

Arcadia Missa is

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TimeOut

Nnena Kalu

Art Arcadia Missa, Marylebone



Nnena Kalu at Arcadia Missa. Photography: Tom Carter; Courtesy of the Artist and Arcadia Missa, London

Time Out says

★★★★★

Obsessive, repetitive, maximal: Nnena Kalu's art is like an act of physical, aesthetic meditation. She takes textiles, plastic, unspooled VHS tapes, netting and rubbish and binds and rebinds it over and over. In the process, she creates hanging bundled forms of countless colours and textures. They hover like disembowelled organs, hearts and guts constructed out of detritus. They look tense, dangerous, ready to burst.

Her drawings are even more intense - whirling whorls of fierce spiralling marks on coloured paper, that double back on themselves over and over - but you can only just spy them in the office in the back of the gallery.

But it's not as objects or images that Kalu's work is the most interesting. Kalu has 'limited verbal communication'; creating these sculptures and drawings is an act of expression, a feverish striving for visual communication, a plea for language. The objects are a symbol of that endeavour, but to see them is to be spoken to, reach out to, and brilliantly communicated with.

Written by Eddy Frankel Thursday 2 May 2024

PLASTER

Nnena Kalu's sculptures are a dumpster diver's dream

30/04/24 6 min read Words: **Elise Bell**

"Bodily organs, entrails and guts spilling out":
Elise Bell on Nnena Kalu's latest sculptures at
Arcadia Missa



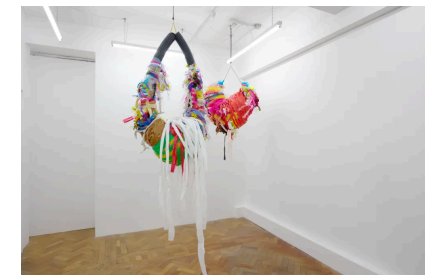
Installation view of Nnena Kalu, *Nnena Kalu* at Arcadia Missa, London. Photography: Tom Carter; Courtesy of the Artist, ActionSpace, London and Arcadia Missa, London.

In 1967, the American artist Lee Lozano began making her Wave series, a collection of eleven monumental canvases made over a period of four years. Featuring lines carefully painted into wave-like grooves (similar to the grooves you might see on a vinyl record), Lozano would complete each of the works in one sitting: her first piece *2 Wave*, taking eight hours, another, *96 Wave*, lasting three days, exhausting herself mentally and physically in the process. Though rarely shown, when it is, Lozano's Wave series hangs on black walls in one room, the shimmering lines creating a mesmeric optical shift, sightlines going bananas, colour becoming unfixed. Meticulous as they are, Lozano's repetitive gestures betray an expressionistic spirit, her repeated mark-making turning what could feel hard, and cold, into something altogether more moving and profound.

A similar repetition is the name of the game in the work of Nnena Kalu, an artist whose work has spanned two decades, multiple residencies, and now a solo exhibition at a commercial gallery. Kalu's is exhibiting for the first time at Arcadia Missa, just off London's frantic Bond Street. Like Lozano, Kalu uses repetitive gestures in works that defy clear categorisation; the most recent of which are technicolour installations which hang suspended from the ceiling, gently twisting in the air as bodies move around the gallery.



Nnena Kalu, *Tube Sculpture 1*, 2023. Photography: Tom Carter; Courtesy of the Artist, ActionSpace, London and Arcadia Missa, London.

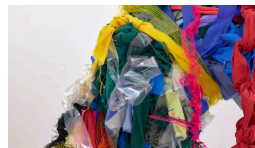


Installation view of Nnena Kalu, *Nnena Kalu* at Arcadia Missa, London. Photography: Tom Carter; Courtesy of the Artist, ActionSpace, London and Arcadia Missa, London.

Assembled through a patchwork of materials, the make-up of Kalu's sculptures read like a dumpster diver's dream: ink-black spools of VHS tape; drainage piping, tubes, plastic strips, rope, gauze, mixed fabric in bright pinks, greens and blues. The abstract sculptures are made up of layers of material, wound over again and again to create clenched fists of colour which hover like carnivalesque clouds.

In videos shot back in 2018, you can see the way Kalu creates her work, her winding and binding of these enormous forms becoming a performance in-and-of itself, as she methodically, and with a steadfast intention left uncommunicated to her audience, builds up her sculptures. Referred to as "overripe fruit" in the exhibition text, these forms feel more like bodily organs, entrails and guts spilling out inside the gallery. The sculptures seem to exist as an extension of Kalu's own body, communicating to viewers an urgent and frenetic internal rhythm that is palpable as you weave amongst the works.

Hidden in a back room just behind the main gallery space are two of Kalu's drawings. If you ask politely, you might be able to see them, the drawings helping make sense of Kalu's practice. Using coloured pencil, Kalu has created dynamic, vibrant vortexes of colour, which seem to pull you in and spit you out as you look closer.



They're reminiscent of another female artist, that of the Victorian spiritualist Georgiana Houghton, who, like Lozano and Kalu after her, uses repeated gestures to create some of the earliest examples of (what could be seen as) abstract work. Known as 'Spirit Drawings' for the fact that Houghton created these works 'unconsciously' during seances, these works – much like Lozano's waves and Kalu's sculptures – correspond to a shared need to communicate beyond language. It's a shame then that Nnena's drawings are not included in the exhibition, the bringing together of drawing, and sculptural form potentially providing a wider view of Nnena's work, whilst also being a welcome addition to the gallery's very white walls.

But it's a triumph all the same. During a time when news of arts cuts are repeated so often it's hard to imagine how a creative scene in this country exists at all, it's a pleasure to see the work of a thriving artist who has been working with one of the UK's most important art organisations: ActionSpace. Kalu has limited verbal communication, and has been supported by the charity since 1999, the organisation providing studio space for the artist to practice within and championing her work. It's a small aside to a much bigger story: that of an artist making room for herself within the contemporary art world, creating work that feels as enormous and propulsive as the talent that thrums in her very bones.



Installation view of Nnena Kalu, *Nnena Kalu* at Arcadia Missa, London. Photography: Tom Carter; Courtesy of the Artist, ActionSpace, London and Arcadia Missa, London.

Nnena Kalu's Vortex Drawings



DR. JAREH DAS

Nnena Kalu, *To All The Kings Who Have No Crowns*. Photo credit: Carl Freedman Gallery, Margate, 2022


Born in Glasgow in 1966, Nnena Kalu is an artist who has worked with circular and linear motifs for over two decades resulting in both two and three-dimensional works exploring repetition, mark-making, and depth of colour. Her practice is rooted in responding to surrounding sounds and rhythms which influence her resulting shapes and forms.

Kalu is mostly non-verbal and autistic and works in a processual manner which sees her bind layers of materials together, driven instinctually to continually repeat this process, whether this in drawings, paintings, small or monumental sculptures. The resulting works all share an emphasis on materiality, mark-making, and exploration of the colour field. She continues to develop her practice at ActionSpace, a leading organisation supporting the development of artists with learning disabilities, which has been based at Studio Voltaire since 1999. In recent years, she has presented solo exhibitions at Glasgow International in 2018 with Project Ability, Humber Street Gallery, Hull in 2019 and 'elsewhere' Studio Voltaire's offsite programme in 2020, and in 2021, she was part of Yinka Shonibare's curated Royal Academy Summer Exhibition.

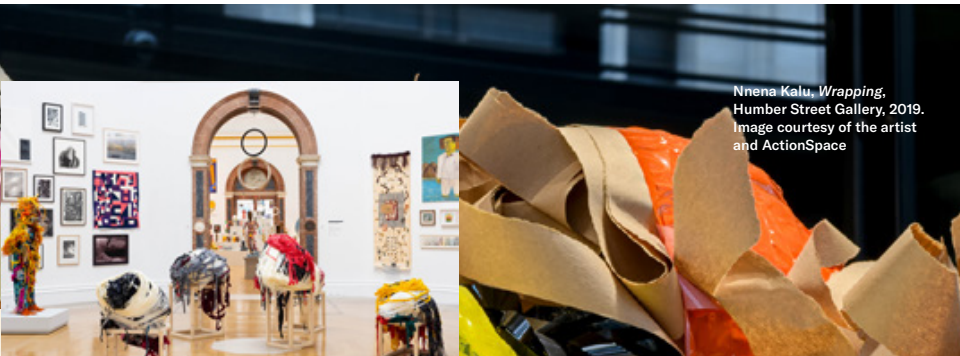
At the end of February, at Carl Freedman Gallery in Margate (once based in London but since 2019 now calls Margate home), I witnessed Kalu completing her outstanding large-scale vortex drawings *Untitled 1-6*, (2022) presented alongside cocoon-like sculptures that are made from strips of tape, paper, textiles, and VHS tape assembled through binding these materials together. These sculptures have been described in the text accompanying her Studio Voltaire *elsewhere* commission in central London in 2020 as 'cylinders of translucent plastic and reams of black cassette tape are unspooled in order to bind and be re-bound. In this way, each solid form is, in fact, an immense unravelled line: a winding trail given substance and volume.'

Kalu's performance was part of an outstanding group exhibition curated by Jennifer Gilbert of Jennifer Lauren Gallery entitled *To all the Kings who have no Crowns* showcasing varied artworks by non-conventional, self-taught, neurodivergent, and disabled artists redefining artmaking and its practices. Watching Nnena repeatedly draw lines, hypnotically, in a circular motion with pencil and paint pen onto large sheets of yellow paper for these works (*Untitled Vortex drawings*, 2022) gave an insight into the artist's approach to drawing. The meaning of Kalu's drawings remains unknown, with an emphasis on both the process from which shapes, forms, and colours are assembled. A performative approach of rhythmic reception to sounds around her and movements that direct artmaking means she works instinctually rather than formally. While many of Kalu's works are untitled, the word 'vortex' appears in some of their titles including *Vortex Map Drawing* (c. 2015), a drawing with overlapping pink, red, orange, white, and black circular lines on a found OS Map. A vortex is a swirling motion of water, a whirlpool. At one time, it was believed that similar shifts amongst the component parts of the universe caused rotating movement here on Earth. The form and motion at play in these drawings could be likened to a swirling motion of water, but the act of channelling compulsion into creativity and material explorations that speak of the body, performance, movement, and tactility is a more appropriate way of approaching Kalu's works.

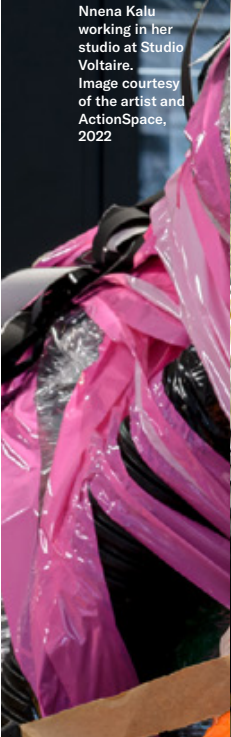
Nnena Kalu's drawings are confident and expressive, led by her self-determination. Through a textured layering of lines by repeated action, she invites us into a world driven by sound and rhythm. An expansive, varied, and tactile practice that emerges through a desire to bring materials together layer by layer whilst continually evolving ways to keep reworking, reusing, and representing them.



Nnena Kalu, Installation view of the Summer Exhibition 2021 at the Royal Academy of Arts, London, 22 September 2021–2 January 2022. Photo: Royal Academy of Arts, London, David Parry




Nnena Kalu, *Wrapping*, Humber Street Gallery, 2019. Image courtesy of the artist and ActionSpace




Nnena Kalu working in her studio at Studio Voltaire. Image courtesy of the artist and ActionSpace, 2022



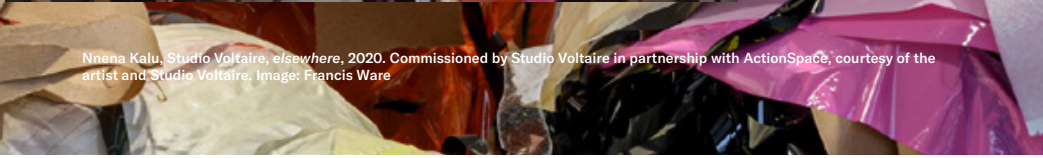
Nnena Kalu, Studio Voltaire, *elsewhere*, 2020. Commissioned by Studio Voltaire in partnership with ActionSpace, courtesy of the artist and Studio Voltaire. Image: Francis Ware



Nnena Kalu working in her studio at Studio Voltaire. Image courtesy of the artist and ActionSpace, 2022



Nnena Kalu, Studio Voltaire, *elsewhere*, 2020. Commissioned by Studio Voltaire in partnership with ActionSpace, courtesy of the artist and Studio Voltaire. Image: Francis Ware



Nnena Kalu, Studio Voltaire, *elsewhere*, 2020. Commissioned by Studio Voltaire in partnership with ActionSpace, courtesy of the artist and Studio Voltaire. Image: Francis Ware

Nnena Kalu Weaves a Wild Web of Sellotape and Wool

“She’s a creative force to be reckoned with.” The British artist, who has autism, creates enormous, expressive drawings and brightly-coloured sculptures from everyday household materials. Words by Louise Benson



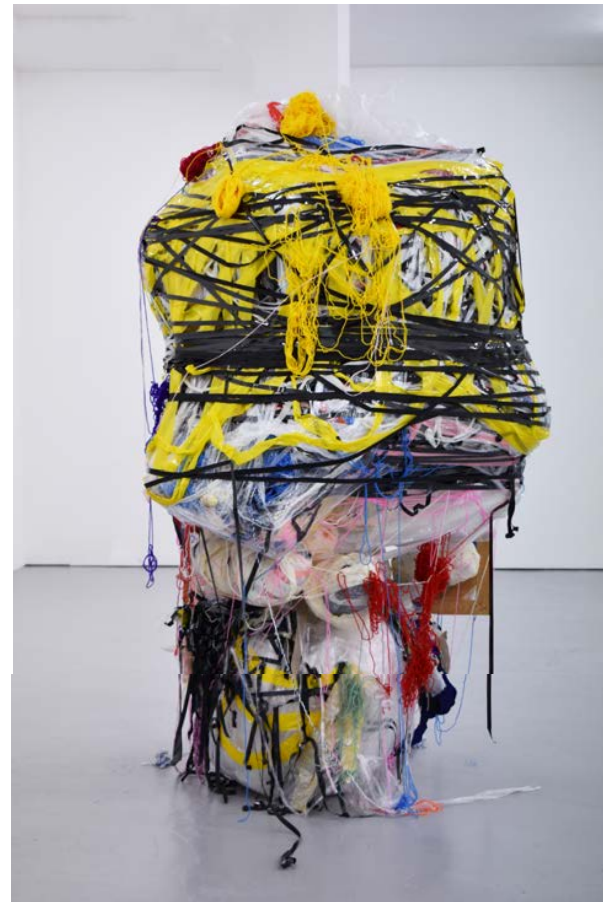
Nnena Kalu, Sculpture, 2013, Mixed Media. Courtesy of the artist and Action Space

Nnena Kalu is already hard at work when I arrive at her first major London solo exhibition, located just a stone’s throw from the Royal Academy of Arts. The venue is a temporary off-site space for Studio Voltaire, who will be popping up with exhibitions across London throughout 2020. This is the first show of the programme, titled simply: Nnena Kalu.

Certainly, Kalu’s larger-than-life sculptures need little introduction. Enormous mounds of paper, wool and tape bind her various structures together, which are wild and expressive in their gestural forms. It’s as if the pace and arc of Kalu’s arms and hands can be traced in the wending of the cyclical rounds. To look at them is to begin to feel almost dizzy.

The screech of sellotape cuts through the room, a welcome respite from the usual silence that pervades most gallery spaces. It is a stark difference from the usual order of things: the artist herself is present, wrapping, winding and enveloping her sculptures until they swell and burst forth with layer upon layer of material. Kalu will continue to build up the works on display, for two days a week, throughout the duration of the exhibition.

For Kalu, who is autistic and non-verbal, her art practice is an important part of her personal expression. She is assisted in her work by Charlotte Hollinshead, who has run the South London studio of Action Space for more than two decades. She reflects upon Kalu’s work and their longstanding relationship when we meet at the gallery. Hollinshead communicates on behalf of Kalu, and is careful to place her at the centre of our discussion, emphasizing the ways in which she has forged her own creative path.



Nnena Kalu, Spring Syllabus, 2018, London. Courtesy of the artist and Action Space

How long has Nnena been making work as an artist, and what has been her journey to where she is today?

Nnena started working with us in 1997 on a combined music, art and theatre project. I've worked with her since then, and we know each other really well. It was apparent from the beginning that she had a deep need to create, to layer and to repeat. When people first come to work with us, we start with some basics, just to see how they use their materials. Nnena spent a good few years trying out lots of big drawing—everything always goes big with Nnena. Big drawing, big painting, big collaging: lots of that. And everything she did was phenomenal immediately.

“It’s Nnena who is driving all this forward. She’s a creative force to be reckoned with”

In her drawings, Nnena would really love repeating clusters of colours and lines that went across the page. She had also been making hundreds of little paper pieces in the studio, where she was ripping paper and then folding it up into little bundles and taping them. It was difficult to work out how to present them, but then we staged this big studio event in a big empty shop. We took all those little cocoon-y pieces, and Nnena started attaching them to a wall and to boxes around the room, then binding them with tape and with wool. It was quite a groundbreaking moment, because it was the first time Nnena had had the space to play with an idea. It was very organic and really exciting.

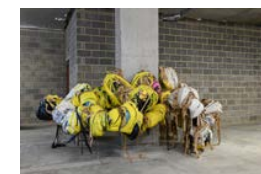
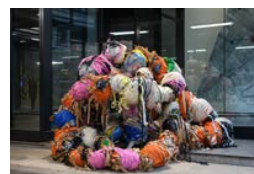


Nnena Kalu, Collage painting, 2008. Courtesy of the artist and Action Space

What do you think appeals to Nnena about the various tapes and other household materials that she makes use of?

There are a lovely varied textile qualities, and I think they can bulk up very quickly. Nnena's got a significant physical impairment in her left eye, so a lot of this work is driven by the movement and driven by the sound and the rhythm, rather than a visual element. It's not necessarily an aesthetic coming-together of pieces. Nnena's making the choices about colours and things that she wants to use, but a lot of this is about the physical engagement with it.

In terms of the household materials, it's about affordability often and what we can get our hands on, because whatever Nnena uses, she uses a lot of! I spend a lot of my life trying to source things which aren't too costly that we can get in bulk. There's a lot of re-purposing that goes on. Our job is to constantly think: Nnena's needing to do this, how can we enable it? It's a constant delicate process to make sure Nnena's in charge of what's happening, not overcrowding her or clustering around what she's doing.



What is your relationship with Nnena, and how have you managed your collaborative process?

We're very close, Nnena's like my second family. But for someone with more complex needs, who requires a lot of support to present and make their work, it's important to understand that she really does have ownership over this whole thing, and this process. My job is just a constant twenty-year exploration of trying to work out what Nnena likes doing—what works, what doesn't work—and to help her with her need to make, which is so strong, and to enable it to flow in the right way that suits her. It's not my agenda but her agenda. She's totally in control of this, and I think all artists could do with somebody who can tap into their ultimate needs. I'm a sort of glorified assistant, really.



Left: Nnena Kalu, Boulder Sculptures, 2018, Mixed Media. Right: Nnena Kalu, Project Ability, 2018, Glasgow International, Glasgow. Both courtesy of the artist and Action Space

What are some of the challenges that Nnena has faced in the art world and beyond as an artist with autism, and how has the landscape changed during the time that you have been working with artists with disabilities?

I started doing this in 1996, and I think artists and projects like this would just be dismissed as community arts, or outsider art or disability art. If we ever got in touch with a gallery, they'd always just put you through to their education department and we'd be invited to go for a visit. We were just never taken seriously. The transformation of attitudes within the art world, over the time Nnena has been developing her practice, has been quite significant.

Sometimes the frustration of Nnena not being viewed as an artist has just made me want to smash my head against a wall. Nnena works harder than most artists I know, and she has a twenty-year practice. She's just really got it, she's got it all going on. For anyone to dismiss what she does is really frustrating, but that sidelining still happens and it's just quite tedious. This is a really important exhibition because it's in a contemporary gallery space in Mayfair, without them pushing some disability agenda.

We've had years of trying to just navigate our way through other people's political agendas to try to keep it pure to Nnena. This show is amazing because she can just be her.

“Nnena works harder than most artists I know, and she has a twenty-year practice. For anyone to dismiss what she does is really frustrating”

We have to be really careful with the wording, and I think we're still trying to work out how to describe aspects of that relationship without undermining the work she does. Because if we just say something is collaborative, it takes away from the power of Nnena. It's Nnena who is driving all this forward. She's a creative force to be reckoned with, and I would just never want her work to be seen as lesser because of my role. I think that's really important. It always worries me how this will be perceived, so it's a big risk. This is Nnena's practice, it's not mine.

FRIEZE

Nnena Kalu's Chrysalides of Material Quietly Evolve in Mayfair

In an exhibition organized by Studio Voltaire, the artist's work grows at a pace with which galleries today are often unfamiliar



Watching the sculptor Nnena Kalu at work reminds me of a word: 'thing-less'. It's a word Eileen Myles uses to describe a Robert Harms painting – *Other Flowers* (2013) – in her 2015 article, 'Eleven Favourites'. Myles writes: 'For me, [Harms] is one of the most feeling of painters. His work is thing-less.' I interpret this thing-lessness as a work's resistance to serve any material purpose beyond documenting itself. An uncategorizable, uncollectable boundlessness.

Kalu takes simple, linear materials associated with packing and protecting – strips of paper, tape, cling film, plastic tubing – and collates them into bundles that she ties or wraps into a rhizome of spherical forms. Her process is repetitive and fractal-like, evolving these thing-less spheres into tubes until they bend back in on themselves, mutating and growing into bigger twisted shapes. Kalu's forms are often described as cocoons, but that makes them sound too still. I think they're more like chrysalides, pulsing.



Nnena Kalu, 2020, installation view. Courtesy: the artist and Studio Voltaire, London; photograph: Francis Ware

Kalu's self-titled exhibition, installed on the ground floor of 30 Old Burlington Street in Mayfair, is the first in a series of off-site shows that Studio Voltaire has organized for the coming year. The space is much larger than the corner she occupies at ActionSpace, a studio programme for artists with learning disabilities in London. Kalu, who is non-verbal, has been working with ActionSpace for 19 years, closely assisted by artist facilitator Charlotte Hollinshead. Hollinshead works diligently to provide materials, offer support (holding tape, cutting paper) and develop Kalu's professional opportunities. While I watch Kalu work, Hollinshead is by her side, anticipating the next move. They move together, rhythmically wrapping, stretching and reshaping Kalu's sculptures. Though they are old friends and colleagues, Hollinshead tells me that she is often surprised by Kalu's direction.

Every weekend for the duration of the show, Kalu has been reworking her installation in front of visitors. The exhibition opened with three separate structures: a cluster spun around a pillar, a freestanding bulbous igloo and a wriggling corner piece. Since, the room has been filling wildly with saturated, tangled nodes of plastic and paper. Curator Nicola Wright explains that a lot of the material at Studio Voltaire is repurposed from Kalu's 2019 exhibition 'Wrapping' at Humber Street Gallery. This recycling allows Kalu's installations to grow from a different starting point each time, organically shapeshifting previous forms.



Nnena Kalu, 2020, installation view. Courtesy: the artist and Studio Voltaire, London; photograph: Francis Ware

Kalu's reusing of material means she operates at a pace with which galleries today are often unfamiliar. Though Kalu is productive, her practice does not orient around the production of objects. The installations are ephemeral and flexible documentations of her agile process. Her work might be better understood as a limitless cycle of transformation than a series of static artworks. There is no end to Kalu's art: she may finish an installation in one space, but parts of it will reappear, dismantled and altered, in the next.

Not far away from Studio Voltaire's temporary gallery is Europe's busiest shopping road, Oxford Street. In an area dominated by consumerism, Kalu's exhibition is resonantly quiet, thing-less by comparison. Through the windows, we can see her chrysalides of material frothing, growing and unfolding under her binding processes: a soft interruption to the noise of Mayfair. I imagine, were the exhibition not bound by walls, 'Nnena Kalu' would be a rolling infinity pool of forms, undulating and whirling.

Main image: Nnena Kalu, 2020, installation view. Courtesy: the artist and Studio Voltaire, London; photograph: Francis Ware

The time of her life: how Nnena Kalu turned Patrick Swayze videos into art

Kalu, who has autism, channelled her compulsive behaviour into creativity – and now her bristling, energetic work is wowing Hull



Nnena Kalu's Wrapping at Humber Street Gallery, Hull. Photograph: Jules Lister/Courtesy of Humber Street Gallery and the artist

Humber Street Gallery in Hull was a blank slate two days ago, but by the time I arrive the ground-floor space is already half full with newly made sculptures. [Nnena Kalu](#) works fast and she works big. The artist repurposes waste material like old VHS tape, and as I watch her in action, she unspools it in long, satisfying reams to

garnish her boldly expressive sculptures. A massive stockpile of raw material sits at one end of the gallery, from videotapes to assorted coloured adhesive tapes, and piles of fabric, like puzzle pieces waiting Kalu to fit them together and make sense of them.

She paces across the gallery at regular intervals to dive into this trove, beginning a process that repeats its basic steps yet produces something new each time. A pre-made group of boulder-like forms are bound together, and then attached to an ingenious system of adjustable frame-like structures, where they're wrapped and bound further, to create messy forms that seem to bristle with energy.

For Kalu, this is a rare opportunity to exhibit in a dedicated contemporary art gallery. She's on the autism spectrum and has complex support needs. She's able to work as an artist with the help of [ActionSpace](#), a London-based organisation aiding artists with learning disabilities. Kalu gets direct support from Charlotte Hollinshead, whose role functions as something like a more specialised artist's assistant. Kalu is unable to articulate complex thoughts verbally, so Hollinshead speaks on her behalf.



Driving the creative process ... Nnena Kalu at work. Photograph: Jules Lister/Courtesy of Humber Street Gallery and the artist

Over the 20 years that they have worked together, Hollinshead has used a trial and error approach to introduce new elements and find the best way for Kalu to work, and the introduction of VHS tape was a big success. Hollinshead clearly plays a significant part in Kalu's work, but she's keen to stress how Kalu is driving the creative process, decisively rejecting or accepting new elements that are introduced to the process, bending them to her interests to produce often surprising results. As Hollinshead puts it: "She's not just blindly unravelling tape, she's making careful decisions. The more time and space she has, the more it becomes apparent."

Kalu's rapid pace makes it a challenge to gather materials, with VHS tape in particular becoming difficult to source. Hollinshead is now almost constantly on the hunt for it, gladly accepting donations from wherever she can secure them. Sometimes this produces interesting results, such as a recent project in Belgium where Kalu

worked almost exclusively with tapes of Patrick Swayze films.

Last year's [Glasgow International](#) was a breakthrough moment for Kalu, situating her among one of the UK's most exciting contemporary art events and exposing her work to the mass of artists and industry professionals who descend on the city for the festival. That industry recognition was vital for ActionSpace, who are part of a nationwide group of organisations – such as [Glasgow's Project Ability](#), where Kalu exhibited – pushing for greater inclusion for learning disabled artists. It was in Glasgow that John Heffernan, curator of Humber Street, saw Kalu's work, offering her a show in Hull off the back of it.

"People are constantly sidelined into outsider art or educational activity," Hollinshead says. It's this attitude that disabled artists are often working against. Education and advocacy around disability are vitally important, but often these roles are imposed on artists by industry gatekeepers, preventing their art being appreciated simply on its merits. This was why Humber Street was the ideal venue, with Hollinshead mentioning that they "have been perfect in providing an open platform with no agenda".

The gallery, which sits in a former banana ripening factory at the heart of Hull's recently redeveloped Fruit Market cultural quarter, relaunched its programme earlier this year, aiming to build on the success of the UK's tenure of the City of Culture by developing artist talent for the long term. Kalu's exhibition is part of this new model.

As with many learning disabled artists, Kalu's compulsive behaviour forms a starting point for her work. This can be seen through her repetition, her need to bind and layer materials over and over again, until in this case, the resulting objects fill a room. Through working with ActionSpace, Kalu has been able to "tap into that compulsion and turn it into a positive, creative force", in the words of Hollinshead.

However, while compulsive behaviour is more readily apparent in the work of learning disabled artists, it may be a slightly misleading discussion. Ultimately, all art making is a sort of compulsive behaviour. Unless you're at the absolute top of your field, there's little material benefit from being an artist, but those who are, do so because they feel like they need to. Perhaps this line of thinking is key to rejecting easy labels and reconsidering how the industry can respond to artists like Kalu. As ActionSpace co-director Sheryll Catto puts it: "Our artists are artists and they exist in whatever the contemporary canon is."

[Nnena Kalu: Wrapping](#) is at Humber Street Gallery, Hull, until 8 December.

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