

# FIGURE



*conversation with* **ZOE WILLIAMS**  
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***Sunday Fantasy***, HD Video, Co-directed by Amy Gwatkin, Starring and in collaboration with Deniz Ünal and Nadja Voorham, 2019. Commissioned by Mimosa House. Courtesy of the artist and Ciaccia Levi, Paris.



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**MARCO GALVAN** *in conversation with*  
**ZOE WILLIAMS**

**MG**

What is your first memory of art and how did you approach it?

**ZW**

My parents, brother and sister all went to art school and it was quite an integral part of our family life, so it has always been something that I have been around. I think from very early on, I was drawing my own worlds and making things, without thinking about it too much as art — and actually perhaps at that time it was more of a magical or ritual process for me. Both of my parents were also doing other things for money — my dad was a shepherd for most of his working life —, which led me to resist art for a while, seeing how difficult it was for them to make money from it. Of course, it is also natural for someone growing up to want to break away from what the dominant form in your family is. So I remember



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wanting to try to follow different paths and was interested in becoming a Marine Biologist for a while, until I realised I needed to be good at Science and Maths.

I think one of the freedoms of art which appealed to me, is that you can research other fields and draw inspiration from them, without necessarily needing to commit to knowing everything about the topics in minute detail—something of a magpie approach I suppose, but this keeps things playful. In this sense, deciding to work as an artist naturally happened for me, and through my BA, it evolved and took a more and more consistent shape in my life. I suppose also that when you start building up your own visual language, it becomes a lens that you can see and play with reality through.

**MG**

**ZW**

Did you start with a particular focus in terms of medium?

I couldn't decide in terms of the medium, I was greedy and I wanted to do all of it. I guess I was initially drawn to the more applied arts, such as *Fashion and Jewellery Design*, but I ended up doing a quite conceptual-mixed BA in *Art & Visual Culture*, as this felt like it offered me more creative freedom. Primarily on the course, I was working on these creepy watercolours, later becoming more interested in exploring installation and video as forms. These were quite influenced by artists such as Mike Kelley and Karen Killimnik, as well as people like Carol Rama. That's actually when I started to think about art as a practice. It has always been fairly multi-media, incorporating video, sculpture and other formats with a tendency to oscillate between the crafted and the chaotic, through this approach I started developing my symbolic language.

**MG**

Your work usually incorporates different media, sometimes taking the form of collaborative projects as in



“Sunday Fantasy”, Exhibition view, Mimosa House, London, United Kingdom, 2019.  
Photographer: Tim Bowditch.  
Courtesy of the artist and Ciaccia Levi, Paris.



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Photographer: Tim Bowditch.  
Courtesy of the artist and Ciaccia Levi, Paris.

*COCKTAIL 2011-2014*. Could you talk about this project and how collaborations help to develop and define your practice?

**ZW**

*COCKTAIL* was one of the first big collaborations that I had done. It happened in a period when I was starting to work in a more performative way: I had this vision and feeling that the objects and other elements that I was working with needed to be activated in a more direct way. Working with others, so that there was a dialogue and tension created between different viewpoints and approaches was really important- allowing for a push and pull of control. I worked on the project with an artist and producer called Lucie Akerman, who was running an events space and studios in Bristol at the time of the first *COCKTAIL* in 2011. We decided to put on *COCKTAIL* in her space, with the idea that the revenue from the bar would fund the project and give us a bit extra to pay the people we had involved. We were both interested in this idea of creating situations which held a tension between an artwork and a sort of utopic, temporary hedonistic environment — which in some circumstances a night club/party can embody — although of course this is on the more idealistic end of the spectrum! *COCKTAIL* was a two day event which was built around a bar and dance floor, I designed the interior/’set’ for this and then other artists also inputted costumes, music, videos and performances. So it was like a group show.

I think also there was a component of us wanting to play with and heighten the feeling of a ‘hedonistic’ environment, to see what effect this would have on people's experience of it as an artwork in a more irreverent way. The end result of the first one was inevitably quite chaotic, due to the amount of alcohol spilt and served and the



***COCKTAIL***, Collaborative event series with Lucie Akerman,  
Bristol, United Kingdom, 2011.



*COCKTAIL*, Collaborative event series with Lucie Akerman,  
Bristol, United Kingdom, 2011.

unravelling of the set, but this was very much part of it. As a series of events which happened until 2014, it then became more polished and maybe less interesting, but it was definitely an important part of my work.

Concerning how collaborations with other artists have helped develop my practice, it has been a massive part of how I work, but it really depends on what the individual piece of work is. For instance, if I am making objects like ceramics or drawings, they exist very much singularly and they have their own presence and meaning; whereas my latest solo show "Sunday Fantasy" at Mimosa House in 2019, was very much rooted in collaboration. Through the film work I made for this, I wanted to actively dissect and challenge the idea of singular authorship. Since the film was exploring notions of desire and fantasy landscapes, I felt it very important to engage a variety of voices within this and not just my own. I therefore worked with my friends and artists Amy Gwatkin, Deniz Unal and Nadja Voorham on the direction and narrative of the film.

**MG**

*COCKTAIL*'s central line of enquiry revolves around disrupting the channels of a comfortably received consumer experience. You investigated this topic even further with your solo show "You Consume Me" in 2014, by presenting forms of the luxury goods industry. Where does your interest in exploring this aspect come from?

**ZW**

I have always been interested in the idea of what a 'brand' is and how it's identity is built up, especially in the context of the luxury goods industry. There is something about how brands become symbols or totems, which goes deeper than them just being about the selling of commodities, so that they infect people on a more psychosexual — I want to say spiritual level. Also, I am interested in exploring ideas of the value and exchange



***You Consume Me IV***, C-Type print, 101 × 67 cm, 2013.  
Courtesy of the artist and Ciaccia Levi, Paris.



***Violet Baroque Crème***, C-Type print, 101 × 67 cm, 2014.  
Courtesy of the artist and Ciaccia Levi, Paris.



***You Consume Me III*** (detail), C-Type print, 101 × 67 cm, 2013.  
Courtesy of the artist and Ciaccia Levi, Paris.

of objects on a really basic level and how these things change when they morph into luxury commodities. In 2011, I made a piece called *The Golden O* or *Artefact I*, which was a tiny cast gold orifice-like object, for an exhibition called "A Skvader", at Norwich Castle, Museum and Art Gallery. This piece was a 'response or ode' to a 'Bronze Age Torc Ring', from the Museum collection, which is one of the very earliest forms of money in the UK. I then used the emblem of 'The Golden O', as a kind of pseudo logo or currency, which was replicated across different parts of my work for a while in different guises. In the first *COCKTAIL* for example it became part of a wallpaper motif.

I am really interested in how living in a hyper-consumer society effects, and to a certain extent infects us. I'm captivated by the tension and shame factors that rotate around these things. There is a kind of guilt around talking about consumerism, but the fact that its excesses are both seductive and repulsive cannot be denied.

**MG**

In your solo show, you exhibited artworks that embody a series of elements that have become characteristic of your practice, such as animal elements (fur) and sinuous lines and shapes (eels). Do they become symbols that give a reading key to your practice? Do their metaphorical meanings change and adapt to the context in which they're placed or do they have a standard meaning to you?

**ZW**

They change depending on the context in which the artwork is presented, sometimes in quite an instinctual or formal way. In the case of "You Consume Me", for example, all the subjects investigated were self-eating or self-referencing somehow, so I am interested in that range of symbols, almost like a parody of magic. From my point of view, the orifice is a sort of self-eating symbol. It is like punctuation: I see the symbols



*Ruffles*, Performance document, Set in the RIVA Tunnel, Artmonte-Carlo, Monaco, 2019.  
Photographer: Boyer Manon.



***Ruffles***, Performance, Set in the RIVA Tunnel, Artmonte-Carlo, Monaco, 2019.  
Photographer: Boyer Manon.



*Ruffles*, Performance, Set in the RIVA Tunnel, Artmonte-Carlo, Monaco, 2019.  
Photographer: Boyer Manon.

that I use as disruptors that could be played around with in different formats to underpin or unsettle the appearance of a grander narrative. I think repetition in materials, like skin and fur or creams, heightens this idea of a kind of recurrent symbolic bodily language. Through the work I always try to flirt with and corrode this tension between seduction and repulsion and notions of the sacred and the profane. I guess these are the things I'm trying to investigate through the elements in my practice, in order to try and break out of the binary relationships we might have with them.

I am also interested in observing the way as humans, we project ourselves onto animals and how animals become symbols or icons within our own narratives. At times, I find myself approaching symbols as they might be utilised within fairy tales or myths, where objects or non human characters act as metaphors or allegories for deeper meanings. Within my drawings especially, I like to imbue objects and animals with a sense of power — as things that are trying to take over the world and disrupt existing hierarchies. Sausages, rings, minks, money, octopus limbs, eels, credit cards, cream cakes, high heeled shoes, phones and urine are just some of the recurrent motifs that I use.

**MG**

Considering *The Chic & The Borderline* series of *tableaux vivants* as well as the *Eternal Bronzer* series of performative acts, how do you feel your performance can resonate within and expand your art practice?

**ZW**

Performance is something that came a bit later in my practice. I started by experimenting with a series of videos of me using food as a sculptural medium and I remember the whole experience as quite performative in itself. It then started to become more important for me to create objects



**Party Scene** (detail), Pencil and watercolours crayon on paper, 33 × 45 cm, 2018.  
Courtesy of the artist and Ciaccia Levi, Paris.



**Party Scene** (detail), Pencil and watercolours crayon on paper, 33 × 45 cm, 2018.  
Courtesy of the artist and Ciaccia Levi, Paris.

and environments which had a performative aspect and this was concretised with "COCKTAIL". Broadly speaking, my performative pieces are often more about the creation of an environment or situation than a singular act. These pieces have often revolved around ideas of hedonism and excess and how they could push the boundaries of a 'precious' art object or situation.

"Eternal Bronzer", was an event in 2015 that I worked on with two friends; artist Urara Tsuchiya and artist and set-designer Amy Stickland. We created a space and an event which took the form of a catwalk, showcasing Urara's cling film underwear, Amy's set, toy whips, talcum powder, music and a zine of writing and fashion editorial type images which we had created, with contributions from other artists. There is no concrete documentation of the event, but the series of fashion editorial type images are now what remain as 'artefacts' from the project. This is quite tongue in cheek, as the main focus of the shoot is a hairless cat called Baby and the actual images give the impression of 'selling' a sleek brand or situation, when in fact the reality was anything but.

*The Chic & the Borderline*, was a project that I worked on with curator Vincent Honoré as part of Istanbul Biennale in 2016. This was the first time that I had actively performed as more of a 'character'. As performers we became 'objects' playing out an ominous and at points erotically charged situation, within an old hotel room and invited audience members to experience the room in stages. There were other people's artworks, a Pippilotti Rist sound piece, a Celia Hempton painting, some of my objects and costumes and of course me as a 'performer'. There are very few images of how it actually looked because we didn't



***Small Weasel on Nest of Adders***, Ceramic, 18 × 19 × 19 cm, 2020.  
Courtesy of the artist and Ciacchia Levi, Paris.



***Carol Rama Shoe***, Hand glazed ceramic, rabbit fur, 8 × 7 × 20 cm, 2019.  
Courtesy of the artist and Ciaccia Levi, Paris.



***Weasel Vision in the Morning Dew***, Ceramic, 37 × 18 × 18 cm, 2020.  
Courtesy of the artist and Ciaccia Levi, Paris.



***High Salmon Piss Pot Heel***, Hand glazed ceramic with gold lustre, rabbit furs,  
8 × 7 × 20 cm, 2019.  
Courtesy of the artist and Ciaccia Levi, Paris.

film it and there were no phones allowed. It was quite uncomfortable at points, but not in a bad way. Reproducing selective images from it, again allowed for a certain illusion or narrative to be played with and created, when the event itself was much more fragmentary.

**MG**

Another performance where you incorporated your ceramics and drawings is *Ceremony of the Void*, the opening performance of the group show "X A Fantasy". The highly expressive lines of all the ceramics and the distorted figures depicted in your drawings recall for me some of Goya's painting and engravings. Is there an interest in the grotesque in your practice?

**ZW**

Yes, for this piece of work in particular, I was thinking more about the idea of the grotesque in relation to overstimulation. There is something about excesses of pattern and surface and the excess of a serpentine line that can start to become grotesque. Too much of something, of say ornament, starts morphing into the grotesque and the point at which this changes is what I am interested in. With *Ceremony of the Void*, there was also a focus on the grotesqueness of overconsumption of a feast or bacchanal type environment and how this can so quickly tip into becoming abject from being sumptuous. With this piece, I was working with it being like this large scale allegory of sorts.

**MG**

Quite opposite to what horror vacui used to be in the past...

**ZW**

Yes, I suppose so — I didn't actually know this term, but it makes sense, perhaps in our culture now though we have a kind of opposite to horror vacui? I think now there is a certain horror of space being 'filled'. The title *Ceremony of the Void* is actually the medieval habit for guests to stand around drinking sweet wines and spices whilst the table was 'voided' at the end of a meal. I was



***Ceremony of the Void***, Performance, installation, David Roberts Art Foundation, London, United Kingdom, 2017. Photographer: Dan Weill. Courtesy of the artist and Ciaccia Levi, Paris.



***Ceremony of the Void***, Performance, installation, Costumes by HYDRA, David Roberts Art Foundation, London, United Kingdom, 2017. Photographer: Dan Weill. Courtesy of the artist and Ciaccia Levi, Paris.



***Ceremony of the Void***, Performance, installation, Costumes by HYDRA, David Roberts Art Foundation, London, United Kingdom, 2017. Photographer: Dan Weill. Courtesy of the artist and Ciaccia Levi, Paris.



***Ceremony of the Void***, Performance, installation, David Roberts Art Foundation, London, United Kingdom, 2017. Photographer: Dan Weill. Courtesy of the artist and Ciaccia Levi, Paris.

interested in the way this phrase conjures up images of a kind of empty excess, which again brings up ideas of over consumption. But also, this idea of overstimulation of things and patterns that can become quite nightmarish.

**MG**

You work a lot with colour, combining them in contrasting shades and using pastel palettes. What's the role of colour for you?

**ZW**

I think my use of colour kind of relates to how I approach ideas of the grotesque. I get a lot of pleasure, both through experiencing and using certain colour palettes and combinations. It is obviously such an emotive and sensorial tool, and I like to think of using it in a way that simultaneously entices and repulses the viewer. Notions of magic and transformation are also really interlinked with colour and in turn scent, both of which have a kind of elevating power for me. In *Ceremony of the Void*, the golden yellow translucent colour of piss was used as another recurrent motif which ran through the work in different forms and underpinned it. Here I was wanting to use it as this kind of subliminal symbol or disrupter of the work. Colour can also add a sense of drama or artifice to a situation, in a way that I find very useful.

**MG**

Your master's dissertation explored the history of the dildo and your solo show, "Sunday Fantasy" in 2019 at Mimosa House, rotates around another sexual object, exploring the imaginative potential of desire. Are you somehow subverting the sexualisation of the female body, by showing it in its purest form in a very sensual way?

**ZW**

I guess capturing and dissecting the idea of an object of desire is really important. When I was exploring the 'history' of the dildo, it was the idea of it operating as an object that is both functional and symbolic, which was really interesting to me. In relation to the film *Sunday Fantasy*, I wanted



“Pel”, Exhibition view, 2015. Photographer: Claire Dorn.  
Courtesy of the artist and Ciaccia Levi, Paris.



*Pel*, Still from video, 8 min 40 s, 2015.

Courtesy of the artist and Ciaccia Levi, Paris.



***Pel***, Still from video, 8 min 40 s, 2015.

Courtesy of the artist and Ciaccia Levi, Paris.

to create a mutable emblem with the glass scent bottle and urine, which repeats as a motif and gets passed between the characters as a tool that 'possesses them.' When capturing so called 'erotic' or sensual content on film things can quickly get dominated by this and therefore become one-dimensional, which I was keen to avoid. I wanted to try and create a piece which played with and celebrated ideas of the sensual and the erotic from a queered/female identifying perspective. But also as something that talked about a sensual relationship to the world and to objects in a broader sense, that wasn't just framed around one-dimensional ideas of sex and the female body/gender. It's obviously quite hard to do that. The film was also meant to be playful and frivolous in a way that undermined its apparent 'sexiness', with the soundtrack by David Aird playing an important role in disrupting this atmosphere. Within the context of the show, there was also a sense of watching and consuming the act of 'getting off' on something, the mirrored room was meant to accentuate this. For me, it was more about playing with the idea of how we're sensually engaging with each other and things in the world, rather than objectifying a series of thoughts and concepts on the subject.

**MG**

When visiting this show, the viewer is transformed from a mere spectator into a voyeur, perhaps even a participant. How do you consider the public and the receptiveness of your practice when producing your work?

**ZW**

I wanted there to be some sort of activation, an implicit dialogue. For "Sunday Fantasy" in particular, I wanted people to experience sensorial feelings, even if this was disgust, and to perceive that feeling evolving into a perspective on the work. It is impossible to drive and control people's reading of my work because it's always extremely



“Sunday Fantasy”, Exhibition view, Mimosa House, London, United Kingdom, 2019.  
Photographer: Tim Bowditch.  
Courtesy of the artist and Ciaccia Levi, Paris.



“Sunday Fantasy”, Exhibition view, Mimosa House, London, United Kingdom, 2019.  
Photographer: Tim Bowditch.  
Courtesy of the artist and Ciaccia Levi, Paris.



***Ceremonial Piss Pot Holder***, Ceramic and glass, 2019. Photographer: Tim Bowditch.  
Courtesy of the artist and Ciaccia Levi, Paris.

subjective. But for sure, there is a play with the viewer, playing with the boundaries of what the artwork is and what is going on in the space around it.

Vulnerability was also relevant to "Sunday Fantasy" as it is about an embodied space, and people acquire a kind of power through watching it: in the sense that, if you use yourself as physical and emotional material in this way, you create a weird power dynamic. In this respect, my work is also about marrying these slightly uncomfortable elements by making explicit the gaze of the viewer and the consumption of the artwork/body. At the very least, with all of the works I make, I hope to create a 'generous' viewing experience for people.



***Eternal Bronzer Photoshoot***, Collaboration with Amy Stickland  
and Urara Tsuchiya, 2015. Photographer: Amy Gwatin.



***Bibbins***, Collaboration with Amy Stickland and Urara Tsuchiya, 2015.  
Photographer: Amy Gwatkin.

Zoe Williams, Figure Figure 2021  
Courtesy of the artist

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