JESSE DARLING
PRESS

BOMB

Jesse Darling by Vijay Masharani

Sculptural entropy as an unveiling.

MARCH 11, 2024

Installation view of Jesse Darling: Turner Prize 2023, 2023–24. Towner Eastbourne, Eastbourne, United Kingdom. Photo by Angus Mill. Courtesy of Towner Eastbourne.

In lieu of the Tate-produced studio documentaries that normally accompany a Turner Prize nomination, Jesse Darling elects to shoot a short road movie with a voiceover that reflects his expansive, inquisitive way of thinking. It's an approach that is indelible in his sculptural installations of spindly steel glyphs, tools, figurative-ish ceramics, asemic vinyl tallying, surveillance circuits, and garments. When assembled in the gallery, they read like a set of hypotheses under constant revision, punctuated with gleaming aphoristic clarity.

Our conversation also arcs outward, away from the studio, to a discussion of the social abstractions that encroach on our sense of the possible—race, gender, the family. The idea of sanity is also normative, as Darling begins by describing how an unstable perspective opens up an understanding of the present as radically contingent. He recasts the psychoanalytic figure of the "ordinary psychotic" as a sort of social critic who sees our ravaged world as anything but a foregone conclusion. That critique is even possible implies alternative horizons, so when Darling depicts the European city as cannibalized by the martial power it projects overseas, he nudges viewers ever so slightly toward a different type of metropolis.

—Vijay Masharani

Vijay Masharani
I want to start off with a passage from Theodor Adorno: "The only philosophy which can be responsibly practiced in the face of despair is the attempt to contemplate all things as they would present themselves from the standpoint of redemption." I situate your work as social critique in this tradition. How do you keep the approach critical?

Jesse Darling
When I'm looking at the world, I'm seeing it in a lot of different ways. We're a narrative species, and what we tend to naturalize as normal is neither necessarily normal nor natural. Although I've got a lot of resistance to some of psychoanalysis's basic tenets, having spent time with Indigenous and Black radical thought, I'm interested in "ordinary psychosis" as a neutral descriptor of an orientation. My tendency to see from several angles is less critical than compulsive, as pathology and criticality are themselves entirely context dependent.

You could also say that certain positionalities are denied a way to belong within a given symbolic order, and maybe that then becomes a form of politics. And in that sense, maybe that's the critical impulse: to declare a new set of rules. We need to be able to imagine the next world in order to make it. If that's psychotic, bring it on. And the next world, if it emerges, will emerge out of ruins. People always talk about the fragility of the work, and there's been a persistent reading of it as a kind of lament for what falls apart; but I don't think of it that way. Apocalypse just means an unveiling, right?

Installation view of Jesse Darling: Turner Prize 2023, 2023–24. Towner Eastbourne, Eastbourne, United Kingdom. Photo by Angus Mill. Courtesy of Towner Eastbourne.

VM
The last show I saw of yours was at Camden Art Centre, and it featured a diverse material palette of tools, surveillance equipment, appendages, urban detritus, quasi-linguistic mark-making in red, garments, metal, and so on. How did you develop this vocabulary, and how has it stabilized over your last few exhibitions?

JD
I can't—won't—work with an object that I don't feel I understand. I only want to work with something that I have an intimate relationship with. So if my material usage has stabilized, it's because I've developed more established relationships with those objects and materials; I know how they work and what stories they want to tell through me. That's what objects are: citations. You borrow these signifiers from the world, and I try to use them like that, like common terms and known idioms. As a matter of principle and necessity, I never wanted to work with anything expensive. With the Turner show, there's some stuff in it that I haven't used since 2014: found wood, plant matter, organic stuff, things that show up along the road. Everything has a provenance, backstory, a trail of blood. I engage with that autobiographically, and so your palette of signifiers and materials would be necessarily different to mine, which would differ from someone else's. I think if one is doing that quite serious work of trying to map the world, the question of which tools you use is important. I feel like it's necessary to interrogate your own relationship with the things that you work with. You raised the issue of military technology in my work, and it's because I've always lived in fortress Europe under the uneasy protectorate of planet America. And this particular Marvel universe is a martial universe.

"I think if one is doing that quite serious work of trying to map the world, the question of which tools you use is important."
— Jesse Darling

VM
Right. I think there is something martial that suffuses everyday life in Europe. I feel the same way about the United States, although it's somewhat different.

JD
For years now, I've been riffing on the way that border begins at the threshold of the family home. As a parent, I find it wild that all the kid lit, as well as the Pixar and Disney universes, perpetuate this myth, itself foundational to an entire worldview. That definitely deserves to be interrogated and denaturalized. Shit's not normal, and the white-encoded nuclear family is a bad model for supporting the care of children. But at the level of access and resources, the nuclear family is rewarded and recognized, and formations that fall outside of that are essentially penalized, which has real material consequences. So that structure is a microcosm of the martial state that keeps out the Other as the specter of contagion, miscegenation, cross-class sociality, whatever. Since becoming a parent, this is what a lot of my work has been riffing around, which is why there are persistent motifs of domesticity, quite clumsily, or crassly, placed alongside barbed wire. This in turn reflects the crassness of terms like "home security" and "domestic terror," which evoke a breaching of the threshold of the family domicile.

Installation view of Jesse Darling: Turner Prize 2023, 2023–24. Towner Eastbourne, Eastbourne, United Kingdom. Photo by Angus Mill. Courtesy of Towner Eastbourne.

VM
I think it's common for artists who are raised religious to become disillusioned, and art fills that void. You, on the other hand, are becoming increasingly interested in religion and have even entertained becoming a preacher. I have as well, but my ambivalence toward religion is a sense of closure that it comes with.

JD
I preach in the vernacular sense in that I've been afforded more space and time for my thoughts as I've gotten older. Maybe it's gravitas or maybe it's privilege. I did look into ministry, but I have a few deal-breaking problems with the figure of Jesus Christ, one of the many prophets, who was probably a neurodivergent person—with a political practice of making company with untouchables—who was murdered by the state. Many years after his death he was deployed as a political martyr for somebody else's agenda, but no one's ever come back from the dead, and he didn't either. I said this to the reverend of St. James's church in Piccadilly, where I had an installation in 2022. As a priest she is a wonderful speaker, listener, and diplomat. She said,
"I'm not going to debate the resurrection, but in Luke, the oldest of the gospels, it never explicitly says that he came back from the dead, but instead that he is risen." So does this mean raised up on hands or bloated in death? I mean, what if consensus was developed around one of those interpretations? What if the bloated corpse of Jesus Christ was brought out on the hands of his followers? And although like all white liberals I'm very drawn to this post-Christian universalizing, this "all men on earth" thing, what Sylvia Wynter would call the overrepresentation of one category of Man, it is truly not the appropriate structuring matrix at this time. So, my plans to become a priest are shelved for now, but watch this space.

Installation view of Jesse Darling: Turner Prize 2023, 2023–24. Towner Eastbourne, Eastbourne, United Kingdom. Photo by Angus Mill. Courtesy of Towner Eastbourne.

VM
In a 2018 interview in Momus, you said that in temporarily losing the use of your limbs, the valorized categories of sculpture—DIY, the uninhibited gesture—were revealed to have ableism baked in. That remark has always stuck with me. How do you feel your studio practice has been transformed or marred by this event?

JD
Well, for a start, I don't have a studio practice. Like, studio practice? In this economy? Instead, I have a kid and some reading groups and a lot of physical rehab and a teaching job and one or two friends and lovers. The art world is a deathly world which provides nothing needed for the production of art. It gives no life back. So I began to do things that will give me life and divest from the rest because I've been doing this for a long time, and it's not getting better. You asked me about the red writing on the wall in Enclosures at Camden Art Centre. It's called Writs (2022), and it's a kind of counting or accounting.

I think about all of the lives that go uncounted, uncanonized by "the institution" in its broadest sense. I recommend you visit the Covid memorial while you're in London; I couldn't have known it, but all those red hearts, all that asemic accounting, has some parallel with Writs. It is a public monument at the most incredible scale. The unalienated heart of art itself is buried too damn deep in the art-world corpus, or corpse, to remember that such a thing exists, but it's there on that wall. It's not the fact of the work itself but the fact that somebody made it. And don't let the conceptualists fool you: that in itself is a whole politics. It's the best artwork you'll see while you're here.

artnet news

Art World Archives

Multidisciplinary Artist Jesse Darling Has Won the 2023 Turner Prize

Darling will pocket the top cash prize of $31,500.

Jo Lawson-Tancred, December 5, 2023

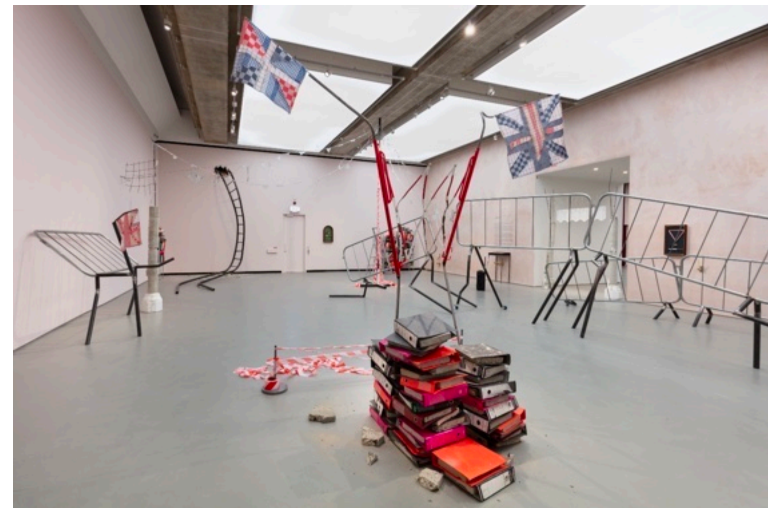
Jesse Darling at Turner Prize 2023, Towner Eastbourne. Photo: Victor Frankowski, Hello Content.

The multidisciplinary Berlin-based artist Jesse Darling has won the 2023 Turner Prize, the U.K.'s most important prize for contemporary art. The announcement was made during an award ceremony at the Winter Palace in Eastbourne, a coastal town south of London, and broadcast on the BBC.

During his acceptance speech, Darling took the opportunity to remind the British public that, starting with Margaret Thatcher, successive governments have been removing arts education from the national curriculum, so bringing about greater elitism within the arts. "Don't buy in!" he declared. "[Art] is for everyone!" Before leaving the stage, Darling waved a Palestinian flag.

On view at the Towner Eastbourne contemporary art museum, his darkly playful sculptural installation, replete with broken rollercoaster rails, red striped tape, lace doilies, and Union Jack flags made of tea towels, responded directly to Eastbourne and other classically British coastal towns that have been deprived in recent history. Describing a walk around the town, he recalled "closed shops, a lot of poverty, and a lot of old white people waiting to retire; you can see the effects of devastating austerity and class divisions."

"You've got to love something to be able to critique it," he concluded. "This is my country despite everything; it's our country. I want better for it."



Jesse Darling at Turner Prize 2023, installation view. Photo: Angus Mill, courtesy of Towner Eastbourne.

Darling has won a cash prize of £25,000 ($31,500), with the remaining shortlisted artists—Rory Pilgrim, Barbara Walker, and Ghislaine Leung—each receiving £10,000 ($12,600).

The five-person jury, chaired by Tate Britain's director Alex Farquharson, included Martin Clark, director of Camden Art Centre; Melanie Keen, director of the Wellcome Collection; Helen Nisbet, artistic director of Cromwell Place and Art Night; and Cédric Fauq, chief curator of CAPC Musée d'Art Contemporain de Bordeaux.

The work of all four shortlisted artists has been on view since September (through April 14, 2024). Each installation had its own highly distinct tone with which to respond to the present moment.

Pilgrim's RAFTS film offered a sentimental celebration of creativity and community during the pandemic years, a far cry from Darling's wry skewering of post-Brexit Britain with its many coastal towns now in decades-long decline. Walker took sensitive portraits of Brits affected by the Windrush scandal and blew them up into an impressive mural, while Leung's highly conceptual "scores," or instructions, for strange constructions were comparatively sterile and esoteric.

Founded in 1984, the Turner Prize recognizes an artist of any age who is either British-born or works primarily in Britain. It gained particular prominence and notoriety during the 1990s when it was awarded to up-and-coming YBAs like Damien Hirst, Chris Ofili, and Rachel Whiteread. Other notable winners include Anish Kapoor in 1991, Wolfgang Tillmans in 2000, and Grayson Perry in 2003.

The Telegraph

Witty, tricky, effervescent – why Jesse Darling is a worthy winner of this year's Turner Prize

From a twisted roller-coaster to scuttling crowd-control barriers, Darling's art impresses with its playful drama and daring

ALASTAIR SOOKE
CHIEF ART CRITIC
5 December 2023 • 8:00pm

Jesse Darling's No Medals No Ribbons

Thank goodness! I was so worried that the Turner Prize jury would mess things up; but, by choosing Jesse Darling as the winner, it has done the right thing, and followed the rubric, to acknowledge "outstanding" British art – though let's gloss over the fact that one of the judges was Martin Clark, director of Camden Art Centre, which hosted the exhibition (along with a larger, related show at Modern Art Oxford) for which Darling technically received his £25,000 cheque. (According to the jury's chair, and Tate Britain's director, Alex Farquharson, Clark "declared an interest", which was taken into consideration.)

Even if the jury's decision wasn't unanimous ("Frankly, it never is," Farquharson says), Darling – a trans artist who was born in Oxford in 1981, but lives in Berlin – was always the standout for me; the fecundity of his imagination, and sophistication of his sculptural approach, made his fellow nominees seem creatively uptight.

In Eastbourne, his antic, pink-walled installation of paradoxically playful urban dereliction features, among other surprising elements: crowd-control barriers, seemingly scuttling about like delirious, oversized millipedes on metal legs; a yellow-pronged rake attached by a chain to a wooden fence post supported by a crutch; a central Maypole (2023), wrapped with red-and-white hazard tape; and a twisted roller-coaster track that bursts, dramatically, through a wall.

His room has been accused of bittiness, but I see, rather, an abundance of witty ideas – which Darling, with that flair for design innate to any artist worth their salt, cleverly synthesises by, for instance, repeating motifs, and using a restricted palette (burgundy, neon-orange, Barbie pink) to provide chromatic unity. Most of his materials, too – metal barricades, cast concrete, pigeon spikes – have an industrial, street-furniture consistency. Despite how ugly and prosaic this may sound, somehow there's a sense of visual élan throughout.

The theme of Darling's installation is announced by the entrance to his gallery, which he turns into a checkpoint by juxtaposing razor-wire with a swathe of netting: here is a portrait of contemporary Britain as a curtain-twitching nation of enclosure and keep-out signs. This isn't to say, though, that his vision feels caustic or mean; if anything, it comes from a place of affection for, as much as frustration with, his homeland. Smaller sculptures, incorporating doilies, candles, cast hands and decorated hammers, evoke religious shrines, and brim with innuendo.

Darling's art may be, as Farquharson puts it, "enigmatic"; certainly, it's trickier to "get" than some of the other stuff on this year's shortlist. Yet, good art rarely operates in a neat, rational manner, and you'd have to be dead not to feel the energy that animates what he makes.

The Guardian

Jesse Darling wins the 2023 Turner Prize

Lanre Bakare Arts and culture correspondent
Tue 5 Dec 2023 20.00 GMT

‘A familiar yet delirious world’ … Jesse Darling’s Turner-winning installation at Towner Eastbourne. Photograph: Angus Mill

The Oxford-born artist won the £25,000 award for sculptures made of commonplace objects conveying ‘the messy reality of life’, and unsettling ‘notions of labour, class, Britishness and power’

Jesse Darling, whose sculptures are made of everyday detritus to reflect the political instability of our times, has won the 2023 Turner prize.

Oxford-born Darling was one of the favourites to take home the £25,000 award. His sculptures made up of faded union jack bunting and metal pedestrian barriers were shown in two locations: No Medals, No Ribbons was at Modern Art Oxford and Enclosures at Camden Art Centre.

Rapper Tinie Tempah presented the award to Darling, who was commended by the jury for his “use of materials and commonplace objects like concrete, welded barriers, hazard tape, office files and net curtains, to convey a familiar yet delirious world invoking societal breakdown, his presentation unsettles perceived notions of labour, class, Britishness and power.”

Turner winner … Jesse Darling. Photograph: courtesy of the artist

For his winner's speech, Darling criticised Margaret Thatcher for taking art out of schools because it wasn't "economically viable". He said: "She paved the way for the greatest trick the Tories ever played, which is to convince working people in Britain that studying, self expression and what the broadsheet supplements describe as 'culture' is only for certain people in Britain from certain socio-economic backgrounds. I just want to say don't buy in, it's for everyone."

Afterwards, Darling pulled a Palestinian flag out of his pocket. When asked later why, the artist said: "Because there's a genocide going on and I wanted to say something about it on the BBC."

The Turner prize, regarded as one of the art world's most prestigious awards, is presented to an artist born or working in Britain for an outstanding exhibition or presentation of their work over the previous year. This year's ceremony was held at Towner Eastbourne as part of the institution's centenary celebrations. It featured four nominees whose work was tied together thematically by the political upheaval that has impacted people's lives in Britain, following seismic events such as Brexit and the Covid-19 pandemic. They spanned sculpture, portraiture, video work and large-scale installations and – as usual – the shortlist attracted controversy and ridicule in some quarters.

London-based Ghislaine Leung's work – a repurposed ventilation system from a Belgian bar – dominated the space it was in, with the huge air vents and shafts taking up most of its exhibition space at Towner. It received mixed reviews, with the Guardian's Adrian Searle saying it had "a ridiculous sort of rigour", while others found the work, which also featured a fountain, incredibly dull. Bristol's Rory Pilgrim's work also divided critics: one found it "often heartbreakingly beautiful" while another called it "cold and stilted".

But there was almost universal praise for the two favourites: eventual winner Darling and Barbara Walker.

Walker, 58, from Handsworth, Birmingham, created portraits of Black British people caught up in the Windrush scandal. Many of the people featured were interviewed by the Guardian's Amelia Gentleman, who first broke the story. The judges praised Walker's work, which was sometimes created on official forms and documents, as "portraits of monumental scale to tell stories of a similarly monumental nature".

The work of Darling, who currently resides in Berlin, impressed the jury most of all. They praised the artist's ability to manipulate materials "in ways that skilfully express the messy reality of life" and expose "the world's underlying fragility".

Tate Britain director Alex Farquharson, chair of the jury, said that Darling's work was a "state of a nation" address that had a "timeliness, dynamism and a boldness that was really grappling with the world … and there's a lot of humour in the work and you feel immersed in its world."

Farquharson added that the work was juggling with themes of Brexit, nationality, identity, bureaucracy, immigration and austerity. "There's a sense of timeliness with all the work, and in that sense I think it's a really good year. Everyone in their separate ways, feels of the moment."

Since its inception in 1984, the annual award has become notorious for its divisive nature, with critics often ridiculing entries that sit outside traditional practices such as painting or sculpture. In the past couple of years the Turner seems to have found its feet again, after a period of uncertainty during which there was no definitive winner in 2019 (the nominees shared the prize), and the prize was cancelled during the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020.

Last year's victor, Veronica Ryan, was widely praised for her sculptures, which sat outside Hackney town hall and, like Walker's work, referenced the Windrush Generation of Caribbean immigrants who made Britain their home in the postwar period.

The Turner prize 2023 jury was comprised of Farquharson alongside: Martin Clark, the director of the Camden Art Centre; Cédric Fauq, the chief curator of Capc musée d'art contemporain de Bordeaux; Melanie Keen, the director of Wellcome Collection; and Helen Nisbet, artistic director of Art Night.

Darling says he already has plans for how he intends to spend the prize money: "I'll get a new tooth put in, pay my rent and buy my friends a drink."

The New York Times

Turner Prize Goes to Jesse Darling, a Sculptor of Mangled Objects

The artist won the major British art award on Tuesday for works that warp commonplace items into “something you’ve never seen before.”

By Alex Marshall

Dec. 5, 2023

Jesse Darling, a sculptor who makes scrappy installations out of mangled objects, won the Turner Prize on Tuesday at a ceremony at the Towner Eastbourne art museum in southern England. The museum is hosting an exhibition of works by the four artists nominated for the prestigious annual British award through April 14.

Alex Farquharson, the director of the Tate Britain museum and the chair of the prize jury, said in an interview that Darling, 41, manipulated banal objects in ingenious ways to produce work evoking a society on the verge of collapse.

“It’s always so impressive when an artist, using commonplace items, creates something you’ve never seen before,” Farquharson said.

Darling beat three other nominees, including Barbara Walker, who draws portraits of Black subjects, sometimes directly onto gallery walls, and Ghislaine Leung, an installation artist whose work highlights the difficulty of balancing motherhood with an art career. Also nominated was Rory Pilgrim, a multimedia artist and musician.

Darling, whose work also includes performance and digital elements, studied at the Gerrit Rietveld Academy, in Amsterdam, and at Central Saint Martins and the Slade School of Fine Art, two respected London schools. As well as making art, he told an interviewer in 2012, he had “done just about everything for money” including music journalism, sex work and stints as a chef.

Visitors viewing Darling’s artwork at the Towner Eastbourne art museum in October. Jeremie Souteyrat for The New York Times

He began gaining prominence in Britain in his thirties, exhibiting at the 2019 Venice Biennale and at the Tate Britain in London. The Turner Prize nomination, however, came for two solo shows at smaller institutions: Modern Art Oxford and Camden Art Center. He now lives in Berlin.

Several leading British art critics said that Darling should win the award after seeing the exhibition at Towner Eastbourne, where Darling’s contribution includes metal crowd barriers bent so they resemble animals crawling across the gallery floor or urinating against the walls.

Alastair Sooke, writing in The Daily Telegraph newspaper, said that Darling’s work was “the most exhilarating” he had seen nominated for the Turner Prize in many years. Darling’s art “boils and bubbles with brilliant ideas and touches,” Sooke added.

Founded in 1984, the Turner Prize is one of the international art world’s major prizes. Many past winners, including Steve McQueen, Antony Gormley and Damien Hirst, have gone on to become stars. Yet in recent years, the Turner Prize has been disparaged for focusing on artists whose work had more to do with political activism than aesthetics.

A critic for The Daily Telegraph wrote that Darling's work "boils and bubbles with brilliant ideas and touches." Jeremie Souteyrat for The New York Times

Last year's award was widely seen as a return to form: It went to Veronica Ryan, a sculptor whose work has been shown at the Whitney Biennial.

Darling will receive 25,000 pounds, about $31,500 in prize money. In a BBC interview last month, Darling said he did not know how he would spend it. "I might use it to retrain," he said. Farquharson said that he hoped Darling was joking.

Alex Marshall is a European culture reporter, based in London. More about Alex Marshall

A version of this article appears in print on , Section C, Page 3 of the New York edition with the headline: Art Prize Rewards Sculptor Who Mangles to Transform

BBC

Turner Prize: Jesse Darling wins for 'delirious' art using tattered flags and barbed wire

5 December

By Ian Youngs
Entertainment & arts reporter

Jesse Darling has given crowd control barriers legs and made them look like they are running amok

An exhibition featuring crowd control barriers that have gone out of control, twisted railway tracks, barbed wire and tattered union jack bunting - all making a comment on modern British life - has won this year's Turner Prize.

Jesse Darling picked up the prestigious art award and its £25,000 cheque at a ceremony in Eastbourne, East Sussex.

He has spoken about being inspired by his view of the effects of austerity, Brexit and the pandemic on the town, and the "hostile environment" immigration policy.

Speaking to BBC News after his win, he explained: "You have to love something to be able to critique it. I was born in this country and I'm looking at what's going on here.

The artist says he uses objects that are cheap and easy to find, but that hold meaning for viewers

"I wanted to make a work that reflected that, and I wanted to make work about Britain for the British public.

"Whether they like it or don't like it, it was a great honour and privilege to be able to do something so public for the British public."

The judges praised his use of common objects like barriers, hazard tape, office files and net curtains "to convey a familiar yet delirious world".

Barbed wire and a piece of net curtain hang above a crumbling mock checkpoint at the gallery entrance

Tattered and faded union jack bunting hangs from the ceiling

Darling said he would spend his prize money on dentistry and rent

"Invoking societal breakdown, his presentation unsettles perceived notions of labour, class, Britishness and power," they said.

The chair of the judges, Tate Britain director Alex Farquharson, added that his art was "bold", "engaging" and partly a reflection on "the state of the nation".
"It's one element of it, one layer of it. I don't think it's the whole story. There is some sense, from his point of view, that these are times of crisis."

In his acceptance speech, Darling also spoke up for the power of teaching children art in schools, and said Conservative governments had sent the message that self-expression and culture were "only for particular kinds of people from particular socio-economic backgrounds".
"Don't buy in. It's for everyone," he said.
At the end of his speech, Darling pulled a Palestinian flag out of his coat pocket and waved it.

Analysis
By Katie Razzall
Culture editor

Jesse Darling was many of the critics' favourite for the prize. His room of jaunty crash barriers and union jacks is inventive and original.

Darling - who was born in Oxford but lives and works in Berlin - has said he is reflecting the hostile environment in the UK towards immigration in this work.

The exhibition entrances are turned into checkpoints complete with barbed wire. But the space itself feels alive and humorous.

That's down to the crowd control barriers Darling has sculpted at prancing angles. This is anthropomorphising writ large - the very things that are used to corral people by the police are given a life of their own, turned into creatures that can't be controlled.

We're also surrounded by frilly curtains and a maypole adorned with police tape and anti-pigeon spikes.

Darling has said British towns these days are showing the effects of austerity, Brexit and Covid. He's riffing on that in a show that tackles nationhood and British identity.

All the four nominated artists were reflecting what's happening in Britain right now. In the end, Darling was felt by the judges to be a cut above.

The other nominated artists were Ghislaine Leung, Rory Pilgrim and Barbara Walker.

The Telegraph's art critic Alastair Sooke called Darling's room at Eastbourne's Towner gallery "the most exhilarating presentation I've encountered at the annual exhibition in recent years".

Files are filled with concrete as a comment on bureaucracy

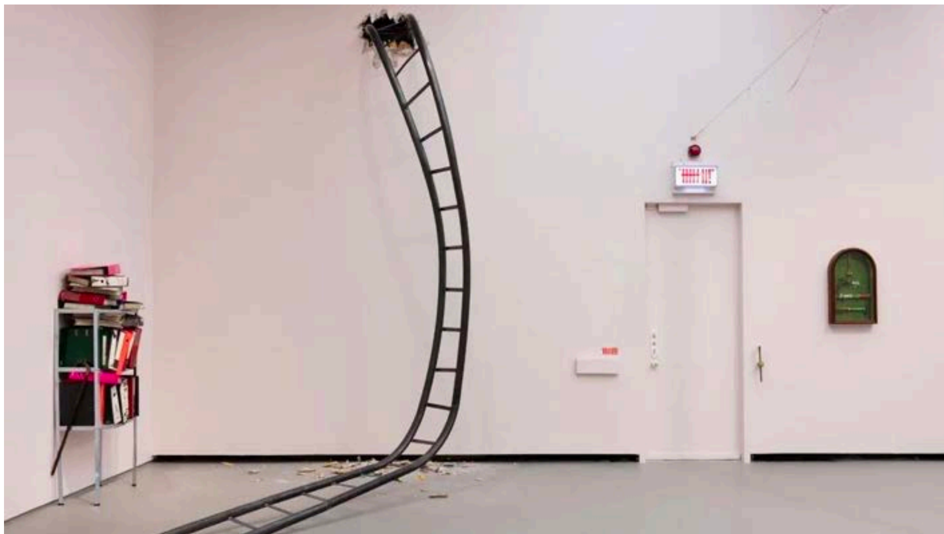
Sooke wrote that the artist "offers an unruly vision of contemporary Britain as both ruinous and suffused with impish magic".

"Compared with such sculpturally compelling work, which boils and bubbles with brilliant ideas and touches, the offerings from the other shortlisted artists seem lukewarm."

However, **the Sunday Times' Waldemar Januszczak** did not like Darling's entry. "I suppose it's a glumly poetic interpretation of Britain today," he wrote.

"Where it fails is in its overall visual impact. It's too bitty."

A cabinet contains hammers that are decorated like toys, with colourful ribbons and bells



Rollercoaster rails appear to crash through the gallery wall

Darling, 41, who only went to art school in his 30s, was nominated for two exhibitions in Oxford and London last year.

He said he would use the prize money to "get some dentistry [and] I'll probably pay my rent."

The Guardian

Toys, twisted rollercoasters, rooftop fountains: meet this year's Turner Prize nominees

Nicholas Wroe
Sat 23 Sep 2023 11.55 BST

Barbara Walker, Ghislaine Leung, Rory Pilgrim and Jesse Darling explain what's gone into their nominated work – from a 'dysfunctional' steel rollercoaster to a dramatic fountain splashing water on to the venue floor

The Turner prize shortlist, as jury chair and Tate Britain director Alex Farquharson rightly points out, provides an annual "snapshot of British artistic talent". But this year, the last word you would use to describe the actual work of the four shortlisted artists is "snapshot". Instead, they have all engaged – through a variety of approaches and mediums – with the long-term and the bigger picture, seen through remarkably wide-angled political and social lenses.

The rules of the prize have changed over the years but three of the four artists – Ghislaine Leung, Rory Pilgrim and Jesse Darling, all born in the 1980s – would fall under the now discontinued age limit of artists under 50; the other artist nominated this time, Barbara Walker, was born in the 1960s. Only Walker and Leung are based permanently in the UK, with Pilgrim moving between the Netherlands and Dorset, and Darling working from Berlin. The shows for which they were nominated also extend beyond the UK, with Walker's Burden of Proof being shown at the Sharjah Biennial in the United Arab Emirates and Leung's Fountains in Copenhagen, Denmark.

Here, the artists reveal their plans for the Turner prize show, which opens at the Towner Eastbourne this month. All four offer critiques of the structural, the systemic and established ways of thinking and doing, while simultaneously exhibiting empathy and sensitivity to individuals, from victims of the Windrush scandal to some of those hit hardest by lockdown and Covid-19. The winner of the £25,000 prize will be announced on 5 December.

Jesse Darling

Jesse Darling's No Medals No Ribbons, 2022. Photograph: Ben Westoby/ Modern Art Oxford

"I grew up in Oxford, so it was quite a big deal," says Jesse Darling of the nominated show at Modern Art Oxford entitled No Medals No Ribbons. The title alludes to a relative of Darling who, as a prisoner of war in Germany in the second world war, made prosthetics for the arms and legs of injured comrades from scrap obtained in the camp. After the war he modestly declined to be honoured. Darling's work similarly appears to use apparent detritus for related ends.

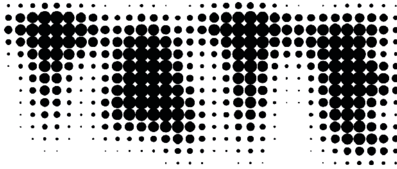
The show took in work from the last decade or so – “very much not a retrospective, but interesting to see what tune I’d been singing all this time” – and included a “dysfunctional” steel rollercoaster, held together in part by bandages; modified mobility aids such as “crawling canes”; “embarrassed” billboards with models’ faces turned to the wall as “if ashamed of having to sell different things all the time”; and assorted creaturely, heavenly, as well as more everyday objects, in various constructions.

“It feels sort of optimistic to know nothing lasts for ever. And that which feels totally intractable, is essentially bodily”

Darling’s work has often been discussed in terms of fragility or impermanence or vulnerability, and sometimes interpreted as a personal statement. But Darling sees the sense of precarity as reflective of a more general mood. “The work has been written about as though it’s an expression of my personal fragility, but actually it’s a wider political instability. I’ve always had a kind of conviction that things are not so stable and the idea that things are stable and continuous is often deployed by the likes of empires for obvious reasons.”

Darling has also been nominated for a show at Camden Art Centre, Enclosures, that used bricks and clay to explore the fact that Britain is in “an ongoing process with the privatisation of public space, and consequent effect on the social environment”. Although the Turner exhibition prefers not to show new work, Darling is not one to “plug and play” and is now mulling “those steel barriers with little legs that, if you choose to look, are absolutely everywhere. Maybe they’ll force people to move in a certain way in the gallery, and whether that becomes malignant or funny or sad or damaged, will emerge.”

And as for the sense of impermanence across the work, Darling notes that this idea extends beyond the individual body to all human edifices, “including political systems, hegemonies, institutions and so on. It feels sort of optimistic to know that nothing lasts for ever. And that which feels totally intractable, is essentially bodily in some way and therefore subject to the same kinds of seduction, dereliction and transformation. If we think of other people, things and beings as being fungible just as we are, it becomes difficult to despise any of them.”



Turner Prize 2023 shortlist announced

PRESS RELEASE 27 APRIL 2023

Tate Britain today announced the four artists who have been shortlisted for the Turner Prize 2023: Jesse Darling, Ghislaine Leung, Rory Pilgrim and Barbara Walker. An exhibition of their work will be held at Towner Eastbourne, East Sussex, from 28 September 2023 to 14 April 2024 as a major moment in the gallery's centenary celebrations. The winner will be announced on 5 December 2023 at an award ceremony in Eastbourne's Winter Gardens.

Jesse Darling

Nominated for his solo exhibitions No Medals, No Ribbons at Modern Art Oxford and Enclosures at Camden Art Centre. Darling's work encompasses sculptures and installations which evoke the vulnerability of the human body and the precariousness of power structures. The jury was struck by Darling's ability to manipulate materials in ways that skillfully express the messy reality of life. They felt that these exhibitions revealed the breadth and integrity of Darling's practice, exposing the world's underlying fragility and refusing to make oneself appear legible and functioning to others.

One of the world's best-known prizes for the visual arts, the Turner Prize aims to promote public debate around new developments in contemporary British art. Established in 1984, the prize is named after the radical painter JMW Turner (1775-1851) and is awarded each year to a British artist for an outstanding exhibition or other presentation of their work. The Turner Prize winner will be awarded £25,000 with £10,000 awarded to the other shortlisted artists.

Turner Prize 2023 is part of Towner 100, a year-long centenary celebration of arts and culture across Eastbourne. The programme launched with two displays this spring exploring the Towner Collection past and present. Towner 100 will continue with a large-scale exhibition of Barbara Hepworth's sculptures this spring, followed by the Turner Prize in the autumn.

The members of the Turner Prize 2023 jury are Martin Clark, Director, Camden Art Centre; Cédric Fauq, Chief Curator, Capc musée d'art contemporain de Bordeaux; Melanie Keen, Director of Wellcome Collection; and Helen Nisbet, Artistic Director, Art Night. The jury is chaired by Alex Farquharson, Director, Tate Britain.

Alex Farquharson, Director of Tate Britain and Chair of the Turner Prize jury said: 'It's a privilege to be able to announce this fantastic shortlist and I congratulate all four of the artists nominated. The Turner Prize always offers the public a snapshot of British artistic talent today. These artists each explore the contrasts and contradictions of life, combining conceptual and political concerns with warmth, playfulness, sincerity and tenderness, and often celebrating individual identity and community strength. With such rich work to draw on, we can all look forward to an outstanding exhibition at Towner Eastbourne this autumn.'

Joe Hill, Director and CEO, Towner Eastbourne, said: 'It is a great pleasure to reveal the four shortlisted artists who will exhibit their work for the Turner Prize 2023, at Towner Eastbourne. Congratulations to Jesse Darling, Ghislaine Leung, Rory Pilgrim and Barbara Walker for their nominations. Together they are an incredibly strong set of exhibiting artists, who ask us to look at some of the most pertinent issues of today, and who will collectively bring a sense of place and community to our galleries, through their diverse range of practices, from film and performance to drawing and sculpture. We look forward to welcoming you to Towner this autumn to see their work in Eastbourne - there really is something for everyone to engage with in this shortlist and my thanks to the jury for their research, knowledge and insight in putting forward these four brilliant artists for the exhibition.'

The Guardian

Turner prize: pandemic problems and Windrush scandal among shortlist

The work of artists Jesse Darling, Ghislaine Leung, Rory Pilgrim and Barbara Walker will be exhibited at Towner Eastbourne before winner is announced in December

An artist who reflects on the challenges of the Covid pandemic and another who explores the impact of the Windrush scandal are among four shortlisted for this year's prestigious Turner prize, with the winner announced in December.

The work of Jesse Darling, Ghislaine Leung, Rory Pilgrim and Barbara Walker will be exhibited at the Towner Eastbourne from 28 September before the jury's final choice.

Alex Farquharson, the director of Tate Britain and the chair of the Turner prize jury, said it was a "fantastic shortlist" for a prize that "offers the public a snapshot of British artistic talent today".

He added: "These artists each explore the contrasts and contradictions of life, combining conceptual and political concerns with warmth, playfulness, sincerity and tenderness and often celebrating individual identity and community strength."

Darling, an artist based in London and Berlin, uses sculptures and installations to "evoke the vulnerability of the human body and the precariousness of power structures", the Tate said in its announcement.

The jury was struck by the artist's ability to manipulate materials "in ways that skilfully express the messy reality of life" and expose "the world's underlying fragility".

Evoking the precariousness of power structures … Jesse Darling's No Medals No Ribbons installation at Modern Art Oxford. Photograph: Ben Westoby/Modern Art Oxford

Darling was nominated for solo exhibitions No Medals No Ribbons at Modern Art Oxford and Enclosures at Camden Art Centre.

The Turner prize, one of the best known prizes for visual arts, aims to promote public debate on new developments in contemporary British art. Last year it was won by Veronica Ryan, who created the UK's first permanent artwork to honour the Windrush generation and at 66 was the oldest artist yet to be awarded the prize.

Each year, the winner receives £25,000 with the runners up getting £10,000 each.

Joe Hill, the director and chief executive of Towner Eastbourne, said the shortlist consisted of "an incredibly strong set of exhibiting artists, who ask us to look at some of the most pertinent issues of today, and who will collectively bring a sense of place and community to our galleries, through their diverse range of practices, from film and performance to drawing and sculpture."

The members of this year's jury are Martin Clark, director of Camden Art Centre; Cédric Fauq, chief curator of Capc musée d'art contemporain de Bordeaux; Melanie Keen, director of Wellcome Collection; and Helen Nisbet, artistic director of Art Night.

artnet news

Shows & Exhibitions

The Turner Prize Has Shortlisted These Four Artists, Who Share a Sense of 'Tenderness and Humanity'

The four shortlisted artists will show their work at Towner Eastbourne from September 28.

Jo Lawson-Tancred, April 27, 2023

This morning, Tate Britain made its annual announcement of the four artists shortlisted for this year's Turner Prize: Jesse Darling, Ghislaine Leung, Rory Pilgrim, and Barbara Walker. Their work will be exhibited at Towner Eastbourne museum in East Sussex from September 28 to April 14, 2024, with the winner later crowned at an award ceremony on December 5.

Installation view of Jesse Darling, "No Medals, No Ribbons" at Modern Art Oxford, 2022. Photo: Ben Westoby, © Modern Art Oxford.

The British-born, Berlin-based artist Jesse Darling, 41, makes installations from a range of materials and was nominated for two solo exhibitions from 2022: "No Medals, No Ribbons" at Modern Art Oxford and "Enclosures" at Camden Art Centre in London. The Oxford show was the largest of his career, and featured precarious sculptures stitched together using everyday items that had been strangely anthropomorphized, as in the case of plastic bags with metal limbs or a roller-coaster track rewrought into a misshapen, skeletal form.

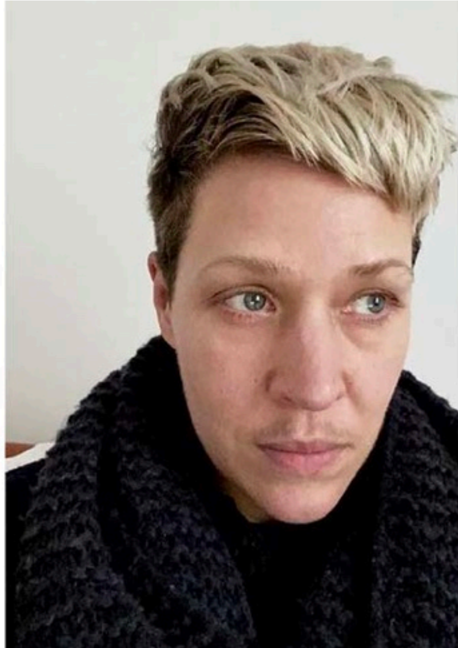
Though there is no obvious common thread between the shortlisted artists as was the case last year, when the cohort were all women or non-binary, but Tate Britian's director Alex Farquharson commented that vulnerability was a shared theme, with each of the artworks speaking to "social themes, social structures, as well as a real sense of tenderness and humanity."

One of the world's most important accolades for contemporary art since 1984, the Turner Prize is known for showcasing radical artistic practices that have historically sparked debate. This year's jury, chaired by Farquharson, comprises Martin Clark, director of Camden Art Centre, Cédric Fauq, chief curator at Capc Musée d'Art Contemporain de Bordeaux, Melanie Keen, director of the Wellcome Collection and Helen Nisbet, artistic director at Art Night.

The award ceremony on December 5 will take place at Eastbourne's Winter Gardens, with a prize of £25,000 for the winner and £10,000 for each runner-up.

OCULA

Jesse Darling's Unruly Bodies



In Conversation with
Amy Budd
London, 23 November 2022

Jesse Darling. Courtesy the artist.

Over the last ten years, Jesse Darling has explored how systems of power—government, religion, ideology, empire, and technology—can be as fragile and contingent as mortal bodies.

Working across sculpture, installation, video, drawing, and text, his distinctive artworks expose the libidinality of social reproduction and expose contradictions within dominant narratives about the world, our bodies, and our lives.

Darling's work is comprised of everyday objects as well as the materials and technologies that produce and maintain the body and the border. Playing in the limen between stability and dysfunction, his work evokes counter-histories and speculative models to rethink the concept of resistance.

Exhibition view: Jesse Darling, No Medals No Ribbons, Modern Art Oxford, Oxford (5 March–1 May 2022). Photo: Ben Westoby.

In his recent survey exhibition, No Medals No Ribbons at Modern Art Oxford (5 March–1 May 2022), Darling configured new and existing artworks into a symbolic landscape of recurring gestures and motifs, with sculptures as proxies for bodies and allegories.

Curated in dialogue with the artist, the exhibition charted how Darling merges lived experience with mythical symbols, religious fables, political thought, and pop-culture references to open new ways to think about the world. A common theme underpinning Darling's work is the idea that 'to be a body is to be inherently vulnerable'. In recent years, Darling has explored this notion by assembling his work around material forms of debility, where bent and curved works stand in for unruly bodies.

Despite their durability, Darling's artworks are often precariously assembled. Insistent that nothing should live forever, the artist imbues his sculptures with entropy—the tendency to collapse and break down over time. Crutches and walking aids prop up standing sculptures, while the legs of chairs and cabinets appear injured or wounded with kinks and bends.

Collectively, these works evoke the inevitability of the body's failure, and express a desire to resist social and political constraints imposed on life by an extractive system. They encourage us to think about vulnerability and interdependency as crucial aspects of our lives together—a proposition most recently addressed in *Enclosures* (13 May–26 June 2022) at Camden Art Centre, London.

Exhibition view: Jesse Darling, No Medals No Ribbons, Modern Art Oxford, Oxford (5 March–1 May 2022). Photo: Ben Westoby.

Exhibition view: Jesse Darling, Enclosures, Camden Art Centre, London (13 May–26 June 2022). Photo: Eva Herzog.

There, Darling considered the broader social and psychological implications of enclosure, and the effects that increasingly privatised and individualistic thinking has had on Western systems of caregiving, architectures of domesticity, and perceptions of the self outside the commons.

Concrete pillars stand as ruined relics of crumbling empires. London bricks form a ruin or foundation restricting movement. Surveillance systems become panopticon in the farcical presence of detached governments, while ribboned hammers and weighted baby carriers speak to scripts of labour, gender, and identity.

Amongst it all, many hands in the continuously evolving installation, *Light Work* (2018–ongoing), allude to the messy and unfinished labour of coalition-building and collectivity. With an upcoming exhibition at Chapter NY in the fall of 2023, and works on view at Art Basel Miami, Jesse Darling and Modern Art Oxford curator Amy Budd discuss the contents, process, and messages behind the artist's work.

Your exhibition at Modern Art Oxford was the first survey of your work to date. It brought together new and existing sculptures, drawings, photographs, and installations made over the last ten years into thematic arrangements for the first time.

You chose the title No Medals No Ribbons, which indicates an act or gesture of refusal. Can you explain the meaning behind this phrase?

In common terms, it's a kind of repudiation of the triumphant retrospective thing that goes along with a survey show. On the one hand, it's pretty much what it says on the tin. It's also a quieter reference to a distant ancestor of mine whose story I came across recently.

Exhibition view: Jesse Darling, Enclosures, Camden Art Centre, London (13 May–26 June 2022). Photo: Eva Herzog.

As a prisoner of war, he started bricolaging artificial legs for his injured comrades from pieces of window frames, metal chairs, cotton batting, rubber from old tires, camp scrap, and anything he could get, bribing the guards with chocolate and cigarettes for stove fuel.

According to vernacular reports, he made up to 300 artificial arms and legs, some of which had complicated jointing mechanisms. When the war ended, they sought him out for recognition and decoration but he refused, saying it was best to forget. His materials list looks a lot like mine although I'm not living through war or making anything useful in this sense. And sometimes, though I think a lot about history, I think I would rather forget my own.

Exhibition view: Jesse Darling, Enclosures, Camden Art Centre, London (13 May–26 June 2022). Photo: Eva Herzog.

Throughout your career, you have conjured sculptures and installations from a spectrum of everyday plastic debris, which often merges with austere steel and metal offcuts, and other bits of unwanted domestic ephemera.

It seems these incongruous materials hold the potential to symbolise complex ideas, as you've previously described steel as 'part of a history of the extraction and colonialism', while plastic is 'a synthetic technology of immortality'. How do you choose the materials you work with?

A lot of the time, I used what was cheap, or free and easy to find. There's poetry in objects everyone can recognise from their daily lives. It's a shortcut to meaning and affect, and I like the fact that the meaning ascribed to everyday objects is necessarily personal and individual, as well as social and defined by people's experience of use.

I've learned to trust that objects and materiality in themselves are sometimes smarter and more eloquent than I could ever be. I find myself drawn ambivalently to petrochemical materials—steel, plastic, silicone. I noticed that this was a consistent thread and did some reading around the histories of these materials, which gave me a lot to think about.

Jesse Darling, Planes (2017–2022). Exhibition view: No Medals No Ribbons, Modern Art Oxford, Oxford (5 March–1 May 2022). Photo: Ben Westoby.

Plastic is a zombie medium—lurid and undead, made from fossil fuels, which are in turn made from the exhumed bodies of our ancestors. Steel is a technology of coloniality and capitalism, of war and industry. These materials have produced my body, in a manner of speaking, and everything I know. So, you could say that it's autobiographical, but my autobiography isn't just about me.

It's a story about the feudal church, the enclosures act, the industrial revolution, the British empire, the transatlantic slave trade, Henry Ford, Walt Disney, Margaret Thatcher, Tony Blair, Hitchcock, NASA, Nickelodeon, World Wars One and Two, the welfare state and its dissolution, mining and the miners' strikes, the failed sexual revolution, Silicon Valley, 9/11 and the wars in its wake, penicillin and the pill, the DSM and AIDS, and Covid-19. It's much bigger than I am.

Jesse Darling, Demonstration of an order (2018). Courtesy the artist and Galerie Sultana, Paris.

I'm curious about how you develop your ideas. You seem to have an autodidactic approach to art-making and storytelling. What is your starting point?

I don't know what autodidactic means, but I feel like I had to figure out my own approach to working out the things I wanted to say, or the things that wanted to be said through me, despite me—although every artist has to do that.

I guess my ideas come from the same place as anyone else's: my upbringing, education, position as subject (age, race, class, gender), whatever's been going on in my life or in the news at any time during my years as a person in the world, the collective unconscious, and messages from the ineffable.

I start with intuition and muddled feelings without form, which find shape through the process. Often, I'm not sure what I've made until afterwards, and then sometimes I'm shocked or disappointed. I say I'm not a conceptual artist, just an artist who thinks and sometimes reads a lot. But whatever drives my work, I can't get that from reading a book.

Exhibition view: Jesse Darling, No Medals No Ribbons, Modern Art Oxford, Oxford (5 March–1 May 2022). Photo: Ben Westoby.

Your work often addresses the fragility and impermanence of life. This has been eloquently explored through your series of mobility aid sculptures evoking the physical vulnerability of the body, as with the crawling canes in the Modern Art Oxford exhibition. Other works, such as the decaying floral vanitas Still life (2019–2022) and crumbling plaster asthma inhalers, Peak Flow (2013–2022), also collapse and break down over time.

Mortality is an important theme for you, but is there also a hopeful message in your work? Could vulnerability also be a strength, and adaptation, resilience, and change be empowering?

For me, it's quite a hopeful feeling to know that even empires fall, kings topple, and governments are overthrown. To know that everything has its end, even when it seems like the reign will be endless. Vulnerability is a given in everybody. It's what makes us alive. It's not that vulnerability is a strength per se, but our physical fragility as organisms and propensity to suffer in love, conflict, under structural violence, and our animal need for nourishment and warmth are what we share.

'I am interested in man-made materials and by-products because they are expressions of will upon the world.'

Although universalism is such a melancholic white-European Christian thing, I'm attached to it because I have to believe in coalition and community, despite everything. To acknowledge our common vulnerability at the level of the mortal body is a way for me to think about trying to care for each other.

Exhibition view: Jesse Darling, Enclosures, Camden Art Centre, London (13 May–26 June 2022). Photo: Eva Herzog.

Your recent commission Enclosures at Camden Art Centre coincided with the Modern Art Oxford survey exhibition and seemed to signal a shift in direction. The work, resulting from the Freelands Lomax Ceramics Fellowship, focuses entirely on clay, which has previously appeared in your sculptures and installations, but only in its unfired form. What was the starting point for this new body of work?

I wouldn't say it's entirely focused on clay, but because I wasn't going to be anywhere near Camden for the duration of the fellowship, I took up the idea of clay as something Indigenous to the ground and the land—something dug up and put to use.

When you think about the ground, you arrive at the idea of land, and then borders, because that's how nation-states propose and enforce themselves, with rhetoric pinned along the borderline. Then, you arrive at the limen, and whatever lies beyond the border in every direction.

Everyone knows about the things that borders refuse or seek to erase—lives, ideas, ways of living—but there are also plenty of things it cannot contain. I am interested in man-made materials and by-products because they are expressions of will upon the world, like art, or anything we make.

Exhibition view: Jesse Darling, Enclosures, Camden Art Centre, London (13 May–26 June 2022). Photo: Eva Herzog.

So there was a lot of concrete and brick in the show to represent architecture—the ground above the ground. I also used different clays, which look, work, and signify different things. I wanted to evoke a preciousness—both as something special, beloved, and vulnerable, and as weaponised or permitted [white] fragility. For this, I used porcelain.

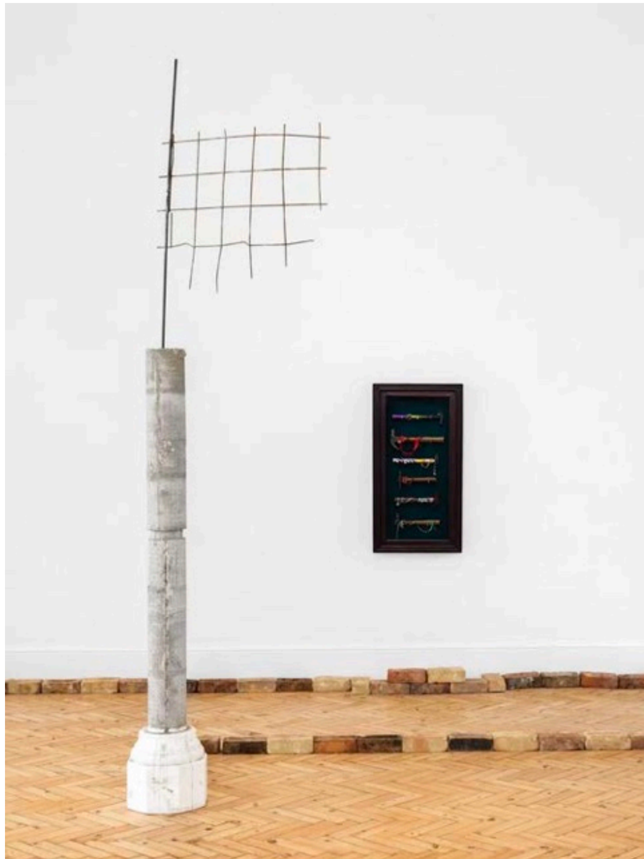
Elsewhere, unfired clay stands in for what is messy and unfinished; a rough-fired earthenware contrasts architectural materials as the fluidity of living does the rigidity of the enclosure. Not that this was conscious exactly, but now that some time has passed, I can see it more clearly.

This commission directly addressed the current political climate in the U.K., perhaps more explicitly than previous artworks and installations: closed-circuit cameras evoke the prevalent surveillance and policing of society, and the gallery is demarcated with bricks, fences, and barbed wire to suggest the aggressive privatisation of space.

Heaps of headless porcelain dolls are vulnerable discarded subjects that could represent the dismantling of a welfare state. But the installation also takes a long view and can be read as a post-mortem enquiry into the origins of 'enclosures', questioning why the primacy of land ownership is so entrenched in the British psyche.

How did you develop this work remotely from your current residence in Berlin? When thinking through these questions and histories, does it help to have some objective distance from the U.K.?

I am able think and work because I live somewhere with a welfare state. There is also some kind of precedent of 'the commons' here, or just civic space, which is also a complicated paradigm I don't want to celebrate unequivocally, though it throws some light on the situation in the U.K. I doubt that my distance is in any way objective. I am consistently appalled by the headlines in the U.K. and the reporting in general.



Exhibition view: Jesse Darling, Enclosures, Camden Art Centre, London (13 May–26 June 2022). Photo: Eva Herzog.

Exhibition view: Jesse Darling, Enclosures, Camden Art Centre, London (13 May–26 June 2022). Photo: Eva Herzog.

I'm not sure if the shock is valid as data, but I'm equally unsure if the national prerogative to keep calm and carry on is a proportionate or appropriate reaction. I have a U.K. passport and have spent about half of my life living there, so I wouldn't claim to be a neutral observer.

The enclosure is not just a British paradigm, after all. It's the story of the larger European project and every colonial initiative. So it's not like there's really an 'outside' anywhere I go, not least because I am part of it, and/or it's a part of me.

It's interesting to see CCTV surveillance cameras used in the installation. Did this occur to you during installation, or was this something you already had in mind?

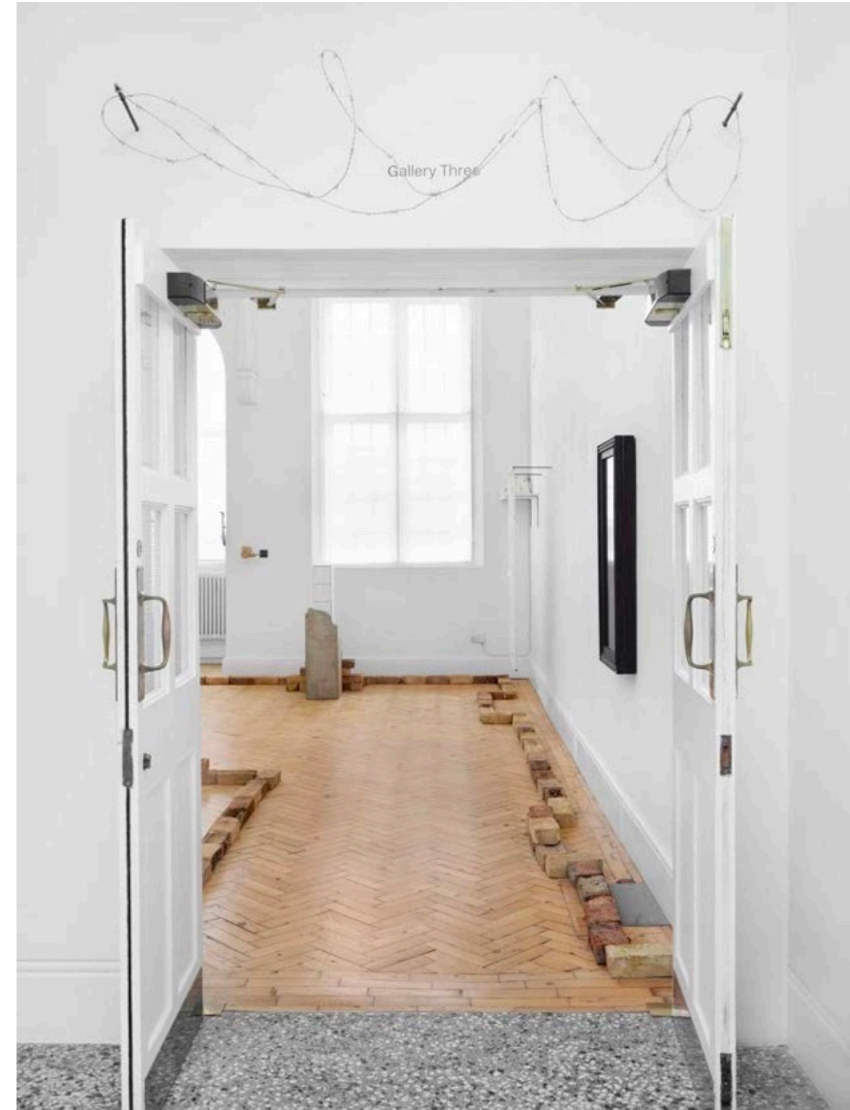
It's tempting to connect these interventions with your earlier digital practice, but your use of the screen here is more voyeuristic. It reminds me of 1970s closed-circuit video practices, which made visitors unwitting performers for the camera.

In my long-ago digital practice, I was riffing around the conditions of visuality and labour, the poetics and politics of the scroll and feed. These bodies of work are distantly related, though I'm more interested in historical materialism than in hyper-contemporary virtuality nowadays.

There are three different cameras in the show: an old-style CCTV camera, a small spycam for home use, and a baby monitor. It's very Panopticon 101—a little comment on the continual feed and capture, how normalised this has become, and the affects it produces.

In the contemporary paradigm, surveillance tends to get folded in with care and protection, which we all know. But it rarely seems to be problematised, even as we rehearse these concepts of informed consent and cultural property ad nauseam, while hearting viral videos of somebody's drugged-up child crying in confusion after surgery and sharing cellphone footage in which someone is stripped and beaten by racist police.

The idea that CCTV will keep us safe is equally ridiculous—and dangerous—as the promise that media representation will improve material conditions and make us free. In fitting large areas of a city with CCTV, the municipality and government admit that most of the city functions as private property, even though this private property is for public use and thoroughfare.



Exhibition view: Jesse Darling, Enclosures, Camden Art Centre, London (13 May–26 June 2022). Photo: Eva Herzog.

I'm also interested in the vernacular use of closed-circuit cameras in the home, as the threshold of the private home in a certain context represents an extension of the border. As always, the underlying question is not so much what is being protected as whom it is being protected against.

Buying in to the idea of protection in appropriating technologies of state security, and/or assuaging oneself in the event of state law enforcement, the private homeowner becomes a protectorate of the landowning feudal state. This buy-in clause is not available to every private homeowner, of course, which exposes the lie of liberal democracy.

When we first spoke about your work on Zoom, and ahead of inviting you to present an exhibition at Modern Art Oxford, you mentioned you were thinking about sleigh bells. I was very surprised and intrigued to see silver bells attached to hammers in the cabinets at Camden.

Do you tend to think about an object or material for a while before you know what to do with it?

Yes, sometimes I'm drawn to something and will seek it out in the studio without a clear idea of what it needs to do or where it'll end up. I've learned not to question this impulse too much, nor analyse the object or material too deeply, but to trust the haptic poetry of a thing.

I will look at or handle it for a while without trying to understand it. Sometimes I'll dream about it, or wake up suddenly at four in the morning with a clear sense of what the thing wants to do. Only afterwards do I think about what it is that I've made.

It's hard to get away from history in your work. It informs both the narratives you excavate and how you repurpose modes of museum display to reconfigure knowledge production and ideas of the past.

Jesse Darling, Gravity Road (2020). Exhibition view: No Medals No Ribbons, Modern Art Oxford, Oxford (5 March–1 May 2022). Photo: Ben Westoby.

For instance, the floor-based installation of London bricks, Enclosures, recalls an archaeological dig. Seeing these bare-bone foundations across the room reminded me of the snaking structure of Gravity Road (2020), installed at Modern Art Oxford like a prehistoric dinosaur skeleton. Are you particularly drawn to evoking or critiquing the museological aura of artefacts? What does a relic or ruin mean to you?

Every artist working in the Western context works in the museological afterlife with all that this implies: imperial violence, appropriation and deterritorialisation, specific rituals and systems for taxonomising objects, and data taken to be universal. All these aesthetic and epistemological legacies are themselves part of the afterlife of the Christian church.

I'm uncomfortable with work that doesn't seem to know or acknowledge itself as such, or work made for circulation in the Western context that imagines itself to fully transcend this. The relic and the ruin are what we're currently living in, especially in the dead world of contemporary art. —[O]

FRIEZE

Jesse Darling’s Malleable Bodies

Two exhibitions at Modern Art Oxford and Camden Arts Centre, London, examine the impermanence of power

BY IARLAITH NI FHEORAIS IN EXHIBITION REVIEWS , UK REVIEWS | 26 MAY 22

Amid a vicious attack on trans life in Nigeria, the UK and US, I spent most of April and May in a defensive huddle with my trans siblings. In April 2022, the British Equality and Human Rights Commission published guidance threatening the legal exclusion of trans people, particularly trans women, from gendered spaces such as bathrooms, changing rooms, homeless shelters, hospital wards and prisons. Shortly afterwards a government ban on conversion therapy made an exception for trans people. The community has been left mourning a lost future of safety and security, the vision of life we had once fashioned in this country. The erosion of our rights and dignity makes power a very real and tangible force in our lives. It has a physical, embodied presence: a mouth, eyes, feet and hands. It walks, rushes forward, grabs you and speaks.

Jesse Darling, *Saint Batman*, 2016. Courtesy: the artist, Modern Art Oxford and Arcadia Missa, London

The Oxford-born, Berlin-based artist Jesse Darling's work acts against this politics. Their show at Modern Art Oxford (MAO), concluded on 1 May, and another exhibition can currently be seen at Camden Arts Centre, London (CAC). MAO hosted the retrospective 'No Medals, No Ribbons', featuring work made over the last ten years. Through primarily figurative drawing, sculpture and installation, the exhibition made visible the central theme of Darling's practice – the impermanence, vulnerability and mortality of power and its instruments of control: state, technology, government, religion and empire. At CAC, Darling presents a new commission, 'Enclosure', exploring histories of extraction and exhumation, addressing through clay the fallibility and malleability of humans and the things they make.

Between protests, indignant voice notes and evenings holding each other, I grappled with doubts about the purpose of giving up time to write about art. As I was waiting in the MAO cafe, my partner sent me a quote from the US poet Alok Vaid-Menon's Beyond the Gender Binary (2020): 'They say we are pretending [⋯] They say we are attacking them [...] This is how power works: It makes the actual people experiencing violence seem like a threat.' Ballasted, I entered the airy main gallery occupied by Gravity Road (2020), a large steel rail-like structure reflecting on the common roots of coalmine railways and rollercoaster rides. Surrounded by aluminium 'paper' planes (Planes, 2022), Gravity Road is a familiar yet necessary allegory of resource hoarding, pleasure and hubris. The exhibition finds intimacy in the human scale, mainly figurative work in the smaller, cramped alcove-like spaces of the galleries beyond.

Jesse Darling, 'No Medals, No Ribbons', installation view, 2022. Courtesy:

Elsewhere, in Le Baiser (No More Saint Jeromes) (2017), two disembodied hooded heads are caught in the sweet moment when time slows down before a kiss. They sit alongside the buckled animal forms of collapsing furniture seen in Epistemologies (Collapsed Cabinet) (2022) and Chaise (2016). Scattered on the ground, powdery white, blue and pink inhalers (Peak Flow, 2013/22), made from plaster, are surrounded by the dust of their own construction, a nod to the materiality of these life-sustaining devices. In Virgin

Variations (2019), a suite of wooden school lockers with transparent Perspex doors appeared almost to hold court, while Watcher (2017), an exhausted-looking steal figure, was leant to one side with its head directed towards the ground.

Throughout the space, concrete blocks appeared held in arch files (Epistemologies, 2022), representing the weighty afterlives of defunct forms of knowledge. In one dimly lit antechamber hung a self-portrait of Darling, its title a quotation from Dante's Divine Comedy (c.1308–1320): In the middle of the journey of our life I found myself astray in a dark wood where the straight road had been lost (self-portrait) (2022). The artist is nude, with a crutch in one hand and a torch in the other, held close to the groin. Their eyes are downcast. The calves and feet are human, but the upper legs resemble smooth tubes, and one knee is almost a metallic hinge. A red and yellow miasma floats above their head, a kind of halo.

Darling exposes the coalitions possible from a crip position; how vulnerable, adaptive and negotiated bodies bear witness to the whims of power on a corporeal level. This goes beyond the often-hollow gestures of care that artists and institutions discuss ad nauseam and, instead, moves towards a politics of solidarity. In this sense, Darling mobilizes crip-ness to map an understanding of what it means to be alive together. In their essay 'Why It's Taking So Long' (2022), the artist Johanna Hedva reflects on how they 'realized that the most common and universalizing condition of life – that our bodies are fragile, get

Jesse Darling, 'Enclosures', installation view, 2022. Courtesy: the artist, Camden Art Centre and Acadia Missa, London; photograph: Eva Herzog

sick, need rest, need support, that they need at all – had been twisted into the measure of one's own individual failure, something to be ashamed of and sorry for and kept out of sight.'

Darling presents 'Enclosures' at the CAC as the fourth Freelands Lomax Ceramics Fellowship recipient. Developed over a two-year residency, the exhibition takes its title from the long series of Acts of Enclosure, passed in the English (later British) parliament from the 17th to the 19th centuries, by which common lands were made private property. The modest room is lined with rows of bricks that hint at walls, barbed wire at the entrance and metal grates over the windows. It soon becomes clear that we're being watched – I catch sight of myself on monitors, recorded from unknown cameras. Clay hands grasp onto tiled-over arches, with limbless and headless dolls placed throughout; the only means of escape are hammers wrapped in ribbons and bells out of reach in glass vitrines. A feeling of being bound permeates the space. In CAC's File Note 140 Jesse Darling (2022), the scholar Sebastian De Line observes that 'rather than making kin with petrochemical by-products, society may come to acknowledge that we're already kin,' inviting us to consider our affinities with the materials that make up our lives.

Framing the space are headless pillars emblazoned with improvised flags made from steel grids, lace and Venetian blinds. Red tally marks punctuate the tones of earthy browns, greys and off-whites. In a country where less than 1% of the

Jesse Darling, 'Enclosures', installation view, 2022. Courtesy: the artist, Camden Art Centre and Acadia Missa, London; photograph: Eva Herzog

population owns 50% of the land, enclosure still marks our present. 'Enclosures' ties questions of ownership and extraction to the body, a bound yet malleable entity. Here, clay – a material of such cultural resonance – acts as an invitation to consider how minerals flow through and form us.

Darling's work refuses the ordering and categorization of the colonial state, showing us that the body is beyond fixity. It bends, transforms and breaks. Though many institutions now demand work on care and resistance, I refuse to engage in clichés about

the solace that art can provide in difficult times, or its capacity to be an amorphous means of resistance. As Darling gracefully reminds us at MAO and CAC, like our fragile, mortal impermanent selves, power and its grip on our bodies will inevitably wither and fade. As Darling states in conversation with the MAO curator Amy Budd, 'it's a hopeful feeling to know even empires fall, kings topple and governments are overthrown.'

Jesse Darling 'Enclosures' is at **Camden Art Centre**, London, until 26 June

Main image: Jesse Darling, Gravity Road, installation view, 2022. Courtesy: the artist, Modern Art Oxford and Arcadia Missa, London; photograph: Ben Westoby

The Guardian
News website of the year

Art and design

Jesse Darling: Enclosures review – part public toilet, part CCTV-infested hellscape

★★★★☆

Camden Art Centre, London

Using clay, porcelain and a plethora of surveillance cameras, the artist explores how our bodies are forced to submit to state control

'This is not easy art' … clay hands rub smears from white tiles in Jesse Darling's Enclosures. Photograph: Eva Herzog

Hettie Judah

Wed 18 May 2022 17.07 BST

Artist-poet Jesse Darling's recent survey show at Modern Art Oxford took a swipe at the tidy authority of museum displays. Glass-topped cabinets teetered and slumped into corners, metal stands refused to do just that, and an exuberant - if terrifying - rollercoaster sculpture looped the upper reaches before unravelling into splayed track. The programming of that show directly after an exhibition by Anish Kapoor - an artist who delights in impeccably controlled materials - felt gleefully pointed.

Coming swiftly afterwards, Darling's Enclosures at Camden Art Centre is a rather different animal. The result of a ceramics fellowship that took place more off site than it might have under less Covidy circumstances, the show translates the artist's interests in vulnerability and care into the exploration of clay.

The material appears in many guises. London clay - the primordial gunk oozing stickily beneath our capital - turns up as London bricks, which map out a pattern of walls and entrances on the floor. Coarse yellow clay has been made into clumsily formed hands, which protrude from the walls fired and unfired. Clay as a processed industrial product manifests as cool white tiling, transforming one wall of the gallery into that of an old public toilet. The elite material in this lineup is porcelain, crafted into little plump-buttocked doll bodies in radiant white.

'It becomes apparent that we, too, are being filmed' … Jesse Darling's Enclosures. Photograph: Eva Herzog

The clay body forming each element, and the nature of its participation in the structure Darling has built, thus becomes a metaphor for the human body. The rough clay hands scrub dirty smears from the white bathroom tiling. Concrete and London bricks invite us into - or keep us out of - various parts of the gallery. The porcelain dolls are displayed under bell jars, or kept on a high shelf safely out of reach.

Darling's earlier works, such as The Ballad of Saint Jerome (shown at Tate Britain in 2018) expressed the vulnerability of the body in terms of sickness and damage, and explored the power relationship that emerged between the carer and the cared for. In Darling's reimaginings of the legend of Saint Jerome, the lion becomes distinctly ambivalent at being beholden to the hermit. In honouring Saint Jerome for pulling a thorn from his foot, the lion in the legend has to repress his own nature and become a friend to man. In accepting care the lion must also accept a loss.

In Enclosures, vulnerability appears more as a social construct, and care occupies a sliding scale that ranges from parental concern through corporate surveillance to the threat of bodily violence. Cameras of various kinds are mounted around the gallery. You don't really notice them at

first: we are now so accustomed to surveillance cameras tracking us in London that these plastic-clad electronic eyes barely register.

The material appears in many guises … Enclosures. Photograph: Eva Herzog

A tiny portable monitor for a nanny-cam is strapped to one of the concrete pillars. Its camera is trained on the shelf of porcelain doll bodies in an approximation of hands-off parental care. It becomes apparent that we, too, are being filmed: from many angles, and perhaps with less benign intent than the dolls. The footage from one camera positioned over the (barbed-wire-topped) entrance door is projected on to the wall, behind a tiny paper maquette of a shed behind a white picket fence. Walking to the other end of the space, beneath a white lace pelmet, we encounter a small old-fashioned box television transmitting footage of the gallery behind us.

Red vinyl hieroglyphs are stuck next to each camera, and across various sections of wall. Some are struck-through clusters of lines, like a prisoner counting down the days. Others seem to be approximating text, as though making an unsuccessful attempt at communication: “Hi!” “Surveillance Cameras in Use” “Smile, you’re on CCTV!”. Perhaps these emblems of control have gone a little rogue, like Darling’s wayward wobbly furniture?

Two glass cabinets contain old wood and metal hammers decorated with coloured ribbons and bells, like babies’ rattles, jesters’ batons or morris dancers’ sticks. They are tools of violence or construction dressed up as distracting toys. Are they a threat or a way to break free of the system? Or both?

It is not such a leap from making work about the unwell or damaged body to making work about a body submitted to various forms of state control (even if that control is imagined to be for our own good). We cannot place a firm partition between the political and the emotional spheres: an oppressive environment plays out in the physical body. This is not easy art. Darling has taken on a tricky task, laying down a thoughtful route to address particularities of the body without sliding into identity politics. Navigating it is exhilarating.

sculpture A PUBLICATION OF THE INTERNATIONAL SCULPTURE CENTER

Jesse Darling

April 22, 2022 by Beth Williamson

Oxford, U.K.

Modern Art Oxford

Jesse Darling's "No Medals No Ribbons" (on view through April 30, 2022) caught me unawares. I didn't expect to be affected so deeply, but I was. In a world reeling from war in Ukraine, the fallout of Covid-19, and any number of other tragedies, Darling's twisted metal sculptures cast a gentle spell of sadness, accompanied by just a glimmer of hope. Their work evokes, rather than represents, the fragile and contingent nature of humanity, and that is perhaps what makes it so affective.

The ambitious *Gravity Road* (2020) forms the centerpiece of this major solo exhibition spanning a decade of Darling's work, almost filling the main gallery space with its twisted, broken, makeshift railroad tracks—the perfect evocation of our dysfunctional world. Its contortions are painful, its curves poignant. Its origins lie in the gravity railroad built in 1827 to transport coal from Pennsylvania mines, a design that was soon developed into the rollercoaster thrill rides found in amusement parks. Darling's rollercoaster, however, has nothing to do with Coney Island, Luna Park, or Dreamland. Their broken anti-monument challenges the power systems that increasingly surround us as the technology of industry and empire is repurposed for pleasure.

Virgin Variations (2019), a series of 22 simple wooden cabinets arranged in two rows of 11, towers above head height. Narrow and vertical—reminiscent of high school lockers—each cabinet is decorated with everyday objects and images, not unlike the accouterments of teenage students. We do not know who they belong to, but they evoke a sense of personal ritual and meaning. At the same time, they also suggest a memorial wall, bejeweled with gifts of remembrance for the departed. In fact, *Virgin Variations* is a shrine to Saint Ursula, who was murdered and buried in Cologne, along with her 11,000 virgin followers. Each cabinet marks an absence, an empty tomb for those forgotten or unnamed by history. Nearby, the small provisional figure of *Equestrian Statue* (2015) offers a stark contrast to monumental bronze and marble public sculptures celebrating military and political leaders. Darling has created something more like a broken child's toy. Formed from mild steel, wheels, and a metal chain, the horse is only suggested, a counterpoint to heroic narratives and structures of power. The poignancy of this little sculpture makes it the most arresting object in the show.

The raw materiality of Darling's work is crucial to their narrative. Steel and plastic are used everywhere to great effect. The seeming instability of works such as *The Deputation* (2017/2022), *Sphinxes of the gate (Wounded sentry)*, and *Sphinxes of the gate (Pet sentry)* (both 2018) alludes to an entropic system such that "nobody gets out of here alive, and nothing is too big to fail," to use Darling's words. The vulnerability of the bodies suggested in the sculptures is, at times, almost too much to bear, but there are one or two lighter moments amid the seriousness.

In *Saint Batman* (2016), Darling reimagines the well-known character as a mythical saint, making a farce of his heroic masculinity. Meanwhile, in *Our Lady Batman of the Empty Centre (temporary relief)* (2018), the saint switches gender. *Saint Icarus (attributes)* (2018) also brings together the serious and the silly, reimagining the myth of Icarus in a precarious assemblage of wood, aluminum, rucksack straps, and ratchet straps. There is nothing flippant about Darling's strategies, but the humor offers a welcome glimpse of hope in this emotional rollercoaster of an exhibition.

"No Medals No Ribbons" coincides with Darling's new commission at Camden Art Centre, London, on view April 28–June 27 as part of their Freelands Lomax Ceramics Fellowship.

ART AGENDA
REVIEWS

Jesse Darling's "No Medals No Ribbons"

by Frances Whorrall-Campbell

March 5–May 1, 2022

Modern Art Oxford

March 22, 2022

1 — 8

View of Jesse Darling's "No Medals No Ribbons" at Modern Art Oxford, 2022. Image courtesy of the artist and Modern Art Oxford. Photo by Ben Westoby.

What does it mean to make forgettable work when the art world trades in memory? Pics or it didn't happen, the reification of the document: even in the dematerialized, social-media-sodden scene, art still functions as a memorial—even, we might venture, a monument to capital. Forgetting is abolitionist.

The title of Jesse Darling's survey at Modern Art Oxford, "No Medals No Ribbons," signals a refusal to this sort of public recognition. Like the vitrines of slowly wilting flowers in the gallery café (and entrance to the exhibition), it calls up the trappings of remembrance while imploring us to forget. Inside the show, objects engage in childlike cosplay, slough off inhibitions to reveal new forms. A litter picker, crutch, and plastic bottle come together to form a gun; a Hitachi vibrator becomes the torch on the Statue of Liberty. Objects seem unbothered by the fact they are in a museum: they trip over each other, try and trip you up, stretching and lurching their wiry limbs in ungainly configurations.

Two unsteady vitrines—part of the series "Epistemologies" (2018–22)—comprise an art-historical joke at the expense of the institution. Containing only concrete blocks or a pile of lifeless birds, these works make a blunt mockery of the Western museological tradition and the ways in which it displays and produces knowledge. But Darling's ambivalence extends to the mythologization of their own practice. Tucked away in the central room, behind a crowd of other tall sculptures, stands *HonourRole*(2016). This single classroom chair is identical to those in the group that make up *Marchofthe Valedictorians*(2016), a work shown at the 2019 Venice Biennale. Isolated from its cohort and stuck in the naughty corner, *HonourRole* exhibits a kind of embarrassment with the artist-as-brand that is created by this cultural and financial ecosystem.

The fraught question of Darling's participation in what they call the "art industrial complex" animates "No Medals No Ribbons." The sculpture *GravityRoad*(2020), described by the artist as a "dysfunctional rollercoaster," performs an apparent perversion of leisure: its deformed steel track, held together with bandages and sandbags, seems to issue from an apocalyptic future-present while also signalling the origins of the amusement ride in the mining shaft and railroad. In its broken body, *GravityRoad* remembers the rollercoaster's twisted history. Its perverse kinks are not an expression of artistic license but a historical and material rendering of modernity's death drive: the exhilaration of colonists carving up land resurfacing in death-defying "fun."

An art gallery is not so different from an amusement park. A work of art becomes a commodity because it can produce knowledge: a certain kind of eloquent leisure. It has its own extractive logic, drawing on physical resources and the artist's biography to produce aesthetic, political, or historical value which (ideally) translates into a solid investment. "No Medals No Ribbons" disturbs this neat conversion, transforming works that might otherwise appear clearly packageable into objects the viewer encounters in an embodied way, beyond these abstractions.

*GravityRoad*for example, was originally made for the Third-Reich-era former swimming pool that houses the Kunstverein Freiberg, where it appeared in an austere installation that almost served to reify its gleaming curves. At Modern Art Oxford, however, it is more ungainly in the way it fills the space: any further claim to monumentality is undercut by the tens of aluminium airplanes strewn across the floor. Neither a coherent installation nor a tidy collection of sculptures, the crowded hang unsettles any expectations of tasteful restraint. Just as the rollercoaster is denatured and deformed—made almost unrecognisable so we can recognise a truth that lies behind its outward appearance—so is the familiar formula of the retrospective, where works neatly queue up around the length of an artist's biography.

"No Medals No Ribbons" is anti-hagiographic: like *GravityRoad*and *HonourRole* , objects from Darling's practice are recontextualized through different installation or other adaptations. Many of these are also leitmotifs of art history: consider the votive cabinets and tin-foil saints in the final two rooms, Catholic classics alongside a forcibly feminized Batman. The compulsion to repeat across history, whether personal or (inter)national, finally yields different results, even if these are just the hallucinations of a paranoid society. Compulsions and hallucinations are also a symptom of devotion, but what are we madly in love with now that God is out of the picture? With art? With destruction? With each other? "No Medals No Ribbons" suggests all of the above.

ARTFORUM

INTERVIEW

JESSE DARLING

Jesse Darling on Gravity Road and the construction of leisure

September 30, 2020

Jesse Darling, *Gravity Road*, 2020, steel, sandbags, soil, flowers, elastic bandage, metal coating, 15 1/2 x 19 x 53'. Kunstverein Freiburg. Photo: Marc Doradzillo.

After months of working under lockdown in Berlin, Jesse Darling recently traveled by train to Kunstverein Freiburg, in southwest Germany, to install Gravity Road, *a "dysfunctional roller coaster" that consists of a suspended horizontal track, a ladder twisting to nowhere. Like the artist's previous experiments in steel—such as* The Veterans *and* Wounded Door 1, *both 2014—the work's anthropometric scale and distorted form suggest both vulnerability and potential. The exhibition opened on September 19 and runs through November 1, 2020. Here, Darling talks about the work's genesis and installation, with special thanks to Joe Highton, Zach Furniss, and Victor Ruiz Colomer, without whom this work would not have been realized, and Heinrich Dietz at Kunstverein Freiburg, who commissioned and curated the work.*

NEVER SAY NEVER, but I can't see why I would make anything on this scale again. The space that *Gravity Road* was made for was built as a swimming pool under the Third Reich. It really feels like that; I very much felt it when I went in. It's huge, huge. A big, big swimming pool with a balcony around the top that made me think about Leni Riefenstahl and the fascist obsession with the perfect body, but also of this idea of leisure, and there being a certain way to be at leisure. With this balcony, it's not like looking down into the marketplace, or, I don't know, the kids' playground where things just fall and tumble around on each other. It's about a kind of surveillance. There is a particular construction, in this architecture, of leisure as imagined by the Nazis in this part of Germany at that time. There are these huge pillars when you come in, they're kind of modernist, sans serif, but they have the same effect of Greco-Roman pillars. The temple, the great hall.

The first roller coaster originated at a nineteenth-century railway company in Pennsylvania, and was also called Gravity Road. Like the swimming pool, its construction of leisure was fraught with social and political conflict. Siegfried Kracauer wrote about roller coasters, and it should surprise nobody to know that the first amusement parks were racially segregated. The roller coaster is also derived or extrapolated from the mining train. The miner was not worth as much as what he would extract.

There are many institutional curators who really do think that artists are a special and qualitatively different breed of person, and they tend to be the ones who don't see or recognize labor. My labor, anyone's labor. Kunstverein Freiburg's curator, Henri Dietz, is not like that. It was and is a dialogue. And Joe Highton, an artist who worked with me on this show, is just amazing. He is somebody who really thinks with his body. We worked on a small project together when I was paralyzed down my right side, and without talking much, I felt like Joe became my right arm, it was like dancing. That big curve at the end of the roller coaster, that's Joe's curve.

The Kunstverein has a small budget. I have never wanted to make expensive work, out of principle but also because, what are you going to do with it afterwards? So I thought of steel, old school. Steel is cheap and you can make things happen in a space with it. I hadn't been working in steel sculpture for quite a while. I just got bored of it, or got to be better at it, and wanted to do something I didn't know how to do. The fact is, steel itself is part of a history of the extraction and colonialism that kind of built the white supremacist West. Of course, the fascists and futurists were all about speed, and now you have the accelerationists who take up where those guys left off. The roller coaster is emblematic of this steel sickness, speed sickness. I can't even remember the last time I was on a roller coaster, but I do feel a bit animated by the ghosts of the steel sometimes. I was talking to my friend Jonny Bunning, who is a historian, about how weird it is that people would pay to be scared, and he pointed out that the original roller coaster thrill was an industrial-collective afraid as opposed to, you know, neoliberal extreme sports stuff. Apparently, the new roller coasters are individual pod experiences where you are alone in your fear and you don't have to sit there with the screams and saliva of everyone else there. I guess that I believe in the idea of the collective with all its problems. That, for me, is the way that I survive social media and the feed, and also the news.

Jesse Darling, *Gravity Road* (detail), 2020, steel, sandbags, soil, flowers, elastic bandage, metal coating, 15 1/2 x 19 x 53'. Kunstverein Freiburg. Photo: Marc Doradzillo.

If it were possible to ride this roller coaster, it would be a short ride. It's made roughly at a child's scale, and it's supposed to make you think of your own body—I don't know how successful it was in this way because it took so fucking long to make and there was such a lot of hard physical work involved. And then the install was the first time we'd ever seen it, because it was too big to put together in the workshop. So I had no idea what it was or what it did. At first, having installed it, the lights were on really bright in the space and I was like, "Okay, woolly mammoth with animal legs"—which does seem appropriate, on a museological scale and in that space. But then I walked away from it feeling really shit, thinking, "Is this what we made?" I didn't feel what I wanted to feel.

So I took a day off, I walked an hour and a half along the river to the city limit to the big box garden center and bought some flowers for the sandbags placed around the “legs” of installation—old banking sandbags with “Deutsches Bundesbank” still printed on the canvas. The bags were filled with earth and sand and then there were these flowers. Graveyard flowers that don’t need bright sun to grow. Chrysanthemums, daisies. On the way back from the garden center, I thought that maybe we just need to turn the lights off, and suddenly, the roller coaster took on this much more serious affect. You could still see the animals, but it felt less cartoonish, much more like a relic. Like how in natural history museums they don’t blare the lights because it decays the old things. It felt sort of somber.

I’m glad that this is in Freiburg, where there’s not much of an art scene, and I’m glad that because it’s in the middle of a pandemic not many people will visit. What I mean is, sometimes art feels like a rigged game, critique just disappears after a certain point, and that’s just so dispiriting to me. I don’t believe that my art gestures do anything. It’s not activism. But I’m making art for this world. I want to think seriously about work that repels fascist sympathies. We kept the lights off at the opening and people were in there with torches like poking around an abandoned theme park. A lot of kids came. People who don’t know anything about me or my work somehow found a reason to care about it that night. And this was really good.

— As told to Lizzie Homersham

FRIEZE

A Different Kind of Healing

Ex voto-like works by Jesse Darling, Julia Philips, Diamond Stingily and the late Donald Rodney imagine a world ordered differently

BY SINÉAD GLEESON IN FEATURES , THEMATIC ESSAYS | 07 SEP 20

The German artist Peter Dreher, who died earlier this year at the age of 87, painted the same glass of water over and over. Beginning in 1974, he rendered the glass more than 5,000 times ('Day by Day, Good Day', 1974–2020). Dreher believed that returning to the same subject allowed him a new vantage point each time. In a 2017 interview with Studio International, he described himself as 'a happy Sisyphus': 'because I succeed in seeing my subject (the glass) afresh each time – as if I were seeing it for the first time'. The glass-as-subject to which I find myself repeatedly drawn is the body in pain; I gravitate towards artists and writers – from Frida Kahlo to Lucy Grealy – who took this as their subject.

This piece was originally commissioned with a specific group of young practitioners in mind. But, following the brutal murder of George Floyd by Minnesota police in May, I kept circling back to one artist in particular, whose work felt newly resonant amidst the ensuing urgent calls for racial justice. British artist Donald Rodney was born in Birmingham in 1961 and he was just 36 years old when he died from sickle cell anaemia in 1998. He centred his illness in what he created, while exploring racism, bodily autonomy and inequality. Psalms (1997) consists of a motorized wheelchair to which Rodney added a neural computer. It moved around the gallery, a kinetic mapping device made up of sensors and a camera. Visitors could ignore or engage with the chair as it circled the space in sequences, and the camera operated as both Rodney's eyes and his presence in the gallery. The chair refutes the gaze of strangers who stare at disabled or non-conforming bodies; it is also a stand-in for a body of colour in the overwhelmingly white space of the art institution. Psalms was originally shown as the centrepiece of Rodney's exhibition '9 Night in Eldorado' at the South London Gallery, which took place in 1997, the year before his death. Rodney was too ill to attend. The chair is an ex voto: a stand-in for the artist, making both him and his illness visible, while critiquing the invisibility of Black and disabled artists within mainstream artistic culture.

In the House of My Father (1996–97) is a close-up photograph of Rodney's palm, holding a small house: a symbol of security and belonging. Closer inspection reveals that the structure is made from the artist's own skin, which was removed during his treatment for sickle cell anaemia, a disease that disproportionately affects people of colour. It's a powerful image, encapsulating the politics of illness and inequality. 'Ownership is the most intimate relationship that one can have to objects,' wrote Walter Benjamin in his 1931 essay 'Unpacking My Library'; never is that more evident than in being the owner of a sick body.

Ex votos were objects originally offered to a saint in return for protection from illness or death. In South America, they were usually paintings of the peril from which a penitent wished to be saved. But they are not just depictions of distress: each one is a repository of future hopes, of a different set of possibilities. As a teenager, I developed an orthopaedic illness that led to years of immobility and surgery. There was one spell of 18 long months on crutches, during which time my school organized a trip to the French pilgrimage site of Lourdes. There was a raffle for places, such was the demand, but I was given priority because my illness offered the possibility of a miracle. I was, in a way, my own ex voto. I believed. I thought I would be cured. At a candlelit procession, psalms were sung – the sacred songs invoked by Rodney in his installation – and, at the Grotto of Our Lady, I saw medical supports hanging as offerings or as proof of miracles. The accessories of illness as externalized cure: a prosthesis as prayer, a cane as a stand-in for disability.

Jesse Darling, *Epistemologies (shamed cabinet)*, 2018, mahogany, glass, steel, linen, archival binders, concrete, 125 × 110 × 50 cm. Courtesy: the artist and Arcadia Missa, London; photograph: Matt Greenwood

Years later, when I first encountered Jesse Darling's sculptures, I was struck by how they transformed these objects, reclaiming and reinventing them. Collapsed Cane (2017) is a hospital-issue, metal walking aid distorted out of shape, unusable. The curve resembles a pelvis, mirroring the bone it is meant to support. It was shown as part of Darling's Tate Britain show, 'The Ballad of Saint Jerome' (2018–19), which drew on the fable of the lion who had a thorn removed from its paw by the titular saint. The duality at the heart of this is Christianity's insistence on the redemptive power of healing, but also the power imbalance in being ill. The act of healing is often underpinned by a notion of value: who or what is worthy of cure? Epistemologies (shamed cabinet) (2018) resembles both a museum vitrine and a case for relics. The legs are warped and unsteady, implying a sense of brokenness, while the glass receptacle reinforces the sacredness of its contents, which resemble binders of medical notes. Every patient is familiar with having their history, their pain and their treatment collated in these corporate folders – reduced to a vocabulary and logic that is as powerful as it is inadequate. Darling looks at how ill or disabled bodies navigate the capitalist structures of hospitals and their hierarchies of knowledge.

In her 2019 Pulitzer Prize-winning book, The Undying: A Meditation on Modern Illness, the poet and essayist Anne Boyer writes: 'Having a body in the world is not to have a body in truth: it's to have a body in history.' The historical body is utilitarian, erotic, aesthetic but also an intersection of gender, race, class, sexuality and ability. As with the lion, which represents the intrusion of the wild or exotic into the realm of Western Christianity, the othering of the patient is a consistent part of the medical narrative. A patient learns early on that absorbing pain is a means of martyrdom, inching them closer to a kind of religious ecstasy and the idea that there is meaning in suffering. In their 2018 'Support Level' show at Chapter NY in New York, Darling explicitly investigates this, using eerie doppelgängers of medical supports. Comfort Station (2017) is a twisted commode that appears to drag itself towards the viewer while, in Cut Curtain (2017), a PVC curtain displays a gash, rupturing its intactness and underscoring the lack of privacy in hospital spaces. It reminds me of a line from Anne Carson's book of poems The Beauty of the Husband (2001): 'a wound gives off its own light'. The source of pain can turn into an articulation of it. The wound has a voice: it speaks and it tells its own metonymic story of embodiment – as do medical aids. By resisting the objects of support as signifiers of dependence, Darling destabilizes assumptions around what sick bodies are capable of.

I once spent nine weeks in a medical support: a hip spica plaster cast, which went from rib cage to toe tips. It was its own kind of sculpture, a fibreglass tomb. When the time came for it to be removed, a doctor did so with a cast saw. But something was wrong. Heat seared and I screamed. The doctor, however, insisted the tool could only rotate back and forth: there was no way for it to penetrate the skin. The next day, when the cast was

finally removed under anaesthetic, six large gashes congregated on my legs. I still have the scars. I thought of that saw when looking at Julia Phillips's Operator I (with Blinder, Muter, Penetrator, Aborter) (2017), glazed ceramic implements arranged on a metal surgical table. The objects look medical: a reminder of how tools used to heal and repair the body can, if misused or repurposed, become objects of torture and control, used to silence and maim. They acknowledge, too, how Western medicine has a history of its own kind of violence, across gender, race and class. It reinforces the concept that authoritative dismissal is another form of silencing. ('Calm down, the saw isn't cutting your skin.')

Phillips's work, like Darling's, draws on the medico-mechanical. It accepts the necessity of medical supports, but is wary of their potential to harm, to hurt rather than to heal. Her surgical objects are an ex voto to ward off pain and to give back autonomy to the patient. Much of her work is life-cast from her own body. In Witness I–III (2019), for example, ceramic heads, shoulders and lungs hang as austere proxies. The pink lungs are threaded with blue capillaries and are uncomfortably lifelike. The viewer enters a room with a gravel floor, where microphones in each piece pick up on the inevitable underfoot crunch as well as other ambient noises and voices, which are played back – repeated or distorted by sound effects – through speakers. The lungs, discarnate in their suspension, will not be silenced. At the heart of Phillips's work is the question of who has a voice, which often intersects with questions of class, race and gender.

Diamond Stingily has thought a lot about such issues. 'Surveillance', her 2017 show at Ramiken Crucible in Los Angeles, explored how observation can be used as a tool of systemic racism. Cameras scanned two of the gallery rooms, lit by imposing light towers with televisions displaying the footage. The cameras were omniscient, offering the insistent gaze of a panopticon: the watched did not know how frequently they were being viewed or when. The position of the lights was crucial – elevated, intimidating – and the objects they illuminated were Stingily's Hergott Dolls (2017). Based on Amish folk objects, the dolls are constructed in dark materials, rough-edged, with arms splayed, their position Christ-like or, perhaps, invoking an act of surrender. In 2018, they lined the walls and floor of Freedman Fitzpatrick gallery in Paris for her show 'For the People of [__________]'. In the press text for the exhibition, Stingily imagined them as belonging to the traditions of an unnamed people who 'disbanded from colonized countries in the early 1800s[,] mostly of African, Asian and Indigenous descent': who stepped out of the capitalist, imperialist world and formed a culture apart, where 'very few non [__________] have visited'. From a certain angle, one doll looks hooded, crumpled in a heap with hands bound behind its back, an image redolent of police brutality. Anonymized bodies of colour, the dolls may symbolize the victims of racism or act as an ex voto of hope and supplication that another way is possible.

Diamond Stingily, 'Surveillance', 2017, exhibition view, Ramiken Crucible, Los Angeles. Courtesy: the artist and Ramiken, New York; photograph: Dario Lasagni

'Surveillance' also featured the work of Bri Williams, whose own dolls are more detailed: clothed, specifically positioned and with braided Afro-Caribbean hair. Initially playful, the childlike figure of School Mates (2017) lies on the floor, hands over its eyes, as if playing a game of hide and seek. Another doll stands in a corner shielding its face, attempting to resist surveillance, not wanting to be complicit in the voyeurism of others. These dolls are a specific kind of doppelgänger: corporeal ex votos that ask for a collective form of healing. Viewed from the vantage point of this summer, as protests for racial justice roil the US and elsewhere, Stingily's ideas around visibility take on renewed relevance. It was the hypervisibility of Black bodies in white spaces that led to the shooting of the unarmed Ahmaud Arbery while he was out jogging in a residential neighbourhood in Brunswick, Georgia, in February. But it is the ongoing presence of Black (as well as white) bodies in the streets, demanding change, that might lead to a more just society, in which people of all colours can thrive. In the bright, white, illuminated space of the gallery, Stingily's dolls may seem small and powerless, but their presence attests to collective resilience and its possibilities. What's at play here – as in the work of Darling, Phillips and Rodney – is a kind of visual parataxis: see us, include us, stand with us.

Diamond Stingily, 'Off Kedzie', 2019, exhibition view, Galerie Isabella Bortolozzi, Berlin. Courtesy:
the artist and Galerie Isabella Bortolozzi, Berlin; photograph: Roman März

I keep returning to the articulation of pain – of how to put it on the page and how art can speak for the 'misbehaving' body (to borrow from the title of the Wellcome Collection's 2019–20 exhibition of work by Oreet Ashery and Jo Spence). A couple of years after the Lourdes trip and the permanent leg scars from the saw, I discovered Kahlo's work. She remains one of the most unflinching chroniclers of the body and injury, and of the injustices of othering – medical and otherwise. Kahlo collected hundreds of Mexican ex votos, painted on wood and metal, many of which still hang on the walls of her famous Blue House in Mexico City. She also painted her own – not to seek protection, but to document her suffering, while believing that healing could come from making the work. An ex voto is also an informal remaking of a scene, a kind of rearrangement. Never has the world felt more like it should tilt towards new structures and new ways to live. This article first appeared in frieze issue 213 with the headline 'No Miracle Cures'.

Main image: Donald Rodney, In the House of My Father, 1996–97, photograph, C-print on paper, mounted on aluminium, 12 × 15 cm. Courtesy: Estate of Donald Rodney

ARTFORUM

SLANT

DAILY DRAWINGS: WEEK FIVE

May 22, 2020

As people around the world stay indoors to curb the spread of Covid-19, Artforum *has invited artists to share a drawing—however they would like to define the word—made in self-isolation. Check back each day this week for a new work by a different artist.*

I don't know what I'm doing mostly. I'm messing around at my kitchen table when my kid's asleep. All these drawings are letters, poems, theories I can't write. Nobody knows what happens after the dark woods or if we make it out at all. But when it's not possible to see the forest for the trees, it might be time to really look at the trees for a while.

Jesse Darling, *Untitled*, 2020, acrylic and paint pen on paper, 11 3/4 x 8 1/4".

TEXT BY
INGRID LUQUET-GAD

CURA
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JESSE DARLING

Any mutant super-organism, if still an organism, will at one point feel fragile and vulnerable. At the core of all our added plug-on and -ins, hormone treatments and designer drugs, lies a coil of eternal humanity, common to all living creatures: the need to care and be taken care of. This is where Jesse Darling s practice comes in. Their sculptures are staunch and opaque, escaping art s usual representational regime in favor of the ambiguity of things– objects and bodies alike. Indeed, they are not realist but ferociously real, stripped bare of any speculative or allegorical varnish.

Take, for instance, this plastic school chair striving to stand upright on its meter-long, wobbly-looking legs. You might have seen it at the current 58th Venice Art Biennale, together with other, similar ones that make up the work *March of the Valedictorians* (2016). To us, this chair looks exhausted and miserable. Sure, we might identify ourselves with this banal plastic thing, a tting stand-in for our own condition as a faceless, exhausted body amidst a grey mass of disposable human capital. As an artwork however, this group of chairs does not represent or perform anything else beyond their own, tragicomical failure to be a normal chair. They do, however, ask for their speci c condition to be acknowledged: some brutally banal, aesthetically uninteresting plastic chairs, that nonetheless possess a right to be present, and to be noticed.

Objects are bodily and complicated, wrote Jesse Darling in an email exchange we had two years ago. At the time, they had just opened their solo-show *Armes Blanches* at Galerie Sultana in Paris. From an earlier digital and immaterial media practice, they had started to fully embrace a practice as a sculptor. Objects stubborn being-in-the-world, they explained in the email, had a lot to do with this shift. This was the practice that seemed the most tting to the central preoccupation of their practice: making room for the radical Otherness of all bodies, of any bodies. Born in 1981, the British artist started art school as they were turning 30. After graduating from Central Saint Martins and Slade School of Fine Art in London, they made a name for themselves from within the media-structure, and media-hungry art world of the early 2010s. Through video, social media, poetry, essays, lectures, they already endeavored to carve out a space for intimacy and plurality from within a corporate ecology offering little or no hope for radical alternatives– IKEA and Batman provided themes for some of the early shows. In a 2012 interview on Rhizome.org, they assessed: I believe very strongly in contingency– or otherwise, [potential-] failure-as-process.

The aforementioned gallery shows were both held in 2016: *The Great Near* at Arcadia Missa in London and *Atrophilia* with Phoebe Collings-James at Company Gallery in New York. At Company Gallery, a lion sat perched on its pedestal. We see only its head, which is protruding from under a red cap, while the body is sketched as a mere pair of dangling, empty sweatshirt arms. This piece is more gurative than their later ones and displays more sculptural savoir-faire. But the tape patching up the lion s blue head already signs it as one by Jesse Darling. Again, this detail signals that it is as much this individual object (a sculpture) that is hurt than the character it represents (a lion). By turning to a space-based practice, Jesse Darling both anticipated and accompanied a turn that saw artists abandon the ethereal digital enthusiasm of the beginning of the decade. In his 1988 essay *The Inhuman*, Jean-Fran ois Lyotard could still ask whether thought could go on without a body, and fantasizing about a future where thought and body would be dissociated according to a hardware/software model. Thirty years later, we seem to rediscover bodies anew. They appear as a nodal point where economic, political, scienti c and ideological uxes materialize.

I do see the sculptures as mortal and vulnerable, just as we all are [ ]. This is a politics of care as well as a way to remember that nothing is too big to fail, wrote Jesse Darling in the same conversation. At Galerie Sultana, the works

Plastic bags, 2013 (2018) Courtesy: the artist and Galerie Sultana (opposite)
Border Sphinx 2 (boundary boy), 2016 Courtesy: the artist and COMPANY, New York (p. 198)

Cherry Gun, 2017 (2018) Courtesy: the artist and Galerie Sultana (top) Our Lady St Jerome, 2018 Courtesy: the artist and Galerie Sultana (opposite) March of the Valedictorians, 2016 (detail) Courtesy: the artist and Arcadia Missa (pp. 202-203)

testi ed to a lighter sculptural practice, *a cocoon exquis* combination of various daily-life materials closer to assemblage than sculpture as such. Some of those materials were found: plastic bags, work gloves, various medical supplies, sometimes owers left to wither. Others had been slightly tweaked and repurposed. Welded steel structures held various objects: a found plastic bag, a work glove, a molded, silicon corset, several recurring pink jesmonite fetuses (or were they aliens? cancerous growths?), as well as stern Commedia dell Arte masks. Quite clearly, identity was here posited as socially produced, be it through archetypal political roles (the masks) or gender stereotypes (born an indistinct cell-mass, you are made to t into a bra or a glove, be it through a medicinal straightjacket). There as well, the material presence of the works alone, porous, transient and detumescent, was enough to convey as a bundle of sensations the themes delineated by each more referential element.

Emphasizing presence over reference opens up an alternative to the two of the main caricatures often found in more representational strategies. On the one hand, there is the posthuman messianism of the 2010s. On the other, its current counterpart, with its procession of zombies and mutants, coated with a glamorous apocalypticism. Both submit to the trend of inventing radically new bodies. Jesse Darling s object-as-bodies and bodies-as-objects present us with nothing that is essentially new. Caring, being in pain, looking for intimacy, expressing vulnerability, has not yet been technologically overcome. Jesse Darling s bodies are not mutant. They are fundamentally Other, not tting in, painfully trying to cope with a daily life where instead of questioning the superstructure, one turns to self-enhancement techniques to stay always on, always exible, always vertical. While different bodies, visibly so, are slowly reclaiming a space in the public sphere, it might be non-productive bodies that remain most excluded, also from representational strategies. Disabled bodies, injured bodies, fragile bodies, dissenting bodies. *Crev□*, the artist s solo show last spring at Triangle France at La Friche la Belle de Mai in Marseille speci cally took up this subject. There, nothing was standing upright. Stranded steel paper planes covered the oor, while owers trapped in glass-cases were left to wither under public scrutiny.

Two years ago, Jesse Darling became ill from a neurological disease that left them paralyzed on one side and in great pain for over a year. The French word *crev□*, which translates as punctured or exhausted, came from this experience. So did their rst major institutional solo show, *The Ballad of Saint Jerome* at Tate Britain in London last autumn, built around the biblical myth of Saint Jerome who tamed a lion when he understood it was wounded and needed help, and that it was not a dangerous beast to be tamed. There as well, the works invent new, futuristic bodies. They refused the imperative to adapt or disappear. Twisted museum cabinets perched on metal legs, crutches bent under their own weight, anthropomorphic lions equipped with a medical kit: absurd and poignant at the same time, they shun interpretation. Are they going to stay there, set down, left in utter neglect, abandoned?, asked Jacques Derrida in his 1978 essay *Restitutions of Truth to Size*, addressing the interpretations made about Vincent Van Gogh s painting *A Pair of Shoes* (1886). To him, trying to render them to their rightful owner, that is, guessing to whom they belonged, and whether the owner was a farmer s wife (Martin Heidegger) or the artist himself (Meyer Schapiro). Those shoes are essentially offered to us as detached from naked feet and from their subject of reattachment. Neither gendered nor useful, they exist as objects. And as bodies: a product of culture, yet vulnerable and complicated.

Untitled (10 pairs of sculptures), 2019 Courtesy: the artist and Galerie Sultana (opposite)
Saint Batman, 2016 Courtesy: the artist and Arcadia Missa, London (pp. 206-207)
Ass Priest, 2017 Courtesy: the artist and Galerie Sultana (pp. 208-209)

Frieze

Reviews /

BY DORIAN BATYCKA
19 NOV 2019

Jesse Darling Teaches An Injured Society How to Practise Empathy

The artist's exhibition at Galerie Sultana, Paris, explores compassion as a means of resisting capitalism

In Berlin-based artist Jesse Darling's work, strong metaphorical associations form between facts and fiction, inanimate and animate objects, bodies and communities. Their latest exhibition, 'Selva Oscura' (Dark Jungle), at Galerie Sultana in Paris, explores the potential of empathy and support as means of resisting capitalism, with its focus on productivity and constant acceleration.

By incorporating objects that evoke the human body's vulnerability, Darling's works examine the subtle personal and political implications of everyday materials. In Untitled (2019), for instance, a set of three glass vitrines are filled with colourful bouquets. Often present at rituals, such as weddings and funerals, or in hospital rooms, flowers are gifted as expressions of joy, loss, care and, most of all, empathy. Where words fail, flowers speak with silent eloquence. The flowers speak not only for the dissemination of tenderness and care, but also mark unspoken tragedy, adversity and afflictions. In their decay they will soon turn into a vanitas symbol, a reminder of death, pointing out the transience of life and the futility of earthly gratifications.

Elsewhere, in St Jerome in the Wilderness (2018), we encounter 15 freestanding sculptures made of prosthetic steel, lacquer, a toilet brush, rubber, ferrules and archival binders – objects borrowed from everyday life that Darling has repurposed with the intent of evoking a forest-like setting. The title of the work refers to the priest and theologian St Jerome (best known for translating the Old and New Testaments from Hebrew and Greek, respectively, into Latin) and a hagiographical account in which he tamed a lion in the wilderness by nursing its wounded paw back to health.

Reading St Jerome in the Wilderness with this tale in mind adds another layer to the materials Darling incorporated here. The steel and ferrules merge to form crutches: mobility aids for an injured society. The reasons why these materials have high symbolic meaning to Darling is related to personal experiences. In an interview with Momus, Darling said that they had lost use of their limbs and still experience limited mobility from time to time. Moored to St Jerome's story predicated on concern for others, the work reminds us that companionship falls into our collective will to be soothed. The modern mystics of today are not necessarily the doctors and nurses who cure suffering professionally but, rather, those who practise care and empathy as part of their personal, daily routine. The freestanding sculptures situated in the gallery thereby represent the synthetic materials that call into question the precariousness of everyday life, but also the health systems that are designed and intended to offer support, but sometimes fail to.

In a recent Instagram post, Darling cited Dante Alighieri's Inferno (c.1320): 'Midway upon the journey of our life, I found myself within a forest dark, for the straightforward pathway had been lost.' In the depths of their exhibition at Galerie Sultana, we, too, are challenged to navigate the dark forest – the selva oscura – that they have planted. Somewhere within Darling's 'perpetual purgatory', we encounter the gatekeepers of care: the flora in the vitrines suggesting new circuits of care, community and understanding and the crutches to help us walk again. Yet in a world rife with greed and inequality, Darling's practice evokes the need to establish new materialisms, foregrounded in an unnerving benevolence towards tenderness and sympathy. Their exhibition is thus a call to acknowledge agony and the importance of recalibrating society towards a healthier dynamic, a recognition that art isn't just about bringing pleasure, but also soothing pain.

Jesse Darling, 'Selva Oscura' runs at Galerie Sultana, Paris, until 23 November 2019.

MOUSSE

CONVERSATIONS

On Broken and Glorious Things: Jesse Darling

Jesse Darling and Isabella Zamboni in conversation

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.

Jesse Darling, *Regalia and Insignia*, 2018

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 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?

MAP

BLAZE ON, PICTURE

William Kherbek reviews The Ballad of Saint Jerome by Jesse Darling, Tate Britain, London, 22 September - 24 February

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 'sovereignty' 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.

Jesse Darling 'The Ballad of Saint Jerome' 2018.
Courtesy Arcadia Missa

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 'sovereignty' 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.

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.

AnOther

The Artist Using St. Jerome and the Lion to Redress Patriarchal Power

SEPTEMBER 26, 2018

TEXT Maria Howard

Lion in wait for Jerome and his medical kit (detail), 2018
Jesse Darling © Jesse Darling, courtesy the artist and Arcadia Missa

As their first institutional show opens at Tate Britain, Jesse Darling shares some of the ideas behind it

Impressive for both its scope and unfailing critical gaze, Jesse Darling's work takes from a wide range of sources – from early Christian theology and Renaissance painting to Marxist feminist theory and scientific papers – to question the patriarchal structures that continue to surround us. In their upcoming show at Tate Britain, Darling turns a weary and wary eye to the twin institutions of museum and church and explores the story of St. Jerome and the lion, at the same time addressing the relationship between care and surveillance, the fragility of the body and art as a strategy for survival.

Art Now: Jesse Darling: The Ballad of Saint Jerome 2018
© Jesse Darling, courtesy the artist and Arcadia Missa, photography by Matt Greenwood, courtesy of Tate

On their upcoming show at Tate Britain...
"The whole show is kind of a riff on museum and church aesthetics and the visuals of old imperial epistemology – the glass vitrine, the frame. When there's something quite small in a great big box then hopefully you get the sense of a pinned butterfly, something that could otherwise have lived in the wild but never will now. So these tiny little works I'm making are kind of like relics, like little bits of shit that allegedly came from some saint – you build this great big box around it and then it's a thing. And that is basically what the whole show is trying to do. I wanted to kind of occupy that space and resist a little bit, resist what it does."

On St. Jerome and the lion…
"St. Jerome and the lion appeared to me extraordinarily like a love story. The lion of course is this savage who showed up to where Jerome was studying. Everybody said they should kill the lion but Jerome said 'No, he's just wounded' [and proceeded to remove a thorn from the lion's paw], and I thought this was the most beautiful, romantic thing. That somebody would see you in your woundedness and say this is not dangerous or bad, this is just someone who's hurting. I mean that's what everyone wants, right? Then years went by and I kept thinking about it but also I got a bit of perspective on it, and started to do my own reading.

"So St. Jerome showed up in my work; he is nowhere but he is the museum. He's the Tate, the institution, the church, the state, the medical-industrial complex, the white gaze, the male gaze. I am also Jerome in this context but I relate to the lion politically – though I have to acknowledge that I'm on both sides of that. By the time you're having an institutional show, even though it is my first at the age of 38, I think you can't pretend that you're completely not of it."

Art Now: Jesse Darling: The Ballad of Saint Jerome 2018©
Jesse Darling, courtesy the artist and Arcadia Missa, photography by Matt Greenwood, courtesy of Tate

On understanding the 'structural violence' of the patriarchy...
"I don't want to make it all about my own class and gender and sexual history or anything like that but the way that people come to understand themselves as mad or bad is also part of a structural violence. With the series of works called No more St. Jeromes, I was thinking, what if you didn't have this paternalistic influence, the imperial understanding of bodies, when you enter the medical diagnostic industrial complex as a sick or crazy person? Like the church it styles itself as this benevolent relationship to the one seeking care, but that's just one part of the story."

On making art…
"I don't call myself a research artist and I don't make claims about what my work is doing – it doesn't function like academia or activism, it's just doing what art does. And that basically means that – whatever you take from it – you understand it in a register of the subjective. I don't like things to be really slick or manufactured, the aesthetics of capital. I want you to see the decisions and the mistakes. That to me is an aesthetics of the subjective."

Art Now: Jesse Darling: The Ballad of Saint Jerome runs until February 24, 2018 at Tate Britain, London.

ARTFORUM

Jesse Darling, *Saint! Jerome in the Wilderness*, 2018, ink on paper, testosterone

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.

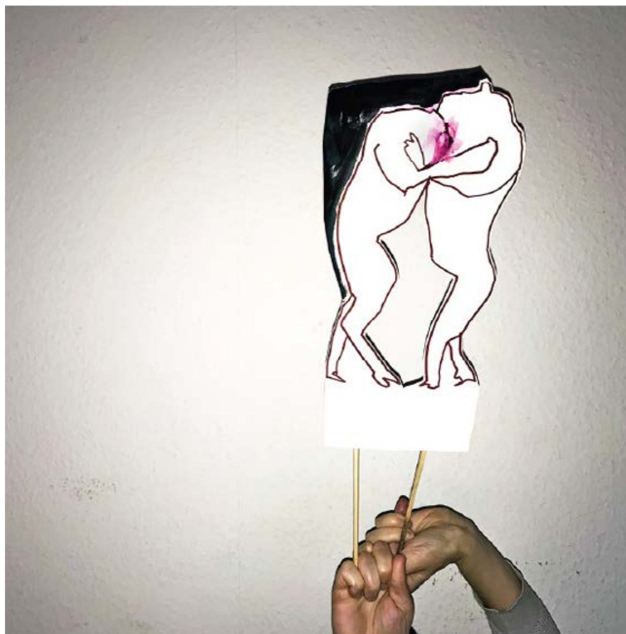
If the covert potential of underdog communities has been central to Darling's work for some time, so has engagement with print media. See, for example, the hashtag turned poster project #losermilitia, 2016: AND YOU WILL KNOW US / BY THE ASTHMA INHALERS / AND ANXIETY MEDS / THE TICS AND ALLERGIES / DRINKING 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 towardsculpture: 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



Jesse Darling, *No More Saint Jeromes*, 2018, ink on paper, chopsticks, tape

Jesse Darling, *The Staff of Saint Jerome*, 2018, steel, rubber, bandages, lion, testosterone

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Work in Progress: Jesse Darling

The derelict Croydon airport, Batman as a sainted figure, and a potential new work: a road movie going nowhere

BY JESSE DARLING

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.

Courtesy: the artist

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.

Jesse Darling, *Cont hurt Batman !!!*, 2016, pencil or paper, 29 x 42 cm. Courtesy: the artist

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.

Jesse Darling, *Saint Batman*, 2016, steel, plastic, sugar, expanding foam, 110 x 60 x 30 cm. Courtesy: the artist and Arcadia_Missa, London; photograph: Tom Carter

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

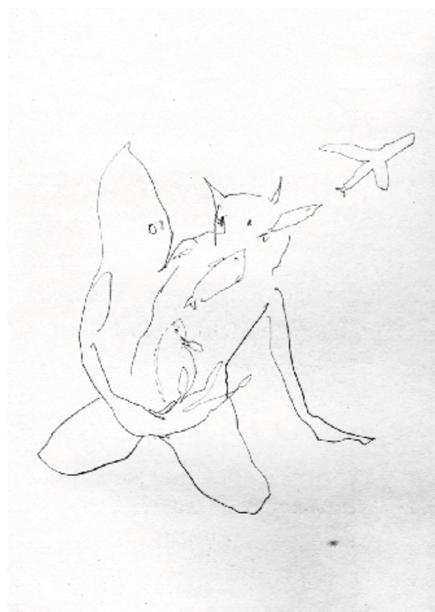
And so I started thinking about Batman in the bardo: a road movie going nowhere.

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, conehead 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.

Jesse Darling, *Untitled (postcard)*, 2016, ink on paper, collage, 15 x 20 cm. Courtesy: the artist

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.



Jesse Darling, *A ghost jerks Batmam off & a small hare stands erect where the ghost fingers & then fish r flyin in a perfect arc before becoming planes& disappear out of the world*, 2016, pencil on paper. Courtesy: the artist

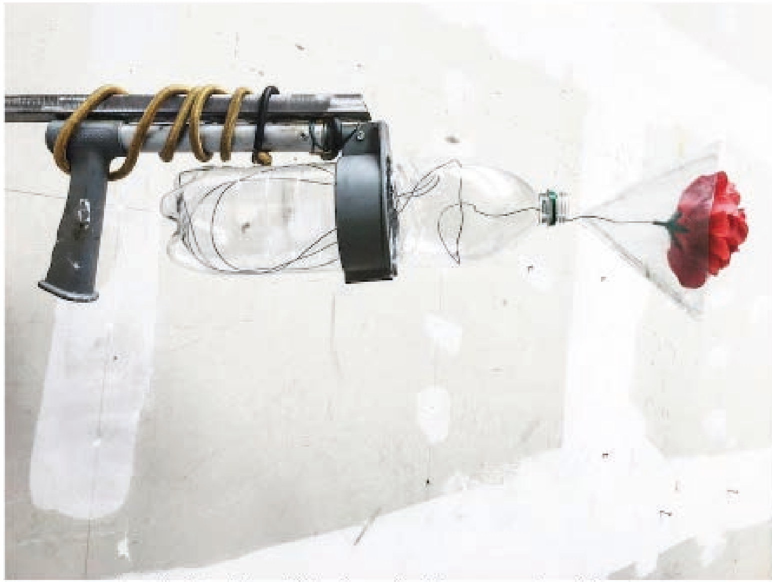
When I was about seven years old I read George Orwell's Animal Farm (1945). I liked it alright; I liked books about animals. It was cool when they took over the farm but I was sad about Boxer. I have not read it since, though I understand I may have missed some of its nuances. Still, a story that can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

MOMUS
— A RETURN TO ART CRITICISM —

"Speaking from a Wound": Jesse Darling on Faith, Crisis, and Refusal



Jesse Darling, "Gun?," (detail) 2014/2016. Image courtesy of the artist.

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.

Jesse Darling, "Domestic Terror," 2016.

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 I 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 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.

Jesse Darling "Collapsed Cane" 2018

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 – ie. 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 a non-compromised 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.

theguardian

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 croched 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 Opavivara!. 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 outragiously 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 loos, 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.

https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2016/oct/05/frieze-art-fair-2016-review-everyones-a-performer-in-the-boozy-fruity-house-of-fun

ARTFORUM

Phoebe Collings-James and Jesse Darling

COMPANY

Phoebe Collings-James, *Bodied*, 2016, polypropylene woven sack, tape, poplar frame, 70 × 70 × 7".

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 into 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 stilt-walkers, the sculpture—which is festooned with festive red ribbons—nods 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 polis. Rather, these surreal figures appear like scrawny, ambivalent heralds who greet us at a historical juncture. Similarly elevated were *Valedictorian (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) ArtePovera, 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 referentially). The bagging and shipping of foodstuffs 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 animated. The cross-shaped box brings to mind forms of medieval reliquary, with the masklike white bag at its center seemingly imbued with real presence—an acheiropoieta 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 altarpiece-like *Volive* 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 figurine. 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 Sultana, Paris 24 February – 22 April

i-D

jesse darling: from batman to empire, from gender to war

We look inside the artist's new show at Arcadia Missa as it closes this weekend.

MAY 7 2016, 11:05AM

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 conditions 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 encompasses 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 brighten 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 shouting 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.

'Mene Mene Tekel Parsin' installation view

Kameelah Janan Rasheed *Potentially How to Suffer Politely (And Other Etiquette)* 2016

At the threshold, a projection of a poem below eye-level traces words in light (Imran Perreta'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 passwords, 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 *Ebi 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 Sulaïman Majali's *hero/antihero*, 2012, an overlay of two pairs of words in all caps that require writing out separately 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 (il)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 *ell / ells - 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 tilde, 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. ∎

Hannah Gregory is a writer and editor living in Berlin.

FRIEZE

In Focus: Jesse Darling

Undivided selves

BY JESSE DARLING IN FEATURES | 24 APR 15

For *Habeas Corpus Ad Subjiciendum* (2012), London-based artist Jesse Darling stands mute in the beam of a projector. A silent PowerPoint presentation flashes up text and images of the artist's tweets and online posts, and directly addresses the audience with facts, questions and instructions. Titled after the medieval legal writ that requires the presence in court of a prisoner who is to be tried, Darling's response to the occupational hazard of the 'artist talk' offers up a flesh-and-bones body whose voice has been flattened into Microsoft Office standard slides. The presentation pre-empts predictable questions about the artist's biography with a hint of dramatic intrigue. One tweet reads: 'Everyone knows that Darling is an end-of-the-line monstrous war-cry kinda pseudonym, taken in defiance of a world that doesn't love you.' Later, it affects a sincere, academic tone: 'I talk about performance because it acknowledges the contingency, the temporality, the artifice. I talk about performance but really I mean *passing*.' Eventually, the pretence of the lecture collapses with a slide announcing: 'I'm not a performance artist, I just play one for money.'

Jesse Darling, *Material Girl*, 2014, Steel, plastic, rope, 110 × 59 × 75 cm. Courtesy: the artist and Marcelle Joseph Projects, London

Jesse Darling, *Masc Irade*, 2014, Steel, plastic, pram wheels, bungee cord, 180 × 132 × 90 cm
Courtesy: the artist and Marcelle Joseph Projects, London

The collectivity evident in Darling's digital output – groups of friends appearing in videos, active conversations on social media – is intrinsically related to a commitment to exploring the role collaborative living can have on artistic practice. This interest saw Darling found the Kitson Road Living Project in south-east London, a home for artists and a space for art events that operated from early 2013 to July 2014, when it moved nearby and became the Fernholme Road Living Project. A politics of sharing pervades much of Darling's work, exemplified in a 'drawing practice' of stick-and-poke tattoos given to friends and collaborators, including one of a woolly mammoth, made on the occasion of the 'Extinction Marathon' at London's Serpentine Gallery in October 2014. The recipient of the tattoo brings an idea to Darling and talks through its significance; the artist then sketches a pictorial interpretation onto his or her skin before rendering it as a permanent ink drawing – the corporeal memento of a shared event.

These various activities underpin Darling's sculptural work, which can be seen as a more classical formal means of expression. Last winter, 'Spirit Level' – Darling's second show of work made with the artist Takeshi Shiomitsu – was presented at ANDOR gallery in London. The intimation of damaged bodies and various cures pervaded the show: sculptures were made of broken or sawn plasterboard and wood stuck together with expanding foam, alongside heat-sealed, clear-plastic envelopes containing medicines, foods and toiletries attached to the wall with tape printed with the word 'CERTAIN', in the style of 'FRAGILE' tape. Larger sculptures incorporated tourniquets, pink ribbon, butchers' hooks and punch bags, with leaking water containers and various items bandaged with the tape.

'Material Girls and their Muses' (2014), an exhibition organized by Marcelle Joseph Projects in a derelict office in London's Clerkenwell neighbourhood, featured Darling's 'loser militia', a motley crew of figurative sculptures. The works loitered about, leaning against walls or hanging from the ceiling. Some radiated an eccentric disfunctionality, while others suggested a deflated heroism. Made from steel tubing, elastic, rope and Darling's singular material of supermarket shopping bags sculpted using the flame of a plumber's brazing torch, they exuded a droll and anguished energy.

The gathering centred on *Masc Irade* (2014), a tall, sketchy figure strung up on blue bungee cord. A steel yoke bent into a wide zigzag reminiscent of clavicles and shoulders acted like a clothes hanger for a torso made of sculpted shopping bags. Resembling a flimsy white vest bearing the slogan 'Top Brands', the body was pulled taut by a metal lower half precariously balanced on pram wheels. It's a sculpture on the verge of a comic or vicious spasm – part slapstick, part slap-in-the-face. The forces of seduction and violence seem to reside just under the skin of many of Darling's works, which please, fascinate and revolt in equal measure. The legless *Our Lady of Whatever* (2014) comprises a pink hourglass body made of shrivelled translucent plastic. She hovers in space, her carapace winding down to where the heat-sculpted plastic puckers around a sizeable hole suggesting a mixed-use genital-anal opening. *Material Girl* (2014), a headless sculpture whose hybrid animal/human form would have felt at home in Hieronymus Bosch's *Garden of Earthly Delights* (1503– 04), recalls raw poultry. It hung from a pair of butchers' hooks attached to a squat metal structure with knock knees and splayed feet, its 'body' a sheath of orange plastic like a grotesque version of a couture dress.

Throughout Darling's work, a single, distinctive gesture recurs time and again: the penetration of natural or cultural barriers, performed either by poking a needle through skin, cutting through the froth of online babble or burning through a disposable plastic membrane. For Darling, 'social media is an outreach platform, a self-selecting community aggregator.' He explains: 'I'm trying to bring together these aspects of my practice in the public eye so that they need not feel so compartmentalized nor give any extra weight to the silly hypothesis, still very prevalent in art discourses, that there is anything like a "digital divide" [irl/url]'.

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