

The approach

Paloma Proudfoot

A festival of ugly sounds

8 November - 20 December 2025

Preview: Saturday 8 November, 6-9pm

My earliest memory is of biting my older brother in a rage when my request for orange squash wasn't being understood. Maybe he was wilfully pretending not to understand what I meant by pointing at the juice bottle – too high for me to reach – hoping I'd give up and stop pestering him. I can still conjure the bruise coloured tooth marks in my brother's freckly forearm after my frustrated outburst, and his incongruous laughter – not even my harshest bite could get to him.

I had glue ear, which meant I could emit sounds but not yet in the form of coherent language, and I could hear only so far as if being underwater. With only a few words, I spoke mainly through abstract gargles, screams and bites, until grommets cleared my ear canals and speech therapy honed my wayward sounds into polite words and diction.

Human sound is slippery, travelling and mutating from private interior to public exterior. Starting in the rehearsal room of the inner monologue to the gathered breath funnelled through vocal folds that form the sounds emitted into the air as words. This finely tuned process can so easily be thrown out of sync. A warped or uncontrolled sound, misunderstood, feared, derided.

I was late to speak, but like most children quickly learned the association between language and control, and the gendered nuances of sound. Crying, screaming, whispered gossip and giggling are girl sounds. To be taken seriously these tones and timbres of voice that push the extremes of joy and pain should be kept to a minimum.

– Paloma Proudfoot

The Approach is pleased to present *A festival of ugly sounds*, a solo exhibition of new ceramic, bronze, and textile works by Paloma Proudfoot. The exhibition investigates the gendered histories and cultural associations of vocal utterances, examining how sound shapes identity, emotion, and communication.

Proudfoot's works consider how, throughout the centuries, women's sounds have been regarded as obscene and thus have sought to be controlled, curtailed and muted. As Anne Carson writes, 'putting a door on the female mouth has been an important project of patriarchal culture from antiquity to the present day. Its chief tactic is an ideological association of female sound with monstrosity, disorder and death.'¹

In *Gossip*, anatomical mechanisms of voice are enlarged and turned outwards. Vocal folds, trachea and diaphragm protrude sound as branches, each growth emerging from the speaking figures visualising how voice travels and transmogrifies, describing and collapsing the distance between bodies and environment. Whilst the mechanics of sound production are implied and exaggerated, the work itself remains muted. Like a silent or dubbed film falling out of sync, the viewer sees the animations of sound without actually hearing it. In this space we fill in the gaps – overlaying our own sounds produced from memory and imagination onto the image.

Feminine utterances come in different forms. Women have often been attributed the role of the divine vessel, a messenger through which omens are delivered and communicated, in the form of body premonitions as well as speech and song. In the ancient world there was 'Ololyga' – a ritual shriek particular to females, either of intense pleasure or pain. Festivals were held to allow for these guttural emotional outcries – albeit not within city limits lest

these vocal expressions contaminate the ears or space of men.

In Irish and Scottish traditions, dating as far back as the 7th century, the practice of keening was popular, whereby ritualistic mourners would wail and sing laments at funerals on behalf of grieving families. These women became conduits for collective grief, ventriloquising the suppressed inner cry of the grieving assembly. In *Keener* the vocalisation of mourning is reimagined as a lily – often considered a symbol of death – its bud emerging from disembodied lips, each petal a tongue forming a floral trumpet.

Women continue to be encouraged into roles that position them as conduits rather than producers of sound. In early technologies, women were targeted for jobs as telephone switchboard operators known as ‘speech weavers’ and typists, and today feminised voices are reproduced as AI assistants such as Siri and Alexa, mere robotic channels of information rather than authors.

Proudfoot’s work *Three Fates Unknown* draws on the classical trio Clotho, Lachesis and Atropos², who spin, measure and cut the thread of life respectively. A line threads the figures together, morphing from artery to thread to headphone wire, joined together into a single feedback loop. Death lies below but keeps busy listening, winding the threads of life into a cat’s cradle. Speech and handicraft share a background as spaces traditionally associated with women’s work, whether laundry rooms or switchboard offices, these environments harboured safety for conversation between women otherwise denied or fiercely policed in patriarchal society.

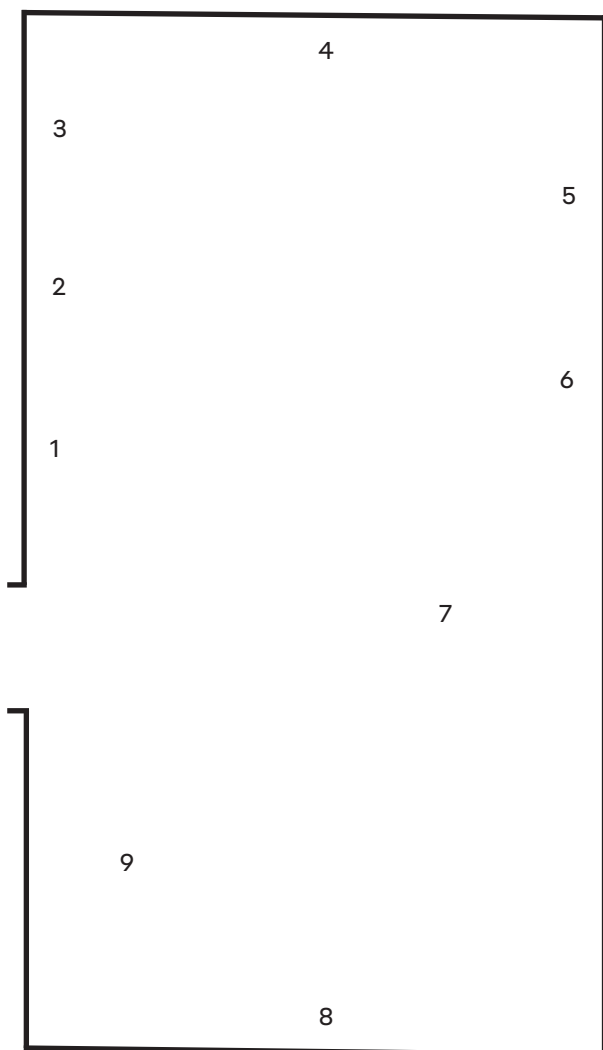
In *A festival of ugly sounds*, Proudfoot reclaims the female voice – once cast as unruly or monstrous – instead amplifying it into a site of resistance, communion and power. The works expose how sound is never neutral, but always entangled in histories of authority, gender and control.

1. Carson, Anne. *The Gender of Sound*, 2025, Spiral House, pp. 5. Originally published as part of *Glass, Irony, and God*, 1995, New Directions.

2. In Greek mythology, the Moirai - commonly known as the Fates - were three sisters responsible for ensuring that every being fulfilled their destined path. Their influence echoes throughout Western culture, appearing in forms as varied as the witches of Shakespeare’s *Macbeth* and the prophetic messengers of Disney’s *Hercules* (1997).

Paloma Proudfoot (b. 1992, London, UK) lives and works in London. She graduated from Edinburgh College of Art in 2014 and the Royal College of Art in 2017. Recent solo exhibitions include: *Speech Weavers*, Fondazione Bonollo, Vicenza, IT (2025); *Lay Figure*, The Lowry, Salford, UK; *The Voice of the Play*, The Approach, London, UK (both 2024); *The Three Living and The Three Dead*, Soy Capitán, Berlin, DE (2023); *The Memory Theatre*, Bosse and Baum Gallery, London, UK (2022).

Recent group exhibitions include: *Magical Women*, Draiflessen Collection, Mettingen, DE; *Material Worlds: Contemporary Artists and Textiles*, The Wilson Art Gallery and Museum, Cheltenham, UK (Hayward Gallery Touring); *Notes on Becoming*, Oldenburger Kunstverein, Oldenburg, DE; *Sound of the Earth. Ceramics in Contemporary Art*, Kunstmuseum Appenzell, Appenzell, CH (all 2025); *The Infinite Woman*, Fondation Carmignac, Hyères, FR; *Present Tense*, Hauser and Wirth, Somerset, UK (both 2024); *Unruly Bodies*, Goldsmiths CCA, London, UK (2023).



1. *Keener*, 2025
Glazed ceramic, bronze, marble, metal
48.5 x 45 x 32 cm
2. *Inner monologue*, 2025
Glazed ceramic, textile, metal bolts
109 x 52 x 7 cm
3. *A body never stops (II)*, 2025
Glazed ceramic, bronze, metal bolts
89 x 153 x 4.5 cm
4. *Three fates unknown*, 2025
Glazed ceramic, textile, wooden board, cord, metal bolts
273 x 252 x 12 cm
5. *Grief speaks a flower*, 2025
Glazed ceramic, bronze, textile, metal, metal bolts
139 x 94 x 15 cm
6. *Doublespeak*, 2025
Glazed ceramic, metal bolts
130 x 88 x 8 cm
7. *Lay figure (II)*, 2024
Glazed ceramic, metal bolts
37 x 96 x 59 cm
8. *Gossip*, 2025
Glazed ceramic, bronze, glass, wine, metal bolts
192 x 239 x 11.5 cm
9. *Messenger*, 2025
Glazed ceramic, bronze, marble
142 x 55 x 30 cm