome, pertinently tackles its concerns and languages—highly narrative and emotional, the gothic yet playful sculptures, drawings, and installations address myths and ideologies internalized in our culture, particularly in relation to the body. The specific myth that Darling looks at is the one underlying modernity, its religious, political, and cultural institutions, its medical-industrial complex, its white male gaze. And the specific ballad that Darling recounts is the one of Saint Jerome, the fourth-century Christian scholar who, instead of reacting in fear in front of an apparently ferocious lion, recognized and healed a wound in its paw, removing a thorn there stuck. On the occasion of their first solo institutional show, Jesse Darling talks of why Jerome’s is a tale of oppression and love, how values are fetishes like BDSM, how bodies and civilizations inevitably fail, and why flowers grow particularly well in a graveyard.
Isabella Zamboni: As some of their titles suggest, many artworks in this show appear as relics, parts of the holy Jerome's and his lion’s bodies within glass vitrines, or devotional portraits, but they seem at times relics also in the sense of leftovers of something that has been destroyed or lost—the hole in the central white wall, for example, the foam bits near the sphinx “strewn like vomit or confetti,”[1] wounded hands and paws, a cluster of birds. What is it that that could be revered here? What is sacred in your story? And what has possibly been lost?

Jesse Darling: On the one hand, you might say I’m trying to make a case for broken things and people, of which I’m probably one. But I am also suspicious of conservative ideologies that try to keep things whole—legacies, lineages, hierarchies. Archival and packing foams, for example, are polymer products designed to keep important things unbroken, but they will outlive most of those things, along with the people who wanted to protect them. And in this paradox of petroleum modernity, which is a kind of death cult, there is a hole—like a wound, or an abscess, or an absence—which I think of as the center that could not hold. So I wanted this hole to be the “altarpiece” of the exhibition.

And God, or nature—the principle of entropy and regeneration, whichever way you want to see it—will have its way in the end, and that for me is the redemptive idea. Of course redemption is a deeply Christian concept, but then again, so is “apocalypse.” In terms of divine macro consequence I think neither one is a real thing, but within the scope of a single life there could be instances of both. And in the inevitable failure of bodies, structures, and civilizations, there is the certainty of transformation, if not renewal, like how flowers grow especially well in a graveyard. I like to think of wild birds picking at the ribs of great imperial cities, and of the many ways that life goes on despite.

IZ: This act of projecting value or redemption amid the modern “apocalypse” seems to happen through a sort of short circuit between acknowledgment and complicity, condemning and ennobling—a sweet-sour overhaul like birds inhabiting debris. In this same perspective I see the roles of sex and affect you put in play in your works. The story of Saint Jerome and the lion, you stated, is an extraordinary tale of love on one side, but also of domestication, of subjugation within care. In his story that you recount at Tate, references to sex come up: male heroes receiving female attributes, Lady Batman engraved with breast and penis; strap-on harnesses or ball gags employed in the sculptures. Do you suggest to see love as a form of extortion, of exchange at a high price? What role does sexuality play in this?

JD: “Everything in the world is about sex except sex,” said Oscar Wilde. We’re talking about contemporary art objects, after all, which have their origins in the religious fetish and the commodity fetish—and which, like sexual fetishes, function as symbols of desire. But there would be no religious “fetish” without the commodity form. And where the European self is constituted as rational and Enlightened, in opposition to the libidinal and impulsive fetish worshippers dreamed up by European anthropologists, there is also a sexual fetishism at play. So this is a little bit where I’m going when I think about the lion who appears out of the wilderness in the story of Saint Jerome: a wild beast from a wild place tamed (or topped, or subjugated) by Jerome into relinquishing the law of nature for the law of the Father.

It’s a complex power dynamic: Jerome the scholarly patriarch embodies the power of the institution, but the lion has claws and teeth by which the scholar could easily perish. So there’s an implicit ambivalence, but also a mutuality. Queer sex practices like BDSM offer an articulate framework for working out these dynamics in a non-naturalized way as opposed to, say, normative heterosexuality, which is essentially a full-time d/s relationship in which the woman is de facto sub/bottom, but without the understanding that this set of relations also constitutes a “kink.” I don’t want to perform the gesture of addressing the straight world
from a queer place. I would rather that the work queers the viewer and not the other way around.

There are some technologies of sex in the show—if you know, you know—but many of the items that look like sex toys were bought at a pet shop and intended for domestic animals. The fact of subjugation doesn’t preclude love: people love their animals! And men love their wives. And if love is not enough, it still gets people through. As do painkillers, prayers, and other prophylactic technologies. But there’s nothing didactic to be said about any of this, which is why I am ambivalent about trying to put language to it.

IZ: BDSM as a way of looking at values as constructs, but also a form of relief within an oppressive love, brings us back to the sort of short-circuit we were hinting at before. One way I see this concretely reflected in your works is in a sort of embracing of the breakage—a “queering” agency, I may add. You appropriate ordinary and omnipresent materials like plastic, and tools like binders, toilet brushes, or medical equipment like crutches, to give them a new playful, yet at the same time distressing, life. The act of fracture from their previous status is visible and at the same time poetically sublimated—objects appearing spindly, infirm, gothic, but also sympathetic, gracious, warm.

JD: The figure of the medieval lion is a bad meme, a “poor image,” that traveled to Europe as a story in stone. Through several cycles of mediation the lion was transformed like a slow download, and by the time [he] arrives in some of those paintings [he] is unrecognizable as a lion. When I was very sick recently, I made a show about my experience in hospitals and waiting rooms. Reviewers talked about the sculptures as being abject and full of death, but I had seen them as full of life and resilience. Had I failed in communicating something, or was this failure on the part of the able-bodied viewer who projected their own worst fears into the work? I honestly don’t know. But I think I am trying to say that something “broken” is also just that which has undergone transformation (or transmutation, transubstantiation: from everyday objects to body and blood, and back again). And embracing decay in general might also mean embracing the decay of narratives or use values: a kind of unmaking of the everyday, which is what happens both in love and in illness.

IZ: I’m interested to hear more about your conception of embodied knowledge. How do you put it into practice, as an artist, and in your personal life?

JD: I think all knowledge must be “embodied knowledge,” which is to say empirical, limited, intimately connected to the body and its biography. I’m a white European assigned female at birth, and this is the formative set of relations and experiences that inform my thinking despite my own longing to depart from these things. And my consistent failure to depart from these things, or to raise my right arm above my head unassisted, or to master literally anything over the course of my life, is what constitutes this so-called embodied knowledge. There’s nothing special about me in that or any other regard.

IZ: I was curious to hear you talk about one work in particular, Icarus bears the standard: a yellowish pillow bridled with dog leashes, strap-on harnesses, and long straps, hanging from a mobility crutch high on the wall, as a sort of banner.

JD: I am uncomfortable with trying to talk about specific works, but like a lot of my other work it’s a bunch of visual and verbal puns slung together with magical thinking and is some kind of partial self-portrait. I was trying to say something about the heroic and the heraldic, also in the sense of heralding something that is not yet here. But the idea of the heroic is ridiculous of course, and so is Icarus, who believed that technology could shield him from entropy, who thought he was the exception to the rule. But I identify with Icarus in his machismo and longing. And his prosthetics took him almost all the way to glory! After all, who doesn’t want to look at the sun?
The final lines of Marianne Moore's 1959 poem, 'St. Jerome and his Lion' end on an emphatically triumphal note: 'Blaze on, picture,/ saint, beast; and Haile Selassie, with household/ lions as the symbol of sovereignty.' Representations of the Saint in the company of a lion are familiar from art history, not least in the case of the da Vinci painting on which the Moore poem is based, and in most of these instances, the artists choose to emphasise the 'sover-eignty' of which Moore speaks in the poem. In them, Jerome is seen praying, reading, contemplating the Gospel, and, in at least one case, sleeping while his lion companion attends him in an intensely chillaxed attitude. Jerome's power over the creature, his 'dominion'—to slip into the vocabulary of theology—is clear and essentially unquestioned. On viewing the works in Jesse Darling's exhibition, The Ballad of Saint Jerome, at Tate Britain, such hierarchies are not only interrogated and destabilised, but larger questions about the nexus of history, myth, belief, and need are placed before the viewer, and St. Jerome's narrative becomes a much more contemporary and less cartoonish one.
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Those not steeped in the biographies of the Saints may be wondering what the connection to St. Jerome and his lion might be. A popular legend runs that Jerome was visited by a lion at a monastery at which he was working in Bethlehem. Unfazed by his fellow monks' panicked fleeing (or desire to kill the creature, in some versions), Jerome confronts the lion and finds the source of the problem, a thorn in its paw which he removes, gaining the lion's eternal loyalty to him as they perform a number of good works together (astute readers of this narrative, not least Marianne Moore, may find parallels with the fable of Aesop known as 'Androcles and the Lion'). This cross-species partnership, in the iconography and parlance of the contemporary period might well be metaphorised as the relationship of Batman and Robin with the lion comfortably situated in the role of the earnest, but sometimes rather bumbling, Boy Wonder. The variation on the St. Jerome story presented by Jesse Darling explicitly appears to address this metaphor, pairing the lion with a version of the Caped Crusader (to use Batman's contextually suggestive metonym) across a range of works that are alternately comically heroic and intensely fragile and moving in ways that touch similar devotional themes as the more Moorean renderings of Jerome from history.
Jesse Darling is a master of finding the interrogative in the declarative, and 'The Ballad of Saint Jerome' expresses this quality in the artist's aesthetic in exemplary fashion. The scale of the Tate's galleries can work against some contemporary artists, but Jesse Darling's fluency in finding the questions that expose deflationary truths inherent in relations and spaces shines, not to say 'blazes', in this exhibition. The viewer enters and is flanked by two sculptures of lions encased in glass, one carrying a ball in its mouth and the other feeding from what looks like a hamster's water dispenser. These works are collectively entitled 'Sphinxes of the gate' and are singularly identified as 'Pet sentry' and 'Wounded sentry' (2018). Wounds, and the attendance of wounds, surround the viewer in the exhibition: wounded sentries, wounded figures, wounded materials, wounded walls, such as the one the exhibition's centerpiece, 'St. Jerome in the Wilderness' (2018), stands before. Composed of a collection of poles topped with splayed ring binders, toilet brushes (mercifully store-fresh), and rubber ferrules are among the spindly metal branches of these anthropogenic trees. This 'wilderness' stands before a gaping, snaggletoothed hole smashed into a temporary wall. It is a fearsome prospect, speaking of various forms of vulnerability and isolation, states ascetic Saints like Jerome may have coveted, but which carry particular foreboding in the contemporary moment of precarious economies, racist stigmatisation, and digitally atomised individuals drifting in an increasingly febrile politics which may well presage a rendezvous with the abyss. The objects topping the flora of this forest bespeak human physical vulnerability, but also the iconography of order and bureaucracy, thus, in the Britain of 2018, it is difficult not to connect them to signifiers of the country's increasingly vulnerable National Health Service, but any such single reading is far, far too simplistic; the work is a metaphor, but also a metaphor about the human need for metaphors.
Though perhaps a more muted work, the artist’s drawing on aluminum foil, ‘The lion and batman in the garden (temporary relief)’ (2018), featuring a kneeling and beatified Batman alongside a sainted lion nursing what is perhaps a hybrid cat-bat-child struck me as perhaps the most emotionally affecting work in an intensely powerful show—made all the more so for its willingness to integrate humour as in the drawing, ‘Lion in wait for Saint Jerome and his medical kit’ (2018), in which the titular lion crouches, half defensively, half giddily, while bearing up a harpoon-like weapon. Healing is going to hurt, for both lion and Saint. ‘The lion and batman in the garden’ is perhaps the work most directly connected to the familiar depictions of Jerome and the lion, but it is not a work of triumphalism, or of dominionism, or complacent sovereignty. It is a work concerned with vulnerability—be it willed, inherent, or adventitious—and the ways in which this vulnerability can create communities. It is, thus, a work of art that, like its subject, can heal.

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William Kherbek is the writer of the novels Ecology of Secrets (Arcadia Missa, 2013) and ULTRALIFE (Arcadia Missa, 2016) and the epic poem, Pull Factor (2016). Kherbek’s poetry collections, Everyday Luxuries and 26 Ideologies for Aspiring Ideologists will be published this year by Arcadia Missa and If a Leaf Falls Press respectively.
EASILY TORN, ephemeral, evocative—the magazine page is an appropriate second home for Jesse Darling’s work. In recent years, the artist has honed a spindly, pragmatic mode of assemblage, hospitable to bent metal tubing, hoodies, medical gear, fluttering plastic bags. When combined, these unassuming materials tend to sketchily conjure bodies. In this way, Darling’s approach to representation gravitates toward deliberate weakness, manifest damage, and evocations of mutual aid, as if to anticipate and then repudiate a context of toxic masculinity and wrathful white heteronormativity. In their recent exhibition at Chapter NY, for example, Darling arrayed dreamily bent crutches, wall-mounted and white-painted steel tubing that slanted outward like a giant pair of etiolated, striding legs, and a toilet for the disabled—its grab bars animatedly angled like arms, while elongated metal tubes reached to the floor to suggest an organism hobbling forward, or away. These unsteady means of support temporarily supported one another: They implied an ad hoc posse, transforming individual failings into communal strength.

If the covert potential of underdog communities has been central to Darling’s work for some time, so has engagement with print media. See, for example, the hashtag turned poster project #losermilitia, 2016: AND YOU WILL KNOW US / BY THE ASTHMA INHALERS / AND ANXIETY MEDS / THE TICS AND ALLERGIES / DRINKING PROBLEMS / THE CRYING ON THE BUS / WE ARE THE MISSILE, it reads, garlanded with sweet illustrations of flies. For Artforum, Darling presents something in between such circulatory work and their relatively substantial, if still pointedly nonmonumental, gallery practice. What follows is a sequence of images that ask to be read as fugitive sculpture, or as towards-sculpture: here for the moment, glimmeringly articulate, its assembly requiring no physical strength, its components trashed after being documented.
Some of this was created on the top of a defunct refrigerator that Darling—essentially housebound at the time, unable to use their right arm and reliant on a shaky left—pressed into service as a kind of sketchpad. (Variations on some of these iPhone images were beamed out via Darling’s Instagram account, untethered from ontological certainty about their art status. Crossing onto these pages, where they jibe with conceptions of the “poor image,” they remain somewhat unfixed.) The unremarkable domestic sphere, viewers might infer, can enlarge wildly if one inhabits it deeply enough; can become ghosted with magical thinking. One image, featuring what Darling groups as “prophylactics, charms, and placebos,” grids together a selection of what might be considered faith objects: antiaging cream, a Chinese good-luck keepsake, crosses, a baton of sage, a pricey anti-decay toothpick.

If this kind of amalgamation suggests you have to build your own hopefulness out of what’s around (and also, along the way, unabashedly illuminates the artist’s own compromised living conditions), such a reading is reaffirmed by imagery relating to Saint Jerome, the Italian priest and translator, who legendarily plucked a thorn from a lion’s paw and subsequently adopted the beast as a study buddy. In Darling’s left-handed, obliquely queered retelling—a drawing, or, as it is subtitled, a “temporary relief,” mounted on chopsticks and held up in a double-handed grip—two bloodied lions smooch. Another transitory sculpture incorporates a child’s leonine toy and a crutch into Saint Jerome’s staff, here converted into a wand of sorts. Jerome himself, where he appears, is far from a hero here, more a paternalistic figure demanding fealty and conformity in return for healing. (See, relatedly, the bellicose parade of repurposed dildos.) As posited by this alternative narration—and by Darling’s practice at large—the injured might be better off finding others like them and, helped by companionship, living through the hurt.

—Martin Herbert

Jesse Darling, Our Lady Saint Jerome, 2018
white clay, porcelain, Band-Aids, wings, propeller, chopsticks, lion
At some point early on I started to become acutely aware of the inadequacy, specificity and violence of (photographic) representations of the human body, both in my work and in the world. I then got stressed out about the idea of testimony in general, which is to say, the representation of experience, which led me to stop working in text and video for a few years, and start calling myself a sculptor. The relative illegibility of the object allowed me to hide in plain sight while working out difficult things, and I believe(d), after all, in the potential of abstract works to speak and sing in their silence, like a riposte. But in a cultural moment of accelerated visual saturation, the silence of objects can sometimes become a form of self-conscious camp: theatrically abject golem girls doing their little turn and curtsy for the nice moneymen. Film, on the other hand, is explicitly manipulative and didactic, and in the time of ‘post-truth’ politics (although in my view there has never been anything like ‘truth’) it feels like a good moment to explore the narrative form again, even if it’s all just fables and fairy tales.

I started thinking about this new film last year, while squatting in a studio in the industrial outskirts of Croydon in south London. Out there it’s a wasteland, just one long road and some big barn stores and a swathe of meadow that used to be an airport. Imperial Airlines was the height of luxury back in the 1930s, and Croydon airport was home to the first purpose-built passenger terminal. Nowadays it’s a perfect repudiation of the accelerationist narrative: where-all-this-once-was-grass in reverse, with gentle wildflowers and burned out motorbikes looking like the picked corpses of wildebeests in the Serengeti. Miniature ponies graze under the pylons behind IKEA and traveller kids play footy between burned out cars. It isn’t a ghost town so much as a zombie mile: empty billboards, mountains of fly tip, power plants buzzing softly alongside rows of allotments.

It felt like the realized iteration of a bunch of ideas I’d been putting around for years about how space is occupied and produced despite everything, and during a period in which London felt strangled by
homogenous development capitalism, it was a place where the cracks in the facade were in full view. Through those cracks grew bluebells and brambles. Dead pixels on the LCD ads that nobody ever looked at. I felt at peace there. It was lonely but it was okay.

At the same time I kept having this feeling that death was encroaching, at least in the sense of a continuum in which growth and expansion, at some point, just stop. Not a physical death, necessarily, just a feeling that a world I had known and counted on was about to fall apart. Now I know that I was right, in a way. This was before Brexit and Drumpf, but there was something in the air, exemplified or amplified by those liminal spaces at which the city meets its limits. It was a place in between life – the long grass growing slowly over the airport runway – and death, in the form of decay, obsolescence, waste space and real estate. In the wider world beyond the old Croydon airport, it seemed like certain ideas, struggles and identities were becoming irrelevant, and this meant that I (or someone like me) was likely to emerge on the wrong side of history. This was all right by me, but I wanted to understand more about the history in question so that I would understand exactly what was unravelling when the unravelling began. All the better to let it go, with grace.

I started reading a lot about the inception of modernity, trying to trace the beginnings of the trouble. I was learning the histories I wasn’t taught in school: coloniality, slavery and empire, the burning of witches and the hegemony of quantitative scientism. I was reading alternative histories of technology, Black radical theory, Kant refracted through Spivak, some Silvia Federici and Wittgenstein and Latour. I wanted to understand what it means at the fundamental level to be a modern Western subject, defined in part by a traumatic and arbitrary binarism that could all be Descartes’ fault, or some kind of ‘them and us’ schism deployed by early colonials, or who the hell knows? I started feeling like someone who grew up in a really strict church and never questioned the scripture. Despite its understanding of itself, it was becoming apparent to me that the rational doctrine of post-enlightenment secular modernity was just another form of theology.

Around the same time I was making some sculptures for a solo show called ‘The Great Near’, in which I tried to ‘denaturalize’ modernity as a form of syncretic religion, and I got stuck on Batman as a sainted figure. Perhaps because of (his) inherent queerness, (his) body, like the bodies of all the great martyr saints, felt somehow permeable, penetrable – something that I could enter into, expand inside of. But Batman also embodies every aspect of the failing, flailing sovereign, being a damaged, closeted, libertarian masc. homeowner with daddy issues: a white saviour with no superpower except money and a sense of entitlement. (He) was an ideal stand-in for my own body, with its wannabe masculinity, hubris and fallibility: features my body shares with the body of empire.
Often, my work tries to visualize the precariousness of architectural, cultural and corporeal bodies as a form of traumatized optimism: nothing and no-one is too big, rich, tough or powerful to fail (or just, you know, die). The whole project of Western modernity is vampiric on every level. Death and decline are not allowed in the picture (how else do you maintain a narrative of exponential linear growth?), so fresh blood is continually required to maintain the machine. But as the Situationists of my teenage theory crushes would have said, eternal life somehow equates to eternal death.

In my sculpture practice I’ve always been attracted to petroleum products, synthetics, alloys (the quintessentially modern materials) and, in particular, plastic. The uncanny of crude oil. Plastic in proliferation. A medium of immortality, clogging up the earth and destined to outlive us all. Celluloid (derived from cellulose, which plants use to regenerate themselves) was one of the first plastics to find its home in the modern mainstream, and now – in perfect ghostmodern synthesis – those moving images are transferred to the incorporeal digital, so the dead can keep dancing away forever on the silver screen (or at least so long as the grid holds out). In this and many other ways, the narrative feature film is the modern medium, par excellence.

Loewe frieze week editorial

And so I started thinking about Batman in the bardo: a road movie going nowhere.

Because of my issues with representation, I wanted the characters to be 2D animated, in partial homage to the comic books and Disney imperialism that helped to form the idolatry of high modernity. I started drafting character sketches for these two figures I call ‘Batman’ and ‘the ghost’. Batman both is and isn’t recognizable as the superhero: he’s also cuck, buck, horned god, beast and Viking; and the ghost guy is and isn’t the grand wizard, high vizier, dunce, cone-head and cardinal. They are brothers and lovers and enemies, and they’re stuck together in purgatory until they figure out that they’re dead – which they may or may not do by the end of the film.

I started reading the Tibetan Book of the Dead and parts of Dante’s Inferno (c.1320) to help me think
about what their world might be like. Purgatories seem common across many cultures, a sort of suspended space above and below the world that, despite the presence of orgiastic spirits or vengeful demons, are defined by a sort of dullness. Nobody wants to stay there long, like passport queues at the border zone. I felt like the bardo at the end of white western modernity would probably be a processing plant of some kind, like the workfare rule or Kafka’s bureaucratic trash basket. I imagined sex at its most baroque, without the radical promise; obsolete cellphones going to endless automated operators and ringing off in the call waiting time. That there could be a love story in this scenario felt both impossible and necessary. After all, the commitment to a certain narrative is one reason that it’s hard to move on. The characters are stand-ins, of course, and their conundrum is a metaphor, though not a particularly subtle one.

When I was about seven years old I read George Orwell’s Animal Farm (1945). I liked it alright; I liked books about animals. It was cool when they took over the farm but I was sad about Boxer. I have not read it since, though I understand I may have missed some of its nuances. Still, a story that can entertain a child while carrying the weight of history is something to aspire to.

For me, narrative film is always inherently populist and propagandist, producing total affect without consent – and I dislike works that look and feel like Hollywood but refuse this relation to the audience. It feels like fables and fairy tales are legitimate etymologies now, since fully understanding something is not truly possible until long after the fact. And as with all work produced at this time, it will be interesting to see what seems preposterous and what seems prescient in 10 or 20 or a 100 years, or what ‘survives’ at all, if anything.

Main image: Jesse Darling, from the series ‘Whats wrong Batman’, 2016, pencil on paper, 29 x 42 cm. Courtesy: the artist

https://frieze.com/article/work-progress-jesse-darling
Over the past year, I’ve had considerable difficulty maintaining my faith in art. In the short version of this introduction to an interview, I would follow that sentence with “… so I talked to Jesse Darling.” Though I’ve been interested in their practice for years, I have never actually seen any of Darling’s work in person – I’m familiar with the London- and Berlin-based artist mainly through their various writings, install and studio images online, and from their social media. This is fairly appropriate for an artist who achieved recognition as a (dissenting) participant in what most of us now rather sheepishly recall as the “post-internet” moment. It’s worth remembering, though, that six or seven years ago, a lot of people sincerely believed (mea culpa) in the internet and social media as a democratizing, hierarchy-busting force for good in the world. Now that the algorithmically-driven, socially-networked attention economy has facilitated the rise of the Alt-Right and catapulted the living embodiment of plutocratic, white-supremacist patriarchy to the U.S. presidency, things look rather different.

While it would be too much of a stretch to say that Darling predicted any of this, they were a prescient critic of the toxic masculinity and neo-colonial impulses that accompanied so much of the traffic in net-native culture from browser to gallery. If Darling avoided the speculative rush to capitalize and co-opt that swept up many of their peers, they’ve also dodged the swift neutralization and obsolescence that’s followed. In their fiercely intelligent commentary as much as their poignantly precarious sculptures, Darling has been enduringly concerned with the vulnerability of the body in space as much as the dispersal of the nerve system across digital networks. In this time of ascendant reaction and difficult reckoning, we are constantly reminded of the artworld’s complicity with dirty money, predatory sexism, and entrenched racism. But this is also to assume that there is any such monolithic thing as “the artworld.” Talking with Jesse Darling, I was also reminded that art is so much bigger than “contemporary art,” and that you don’t have to believe in one to believe in the other.
First, I want to ask about what you’ve been working on lately – or, maybe, not working on. What have you been planning, or occupying your time with?

Having latterly lost the full use of some of my limbs, I’m confronted with the ableist machismo of the values that used to animate my sculpture practice: ideas of “hard work” and “DIY” and “the gesture,” all of which are just variations on problematic inherited ideologies, unquestioned until now, that generationally provided the worker/settlers of my family with a sense of their own worth in the world. I felt I had a lot to prove, tied into insecurities about my own gender and class identity. But if I had a point to make, I guess I made it. Though this isn’t my first time around with chronic pain and malfunction, signifiers of the disabled, damaged, or prosthetic body kept showing up in my work somehow despite me. Now I am trying to think and work towards a non-macho sculpture practice by gathering and assembling small objects in narrative formulations, and learning to draw with my left hand. I’ve been thinking about modernity and prosthetics, and the idea of learned versus “automatic” behaviors – both of which are almost always the product of structures and mechanisms outside of the self.


Do you feel like this last year or so has been fundamentally different for you, as an artist? In North America, Trump’s election feels like a momentous calamity that changed everything, though I imagine that in the UK and Europe, it probably feels more like one link in a longer chain of dismaying events. Has the recent political climate shifted the way you think about your art, or impacted the way you work at all? Or would you say that events in your personal life have cast a longer shadow?

The year before Trump and Brexit was a dark night of the soul for me in which I was struggling to find any value in the rigged game of the artworld and began thinking that art is a sort of compulsion or neurosis – at least as it functions encoded by capitalism – an activity with no productive value yet something one can’t stop doing. I wondered aloud, alone and in collaboration with others, how these compulsions could be reified or legitimized as rituals in the sense of a religious observance: ecstatic witnessing, as it were. At this time, I was doing a lot of teaching, trying to help students locate their wound and speak from it, and trying to show up for people with the idea of one’s work as the alibi but also as the common factor through which we try to speak to one another or the world. In this way, I truly believe in art: its objects and engagements. But I worried about that, too; was I part of a fucked and privileged system invested in producing elitist discourse?
When Trump was elected I thought I should do something. I felt as an artist I wasn't doing enough. All the arts-against-Trump stuff felt so feathered and impotent. I thought about what I'm trying to do when I'm teaching and considered retraining as a multi-faith minister: not to preach a gospel but to gain access (to hospitals, schools, refugee centers, prisons, hospices), and to just show up for people, not as a representative of any organization or faith but as a representative of … I want to say humanity but this word is tainted by the modern colonial project, as with most words and concepts I necessarily use, having no other. I wanted a way to circumvent the protocol, and to address people's needs at the level of the encounter. But I want to acknowledge here that the idea of a multi-faith priest is one of those homeless notions that makes no sense to those who already practice a faith in their communities. And I didn't do it, in the end; the training is long and expensive, and life got in the way.

In terms of the work itself, I continued thinking hard about how to talk about The Problem without trying to exonerate or align oneself: without positing the Other as the object, which is a frequent strategy in leftist art practice. It always bums me out for its coolly violent, anthropological distance to the figure of the refugee or the subaltern: paternalistic orientalism at its most well-intentioned. For sure it's easier for white Anglo-American artists to talk about the fascist or the Klansmen as a different kind of Other; but I'm more interested in complexity and complicity, the libidinality of the investment through which we allow violence to continue. Whiteness as automated, as traumatic reenactment. A wound indeed. Trying to face up to death somehow: the end of a rotten epoch whose whole project was to banish death.

Becoming a parent brought me in touch with the continuum more than anything else; carrying a fetus, the body contains life and death in equal measure. I had already started crossing over, using testosterone, etc. when Lux came along and I had let some of my feminisms lapse as though they were someone else's problem. Only through the experience of pregnancy and childbirth did I fully understand how deep and total is my culture's own hatred and fear of women (usual caveats apply for use of this term: I mean people with and without a uterus, who may or may not necessarily identify as women). This was some kind of awakening also.

I think part of the ambient fear and anxiety of the past year — aside from simple worry about what will happen next — is the impossibility of formulating a coherent idea of how to move forward when the forces of reaction have usurped so much power. The response from the art establishment (ie. big curators and major art events) has been distressingly similar to that of the centrist pundit class: pure hysteria and denial, ineffectual fantasizing about how to reinstate the previous status quo rather than facing up to the essential rottenness of things.

Yes. Most of the establishment art class doesn't really care about art, I think; in some ways you'd think there's no skin in the game for them. But I guess the very existence of the artworld as we know it is hoisted and buttressed by a suspended set of values that must also collapse with the fiction of liberal democracy. And it's complicated because without the whole circus, none of our work means a thing. The objects become totemic, faith trophies or whatever — at best, that is. At worst, it's all just a bunch of worthless junk full of stolen tropes and cynical jokes. Most of the problems we spend our time discussing in the artworld are not real problems; they're philosophical or theological conceits, really, and nothing will change through the value-production-industrial complex of endless panel discussions. The world as we know it may very well be ending, not in the Alt-Right, accelerationist sense but in the Wildersonian afropessimist sense; this would mean the end of the artworld too, of course. We would all have to find some other way to make a living if making a living was still something one did. And/or we would give ourselves wholly to the business of life. There are artistries in everything. But I think again of faith, somehow necessary where art is not. In Octavia Butler’s Parable of the Sower the main character Lauren Olamina is what I would call an artist, and this helps her survive apocalyptic conditions where others cannot.

Well, on that note, how are you surviving? What is it like to make art in these conditions? On a personal, practical level, how do you cope with life?

I cope through evoking an imagined community, burning with probably quite risible faith in what I do, not spending much money, trying to be grateful, and practising pleasure where possible.
It seems to me that people who have real insight into how to deal with this anxiety and combat its root causes are people for whom this vulnerability is not new—for example, queer and POC advocacy groups, labor organizers, as well as people with disabilities or chronic health problems (especially when they're organized to advocate for themselves). On the other hand, people with these kinds of vulnerability are also doubly victimized by not having the time or resources to deal with their primary level of violence/pain/repression. Artists, meanwhile, (despite being accustomed to precariousness) are mostly unfamiliar with this kind of collective organizing. Artists are trained to be hyper-individualistic, high-functioning neurotics—i.e. to be really good at exploiting themselves. And I think this hyper-functioning also encourages the denial I was talking about before. For artists who are really facing up to the reality of things, what options are there other than withdrawing from a corrupt system? Where is the place for an uncompromised art and what does it look like?

Before I was an artist I lived for many years in squat scenes, running kitchens and making community zines and parties. We didn't call the cops, didn't see doctors, didn't work with external contractors: every need could be met from within the community, from plumbing to translation, and many people lived there who could not or would not survive "topside" in civic life. I learned a lot about social organizing: mainly how not to do it, but there were some takeaways too. I came back to London and started setting up these big share houses as “living projects,” mostly, I think, to convince people without the same political/ideological background to join my project of sharing resources as a household, which was my only model for living. I've since regretted subsuming these living strategies into what I once called an art practice, and would not do it now. If I were to organize, I would not do it as an artist but as a body alongside other bodies.

Making public my own vulnerabilities and inconsistencies was a decision: something, at least, that I felt I could defend politically in opposition to the “hermetic masculine” of “phallic modernity” — and this acknowledgement of the ongoing crisis of life under capitalism was part of what I called my practice. But at some point, I attempted to remove my own story from the work and also from the discourse around the work (an ongoing project). My gender, my disability, my lover/s, and my kid are not for curation (but here I am listing these things in correspondence with a journalist!). In this sense, I have already partially withdrawn, or at least have attempted a refusal. And there may be no such thing as non-compromised art but it’s what I call the work I came here to do. If there were no sense left in referring to that work as art I would think about it differently, but in some way I would continue. And the artworld is only an extension of the real world. I do feel like a missile when feeding my baby under the green sign of Starbucks with mobility cane and all the androgynous sports gear I'm probably too old to carry off: the very repudiation of what liquid-modern neoliberalism demands of its laborers, to remain young, lean, legible, capable, flexible. Wearing my wounds on the outside and flanked by what slows me down. “We are undone by one another,” wrote Judith Butler, and I keep that tucked into my heart. I mean that, as a parent and caregiver, I became fungible; as a failing body I joined the collective failure of all bodies, and from this position full of holes I stream out towards the holes in others and in this way, we might breathe one another, feed one another, flow through one another and sometimes fill up.

Jesse Darling’s solo exhibition, Support Level, opens January 21 at Chapter NY.
Frieze art fair 2016 review: everyone's a performer in the boozy, fruity house of fun

From the crocheted loo seats to the pram-cum-barbecue and roving wet bar, there are stunts and stage-props galore. Then you turn a corner and find an artwork that sticks in your head and stays there.

Jesse Darling’s March of the Valedictorians. Photograph: Arcadia Missa/Felix Clay for the Guardian

I have seen painted erections and sculptures of first world war female munitions workers, a perished inflatable dildo and several elephants, and a welcoming lavatory attendant. But not all at the same time, though the conjunction would not surprise me.

They are all at the 14th Frieze art fair – which opens in London on Thursday – among hundreds of other things, lovely paintings and silly sculptures (a stag covered in glass baubles, anyone?), not counting the people, some of whom are performers. Everyone is a performer at the fair. Even attempting to write about it is a performance.

A white-faced waiter in an empty restaurant proffers a small blackboard, with some sort of schematic face drawn on it. The paintings on the wall behind revolve, and there’s not a table to be had. My Heart Will Go On, reads the neon over the door at Frutta gallery, from Rome. Not your usual trattoria, then. The guy does his mime artist thing, lifting an eyebrow and twisting his mouth when I ask if he’s the dealer or the artist, and if there’s a table. The restaurant is a stand at the fair, and has nothing to sell except perhaps the set, or possibly the whey-faced goon with the board.

There are several quasi-real stage-sets here, with method-acting gallerists and collectors trying hard to be someone important, a worthy recipient of the things on show. Art fairs are always like this, the art reduced to the status of stage-prop. More usefully, artist Julie Verhoeven has taken the role of concierge in a suite of the fair’s toilets. Ask if she does assisted toilet-breaks, and her eyes light up as she bustles about, saying she loves a bit of debauchery.

But I don’t see much cottaging going on in the pink for a boy, blue for a girl lavatory décor, with its crocheted scatological toilet seats, the embroidered turds on her trolley (these are an acquired taste), and the tasselled fringe of bright white tampons down by the Harpic bottles, cleaning rags and Toilet Duck.

Verhoeven has turned the loos into an infantilist’s fun-house, making the usual business of closed-door deals and sobbing collectors more an entertainment than usual. I suppose you could call her project social sculpture. I call it a laugh.

A Gentil Carioca from Rio de Janeiro fills its stand with its own trolleys or work stations, by Brazilian collective Opavi-vara! These too have social purpose. A wheelchair provides the base for amplifier, speakers and a karaoke machine, there’s a pram-cum-barbecue unit, and best of all a wet bar set up on a supermarket trolley, with all the booze and fruits. Mine’s a caipirinha, but there isn’t time, either for a drink or a song.

If you want respite, there is Dominique Gonzalez Foerster’s remade 1970s room. With its period brown walls, daybed and mirrors, it corresponds to a description of film-maker Rainer Werner Fassbinder’s own bedroom. The things this room might have seen, but hasn’t. But it is full of a kind of lassitude.

Gonzalez-Foerster’s R.W.F is an imaginary as well as a real space, a transposition of somewhere she has never seen. It has been built (at Esther Schipper’s stand) as part of a section called The Nineties. Several galleries are presenting works and installations from the period including early Maurizio Cattelan (a spoof Lucio Fontana painting, cut with Zorro’s mark) and a Carsten Holler infant’s cot, elevated on ridiculously high rods above a set of wooden wheels. One breath of wind and the kid would be flung to its doom.
Anthony Reynolds Gallery, in the same section, has a show of the candid, intimate photographs of Richard Billingham’s dismal family life in a Birmingham high-rise. They remain wonderful, awful images, and have more bite than much at the fair, or anywhere else come to that. Billingham has spent much of the past 20 years escaping the success these images had. Sometimes early success – and a great body of work – can pursue an artist down the decades in unforeseeable ways.

The best thing about the fair is to encounter works for the first time, or that one had only known by rumour or reputation. Seeing things for oneself matters, in an age where art often gets bought on the strength of an internet image.

Betty Tompkins has for years been painting the female body, oft in stark, in your face detail. Turn a corner at the P.P.O.W stand and there is her Ersatz Cunt Painting, a kind of pink glow. Next to it are a series of small canvases called Women’s Words, each emblazoned with often derogatory names given to women and parts of their bodies, from the affectionate Love to the Village Bicycle, from Bit of Crumpet to Dirty Old Slapper. They jostle over the wall, like a crowd of leering blokes.

Some art works need seeing only once, and sometimes even that is once too often. There are fewer novelty sculptures of people in abject and ludicrous contortions of human distress than previously. Gagosian shows potter Edmund de Waal, but no matter how good his books might be nothing convinces me about his precious little pots. Hauser & Wirth has a mad and outrageously crowded stand dedicated to the impossibility of recreating an artist’s studio. This is great fun, as you work your way through the stagey, cluttered salon finding the real and fake artworks of a fictitious artist, all made by the gallery’s own roster of artists – from Mark Wallinger to Phyllida Barlow, Leon Golub to Martin Creed.

And then, at the far end of the fair, I come across Jesse Darling’s March of the Valedictorians, a group of mutually-supporting chairs on bent-legged stilts, a kind of wavering community not sure of its place. Just like an artwork, just like a human crowd. It sticks in the head and stays there.

London’s Seventeen gallery has a snake eating its own tail as a seating arrangement, where you can sit and watch John Rafman’s virtual-reality video, in which, apparently, you begin in an art fair and drift into a horror movie. You don’t need VR for that, and in any case the art market is itself an Ouroboros.

Art fairs can give art its lame name. But work at it and things stick out. Some works, one feels, are only made to be hung on an art fair wall, the bearers not so much of ideas or a sensibility but of a fashionable name and the glamour of the gallery that tried it on and moved it along. Some things are destined for a museum, while others get resold in the parking lot or in a hotel bedroom, or back in Verhoeven’s loo, the unlucky and unlikely dupes of a moment’s enthusiasm or a passing whim.

Some things arrive on their stands cosseted in bubble-wrap, only to be embalmed again at the end of the fair, then unwrapped once more a few days, weeks and months later at another fair – in Paris in a week or two’s time, at Art Basel Miami, or, if they get lucky, at Frieze Masters a few years down the road, where they will be rediscovered as the works of a hitherto unacknowledged genius. By which time their price has quintupled and a critic like me will be cursing the blindness with which they reacted the first few times around.

These thoughts had me pressing the buzzer next to the ornate bronze elevator doors Ryan Gander has installed in a wall at Johnen Galerie. “Elevator to Culturefield,” reads the sign. But the doors don’t open and the lift is going nowhere. It is nothing but a dream of escape. There isn’t one.
Phoebe Collings-James and Jesse Darling

One of the seven freestanding components of Jesse Darling’s Liberty Poles (all works 2016) clattered to the floor at the opening of *Atrophilia* in late October, when someone brushed against it. So many signs are ominous in retrospect, but this incident felt especially preordained. The two-person exhibition with Phoebe Collings-James had taken its title from a word invented by the two artists to convey a “desire for collapse or stasis” (a fall in rest or hibernation, then, rather than anarchy).

*Liberty Poles* comprises several empty, upturned bags of Gold Medal-brand flour positioned atop spindly, uneven poles and a single crutch. Resembling a group of unsteady still-walkers, the sculpture—which is festooned with feathery red ribbons—nodes toward Juvenal’s critique of Rome’s commoners, who he said were interested only in “bread and circuses,” or pacifying forms of entertainment. Yet the pathos of this sculpture—with its weak limbs and basic nutritional values—does not suggest the same scorn for today’s distracted polls. Rather, these surreal figures appear like scrawny, ambivalent heredities who greet us at a historical juncture. Similarly elevated were *Valerictorian* (1), (2), and (3), a group of generic red classroom chairs whose legs had been extended to baby giraffe height, accentuating the sense of public bodies. It’s uncertain whether we are watching members of an old world order buckling at the knees or a new one shakily assembling itself.

Both Darling and Collings-James’s works are examples of a contemporary (and distinctly European) Artaï Povera, in which ritual and mythology are coaxed from the poor materials of a globalized marketplace. In Collings-James’s sculptural wall works, deep box frames display commonplace food bags. Finished in the glossy red of the International Red Cross and shaped like squares or the crosses associated with aid, the frames invoke a history of humanitarianism and its discontents: Each is as deep as the organization’s shallowest vessels for transporting dead bodies. *Draw Back Your Bow* is a square box with a pair of red-mesh onion bags torn open, empty save for a flake or two of onion skin, and fixed to the back of the frame with yellow tape. The sacks summon both Alberto Burri and David Hammons, but Collings-James’s touch is more clinical (aesthetically and reference-ally). The bagging and shipping of foodsstuffs are here aligned with the transportation and commodification of bodies, dead and alive. Collings-James’s objects are markers of international struggle on a grand scale, so that the violence signaled by the rips in the bags is actually always elsewhere. In the work *Bodied, however, things are more amnestiated. The cross-shaped box brings to mind forms of medieval reliquary, with the masklike white bag at its center seemingly imbued with real presence—a chthonic prothesis of global consumerism.*

Suggestions of divinity are in fact the crux of the connection between the two artists. Other sculptures by Darling included *Border Sphinx 1 (boundary boy)* and *Border Sphinx 2 (boundary boy)*, featuring a pair of blue lion masks wearing hoods ripped from Champion sweatshirts over caps, and *Liberty Torch 1 (Ace of Wands Series)* and *Liberty Torch 2 (Ace of Wands Series)*, each composed of a scuffed torch cast from a vibrator-shaped mold and stuffed with fake flowers. The amulet-like *Votive* employs what is perhaps this millennium’s heaviest symbolic object: an airplane, which has been fashioned into a small wax candle and swaddled in singed bandages, like a wounded bird or broken superhero figure. The solemn treatment of this small damaged object transforms it into a work of fragile iconography—a prayer for grace in a time of collapse.

—Laura McLean-Ferris
Jesse Darling | Armes Blanches
Galerie Soliman, Paris  24 February – 22 April

"Some time, somewhere, I was talking to my mother..." (1982). In the 1980s and 1990s, the British artist has been described by critics as being at the forefront of the conceptual art movement. In this body of work, she explores the idea of the body as a site of resistance and rebellion. The work is characterized by a playful, yet critical approach to the representation of the female body. The sculptures are often characterized by their hybridity, combining elements of the real and the imaginary, as well as the use of materials that challenge traditional notions of beauty and femininity.

The exhibition presents a selection of works from this period, highlighting the artist's ongoing exploration of the materiality of taxidermy and the human body. The works are displayed in an installation that evokes the atmosphere of a taxidermist's workshop, with taxidermy specimens and other materials arranged to create a sense of play and involvement. The exhibition offers a unique opportunity to see these works in the context of the artist's development, providing a rich insight into her creative process and the evolution of her art.

Annie Peacock, ‘The Artist as Taxidermist’, 2013, oil on canvas, 152 x 114 cm.
Photo: ArtReview
(From: Galerie Soliman, Paris)
For Jesse Darling’s latest solo exhibition at Arcadia Missa, South London, entitled The Great Near, the press release for the exhibition is edited verbatim from the Wikipedia definition of modernity:

the prioritization of individualism, freedom and formal equality; faith in inevitable social, scientific n technological progress/human perfectibility; rationalization professionalization; industrialization, urbanization, secularization; the development of the nation-state n its constituent institutions eg representative democracy, public education, modern bureaucracy; forms of surveillance

It can be read as an index to the works, in large part legibly assembled from equally legible low- and no- cost material: steel, cloth, clay. Barbed wire and plastic cherries gird Temps de Cerises I; plastic ivy the cruciform of Saint Batman, face of pink expanding foam; body of printed binliner. Temps de Cerises II rests on wood stilts and trolley wheels; a hot pink matte, flat, tall rectangle with bare branch that blossoms pink expanding foam (while a red flashing bike light bears signal or alarm). Colonel Shanks flat, tall, rectangular body rests on the A-frame of an aluminium mobility crutch and bent steel legs (shy or broken); its rear bearing bike chain and grosgrain ribbon; its front a white styrofoam staghead. Cavalry of sculpted clay horseheads rests on stems of bent steel mounted on a cheap shelf. On the walls,
mounted burnt eyes or faces of dishcloth flags, hoisted by steel frames whose arrows point nowhere, in opposite
directions: these named Domestic Terror, 1 2 and 3. Halos, horns or crowns of thorns; these spectres of good and evil
of the secular, discredited Christianity of white, western nation-states. The hubris and detritus of Empire is what The
Great Near draws from and builds on.

What it means to be constructed and deconstructed as a subject in an ongoing area of enquiry for Jesse Darling,
whose work thus far has spanned sculpture, painting, drawing, writing, video, digital and live performance. Jesse is
concerned with how human subjects are formed and deformed in the radically fragmentary, partial and unequal con-
ditions of modernity and postmodernity we have inherited and live in; with alterity in an expanded and reflexive sense,
the latent alterity of the potential sickness and disability and the certainty of decline and death, that which encompass-
es the human, animal and material world whether ‘manmade’ or ‘natural.’ That the aftermath of war may not look, feel
or be meaningfully different from the aftermath of disaster, whether as a human or an object.

Equally, masculinity, no less than femininity, could be a drag - costume, joke or nightmare. The single painting in
the exhibition depicts a head-in-hand Batman, streaming blood from the lower abdomen; Batman being, as Darling
emphasises, a self-appointed hero, hubristic and with no particular powers. There are moments of dark humour in The
Great Near, a palpable faith in the work of hands and palpable pleasure in vivid colour and a light touch. These bright-
en an essentially dark landscape. As Darling put in a recent Facebook status update: ‘The apocalypse has already
happened its jus not evenly distributed.’

https://i-d.vice.com/en_uk/article/59g4ea/jesse-darling-from-batman-to-empire-from-gender-to-war
Mene Mene Tekel Parsin
Wysing Arts Centre, Cambridge
21 May to 9 July

Walking into the single room of this group exhibition of emerging and long-practising artists is something like the inverse of opening up a busy social-media feed of shooting words and grabbing images. Pale grey, shimmering and mostly monochromatic, like the page of a mystic writing pad, ‘Mene Mene Tekel Parsin’ may be constructed around the power of the word, but its works do not brandish a message of certainty. The absence of images makes for an anti-spectacular effect, and
the words of the works don’t jump out, cajole or arrest you, you have to find them.

At the threshold, a projection of a poem below eye-level traces words in light (Imran Perretta’s when i (do) fall asleep, 2017), and on the near wall, two white rectangles appear from a distance to be blank. Approaching, letters formed diagonally in faux pearls can be glimpsed – Sarah’s Boulton’s how amber will fall, 2017. The ‘b’ of amber is written as a ‘3’; many of the words that make it into her elliptical texts were once poetically chosen pronouns, secret portals into personal browsing. The pearls have already started to fall off the wall in a random pattern on the floor, which is countered by a small grid of pearls still pressed into their sheet, order before entropy. There are many secrets hidden here, and I’m not sure whether, like spoilers, I should tell them.

The exhibition’s encrypted approach is foretold in its name – ‘Mene Mene Tekel Parsin’ are the four Aramaic words said to have been spelled out by a floating hand in the biblical parable Belshazzar’s Feast, indecipherable to ‘all the King’s wise men’. A humble man, Daniel, eventually construes a message about the end of the Kingdom, whose rhyme and reason religious scholars have debated ever since. The visitor, then, is called to reflect on the ‘writings on the wall’, which employ strategies of obfuscation and resistance.

Three silver scrolls of different lengths hang to the left of the room, a banner to the right, the former catching a kaleidoscope of light. The scrolls are Evan Ifekoya’s Ébi Flo (Flex), 2016, printed with repeated fragments of narrative in CMYK colours, telling of the closeness of disco dancefloors and existential pronouns: ‘Am i / You Me / Or are we?’ For with the pronouncements of language comes the policing of identity. The banner is Sulaiman Majali’s hero/antihero, 2012, an overlay of two pairs of words in all caps that require writing out in order to decode. Once you have, the piece suggests the reductiveness of social characterisations based on readings of faith or race, especially in the current media climate.

When the works use conventions of propaganda, they subvert them: in American artist and educator Kameelah Janan Rasheed’s Potentially How to Suffer Politely (And Other Etiquette), 2016, green clapboards in the field outside are printed with slogans exposing the paradoxes of liberal discourse that advise the oppressed to act with restraint. Recalling Martin Luther King’s criticisms of the white moderate ‘who is more devoted to “order” than to justice’, in this rural setting, phrases like ‘Lower the Pitch of Your Suffering’ read as a retort to Keep Calm and Carry On Britain in the face of everyday racism. Lines from Language poet Hannah Weiner’s Code Poems, 1982, composed from the International Code of Signals, respond indirectly inside: ‘How long have you been in such distress? / How many days? / Many / So many / Too many’.

Jesse Darling’s Bliss Symbols Protest Posters, 2017, translate mottos concerning the tension between speaking up and keeping silent (‘in silence they clamour’; ‘speech is never free’) into Bliss symbols, a graphic script of directional arrows, shapes and hearts which is not derived from the sounds of any spoken language. Now used primarily in special needs education, Bliss was developed with the ideal of universal communication in mind. But even though the exhibition, of which Darling is also the curator, features international artists, its shared language is that of colonising English. Threads of textual transition and (ill)legibility come out of both the artist-curator’s will to question the narrative structures of modernity and a personal ambivalence to being held to words.

Darling’s move away from in-person performance follows recently deceased conceptual artist Stanley Brouwn’s self-concealment, and the Bliss Symbols posters are pasted close to a vitrine of his artist book elli / ellis - step / steps, 1998. Recording materials in old units of measurement derived from the dimensions of a man’s body – forearms and feet – Brouwn pursued a minimal precision that translated to distances, walks or himself, though as an artist he was never physically present.

The task, as told through the works on display, is to figure out how to exist and express within the systems – linguistic or otherwise – that are imposed on one’s being; to try to escape the violence of categorisation while recognising that things have to be voiced somehow in order to be realised.

The three performances of the opening enact aspects of this voicing, and draw attention to the affective relation of listeners. New York-based artist Gordon Hall holds words and objects as approximate equals in an ‘open-ended object sentence’, U, 2017. The U-shaped sculpture with small handmade objects placed atop – among them a tile, a comma and a hand – prompts short texts read in the order the items are arranged. Hall’s measured mode echoes that of Brouwn, and returns to the etymology of the exhibition title, the individual words of which refer to both counting and account.

Claire Potter’s account tumbles out of her mouth, stop and start, as fragments of typewritten text with many crossings-out are shuffled on the floor like a desperate Tarot. The scraps are left beneath the dangling microphone as documents of attempted articulation. Experimental vocalist and movement artist Elaine Mitchener has the last convulsive words, conveyed through changing body and facial expressions, and non-verbal sounds. In moments of pain, extreme feeling or disorientation, language lacks and is lost, while the body involuntarily fills in the gaps. ‘I …… you’, ‘I …… you’, she repeats, but the missing verb remains withheld.

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