

FIGURE FIGURE



conversation with **HENRY KITCHER**
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The Weight of The World, Soil and concrete, 40 × 34 × 3,8 cm, 2021.



Home is Where The Heart Is, Polyester resin, 35 × 26 × 52 cm, 2020.

MARCO GALVAN *in conversation with*
HENRY KITCHER

MG

How did you approach art?

HK

As a kid I used to play a lot of video games but also used to draw a lot, being inspired by old paintings of Greek gods, such as Hercules fighting Hydra. My first real art experience was when I was around nine and my mother took me to the Tate Modern to see a Frida Kahlo retrospective. For me, it was a massive eye opener into a world that was much bigger than my own. One filled with vibrance in sadness and joy. From that point onwards, I remember I started asking for “art books” as presents for birthdays and christmas. I did not ask for anything specific, I just wanted to know more. Seeing life through others’ eyes changed everything for me in my young gamer days. I actually still have the pamphlet of the show

somewhere at my place which I guess shows how much I hold that show dear.

MG

Once that window opened, how did you realise you wanted to make art?

HK

I have always studied art at school, but when it came to choosing a university degree, I was not sure whether to pursue an artistic path or make a career choice that could possibly lead to safer employment possibilities. I come from a background where you grow up with the idea of going to school and then getting a job. As I had always enjoyed playing with computers and I had done some digital work in the past, I thought of applying to do graphic design. This being said, I had always known I wanted to be an artist. My graphic design tutors understood my tendency towards fine arts and gave me the possibility to continue the course while focusing on my main areas of interest. I started doing a lot of video and set installations, where I was already incorporating natural elements and issues.

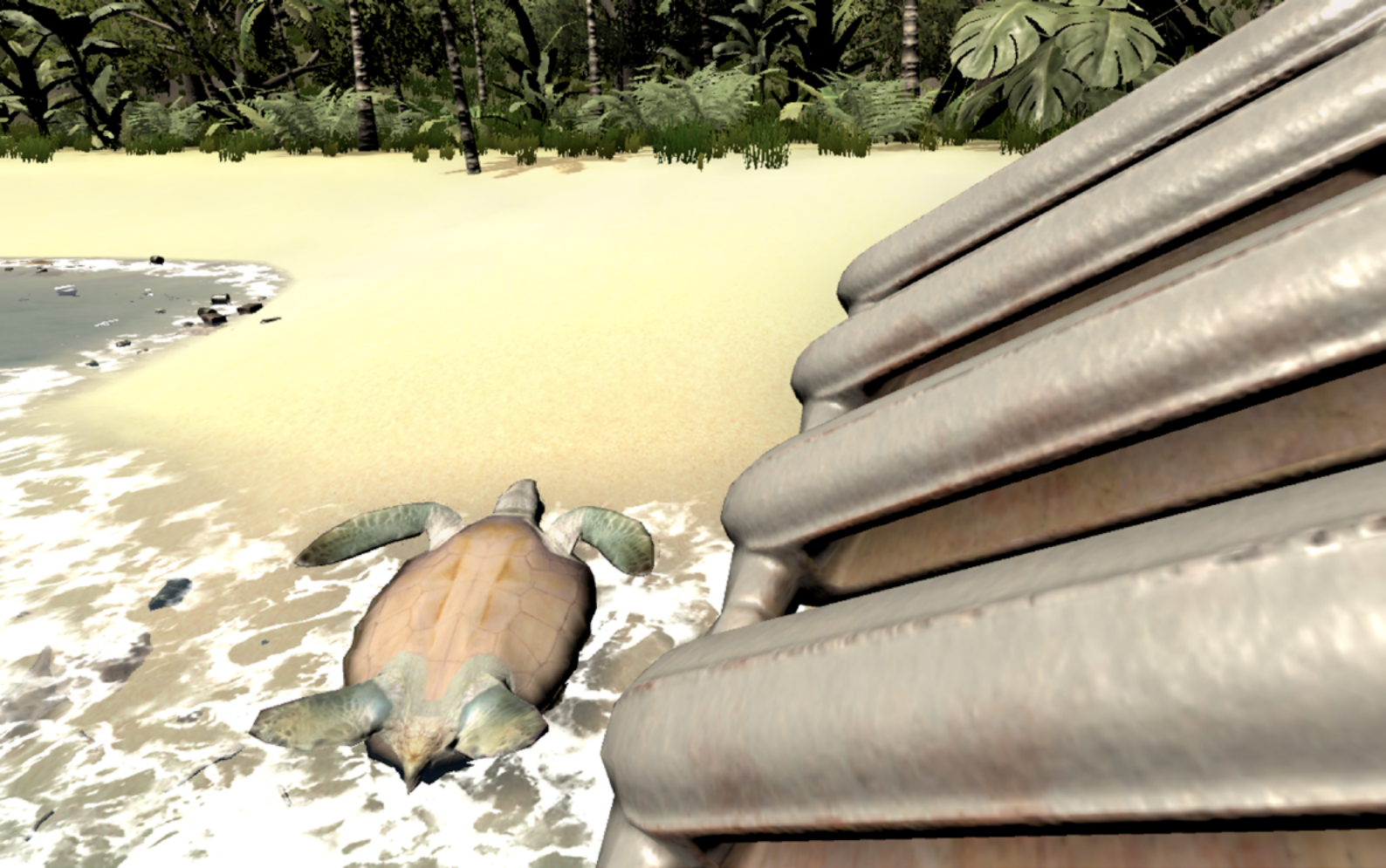
Back in 2016 I did a video piece called *Stunning*, about a certain level of indifference we have towards the animal kingdom, looking at how much we distance ourselves from it by calling ourselves the dominant species. The piece itself was a dual screen video, made up of little clips from nature shows and social media or the news, drawing a comparison between the human and animal kingdom, where I was taking on a role of voyeur and observer.

MG

Your work encompasses elements and materials that imply the contact between man and nature (soil, rocks, concrete) but also video game computing. How did you conceive your two video game works *Paradise (Lost)* (2019) and *Green Screen* (2020)?

HK

The video game works came from a desire to create interactive experiences without real



world funding prohibiting me from creating anything large scale and possible. Despite no real guidance, *Paradise (Lost)* was set on a desert island where you would be inevitably encouraged through defeat to interact with trash littered around a picturesque beach. The aim of the game was simple: to pick up and remove up to ten pieces of trash from the beach in order to clean it. If you did not pick up enough trash within a set time frame, the water level would rise and fish would start floating to the surface (game over). It is obviously a very simple and elementary idea but the real message that I wanted to convey behind it was that no matter how big or how small your actions may be, they all have an impact.

Green Screen took a lot more time to produce but I think it worked out. It was a purely cinematic experience where you would be able to move through a dense pine forest at night. As you are walking, you start to understand that something is a bit off: at a closer inspection, the landscape would reveal light boxes above you and flickering red lights here and there. As you reach the end of the pathway, you would see a production tent and cameras set up and all sense of isolated calm you would experienced had been entirely falsehood. A facade. That is the way I see the artificial green spaces in our urban landscape, facilitating some kind of purpose without giving any sense of wild freedom.

MG

As an artist working on the relationship between nature and human intervention, if not of critique, do you think you assume a position of awareness towards these topics?

HK

I do not like forcing ideals or ways of living down people's throats, more just opening one's eyes to a different way of seeing. Broadening someone's





perspective might allow little change that makes a difference without necessarily changing their life drastically.

Concerning the art world, I think it can be a powerful channel to spread messages related to sustainability, just as it is for many other topics.

MG

So do you think that is actually possible for artists to significantly raise awareness through their artworks? I am thinking of your soil sculptures which are in a way recyclable as you sometimes use the same soil, as well as the same moulds, to produce new artworks. Do you think that the art world, not only on a production level but as a whole machine, could commit to spread messages related to sustainability or be itself sustainable? Do you think it would be possible or any type of operation would fall into the so-called green washing?

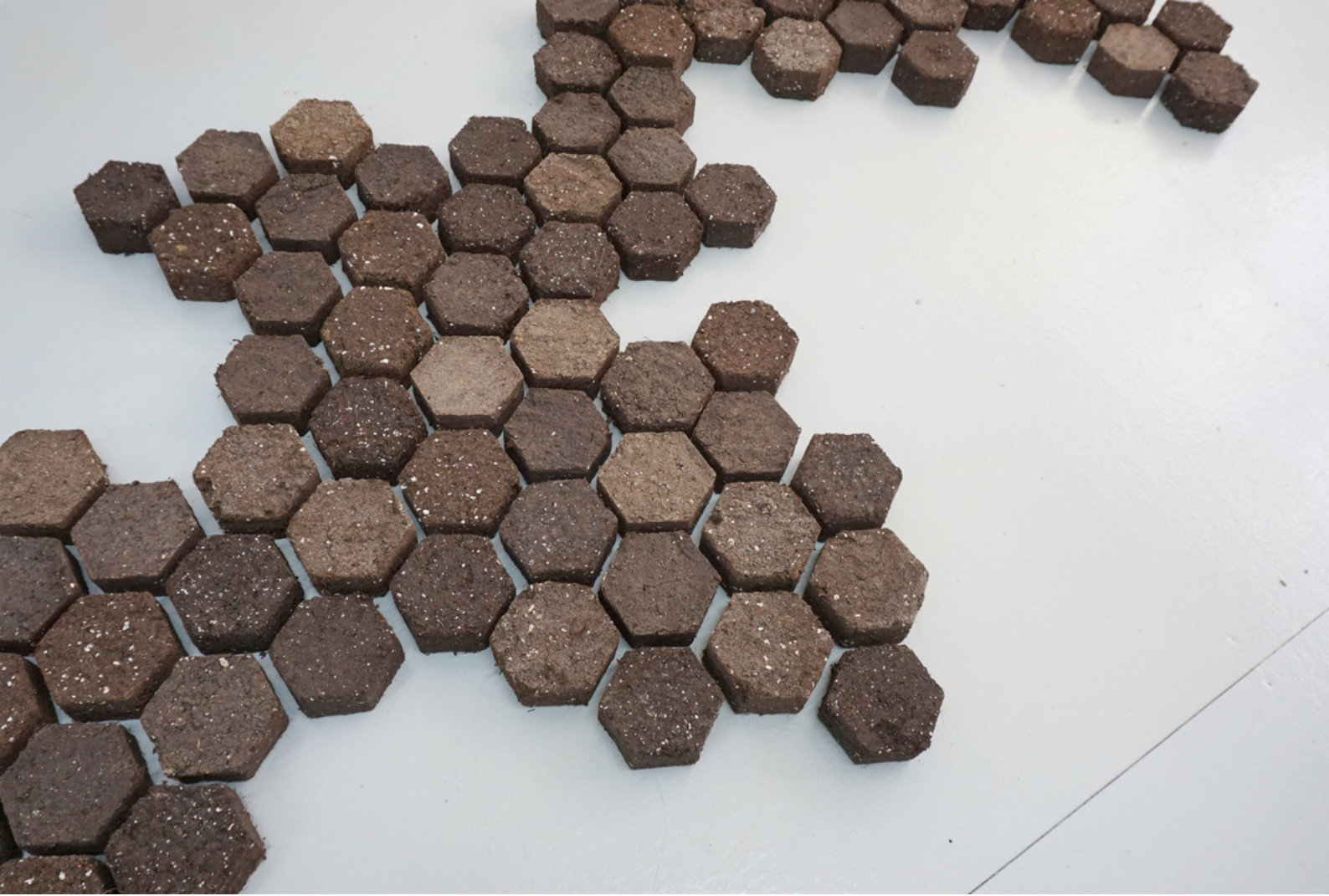
HK

I think any field or industry has the possibility to take a more sustainable turn.

As far as art is concerned, I think it is a crucial platform to spread these sorts of messages because audiences take time to look at it and think about it on a “deeper level”. Some people go to museums and galleries to explore to broaden their knowledge of topics and feelings that cannot be seen in their own lives that need telling through others. Galleries and museums offer crucial space to think.

I like to see artists doing all sorts of different things, without standardizing, emulating or following trends. I do not want to go to a show and see everyone talking about the same thing from the same perspective. Moreover, I would like to see more resourcefulness. A big switch in my practice happened when I realized how much waste I was generating by telling a story about our natural environment. I was ordering material that was coming in plastic,





non-recyclable bags, and that really triggered me in thinking I wanted my process to be as truthful as it can be.

MG

... I guess this led you to soil. What first made you want to use soil as an artistic medium? Did it come from a desire to engage directly with nature?

HK

Exactly. Throughout the Covid pandemic, the store where I used to buy resin for my work ran out of it. Hence, I took a step back to rethink about my process and, as I was saying, in a time where everyone became super resourceful, I tried to focus on finding a type of material I could use as a replacement, that would allow me to push new bounds with, that would always available and could generate minimal waste.

At first, I did a bit of experimentation using simple things like leaf litter and sticks found on the street that previously inspired the *Scaffolding* resin series. Then, due to lockdown, the garden-mania exploded worldwide and I jumped on the same bandwagon as everyone else, but rather than redoing my garden—as I do not have one—I decided to explore working with soil.

One thing I loved about soil was that I was able to cast with it and, in case the result was not great, I was able to use it again and again by simply breaking it up with my hands and water and putting it back in the soil mix to then cast more. The perfect example of this process is my latest installation *Enclosure*, where all the raw soil I had scattered between my casted forms was swept up, and it is now going into a whole other work. Nothing is ever going to waste. The material, just like all, has its limitations but it is enjoyable to see what is possible and to try and push people's perception with something so mundane.



Enclosure, Soil, 500 × 310 cm, 2022.
Photographer: Gillies Adamson Semple.



Enclosure, Soil, 500 × 310 cm, 2022.
Photographer: Gillies Adamson Semple.

You briefly referenced the *Scaffolding* (2020 -) series, consisting in house-looking sculptures made of resin sticks, touches on the structures in society that provide humanity with support and stability. How did you conceive these pieces?

HK

When I was in university, I used to be obsessed with Rachel Whiteread. She casts the spaces inside and around objects, investigating domestic architecture and the traces of humanity impressed upon such sites. I was fascinated by the idea of making a perfect copy of something and telling new stories through something so simple like changing the material. I started attending the casting workshop where I got to experiment with this medium and create small things such as a light bulb made in jesmonite.

My approach to casting changed when I left university, as I wanted to make a series of moulds that I could re-cast multiple times in order to be more resourceful and create work in a Lego- like mechanism.

I was reading in the news about these series of hurricanes that hit Indonesia. I was interested in hearing the stories of the people who were left with nothing, talking about the material loss of a home. I started doing a lot of research into loss, expanding to safety, security and privacy. Hearing people's stories became the center point in understanding a pain I could not see or feel. So I decided to try and translate this into a piece or into a series of works.

Coincidentally, in 2020, a huge storm hit the UK. Nothing comparable to the hurricane in Indonesia, but on my street, there was a sheer amount of tree branches and sticks that fell down from the trees. I gathered as many as I could thinking I would have used them as my Legos, as my building blocks.



I made twenty silicone moulds of these sticks which I then casted in, cleaned, polished the resin results up so that they would have the same appeal and playfulness as Legos. I assembled the sticks into these series of houses, fragile like skeletons of something that once existed in a fuller form. This series really proved how resourceful I could get with mould making, generating numerous amounts of work from the same moulds.

MG

As you were saying, your sculptures, whether concrete, resin or soil, are often casts of existing objects or shapes. What is the meaning of this repetitive action?

HK

Repetition inspires and reminds me of human history in a way, how far we have come to grow. I am thinking about something as simple as bricks and how large-scale manufacture paved roads to empires. I think of that quote “Rome wasn’t built in a day, but they were laying bricks every hour” when summarising my process.

A multitude of bricks put together is a sign of man’s advancement over its landscape. Even if I am replicating large scale industrial manufacturing on a much much smaller scale, I see the repetition of the object as a sign of growth and a change of ideals and lifestyle. Something that when paired with conversation of our natural environment I hope encourages thought for how we can grow and be better.

A good example would be a piece that I did back in 2018 called *Pumpkin Spice Latte*. It consists of these concrete casts of chestnuts I made during the autumn period. I casted a ridiculous amount, something like five hundred of them. The title of this work is a reference to how nowadays we capitalise upon our seasons. How Autumn has become a product of our environment with pumpkin spice lattes filling the



Pumpkin Spiced Latte, Concrete, Dimensions variable, 2018.
Photographer: Chris Lensz.



Pumpkin Spiced Latte, Concrete, Dimensions variable, 2018.
Photographer: Chris Lensz.

coffee shops and the colours orange and red highlighting seasonal sales in stores and online. Repetition has acted as a real aid to highlight and tell stories of industry when it comes to providing new perspectives to how we live with our natural environment.

MG

In your *Confession Series* (2019) you take a position of contempt towards the man's carelessness of the environment. The idea of leaving traces, as the love message on a tree bark, leaves in the viewer a sense of empathy towards the human being who, with this action, confirms its littleness in a vaster natural ecosystem that will unavoidably overpower him. Do you think the tendency of men to control nature is dictated by this fear?

HK

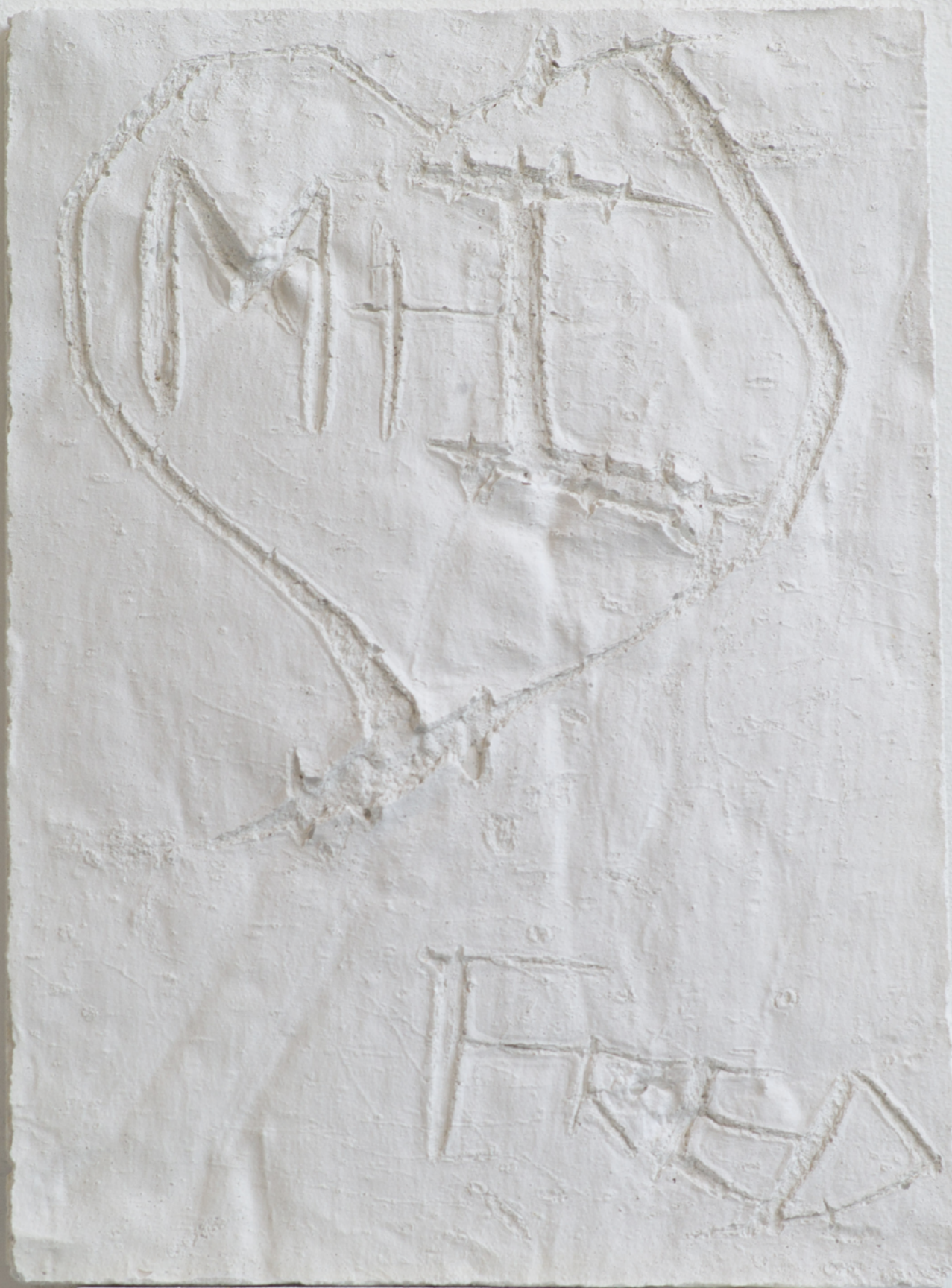
I have always been fascinated by the impulse to leave a message or mark carved into a tree. Maybe it is because trees give off ideas of strength, stability and life ever longing. In my *Confession Series*, I wanted to immortalize these messages further by making latex moulds of the etched bark I had seen and turn them into a series of jesmonite tiles. I love the playfulness and how relatable this interaction with trees is, like you are etching this moment into softer stone hoping it will last forever. It is certainly not the best way of interacting with nature, but I am always very touched by this romantic impulse of permanence. These individual stories that intertwine and come together on the rough surface, confessions that you hope stand the test of time.

MG

That emerges also in your work *Attachment Issues* (2019). It is interesting how you bring human emotions into your works and you let them shine through...

HK

Attachment Issues is a pile of latex logs which I have turned it into a series of rather comical balloons. The original logs belong to a tree that used to be on my street before the council decided



Love Triangle, Jesmonite, 25 × 18 cm, 2019.



to cut it down for some reason. I still remember the incredible community uproar due to the loss of said tree: people were putting banners around it to protect it and creating real conversation about its importance in their lives. It was very overwhelming for me to see this human response to the loss of a tree, as if it was a loved one. I collected some logs from the tree before they were put into the shredder.

I wanted to try to capture this idea of loss. I opted for latex as it is such a ghostly and fleshy material, evoking some kind of ominous ethereal presence. I piled all the logs together and decided to bury among them a cast of my arm. The work touches on the decapitation of nature within our natural environment, but it is also for me a story of empathy and loss. I showed it for the first time at the first Four Walls exhibition and it is a seminal work for me as it paved the way for where I am now highlighting the human in the midst of environmental work.

MG

Talking about Four Walls, it is an initiative that comes alongside your artistic practice and during the pandemic lockdowns you launched Free wall space. What drove you to expand your interests in these two community oriented offline and online initiatives?

HK

Four Walls started right after I finished university. I was looking to create a space to host dialogues that I lost from leaving an academic environment so I decided to reach out to several different practitioners doing installation, sculpture, photography, video and so on and so forth. I wanted to talk about art in its broader spectrum and I realised that so many artists did not have a platform or the chance to show what they were doing to a wider audience. Four Walls was trying to respond to this idea of giving voice to creatives that maybe were not topping mailing lists yet



Attachment Issues, Latex and cable tie, 78 × 56 × 51 cm, 2018.
Photographer: Chris Lensz.

were doing magical things. Each artist I invited showed one piece of work, as I wanted to keep it simple in order to facilitate the dialogue between the works in the space. The project lasted around two years, then it naturally adapted to lockdown context and sort of evolved into FreeWall space. I had long brainstorming sessions with my friend and artist George Stuart, discussing the urge to actively respond to the forced isolation we were collectively living through globally. We decided to build a website where everyday at 3pm a new artwork would be on show. We were allowing people to submit their work, giving way to a multitude of perspectives to come together within the same ecosystem and to help retain creative drive when we were all told to slow down and stay indoors. We met some great people during the three months FreeWall space was active and a lot of them are friends today.

MG

Your latest project *Enclosure* (2022) draws attention to the decrepit, anti-bucolic nature of the urban landscape engaging with new social ecologies and broadening the range of artistic sculptural materials. What drew you to work on this large scale installation?

HK

Enclosure for me is a piece that perfectly encapsulates my research period into soil as a medium. It revolves around the coexistence between the urban and natural environment, the manufactured landscapes we live and grow in. It takes form in six soil craters in an off-balanced modular constellation. The whole work was inspired by the history of civilisation, especially when Romans settled in England and how they started to develop and change the landscape building way for the country we see today. There are formal elements—such as soil and the brick—that return and combine in *Enclosure*, but also recurring themes like nature's entrapment within



Enclosure, Soil, 500 × 310 cm, 2022.
Photographer: Gillies Adamson Semple.



Enclosure, Soil, 500 × 310 cm, 2022.
Photographer: Gillies Adamson Semple.

our urban landscape and societies. For this, the materials are elemental and wild, yet staged and controlled. The work is quite personal as it is the first solo installation I have done where I have been able to truly build up my own landscape within a space and tell my own story. The circular shapes recall industrial forms, gears and this idea of productive motion. The fact that they are made of natural resources calls to attention the fundamental development of metropolitan society and a shift of prioritising industrial demands above human and environmental needs. The brick, the building block of empires, in this case reminds us of the very ground we walk upon and the fragility of its foundation to larger forces.



High-Rise, Concrete, 46 × 43 × 136 cm, 2019.



Pumpkin Spiced Latte, Concrete, Dimensions variable, 2018.
Photographer: Chris Lensz.

Henry Kitcher, Figure Figure 2023
Courtesy of the artist

PUBLICATION DIRECTION

Fiona Vilmer
fiona@figurefigure.fr

INTERVIEW

Marco Galvan
marcogalvan@hotmail.it

VISUAL IDENTITY

Atelier Pierre Pierre
hello@pierre-pierre.com

www.figurefigure.fr

[Instagram](#)

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