

FIGURE FIGURE

A red wax-like illustration of a reclining nude figure, possibly a woman, with anatomical details. The figure is positioned horizontally, with its head to the left and legs to the right. The torso is covered in a cluster of red, circular, textured shapes, resembling a large, fleshy growth or a cluster of eggs. The legs are also covered in similar red, circular, textured shapes. The figure is rendered in a soft, sculptural style, with visible shading and texture. The illustration is set against a black background, which is overlaid with the large, white, serif text 'FIGURE' repeated twice.

conversation with **REBECCA ACKROYD**
MAY 2021

N° 43



The Mulch, Installation view, Peres Projects, Berlin, Germany, 2018
Photographer: Matthias Kolb.

MARCO GALVAN *in conversation with*
REBECCA ACKROYD

MG

How did you start making art? When did you first approach it?

RA

I don't think I've ever really thought of being an artist. My first memory of going down that path was when my teacher from school told me I should do art for GCSE and I don't think I was even considering it, I have a lot to thank him for. When I went to the Royal Academy I definitely committed to it in a way that I hadn't before and I think it's a path you have to pursue because it's a passion, or perhaps more accurately it's an obsession. I used to be on my own a lot when I was a child and I used to make games up and worlds. I definitely had a very vivid imagination and I have always had visceral dreams. I used to talk to my mum about them and sometimes I'd be convinced something I'd dreamt was a



The Mulch, Installation view, Peres Projects, Berlin, Germany, 2018
Photographer: Matthias Kolb.



The Mulch, Installation view, Peres Projects, Berlin, Germany, 2018
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memory; I still have them now so they're always quite present.

MG

I also tend to remember dreams very vividly, in a very detailed way. Do you look into the meaning of your dreams?

RA

I think I'm more interested in what they could potentially mean. In my last show, "100mph" at Peres Projects, I exhibited some dream-drawings that I made during the past year. I know what some of them might be about, more or less, but I avoid picking them apart.

MG

Do you have recurring dreams, objects, people and places that appear more than once?

RA

Well, there are recurring themes: I have a lot of zombie dreams and they are usually quite concerned with anxiety, where I try to defend family and friends. I also have recurring apocalyptic dreams but a lot of them are about scale, where I usually find myself in-between these huge architectures that make me feel small and overwhelmed. Also there are recurring locations, like I've had numerous dreams about Venice and the canals in particular.

MG

Architecture and scale are actually quite relevant themes in your practice. I'm thinking about your first solo show "The Mulch" at Peres Projects, where ghost-like lounging figures around the gallery presented vents incorporated in their bodies, making them become hybrids between human-looking figures and structures. Could you talk a bit more about your interest between the corporeal and architecture?

RA

I suppose more generally I'm interested in altering spaces so that when you enter them it feels like a different realm — which is how I approach my solo shows. With the figures in the show, I wanted these androgynous bodies that were themselves emulating architecture, referencing in a very loose way a churchlike structure — passageways in cathedrals, stainedglass windows. I wanted the contra-



1,000,000 eggs, Drawing, gouache, soft pastel on Somerset satin paper,
165 × 130 cm, 2020.



Pin head (detail), Drawing, gouache, soft pastel on Somerset satin paper,
185 × 122 cm, 2020.

diction of these figures, lounging or reclining, but are still strong and composed.

In relation to the body and architecture, the way I deal with a space is crucial to me because it's the way I am able to turn it into something that belongs to me. As I was mentioning before, it's important to create something that someone can enter into.

MG

Here, and in recent shows, you seem to explore a series of dichotomies such as revealing and concealing, excluding and including, what gets kept and what gets left. Would you agree?

RA

I think there's something about fragmentation that is really important in my work.

In "The Mulch" exhibition, I made a work from an old shop shutter: it had my mum's maiden name laser cut into the top of it and inside the box of the shutter there were a couple of photos of me in one of her old dresses. The photos were taped at the top, visible but subtle. I think that began a train of thoughts and ideas about erasure and loss — especially in those circumstances where a maiden name gets erased with marriage — but also an idea of generational loss. This is also tied to memory and how it's such a fractured thing that gets distorted through time and age. All of these ideas together are the driving force for a lot of my works now. In some of them it's more palpable and direct, like the casts. All of these ideas become moments of memory fractured and broken that translate into floating objects in space.

MG

A bit like Plato's hyperuranion, where all ideas live and are contained all together...

Is there a component of instinctivity and urgency in your work?

RA

I think there's probably both. I have semi-specific ideas that come from my instinct but then as



Underfoot, Installation view, Fondazione Arnaldo Pomodoro,
Milan, Italy, 2019-2020.



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I research or start working on them they might end up as something completely different. There's definitely urgency in the way that I work. That also explains the materials that I use in making sculpture. I'm very interested in speed, with the figures in particular, thinking about how they're constructed using rudimentary materials. It's quite important for me, the component of immediacy — there's a directness a bit like making a drawing.

MG

Previously you were referencing your attachment to memory through details, like your mum's maiden name. You often reference a personal narrative in your work. I'm thinking about the patterned carpet at your show "House Fire" at Outpost, which in other interviews you described as referencing an idea of British identity. What drew you to deal with domesticity, as well as personal histories?

RA

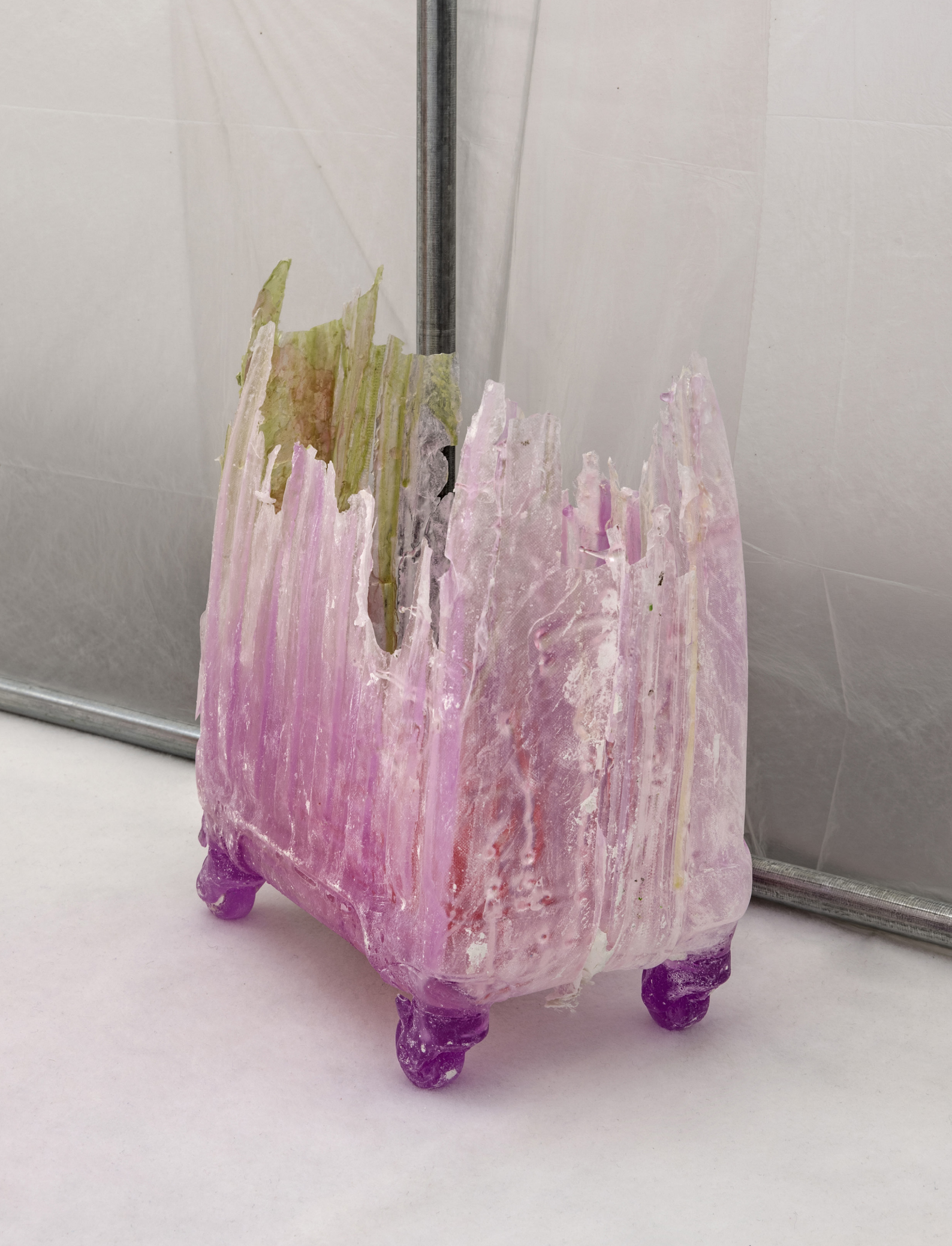
Specifically that carpet was supposed to provide a stereotype of British identity and pub culture in which to set the exhibition, I suppose a pub is where home and public space overlap. I never really think that my work is about me, even though it is inseparable from me. There are trains of thought that ignite from my personal experience but I try to loosely reference these elements as I feel I don't want the work to become too literal. I'm not so interested in autobiography; I'm more into the generalised experience of something that looks familiar but is misplaced or somehow wrong.

MG

I guess in this case scale plays a fundamental role in modifying a space and making it oddly wrong and altering perception and the notion of familiarity. I am thinking for example about the sculptures you've shown at "Bloody Life" at Herald Street in 2016. Is the range of scale in your work a way to create different layers of experience when approaching your works?



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RA

The works that I make at the moment, which are mainly casts and are very much rooted in the real world. The bigger figures, or limbs, I see as existing in a realm that is fictional, or alludes to being something other. I'm interested in where the two meet.

I often can't explain where my work comes from or why I do it. I don't know the answers to those questions and I don't want to have them because that's what's interesting about it.

I recently watched a documentary about Hilma af Klimt, who used painting to capture ideas around spirituality, something that is so much bigger than humans and I love the idea of transforming the ethereal into a physical thing — making something you haven't seen before.

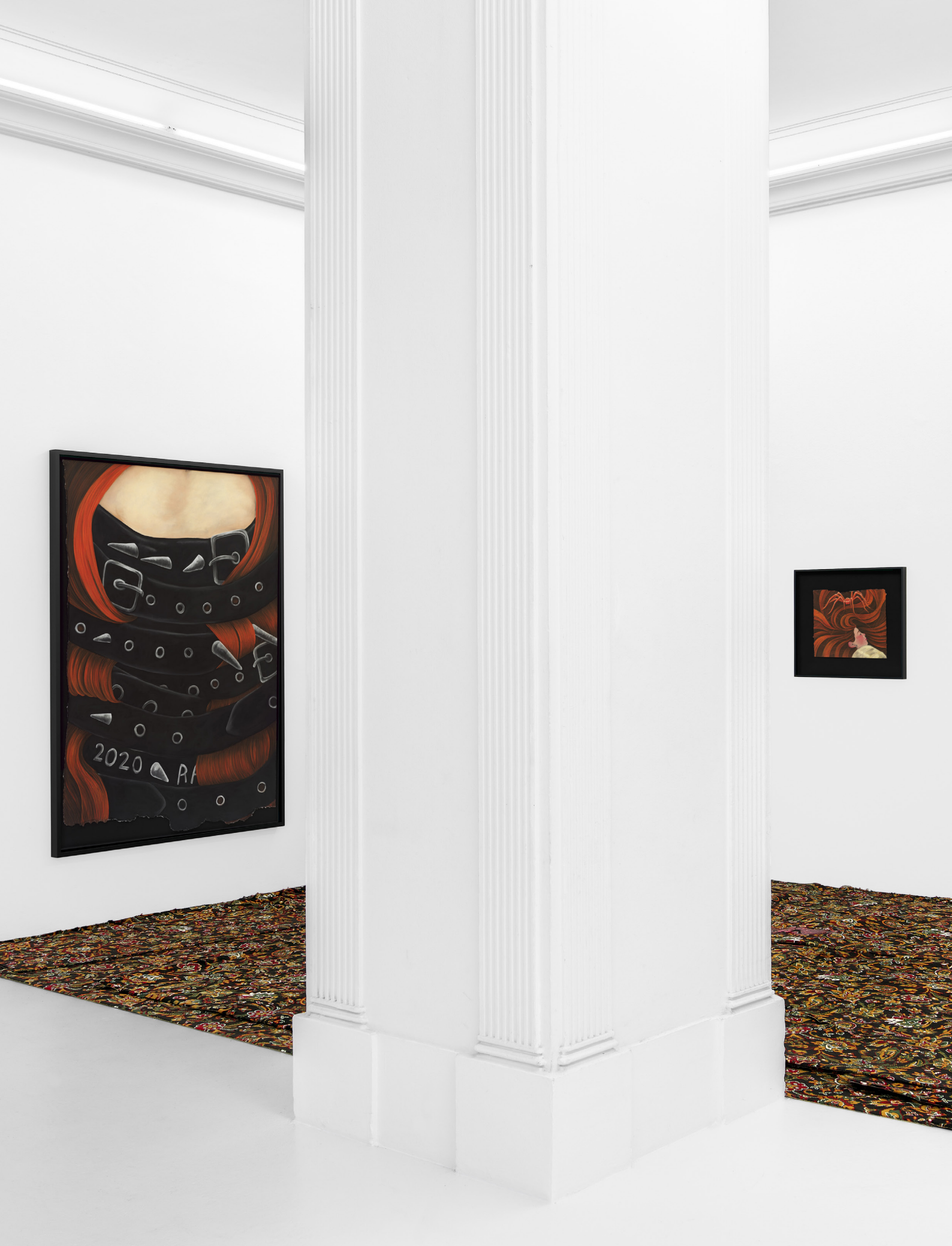
MG

At the beginning we were talking about dreams and, when you did the show "Conducting Bodies" at Exo Exo in 2019 in Paris, you exhibited your work in dialogue with a short movie by surrealist filmmaker Maya Deren. In the show, you explored the interaction between individuals and environment and both of your works resonate around the idea of individual formation and the human body's place in nature. In your practice, is there a component of symbolism that evokes those non-linear narratives you were mentioning?

RA

I definitely have recurring motifs. In the show you referenced the flower drawings were meant to be evocative of the body, but not literally because I wanted to have an openness that evoked a semi-abstractness. I'm interested in the cross pollination of ideas and content, whether that's a drawing of an eye or a cast of legs on a therapy couch. I like to place my work in a space where worlds collide.

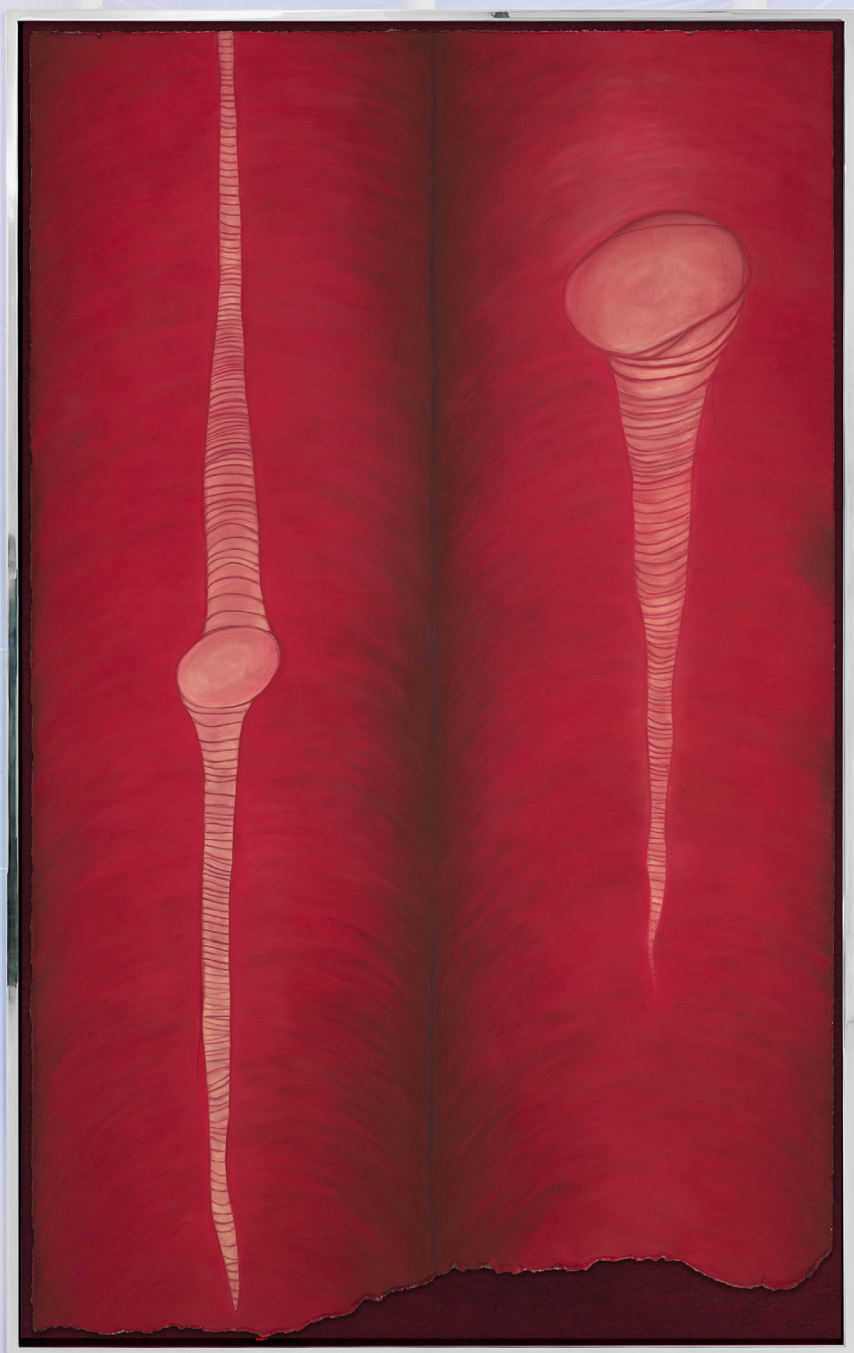
Houses are a recurring symbol, as I've made a series of sculptures of little toy-sized houses that are meant to represent memories



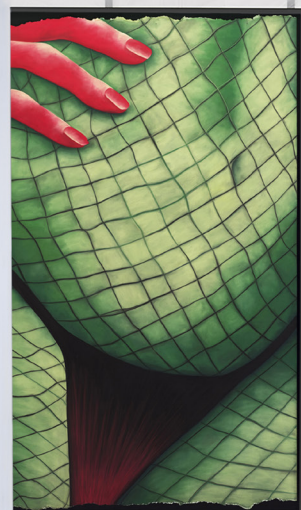
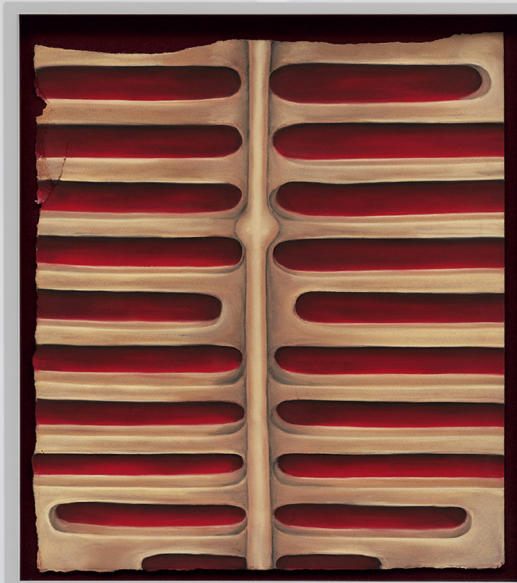
100mph, Installation view, Peres Project, Berlin, Germany, 2018.
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of a house I have lived in, almost like different memories and perspective of that same house, covered in black felt, like shadows. Each house is different like its being seen from a different angle or time in each reproduction.

MG

Your show "Underfoot" at Fondazione Arnaldo Pomodoro in Milan seems to be a further exploration of Conducting Bodies. Here we see the tunnel structure again, as a temporary accommodation housing the works within the gallery. How does your work relate to the ideas of transition and precariousness?

RA

I was thinking a lot about the transient notion of a home and wanted to build a cocoon for those works. I wanted to use the tunnel as a holding space, containing a body of work (literally) and also becoming a space for all the overlapping ideas within the show to bump up against one another. It was a specific idea of building something impermanent, the fragile nature of the structure reflected fragile ideas of existence.

MG

It is interesting how you decide to recreate a tunnel as an involucre to protect and contain your works. For your installation *Singed Lids* at the Lyon Biennale you present a similar tunnel-like structure, the one of a resin aircraft cabin, with dismembered body parts fusing with armchairs and objects. The general tone of this crafted installation echoes an ongoing question in your practice about the physical connection to absence, loss and trauma...

RA

I guess the idea for that piece started from the perspective of seeing an airplane as a transient space and the idea of travel as a dying thing, how in 100 years it might be seen as totally archaic, especially in relation to climate change. I was thinking about this red hot space populated with embers of a former time or former world. I kept thinking of the afterimage that you have when your eyes stare at a source of light and then you're



Drip feed, Drawing, gouache, soft pastel on Somerset satin paper,
29 × 37 cm, 2020.



100mph, Installation view, Peres Project, Berlin, Germany, 2018.
Photographer: Matthias Kolb.

left with this residual shadow image, and I wanted to make a sculpture of that effect, of something that had burned inside a space.

MG

The airplane as a non-place in between time and space that you presented in this series perfectly embodies the ephemerality of some of your structures within time and space, especially in relation to the material you use. Could you expand on how important material is in your work? How did you end up choosing to work this much with materials like chicken wire and resin?

RA

I started working with chicken wire during my last year at the Royal Academy. I needed to produce something very quickly so I started playing around with it as it was the most rudimentary and basic material I had available. So I started crafting these legs, which were supposed to be like a sketch but ended up being the work. There was a speed in using those materials synonymous with drawing, and that sense of speed and urgency became intrinsic to that body of work. I could make things on an architectural scale, 6 meters high or traversing an entire room, in a matter of days.

MG

Your sculptural works are often fragmented, resembling remnants uncovered in archaeological digs (thinking about *Singed Lids*). This segmentation also translates in your latest show we were just discussing, where the paintings hang from supportive structures against translucent dust sheets, creating an atmosphere that detaches the viewer from the outside world and inviting to experience them individually and intimately. Could you talk about the show and how drawing is incorporated into your overall practice?

RA

I started making drawings alongside making sculptures as a way of having a release from the practicalities of making objects. The first ones were more weird and psychedelic with this recurring character of a green woman presiding over this



Singed Lids, Installation view, La Biennale de Lyon, Lyon, France, 2020.
Photographer: Blaise Adilon.



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world of semi-organic looking forms. Drawing occupies a much more psychological space for me, with sculpture I felt like I had a clearer concept of what I was doing and the specific content, whereas drawing opened up a new way of thinking and making.

MG

Did you make the paintings in the show during the past year? Was painting in 2020 something you decided to explore further because of the general situation and restrictions?

RA

Yes, I made them in London and Berlin. I suppose it reflects a general experience of interiority both physically and psychologically, I pretty much only made drawings for a year. I also showed the dream drawings, which I made during the first lockdown in London when I wasn't going to the studio much. They began as a daily journal, but became more of a documentation of sleep, as that was where the action was.

JUNE 12 2020



VERY TYPICAL VENICE SCENES - LIKE A TOURIST DREAM.



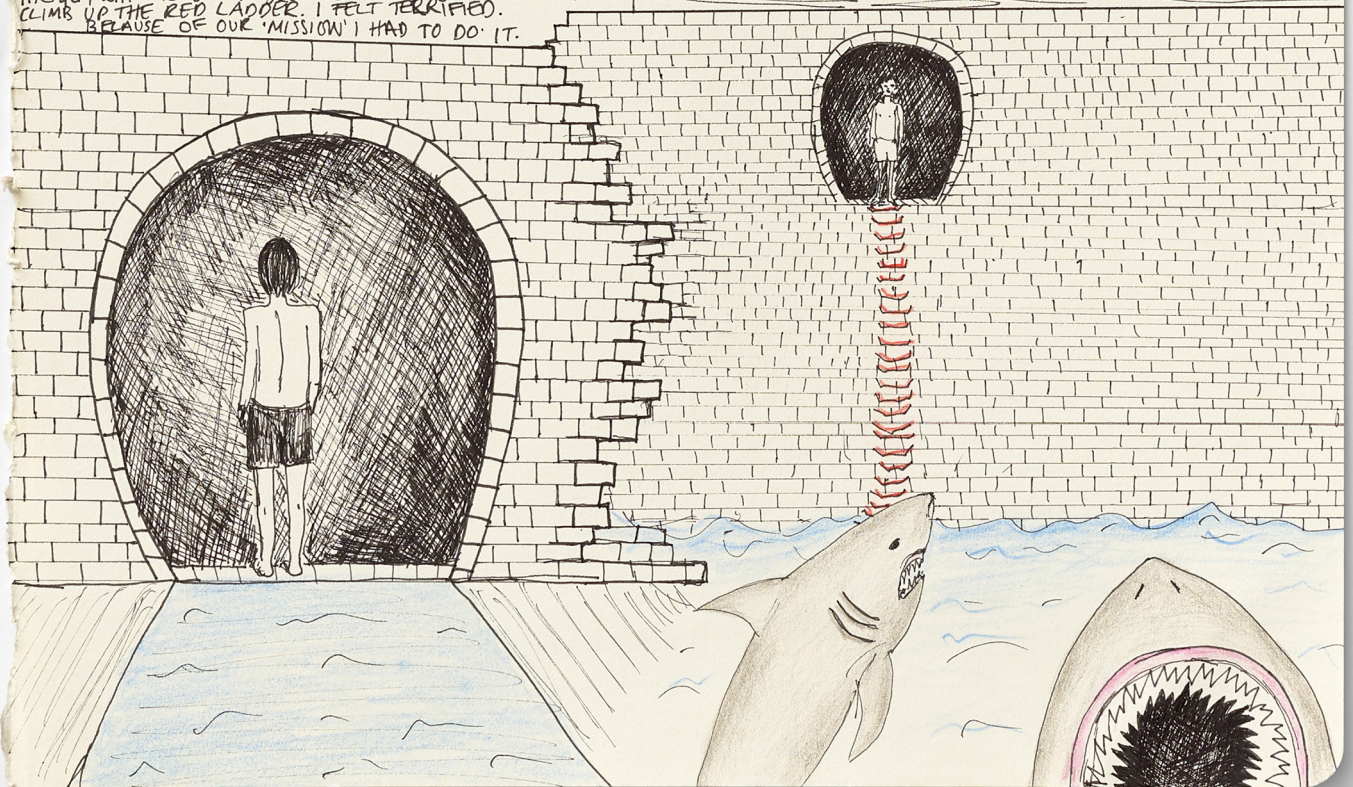
VENICE DREAM - IN LOVE WITH GEORGE CLOONEY. REAL LOVE! I KEPT THINKING - 'HE PROBABLY WANTS TO BE WITH A NORMAL GIRL LIKE ME' HA! HE ENDED UP MARRYING SOMEONE ELSE. I WASN'T TOO UPSET, CONSIDERING HOW IN LOVE I FELT. I HAVEN'T EVER THOUGHT ABOUT GEORGE CLOONEY SO ITS A SURPRISING APPEARANCE.



JUNE 12 2020

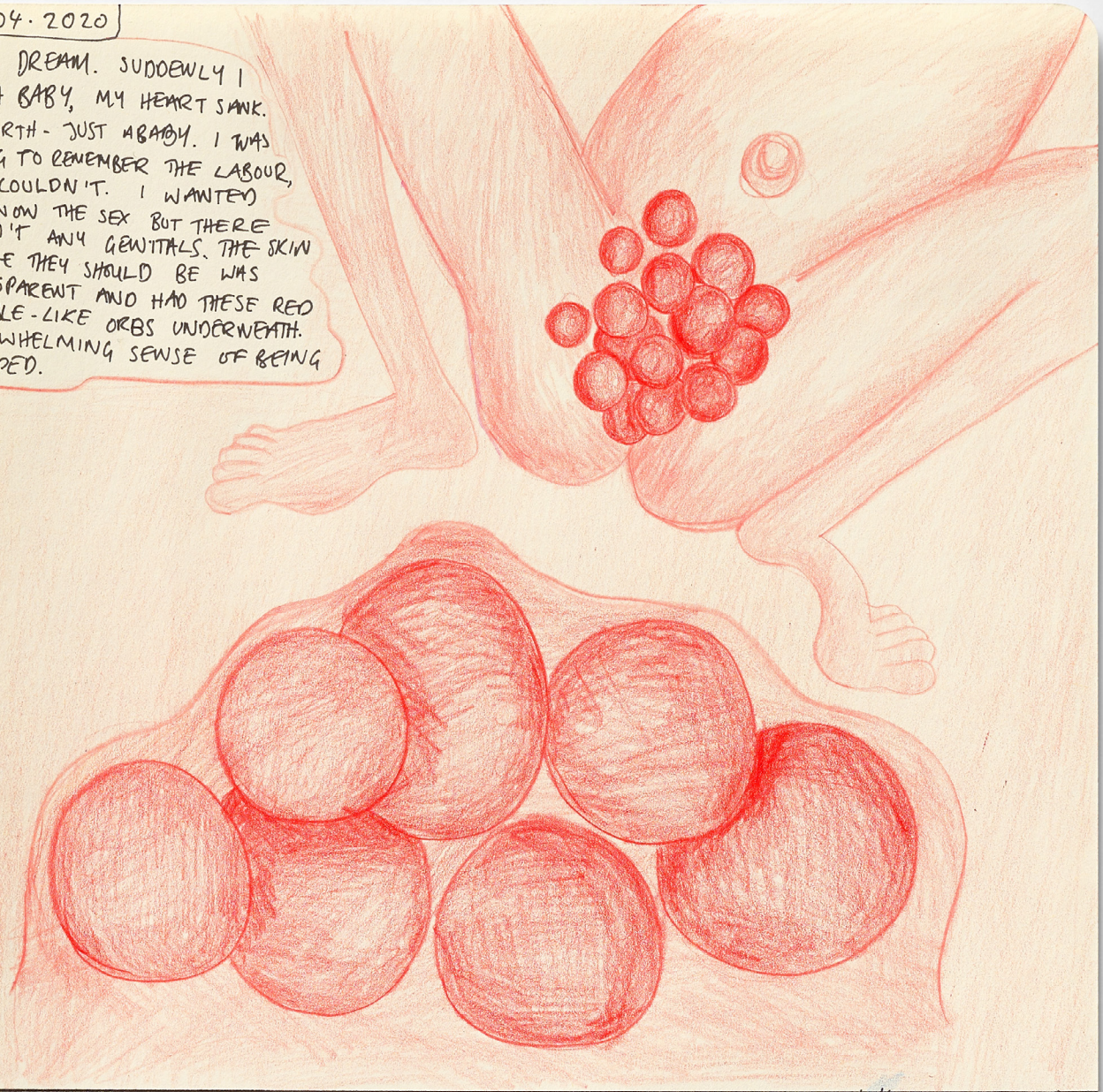
LIKE A COMPUTER GAME. CONCRETE WATERWAYS - SWIMMING WITH SOMEONE - LIKE WE'RE ON A MISSION. HOT CLIMATE, DEFINITELY NOT THE UK. THERE WERE SHARKS IN WATER AT THE END OF ONE OF THE CANALS. THE GUY WITH ME SAID I JUST NEEDED TO JUMP IN AND CLIMB UP THE RED LADDER. I FELT TERRIFIED. BECAUSE OF OUR 'MISSION' I HAD TO DO IT.

ON A BOAT TOGETHER.



22.04.2020

BABY DREAM. SUDDENLY I
HAD A BABY, MY HEART SANK.
NO BIRTH - JUST A BABY. I WAS
TRYING TO REMEMBER THE LABOUR,
BUT COULDN'T. I WANTED
TO KNOW THE SEX BUT THERE
WEREN'T ANY GENITALS. THE SKIN
WHERE THEY SHOULD BE WAS
TRANSPARENT AND HAD THESE RED
MARBLE-LIKE ORBS UNDERNEATH.
OVERWHELMING SENSE OF BEING
TRAPPED.



14.04.2020 TRYING TO TELL SOMEONE MY
NAME IS ANGELINA BUT THE LETTERS ARE LIKE
PEBBLES IN MY MOUTH THAT KEEP FALLING ONTO
THE FLOOR.



18.04.2020 DREAM OF LOSING
MY BIKINI BOTTOMS UNDER THE SEA.
TRYING TO GRAB THEM BUT THEY
KEEP GETTING SWIFT OUT OF REACH.





Nether region (here or hell), Drawing, gouache, soft pastel on Somerset satin paper,
185 × 145 cm, 2020.

Rebecca Ackroyd, Figure Figure 2021
Courtesy of the artist and Peres Projects

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