

conversation with GEORGINA HILL MAY 2023



Danser, Stained glass, solder, oak, satin, 24×33 cm, 2021. Photograph: Nefeli Papaioannou.

ANGELA BLANC in conversation with GEORGINA HILL

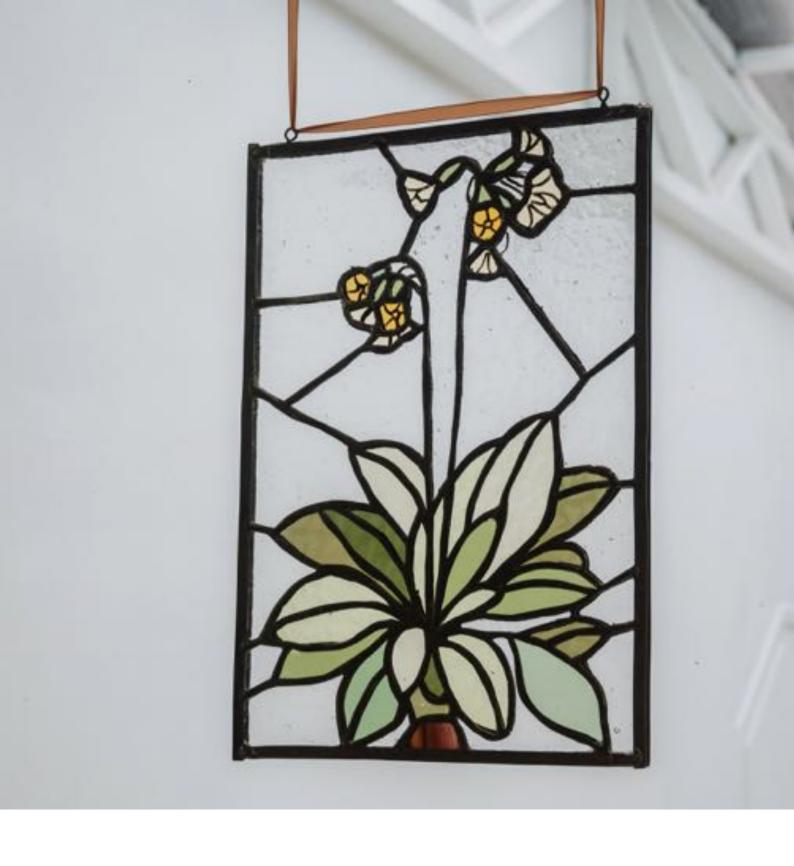
AB

What is your background, and how did you engage in the arts?

GH

I was born in Worcester, in the Midlands, and grew up in a town outside of Birmingham. My father made stained glass and had a studio in the countryside. With my sister, we were dropped at this craft centre, walking around the fields, talking to different craftspeople, like a milliner, violin maker, or glass blower. My childhood could sound idyllic, but it was far from an idealisation of craft or rurality.

I intended to be an artist all the way along, but I didn't know how to have the confidence to do exactly what I wanted. So, I decided to study English literature at UCL, and then I did a Shakespeare Masters. Afterwards, I worked as a research assistant for a professor





who used to be in the economic and finance ministry. I assisted him in leading research on the history of reading, books' economic models and how information could spread when it became cheaper.

I eventually went to Berlin and started to study at UdK in Hito Steyerl's class.

Why did the Hito Steyerl class attract you?

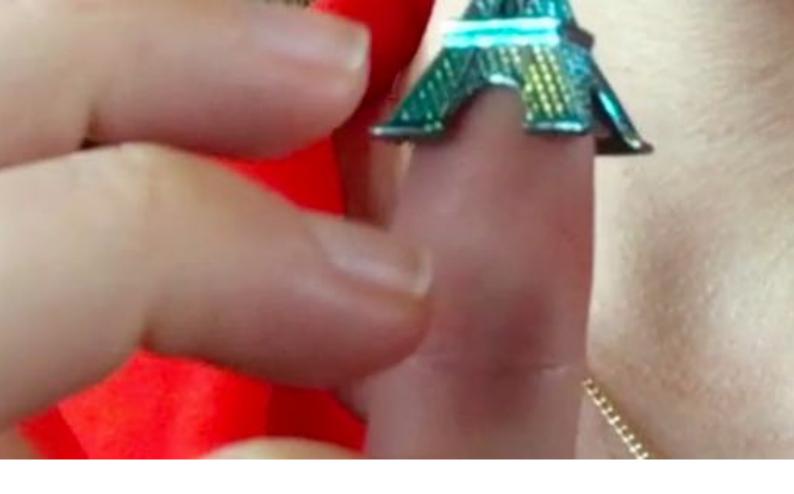
At that time, I had started to work on more political projects with journalists and activists like Julian Assange and Wikileaks, or David Simon, the writer of the socio-political series, The Wire. I did not know so much about art schools, but I visited UdK because I heard that it was free and thought this was my chance to transition, as I could not see how I could afford to study again in the UK. Eventually, I was lucky enough to meet Gago Gagoshidze, the tutor of the Hito Steyerl class who suggested I could be a good fit. So I quit everything and moved to Berlin.

Like many classes in Germany, Hito Steyerl's class has an open policy whereby you can attend as a guest student, but you must declare yourself if you want to attend regularly. They accepted me, and I studied there for almost five years. The class is like a collective, even when you have left it you are still part of it, and of the discussions. Like most people in the class, I started to make videos, collectively and independently. I was trying to understand how I could use a background in research and academia in an art space. The class was very institution focused and anti-commercial; there were strong ethics with a focus on the ways the mediated world is embedded in politics.

In parallel, I was also working for political documentaries as producer and cameraman. I

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GH





travelled to Cuba and across the USA, participating in research on Elvis Presley as a metaphor for the commercialisation, addiction, and fabrication of the American dream. I was interviewing many people across different states, whilst I was also making my own films. While I thought documentaries could be a way forward for my art practice, by working on them, I realised that the traditional documentary was not how I wished to proceed. Although I was interested in these politically left-wing subjects, it was definitely a very good practice and learning experience.

Afterwards, I chose to do my MFA at Goldsmiths in London and not at UdK because I had a sense that my work would become more material-based. I needed to have new working conditions to understand how this could be realised. Dr Suhail Malik, a professor at Goldsmiths, helped me understand how my work was starting to map social structures through material relations, using different textures that related to power dynamics. This is when I started to feel confident to free my practice from forms and genres.

And now, how do you see moving images, sculptures, and text, play in your practice? Are these three mediums separate or intertwined? And how does your writing practice sit in relation to both mediums?

I am still trying to figure it out, but I would say that it is a bit secular.

Working with Omar Pérez was a pivotal moment in my art practice. As we were filming in Cuba, instead of looking outside as initially intended, our gaze and the camera gradually turned towards our life which eventually became the topic of the film. We started to make our own world within a world. This shift allowed me to

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Under the pavement, the beach, Steel, Raspberry Pi, Arduino, motor shield, linear actuator, wood, watercolour paint, charm bracelet. $150\times65\times91$ cm, 2021. Photograph: Reinis Lismanis.

realise the power of imagination within the confines of a room. This, of course, is one of the principles of theatre and cinema. This shift gave me the freedom to create a material language that would be independent of moving images. During the lockdown, there was a very strong coalescence of both making sculptural work and installations, but I still captured it with moving images.

My sculpture work has been previously described as "literary", but I don't even know what that means. Maybe because there are sentences inscribed within some sculptures like on the gate *Under the pavement*, the beach (2021), or because the work can feel verbal.

In 2022, I was invited by Anselm Franke to do a talk as part of a symposium called "Unmoored, Adrift, Ashore", at the Emily Carr University of Art & Design, in Vancouver. The first part of the talk was more academic, I was reporting on my interview with a fisherman catching eels in Spain, speaking for him since he could not be there, while trying not to take away his agency and the second part was more based on artistic process speculations. At this moment, I felt that the intersectionality between the research and the art practice was somehow harmonious.

AB

Speaking of your meeting with the fisherman, can you trace back the journey that led you to the North of Spain?

GH

The story is actually not linear. It started in some ways when I was young, as a family we would visit the South-West coast of Britain. Then later, after my father died, my mom's boyfriend, who grew up also between the Midlands and Cornwall, and sailed since he was young, told me about the shipwrecks he knew about and wanted to dive for. I interviewed Ben about this topic and the



footage became the basis for my film *How does* one remember thirst (2020) and a broader subject of research on seas and coastal politics.

During this time, with the Hito Steyerl class, we went to a residency in Spain hosted by Inland collective, which seeks to examine and reinvent power dynamics around rurality and conventional contemporary art. I was introduced to the founder, Fernando Garcia-Dory, who invited me to the North of Spain in 2020 to look at the links between the South-West coast of England and the Northern Spanish coast. One day, we met and interviewed an eel fisherman as part of our research for a talk at Bulegoa z/b in Bilbao on littoral politics.

However, the discussions with my mum's boyfriend about hunting for shipwrecks seemed, for me, more like an analogy for winning the lottery or a working-class dream, but then I realised that he was genuinely interested in their history: what had happened rather than a value they proposed. My experience with craftspeople or working people often eludes the obvious narrative that we are suppressed, and it is dismal. I am interested in showing the nuances.

AB

Your narratives show their agency.

GH

My everyday experience has a lot to do with people who work in making or selling things. They have a lot more agency than you would imagine. It reminds me of a piece I created at the New Covent Garden Flower Market, the biggest flower market in the UK which was about to be demolished as part of the Nine Elms redevelopment. From 4:00 a.m. until 10:00 a.m., when the market opens, I worked with a sound recordist to create an audio archive of this space before it would be knocked down. Nowadays, this area houses the American



Embassy and expensive flats. This social experience in New Covent Garden is a clear example of the impacts of capitalist development and neoliberalism on the most vulnerable communities. But then, and that is the obvious point, the people from these communities are not just victims. Sometimes, when I would show some of my footage to colleagues and friends, they would be really shocked, asking "why are they not angrier". I can imagine it's hard to constantly be fighting or political in a conversation where you're the subject.

AB

Are you close to some of the characters in the film?

GH

Yes. In the film *How does one remember thirst* (2020), I was shooting my grandmother during the lockdown. She was about her neighbour who has been scammed by a man she trusted.

AB

I was confused about this part!

GH

I think it's because there's something funny in the way she speaks, you think she's about to say something conventional and gossipy, but it never happens. She emphasises the predicaments that her neighbour faces and says it could happen to anyone.

AB

In your talk, you said that you used the video medium because it was easy to disseminate it and present it to the people that are part of the community you filmed. How do you see your work as an artist?

GH

The action of meeting, interviewing, and making my work is enough for most people. I invited the flower sellers to see the installation I made for Art Night in 2019, a contemporary art festival in London, but they didn't come. I couldn't be sad because it's a very different space. Although, with documentaries and moving images, through the act of filming, it can feel like the art is also put into these different, "non-art", spaces. Whether it's a fictional film or with amateurs, the whole collective work process is very important, and



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maybe more so than other forms like sculpture. In your talk in Vancouver, you said that the watery symbol came into your practice, and that, I quote, "Liquid matter can be a way of processing artistic sentiment." Water, its fluidity, became more than a subject of research and seemed to have offered key readings in your own artistic process. Can you expand on this?

GH

I was looking at water through a historical lens. It has been used for hundreds of thousands of years as a metaphor for the transition between life and death, fluidity, movements, and metamorphosis but also for moving images and cinema. Also, Deleuze talks about cinema being made up of separate parts that tend to be fluid whole. I think of glass in that way too. Glass is semi-solid and always moving.

AB

You also make connections between subjects, objects, and people from different geographies, histories and backgrounds in a fluid way.

GH

I try to map something that is non-mappable, and to chase traces and linkages, not didactically but most often in an intentionally confusing way. It is about understanding similarities and questioning them too. For example, in the group exhibition "Matter in Mind" in Athens, my works Small Warmth (2021) and Day-Star (2021) were made of little light bulbs, and Le Vitirier (2021) was composed of three pairs of glasses with coloured stained glass for lenses and steel frames. The lenses were coloured red, blue and green, a combination also known as 'RGB colours' which refers to the system representing the colours used on a digital screen. I connected these dissected elements of a screen, the light bulb and the RBG colours, with stained glass because I see it as being the original form of the screen with light shining behind colours to convey a narrative.

In another work, I linked the burning of



Notre Dame with the idea of the shipwreck, both carnages hold potential for transformations and possibilities. I was inspired by Paul B. Preciado's response to the Notre Dame fire in his article "Notre Dame Of Ruins" published on *Artforum*. Preciado called for the ruins to be left untouched, "as a punk monument", to allow space for a new world to emerge. I gained a similar sentiment while interviewing a maritime archaeologist who told me that shipwrecks can become fertile zones for new life to emerge. Although I don't think that destruction is necessarily good, it allows us to think about power differently. There is something strangely possible about ruptures.

AB

How does one remember thirst (2020) is a moving image work that uses the shipwreck as a metaphor for the multiple crises Britain was/is going through (Brexit, Covid, etc.), and unfolds as an intimate journal of your experience of lockdown and an exploration of the medium of video as an emancipatory technology. How did you experience lockdown as an artist? How did this work come to you?

GH

I was initially working on a project reflecting on the shipwreck as a metaphor for Brexit through the working-class conundrum, but when Covid hit, I realised that my hunch was becoming more real. Also, I could not leave my apartment and had to take existing footage, thinking of myself as the actor or the agent in this new configuration. This is when I started to lean towards fiction rather than documentary, in order to illustrate the conceptual framework of what I previously called "making the world of my own".

AB

Do you consider it a pivotal work?

GH

I think so. It is also at this time that I started to make sculptures that are like the ones I make today.

AB

There is almost a register of humour in the video when



Boris Johnson's speech on Covid restriction rules is played in the background.

GH

The ridiculousness of this performative state announcement contrasted with our individual experience and our own film we were living in. I tried to show the convergence of those two parallel experiences of lockdown in a cinematic way. You are both inside and outside as you are not totally isolated from what is happening elsewhere. This is the work where I am shown the most, you can see me, feel me, and you can see fingerprints on the laptop. It is quite material. Everything is very hand-touched, and I wondered how that could coincide with political ideas as well. But it is not something that I am sure I want to continue doing.

AB

Regarding this personal and intimate dimension to your video works, you are never the main character, or completely absent. How do you see yourself in relation to the subject you are filming? This question of the "documented" and the "subject" is also explored in your work *We are the Genii* (2020).

GH

It is about showing subjectivity. All my films are really constructed, though they're not built as an essay trying to hide or prove something. In some ways, it is about declaring my position. Also, as artists, we do not always come up with answers, and sometimes our works can feel voyeuristic and demonstrative. I am trying to work in an honest-artificial way.

AB

The sense of intimacy is also conveyed by the proximity you seem to have with the people you filmed, but the relationship with them is never clear.

GH

With time, I got used to being very close to strangers while filming. It can be challenging as well because when you leave, you take that image to fit your narrative which is why I try to film people I know.



In my films, each character talks about their own economy. Not giving information about them allows them to take on a symbolic meaning. For instance, the Norwegian fisherman in my work represents more than his personal story and becomes a symbol of the Common Fisheries Policy, Brexit and freedom. The man talking about the shipwrecks and about the working-class dream, can turn into an understanding of a specific history.

AB

When you make a film, it seems that you live a transformative experience that enables you to understand something about your practice as an artist. It goes back also to what you said when leading research on the sea: "Liquid matter can be a way of processing artistic sentiment." Water, its fluidity, became more than a subject of research and seemed to have offered key readings in your own artistic process.

GH

Yes, it is true. It is about encountering others and processing the exchange artistically. Maybe this is why I don't do films so frequently anymore. They were a formative stepping stone and influential in the way I conceive my installation work today. I don't feel the need to rely on that anymore.

AB

A common element between your films and installations is your specific use of technology and screens. In How does one remember thirst, the video apparatus is used as a tool to transcend physical isolation. It is particularly striking when you use a green screen on the floor of your apartment to insert a natural landscape within the microcosm of your room. The element of the screen is also dissected in other works such as *Le Vitrier* (2021), three pairs of glasses made of the three RGB colours, and the bulb series that takes the light, an element from the screen, to, I quote, "turn it into a more practical entity, a simple indoor star and simulation of warmth". Why dissect this apparatus? What are your thoughts



Wage Packet IV, Cardboard, circuit board, bulb, micro servo, USB cable cord, dried flowers, shells, paper, fake snow, $22 \times 26 \times 9$ cm, 2022. Photograph: Maximilian Schmoetzer.

or relationships on modern-day screens?

GH

I constantly think about the window. I am obsessed with it from a practical level because my father made windows. He made them for pubs and houses and sometimes repaired stained glass in churches. But it also holds this wellknown art historical symbolism, a painting being seen as a window to another space. I am interested in this outside/inside configuration and see dreaming as well in this way. Now, phones allow us to project ourselves into another space: one can be transported by circulating digital imagery inside the screen to anywhere. So, a painting is a screen is a dream. There is a parallel between the rectangular imaginative space and the biological possibility to imagine the body elsewhere while sleeping. And, in a sense, glass can be a green screen. They are all similar devices to escape our own interiority. I am constantly formulating this idea or seeking different associations. Sometimes, through dissecting screens and turning their parts into exciting other parts that I can somehow see clearer. The elements of glass and cinema have become more fluid and closer in my new work.

AB

The window/screen analogy is also explored in the project you have with Éditions Lutanie.

GH

Manon Lutanie told me about Baudelaire's poem, le Mauvais Vitrier (1855-1864) which is about an ambulant glassmaker. When you look at representations of glassmakers in the 19th century, they were carrying those wooden bags to hold their glass which can be associated with easels. I often go back to this scene of Charlie Chaplin, in *The Kid* (1921), where one day, to make money, he carries pieces of glass in this bag, and the kid he is looking after throws a rock at somebody's window, so Charlie Chaplin comes



A conversation is a garland (1), Air-drying clay, ribbon, balloon, toy train tracks, Dimensions variable, 2021. Photograph: Agnese Sanvito.



A conversation is a garland (II), 3D printed clog, ribbon, balloon, toy train tracks, motor, Dimensions variable, 2022. Photograph: Charlotte Robin. 27

around ready to repair it. They shortcut the economy by making and repairing the problem. I love this humour. I am also inspired by the Lumière brothers and their first video of workmen demolishing a wall which was shown in reverse by accident. It was the first visual experience of reversing time.

So, going back to your question, there is both humour and fascination in dissecting their parts, revealing their compositions and internal sculptural forms. I am fascinated by the possibility of staying still in your body, while moving in your mind and how that is materially constructed. Practically, those elements are very linear, rectangular, and mathematical and yet, they conjure something mind-blowing that is very sculptural and philosophical.

AB

Technology is also explored in *It is only mine in the telling* (2020), a video work made in collaboration with artist Thomas Pellerey Grogan with a performative act and an installation made of steel, rope, sailcloth, algae, an endoscope and a contact microphone. Can you tell us about the story the video and performance narrate and the role of technology within the work?

GH

The project stems from a residency we did in Arnis, which is the smallest town in Germany and where we met a naval architect. We proposed to do some research on the *Klabautermann*, a mythical creature which is said to inhabit boats around the Baltic Sea and Northern Europe. They are said to help those on the water with their duties, and supposedly it is a bad omen for a human to see the creature. There, everyone believes the Klabautermann exists. It is somehow rational, because the sea is so perilous, one has to have faith in something as a way to navigate and remind oneself that they need to be careful. We learned that when ships are built, a coin is



It is only mine in the telling, Steel, rope, sailcloth, algae, chain, $120\times180\times255$ cm, 2020. Arnis Residency, Arnis, Germany.

put underneath the mast. There are different reasons for this: if the ship goes down, the coin could serve to pay Charon to cross the river Styx to the afterlife, or it can possibly prevent rot to the mast, or simply be a reminder to pay respect to the sea.

Thomas' work is about connecting esoteric knowledge or myth with contemporary technology, which I find important when we see that our world has not been served well by oppositions and categories. Dichotomies of science and mythology have, of course, been used to supplant local knowledge, as a means of gaining power over communities. Technology and our digital world are a part of "nature", rather than separate entities. In the frame of our collaboration, we used technology to record the environment microscopically or sonically so we could embody the idea of the creature and the watery environment on boats and on the shore.

AB

To transition on your installation work, one can notice that your sculptures are never static. Small technological apparatuses activate the elements: a series of gates opening at different intervals, a shoe rolling around a train track, and clocks ticking on cardboard boxes. The objects seem to become part of choreography in which everything is connected or to create an autonomous microcosm. Could you talk about your approach to scenography and choreography? How do you address the viewer's experience?

GH

My installations are cinematic restaging, so they need to feel inhabited and representative. An artist who visited the exhibition "In a Cowslip's bell, I lie?" felt the gates and clocks were a metaphor for the threshold between life and death, or between the physical and spiritual.

AB

Gate representations have a rich symbolism...



It is only mine in the telling, Steel, rope, sailcloth, algae, chain, $120\times180\times255$ cm, 2020. Arnis Residency, Arnis, Germany.

GH

Also because there is ghostliness to it. Programming objects to move gives them their own force and an immediate connection with the observer. This is why I remake ready-mades. The act of remaking them, for me, is like writing a love letter inside the object. It also creates a connection across people who make industrially produced objects, thinking about all those things that are handled and seen by many.

In A conversation is a garland. Part II (2021), I attached a balloon to a shoe which is going to fall during the exhibition as it slowly loses helium. In that way, there is drama to the work, and it creates a spectacle. By moving, objects become uncanny and could seem like they are real but not quite.

For the gates, I had a clear idea in the first instance of what they should do. The first mechanism I used was too loud, so I tried to find one that was quieter. I don't want to hide the technology, you will see fixings and cables, but I still try to keep it minimal.

Did you make the gates?

GH

I made them in a metal workshop based on my memory of what gates look like. Each has its own character. The ones presented in my degree show were programmed from one Raspberry Pi, but the technology is very fragile. Now I use a separate Arduino for each gate, which is easier to install.

It is funny to make something you could buy. I am obsessed with finding the nuance to recreate some intimacy with ubiquitous designed objects and myself as a human. This is how I can better understand these things that are outside our houses and inconsequential. Gates, windows and doors convey similar projections of somewhere else. They also have a connection



with glass making with their thick black line demarking a pattern, just like a drawing.

Victorian steel gates can evoke craftsmanship, but also protection and security of properties, power and wealth of Western nations with their history of industrialisation.

Gates are a product of the power of Western industrialisation, but then, we see them in gardens, in front of houses of people who don't have any power, most often subjected to that power. The way symbolism changes is also interesting to me. This is why I render my gates useless.

In the opposite way, the cardboard boxes used in my piece *In a Cowslip's bell I lie (1)*, (2022), are an extended symbol of trade during Victorian industrialisation and by putting flowers inside, I make them soggy and easy to break apart. They become defunct. It is also my attempt to rupture things that are potentially very damaging.

It reminds me of your work *Coping (with) Mechanism* (2019) which also plays with antagonisms and shifting perspectives. While it starts by condemning the development of steel architecture and today's skyscrapers as objects of turbo-capitalism, it ends with a Blacksmith worker narrating the way his skills were for him a tool for resistance and survival when migrating. In the same way, objects are both fragile and can damage.

Tensions are really important. In the process of investigating the symbol of the tower, I was aware of related contradictions. The Tulip tower, a failed project to build a 1000ft tower in the shape of a flower in central London, is a striking example. One could say this architecture - rising to the sky - is the epitome of the hubris of human beings. Emulating an organic form but having to use so many resources to create it and sustain

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Wage Packet III, Cardboard, circuit board, bulb, micro servo, USB cable cord, diamante, satin, clock mechanism, paper, fake snow, $13 \times 14 \times 11$ cm, 2022. Photograph: Maximilian Schmoetzer.

it, is the opposite of symbiosis. However, as the blacksmith explains, which applies to many workers, it is valuable to have a skill in continuing the capitalist agenda. His ability to work in metal allowed his existence in the USA.

My sculptures have this dream-like and delicate aspect but are also strong. The work needs to be seen with all these elements at once. It wouldn't work if it is only a dream without the coldness. It is this duality that we can often perceive in social relations.

AB

Gate holds those ideas of protection and power, but also ornaments and decoration.

GH

I am interested in decoration, nick-nacks that people from various backgrounds have in their homes and little trinkets that seek to be aspirational but are obviously superficial. They are often cheap and tacky, sitting in homes for a long time. It is an excursion through objects. Those things people have in excess, which I guess is what makes us human: we don't have just what we need.

AB

These objects and decorative elements in iron for the gates for example also represent skills, craftsmanship, and the act of creating. Returning to the Blacksmith worker, his skills also allow him to survive.

GH

It is about being useful. Being an artist, you must believe that making something is to exist or to get you through. Now, it is hard to imagine craft skills can be as helpful nowadays because of automation. There is both irony and tension in using technology within my work because I am automating things as well to see how they coincide.

AB

"In a Cowslip's bell, I lie?" presented in fluent, Santander, Spain, is your first solo show. Three gates surround a series of hybrid objects, fragile assemblages of cardboard boxes, cowslips and clocks, and pieces of stained glass.



Wage Packet IV, USB cable cord, dried flowers, shells, paper, fake snow. $22 \times 26 \times 9$ cm, 2022. Photograph: Maximilian Schmoetzer.

Tell me about the materials you have used to make these works. What are the connections between the pieces?

GH

The curator, Alex Alonso Diaz, brought those elements together which resonate with fluent's special location, an exhibition space made of glass walls in the centre of a small mall. Gates were interesting to show because we can find them in the city. And the boxes which are presented here in a new context as vessels of vases and clocks echo the commercial space with shops outside. The materials are things one could have easily, not precious.

From the outside of the gallery, you can see a glass piece of a cowslip, which looked like an advert for the exhibition rather than a sacred object. In Shakespeare's play The Tempest, a spirit called Ariel says he will sleep inside a cowslip when he is free. So the flower alludes to the idea of refuge within a space that is confusing in The Tempest because of slavery and subjugation by dominant forces. We can find these tensions as well in the exhibition: gates are opening and closing, allowing you in and out, cardboard boxes which are part of the distribution chain are on the floor, and are now vessels for flowers and clocks. Everything is between being oppressive and completely intimate where you can sleep inside.

AB

The reduced scale of the elements adds to this overall dreamlike atmosphere and childhood aesthetic in your sculptures and installation, with soft and colourful objects.

GH

There are artists that use the aesthetic of cuteness in extreme ways, but my work is not about that. I look at objects for what they are and seek to intensify their essence, whilst playing with the grotesque of feeding dreams and cuteness. In a way, it is both sincere and ironic.

Since I am interested in objects' subjectivity, it is possible that the ones that are childlike might have a stronger appeal to me because of their symbolism. In the *sun-screen* (2021) for example, I am looking at the fake intimacy of technologies and try to emulate that.

While working with the train and balloon, I am not necessarily imagining myself as a child but rather thinking of the tensions inherent in these objects. I am curious about the stories invoked by these objects, who uses them, and what they mean.



In a cowslip's bell I lie (1), Cardboard boxes, clock mechanisms, flowers, bandages, plaster, dimensions variable, 2022.
fluent, Santander, Spain.

Georgina Hill, Figure Figure 2023 Courtesy of the artist

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