

# FIGURE



*conversation with* **MARY HURRELL**  
**NOVEMBER 2020**

**N° 35**



***1,538 °C (as horizon 0.5)*** (detail), C-type Fuji Flex, 86 × 60 cm, 2017.  
Photographer: Agata Madejska.

**SANDY DI YU** *in conversation with*  
**MARY HURRELL**

**SDY**

Could you briefly describe your practice?

**MH**

My practice is multidisciplinary, but I think of it as sculptural, both ephemeral and concrete. I have a background in dance but was drawn to sculpture as a counterpoint to the live body. I work across electronic sound production, live-action, sculpture, garment design, collage, text and video. I use these as materials and spaces to explore emotional and physical movement in synaesthetic constellations. More than anything, the body is always central to my work.

**SDY**

How did you make the transition from dance to art? Obviously the demarcation between the two tends to be quite fluid, but did you ever have a eureka moment when you decided to pursue contemporary art?

**MH**

Not so much a eureka moment; more a desire to find a language which made sense to me. In the





**1(PITCH)**, Performance, Performed by the artist and Kitty Fedorec, Surveillance video still, “Body Ecologies”, Curated by fluent, Centro Botín, Santander, Spain, 2018.



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early 2000's I studied a hybrid-type course, Dance and Visual Art in Brighton, which was quite unique at the time. This cultivated working within an in-between space. When I moved to London after this, I started out making work within the live art scene but felt that contemporary art could offer a less defined space for dance or performative ideas. I think there was something like a eureka moment when I placed the live body in relation to my sculptural work. The combination heightened the sensory and non-verbal, all becoming a language of the body and its perceptual space.

**SDY**

When reading about your work, the term “Paradoxical dualities of the feminine” jumped out for me. Could you expand on this a little more?

**MH**

When I describe my work as addressing the “feminine” it's more a state or a way of navigating in the world. Audrey Lorde's essay “Uses of the Erotic” was really important for me. She describes the Erotic as a “feminine power on a deeply female and spiritual plane”. The Erotic is not something to be confused with the pornographic, a superficial idea of eroticism and sexuality which can perpetuate patriarchal structures. Rather for me, the Erotic and the sensual are about a depth of feeling and connection to an emotional and intuitive field, a valid and fluid type of intelligence and logic. The term “paradoxical dualities of the feminine” encapsulates a tension that exists within ideas or experiences of being in a female body, holding contrasts and contradictions within you. A vulnerability and a strength. I'm interested in duality, doubles, the pull between polarised points.

**SDY**

I guess in that sense, art becomes valuable and interesting for creating work that isn't easily described using verbal language?





*PEONY*, Paper, digital collage, 2020.









**MH**

There is so much that cannot be said or described that's underneath language and can only really be felt or understood through other forms of expression. Art in its widest sense I believe is highly valuable to share stories and perspectives, to connect people, but also because art doesn't have to make sense. There can be magic to it like music, it can exist in the air.

**SDY**

Some of your work recalls limitations of the body and pushing against the boundaries of it. With everything going on in the world at large, has the current pandemic shifted your views on the body at all?

**MH**

My work does push at and explores limitations of the body as well as thresholds, surfaces and spaces of transformation and shift. I'm interested in the 'touch' of an artwork, not a literal touch, but touch as felt pressures and proximities, spatial interplays of distance and closeness, angles and perspectives, which are felt by the body as opposed to being purely visual.

I think the pandemic has accentuated an understanding of the ways in which our bodies are impacted by physical conditions and environments and the correlative effect on our psychological and emotional being. It is hard to talk about what the effects of the pandemic have had or will have on us since we're still in the middle of it and trying to digest it. That said, I feel it has magnified things that need to change, what it is to be human and how everything is interconnected. There is also a strange mourning process for a very recent past gone by, having found ourselves in a new terrain quite suddenly.

It's been weird to see aesthetic echoes between some of my work and that of the pandemic protective measures, especially the garments I make for live works, which have these protective and restrictive qualities. There's definitely





***3(OXIORCAD)***, Performance, installation, Performed by the artist and Kitty Fedorec,  
Flat Time House, London, United Kingdom, 2018.  
Photographer: Andrew Magurran.



***3(OXIORCAD)***, Performance, installation, Performed by the artist and Kitty Fedorec, Flat Time House, London, United Kingdom, 2018.  
Photographer: Andrew Magurran.



a similarity there!

**SDY**

You have an exhibition coming up at the project space Exo Exo in Paris, with Nicoletti Contemporary. Could you give some details about this?

**MH**

I'm working on a new body of work that will be developed over the next year. I tend to work in series, the last one being *mappings*, a trilogy of performance installations in 2018. The first iteration of this new work will be a solo presentation at Exo Exo gallery in Paris, curated by Nicoletti Contemporary. This was originally scheduled and postponed twice this year, but will now be in Winter 2021 due to UK and France lockdowns.

The new work has sprung from wanting to translate digital processes within my sound and collage work into something physical and three-dimensional, maybe also an impulse to move away from the screen and the virtual, to refocus on something tangible and tactile. I've been looking at histories of sculpture and its formal shifts between horizontal and vertical planes such as friezes, reliefs and the sculptural fragment. I relate these to the poetry of Sappho and how these fragments and relics speak to something primal and contemporary.

I became obsessed with Jacob Epstein's sculpture *Venus* (1917) which led me to further research. From here, I came across the tomb Epstein made for Oscar Wilde at Père Lachaise Cemetery in Paris, in 1914. The tomb was inspired by Wilde's poem 'The Sphinx'. A tradition was started where visitors kiss the stone statue after applying lipstick to their mouth, leaving a "print" of the kiss, and in 2011 a glass barrier was erected around it to make the monument 'kiss-proof'. I really loved this arrangement of the sculptural figure and this kind of 'love graffiti' and then a barrier to try to control the soft defacement.







“Blush Response” at Exo Exo will bring together my research and inspiration from this site in an installation of sculpture, sound and live-action. I’m making a feminine reconfiguration of the site’s elements with a central distorted and dislocated figure, which acts as a collage of reflections on a Venus or Sphinx type body, reimagined as buoyant mannequins. The work explores ideas of love through memorialisation, voids and replicant bodies.

In Spring 2021, I will have a solo show at Nicoletti Contemporary in London which develops from this first iteration.

**SDY**

Could you expand on whether you have a specific research process or way that you begin to plan out an idea for your artworks?

**MH**

I would describe my research process as circular. The work is usually anchored in something personal, either a feeling or experience that become ideas. Images start to collect around this until there’s a sort of ball. Bringing the ideas into the world is an intuitive and physical problem solving. Following this, there’s like a sublimation or alchemy which solidifies.

**SDY**

How do you collect these ideas?

**MH**

I collect a lot of pictures and keep sketchbooks. The way I start to develop ideas is through creating movements between images as a physicality of feeling in motion. The collage works I make are sketches for three-dimensional works. The act of cutting and arranging is something that runs through all aspects of my practice. I sometimes think of each work as a little machine and create systems of images and text to score whole projects. For my upcoming show idea for Paris, I sent the curator a stream of ordered images, like an essay.

**SDY**

Could you walk me through the process of how you produced your three-part project *mappings*?





***Movement Study 6 (Maxxinna)***, Installation, performance,  
Performed by the artist and Nina Davies,  
The Bower, London, United Kingdom, 2018.



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*mappings* started with thinking about ideas around states of water and gravity in relation to mutabilities within emotional and physical states. I was on a midwinter residency in East Iceland in 2017 and I spent a lot of time just watching the weather and noticing a mirroring to ‘emotional weather’. Weather in Iceland changes dramatically, Icelanders are obsessed with it! It could be sunny one day and the next all the waterfalls would be completely frozen mid-flow. At the same time, I came across a stereoscopic map-making machine, which was so beautiful and also inspired compositional structures within the trilogy, the idea of aerial mapping and overlap.

Each part of the trilogy was based on a different state of water: *1(Pitch)* - crystallisation, *2(Aerial)* - amorphousness or viscosity, *3(OXIORDCAD)* - vapour or the transition from liquid to air. *1(Pitch)* used a downward weight pull along with restrictive garments and wax footwear, slowing and stuttering movement. *2(Aerial)* shifted the horizontal gravity pull in *Pitch* to a vertical plane and transformed elements of the work to structures between solid and liquid. There was a vocal soundscape, which stretched and mapped out an intangible body, sculptures made of glass suspended in a rubber-lined room, alongside a video of two bodies fusing together projected onto wax. *3(OXIORDCAD)* was a vapour state. The body was still and held within a clay sculpture and iron cast shoes. This final work took place over sunset and as the light faded, I played a live soundtrack until the body completely disappeared into the darkness. All three works were performed with my long term movement collaborator Kitty Fedorec.

As a visual learner, and living within a vision-obsessed culture, I can more or less infer how something physical





**1,100 °C (M)**, Lead crystal, 2018. Photographer: Tim Bowditch.





**1(PITCH)**, Performance, Performed by the artist and Kitty Fedorec,  
“Body Ecologies”, Curated by fluent, Centro Botín, Santander,  
Spain, 2018. Photographer: Belén de Benito.





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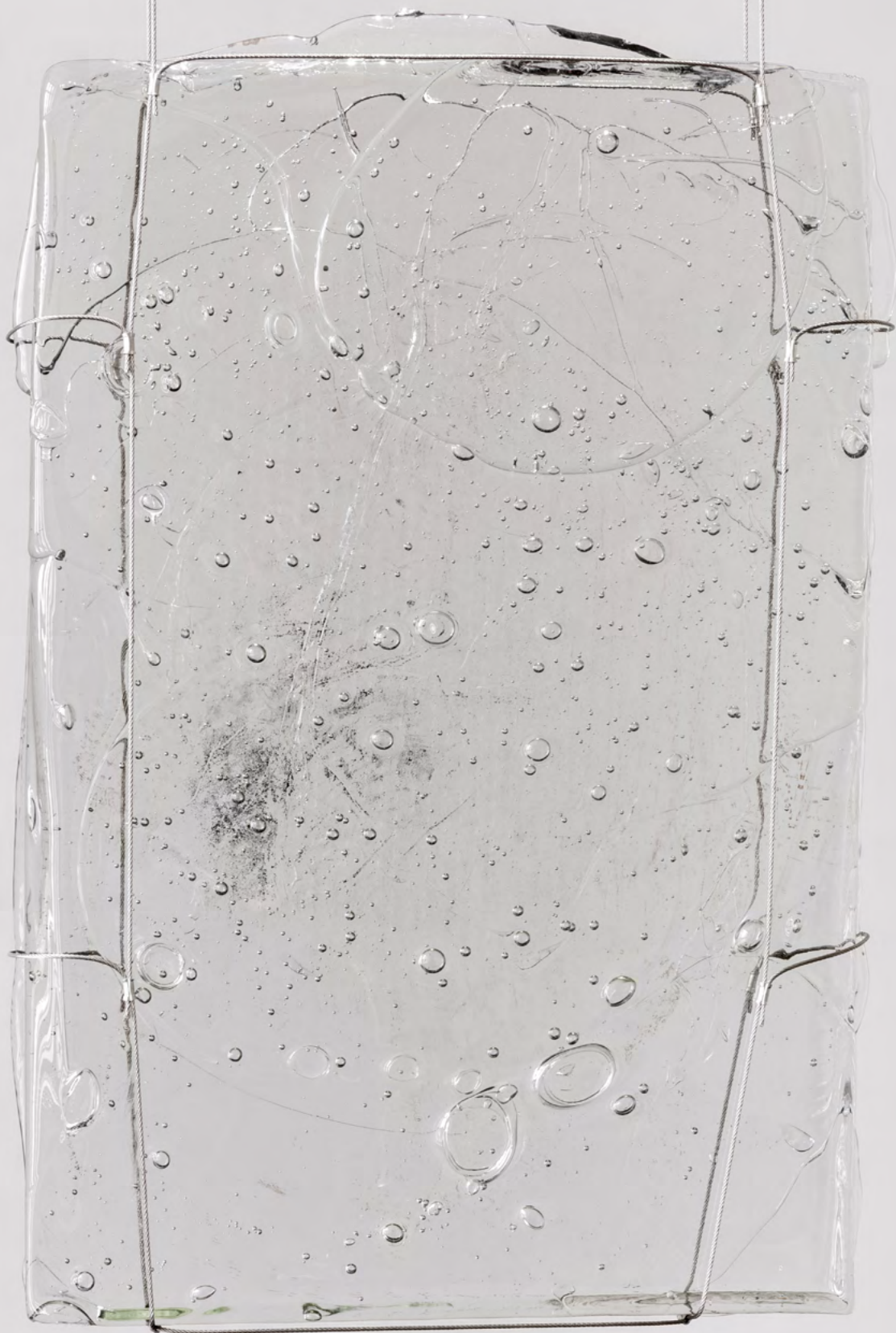
is constructed, such as the costumes you create for your choreographs or the choreographs themselves, or even your materially bound sculptures. Sound, however, completely escapes me. It's one of the most salient aspects of your work, so I wonder if you could explain, for the sound-illiterate, how you construct your soundscapes?

**MH**

I like the word salient in relation to sound! I started making electronic sound pieces around 2014, and they had a very natural progression because my work is so sensory. I was born deaf but regained my hearing around the age of one, so I feel like my relationship to sound has always felt quite special. I grew up singing and playing the piano, but taught myself to use digital editing software later, which is pretty accessible and easy to use these days. I mainly work with my own voice and I manipulate field recordings. I think of the way I make music as more of a sculptural process, starting off with something raw, like the way you'd pour metal into a mould and then shape it, shining or dulling edges and surfaces. I build up layers through cutting and distorting them to create an internalised feeling of sound. I suppose I'm quite interested in sounds that become something unidentifiable, with an ambiguous quality. I like the way sound directly hits the body, and how you either like it or you don't. There's something very democratic and pure about its experience.

**SDY**

Your work often evokes desire, the body and language. As a fan of poet and writer Anne Carson, these aspects of your practice really speak to me, so I was thrilled to discover in your book *EROTIC MECHANICS-mappings* that there were mentions of Anne Carson by Emily LaBarge, as well as Jean-Paul Sartre, both of whom speaks about language and the Other as aspects of desire. Could you speak about your other inspirations, literary, philosophical or otherwise?







***OXIORCAD***, Performance, “Body Echo”,  
Nicoletti Contemporary, Paris, France, 2018.





**OXIORCAD**, Performance, "Body Echo",  
Nicoletti Contemporary, Paris, France, 2018.

**MH**

On the surface, my work is without words, but writing, text and language really inform and underpin it... I write textual scores as maps for my work, mobilising words into space where meaning becomes non-linear. I've only recently made the textual side of my work visible and the artist's book you mention, *EROTIC MECHANICS-mappings*, is the first proper collection of these. The book also includes two essays by Emily LaBarge, a brilliant writer with whom I share a love of Sylvia Plath and Anne Carson. Like with concrete poetry, choreographic notation, instructional texts etc., I'm really into the spatiality of language in relation to movement and imagination. Poetry feels sculptural; you can approach a poem from a different angle with each read and trace a different outline.

One of my earliest literary inspirations was JG Ballard's *Atrocity Exhibition*, especially the way he cuts and melds the body with architecture, landscape and machines. Another big influence in relation to these ideas of language and body was Agnes Martin. Her paintings and drawings are like notational systems for emotion and feeling, as well as her writing on ideas of beauty. Each body of work has really particular references and inspirations though, drawn from music, poetry, architecture, dance, fashion, a love of sculpture... but my main inspirations are from everyday life and going to the swimming pool!

**SDY**

How much do you consider your viewers as bodies viewing bodies? In terms of the power dynamic between the viewer and the one being viewed, are audience members important to the construction of your works? To use artworld jargon, are your works in some ways "activated" by the viewer?

**MH**

I always consider the audience body. It's very important for the work to be a two-way experience, especially with my live work and definitely





***UNDEX***, Performance, “Jupiter Rising x Edinburgh Art Festival”,  
Jupiter Artland, Edinburgh, United Kingdom, 2019.









**UNDEX**, Performance, “Jupiter Rising x Edinburgh Art Festival”,  
Jupiter Artland, Edinburgh, United Kingdom, 2019.





with an activation through this dynamic. In 2016 I made a performance for “An Evening of Performances” at the David Roberts Arts Foundation (DRAF) in London, where there is usually a large crowd in the gallery for the event. A drawback to creating live work within a gallery space is that often audiences can’t see or experience a work without an obstructed view. With this in mind, I made a mobile platform to move through the audience and to shift the eye-line higher, to make a connection to the audience as a whole. I often think of my work as choreographing the audience or composing their bodies, not necessarily through movement, but through spatial perspectives. I think about the position their bodies will be in, in relation to my work, and what this might infer in the reading of it. Working with sound, in particular, is a very direct way of sharing an emotional and physical space together. You can shift spatial perceptions with sound, expand or go really intimate.



***Blush Response***, In collaboration with Agata Madejska,  
Photographic digital collage, 2020.



Mary Hurrell, Figure Figure 2020  
Courtesy of the artist

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