

FIGURE



conversation with **ALEX MARGO ARDEN**
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« All Clear », Installation View, 2022.
Ginny on Frederick, London, United Kingdom.

NOAM ALON *in conversation with*
ALEX MARGO ARDEN

NA

Could you tell me about your background and how you decided to study art?

AMA

I've always been quite outrageous and theatrical to be honest. I grew up in Croydon in South East London and my family were not very creative, especially not in a visual arts kind-of-way. My mum worked as a teaching assistant until she became ill during the pandemic (with Long Covid) and my dad sells air conditioning for a living. When I was 13 years old, I got very sick with a really bad virus which I didn't recover from for many years. I had Chronic Fatigue Syndrome, which is very similar in terms of symptoms to what people nowadays have heard more widely about as Long Covid—it's basically a post-viral syndrome which can leave you disabled, exhausted and have little capacity to



Like Her, Performance, 30 min. 2015.

(Performers: Noah Broad, Kalender Dogan, Caspar Heinemann, Jasper Jarvis, Meg Lloyd-Jones, Laura Gwen Miles, Holly Nicholls, Autumn Schofield, Chanel Vegas, Adam Wells, Ben Wells).

do much. At the time this kind of illness was rarely spoken about and felt extremely under researched and under respected. It totally changed my life to be honest. I didn't go to school properly from age 14 to 19. I'd go in for like one or two afternoons a week. When I was considering what I'd want to do after school—study, job, lifestyle—I needed to be mindful of my health so I wanted to do something where it felt like I could have some agency over my time and energy, and do something I believed in.

I applied to and got into the Art Foundation at Central Saint Martins (which was at the time in this incredible old huge building in Back Hill, Farringdon) actually pretty close to where Ginny on Frederick is now. When I got there I was thinking about performance, masking, labour, care and time. I was doing Marina Abramovic re-enactments, performances of washing peoples feet, rocking endlessly on rocking chairs backwards. There was such a charge to the environment, we'd be making new works every day. I had so much fun and worked so hard pushing ideas in every direction. It was a wild and exciting time. Around then I met so many amazing people, several of whom I've stayed close to, others who I drifted from and then we have resurfaced in each other's lives: so many people I studied with have gone on to do the most incredible things.

From here I went on to study at Goldsmiths for three years, where I was mentored by some inspiring artists and thinkers and was able to push the ambition of my work beyond what I could imagine. In my final year of study there I made a half-an-hour long school-play-like performance involving eleven performers for my final crit, the work was titled *Like Her* (2015).



When the Sun says goodbye to the Earth my staying is the saddest part of your going, With Caspar Heinemann, Backpacks, permanent marker, ribbon, tambourines, Variable dimensions, 2019.

In that work there were five actors performing as Amy Winehouse simultaneously, alongside four mechanics, one boy, one Houdini, twenty five flies and ten planted audience members. Caspar Heinemann, who is my best friend (a position shared with Jenkin van Zyl) and an artist/writer/theologian, performed in it as one of the mechanics. Several years later, after Goldsmiths, we worked collaboratively to make our first play together *THE FARMYARD IS NOT A VIOLENT PLACE AND I LOOK EXACTLY LIKE JUDY GARLAND* (2019/2020) which we showed at Cell Project Space, subsequently we created another play *Among My Souvenirs* (2021) which we took to World Pride in Malmö, Sweden and we are now in early stages of plotting our third. In my time after Goldsmiths I took six years out from studying and did various projects, lots of collaborative things, and during this time I met Freddie, who runs Ginny on Frederick in a queue for the toilet at the Queen Adelaide in Cambridge Heath when he'd just returned to the UK after studying in the States.

Now I've just finished my first year studying at the Royal Academy Schools. It's a totally unique art school, it's absolutely tiny: there's 30 people here across three years. And my studio is opposite Fortnum & Mason and the Ritz! At the moment, on the daily, Marina Abramovic is prowling around looking stunning in designer gowns overseeing her retrospective. She has invited me to visit her dressing room at the London Coliseum when she performs her opera later this month, but I'm not sure how I actually take her up on that invitation. Maybe she just says that to everyone! She's so camp, like a golden era Hollywood movie star.



20, A, 19, 18, B, 21, E, D, F, C, 22, G, 23, Oil on canvas, 51.2 × 91.7 cm, 2023.

NA

Regarding the project that you're presenting here in Art-O-Rama *Responsibility, Responsibility, Responsibility* (2023), and also your latest show in Ginny on Frederick, *All Clear* (2022). In both we can notice the presence of evidence markers. I was curious about the origins of your interest in crime and crime things.

AMA

I am really into numbering systems, I've used them in several works, drawing them from varied references and querying how labelling can perform various functions. I have been thinking about categorisation, organisation, identification and the way these number cards can facilitate order, power, importance. They can be used to highlight, obscure, or reinterpret the landscapes they are placed within.

Within my sculpture shown in *All Clear* (2022) at Ginny on Frederick, titled *The Days Before The Time After* (2022) the impact of the numbering system emerged from thinking about some quite specific references that aren't what we would traditionally think of as crime scenes. The numbers on that work were transposed directly from several images from the discovery of Tutankhamun's tomb. When Howard Carter discovered the tomb, he put these little number cards on all the objects marking their place and noting their relationality in that moment before their extraction and museumification. The numbering system on my work is lifted directly from photographs of the excavation, with the arrangement of the numbers replicating three arrangements taken from three images.

When Stanley Kubrick works with extras on film sets, he always gives everyone number cards, big ones that they hold while setting up the shot and then he'll direct rearrangements of the numbers. It is bizarre, but has been documented in behind-the-scenes photographs



The Days Before The Time After (detail), Assorted folding furniture, crates, boxes, baskets, replica museum food, decommissioned broken and fixed NHS plates, handmade toy theatre, painted backcloth, broken down coveralls, plastic frozen charlotte, hair grip, tins, stoneware jars, spare change, cutlery, tin opener, carpet beater, tools, brushes, pencils, scissors, receipt hook, soft pastels, rope, ribbon, cling film, notebooks, placebo pills, blankets, candles, chamber pot, sponge, soap, comb, bell, tray, palette, brooms, number cards, woodworm, dust, Variable dimensions, 2022.

and is visually very striking. I'm captivated by these examples of overlying a system like this onto objects or people, it feels intense and purposeful and violent.

In the Rust shooting incident paintings I made for *Responsibility, Responsibility, Responsibility* (2023) here at Art-O-Rama there is one titled *20, A, 19, 18, B, 21, E, D, F, C, 22, G, 23* (2023) where the crime scene markers are reproduced exactly as they are in the imagery from the Santa Fe Sheriff's Department's documentation of the aftermath of the incident. The numbers serve a purpose of identifying spots, marks, positions, and objects, but in the work the scene is reproduced from a single digital photograph: that's what the evidence now exists and is distributed as. I am always interested in deviance and inconsistencies. In the works shown at Art-O-Rama titled *His Hand (I, II, III, IV)* (2023) Alec Baldwin's hands are painted from photographs taken after the incident. Each hand is repainted twice from one photograph, but pairs of paintings interpret the content of the same photograph slightly differently. Photographs are often used as sources of evidence, but they only show one angle, they produce an image through a lens, and they embrace the warp of the lens, and after capture they have to be interpreted. I am constantly asking questions about authority and power. That is what drew me in with the Rust shooting incident, where all of the crime scene evidence was unusually publically leaked, and also that charges were filed, then dropped, then refiled.

I was doing some research around Hollywood movie production prior to this incident, looking at accidental inconsistencies in movies, for example, where you have people walking in



His Hand (I), His Hand (III), His Hand (II), His Hand (IV),
Oil on canvas, 40.64 × 30.48 cm each, 2023.



His Hand (II), Oil on canvas, 40.64 × 30.48 cm, 2023.

the back of shots with AirPods in their ears. From this I started looking into disasters on film sets, which is actually a huge thing: people have died on film sets every year since the creation of cinema, and not just a couple, it's a shockingly large number of people—actors, extras, members of film crew, and stunt performers. It's insane. We don't really talk or hear much about it, and we certainly aren't often confronted with it when we watch the films, and yet the films are still distributed while suppressing the horrors of their making—Rust continued shooting after the incident with a replacement cinematographer and will still be released.

There is a quite famous example of a huge on-set disaster in the filming of *Noah's Ark* (1928). They staged this huge flood. There were approximately 7500 extras performing in an extraordinarily dangerous drowning scene in which they threw 600,000 gallons of water at them, sweeping people literally off their feet and sending them flying. A ridiculous volume of water which is really dangerous. In the final film you see a struggle for survival, you see panic, you see actual chaos—and you can't tell if it's acting or real, or a combination of both. As a result of this scene, seven people got rushed to hospital, and three people just died. Someone lost their leg and almost a dozen extras had broken limbs and other serious injuries. This *Noah's Ark* film tragedy actually instigated the first safety legislation in Hollywood in 1929. There were no stunt safety regulations before this. But even after this legislation came in, it didn't stop the accidents and fatalities from occurring on film sets, almost every year since the beginning of cinema there are multiple incidences. Most of us have probably watched a film, or many films,



Bonanza Creek Ranch Church, Oil on canvas, 40.9 × 51.2 cm, 2023.

without knowing that on-set while shooting it someone died or got seriously injured.

Fatalities are not usually over emphasised by production, but there is this incidence of a film called *Shark!* (1969), which bizarrely and distastefully based its publicity around Burt Reynolds's stuntman, Jose Marco, being attacked by a shark on-camera which broke through a protective net and killed him, allegedly. This was run as an advertisement in LIFE magazine to promote the film, and was presented very much as a real life event, the internet reinforces this also but an investigation published in Skin Diver magazine found no evidence of this actually occurring, and therefore concluded it was a hoax. In either situation, of it being a real event or hoax, the promotion of the film using this imagery and narrative is so provocative and controversial. The supposed image of Jose Marco bleeding in the water being used to sell the film is shocking, graphic, and upsetting.

So anyway, for this project in Marseille, I wanted to make something interrogating this incident on the film set of Rust (upcoming film) where Halyna Hutchins, the cinematographer, is fatally shot during a rehearsal by Alec Baldwin. The script for the scene they were shooting did not call for Baldwin to pull the trigger, but he did. He supposedly doesn't know the gun was loaded with a live round. Why is a live round even on the set of a Hollywood film? In my opinion, a real gun shouldn't be on set. Why? It's just not necessary. Lack of safety, lack of regulations on firearms, is a horrific problem that proliferates in Hollywood. At the moment, there is the WAG strike and the SAG-AFTRA strike. People are now thinking a lot more about labour and better conditions, which is great. In 2021, while filming



His Boots, Oil on canvas, 40.64 × 30.48 cm, 2023.

Rust in the days leading up to the fatal on-set incident, there were rising tensions with members of the crew in the International Alliance of Theatrical Stage Employees (IATSE) who were considering striking over working conditions and low pay. On the day of the incident, and ultimately Halyna Hutchins's death, seven unionised members of the film's camera crew did a walkout and were apparently replaced. It is all done on a shoestring budget, it's on tight schedules, people are overworked, people are considered replaceable, there can be poor safety conditions, even though Alec Baldwin is producing it. I also just do not understand why a real gun needs to be on a film set, ever: it's not necessary.

NA

Can you refer to the words Responsibility, Responsibility, Responsibility that are not only the title of the work but they are also inscribed on the wall of your booth by pencil?

AMA

When you think about the whole situation, I feel there are so many questions with regards to responsibility relating to this incident. It is really the big question underpinning all that. There are of course legal proceedings that are currently happening surrounding these events, charges that have been filed, charges that have been dropped, charges that have been re-filed. Is the armourer responsible, Hannah Guitierrez-Reed? The person holding the weapon, firing the trigger, Alec Baldwin, responsible? If in the script it says he should pull the trigger, is he less responsible? (NB. the script for this scene did not say Alec Baldwin's character should). Are the producers responsible? Is the industry responsible? Is America responsible?

In the work I have the single word 'Responsibility' repeated three times across three walls folding around the space, cupping it



We Are Not But We Are, Pastel on five pieces of paper, 200 × 70 cm, 200 × 70 cm, 40 × 70 cm, 40 × 70 cm, 47 × 165 cm, 2022.

not encapsulating it, holding two corners not four with a triad of intensive reduplication. The fourth wall is broken because it was never there, it doesn't bear the word, it is open. This phrase 'Responsibility, Responsibility, Responsibility' appears and disappears as a hand drawn pencil line on a white gallery wall. Its emergence straddles a tension of visibility and invisibility: the fine lines of pencil contact encourage its own discernibility while it also hides in plain sight. Epizeuxis is a figure of speech in which a word or phrase is repeated in immediate succession, with no intervening words. A word repeated with this triplication, acts as a rhetorical device to create emphasis, intensify meaning, enhance memorability, or reinforce: it could be a rallying cry or an urgent plea for accountability. This shared responsibility for this incident runs through so many channels and levels, there are big discussions which need to happen around Hollywood's responsibility and America's responsibility. Gun control and firearms regulation is important. I think also that we as viewers have a responsibility, obviously. As an artist making work about this tragedy, I have a responsibility. And hopefully I'm dealing with the material in a way that is responsible.

When I first saw the imagery which I reproduced in my painting of the church interior, I was really moved by it and found it really haunting. This horrific accident occurring within the surroundings of a church feels really profound visually and emotionally. I am interested in engaging with painting to consider themes such as immortalisation, slowing down, subjecting imagery to another hand, and developing layers of interpretation with materiality of paint. My oil on canvas works are executed by commercial



We Are Not But We Are, Pastel on five pieces of paper, 200 × 70 cm, 200 × 70 cm, 40 × 70 cm, 40 × 70 cm, 47 × 165 cm, 2022.

painters which is a technique I have used conceptually in various artworks to further complicate the responsibility of reproduction and interpretation. When remade as oil paintings the evidence is retouched, the content is restaged in reproduction. Subtle, sometimes unconscious, sometimes conscious, reconfigurations are indicative of the process of moving through hands, digital motions and movements of the brush. Despite their new materiality the resultant images are difficult to analyse or describe in their difference from the originals they de/re/construct. These works are conceptually very much about the history of painting. There is a specific historical importance which is summoned, referenced, or approximated when one translates real things, or digital images into the immortal medium of oil on canvas.

Like with the crime scene painting, *20, A, 19, 18, B, 21, E, D, F, C, 22, G, 23* (2023), I wanted it to have this sense of referencing a religious dimension, obviously because it depicts a church interior, but this isn't actually a church, it's a film set constructed to represent and perform as a church for the purpose of being captured on film. But this church film set is also a physical building, it's been constructed with four walls, it has a roof, as can be seen in my painting of the exterior, *Bonanza Creek Ranch Church* (2023). You can see it's a real building, it may be a film set of a church constructed for that purpose, but you feel like it could be a real church, it could function as a real church. What makes a church a church? In the interior work, I wanted to show the crime scene as it was captured in photographic evidence, but I was also thinking about these huge paintings in the National Gallery, London which depict these



Living History Display, C-type hand print documentation of performance, 2 h, 2022.
(Historical interpreters: Mina Temple, Fiona Tyrrell).

epic scenes from Greek tragedies. They have so many people doing all manner of things in these grand huge tableaux. In my painting of the crime scene church interior, we have no people. There are only these bright yellow numbered cards. They signify action, they identify belongings, they highlight what is there and isn't there, they highlight what has happened there. They solidify the place of everything in a moment, they mark positions, and they demonstrate human action. These markers are stand-ins, they are presences.

NA

When you were talking about the fake church it made me think about the fact that very frequently you explore simulacra, these copies that depict things that either never had an original or no longer exist because this is one. Of course that art in general always flirts with the notion of fake, but I wanted to know, what's your take on this term?

AMA

Most of my work is about remaking things or re-rehearsing ideas, bringing things into different materialities or re-materialising them with great specificity in the same way they once were. Rehearsing, remaking, reconstruction. I like the idea of what repetition is in theatre. When a play is written and then it is performed, again performed, reperformed, reproduced, by different actors, directors, designers. The visual languages and conceptual frameworks I find myself using often centre around the idea that theatrical repetition can instigate the discovery of significant nuances contained in seemingly identical events. The processes of rehearsing, repeating and reperforming can lead one into the lock of strange loops and their inevitable disruptions. These methods are fundamental to the ways I am interested in engaging with history, art, memory, embodiment and survival. We all need to be questioning authorities in many



ASBESTOS
Pure White
FIRE PROOF

CONTENTS

1½ OZ.

SNOW

LOOKS LIKE REAL SNOW
CLEANEST-WHITEST-BEST

ways. With regards to my methodologies it's querying the authority of the artist, the authority of the archive, the authority of histories and those who write them. It is inciting questions of authenticity, the original vs. the replica, the script vs the improvisation. Especially with regards to presentations of historical material, narratives and people, in relation and discussion with lived experience (both original and reenactments there-of). I think there's a lot to query. What does it mean to instigate an arousal of inconsistency, or of a misinformation effect, a Mandela effect? Within the work I hope that the generative processes of reproduction and reinterpretation I employ may, through their trails of conflating and contradictory information, reinforce an overarching fear of forgetting, and yearning to reconsider traces, evidence, and how we (re)interpret the past.

I have been obsessed with replicas, imitations, theatrical modes of production, and re-imaginings since I was a child. I was obsessed with the Cottingley fairies when I was very young and used to make pencil drawn cut outs of them which I'd paint with watercolours. I'd then take photographs of them in parks in Croydon. I bought a box brownie camera at a jumble sale and tried shooting them on that, but without the means to develop them, I think I probably still have the undeveloped rolls of film somewhere. It really captured my imagination. At that time, and now still, I was/am really intrigued by early 20th century discussions around spiritualism, mediumship and illusion—Helen Duncan, Harry Houdini. There is a film about the Cottingley Fairies, Arthur Conan Doyle, The First World War, Peter Pan, and Houdini, called *Fairy Tale: A True Story* (1997).



*Prop poster IV, Prop poster I, Prop poster II, Prop poster III, Pastel on paper
70 × 50 cm, 59.4 × 84.1 cm, 59.4 × 84.1 cm, 50 × 70cm, 2022.*

and we had the VHS of it. I remember watching it over and over in total wonder, it splices all these subjects and figures in quite a strange fascinating way, blurring the lines of real exchanges with imagined ones, probable ones, and speculative ones.

I came across Orson Welles's film *F for Fake* (1973) in my teenage years, and that also does some interesting splicing of ideas. The film focuses on art forger Elmyr de Hory recounting his career which expands into a meandering investigation into the natures of authorship and authenticity, and the basis of the value of art. There are scenes of Welles performing magic tricks, his girlfriend at the time Oja Kodar walking through the streets while men wolf-whistle and gawk at her which Welles describes as girl-watching (Ew!), and discussions with the hoax biographer Clifford Irving. The way Welles subverts and layers various material within the film is at moments confusing and hostile, and as one would expect from Orson Welles it's as self-indulgent as it is self-reflexive. I'm very interested in art forgers in general, I'm a big fan of Han van Meegeren and Shaun Greenhalgh. Van Meegren's *The Supper at Emmaus* (1936-1937) and Shaun Greenhalgh's *Amarna Princess* (1999-2002) are both chef's kiss.

Actually, in relation to *F for Fake* (1973) I saw a work at the Venice Biennale last year by Zineb Sedira called *Dreams Have No Titles* (2022) which references the Orson Welles film, while bringing in all these re-staged scenes from French, Algerian, and Italian co-produced films. The work highlights past and present international solidarity related to historical liberation struggles through these film scenes, and when I was speaking to Sedira after a talk



Lost Street Museum, Reclaimed vacuum-formed brickwork, assorted theatre lanterns, assorted sign brackets, paint, electrical cable, cable grips, plugs, extension cables. Variable dimensions. 2022.

she gave at the Royal Academy I asked if they had filmed any of these re-staged scenes which didn't make it to the final cut. Somewhere, she has three additional re-staged scenes which never made it into the final film I gather largely due to issues of copyright and permissions which had to be adhered to because of funding, it being shown in the French Pavilion at the Venice Biennale and funded by the Institut Français.

I'm interested in the intersections of art forgery, processes of creating facsimiles and reproductions for conservation reasons, and museum display reconstructions. And I specifically refer to these reconstructed tableau scenes in my works *Lost Street Museum* (2022) and *Last Appearance* (2022) and also will again in a forthcoming work I'll be showing in my solo presentation *Attention Restoration* (2023) at Quench in Margate which opens on the 2 December this year and runs through January 2024. In these works, I am questioning how do we negotiate proximity to portrayals of history, displays of history and re-representations of history as histories themselves? Thinking along this line I have so many questions and thoughts around the economies of reconstruction and immersion. It also opens up into a discussion about storytelling, imagination, memories of memories, and embodiment. There is something obviously problematic in trying to generate empathy through a false sense of immersion, which can be trivialising or reductive, but also what other impacts could historical reconstruction, reenactment and illusory immersion have? Themes of learning and memory are hopefully present in the work—learning as the acquisition of a skill or knowledge, and memory as the expression of what has been acquired. When I

890 Two drug runs, in mahogany, each with four rows of drawers, with glass knobs — 72in. (183cm.) and 67in. (170cm.) wide (2)

£400-600

892 The Tobacconist's shop: a single-bay facade with door at right, reeded pilasters and painted fascia between scrolling modillions — 124½in. (315cm.) wide; and the counter, shelves and other internal fittings

The interior came from a confectioner's shop in the Forest of Dean, and the fascia from a shop in Hoarworthy, near Ross-on-Wye.

£200-400

893 The Grocer's shop-front: a reconstructed shop front incorporating a stained glass frieze of five panels, two with legends *Confectioner* and *Pastrycook* — each 47in. (120cm.) wide, the other three each 32in. (81cm.)

£300-500

894 Grocer's shop fittings: the pine counter, panelling and shelves, including a set of mahogany arched shelves with central glazed cupboards and two rows of drawers below (a lot)

£600-800

895 The public house: the entrance, including a painted doorway with two flanking bays and recessed mahogany double doors with glass panels engraved *PUBLIC BAR* — 18ft. 3in. (432cm.) wide

£500-700



900

896 The bar: a mahogany bar with carved modillions and two circular apertures filled with pleated red cloth — 99in. (251cm.) wide, with extension piece

£350-500

897 The bar-back: a mahogany bar back with four engraved and gilt mirror panels, piers with figured pale wood panels, surmounted by a balustrade, with cupboards below — 151in. (385cm.) wide approximately

£500-800

898 An Edwardian washbasin, with polychrome floral transfer decoration and cast-iron supporting frieze

£80-150

899 Three street-lamps, of conventional tapered four-sided form, mounted on cast-iron columns with composite capitals — the columns 92in. (234cm.) high (3)

£200-400

900 A mahogany sales kiosk with five green and gold glass round-ended fascia panels reading *By Appointment to T.R.H. The Princess of Wales and Ed. 1873*, the latter curved, with corresponding etched glass panels and woodwork below, with two similarly etched panels, one in a door — overall width approximately 112in. (285cm.), 90in. (229cm.) high

The sections of this structure were re-arranged when installed in the present situation and thus could be re-assembled elsewhere in a different arrangement.

£800-1,200

END OF SALE

think about history, I'm overwhelmed by the idea of collective memory, its passing down and interpretation—how do we preserve, nurture, and care for inherited memories? Maybe through non-linear pathways? And what about memories which we socially inherit? Memories of re-representations, retellings and reconstructions, memories of cinema, memories of empathy, of feeling, of emotion? When we are reminiscing about the past, we are recollecting details of prior events, it's an active process in the now, we remake our memories.

NA

Looking at your body of work, you are experimenting with performance, hyper realistic figurative painting, or even olfactive installations. I also felt that each one of them gives you almost a distinct aesthetic language. When you start a new project, how would you approach it? How do you decide what medium will be the best in order to convey this or that?

AMA

All of my work is performance. My practice is driven by research and thinking through pre-existing material by bringing it into rehearsal space or re-staging it. With each project I try to find the right materiality that engages with the underlying questions of authenticity, history, labour, power, learning, and memory which run as an undercurrent through most of my work. I am deep in the production stages of two projects at the moment. One titled *Rock, Paper, Scissors* (2023) about collages made on stolen (and then returned) library book dust jackets in the late 1950s, early 1960s by playwright Joe Orton and his partner and collagist Kenneth Halliwell, the work for that project manifests as recollected material and remade collages and will be shown at the Royal Academy of Arts in November 2023 through January 2024.

The other project investigates the cave



***A Rehearsal for the Reappearance of _____ or How to Prove That
Something That Isn't There Isn't There,
Constructed odour, timed dispenser, 2021.***

paintings on the walls of Margate Caves. In the caves there are these incredible paintings which date anything from 1798 til 1980, the most recent being a reimagining of a now lost 'head of Vortigern'. Vortigern was a 5th-century warlord who is identified as 'King of the Britons' but information on which is obscure and his entire existence is contested by scholars. The cave itself is a man-made cave, originally a chalk mine, and then a late 18th century folly, a 19th century tourist attraction, a wartime bomb shelter, closed to public access for several years and now a 21st century tourist attraction. The paintings contained within have been restored constantly. But by being restored I mean over-painted. Every time they have been restored or repainted within their history, the original is destroyed, and yet the symbol or image is reinforced and given more longevity. In order to keep the image of a guard, or farmer, or fox, or horse on the wall new paint recovers old paint and the imagery survives. I wanted to make a work about it and I was thinking about how to do it. As the cave was originally carved from this extractive process where they chipped away all this chalk to make this cavern, I wanted to reverse that. I wanted to repaint everything in an additive process rather than an extractive one. Rebuilding the cave by putting paint onto canvas rather than taking chalk off the wall. I wanted to repaint all the cave paintings onto blank canvas, creating one version from scratch, a single layer of paint but capturing the paintings as they look now.

I have been thinking for a long time of this replica phenomenon with very well attended visitor attractions: I'm thinking Tutankahmun's tomb, the Lascaux caves. The original historical sites can't manage the visitor flow, they can't meet the physical demands of visitors and the sites



THE FARMYARD IS NOT A VIOLENT PLACE AND I LOOK EXACTLY LIKE JUDY GARLAND, With Caspar Heinemann,
Performance documentation, 1 h 30 min, 2019-2020.

themselves pay the price through erosion, decay and destruction, so they have constructed replicas next to them. There is a full scale Tutankhamun's Tomb next to the original and now there is even another reconstruction next to the original reconstruction: replica of the replica. With Lascaux there is Lascaux II, Lascaux III, Lascaux IV, static versions, touring versions. Here in Marseille actually there is a reconstructed cave, the Cosquer caves, this one is 3D printed and you go on these little automated ghost-train style cars through it, it's a bit like the Jorvik Viking Centre in York, minus the smells and animatronic figures (sadly!). With Cosquer, the attraction version is made based on how the original looked at the time of reconstruction, but much of the original cave is underwater, so it is constantly being destroyed. They aren't restoring or preserving the original so the cave paintings contained within will likely eventually fade away and be lost to the sea.

I'm showing my work in Margate, at Quench which is a subterranean gallery space (aka. in a basement). I wanted the exhibition to be a reconstructed attraction of Margate Caves. The main work in the show is a fully functional theatrical touring set. It's made up of all of these hand painted backcloths and all of this rigging, lighting, sound equipment. It's deconstructed though, or awaiting construction. It will be in the exhibition as a big pile, I use this technique in many of my works. A great physical mass, which is laying down, about to open out or suddenly to expand and become something huge and spectacular. The collapsed set has this theatrical potential that it could perform as the cave.

NA

So I'll challenge you and ask about work that does not have materiality but moving bodies. I am referring to your performance piece *Cleaning Up* (2022) presented



THE FARMYARD IS NOT A VIOLENT PLACE AND I LOOK EXACTLY LIKE JUDY GARLAND, With Caspar Heinemann,
Performance documentation, 1 h 30 min, 2019-2020.

at the Royal Academy, where you employed the cleaning staff of the Royal Academy to clean some spilled popcorn as part of the performance. As you mentioned, your work often questions creative labour. You are referring in one of your texts to Mirele Ukeles Lederman, that influences you profoundly in this particular piece. I wanted to ask you, how do you relate to one of her statements from her Maintenance manifesto: "I do a hell of a lot of washing, cleaning, cooking, renewing, supporting, preserving, etc.. Also up to now, separately, I do art. No, I will simply do this maintenance everyday things and exhibit them as art." What is your take on that?

AMA

So with that piece I wanted to re-employ cleaning staff from the Royal Academy of Arts for the performance, revaluing their invisible labour as visible and paying them as performers and not cleaners, while asking them to perform cleaning. The four people I worked with on the project were Rona Hamilton, Magarida Reis, Andrew Kiswiriri Nsiro, and Harry Yorke who all are in the cleaning team at the RA. In the performance they become historical interpreters, I used a photograph taken by Russell Westwood called *Cleaning staff at work on the main staircase, Royal Academy of Arts, Burlington House, 1953* (1953) as the central reference point to re-perform this action nearly 70 years after the original photograph was taken. My work is titled *Cleaning Up: Cleaning staff at work on the main staircase, Royal Academy of Arts, Burlington House, 2022* (2022). My performance re-staged this photograph from the RA collection but shifted the subject to be the current cleaning staff re-employed as performers and acting as historical interpreters. The work re-materialises the original photograph reconsidering labour and visibility, as the action of cleaning is



Cleaning Up (Cleaning staff at work on the main staircase, Royal Academy of Arts, Burlington House, 2022) II, C-type hand print
documentation of performance, 40 min, 2022.
(Historical interpreters: Rona Hamilton, Magarida Reis, Andrew
Kiswiriri Nsiiro, Harry Yorke)

theatrically re-rendered as a cinematic tableaux of clearing a large popcorn spill.

Russell Westwood, the photographer who's original photograph inspired this work, established his reputation photographing actors who were appearing in 'quota quickie' films, which were low-cost British films made by American distributors in order to satisfy the quota requirements of the Cinematograph Films Act 1927. The films were churned out in a matter of days and hence this is why they became known as the 'quota quickies'. Many of these films were screened to empty cinemas while the cleaners cleaned up.

The title *Cleaning Up* is taken from a quota quickie film from 1933 of the same name, in which a vacuum cleaner salesman tangles with a chorus girl and accidentally ends up in the show whilst demonstrating the cleaner. Chaos reigns, but all ends happily! It was considered lost for many years and only surviving in a savage cut on Pathescope home movie format, but has subsequently been rediscovered. Many of the quota quickie films were lost as silver nitrate stock was often recycled for its silver content, it's also extremely flammable and so many movies were lost to storage fires in silver nitrate film vaults.

In my performance you came into the RA and saw this huge spill of popcorn from old buckets, it looks like it could be slop or animal feed strewn all down the staircase. You then watch this cleaning performance unfold and before your eyes in a beautiful unrehearsed choreography the whole thing gets cleared up and it is as if it never happened and was never there. It happening on the steps of the museum feels really loaded too, to make a mess there and



Cleaning Up (Cleaning staff at work on the main staircase, Royal Academy of Arts, Burlington House, 2022) IV, C-type hand print documentation of performance, 40 min, 2022.
(Historical interpreters: Rona Hamilton, Magarida Reis, Andrew Kiswiriri Nsiro, Harry Yorke).

then enact its cleaning up. The museum steps are rendered as a stage, one which has this huge mess made on them and then reversed. They are cleaned to a state of being more clean than they were before the huge mass of popcorn was deposited on them.

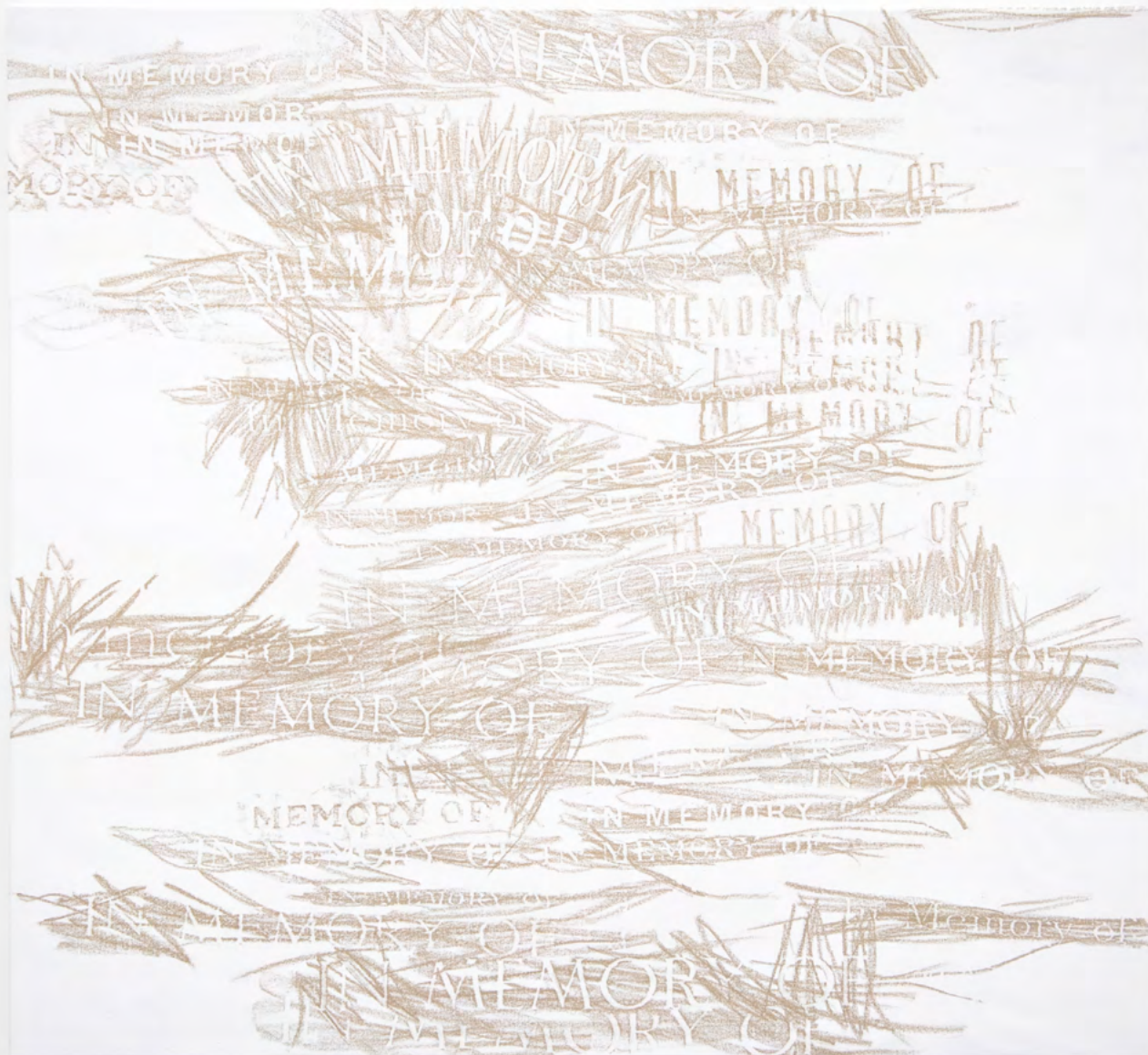
Like you say, my work does reference early performances such as the maintenance art of Mierle Laderman Ukeles cleaning the museum's steps, but it uses methodologies quite different from her, not least because I do not perform as a cleaner myself as she did, but instead re-employ cleaning staff to be performers. My work considers performative processes which can intersect power structures and cultural hierarchies of spaces like the museum, emboldened especially on the architecture of a grand staircase.

NA

Building upon the notion of maintenance and the theme of the fake we previously discussed, let's delve into your practice of replicating old advertisement signs. Thinking of you working on these pieces evokes the image of nuns in the scriptorium meticulously crafting illuminated manuscripts. Could you provide more insight into this?

AMA

I am interested in presenting re-enactments of making work as work, the notion of living history is explored as both a subject and methodology in the practice. There was a television programme called *The 1900s House* (2000) which was the first in a genre of living history television programmes which were popular in the 2000s. A contemporary family was transported back in time from 1999 to 1900 to spend three months in a townhouse in Charlton in the shadow of the Millenium Dome restored to emulate middle-class life in Victorian London. It was a social experiment to explore how a 'modern family' would survive and react to life without everyday



technology and modern luxuries which we have become so accustomed to. I think watching people work, people doing things or pretending to do things can be profound and meaningful.

I often encourage processes or actions which need to be fulfilled or perpetually unfulfilled in the work, like in *Cleaning Up: Cleaning staff at work on the main staircase, Royal Academy of Arts, Burlington House, 2022* (2022) mentioned before, or in my performance *Living History Display* (2022) where we have two women alternating between two tasks, eating a plate of food where they never touch the food acting every chomp and chew and every cutting of each piece of the meal while never eating it, and also fulfilling the production of a sign the same as those shown in the windows of the gallery for the exhibition. The two performers I worked with on this piece were Fiona Tyrrell and Mina Temple, who I met through a community theatre project near where I live in Southwark. They aren't the people who made the window works, but they are re-enacting this labour, and the resultant pastel isn't an artwork as an object, but only an artwork as performance. The performance exists to not complete the artwork but show the making in motion. I have what was made on the night of the performance but it's still unfinished and will remain so. The actions within the performance are inconclusive, the making unfinished and unsatisfactory, but a suggestion towards making/eating/being is there. It still can be physicalised, embodied, and present. A painted backcloth is hung to supply a scenic background. In a living history display of a signwriters' workshop a repetitive loop occurs. We bear witness to something reminiscent of an educational or instructional presentation



Burning Computers Reading Newspapers and Crying, Constructed odour, timed dispensers, 2015.

at a school, or a silent re-enactment at a museum.
The historical interpreters gesture towards
temporary making and endless pretending.



Changing the face can change nothing, but facing the change can change everything, With Caspar Heinemann, Assorted furniture, luggage, ladders, mirrors, lamps, ivy, 285 × 320 × 180 cm, 2019.

Alex Margo Arden, Figure Figure 2023
Courtesy of the artist

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