



SCENOGRAPHIES OF THE INNER WORLD

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ABSTRACT

SCENOGRAPHIES OF THE INNER WORLD is a reflection on my progress as an artist through this focused time of my doctoral studies, documenting how art and research have become intricately woven. Through drawing, sculpture, installation and moving image, my practice has evolved responding to personal experience, memory and myth, and the evocative language of philosophy and psychoanalysis.

I have investigated a transitional space, mediated between internal and external perception - a hinterland between the mind and body where the unconscious leaves a trace. This residue of lived experience haunts the present and troubles the senses and through research in psychoanalytical theory, I have sought to deepen my understanding of these psychic processes.

I describe how ideas are generated from collecting discarded objects, and materials whose meanings are then transformed, elaborated or obscured by the creative process and mode of presentation. The object in psychoanalysis has revealed a matrix of inter-relationships between ourselves and others. The object's presence in the work of contemporary artists has enriched and challenged my ideas.

While thinking and making can inspire, performative embodiment has connected me deeply to my past. In researching my family history and the legacies of displacement and exile, my work has explored ideas of 'haunting', revealing loss, trauma and abjection: evocations transmitted across generations. These themes, each evolving out from the other, evoke a journey from the surface to the depths, from thoughts to feelings.

Concepts of psychic fragmentation and splitting have been a starting point to express the pathology of trauma. Often, hybrid bodies are vibrantly present, while also evoking that which dwells beyond the body. Testing the unsettling tipping points of absurdity and abjection I have trusted a process of free association and serendipity to discover the unexpected and the uncannily familiar.

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INTRODUCTION

Evoking the Inner World of my title conjures all kinds of thoughts and spaces in the mind, that I set out to explore at the start of the Professional Doctorate. After an account of my previous education and professional work, I describe my transition from theatre designer to fine artist. I discarded the structure of a script or stage and found my own inner world to be limitless. This thesis charts the five-year journey to define the scenography of this internal landscape through my creative practice, psychoanalytic theory and contextualised within contemporary art. I reflect on the questions raised, the challenges faced, and the highs and lows of an exceptional and transformational experience.

Artists and psychoanalysts both delve into the labyrinth of the mind, to unearth things hidden, disguised, forgotten and buried. It is through each discipline that my investigation navigates towards a deeper understanding and engagement with the things I discover. My visual response to this process includes drawings, sculptures and installations, and performative work, recorded in film and photography. My thesis is divided into three interrelated parts, loss, trauma, and abjection. Each theme has grown out of the other and so there is a chronology to the report, and yet like psychoanalysis, the themes overlap, repeat and rewind, to constantly reveal new layers beneath.

Memories and impressions from experiences are the starting point for my work, and psychoanalytic theory helps me understand the motivation, process, and content of my creativity and enriches my ideas. The unexpected is often revealed a reminder of the unconscious workings of the mind. These surprises can direct me to the next wave of creative activity and investigation. Ideas can equally be ignited by the evocative language used to describe psychoanalytic concepts. A symbiotic relationship between theory and my creative practice has gradually evolved.

The child's transitional object inspired my first creative piece and led me to explore the role of the object in psychoanalysis and contemporary art. I discovered 'loss' at the heart of my inquiry. It was enlightening to analyse the contrasting ways artists create, transform, and involve objects in their work to express a nuanced relationship to the

experience of loss through their practice. I reflected on my relationship to the object's form, materiality, and presence as a conveyor of meaning.

Researching loss in psychoanalysis inspired me to look further into my family history. Through performative work, I discovered the traces of trauma, transmitted through generations. This work made me question the transitional body as the liminal border between self and other, and how it is exploited as a site of artistic expression. Psychosocial theories of the intergenerational transmission of trauma, and the ghostly hauntings of the past that trouble the present became central to my research.

This work affected me deeply and I describe a period of retreat to make more contained and intimate art. Through researching the after-effects of trauma expressed in artwork, I discovered contemporary feminist theory, which positions the intersubjectivity of a matrixial border-space at the origins of selfhood, and existential longing for connectivity. In considering the role of memory and memorial, I reflected on the ethical position of making art concerning the aftermath of trauma not suffered or witnessed directly. I investigate the expression of personal trauma through creative practice and art in response to the pain of others.

The third part investigates the theme of abjection continuing my research into the psyche's responses to trauma. Through drawing, my ideas developed in a flow of free association and unconscious thoughts emerged more readily. My imagery became less literal and an abstraction of form expressed something beyond the body, in excess of the subject; abject, intrusive, disturbing. Experimenting with fabric, domestic detritus and builder's debris, I created three-dimensional objects that expressed psychic fragments and alluded to the abject body and the home.

The final section is a reflection on all the professional opportunities I've experienced throughout the Doctorate, developing a studio practice, exhibiting, curating, attending artist residencies, and academic conferences. I describe how each has helped shape and develop my work as a researcher and an artist.

PERSONAL AND CREATIVE CONTEXT

Over the summer holiday, before my art foundation course began, I worked backstage at the Royal Exchange Theatre in Manchester assisting the designer Peter Bennion. He had studied Theatre Design at Wimbledon School of Art and described a training and profession that would embrace all my interests – art, theatre, dance, music, literary analysis and a curiosity about the human condition.

I was not disappointed. The curriculum at WSA covered the broad spectrum of performance genres mostly in speculative design projects and some fully realized productions. I practised the technical skills of precision model making and drawing to design costumes and sets, drafting technical plans and storyboards to communicate ideas. Theatre design requires background research, so the theoretical component focused on the historical and contextual study of performance, costume and spatial design.

Throughout the course, I also attended evening classes at the London Contemporary Dance School and for my final dissertation chose to research the art of Isadora Duncan, looking beyond her notoriety to reveal a radical approach to movement and a unique contribution to the development of contemporary dance. I was becoming fascinated by mythology, fairy-tales and the workings of the imagination and unconscious mind. Bettelheim's *The Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales* offered an alternative, Freudian, interpretation. In my final year, I co-designed 'Slips', a production for Lumiere and Son at the ICA that re-interpreted familiar fairy-tales to reveal a more adult complexity and ambiguity.

My portfolio after graduating displayed work that was detailed and illustrative and as a result, I was commissioned to create illustrations for a series of short films of narrated fairy tales and later three series for the BBC children's program, '*Jackanory*'. I also illustrated children's full-colour picture books, and black and white pen and ink illustrations for publication. (Fig. 1)



Figure 1. Ali Darke, *Children's Book illustration*. 1982 - 1984

My 3D making and technical skills were employed in animatronic puppet design primarily for the Jim Henson Creature Shop for film and TV productions such as *Labyrinth*, *Little Shop of Horrors*, *The Story Teller Series*, and *The Bear* (Fig. 2)



Figure 2. *Animatronic puppet, 'Labyrinth'*. Jim Henson Productions, 1985.

Over this first decade of professional life, I honed my technical skills, fulfilling the perceived expectations of the publishers for pretty illustrations, and the practical demands of animatronics, adapting to complex hierarchical systems and industries. However, I felt frustrated that there was little room for personal expression and so to follow my own ideas was compelled to further postgraduate study in Theatre Design at the Slade School of Fine Art.

The course took a traditional approach and was almost entirely studio-based. Treating the designer as Artist and Director, the collaborative nature of performance, practical considerations and budget restrictions were largely ignored. It was wonderfully indulgent, allowing our imaginations free rein to develop an individual aesthetic and visual language. My work was transformed; my drawing and painting style evolved becoming freer and more expressive of a darker interpretation.

The theoretical component was largely contextual research. Theatre designers are collectors and curators of images from diverse sources, the fine arts, photography, architecture, and history. For example, in designing *The Bacchae* by Euripides I researched both ancient Greek and contemporary views on performance, ritual, mythology, religious belief and philosophy. My interpretation reflected themes of the fear of madness resulting from the tension between desire, repression, and religious dogma. I had recently seen a Butoh company in which the mystical, ritualistic and extreme physicality of performance appeared both ancient and contemporary and influenced my conceptual approach.

My final speculative design of Tchaikovsky's ballet *The Nutcracker* freely interpreted the original text by ETA Hoffman to explore traumatic and distorted memories of childhood. Alongside the historical context of the Enlightenment, I sought to understand mental breakdown and started to research psychoanalytic theory. Through works such as *Playing and Reality* by DW Winnicott, *The Divided Self* by RD Laing, and the *Drama of the Gifted Child* by Alice Miller I began to understand how events in childhood affect adult life. I was also fascinated by Freud's *Interpretation of Dreams*. This was my most personal work to date. My Grandmother was suffering from Alzheimer's disease and I witnessed her memory evaporate and her slide into mental confusion. With childlike wonder, she described the world around her as her father's

kingdom. The piece I conceived was as if seen through the eyes of an old woman looking back through the distorted lens of memory, at her transition from childhood to adulthood. Events, recalled as supernatural and magical, lead to a loss of innocence and psychotic breakdown. Themes that still recur in my work emerged to do with perception and memory, the liminal space between inner and outer reality, and anthropomorphism as a means to express unconscious fantasy. Like ETA Hoffman, my Grandmother was German and it seemed appropriate to make my design reminiscent of the illustrations from a book she read to us called *Struwwel Peter*. I was also influenced by the animation of Jan Svankmajer and the Brothers Quay. (Fig. 4)



Figure 3. Ali Darke, *Costume designs: The Nutcracker*, 1993

As our designs were not realised, the finished products for assessment were scale models, drawings, costume designs, and storyboards – and I, therefore, became preoccupied with the model as an artefact for display. (Fig. 4)



Figure 4. Ali Darke, 1:25 Set model, *The Nutcracker*, 1993

After graduating, I continued to work as a designer for contemporary and classical drama, children's theatre, short films, and musical theatre shows; performed in a variety of venues and site-specific spaces. I was often involved in the realization of sets, costumes, props and puppets and scenic painting. (Fig. 5)



Figure 5. Ali Darke, *Beauty and The Beast*. Midland Arts Centre, Birmingham, 1996

I carried on working after the birth of my first child in 1995 but hit a crisis when as my career expanded found I was often working away from home, at one point traveling between theatres in Birmingham, Nottingham, Croydon, Clwyd, and Watford. Theatre design cannot be undertaken part-time. I took a maternity break until my son was established in his school life.

I contemplated training as an Arts Psychotherapist and in further reading, encountered psychoanalytic theories of transitional objects espoused by D.W. Winnicott, attachment theory of John Bowlby, and the writing of Jean Piaget and Erik Erikson on child development. I was struck by the connection between transitional phenomena and the imagination, creativity, art, and culture.

In 1998 I was profoundly affected by the premature birth and death of my second son. I needed time to recover and turned down further theatre work. However, I was compelled to doodle images that initially had no particular purpose beyond an outpouring of my deepest thoughts. (Fig. 6)

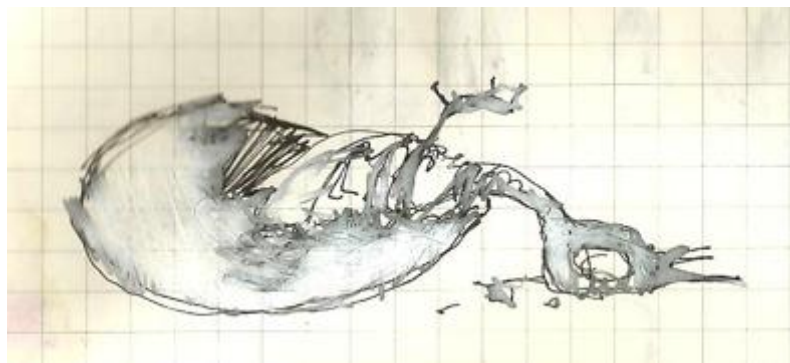


Figure 6. Ali Darke, *Doodle for Elliot*. 1998

In 2001, Michael Pavelka, the Course Leader of the Theatre Design BA at Wimbledon College of Art, invited me to teach a first-year project. Each student designed a set of costumes for the given play or opera. A small selection was then chosen to be made up into full head to toe characters and finally presented in the theatre in a theatrical context. (Fig. 7)

I found that in teaching I needed to analyse the process of designing and appreciate the many ways students learn. I was influenced by the student centred, holistic approach to education espoused by the core staff team in Theatre Design. The PGCE in Learning and Teaching in Art and Design at UAL, allowed me the opportunity to reflect on my teaching practice within the light of contemporary pedagogic theory, challenging my philosophical approach to education and the nature of the subject.



Figure 7. *'The Visit; Student performance: WCA Theatre, 2012*

Much of my design work at this time was within an educational context. I designed productions at Mountview Theatre Academy assisted by their design students. I formed a creative partnership with the Director, Teacher, and Psychotherapist Anna

Sternberg, and together we formed the 'Theatre of Thin Air' – a company of young people aged 11 – 22 and assisted by WCA theatre design students. We created three productions, Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *The Crucible* by Arthur Miller, and *The Seagull* by Chekov. This work required a different approach to teaching, facilitating the student's creativity and ideas to work alongside our own. Surprisingly these were some of the best theatre productions I was involved in and the collaboration with Anna Sternberg was as inspiring as it was creative. (Fig. 8)



Figure 8. *'The Crucible'*, by Arthur Miller, *Theatre of Thin Air*, 2012

In 2005 and again in 2007, I was invited to participate in a professional workshop organized by 'Theatre de Complicité' called 'Laboratoire d'Étude de Mouvement' (LEM). Both proved to be deeply affecting and transformative. Other participants included directors, performers, designers, artists, musicians, photographers, and writers. Developed by the French drama teacher, Jacques Lecoq, and the Architect, Krikor Balakrian, the LEM explores the dramatic potential of space, movement, material, and structure. The pedagogy is not a prescriptive technique but takes an experiential approach leading to creativity based on feelings, instinct, and intuition,

rather than intellectual reflection. Using basic materials, what the body discovers through movement is transformed into charcoal drawings, 3D structures and architectural forms that can then be put into motion, transforming the dynamics of space.

This improvised way of developing ideas is inherent to the rehearsal room but was a revelation as a means for designers to explore the body in space. I incorporated these ideas into my teaching practice facilitating workshops for Performance Design, Fine Art and Drawing BA and MA students across the UAL colleges. (Fig. 9)

It is interesting to look back and realize how I was beginning to use my own lived experience and the body as the material from which to develop ideas, and the theories of psychoanalysis to deepen my understanding of the process and discoveries.



Figure 9. *Student workshop, 'The Transformed Body in Space': CSM 2009.*

The PGCE course culminated in An Action Research Project for which I focused on the potential learning in this experiential pedagogy. The outcomes reinforced my conviction of the importance of holding a safe space open for experimentation, learning through trial and error, and the need sometimes to trust a process of 'not knowing', free-wheeling, serendipity alongside the alchemy of collaborative work.

In 2005 I became the 3rd year coordinator, tutor and a course examiner at WSA. In supporting each student to structure a bespoke final year that encouraged a personal ambition, their projects frequently pushed the boundaries of performance design and challenged my own and the course's definitions of what performance design and practice might be. From 2011 - 13, I became the Acting Pathway Leader, and although I learned an immeasurable amount, I was consumed by the demands of managing and delivering the entire program. I began teaching more modules, introducing the first year to scale model making through a design project that also explored the potential for spatial design to communicate metaphorical ideas. (Fig. 10)



Figure 10. Hiding Places, *Student project: WCA 2012*

At the same time, my practice was shifting its focus from fulfilling the demands of a professional design brief to express a more personal response, driven by *my* preoccupations, making small models and installations. I found it liberating and exciting to work differently – to change my approach to thinking and testing out of ideas, not always knowing where this will lead. For example, I have found I am more interested in drawing when it serves not so much as a tool for resolving design

problems or as a means of communicating with collaborators, but as a form of thinking – a doodling with intent.

In 2012, I participated in a group exhibition 'Resonate' at the Crypt Gallery and I chose to develop further some of the drawn images I had made after the death of my son, interwoven with memories from my childhood. I played with mixing found and miniature objects to explore a liminal, transitional space between fantasy and reality. Re-appropriating discarded things revealed an unsettling ambiguity. (Figs. 11-14)



Figure 11. *Ali Darke, Still Life. 2012*
(leather glove, bird wing, wire, silk, glass dome)



Figure 12. Ali Darke, *Still Life*. 2012
(bird skeleton, wire bird cage, cotton thread)



Figure 13. Ali Darke, *Shame*. 2012
(bird skeleton, wire, nails, wool, cotton, glass dome)



Figure 14. Ali Darke, *Shame*. 2012
(picture frame, glass, leather gloves, fur, ceramic doll, balsa wood)

With my growing interest in psychoanalysis and, to experience more directly and pragmatically, the relationship between art and the unconscious, I participated in a weekly, open group workshop at the London Centre of Art Therapy, led by the artist and Art Psychotherapist Hephzibah Kaplan. The work was produced spontaneously and fast, responding to the available materials and weekly prompt, be it a given theme or object to be incorporated into the work. This intuitive way of working, a kind of visual free association, revelled in a more visceral and abstract expression in paint and through creating objects from simple and scrap materials. (Fig. 15 - 17)



Figure 15a - b. Ali Darke, *Paintings, Art for the Heart*, 2014

The process was as meaningful as the final artefact. The results of this work have led to more ideas to explore from the realm of the unconscious and philosophies of the mind, and an intuitive and experimental creative process.



Figure 16. Ali Darke, *Wave*. 2014



Figure 17. Ali Darke, *Luggage Label*, 2014

CREATIVE PRACTICE AND THEORY

Part 1: LOSS

THE TRANSITIONAL OBJECT.

The first-year Show Case exhibition continued the transformation of my practice as a theatre designer to that of Fine Artist and I can see glimpses in the work of the themes, ideas, and questions that will occupy my mind. I created two installations in my allocated space in the gallery, connected through aesthetic language and each inspired by memories from my past. They evolved through a process of drawing alongside research in psychoanalytic theory. (Fig 18 - 19) I used old tattered domestic objects and materials to make the work, reflecting the fundamental psychoanalytic principle that the past unconsciously influences and distorts the present. The objects gave the installation a human, relatable scale. The ideas continued to evolve as I worked and through the creative process new meanings were revealed to me. Themes of loss, trauma, and shame became evident.

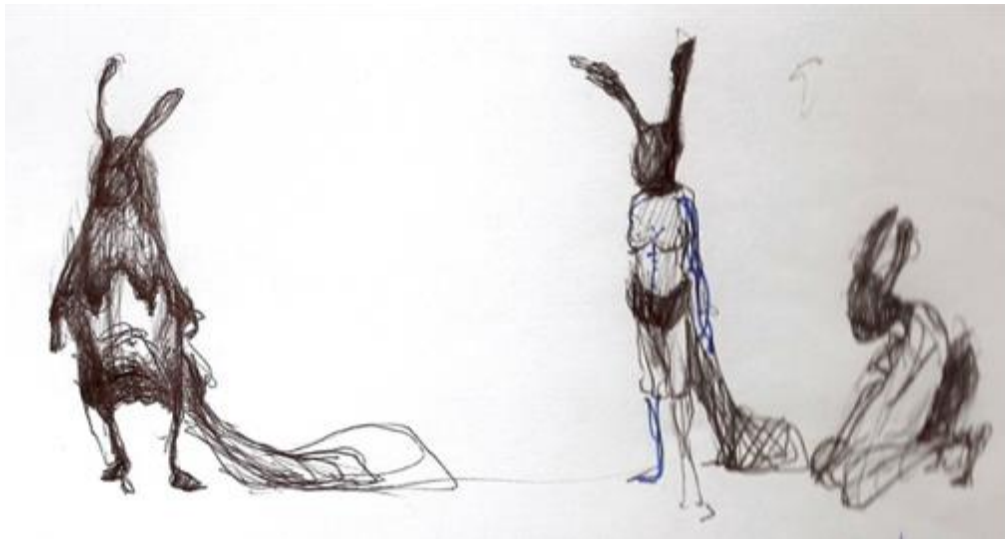


Figure 18. Ali Darke, *Sketch for Spilt Milk*, 2015



Figure 19. Ali Darke, *Studies in anthropomorphism*. 2015

Retaining traces of the theatrical scene, *Spilt Milk* (Fig. 20 - 21) formed a tableau of characters surrounding the aftermath and debris of an event – a milk bottle with its contents splashed across the floor. Despite such a seemingly mundane incident, unconscious family tensions can explode as if a catastrophe had occurred. I was imagining the effect this could have on the bewildered child. Using the character of a stuffed rabbit – my favourite toy, the characters portray varying degrees of anthropomorphic transformation. They are caught running, hiding or frozen to the spot, in the psychological masks that children might hide behind to survive the confusion of the adult world. I played with the concept of the transitional object and psychological transitional space where the inner life of the mind negotiates with external reality.

D.W. Winnicott (1896-1971) describes transitional phenomena as the psychological process by which a child differentiates from the Mother – a gradual toleration of the trauma of separation. The child's needs are met, and the child begins to anticipate – to conceive of the Mother at the point of need and, 'the Mother's adaption to the infant's needs, when good enough, gives the infant the illusion that there is an external reality that corresponds to the infant's capacity to create.' (Winnicott, 1971, pg. 12)



Figure 20. Ali Darke, *Spilt Milk*, 2015
(mixed media)

A transitional object, such as a toy or comforting blanket, maybe used by the child to temporarily stand-in for the Mother's presence as a means of tolerating the anxiety of separation, and may become imbued with protective powers. This is a gentle awakening to the external world and the outside other.

This intermediate area to which I am referring is the area that is allowed to the infant between primary creativity and objective perception based on reality testing. (pg. 11)

The theory of transitional phenomena made me appreciate the potential impact of objects in my work and how this could be exploited to reveal things beyond their immediate appearance. In *Spilt Milk*, I was also expressing the traumatized and fragmented body, experienced as awkward - taking on the trappings of the domestic world. I was beginning to explore the interplay between the mind, the body and the world and the theoretical and philosophical debates that surround being an embodied subject.



Figure 21. Ali Darke, *Spilt Milk*, (detail) 2015
(card, upholstery fabric, chair leg, fur, horsehair stuffing)

At the opposite end of my exhibition space lay a rotting broken chair, *Still-life*, collapsed on the floor. (Fig. 22) The damaged seat showed the wear and tear of bodily use, exposing rusty springs and stuffing, and with the wooden legs splayed suggested to me a gaping wounded body. I perched a skeletal rabbit-like character on an armrest – wearing a mask formed of a stork’s beak. He reminded me of the imposter, the trickster – not the benign stork delivering the new-born baby of folklore, but a thief – a taker-of-life. I was re-appropriating motifs from previous work; birds, skeletons, furniture, and pink wool, here knitted into the form of a baby caught in the beak and trailing into the open wound of the chair. This impish act betrays the complex emotional response to the death of my second son – an internal struggle between the terrible burden of guilt that I had failed to protect him, and fury that I had been cruelly ripped open and robbed.



Figure 22. Ali Darke, *Still Life (detail)* 2015
(wire, upholstery linen, wool, bird's beak)

I was playing with time, the past alive in the present - an absence and a presence. Whenever trauma is experienced associated feelings, memories, and imagery from the past return to haunt. If these memories are unbearable what is repeated, through pathological behaviours, are the resistances to remembering. Freud's (1914) theory of the transference of past behaviour to the clinical encounter is fundamental to his process of psychoanalysis; 'The patient does not remember anything of what he has forgotten and repressed, but acts it out. He reproduces it not as a memory but as an action; he repeats it, without of course knowing that he is repeating it.' (p.150)

Both these pieces were an attempt to marry a psychoanalytic concept, personal experience, and creative practice. Although the feedback was positive - the work was 'skilful', 'moving', 'hauntingly evocative', it was perceived that I was illustrating my ideas. I was implying a narrative in the work, and more literal use of objects as if creating props for the stage. A stage prop has a particular life within the performance space, and like the stage setting, it requires the activation of the performer's presence. There is an expectation of unfolding events in which the prop plays a subordinate role.

Out of this context, the object as protagonist can tell a different story and I needed to explore the dynamic potential of an object's materiality and presence of, and in itself.

Over the summer following the first year, I participated in an artist residency organized between the fine art departments of the University of East London and the University of West Macedonia. I spent two weeks living and working alongside a group of international artists, in the beautiful but remote village of Psarades, which lies at the borders of Albania, Macedonia, and N.W. Greece. (Fig. 23 - 24)



Figure 23 - 24. *Psarades Village and Lake Prespes.*

We worked in an abandoned canning factory, full of decaying machinery. The building had become 'An Open Museum' with previous artists' work left in situ. We were encouraged to work in response to this site, its location, and the remaining artwork. Over the previous year, the factory had become a refuge for goats and the entire building was inches deep in goat shit. Swallows flew through the broken windows and nested in the ceilings. The building was alive! (Fig. 25)



Figure 25. *The Old Canning Factory, Psarades.*

I started working in an office space, taking the idea of using what I found around me. I began 'shovelling the shit', working systematically to create small piles - slag heaps – the refuse from some industrial process, that formed a miniature landscape. While working, despite the heat, sweat, and dirt, I became engrossed in the task, like a child playing. I constructed towers from rusty tins, nails, and other debris. I was storytelling - finding justification for my work in the unfolding narrative. But what was significant is that I was working differently, spontaneously, fast, unplanned – solving problems as they emerged. I loved this way of working with just the limited resources around me. I experienced freedom, with my inner critic silenced for a while. (Fig. 26 - 27)



Figure 26. Ali Darke, *The Uncanny Works*, 2015
(goat shit, tin cans)



Figure 27. Ali Darke, *Three Tin Towers*, 2015

Winnicott develops his theories of transitional phenomena through a close analysis of the child at play, taking seriously the activity and mentality of playing. Transitional phenomena belong to the 'realm of illusion'. (Winnicott, 1971, p.14) In playing, the child draws objects or phenomena from the external reality into the service of an inner subjective reality, and these are invested with personal meaning. However, 'this area of playing is not inner psychic reality. It is outside the individual, but it is not the external world.' (p.51) He equates this liminal area of experience, which belongs and mediates the border between the subjective, and that which is objectively perceived, to that which 'throughout life is retained in the intense experiencing that belongs to the arts and to religion and to imaginative living.' (p.14) Creativity is born out of the experience of play, and Winnicott describes the development from transitional phenomena, to play, expanded to playing with others, and finally in the social context of cultural experience.

In the last two days, I found an old cabinet in an adjacent office. I turned it on its side and used the cavities to display things that I'd collected on my wanderings. I was thinking about these objects in a more poetic, enigmatic language, free from a fixed narrative. Each object was broken in some way, and I was exploiting their disfunction to show things emptied of life. I wondered if being lost in play over previous days had loosened my grip on needing to justify each element belonging to a story, and gave the objects a chance to speak for themselves. (Fig. 28 - 31)



Figure 28-31. Ali Darke, *Un-directional Forces Open Museum*. 2015
(mixed media)



On my return from Greece, I wanted to continue working with discarded furniture. I thought about the network of associations to the home that could be explored within the domestic cabinet, an item of furniture first given pride of place in the 19th- century bourgeois family home for the display of precious china. Collections, knick-knacks, memorabilia, trivia; things personal and intimate were kept here too. I was also interested to question in practice and theory, my use and making of objects and the meanings this might generate. The research opened up a rich, interrelated and complex world of the object as viewed through psychoanalysis and philosophy and the sculptural object in contemporary art. In each discipline there emerges an essence surrounding the 'object of our attention', an elusive space, a doubt, a veil between our perception of the object and the reality of the object's being. Some sense of never fully

knowing, of a thing forever beyond our grasp, forever shape-shifting, and a pervading sense of a thing lost. And it seemed to me that it is in this space that something is happening, an alluring emptiness that entices our curiosity, our ambivalence, and anxieties. '...a work of art occupies a liminal position, with the containing strategies of its medium disposed in such a way that we are constantly aware of what must escape any containment. This awareness must be that of the artists as well: even at their most jubilant moments of inspiration, their muse is melancholy.' (Schwenger, 2006, p.15)

Slipped Out (Fig. 32-35) was the first cabinet I completed and was exhibited in ARTMASTERS, 2015, a group show, at the Truman Gallery, London. I had very little time to make this first piece and integrate this new research. I repeated the motifs of broken eggshells, and old shoes, while also introducing hints of domestic ritual with a neat pile of stained linen sheets. Placed with these objects were scale figures. I hoped to suggest an ambiguous narrative, the miniature replicas creating a fictional space for the imagination.

Spilling out from inside the lowest shelf was an assortment of tattered dusty black shoes –that reminded me of the iconic image showing vast piles of shoes taken from the bodies of Holocaust victims. As a reference to my family history (that I would revisit in later work), *stepping into the shoes of our ancestors* comes to mind. On the top of the cabinet, I placed an earlier work that tied these details together.



Figure 32. Ali Darke, *SLIPPED OUT*. 2015 (detail)
(mixed media)



Figure 33. Ali Darke, *SLIPPED OUT*. 2015 (detail)



Figure 34. Ali Darke, *SLIPPED OUT*, 2015 (detail)



Figure 35. Ali Darke, *SLIPPED OUT*, 2015

The rabbit mask refers back to the stuffed toy from *Spilt Milk* and D.W. Winnicott's theory of transitional phenomena. In my previous readings of Winnicott, I had glossed over a crucial point which is now of particular relevance. I had concentrated on the object as the focus for transitional phenomena, but he explains that the transitional object is first conceived as a mental space, a 'thought' conjured by the child, between the mother's provision of care and the child's perception of a need. It is in these 'first-thoughts' that the origins of the capacity for thinking, of language formation, symbolisation, imaginative creativity, and intersubjective relational experience emerge. Creativity and play occur in this transitional potential space. I wonder if capturing these precarious 'first thoughts', before they become calcified in 'thinking', might be the access to that elusive quality in art that holds the aliveness and potency for others to engage with.

The task of the caregiver in this transitional theory, is gentle disillusionment, towards the child's gradual separation and toleration of an external reality. The transitional object is that which may 'hold' this space for the child who fears disintegration. This object's value is not questioned.

It is an area that is not challenged because no claim is made on its behalf except that it shall exist as a resting place for the individual engaged in the perpetual human task of keeping inner and outer reality separate yet interrelated.
(Winnicott, 1971, p. 2)

My working practice was changing - I was beginning to trust this transitional, potential space without dutiful compliance to a text or director's vision - I had to rely on my instincts and responses to the material in front of me. I tried not to question or at first analyse why I was drawn to this and not that, especially if things did not always form a logical narrative. If questioned too soon, it seems mad, and my ideas are aborted. But changing habitual ways of thinking takes time and practice.

This experience of not questioning is taken up by the artist and psychoanalyst Patricia Townsend, in her description of 'a temporary delusional state that envelops the artist at a particular moment in the creative process. As ideas and images emerge, the artist sees them as the perfect answer to an unformulated question.' (2013, p.180) The artist

will shut out potential problems and only acknowledge these at a later stage of the work. She refers to Winnicott's transitional space and that in the illusion 'inside and outside coincide...at fleeting moments during this phase of the creation of the artwork, there is no felt distinction between the me and the not-me, inside and outside not only coincide they cannot be distinguished.' (p.181) She goes so far to suggest that this state is so near to delusion that art-making can seem precarious and unstable.

The psychoanalyst, Adam Phillips, examines the potential pathology when this fragile transitional space is threatened 'by breaks in the continuity, the distractions in a person's early development: gaps caused by the intrusions and deprivations and natural catastrophes of childhood.' (1988, p. 3) Phillips explains how the gap caused by neglect or absence, is experienced as traumatic because it is beyond the child's grasp to understand and is felt as a primitive threat of annihilation. He describes growth, 'as an ongoing task of psychosomatic integration.' (p. 2)

The two miniature characters, stuck in apparent helplessness - the bird unable to escape and the leaky boat with no water, expose an ambivalence and pretence in their predicaments. Flights from reality through psychological hiding, self-delusion or dissociation are a means of surviving trauma.

In 'Houdini's Box,' (2002) Adam Phillip's thoughts around our desire to escape are explored. When children play hide and seek, what is being played with is the terror of, and wish for, never being found, of being forgotten. The game has lost its appeal when it goes on too long and no one must get too far away. The 'odd moment of being found is the end of the game...the transgression is to disappear; to find a place where no one keeps an eye on you.' (p. 4) Themes of hiding and disguise will surface again in my work.

This tension between hiding and exposure is understood by Townsend (2019) as fundamental to all acts of creativity. There is an initial stillness, hiding in solitude, protecting first thoughts from the invasion of the other. But, the artist's need 'to be found (by the viewer) is the reason why the task of art-making is never-ending.' (p.116) Townsend adds to this the attempt by the artist to find themselves reflected in the work, and when this is achieved this particular round of hide and seek is over and the

game must start again. But, she suggests, the finding is never complete as no artwork can fully capture the inner experience.

These ways of thinking about the artists' need to continue to make new works are related to Winnicott's view of creativity as necessary in everyday living and as rooted in early experiences. To feel alive, we need to create the outside world for ourselves by imbuing it with our own inner experience. (Townsend, 2019, p.116)

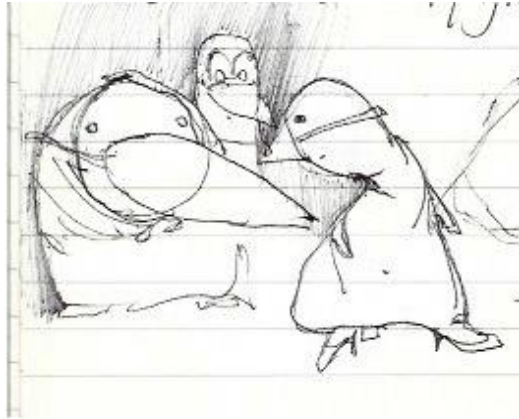
But the external world does not convey one fixed meaning and, even if unconsciously, we continuously search for identification, the desire is never satisfied.

I continued to explore flight into imaginary worlds in *Enroute*. I worked from sketches - finding that my drawing was developing from being a means to communicate design concepts, to a way of thinking in itself - a 'drawing-out' of ideas. The act of drawing slows down my analytical mind - it can be meditative and absorbing, free-associating, defying conscious logical thought. (Fig. 36-40)

Drawing (...) allows a model of representation that maps the fragmented simultaneity of thought, accessing memory, visual fragment and intangible imagination. Downs *et al.* (2007, p. X).



Figure 36-37. Ali Darke, *Doodles*. 2015



I stripped the cabinets of their varnish and painted them in a unifying matt black emulsion. The unreflective patina flattened them out and focused attention on what was within. Through simple changes, I was seeing how objects can be transformed to reveal new meanings beyond their appearance.



Figure 38. Ali Darke, *ENROUTE*. 2015 (mixed media)

I presented this work in the Lightwell Space at UEL for a work-in-progress seminar. Viewers recognised childhood trauma and shame expressed with humour and pathos, and how in the work I was showing an embodied experience of emotion. I was discovering how the body, its functions, and topography in space are embedded in the language of psychoanalytic theory. But, feedback suggested I was still relying on an illustrative style, interpreting my drawings as if they were designs to be faithfully reproduced in three dimensions. Understanding where drawing sits within my practice is an ongoing question.



Figure 39. Ali Darke, *ENROUTE*. 2015 (mixed media)

With the third cabinet, *Petrified*, I worked with no preliminary sketches; instead, responding to the horrific images in the news media of the destruction and human displacement, caused by the Syrian Civil War. This cabinet was the only one not to be painted black. I removed all but the bare bones of the framework on which I applied a layer of concrete and metal mesh. Concrete dolls and shoes spilled onto the floor - transitional objects violently discarded and destroyed, homes abandoned and lives traumatised by the onslaught of violence. Things petrified with fear. (Fig. 40 - 41)



Figure 40. Ali Darke, *PETRIFIED*, 2015



Figure 41. Ali Darke, *PETRIFIED*, 2016
(wooden cabinet, wire mesh, shoes, plastic dolls, concrete)

THE OBJECT IN CONTEMPORARY ART

My research into the ontology of the object coincided with the making of these first three cabinets but did not become manifest in the work until the final three cabinets started to take shape. The object in the world of contemporary art, in philosophical debate and psychoanalytic theory, seems to be coming out from the shadows of a purely human, singular subjectivity, to be valued for its essence and intersubjective potential to communicate, beyond our projections. Looking at the ontology of an object has unleashed new perspectives that confront my assumptions, and prompted me to question what kind of objects I want to make and what meanings an object might convey beyond my intentions.

The world of objects, however 'ordinary' is a trove of disguises, concealments subterfuges, provocations, and triggers that no singular, embodied and knowledgeable subject can exhaust. (Hudek, 2014, p.14)

I am working with and creating objects that I place back out into a world full of things imbued with a multitude of meanings. In contemporary art, the object seems to be a contentious beast that hides behind conceptual thought or wrestles with its status as a conveyor of meaning. Rehberg, (2010, para.1) when considering the art object, concedes that 'The art world has an enduring relationship with objects that vacillates between approval of their inescapable commodification and antagonism toward their fetishistic potential.'

In the New Museum of Contemporary Art's inaugural exhibition *Unmonumental: The Object in the 21st Century*, in 2007, the curators aspired to create a show that reflected contemporary sculptural practices.

Detecting a global trend towards the fragmentary and contingent in some of the strongest sculpture being made today, they are presenting work that reflects the extreme delicacy and fragility of life in the 21st century, "Unmonumental" is about a world in pieces and a parallel impulse in art making. Phillips (2007, p.7)

The illuminating commentaries in the catalogue point to work that has moved away from a celebration of the permanent. These contemporary sculptors have rejected the traditional materials and processes of carving and casting to work with matter that is provisional, and according to Smith (2007, p.184) 'structurally precarious'. In tracing a history of monumentalism in sculptural practice, from the grandiose memorial through modernism, and minimalism, Gioni (2007, p.65) identifies a monumentality in the installation art of the late 20th-century that points to a language of instant interconnection and spectacle. What he sees in the 21st-century work is a 'sculpture of fragments, a debased, precarious, trembling form.' Gioni describes practices with uncertain and fluid definitions of the object. Re-appropriating the processes of assemblage the artists place alongside found objects, artificial facsimiles, second-hand images, detritus, waste and natural things. Memorial in these artists' work is reframed from the monument to 'exist in a multiplicity of different temporalities.' (p.72) It is a view of history that challenges any single truth.

Hoptman (2007, p.138) believes the most interesting contemporary sculptors are the 'mixers, mashers, and sewers-together, the cobblers of irreproducible one-offs.' Implying, that in the commonality of fragmented assemblage there is no unified opinion. 'Style is just another collage element.' (p. 138)

The delicate, haunting work of Nobuko Tsuchiya, is one example of a sculpture showing fragility that seems to just hold together. I find her work exquisite and totally beguiling. A carefully placed construction of "almost" recognisable objects that suggests a function but defeats naming. These are parts of things, fractured, incongruent, yet nothing is random, everything is deliberately placed, we must pay attention to the details. Her materials appear used, but they are definitely not rubbish. (Fig. 42 - 43)

Mike Pinnington (2020, p.32) describes her work speaking of an inner world through combining and recombining physical and imaginative objects to construct a narrative embedded in the objects. 'Life's flotsam and jetsam stands in for memories, dreams and almost unknowable cryptically translated thoughts.'

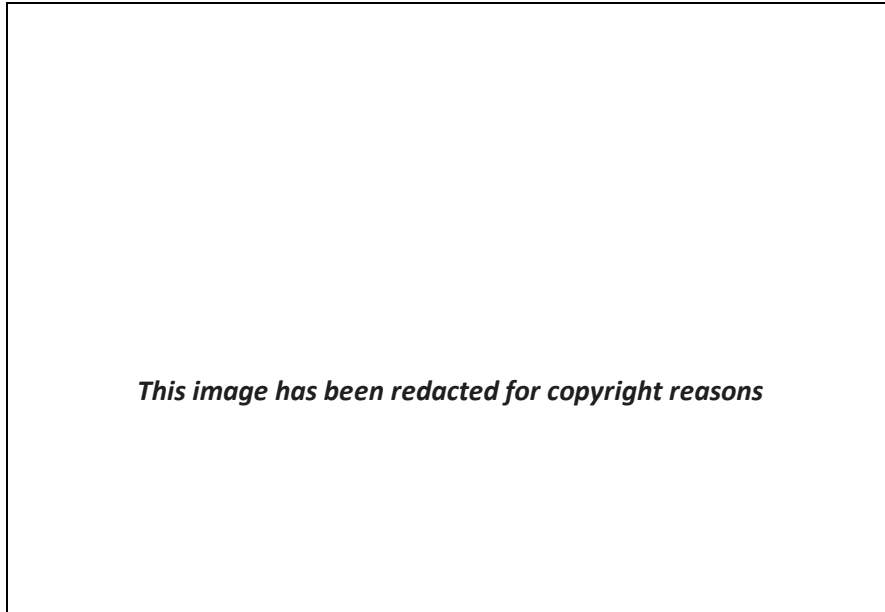


Figure 42. Tsuchiya, *11th Dimension Project*, 2011
(mixed media)

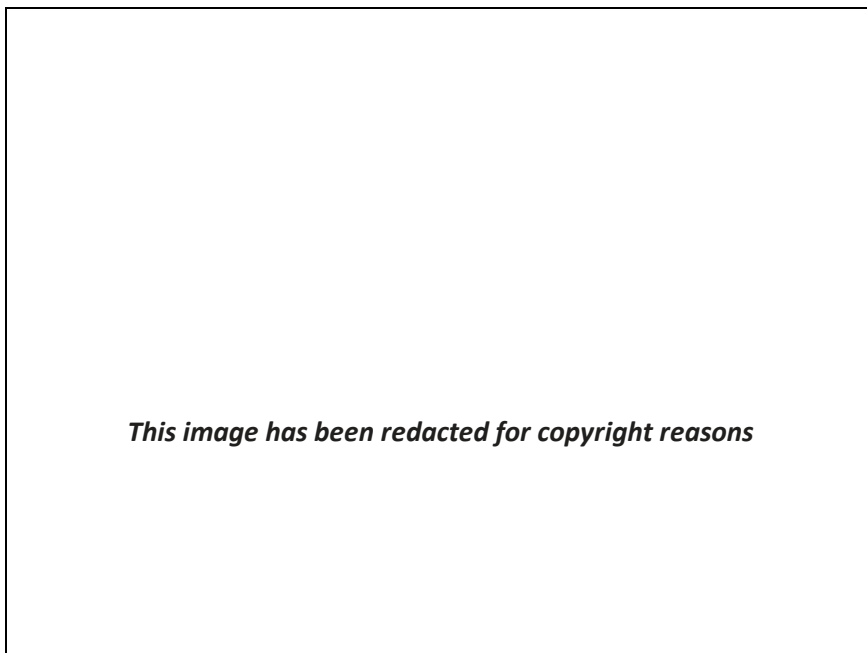


Figure 43. Tsuchiya, *Jerry Fish Principle*, 2005
(mixed media)

Kristen Morgan works with unfired clay creating life-size facsimiles of everyday objects. The natural drying out and decay after construction gives the illusion of something ancient. Her work is both a memorial to the object and an abstraction through the process of degradation. (Fig. 44 - 45)

This image has been redacted for copyright reasons

Figure 44. Kristen Morgin, *Topolino*, 2003
(unfired clay, wood, wire, cement)

This image has been redacted for copyright reasons

Figure 45. Kristen Morgin, *Carousel Horses*, 2006
(wood, clay, paint)

OBJECT RELATIONS

My work within the cabinets, themselves objects, onto and into which I project my phantasy, have become containers for other objects, and a web of interrelationships is alluded to and stirred up. It is with these thoughts in mind that I researched 'object relations' in psychoanalysis.

The assumption is that we start life as an un-integrated formless being, and in our helplessness, need the Mother's care to gently separate from the symbiotic blissful state within her body. The Mother is therefore, the primal object of each child's attention. With the Mother's sensitivity to her child's needs, she nurtures a sense of security— but inevitably her response isn't perfect. Within this imperfection, a child's vulnerability and conflicting emotional responses are aroused. In the battle between anger, love and hate, our perception of a benign or malignant world is formed.

Freud believed that the trauma and shame surrounding painful childhood memories, leads to their repression or denial - the pressure to suppress creates the unconscious drives recognisable in neurotic and pathological behaviours in adult life. Artistic practice is often cast as sublimation - an outlet for the uncontainable energy of the psyche. Melanie Klein (1882 - 1960), a Freudian child and adult psychoanalyst, placed the very earliest experiences of separation at the core of human frailty. She observed that while playing, children interacted with their toys with kindness, aggression or guilt. Her analysis of their behaviour pointed to the fundamental significance in the emotional development of this primal attachment to the (m)other, the external object of desire, and placed fear, anxiety, depression, love, guilt, and reparation at the centre of the earliest formation of the psyche.

In the very beginning, he loves his mother at the time that she is satisfying his needs for nourishment, alleviating his feelings of hunger...but when the child is hungry and his desires are not gratified, or when he is feeling bodily pain or discomfort...hatred and aggressive feelings are aroused and he becomes dominated by impulses to destroy the very person who is the object of all his desires and who in his mind is linked up with everything he experiences- good and bad. (Klein, 1999, p.307)

In defence against the anxiety of this ambivalent emotional landscape, and the organising of an as yet undifferentiated self and (m)other/object, the child splits the object as well as its brittle ego into good and bad parts. Unconscious responses follow this splitting; unbearable feelings of aggression and guilt are 'projected' onto and attributed to the other. Or they are 'introjected', which is the unconscious process of internalising unassailable fragmented parts of the self or other into the psyche.

Segal (2008) interprets Klein's theory of reparation, the hope of restoring the good object, as the 'basis for creative activities, which are rooted in the infant's wish to restore and recreate his lost happiness, his lost internal objects, and the harmony of his internal world.' (p.92) This complex matrix of 'object relations' are re-played in all further encounters and relationships – and in psychoanalysis are fundamental to the Freudian analytic encounter, where primal experiences are transferred and played out with the analyst.

And if Klein's writings offer a particular purchase on this imaginative exercise, it is because she ventures to describe the origins of subjectivity, the very process of its emergence. For the question Klein asks is, in effect, what is it like to be at the beginning of life? (Nixon, 2008, p.179)

The transitional space then is never fixed. The objects as they travel through carry multiple meanings and the potential for transformation. Abraham and Torok (1994, p.8) suggest that introjection is the driving force of psychic life. Enabling growth and 'psychic nourishment', (p.14) Introjection is vital for the lifelong process of acquisition and assimilation, and engagement with the outside world, 'encompassing our capacity to create through work, play, fantasy, thought, imagination and language.' (p.14)

While carrying out this research, I reflected on the work of three artists who each test the conceptual limits of the object. Through revealing the vibrant tension between what is real, imagined, found or recreated in their work, Louise Bourgeois, Cathie Wilkes and Cornelia Parker express their unique relationship with the world of objects.

I have continually revisited the art of Louise Bourgeois (1911-2010), and the wealth of material written about her enduring practice, and find something new, unexpected and inspiring every-time.

Throughout her long career, Bourgeois created multiple reincarnations of her identity as an artist working through different media and forms. Her work manipulates and shifts the tension between abstraction and figuration. Bourgeois was fascinated by and immersed in the theories of subjectivity and psychoanalysis in the hope of developing a deeper understanding of her own emotional life. Her personal experience of psychoanalysis and theoretical research became symbiotic with her creative practice. As Kuspit (2012, p.25) explains, 'one might say that thinking psychoanalytically gave her the alchemical ability to turn her leaden feelings of deprivation and emptiness into creative gold.' Her work expressed clear analogies to Freudian and Kleinian ideas of sexual repression, longings, aggression and anxiety. An exhibition of her work 'The Return of the Oppressed' curated by Phillip Larratt-Smith at the Foundation PROA in Buenos Aires in 2011 explicitly focused on the,

...constant presence of psychoanalysis as a force of inspiration and a space of exploration in her life and work...The Ghost of the father, echoes of infancy, autobiographical imagination, motherhood and hysteria, are all present in the exhibit. (Larratt-Smith, 2011, p.3)

She admitted that she was forever condemned to revisit traumatic memories from her childhood. Schwenger, (2006), believes there is something in the tension of existential grief for the primal lost object, perceived as an internal empty space, that inspires the creation of transformational objects. He describes an 'art of melancholia'.

The very dynamic of representation involves loss, an absent object preceding its replication in the medium. If this object is not always physical - for art's object may be a concept of the work to be executed - it is no less lost in the process of the very labour by which it was found. (p.14)

He acknowledges (p.14) that melancholia may not just be the price of artistic process but the artistic aim, the object. Through her creative experiments, Bourgeois searched for the three dimensional and metaphorical equivalents to the psychological states of fear, ambivalence, compulsion, guilt, aggression and withdrawal. Searle (2010) believed, 'Her art was one of transformations, of ferocious vulnerability and tender violence.' (p.14)

Her sculptural series *The Lairs* focus on early life experience and the beginning of subjectivity. These hanging, collapsed, and simple forms have a primal power of expression. The objects suggest womb like structures, nests, caves or underground burrows. There are holes through which the eye can penetrate. As Nixon (2008) suggests, in Kleinian psychoanalytic theory an object relation is formed 'at the interface of an inside and outside that do not (yet) exist.' (p.176) and the young child moves freely through this porous borderline. (Fig.46)

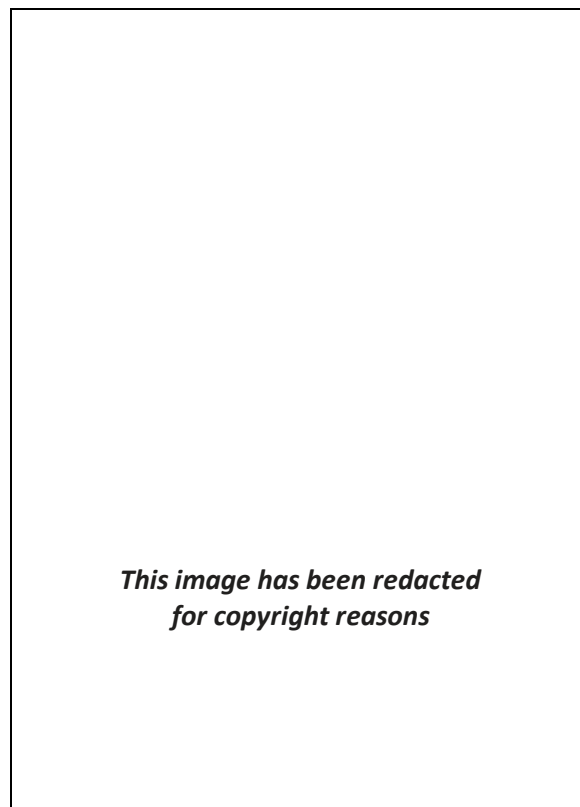


Figure 46. Louise Bourgeois, *Fée Couturière*. 1963
(mixed media)

These structural ideas were prefigured in earlier drawings and paintings where Bourgeois presents the naked female body with the head and torso encased in a house – doors and windows suggesting viewing holes, entrances and exits. (Fig. 47) The image, a feminist critique on domestic entrapment, also shows the body, like a metaphorical object to communicate an internal psychological state. It is interesting for me to see the evolution of her practice from figuration in drawing to more abstract experiments in visceral form, that later assimilate and become part of assemblages.

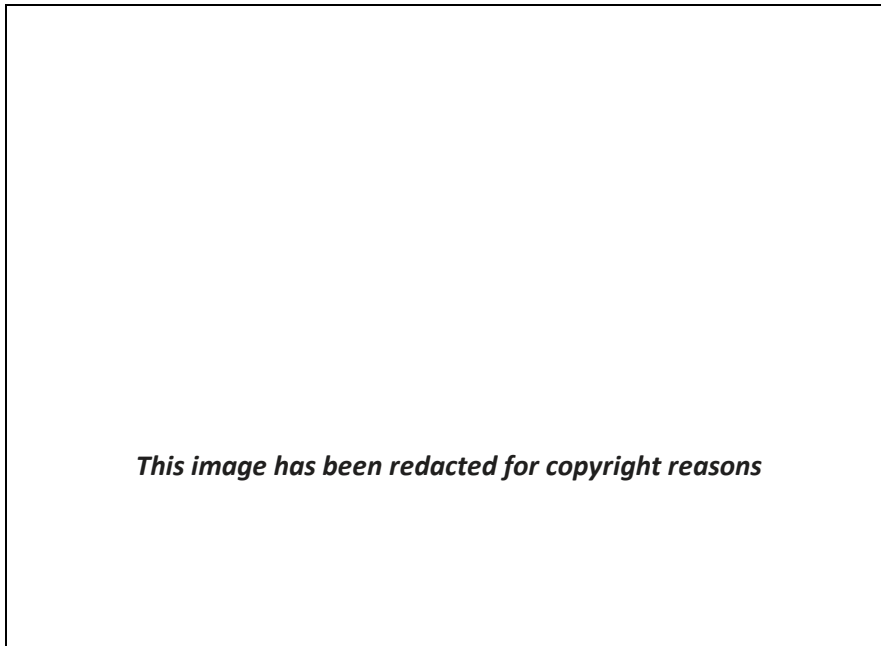


Figure 47. Louise Bourgeois, *Femme Maison*, 1946-47
(oil and ink on linen)

In the light of working on my cabinets, I am particularly intrigued by the amalgamation of semiotics that appears in this later work. From the 1990s, she created a series of installation pieces called *The Cells*, (Fig. 48 - 52) which express a psychological world where past and present coexist. Their encasement in structures of interlocking doors, panels and windows, or more open, cage-like spaces, are reminiscent of the *Femme Maison* paintings and *Lair* sculptures, where permeability is implied. As Baere (2015) describes, there is an 'eroticism at play; the views oscillate between attraction and withdrawal, with hints of penetration.' (p.56) Here is also the potential claustrophobia and agoraphobia of the cell – a tension between entrapment and protection. The title offers 'multiple references to environments of isolation and containment suggested by the cell-like structures...prison, hospital, madhouse, convent.' (Morris, 2007, p.236) They point to a psyche that has internalized and transformed the complexities of the world of objects outside the body, to create a rich metaphorical visual language. But the work is never literal.

Griselda Pollock describes the wondrous mystery of the *Cells* -

If anything is truly psychoanalytical, it is the realization that there is always something beyond the obvious, something ungraspable. We may try to get in touch with the unconscious, but we can never know it. It's "excess" to

cognitive reason can only be traced into visibility in coded and displaced terms, as in dreams. (2015, p.64)

Within the Cells, are carefully placed domestic objects, that sit alongside more abstract forms that Bourgeois has constructed, alluding to autobiographical events, places and family relations. Spector (2015) suggests that Bourgeois conjures her past to 'eradicate it from her consciousness. The work thus exists at the intersection between repression and de-sublimation.' (p. 74) The work vividly confronts the viewer with her themes of latent aggression, childhood memories, family relations, home, architectural spaces, fear and anxiety, exposure and secrecy. In all the *Cells* the fragmented body is present. The Kleinian theory of part-objects, invested with the projected, split off parts of the psyche that are intolerable, come into mind.

In 2016 I saw the exhibition 'Structures of Existence' at Louisiana Museum of Contemporary Art in Denmark. Twenty-five of Bourgeois' *Cells* were exhibited - the scale of the work is human - each cell draws you into a space charged with the memories of home, family and psychological pain. But there is also the pleasure of being absorbed in the details, searching for clues, enjoying the intimacy.

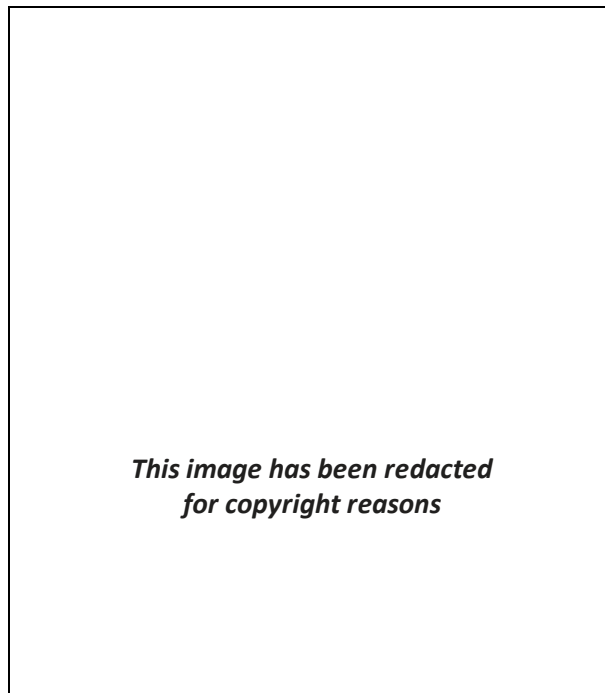


Figure 48. Louise Bourgeois, *Choisy*, 1993
(mixed media)



Figure 49. Louise Bourgeois, *Cell IX*, 1999
(mixed media)

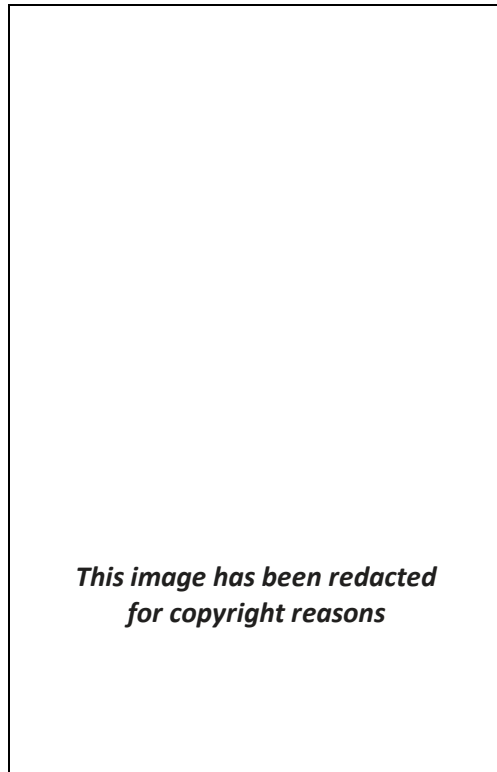


Figure 50. Louise Bourgeois, *Cell VII*, 1998
(mixed media)

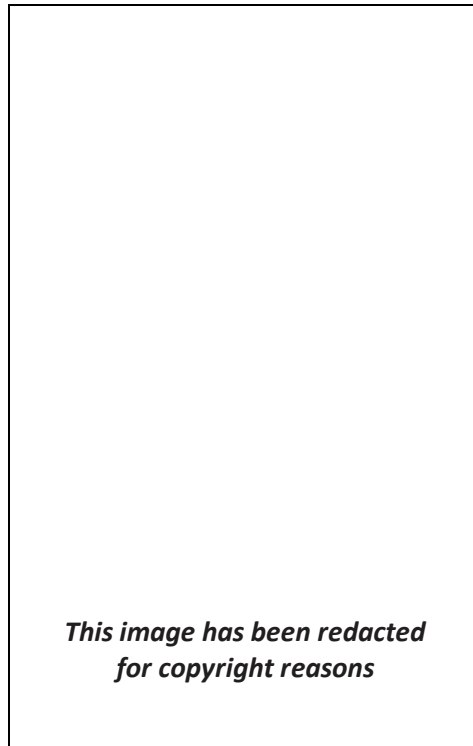


Figure 51. Louise Bourgeois, *Cell V*, 1991
(mixed media)

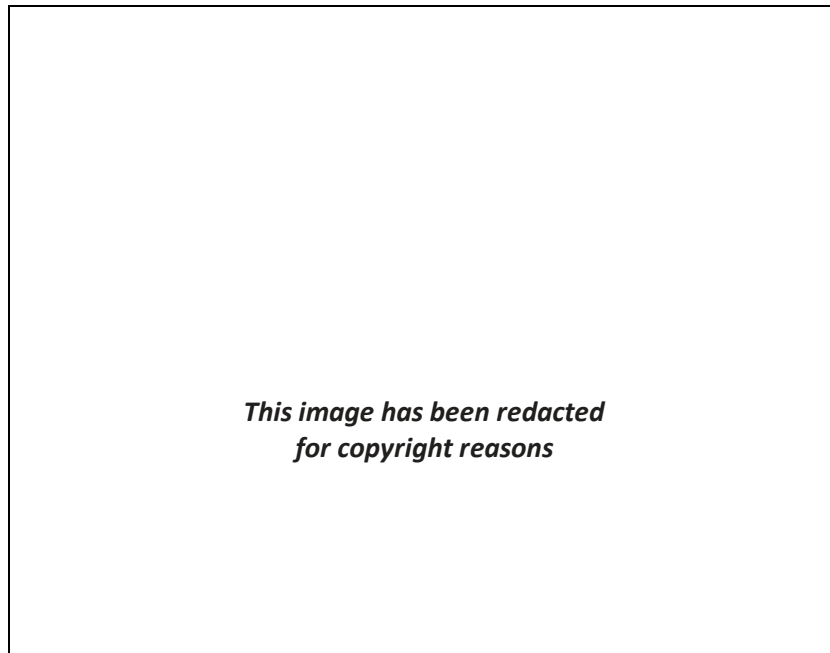


Figure 52. Louise Bourgeois, *Cell: Red Room (Parents)*, 1994
(mixed media)

As Racz (2015) observes 'Bourgeois was interested in the links between one's physical home and psychological dwelling, and it can be argued that she remained at least partially trapped within the houses of her past'. (p.88)

Bollas (1992) describes an ever-evolving subjectivity, transformed through object relations, and lived out through an interrelationship between our projection into the world of object/other and introjection of the object into our psyche. This constant oscillation and negotiation between inner and outer worlds form a fluid and fragile identity;

As we constantly endow objects with psychic meaning, we therefore walk amidst our own significance, and sometimes long after we have invested a thing, we encounter it again, releasing its meaning...This is not a conscious intention but a profoundly unconscious instantiation of the self into the object world.' (Bollas,1992, p.13)

However, a purely psychoanalytical reading overstates the subject's encounter with the object and limits the art object's capacity to engage an in-between liminal space where it is not so much the subject's psychic drives as the object's evocative forces that coerce. This intermediary area echoes the porosity of the transitional space. Hudek's (2014) interpretation of Winnicott's theory describes the transitional object as 'more than a thing in itself', beyond the subject - a dynamic force in constant negotiation between inner and outer worlds and other object relations.

In attempting to communicate a specific memory or emotion through the presentation of objects, I should be aware of the object's inherent resonances. As Hansen (2008, p.18) says in his article *Things and Objects*, 'the power of things is that they refuse to conform completely to our intensions and interpretations, to become the means to an end – even when we have designed them ourselves'. The viewer also brings their individual sensibilities and meanings to the project. We surround ourselves with 'things' invested with our memories, and yet they remain stubbornly indifferent to us.

The toy, like the relational art object, is unpredictable; there is no telling when it will lose its aura and lapse into thingness, or, on the contrary change from mere thing to object of ceaseless wonder. (Hudek, 2014, p.22)

THE VIBRANT OBJECT

So, although my ideas begin in the subjective inner world, the potential vibrancy of objects outside of my design may push my work forward. Most theories of the object have focused attention on the relational, entangled web of interconnections from a human viewpoint – emphasizing the significance of ‘context, interaction, linkage, and difference’ (Olsen, 2013, p.154) Relationality has remained the unchallenged means to understanding. Olsen goes on to say ‘Something rather crucial about things’ being may actually be lost if the principals of semiotics (and relational theories at large) are ruthlessly applied to them.’ (2013, p.154) He does not suggest discarding relational theory but proposes that according to Latour ‘relational theory has already performed its historical mission and is now burdening us with its own excess’ (2005, quoted in Olsen, 2013, pp.131-132) I am reminded of the ‘object,(m)other’ that remains elusive and outside our control and full knowledge.

Objects have a different glamour to them in the current moment and, as such, they are everywhere in art, and everywhere presented in a way that asserts their status as ‘objects’. (McClean-Ferris, 2013, para. 1)

This sense of the autonomy of the object resonates with ideas presented by the American philosopher Graham Harman in his captivating lecture, ‘Objects and the Arts’ delivered in March 2011 at the Institute of Contemporary Art. He is the leading figure associated with the metaphysical movement object-oriented ontology (OOO). Relational metaphors are embedded in the semiotics of language when we speak of things and it may be, as Harman suggests, that through artistic practice a new language and understanding can be explored. Growing out of the speculative realism movement in philosophy, object-oriented ontology aims to bring the things-in-themselves back into the discussion of reality – out of a relational view that cannot separate human from the world.

Harman (2012) claims that an object’s ontology exists beyond human analysis, beyond its matter, its constituent parts, or how we come to know it through our encounter. The reality of the object is withdrawn from us, is always in excess of what we can know of it, is something deeper than when encountered by humans. It is this

‘space’ beyond our conscious grasp, which Harman believes Art can elaborate. ‘We can only be hunters of objects,’ (2012) he says. I am seduced by the poetry of this mystery. ‘Artists, after all, are people who spend their time investing objects with meaning, so the notion that the objects themselves may have something to say naturally strikes a chord’ (Kerr, 2016)

The powerfully haunting quality in the installation work of Cathy Wilkes which I first saw at the Tate Liverpool in 2015, (Fig. 53) resonates with the thinking behind OOO. Her carefully placed figures and objects suggest the aftermath of some event. But nothing is easily read.

Wilkes’s objects behave in a sly combination that hints at narrative and then retracts it, resulting in a sense of suspension and emotional separation... Something here has been stolen, something the owner didn’t know she had, and the everyday items around her are made to stand in for and attempt to express what’s missing. (Smyth, 2008)

Cherry Smyth’s description evocatively recalls my response on walking amongst her objects on display. Wilkes’ lightness of touch is apparent. It is the things in themselves that carry weight. Her pallet is muted – objects and figures do not wrestle for our attention, each item however small is equally a potential clue. We cannot rely on our first impression or the mere appearance of things – here new associations and meanings are created. Byers (2012, p.31) describes how ‘The physical facts of her installations and paintings are in constant conversation with what cannot be visualized or even fully felt’. Her precisely orchestrated arrangements demand our contemplation. Wilkes has talked about her work as an encouragement to look, to pay attention, to visualize beyond the confines of the visible. Nixon (2015, p.2) describes the objects, spaces and interrelationships as a ‘resolution - of the elaboration of a nucleus of affects and ideas of dream-work (Traumarbeit) unravelled in three-dimensions’.

Our focus shifts over the figures, manufactured goods, and used or dysfunctional items. There is a sense of a fluctuating and fluid time scale that adds to the ambivalence of the object’s fixed point in the room and in relation to each other.

This 'back and forth of obfuscation and explicit functionality' Byers says (2012, p.31) relates to the ever-present ghost permeating the objects and the gaps between, as if something has been taken away.

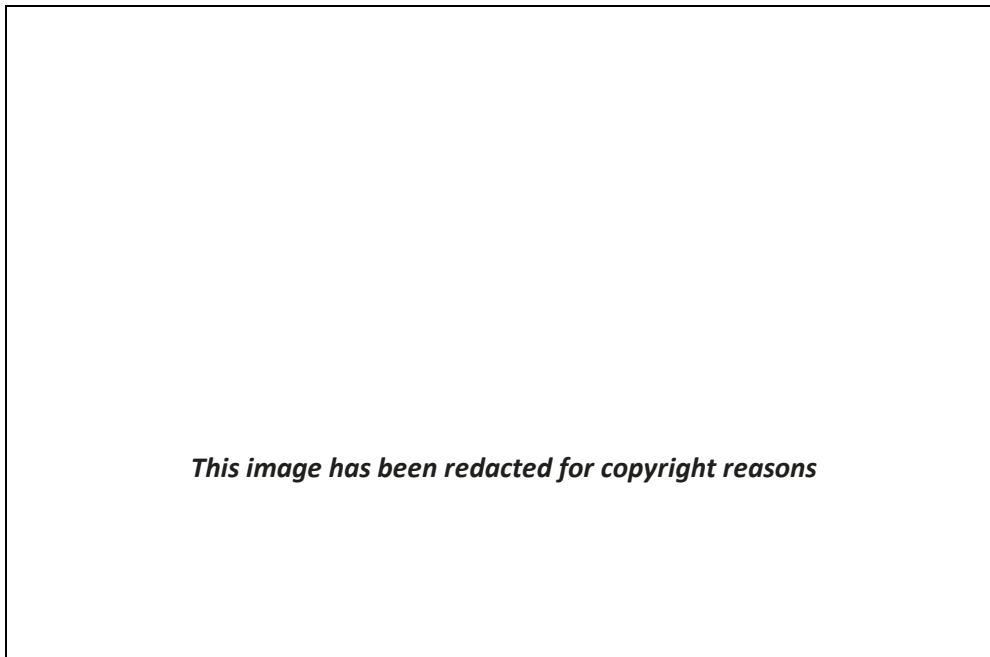


Figure 53. Cathie Wilkes, *Untitled*, 2015
(mixed media)

I sensed the stillness of an absence, a lingering loss and noticed how visitors moved slowly almost reverently around the vast space of the gallery. Wilkes has said her work is inhabited by both the living and the dead and I felt visceral, unnerving disorientation.

There is both materialization and disappearance of physical things and a natural retreat from material reality. In her work the uncanny is apparent and an existential questioning in the air. (Kollektiv, 2009 p.4)

Object-oriented philosophy suggests that although all objects, including humans, enter into surface relations with each other, 'they retain a dark hidden core that is outside of all relation.' (Walsh, 2013, p.11)

THE DOUBLE-LIFE OF OBJECTS

Cornelia Parker is an artist whose relationship to the object is fundamental to her practice. In February 2016 at the Freud museum Cornelia Parker and the psychoanalyst Darian Leader were in conversation, discussing her work under the title, 'Avoiding the Object (On Purpose)'. In her hands, the object is transformed, alchemically, metaphorically and visually to reveal another potentiality in its life, a hidden depth that adds to the complexity of the object's autonomy. Blazwick (2013, p.13) claims that Parker's work points towards object-orientated ontology as 'an urgent, relevant claim for the competency of objects to transform, without loss of their singularity at either a philosophical or an empirical level.' (Blazwick, 2013 p.13)

Her transformed objects reveal their properties beyond human need and history. She reminds us of the mutability of context and time and an ever-shifting world beyond certainty and human control. Materials and substances contradict their expected qualities by these altered states and re-presentations.

Parker works with found objects, distinct from the readymade by being unique and irreplaceable and already imbued with history. The reference to *found* implies that the object was once lost. When a found object is chosen a connection is already made with the subjectivity of an artist. But Parker does not rely on the fetishistic or sentimental in the found object, 'her genius lies,' notes Blazwick (2013, p.32) 'in the elasticity she brings to its semantic, historical and material properties.' She pushes the objects' metaphorical potential to the brink of totally obliterating its former being. Here is a tipping point – beyond which annihilation or absurdity threatens. As in Bourgeois' work, there is aggression and destruction in the process, but in Parker's work, it is less a tactile immediate process than a mechanical procedure that happens before the resurrection of the object can occur.

In her most well-known piece, *Cold Dark Matter: An exploded View (1991)* (Fig. 54) she organized for the army to explode a garden shed in which she had placed the donated contents from the sheds of friends – old bikes, books, empty paint cans, garden tools and detritus collected from car boot sales. After the controlled explosion, she collected the fragments to reassemble, hung from the galleries' ceiling– a light bulb placed in the middle of the floating pieces creating shadows that further expanded

the image outwards into the space. Parker, quoted by Blazwick, (2013) describes that 'as the objects were suspended one by one, they began to lose their aura of death and appeared re-animated, in limbo...as if it was re-exploding or coming back together'. (p.50) The result is an echo of the event, a memory of a moment, recreated.

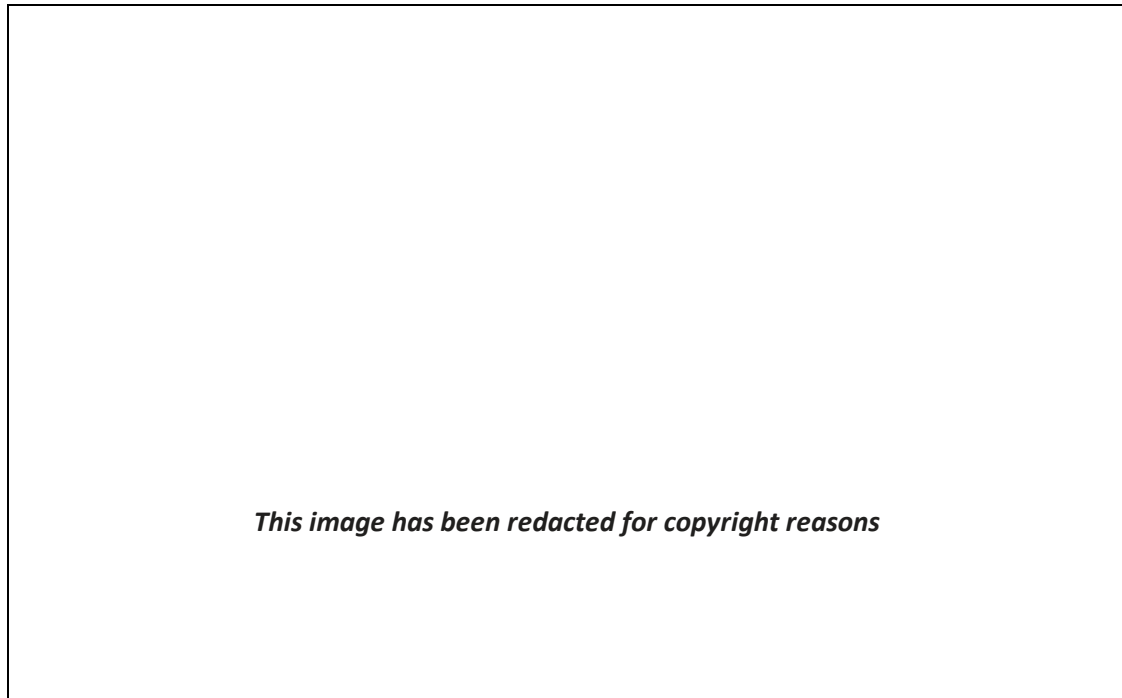


Figure 54. Cornelia Parker, *Cold Dark Matter: An Exploded View*: 1991
(mixed media)

Suspension is part of Parker's language. In the echo and reverberation after the act is the pause – an unsettling transformation in progress – a kind of holding of the breath, life in limbo. Leader describes this resonance as the 'double life' of objects. 'These recuperations not only show objects in a new state but also introduce the idea of an object as a change of state.' (2004, p. 72) Here what is seen is the moment of change itself, of transformation suspended.

In other work, we see the before and after of the object's transformation simultaneously, in the process of inversion, the 'recuperation and reflection, the discarded and the double...this is more complex than a world of contraries since Parker is showing us how each object is not just opposed to its contrary but *contains* it'. (p.73) In showing us this shadow of the object, a new subjective relationship with

the transformed object is created – we are seeing not just the transformed conditions, but ‘objects in the very process of becoming objects.’ (p.74)

Parker creates an empty, negative space where the object once was. The lost object is not quite forgotten or destroyed but, in the shards and fragments is resurrected – this recalls the transformational potential of Winnicott’s transitional phenomena. He stressed that it wasn’t so much the transitional object that was transitional but the space – ‘not the thing but where the thing was that mattered.’ (Leader, 2004, p.75)

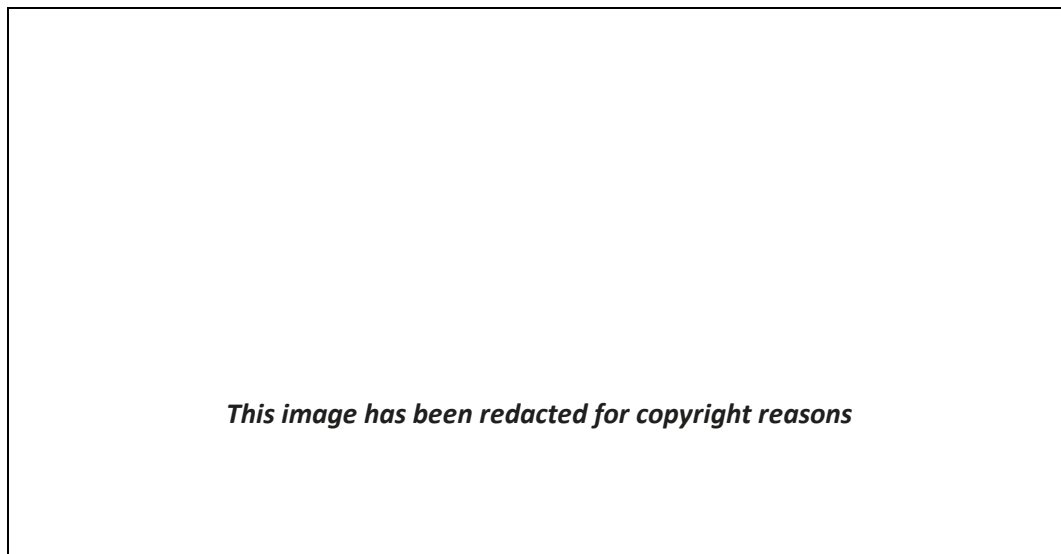


Figure 55. Cornelia Parker, *Thirty Pieces of Silver*, 1988
(silver plated plates and cutlery)

In *Thirty Pieces of Silver* 1988 (Fig. 55) Parker collected silver-plated objects. ‘The aspirational qualities of silver plate are a manifestation of the desire for bourgeois respectability.’ (Racz, 2015, p.166) She then flattened them to ‘squash the bourgeois pretensions out of the objects,’ (p.166) with a steamroller and arranged the objects in 30 discs shaped groups, suspended from the ceiling. They appear to hover a few centimetres above the floor – a ghostly levitation. The biblical reference in the title alluding to money, greed, betrayal, to death and resurrection. Parker has said this piece points to materiality and its inverse of anti-matter. These objects have been emptied out, their projection in space removed, their function altered forever. The void invites speculation – ‘the way in which we absorb it through consciousness and mediate it through subjectivity and memory.’ (Blazwick, 2013, p.106)

In looking at these artists' creative engagement with objects, an exciting matrix of possibilities emerges. On the border of these encounters is an ineffable space, where the shadow of the object is cast. In their hands, these artists confront, fill, expose or transform this void. Through a mediation between the edges of self and the object/other subjectivity is enlivened. However, the concept of a 'me' negotiated through an experience of the 'not me', is troubling when I experience a sense of being haunted, colonised, or invaded by others. This dynamic is a constant process of discovery and mediation, present in the psychoanalytic encounter and all relations.

I was now working towards exhibiting the entire collection of cabinets. *The Tears of Things* was presented in the Safehouse in June 2016, a joint exhibition with a colleague, Richard Sharples. We named the exhibition, *Time and Again*. The gallery occupies an empty Victorian terrace house in Peckham Rye, South London, gutted and dilapidated, the building retains only traces of its domestic past, a site that resonated with my work. The research I had undertaken encouraged me to reflect further on the object of the cabinet itself, the frame acting as a mutable conveyor of thought. Retaining their former function for the display and preservation of precious domestic objects highlights what is placed on show, and what is excluded or slips out, exposing the psychological dramas of domestic life. There are both crafted and found material, a confusion of scales, shifts between fantasy and reality, the object and the thing, and the potential for the objects to be transformed in a new context. I created three more cabinets each exploiting these dynamics.

CRACKED, (Fig. 56 - 58) was filled with white china plates and jugs that I had ritualistically smashed and painstakingly repaired. This display case was exposing inherited trauma, on the bottom shelf remain piles of broken pieces, things beyond repair. I made no effort to hide the fine lines of the cracks and find their fragility and delicate patterns evocative. Although repaired the crockery is useless. Dirty liquid formed a black puddle on the floor, something uncontainable and shameful had leaked out. In feedback, the memory, repetition, and scars of past trauma were recognised, not only in the final image but through the painstaking process itself. Having the single motif of the repaired crockery, without more illustrative explanation had stirred multiple interpretations and had an emotional impact.



Figure 56. Ali Darke, *CRACKED*, 2016
(wooden cabinet, plates, jugs, acrylic paint)



Figure 57 - 58. Ali Darke, *CRACKED*, 2016

In the fifth cabinet, *CORRIDOR*, I reproduced the staircase from my home in miniature, reminiscent of a doll's house. In this model the stairs and doorways lead nowhere - there are no rooms or resting places. Placing this model inside the furniture inverted the space. Reproducing my current home as a miniature is familiar but at the same time uncannily strange. 'The home both contains us and is within us.' (Racz, b2015.p.2)

I was invoking Freud's notion of the Uncanny, or the *unheimlich*, (unhomely), of the German original. The uncanny experience is the unsettling, weird shudder felt when a memory impression from the past, fleetingly disrupts the present, or a premonition of the future is glimpsed. As Freud wrote in 1919, 'the uncanny is that species of the frightening that goes back to what was once well known and had long been familiar.' (p.124) Freud himself struggled to define the uncanny, which, in the English translation loses an aspect of the original German, 'unheimlich', or un-homely. The homely in 'un-heimlich', includes the idea of a concealed or, secretive space, while also conveying something unfamiliar disturbing the familiar. As Vidler (1992) points out, Freud's use of the German word 'unheimlich' allows the definition to grow from its apparent opposite so that the element of something hidden returning is implied. The word uncanny brings a similar derivation from a word-opposite - 'canny' meaning knowledge or skill - defines the 'un-canny' as beyond knowledge; it carries the spectral with it. The feeling of uncanniness brings an insecurity and disorientation, a sense of being invaded by something out of place. It troubles time and space, and eludes definition. The uncanny, Royle (2003, p.16) tells us contains an essence beyond, outside, 'a maddening supplement, something unpredictable and additionally strange happening in, and to, what is being stated, described or defined.' And, he believes that psychoanalysis is itself uncanny, as it lays bare what is hidden, 'it brings to light things that perhaps should have remained hidden, or repressed.' (p.24)

The Home, Kuhn (2015) suggests, whether real or symbolically presented in art, acts as a kind of framing container. There are rich metaphorical possibilities inherent in the architecture of the home; of shelter and containment, walls of separation or imprisonment, windows looking out, doors to open, corridors and stairs to connect, hidden spaces, rooms for congregation and solitude, exclusion and inclusion. I am

reminded of Bourgeois' choice of old doors or wire mesh structures in 'The Cells' that offer the possibility of penetration and porosity.

Whenever the human being has found the slightest shelter: we shall see the imagination build 'walls' of impalpable shadows, comfort itself with the illusion of protection – or, just the contrary, tremble behind thick walls, mistrust the staunchest ramparts...an entire past comes to dwell in a new house. (Bachelard, 1964, p.5)

My ideas for this cabinet had begun in drawings, (Fig 59 - 61) but being unsure how to complete the model, I left it painted white. I exhibited the cabinet in a group exhibition 'Interior' in the AVA Gallery at UEL. In a work-in-progress seminar, it was criticised for lacking a 'collision', some tension that would bring the piece alive. In retrospect I can see some significant qualities of the drawings had got lost in the process of precision model making; the fracturing in one image and the distortion in the other.

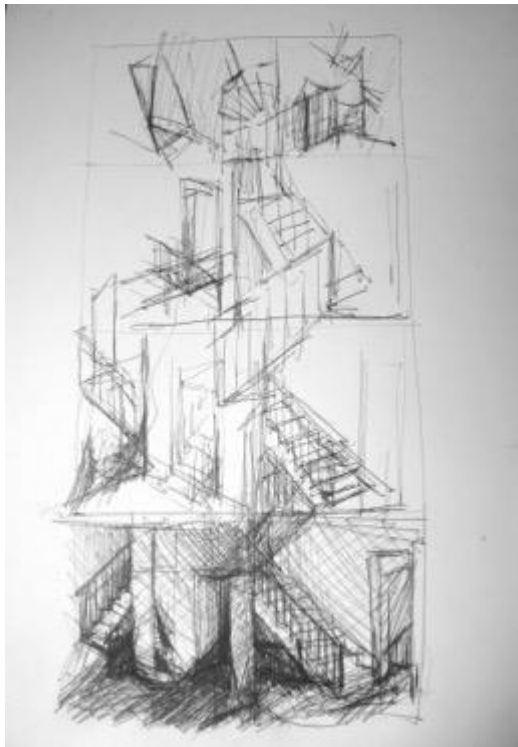


Figure 59 - 60. Ali Darke, *CORRIDOR*, 2015



Figure 61. Ali Darke, *CORRIDOR*, 2015
(mixed media)

I sat with the cabinet unchanged for a long time. I wanted to re-introduce the sense of disintegration from the drawings. Eventually, I began scorching one half of the model. I added miniature suitcases and packing boxes - any inhabitants had fled, this was an inhospitable building. (Fig. 62 - 66) My solution might have been too literal, and adding the miniature objects moved it away from expressing something more enigmatic. But there is also resonance in the miniature house and the potential as an object for the subversions of the cultural associations of 'home'. Perry (2013) describes how the doll's house is often a gendered toy, a place for young girls through playing to assimilate domesticity. The doll's house is also associated with representations of 'social aspiration and domestic fantasies.' (p.77)



Figure 62. *My Staircase*, 2016



Figure 63. Ali Darke, *CORRIDOR*, 2015
(mixed media)



Figure 64 - 65. Ali Darke, *CORRIDOR*, 2016
(mixed media)



Figure 66, Ali Darke, *CORRIDOR*, 2016
(mixed media)

The final piece *ONE WAY OR ANOTHER*, consisted of two cabinets co-joined by a rope, expressing emotional states through the volume and weight of the containers themselves. (Fig. 67 - 68) I was thinking about the ambivalent manifestations of despair, the dread burden of depression and the longing for relief. The first cabinet lay on the floor, half filled with muddy water. Weighing it down it kept the other cabinet in the air suspended by the rope hanging from a pulley in the rafters. Half submerged in the water was a miniature rusty bed and mattress. The other cabinet was empty, only the basic framework remained. I was using the contrast between the volume of one, and the emptiness of the other to communicate, searching for a balance between a relational visual language of representation, and abstraction to convey things that are not necessarily visible but felt.



Figure 67. Ali Darke, *ONE WAY OR ANOTHER*, 2015
(mixed media)



Figure 68. Ali Darke, *TIME AND AGAIN*, 2015
(Exhibition View)

The exhibition received very positive feedback and it was satisfying to see the year's work together in one place, as a collection. Although the cabinets had not been conceived as a site-specific project the atmosphere of the venue complimented their presence. The Safehouse highlighted my work's connection to the home, as the site of a physical and psychological dwelling place. We all carry the physical traces within our bodies of the spaces we have lived in. 'We hold these material and physical memories within us, and so when viewing sculpture there is an instinctive dialogue with these internalised tactile, spatial and haptic knowledges' (Racz, 2015, p.2) It was interesting to follow this with exhibiting the cabinets in the Professional Doctorate Showcase at UEL. The gallery has grey concrete floors and white walls, and although less atmospheric, the cabinets could in fact behave more like containers, and less like furniture. Their identity was less fixed by the location. Feedback in the seminar led to discussion about the challenge to find the right balance in narrative detail when using found objects and representational models, that does not overpower the more evocative potential in less illustrative work.

In August 2016, I revisited the village of Psarades, in North Western Greece for another two-week residency, at the invitation of the University of Western Macedonia. It is the most beautiful, haunting landscape, that has witnessed the horrors of war and more recently a steady stream of refugees attempting to enter Europe across the borders from Albania or Macedonia. The scars of conflict are visible in the many abandoned villages and embedded in memories of blood-shed, loss and displacement. The project that we were invited to take part in was connected to this history and specifically to that of a local landmark, the cave of Kokkalis, hidden deep in the mountains. (Fig. 69) This unmarked site has become mythologised in the local community as a symbol of valour in the face of repression. It had been a refuge and makeshift hospital for the rebel fighters during the Greek civil war. On the day of our visit to the cave, we heard first-hand the traumatic memories of a local woman's childhood. She and her mother had escaped to the mountains during a raid on her nearby village. Those who stayed to defend their homes or couldn't escape were captured and massacred. She told of their fearful return, to find the bodies of their families and friends hanging in the trees. She wept silent tears as she spared no detail of the horrors she had witnessed.



Figure 69. *Kokkalis Cave*, 2015

The intension was to create an exhibition in the cave, but after much debate the Communist party were concerned that we might not preserve the integrity of the site. Instead we gained permission to clear some rooms in the village's abandoned school building, still full of desks, books and debris. It proved a perfect location. Being removed from the cave gave our work less specificity. To avoid the heat of the day I rose early every morning to walk. I found an old rotten shoe in the grass and by the end of the first week had collected nearly 100, in various stages of decay, dumped on the roadside or in the surrounding fields and pathways. These discarded shoes bore the signs of the feet that they had so intimately protected. As single shoes, they were fragments, and evoked a sense of loss. I painted them blue, the colour of the sky and lake, and window frames. Hung from the ceiling, the shoes acquired a ghostly weightlessness, and faint drift. Shoes are meant to ground us - a tool for walking. They were no longer objects but had made the transition to things beyond their original identity. Each shoe having been singled out for preservation, became re-valued and a memorial. I was pleased with the results - the piece was evocative and simple and captured a *feeling* of absence without illustrating it. Each rotting shoe had its own history and the simple transformation of paint and hanging them provoked new associations. Being in the centre of the village we could invite the local inhabitants to come to an event and I received wonderful feedback - people were moved by the work. (Figs. 70 - 71)



Figures 70 - 71. Ali Darke, *Blue Shoes of Psarades*, 2016
(shoes, paint, nylon fishing line)