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KOPPEL

**HARD
TIMES**

AN EVOLVING EXHIBITION BY 15 ARTISTS

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FOODHAK



Front cover image: courtesy of Matt Foster



Image: courtesy of Diana Wolzak



Image: courtesy of Alan Culverhouse

HARD TIMES

Here is a partial and personal account of the exhibition Hard Times, which took place at Koppel X in London, between 5th and 16th of October 2022. The exhibition auspiciously coincided with the British Chancellor's notorious fiscal event and Liz Truss' calamitous and brief tenure as British Prime Minister, all of which provided an additional backdrop for this show.

Introduction

Roll up! Roll up!

‘Roll up! Roll up!’ is the popular refrain which accompanies the arrival of the circus into town with their travelling bands of artists and acrobats, jugglers, animals, musicians, and menageries. Often involving theatre, waxwork, and vaudeville, a parade of gaudily painted wagons would arrive with a processional flourish, to great excitement and anticipation. Common parkland would be camped upon with only the most curmudgeonly complaining about the noise and bawdiness of the performers.

‘Roll up! Roll up!’ opens the press release to the exhibition *Hard Times*, which brings together the work of 15 sculptors: Aileen Kelly, Alex Hegazy, Carolyn Whittaker, Chuting Lee, Diana Wolzak, Ellie Reid, Ian Dawson, Joe Madeira, Matt Foster, Nicky Hirst, Rachael Causer, Susan Young, Tania Salha, Tom Witherick and Tina Culverhouse. These makers met on the MASS sculpture mentoring programme a year previously and forged a close working relationship. They shared their rich, diverse materiality and revelled in their capacity to collaborate through an open-ended process of making, mixing, moulding, forging, forming, firing, arranging, shaping, drawing, pushing, pulling, cajoling, breaking, building, and assembling. Within this arena of ongoing experimentation, the objects that this group made came to be thought of as part of an unfolding and emergent practice. With these thoughts in mind, this group of sculptors decided to create an exhibition which extended dialogues about making, and they descended on Piccadilly Circus.

The Circus – a site for spectacle, a place for slippage and unfettered fancy – became a useful analogy for how the show and its actors were to find relations to their surroundings and environment. The Circus, with its grotesque bodies and freak shows, was a useful projection for an alternative to the post-industrial psyche which orders and commodifies all that is produced. The venue at Koppel X is opportunely situated directly below the Piccadilly Lights, the iconic five-storey-high illuminated advertising hoarding, which casts a desiring neon glow worthy of any circus entrance. Koppel X occupies the former site of a Barclays Bank, and the building is a combination of tattered and brash, with a legacy of chrome and glass as you slide down into the space via a spiral staircase.

Roll up! Roll up!

In *Hard Times*, Dickens’ shortest novel, he theatrically pits the caricature of a heartless bank and mill owner against a cast of circus people who have arrived in a city called Coketown. The circus people have ‘an untiring readiness to help [...] one another’ as they form caring relations with their community, consistently showing compassion and love despite having a tenuous and unstable role within a modern society of factories, manufacturing, and automation. In this moral tale, Dickens uses the circus to deposit humanism back into the industrial city, and his account of the circus provided thematic inspiration for the show. Dickens’ polemic had much to offer for our musings on a twenty-first-century global city that still spews out its waste, permeating new and different kinds of strata. Today, there is not only a breathable atmosphere that is rich with particulates, but another distinct cloud layer that we connect to via fibre optics and electro-magnetic waves, which creates its own smog. As a group, we raised the question, as Dickens did, about the formation of ideas and inspiration, creativity and wonder, asking how we might want to continue to learn through an experiential and relational approach towards knowledge creation.

Roll up! Roll Up!

Part 1, Sowing:

Cast:

Aileen Kelly

Joe Madeira

Alex Hegazy

Ian Dawson

Tom Witherick

Nicky Hirst

As we descend the staircase a series of discrete forms come into view. ‘*Welcome!*’ they say, ‘*come this way*’ and ‘*Follow me.*’

Immediately we are confronted with oversized chunks of blown white expanded polystyrene, precariously stacked from floor to ceiling. These coarse, scavenged hunks are taped together and impress themselves upon the environment in an alluring and contrary way. These are the parts of the assemblage that are discarded after the offloading of white goods, the hidden material that enables objects to circulate the globe. The surface of polystyrene is a little like bark or skin: it readily shows its age. This timeworn sculpture brandishes score marks aplenty and has been adorned with an assortment of mirrored surfaces, reflecting and refracting the light and the room back onto us. Like the glittering lapels of the ringleader’s jacket, the mirrors in **Aileen Kelly’s** sculpture deceive us, and the hollow body of polystyrene can hide in plain sight. Titled *Sham*, this sculpture gradually rotates, performing a slow jig akin to a mirror ball casting out aberrations of light to dazzle us.

‘WELCOME TO THE CARNIVAL’

The downward spiral turns us towards **Joe Madeira’s** *Splat*. Body parts are arranged in profile as they levitate above the floor. Stitched together from sweat wicking fabric, the piece glistens with a style and a modishness. I think of the attire and co-ordinated outfits worn in collective gym sessions and parkruns across the country. Is this a cloak for the modern world, a high-tech polyester which draws moisture away from the wearer like an absurd suit of armour? Perhaps it is a surreal parody of a superhero suit, something The Tick would wear. As the piece tessellates into the mirrored wall in the space, it provides us with our first glimpse of the circus’s acrobats, and I am reminded of Fernand Leger’s post-war murals. In these social paintings, Leger combined strong primary colours with stylised human, metamorphic forms and with similarities to Dickens’ *Hard Times*, the reintroduction of circus performers was a way to re-humanise the machinic synthesis of his cubist paintings.

Standing tall on the other side of the stairwell, **Alex Hegazy’s’s** column springs upwards. In the manner of Brancusi’s endless column, a stack of torus forms oscillates rhythmically. Titled *I Shop, I Cream, I Decay*, a sequence of car tyres makes way for a series of bathing rings; two corresponding objects which seem to bleakly summarise our existence and evolution. The tyres are used but have been repainted, while the bathing rings are virgin and off-gas the sweet smell of newly manufactured petrochemicals into the space. They have been adorned with an abject layer of candy-coloured bubble gum, as if they have been dragged through an American Candy store on the way to the exhibition.

In **Hegazy’s’s** stack and **Madeira’s** *Splat*, there seems an imperative to present a version of the contemporary sublime, which has simultaneously transcendent and nauseating qualities. This sugar rush of bubblegum ice cream and candy floss is further reinforced by the full-on plasticity of **Ian Dawson’s** *I AMS (accidental mega structure)*, where the multicoloured sculpture droops under the weight of endless assortment of 3D prints, clinging like barnacles to a recently-salvaged hull.

In the shadows underneath the stairwell, a small object lurks like a sideshow as we encounter an iPad taped crudely to a lump of concrete dragged from the backstreets. No one is going to steal this. We are drawn into the screen and encounter the pose of a contemporary magician of sorts, as the torso and hands of a narrating figure go through their moves. Matter is transformed in front of our eyes, as dextrous hands go through a sequence of well-rehearsed manoeuvres. We marvel at the reveal, of how easy it looks; this is the banal everyday magic of the life-hack, as a range of magicians tell us how to ‘talk to animals’, ‘seed bomb’, ‘fix holes in the crotch of jeans’, and ‘what to make with baking soda and superglue’. In this piece, **Tom Witherick** has compiled a YouTube playlist as a toolkit of sorts and it is informatively titled *Stone of Collective Knowledge or I’m thinking of dropping it all and going to live in the woods*.

Abashed by how absorbing this endless feed is, I glance around as if a conjurer is applying misdirection to their audience, and I check my pockets before I see a set of elegant and dangling discs gleaming from the ceiling. *Surveillance, Knowledge, and Fancy* by **Nicky Hirst**, the co-curator of the exhibition, requires closer scrutiny as each disc has a photographic image inserted within it. Your eyes run down it in order, trying to add it up, like a quipu knot or a DNA sequence, and I wonder what has been codified and who it refers to. **Hirst’s** piece is also like a beaded fly screen, an object which must be moved to pass through, and I think of it as describing a liminal space.

Aileen Kelly



Sham, 2022
Polystyrene, mirror, tape
220 x 110 x 60cm

Images: left, courtesy of the artist; right, courtesy of Alan Culverhouse

Joe Madeira



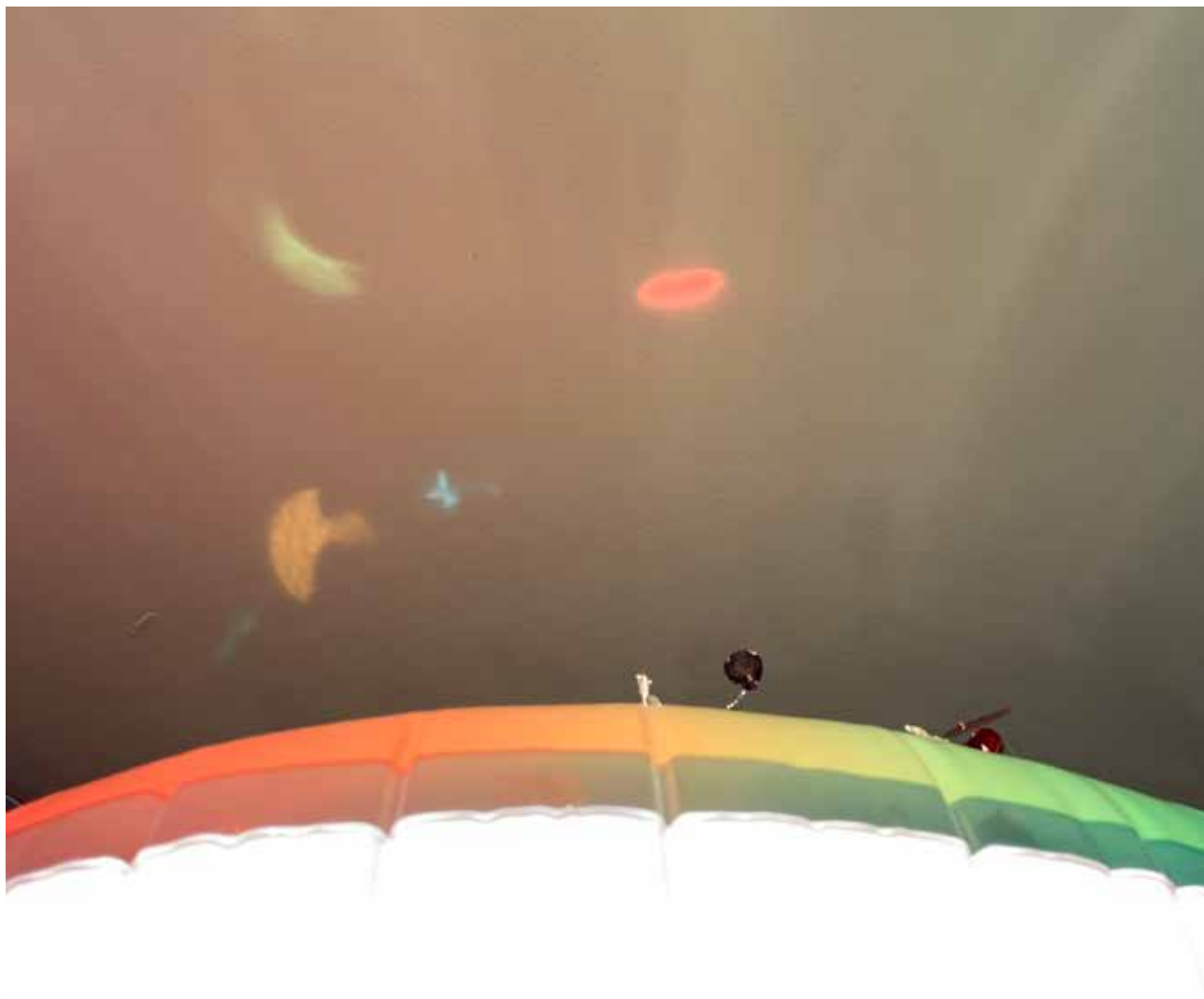
Splat, 2022

Wood, vinyl, polyester filling, sweat-wicking fabric, studding, screws

60 x 92 x 204cm

Image: courtesy of the artist

Alex Hegazy



I Shop, I Cream, I Decay, 2022
 Tyres, chewing gum, bubblegum, wire, magic plastic, inflatables, folklore circle, various mixed media
 250 x 90 x 90cm
 Images: courtesy of the artist

Ian Dawson



I AMS (accidental mega structure), 2020-21
PLA plastic, 3D Prints
65 x 40 x 110cm
Images: courtesy of Ben Deacon

Tom Witherick



Top: *Making Soap from Waste fats.* by OurHalfAcreHomestead
Bottom: *How to build a fire.* by Wikihow



Stone of Collective Knowledge or I'm thinking of dropping it all and going to live in the woods, 2022
Collective YouTube playlist, iPad, concrete, duct tape
60 x 60 x 15cm
Images: courtesy of the artist

Nicky Hirst



Surveillance, Knowledge, and Fancy, 2022
Metal, glue, paper
3 works of 270 x 7cm
Images: courtesy of the artist

Part 2, Reaping:

Cast:

Matt Foster

Susan Young

Tina Culverhouse

Chuting Lee

Carolyn Whittaker

Rachael Causer

In the centre of Koppel X, **Matt Foster's** *Still my beating mind* consists of three long, thin metal rods dangling from the circular architrave in the ceiling. These lines are drawn to the floor, but not quite – they hover, kissing the edge of the carpet. These metal bars have a delicate undulating presence made from welding a succession of stone carving chisels together: they flow towards the ground, like earthing rods. They have an ever slightly perceptible movement, as if about to map the subtle shifts of the pressure and movement in the space, loaded with the potential to carve the passing of time into the space itself.

If **Foster's** sculptures are both a tool to trace and a pendulum to mark time, the flow of matter between floor and ceiling is echoed in **Susan Young's** *Under the Surface*, where a set of ropes, strings, mesh, and cables stretch down in a column from the ceiling to the floor. I think of its title and its resemblance to a lobster pot and imagine it's part of an elaborate trap. Taking inspiration from Alfred Gell's essay 'Vogel's Net', I think of *Under the Surface* as a trap that has acted to ensnare us and hold us in suspension.

Under the Surface falls away across the floor. It has been cut back, like the pruning of vines, and here the second narrative device of Dickens' *Hard Times* comes into view. If the opening section of the exhibition was an encounter with a cast of sculptural characters, which planted and sowed seeds, then this middle section evolves out of a reaping, where the fruits of the crop are cut, gathered, and collected. Hanging on a wall, strands of wire have been twisted into a suspended latticework that is engagingly irregular as it warps and contorts with an inherent tension. In this piece, titled *Word Bank Somethingology*, **Tina Culverhouse** has stripped down chicken wire, meticulously snipping and twisting it to reconstruct and rewire it into another kind of meshwork. From a machined and standardised format, it has been reshaped and reconstituted into a more deranged version of itself – one to catch a different kind of fish. During the show, discarded and unwanted belongings become caught in it: a playing card, a fizzy drink can, a deflated balloon, and, during a performance with the poet Tay McGraa, hand-written tags are tied to it until it resembles a Wish Tree marking a Clotie Well.

We learn that **Matt Foster's** chisels are his grandfather's, passed down the family generations. Like an engram, memories are stored and imprinted inside these elusive physical objects, which transfer and encode them for future generations. **Chuting Lee's** *Stack* includes sheets of rolled memory foam, and she lays this down as she installs so that the piece becomes a palimpsest of traces and retracing. Card is rolled like scrolls and interspersed with images of her family and of her recently deceased father.

Mid-show, the sound of a funeral march is played as a female model descends the staircase and steps onto a low stage. To only the drum beat of the funeral march, a smartly dressed woman in black carefully and soberly smears the model's body with animal Vaseline and begins to apply a layer of felt wadding onto her skin. Is this a blanket for protection as the paste and coating is applied somewhat tenderly, or is this a retelling of tarring and feathering, lest we forget the kind of vigilante vengeance that is handed out to the other in our society? The beat is played throughout, as **Carolyn Whittaker's** performance of *Tendered Philanthropy?* aptly converges with Queen Elizabeth II's state funeral.

The sombre mood continues as a set of studio lights flood and harshly illuminate a bank of sedimentary objects that rise and fall on a series of tray-like surfaces. Small scraps and morsels have been carefully laid out and containers have been opened for us to peer in and examine. These objects are arranged and appear to be graded. The form of the containers have imposed themselves on the objects inside; the excavated objects that have fallen away have now congealed into the shapes of things that house and collect them, and the Tupperware and dustpans have come to shape the detritus.

Lit as it is, I think of the installation as the scene of an accident and the ensuing forensic investigation. It looks as if there is a painstaking reconstruction in progress, like the wreckage of TWA Flight 800, but what is the accident? What has happened here, I ask? With the circus still emanating from within, I look at the holes that have been eaten through cherished fragments and I conclude that **Rachael Causer's** *Grouths* documents a catastrophe and an accident at the flea circus. Motivated by Paul Virilio's maxim that when you invent something you invent its accident (you invent the train and the train crash simultaneously), here is the evidence of the integral and ongoing accident on an unfamiliar yet ordinary scale.

Matthew Foster



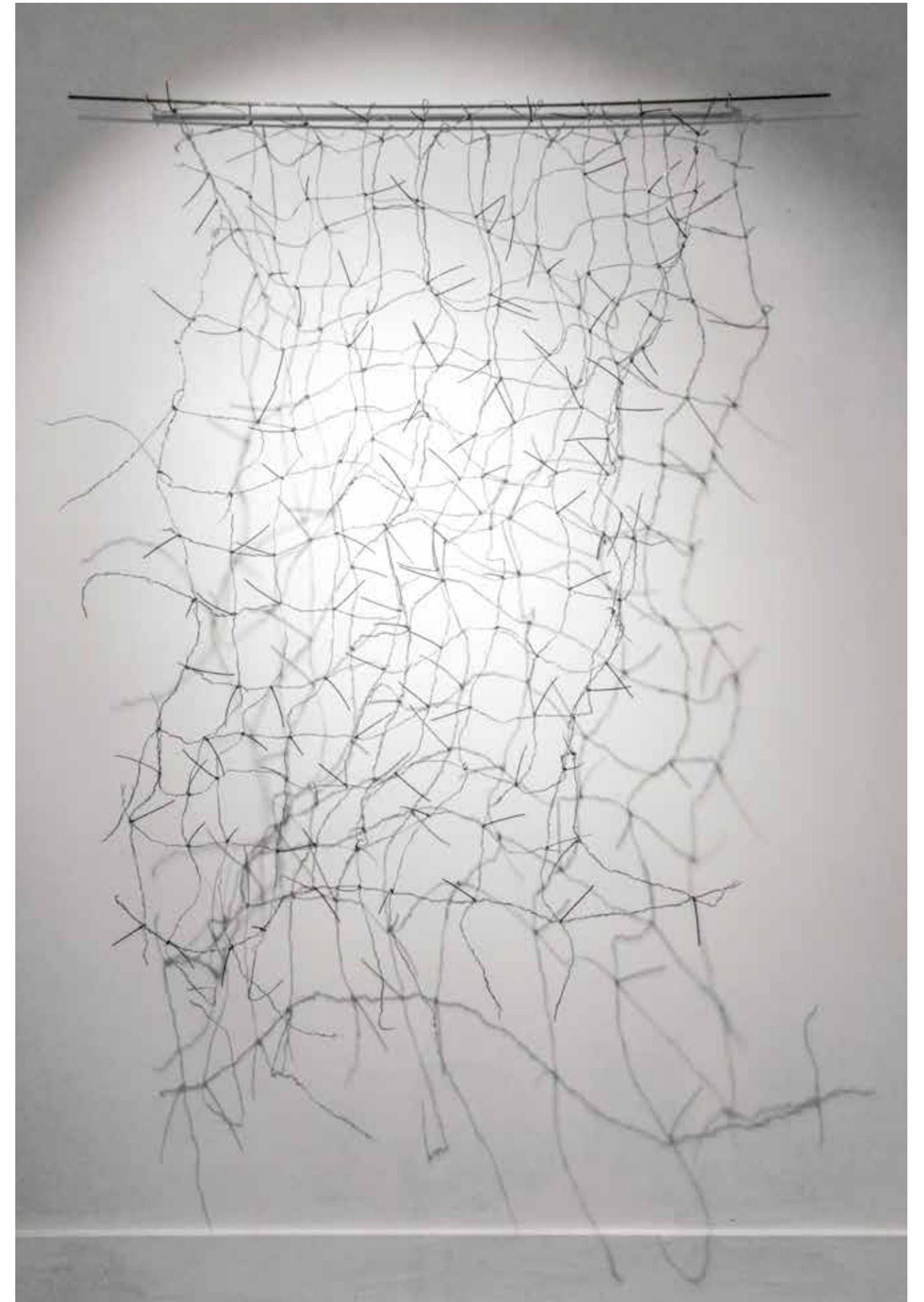
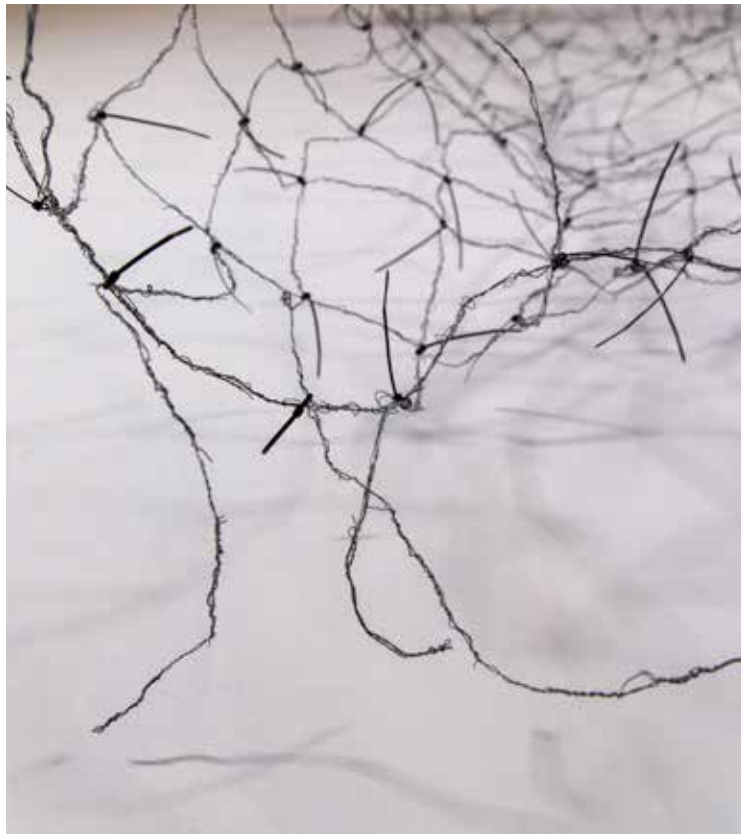
Still my beating mind, 2022
Steel, iron
281 x 122cm
Images: courtesy of Alan Culverhouse

Susan Young



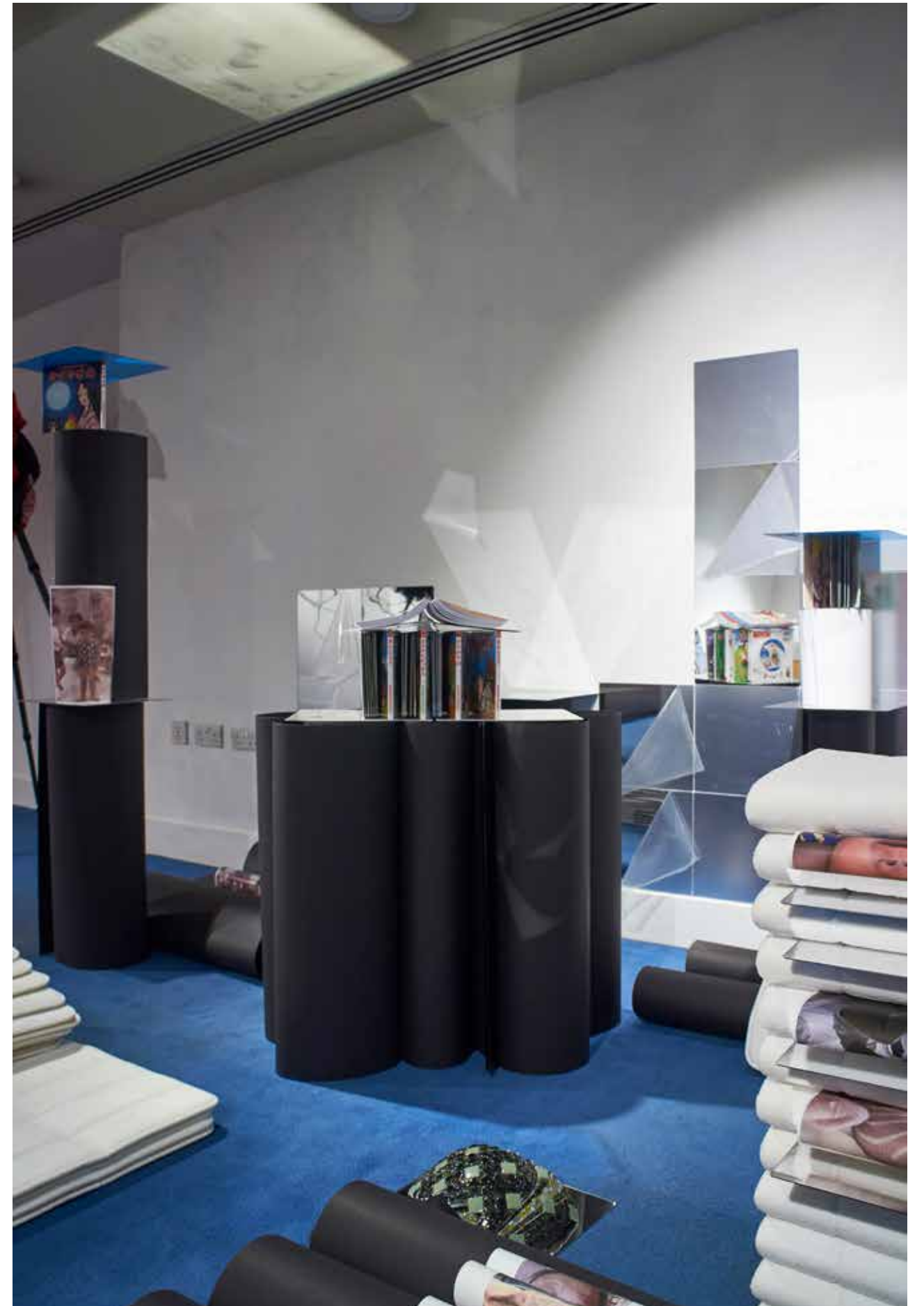
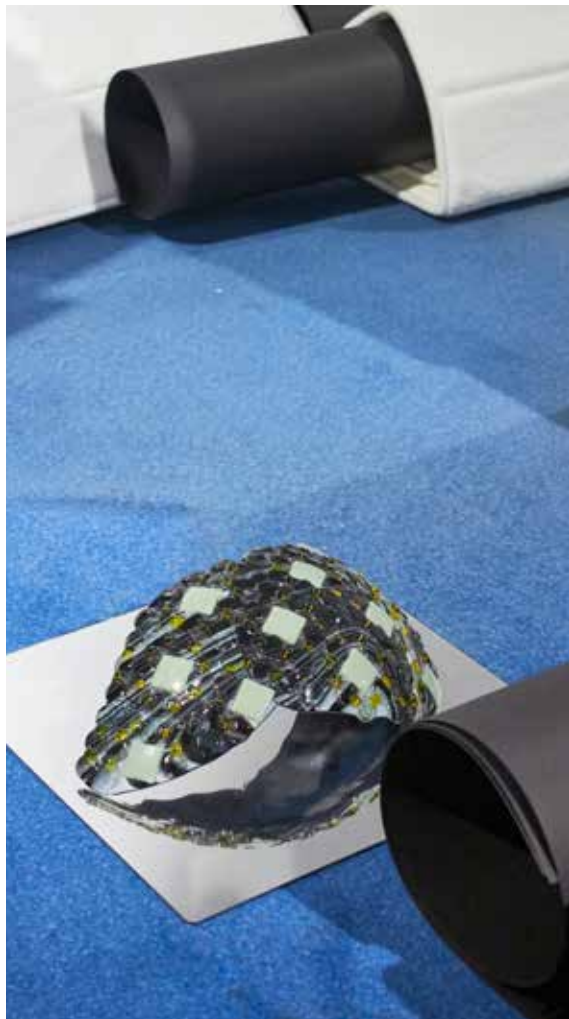
Under the Surface, 2022
Synthetic rope, plastic cable ties, gaffer tape, acrylic paint, glow in the dark paint, metal cup hooks, hardboard,
acrylic fishing line, electrical wire, monofilament wire, fish net stocking, plastic fish net packaging
60 x 60 x 274cm
Images: courtesy of the artist

Tina Culverhouse



Word Bank Somethingology, 2022
Wood, steel, zinc plated wire, plastic, spider's silk, dandelion seeds, gravity (to be added through the duration of the installation)
116 x 180cm x variable
Images: courtesy of Alan Culverhouse

Chuting Lee



Stack, 2022
Paper, memory foam, bathmat, fake mirror
Variable dimensions
Images: courtesy of Evelyn Yang

Carolyn Whittaker

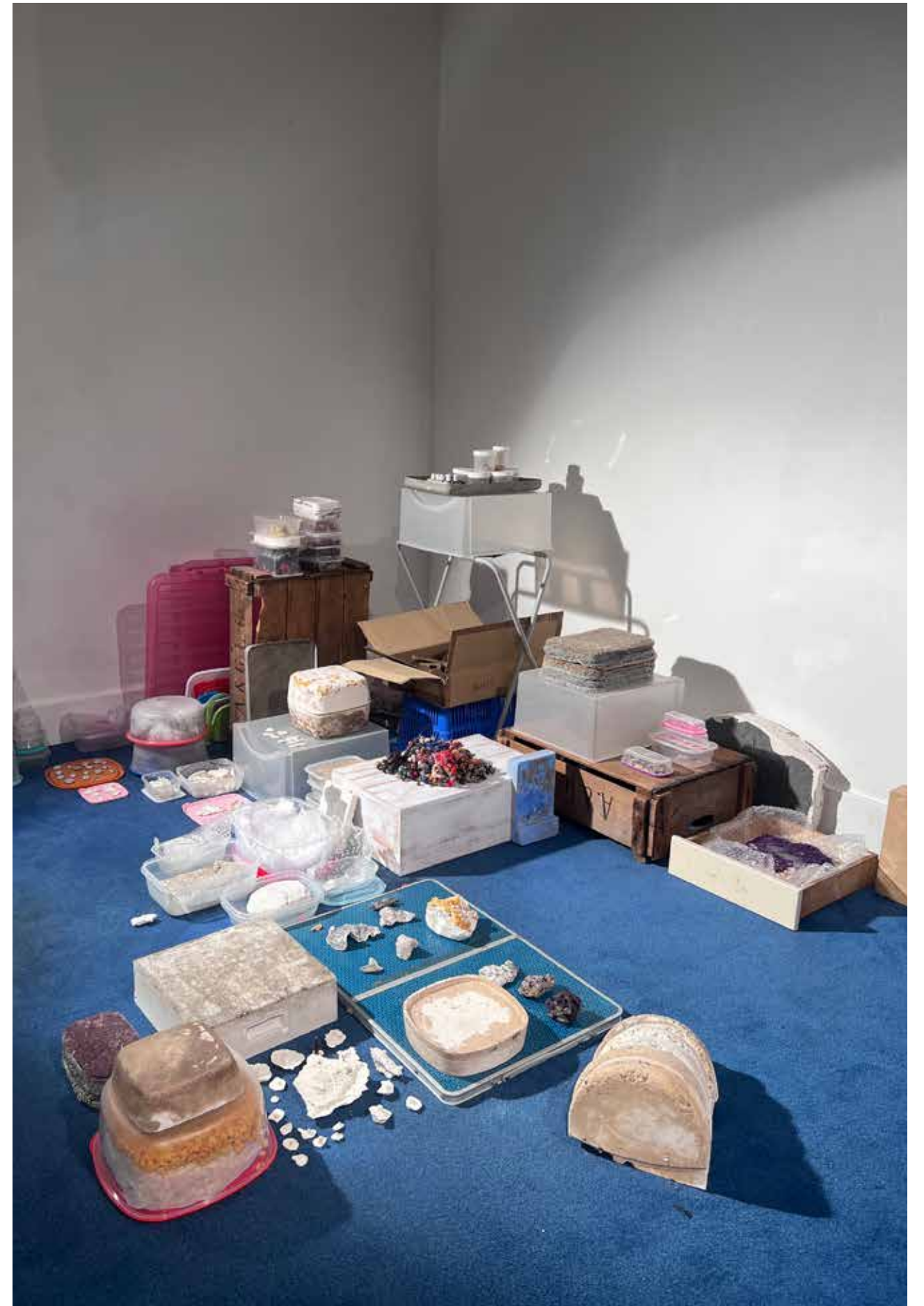


Tendered Philanthropy?, 2022

Performance: Black coat, hand towel, white petroleum jelly for livestock, felting, shuttering ply
30 x 122 x 170cm

Images: below left and right, courtesy of Evelyn Yang; above left, above middle and above right, courtesy of Alan Culverhouse

Rachael Causer



Grouts, 2022
Plaster, carpet, fluff, plastic, wood, cardboard, aluminium, poly filler, acrylic, clay, thread, dirt, slag, paper, foam, frass, pewter, graphite
Variable dimensions
Images: left, courtesy of Susan Young; middle and right, courtesy of the artist

Part 3, Garnering:

Cast:

Diana Wolzak

Tania Salha

Ellie Reid

We transition into the final part of the show.

There is a shimmering, multicoloured jumble of textiles seeping across the floor. This mound seethes outwards as the shredded, knotted, and entwined fabric coalesces. This is mulched matter-carpet compost, a metabolism at work. *Expanding Fabricated Territory* is a piece that has been made and continues to be made as the artist **Diana Wolzak** persists with collecting unwanted textiles from various locations, striking up relationships with the charity shop employees that she encounters, knotting tight bundles to be included. I think of the German word for metabolism: *stoffwechsel* (literally, stuff exchange), and Karl Marx’s term ‘the metabolic rift’, which describes the separation between humans and the planet.

Contemplating *stoffwechsel* is perhaps appropriate for our location, as I remember the familiar ‘Cambio Wechsel Change’ that would illuminate currency exchange booths. The fitted carpet tiles are peeling and giving way under the energy in Wolzak’s vibrant piece, and I think of this type of garnering as a transformation of the location of the Barclays Bank, as the exchange tokens have been withdrawn and replaced by matter that flows out of the seams of the space.

Midway through the show, a group of schoolchildren descend and help tie knots in **Wolzak’s** fabric strips, and different kinds of dexterities are thought about as her list of collaborators ever increase. Along with **Aileen Kelly** and **Rachael Causer**, Serra’s verb list is reworked by the class of schoolchildren as they congregate around different works, writing sequences of verbs. One list segues from ‘to combine, to organise, to tell, to see’. On another day, the space hosts a seminar session which takes Ursula K. Le Guin’s ‘Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction’ as a prompt and invites members of the MASS Sculpture cohort to carry objects into the space and distribute them within the exhibition. Here in these workshops, the true worth of the exhibition is revealed, as everything is active together at the same time in the co-constitution of knowledge. In those moments, the harvesting is truly happening.

A line drawn in space curves wonkily around an alcove, its tentacles stretching around the edges and corners of the space. It arcs in on itself and does the loop the loop, and our eyes follow it darting around the space, like following the flightpath of a gnat. There is also another trace which entices the viewer: that of the shadow cast upon the wall behind. It is like a piece of temporal graffiti, an ephemeral tag as the arcs are multiplied and become even more animated, creating magical images of eyes with large lashes. The pigeon repellent spikes, harsh in origin, transform into spirited glyphs. **Tania Salha’s** pieces call to mind the final verses of T. S. Eliot’s “The Hollow Men”: ‘Between the idea, And the reality, Between the motion, And the act, Falls the Shadow.’

If there is a teeming energy in **Wolzak’s** coiled fabric critters, then the spirit in **Salha’s** twisted continuous line drawing also translates affirmatively, and like a sprite I notice that one of its prickles has drawn blood from **Alex Hegazy’s** stack.

‘Between the desire, And the spasm, Between the potency, And the existence, Between the essence, And the descent, Falls the Shadow.’

We have been travelling through the space inexorably towards the back wall, where there is an explosion of gestures that have been fly-posted across the whole expanse and created a theatrical backdrop for the spectacle to play out. **Ellie Reid’s** *For What it’s Worth* plays with themes from scenography and stagecraft by creating a sense of place for performance. The work is made in situ – it emerges, and everyday a new set of props are made and worked with. A newsprint and tape glove lies discarded upon the floor after it has been made as a prop to paint, print, and sculpt with. Summoning Paul McCarthy’s *Painter*, whose creative genius is more clown than alchemist, tins of tomatoes were bought and brought from the local Tesco Metro and became the legs for the makeshift pasting table where five-star signs advertising the success of the show are being produced, in readiness for their imminent posting. The satire in *For What its Worth* doesn’t overshadow the way in which this speaks gently about survival and mattering.

A shout goes out from the top of the staircase by **Wolzak**: ‘Roll up! Roll up!’ and a blindfolded **Chuting Lee**, dressed all in white, feels her way onto the lowest step. In the performance of *Handing Over* there is another shout of ‘Roll down, roll down’, as hundreds of colourful balls scatter and fall in a torrent down the stairwell. Lee fumbles to try and gather all the balls in a sack as she slowly ascends. ‘Roll down, roll down’ is uttered as more balls cascade down. The sound of the disgorging balls is reminiscent of the national lottery. When the balls have stopped, there is one final utterance: ‘Roll over, roll over.’

Like the rollover of the lottery, we are not at the end. Hopefully the work and experiences that occurred in Hard Times has been stored so that it can benefit us in the future.

Roll on, roll on.

Ian Dawson, 2022

Diana Wolzak

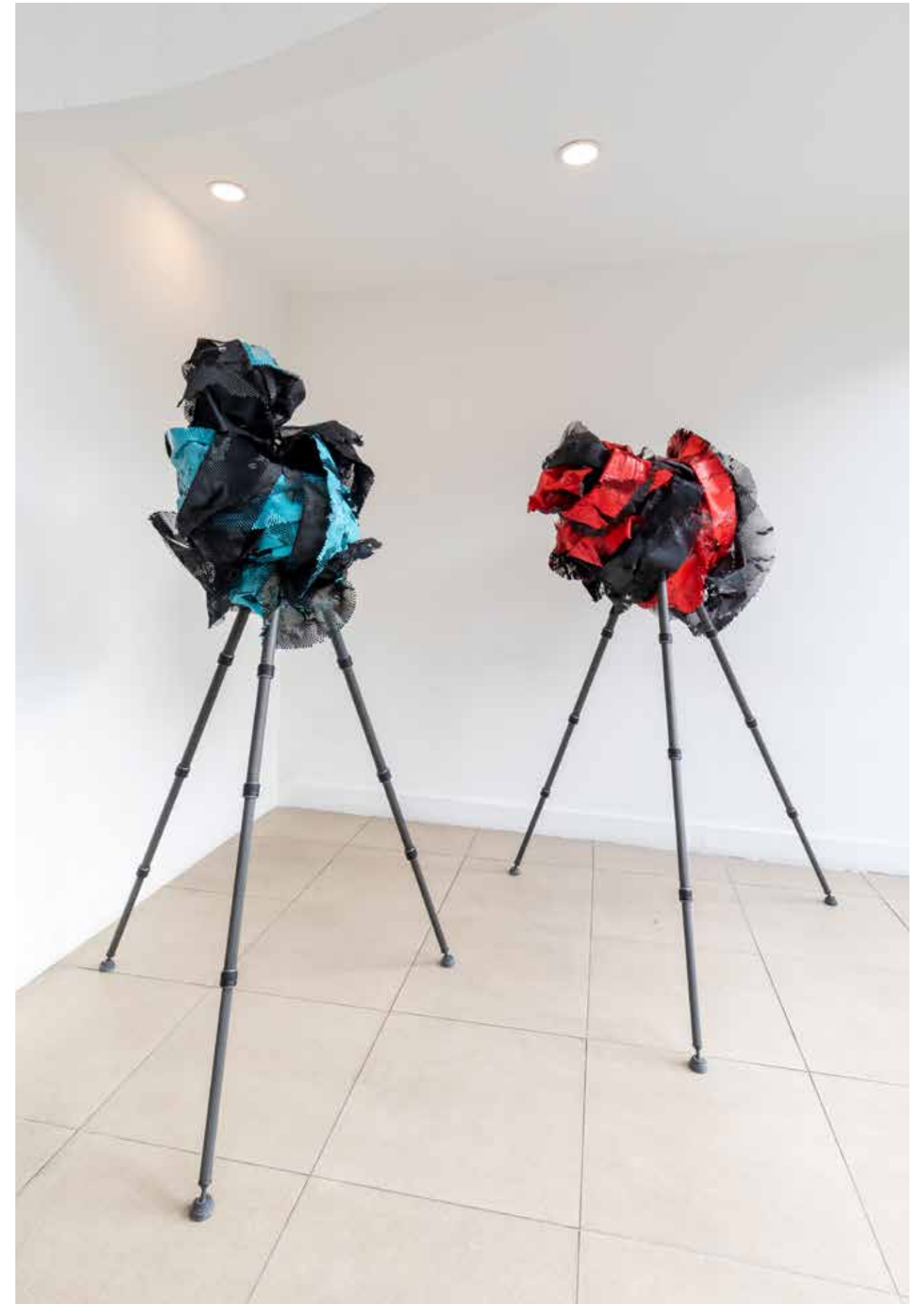


Expanding Fabricated Territory, 2022
Fabric and thread
200 x 150 x 35cm and expanding
Images: courtesy of the artist

Tania Salha

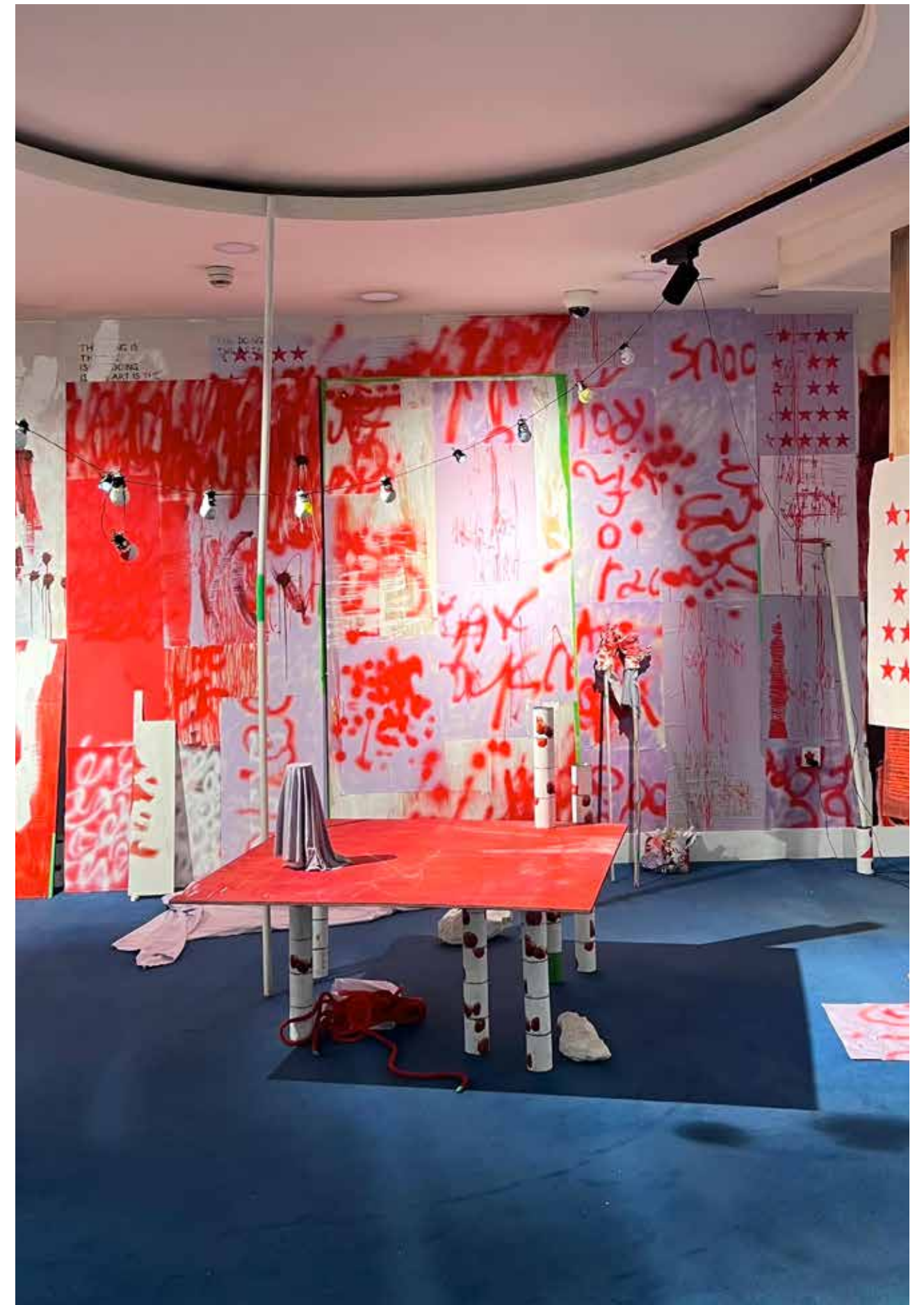


I wish I knew, 2022
Aluminium, metal, plastic, wool, rubber
310 x 278 x 262cm
Images: courtesy of the artist



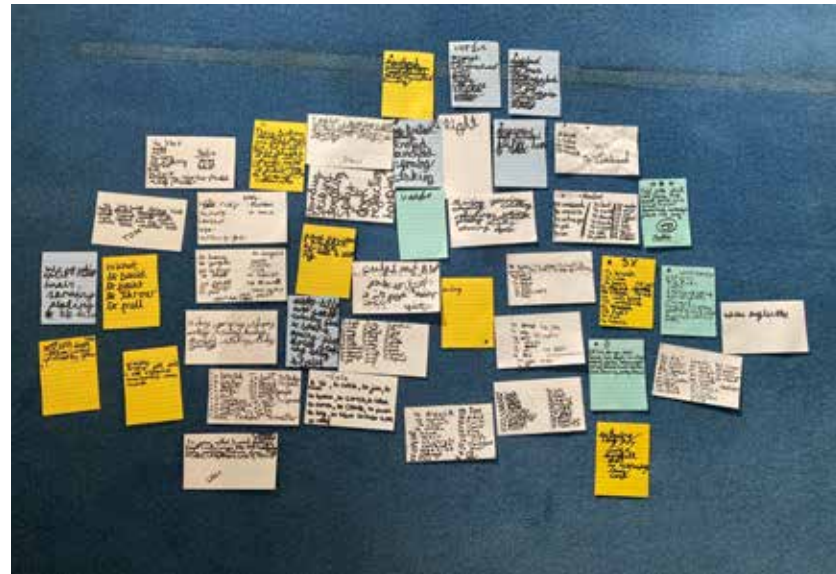
Creatures of habit #13, 2022 (Displayed in the Koppel Window)
Aluminium, metal, plastic, rubber, paper
123 x 265 x 278cm
Image: courtesy of Ben Deakin

Ellie Reid



For what it's worth, 2022
Wood, paper, fabric, tape, rope, chalk, tinned tomatoes, festoon lights
Variable dimensions
Images: courtesy of the artist

Performances and Workshops



7/10 – 13/10/2022 gallery visits to the exhibition and workshops with students from Soho Parish Primary School, who worked with artists Rachael Causer, Tina Culverhouse, Alex Hegazy, Aileen Kelly, Chuting Lee, Carolyn Whittaker, and Diana Wolzak.
Images: courtesy of Rachael Causer



8/10/2022, *Handing Over*
“you are my eyes, I am your hands, you are my hands, I am your eyes”
A collaborative helping performance by Diana Wolzak and Chuting Lee.
Images: courtesy of Evelyn Yang



11/10/2022, *Tendered Philanthropy?*
Performed to the echo of a funeral march and executioner's drum beat, two characters were contractually bound and staged a ritualistic act. This performance, *Tendered Philanthropy?*, by artist Carolyn Whittaker evoked the drama and tragedy of Dicken's novel *Hard Times*, exploring themes of societal disparity around survival, altruistic narcissism, exploitation and redemption.
Images: left, courtesy of Evelyn Yang; right, courtesy of Alan Culverhouse



15/10/2022, *Bad Poets Parade*
Tay McGraa. Poetry workshop.
Image: courtesy of Tina Culverhouse



15/10/2022, *Weaving Thoughts And Things*, performance by Tina Culverhouse in collaboration with Poet Tay McGraa and visitors to the exhibition. Culverhouse invited people to place written words and found objects at the foot of her sculpture which were woven into the final piece.
Images: left, courtesy of Diana Wolzak; right, courtesy of the artist

Fifteen artists had carried me backwards through Piccadilly Circus into a former (1980s?) bank, trespassing further down a whirlpool of a staircase – no mere rabbit hole here, but one swathed in mirrors, last swooned down by Sophia Loren on the set of The Millionairess (1960s?). Where was I?

I had been deftly steered into the mood board of King of Hearts, a film made in 1966. I have not thought about it in years. Norms had been upended, in the hardest of times, nothing made sense in the world anymore in the best possible way ...

Domo Baal, 2022

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