



IMMUTABLE FRAGMENTS

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FRAGMENTS

ALEXIS SOUL-GRAY

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GEMMA BLACKSHAW

THE CUT-OUT WORLD

COLLAGE AS PLAY IN THE WORK
OF ALEXIS SOUL-GRAY

In the solo exhibition *Immutable Fragments* of 2023 at Bel Ami, painter Alexis Soul-Gray presented canvases which draw together the different, discombobulating parts that make up an inner, intrinsically girlish world. While the paintings are very much her own, I recognise them as mine too because of how they refer to the popular visual culture consumed by the girl and young woman of the 1950s, 60s, 70s and 80s. This, I realise, is our imaginary. When looking at Soul-Gray's paintings I am often disconcerted by what I suddenly recall, which may or may not be what is pictured, which often leads to a domino-effect of further, successive mental pictures: Judy Garland as the ruby-slipped Dorothy in *The Wizard of Oz*, the disproportionately large doll of Enid Blyton's *Naughty Amelia Jane!*, the drawing of the Laura Ashley dress I desired on the paper packet of the McCall's pattern my mother never bought from the sewing shop, its cut being 'too complicated'. I look at Soul-Gray's paintings because I am interested in what was and what remains 'complicated' in the experience of girlhood and young or new motherhood, and in the cut-out processes which are as material as they are mental. Soul-Gray makes this complexity manageable, if only for a little while.

Soul-Gray's paintings are cut-out worlds, made, destroyed and made again through many processes, including collage. While some of her collages become paintings, it would be a mistake to categorise them as purely preparatory work; rather, they are a genre of their own, deserving close attention. I squint to look at three leaping women in coloured, knitted vests, a baby new to standing perched upon a branch, a blind-folded girl in black patent shoes, a bow, a brooch, a bloom. These are just some of the often disquieting parts that make up Soul-Gray's collages. Scissored from their original sources, the fragments accumulate over time. They are jumbled together in an old tin for sweets, taken out, considered and put away, just as my own children take out, consider and put away their own ever proliferating and untidy collections of toys. The paper-parts that will become collage are Soul-Gray's metaphor for the cluttered mind: 'of what it holds on to, of what it spits out.'¹ They are also how she too plays, not only with materials, but also with memory and free association, processing something of the doubled anxiety of losing a mother early in life and of becoming a mother to two girls, while engaging in her own elaborate form of snipped and stuck make-believe.



Alexis Soul-Gray, *Immutable Fragments* at Bel Ami, 2023, exhibition views

To collage is to paste. Deriving from the French verb ‘coller’ meaning to stick, and noun ‘papier collé’ meaning pasted paper, it describes the art of gluing paper cut-outs onto a surface. Historically, collage is associated realms of the feminine, the familial and the domestic. A craft of careful work, an activity which folded into letter writing, pattern cutting, album making and photograph collecting, a way of whiling time, collage was an often-intensive pursuit for those women able to engage in leisure in the nineteenth century. In the exhibition *Playing with Pictures: The Art of Victorian Photocollage* of 2009–10, the wild and whimsical collages of middle and upper class women were offered as windows onto ‘the educated minds as well as the accomplished hands of their makers.’² Comprising works from the 1860s and 1870s made from the artful combining of cut-out parts of photographs with paintings and drawings, the compositions are startling in their formal originality, humour and even horror. In one example from a 56-page album made by Kate Edith Gough around 1870, donated by her nephew to the Victoria & Albert Museum, the faces of society ladies are cut from photographs to adorn the heads of swimming, stately ducks.³ The beauty of Gough’s delicate collage of albumen print, watercolour and ink is marred by foxing, brown spots caused by mould spores in the ageing paper, blemishing its creamy ground, exceeding the image’s edges. Soul-Gray, who has been known to leave her painted canvases outside to deteriorate, would be thrilled by this creeping contamination of the surface.

Age, blighted beauty, wear and tear are what Soul-Gray is drawn to: the chipped tin, the stained paper, the frayed binding. Her collecting of the illustrated books she uses for her collages—such as story books, nursery rhyme books, pattern books and albums for girls—might be better described as rescuing. Days in the studio usually begin with a visit to the local recycling centre for such papery things as discarded children’s encyclopaedias, bought for mere pence. Ephemera is found ‘at the near end of its existence, but when there’s still hope because there it’s been placed, not quite in the skip but in a box or on a shelf, when there are still signs of life.’⁴ No matter how cheap the item, she says, ‘it is always difficult to take a book apart.’⁵ Often, having used or recycled their pages, she preserves the spines of hardback books with their trailing, coloured thread—shells of books.

Such books’ illustrations, which are both drawn and photographed, are the source of Soul Gray’s cut-outs, but more than this, they



Put In a Finger and Pull Out a Plum, 2022–2023
Collage and oil on paper
8 7/8 × 11 in (22.5 × 28 cm)

Under The Mistletoe, 2022–2023
Collage and oil on paper
8 5/8 × 11 1/4 in (22 × 28.5 cm)



provide her with the base of the collage. In a recent series of 2023, pages of a nostalgic, mid-century Christmas album with coloured, titled plates draw disparate cut-out elements together in festive revelry. In ‘Jumbo’s Christmas Tree’, ‘Under the Mistletoe’ and ‘The Christmas Pudding’ we see, under the collage, an assortment of laughing, dancing animals in Victorian dress and genre scenes: a family of lions in a theatre box, a hippopotamus in a party hat, an upright crocodile in a yellow bow tie straining to reach a ribboned giraffe for a kiss. Soul-Gray works across these strange scenes of merrymaking, pasting Margot Fonteyn in her ballerina’s tutu and white satin slippers, Princess Diana—arms wide—in the mother’s sport’s day race, a fat pigeon on a branch, its head and tail-feathers exceeding the edges of the image. The aim when pasting these often-anachronistic, jutting, jarring elements, is to work quickly, intuitively and simultaneously, keeping a number of images in the same process of becoming. Soul-Gray explains, ‘I spread the cut-outs across a table, quickly picking them up, moving them around and about, placing them. The important part is not overthinking it. As soon as I’ve found a placement that feels interesting, I stick it down. And then I’m committed to it. That’s it. It’s about accepting the awkwardness of it, about working with that awkwardness, turning it into something which really works.’⁶ When it *doesn’t* work, it is because the collage has become artful, too accomplished in the Victorian sense of the word. Victorian women’s photocollages were meant to be time-consuming—labours of love which may well have been thought of by their makers as transcending an amateurism they knew to be gendered. Soul-Gray works differently, though no less lovingly, painting over a collage which is becoming too fine, too finished, with bold strokes, which then become new ground for further cut-out play.

The collages, while set in the dimensions of their frame, play with scale. In ‘Under the Mistletoe’, photographed by Soul-Gray through different stages of its creation, a piece of costume jewellery, monstrous in size, threatens to crush a crouching Judy Garland’s head. Underneath its blue coat of paint, a young woman sits within a room of carousing animals, who could not detain her. When looking at an earlier version of the collage, with the woman in her soft seventies dress newly pasted to the picture ground, I am struck by the discrepancy in scale between her body and its surroundings. Like Alice falling down down down the rabbit hole, eating a current cake and then finding herself—*curiouser and curiouser*—‘opening out like the

largest telescope that ever was', Soul-Gray's contemplative woman is an impossible presence, someone who cannot be contained.

Alice's Adventures in Wonderland by Lewis Carroll was published in 1865. Contemporaneous with Victorian photocollage, it also engaged with the creation of a cut-out world, a representation of writing and illustration imagining bizarre juxtapositions and distortion, specifically alteration in size, as seen in pictures by Carroll: we see enormous Alice kneeling in the rabbit-hole hallway with head touching the ceiling and Alice as a tiny creature no bigger than a mouse, swimming in the pool of her own tears. Like this work of children's literature, Soul-Gray's Christmas collages—so delightful and yet so dark—take me across time, in part through their girlish imagery and anthropomorphic animals, but also through their determined sense of play with the always-awkward connection of differently scaled elements, play which comprises the making, unmaking and remaking of alternative realities.

In a conversation which flits back and forth between her childhood, her own young daughters' experiences of reading, playing and home-making, and her work across paper and canvas, Soul-Gray describes her practice as that of 'taking worlds apart in order to try and fix them'.⁷ Pasting is about attaching, literally one piece of paper to another, but also one person to another, an adhering to which speaks of love, of loss and of longing. Reflecting on her mother's distance as she was growing up, and on her death at a young age, Soul-Gray offers this as something of a narrative for her collage, a story told and retold through the inherently playful process of cutting up, removing and reassembling. How can one understand what happened and imagine it otherwise? Can processes of destruction and creation function as means of caring for the past, present and future self? 'I will,' she says, 'destroy a work that's looking too pretty so that I might put it back together again, somehow...'⁸

I look again at 'Under the Mistletoe', the collage including the cut-out of the young woman, holding it closer. A little girl I have always seen but only just noticed, in a little pink dress with a single white sock and a single black shoe, comes into view. Her dress, like that of the young woman's, is white and pink with puffed sleeves. Her bobbed hair, like that of the young woman's, is parted and falls to the side. Removed from a picture, missing one leg yet unperturbed, the little

girl stands with a tremendous sense of purpose, hand reaching back towards the young woman as if for steadying, a gesture which connects them. A 'G H Thompson' created the image upon which the little girl and the young woman are placed. 'How curious,' the little girl thinks, as she bends down to read his signature, one shiny shoe covering the last of its letters. I realise she is poised to paint his name out, a pot of bright red pigment in her hand but, 'Oh!', she exclaims, like Alice, 'Where did I put that brush?'

Soul-Gray's paint is not red but blue.

Soon she will obliterate the two.

PLATES



Pop Up Toy, 2023
Oil on canvas
78 3/4 x 63 in (200 x 160 cm)



Two Children and a Chained Parrot, 2023
Oil on canvas
78 ¾ × 63 in (200 × 160 cm)



The Swimming Baths, 2023
Oil on linen
11 ¾ × 7 ⅞ in (30 × 20 cm)



The Walled Garden, 2023
Oil on linen
11 ¾ × 7 ⅞ in (30 × 20 cm)



The Waves at Biarritz, 2023
Oil, fabric pen and spray paint on linen
78 3/8 x 97 5/8 in (199 x 248 cm)



Dusk, 2023
Oil and bleach on canvas
15 3/4 x 11 3/4 (40 x 30 cm)



The Weavers, 2023
Oil on linen
78 ¾ × 63 in (200 × 160 cm)



Disqualified, 2023
Oil on linen
39 ¾ × 31 ½ in (100 × 80 cm)



Little Bunny Blue, 2023
Oil and bleach on linen
19 3/4 x 13 3/4 in (50 x 35 cm)



Under The Mistletoe, 2023
Oil on canvas
57 1/8 x 78 3/4 in (145 x 200 cm)



But It Was Not Showing, 2023
Oil and bleach on canvas
39 ³/₈ × 31 ¹/₂ in (100 × 80 cm)



Look Away, 2023
Oil on canvas
23 ⁵/₈ × 19 ³/₄ in (60 × 50 cm)



Put In a Finger and Pull Out a Plum, 2023
Oil on linen
63 × 78 ¾ in (160 × 200 cm)



Locked In, 2023
Oil and wax on paper
9 ⅝ × 6 ¼ in (24.5 × 17 cm)



Doctors and Nurses, 2023
Oil and spray paint on paper
9 ¼ × 7 ⅞ in (23.5 × 18 cm)



Silhouette Box, 2023
Oil and wax on paper
11 × 8 ¼ in (28 × 21 cm)



Seeing Things In The Dark, 2023
Oil and wax on paper
9 ½ × 7 ⅞ in (24 × 18 cm)



The Christmas Pudding, 2023
Oil, bleach, spray paint on linen
63 × 78 ¾ in (160 × 200 cm)



Chinese Whispers, 2023
Oil and bleach on canvas
19 ¾ × 23 ⅝ in (50 × 60 cm)

ALEXIS SOUL-GRAY

IMMUTABLE FRAGMENTS

My

mother

used

to

call

me

a

butterfly.

Definition. Fragmentation of memory is a type of memory disruption pertaining to the flaws or irregularities in sequences of memories, 'coherence, and content' in the narrative or story of the event. During a traumatic experience, memories can be encoded irregularly which creates imperfections in the memory.¹

*I think my life divides into two:
my life when my mother was alive,
and my life after my mother died.²*

*Somehow things being intact is not what
I want at all, I'm much more into the thing
when it's fragmented.³*

*Snowflake could not stop running when she started down
the hill, she did not know that she had begun a long
journey, that she must run evermore and not until the end
of her days would she ever again be still.⁴*

*Never before had the Iron Man seen the sea. He swayed in
the strong wind that pressed against his back. He swayed
forward, on the brink of the high cliff. And his right foot,
his enormous iron right foot, lifted—up, out, into space,
and the Iron Man stepped forward, off the cliff, into
nothingness. CRRRAAAASSSSSH!⁵*

This dissertation presents four chapters written in a deliberately fragmented manner. Research methods include reading, generative and automatic writing, listening, watching, on-site research, photography, studio practice and the editing of archival material. Chapter one and four are written in almost total fragmentation to allow for the polyvocal nature of traumatic experience and grief to be acted out on the page. The personification of the child as a butterfly, never being able to rest for long becomes the part acted out on the stage/written page by the author. She inhabits many characters, flitting from one talisman to the next, wanting assurance, needing protection. The movement between voices, past time and the present moment woven with academic referencing is an intentional formal decision, an attempt to create a window into what trauma and grief does to the subconscious; life is torn apart, becomes transitory and nothing remains linear. Chapter two provides a more sustained longer form academic approach to the subject of the found image and chapter three presents a photographic essay about objects. I question the collection of relics, attachment items, the objects' ability to help us think and to speak of the ineffable.

INTRODUCTION

*Painting is the language of loss. The scraping-off of layers of paint, again and again, the re-building, the losing again. Hoping, then despairing, then hoping. Can you control your feelings of loss by this process of painting, which is fundamentally structured by loss?*⁶

*I've never worked with a message in mind, and I never would want to. It's much more looking into a broken container that flies off in so many directions and as a result it highlights a space in your mind that establishes judgement and creates answers and finds comfort in those answers.*⁷

*Memory is the seamstress and a capricious one at that, memory runs her needle in and out, up and down, hither and thither, we know not what comes next or what follows after, thus the most ordinary moment in the world, such as sitting down at the table and pulling the ink stand towards one may agitate a thousand odd, disconnected fragments.*⁸

THE BURIAL

*At first, Snowflake felt very sad, for she could not think why this had happened to her.*⁹

My mother was diagnosed with terminal cancer at 52. Failed surgery and chemotherapy left her weak, in constant unmanaged pain and nausea. She suffered fits and could no longer eat and drink normally, her skin was falling off and where the stitches could not heal, faeces spilled from her bowel out of her chest. During the five-month period that followed her diagnosis she developed morbid depression and after multiple suicide attempts in the home, she decided to end her life at a Dignitas¹⁰ clinic in Zurich. During her five-month illness I moved into the family home to help care for her, flew to Zurich and witnessed the suicide; I held her hand. I was 25 years old and spiralling into a deep depression myself.

On the morning of December the 7th 2006, in a hotel room in Zurich, my mother took some scissors and cut pieces of her hair, wrapped them in cotton thread and gave these tiny bundles to my siblings and I along with rings and a pair of glasses.

My brother stands in silent falling snow, but it is not snowing and without speaking a word he turns away and walks to the airport to return alone. My father crying on his knees in the hotel room. I am texting people who don't really care to tell them, 'She is dead'. I AM ANGRY because the radio is on, TV is on, people are waiting for take away coffees at Starbucks and nobody seems to see that the world has ended. 'She is Dead!!', the texts read.

*Maybe forgetfulness, like a kind snow, should numb and cover them. But they were a part of me. They were my landscape.*¹¹

After her death I travelled back to London and gave the hair to my mother's close friend Jane Wildgoose to keep safe at her Memorial Library.¹² As an artist and academic she specialises in the subjects of mourning and hairwork. I got to know her well through my undergraduate years and it seemed the right thing to do. I gave her to Jane, and she stayed inside a velvet box, tucked in a drawer for 14 years.

I can say that those tiny strands remain—so apparently ephemeral and yet so enduring—somehow too intimate, and too powerful a reminder of the great sense of pain, anger and loss that I still feel, occasioned by the death of someone I admired, respected and loved who left this world, it seemed to me, far too soon. Too powerful to touch, to look at, and to see: this palpable evidence of the body that once lived and breathed among us, and now is gone, save for this one tiny, apparently fragile, yet immutable fragment.¹³

Burial is this kind of magic: I say goodbye to the body, and I begin to say goodbye to the dead. I transfer my connections. I give votives, I suffer, I pray. I give up a piece of myself, a little bird left to die in the open sea.¹⁴

A little bird left to die in the open sea. I can see my sadness as a little dead bird out at sea but perhaps at least it is floating, visible, decaying. The body stripped, eyes plucked. Tiny fragile bones washed up and picked over by an inquisitive child along the shore, popped into a bucket and presented back to the mother as treasure along with shells, beads of glass, plastic fragments and small dead crabs.

Blue

*Here is a shell for you
Inside you'll hear a sigh
A foggy lullaby
There is your song from me¹⁵*

Remember what I would say to you Al¹⁶

*I remember Judy Garland's red shoes in The Wizard of Oz.
I remember Christmas tree lights reflected on the ceiling.¹⁷*

I remember last summer being in the sea with my daughters. We watched a baby seagull, tiny and fluffy, confidently swimming out to sea alone. It was going to die we all agreed. Nothing we can do.

I guess I'm always functioning in almost a schizophrenic form where I'm thinking about content but I'm simultaneously thinking about making a very seductive and effective image, and I often fail. The image can teeter into the realm of abstraction then the text grabs the dream and brings you back into some fixed definition that I'm constructing.¹⁸



Alexis Soul-Gray, *The Tree in Epping Forest*, site visit, photograph, March 30, 2022

Alexis Soul-Gray, *Fragment of my mothers hair*, photograph, 2020

Alexis Soul-Gray's grandfather Bram, *The garden my mother played in as a child*, photograph, 1970s



I wish I were the type of person who swam in the sea all year. You swam with total abandon into the sea, you faced the horizon and went. Once I watched you swim far out and I cried on the beach under a tarpaulin for your return. It was raining. A family member assured me you would come back. For years after I used to re-enact this memory in the bath, I would place my face into the water much like a child learning to swim and whisper ‘come back mum, come back’. After your death I dreamt about tsunamis hitting beaches and running for higher ground, repeatedly. Funeral pyres. Bodies in crypts. A pulling up of my body by a dark force.

I knew she was going to die. My body knew.

*It calms me to think of blue as the colour of death. I have long imagined death’s approach as the swell of a wave—a towering wall of blue. You will drown, the world tells me, has always told me. You will descend into a blue underworld, blue with hungry ghosts, Krishna blue, the blue faces of the ones you loved. They all drowned too.*¹⁹

*Memory is like water: laundering, swallowing, drowning, dissolving, floating memories. Memory is Lake Tahoe on a calm day reflecting the world, with the clarity of a mirror, around and above: a family of redwoods, a cumulus cloud, even me. Memory is lake Tahoe on a stormy day stirring its waters with unsettling blues and distressing blacks. Memory is Lake Tahoe on a sunless, cold winter day, turning seal-grey: reflecting nothing at all.*²⁰



The Jane Wildgoose Memorial Library, Crouch End, London, photograph

I remember the morning you asked us to kill you. I agreed. But I couldn’t, I ran downstairs. He gave you the means to do it and then we hid downstairs. It was a horror film. I cowered under a duvet in the dark like a terrified toddler. We waited. Everything was silent. You hadn’t managed it, passed out instead. When you woke up, you never spoke of it again.

At the end of 2020 after a tumultuous year of uncertainty and death caused by the global pandemic, I buried my mother’s hair inside a tree in Epping Forest. After I let go of the hair I experienced a new energy that filtered into every aspect of my life, I could make work like never before; by letting go of this hair I had set myself free. She had said goodbye to me. She was free. I wonder now if the hair had been a transitional object, a linking object, or both.

I don’t want to be free and now I am crying, again.

I didn’t know how I would respond seeing her hair again... my first response was that it looked like baby hair, I have kept hair from both my children, and it just looked exactly like that... fresh, no decay. My second feeling was that I wanted to smell it, maybe eat it. I didn’t, but held it to my mouth for a while. I had decided to leave the hair with Jane but asked her if I might keep the box next to me while I slept at her house that night. Just as I turned the lights off I reached for the box and held it tightly to my heart and hugged it like a teddy bear all night. The comfort I felt was very surprising to me and the following morning I informed Jane I would take her (hair) with me after all. The next night I held it in my hand, the third she sat by my pillow.²¹

*But when from a long-distant past nothing subsists, after the people are dead, after the things are broken and scattered, taste and smell alone, more fragile but more enduring, more substantial, more persistent, more faithful, remain posed a long time, like souls, remembering, waiting, hoping, amid the ruins of all the rest; and bear unflinchingly, in the tiny and almost impalpable drop of their essence, the vast structure of recollection.*²²

*Fainter and fainter beat her heart. Soon she would be snowflake no more, but only a part of the vast, silent spaces of the heavens, a filmy fragment of an autumn cloud.*²³



The Wizard of Oz, 1939, film still

Rozanne Hawksley, *I will fly south ... For Mathew*, 1997, mixed media, detail

Unknown artist, *Little Girl with Dead Bird*, 1500–1525, oil on panel

Alexis Soul-Gray, *I saw the devil sitting under the blossom tree*, 2022, oil on canvas



J. William Worden discusses the importance of letting go of transitional/linking objects in order to complete the grieving process. Worden quotes Vamik Volkan, the psychiatrist who wrote extensively on pathological grief and the linking object. Volkan believes that these types of linking objects are used to handle separation anxiety and that they provide a ‘token of triumph’ over the loss. He believes that linking objects mark a blurring of psychic boundaries between the patient and the one mourned, as if representations of the two persons or parts of them merge externally through their use.²⁴

*There is quite a jerk that the child has to experience between the use of a mother as a subjective object, that is to say an aspect of the self, and an object that is other than self and therefore outside omnipotent control; and the mother performs a most important task in adapting herself to the child's needs so that she blurs a little this terrible jerk to which I have referred and which belongs to meeting the Reality Principle. The mother-figure becomes reduplicated.*²⁵

After my mother's terminal diagnosis and after she had told me she was going to die, she and I went for a walk in Epping Forest. She took me to an ancient tree that had been significant to her growing up there, it was the first tree that the sun touched as it arose. She told me that she would be at this tree after her death and that if I ever needed her this is where I could come, she would be there.

I didn't bury the hair in the end but placed the hair, along with hair belonging to both my daughters and I into the heart of the fallen tree. The fallen branch that the robin²⁶ sat on left a gaping wound that felt like a cave. It was full of earth, fungi, spider webs and rotting bark, it made perfect sense for me to place her inside the tree. I hope nobody will ever remove it, I hid it deep into its open heart. She could be there for eternity.²⁷

The significance of the robin that sat and watched me scale the tree and place her in it did not escape me. The moment was raw and loaded, and I felt she was there watching me. The bird stayed there the entire time. In the late sixteenth century poem, ‘Babes in the Wood’, a robin famously comes across the bodies of dead children and buries them with leaves, moss and flowers.

*And when they were dead,
The robins so red,
Brought strawberry leaves
And over them spread
And all the day long,
On the branches did throng,
They mournfully whistled,
And this was their song*²⁸

After her assisted suicide in 2006 at the age of 53 I could not speak at her funeral. All I remember is staring at the floor through tears, and the pain in my throat. I drew the people who stared at our blackened grief from memory afterwards; they were predatory birds, revolting voyeurs. It hurts when I cry. Grief is a physical pain in your throat that rises and blocks, obstructs the airways and is only there for her. I wanted to read Rossetti as I had done only months before at my grandmother's funeral. I could not.

The large fallen log that the robin was sat on is now burnt and charred. The place I put my mum's hair looks like it's been disturbed, but I just don't want to know. I don't know if someone's dug her out, opened the box, removed the hair and laughed, I can't reach it anyway. God. I'm on tiptoes to see but I think it's still there, not that I could see because I buried it inside the soil, so stupid. I feel like maybe she is in danger because there are teenagers who want to set fires and they are here at the tree and maybe she is in danger and that's ridiculous, but I feel frightened for her, this wasn't the experience I thought I was going to have. My blackened grief, this blackened fallen wood, somebody attempted it, but it has not worked. I hope you didn't feel frightened when they were trying to set fire to the tree. Are you here? It seems ridiculous, but somehow maybe the privacy of the place means I can speak to you. I know it's not your birthday, and I know the sun isn't rising, but perhaps you are here, but there is no robin this time. The trees are full of birds and the cuckoo all the way here, and the lost cardigan looked like it could have been yours. In fact it really did look like the cardigan you were wearing when you died, that gray cashmere super soft cardigan. We must have taken it back to London because we had it in the house and I smelt it and it smelt of you, for months. And then it stopped smelling of you and I have no idea where it is now, this lost cardigan; I can't believe I'm talking about cardigans, so relevant and odd. It probably couldn't



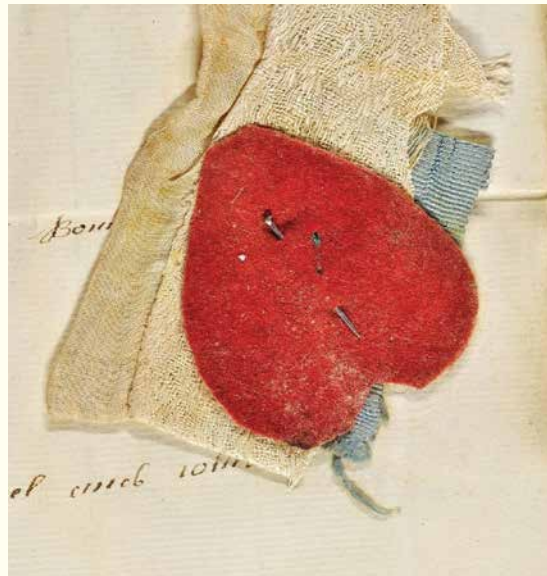
Alexis Soul-Gray, *The Box and the Tree*, 2020, photograph

Alexis Soul-Gray, *The Robin*, 2020, photograph

Alexis Soul-Gray, *The Lost Cardigan*, 2020, photograph

have been more perfect to have found a lost cardigan on this walk. I wish I could keep you warm. You're cold here in the tree, in the earth. I'm vulnerable because this fragment of you is still there and somebody could pick it up, somebody could take it with them, but perhaps best I would never know if that's happened. If this tree ever falls in a hurricane or is felled by a forester, hopefully they won't find the velvet box and you will just slowly melt into the ground, with the tree above you, around you, like a womb. I'm sorry mum, what happened to you was so awful, but I'm so sorry, I love you.²⁹

*Remember me when I am gone away,
Gone far away into the silent land;
When you can no more hold me by the hand,
Nor I half turn to go yet turning stay.
Remember me when no more day by day
You tell me of our future that you plann'd:
Only remember me; you understand
It will be late to counsel then or pray.
Yet if you should forget me for a while
And afterwards remember, do not grieve:
For if the darkness and corruption leave
A vestige of the thoughts that once I had,
Better by far you should forget and smile
Than that you should remember and be sad.³⁰*



Identification Token, The Foundling Museum, London, mixed media, 1740s–1760s

Photography as a medium is often associated with the psychic effects of trauma. The automaticity of the process, the wide-open camera lens, and the light sensitivity of film all lend themselves to this association. Just as photography, to some extent, bypasses artistic intention and convention, so also the traumatic event bypasses consciousness.³¹

I have very few memories of her and those that I can still recall have become almost a parody of themselves, a favourite film episodically watched over and over, perhaps fast-forwarding the trivial bits that no longer interest you to engage again and again in the moment that brings a tear, has that funny dancing or emotive soundtrack accompanying. Memories become almost like postcards on a rack in a giftshop; you can turn the carousel around as many times as you like, but there is only ever a finite number of images. The space left for writing on the back can mutate as time passes, in an ebb and flow of changing communication and meaning as we write texts back to the dead and to ourselves, but always on the back of the same set of frozen silent images locking us into the confines of seriality.

It is a strange thing that all the memories have these two qualities. They are always full of quietness, that is the most striking thing about them; and even when things weren't like that in reality, they still seem to have that quality. They are soundless apparitions, which speak to me by looks and gestures, wordless and silent—and their silence is precisely what disturbs me.³²

Deriving from the Greek, trauma refers to a piercing of the skin, a breaking of the bodily envelope. Trauma is the story of a wound that cries out and breaks through the protecting shield, overwhelming existing defences against anxiety while confirming those very deepest anxieties.³³

Traumatic experience as recalled in one's memory has been well documented as having close associations with the still and often silent image. In her essay 'The Geology of Silence', Gretchen Schmelzer discusses the silence inherent in the recall of traumatic memory. Scientists have found that during a traumatic experience there is a reduction of blood flow to the brain, inhibiting language receptors; meaning that trauma is recorded as emotional or implicit memory rather than in words.

THE FOUND IMAGE

And the thing about silence, about the layers of silence, is that in trauma, you usually get all the layers. And just like the canyon, the forces of your life and time itself will wear away the layers—and will expose some of the story and some of the feelings and you will begin to try to talk. You will have some things you know and don't want to talk about, some things you feel that you can't find words for. And some things that just feel so big or so far away, so ineffable, they don't yet have any way of being described—things that don't feel like yours yet, or maybe never were.³⁴

I use found images as a tool from which to speak, like a quiet voice whispering into a megaphone at a school fair, muffled, inaudible speech only recognisably clear in moments when the wind blows in the correct direction. I appropriate images that are specific to moments in my history that act as vessels, footprints or mirrored versions of my own childhood in the 1980s and early 1990s. Concurrently I reference my mother's childhood from the late 1950s–mid 1960s. These women and children could be considered versions of my autobiography or imagined/hoped for familial paradise. These scenes attempt to replace the lost relationship, fill spaces left void by major trauma, a gathering of fragmented memories, becoming closer to a fairy-tale utopia than reality.

While childhood memories stay reasonably intact, the sensory, textual and emotional landscapes of childhood are immensely fugitive, recurring in flashes, those Proustian plunges induced most commonly by smell and conjured more deliberately by photographs.³⁵

In her essay 'Fairy Tales and Neurosis',³⁶ Sandor Lorand discusses Freud's paper 'The Occurrence in Dreams of Material from Fairy Tales'. In some people a recollection of their favourite fairy tales takes the place of memories of their own childhood: they have made the fairy tales into screen memories.³⁷ I am like Dorothy in the green room,³⁸ wandering around picking up green objects, closing my eyes and saying, 'Oz', hoping that my touch upon this object alongside the projection of my voice will make her reappear. But there is nothing but stony silence and I keep wandering between the ornaments, sculptural busts and twinkling gems. None of my cries for home have ever brought her back.



Marlene Dumas, *Stern*, 2004, oil on canvas

Susan Hiller, *The Blues*, 1984, c-type prints

Laura Ashley Advertisement, c. 1989, photograph

Edvard Munch, *Rosa Meissner at the Hotel Rohn in Warnemünde*, 1907, photograph



Sontag writes of the survivors who experienced 9/11 as recalling the experience as being 'like a movie',³⁹ unable to fully engage with the actual horror of what has been experienced, the frontal memory system reverts to a version of the actual. This version of the actual, the signifier, may also be described as a screen memory. Screen memory is a term first described by Sigmund Freud in his 1899 paper 'Screen Memories'.⁴⁰

*'Screen Memories' is one of Freud's first and most original articles. Written in 1899, it is part of the result of his own pioneering work of self-analysis, which would soon culminate with the 'Traumdeutung', and contains the seminal idea that memories, when referred to one's infancy, are subject to processes of concealment and retranscription in order to keep unconscious material that would generate anxiety in the subject.*⁴¹

I know that my mother swallowed barbiturate in front of me, but more than anything I see a bowl of sweets placed in the centre of a table, and written on the sweets the word, 'happy'. This has become in some way a screen memory. The women and children that feature throughout my practice carry the same agency, a re-transcription of the actual. The falsified memory is the first that we become aware of. The essential elements of an experience are represented in memory by the inessential elements of the same experience. In her book *After-Effects | After-images*,⁴² Griselda Pollock describes Louise Bourgeois' work functioning as a screen memory: 'a scenario from a later stage in childhood that screens while retrospectively incorporating more archaic psychic material that left traumatic impact without being graspable at the time'.

*Affect suggests working on recurring traumatic material, which in the nature of trauma is not yet a known narrative. It is a void around which surges undischarged anxiety that compels many returns. Such affects and their causes are personal to Louise Bourgeois and her history. Insofar as she transforms her own materials into aesthetic inscriptions through abstract formulations, however, they become screens as much for the viewers as for the artist herself, alternating between projections of social situations and evocations of the psychodynamic foundations of subjectivity itself.*⁴³

Memory freeze-frames: its basic unit is the single image. In an era of information overload, the photograph provides a quick way of apprehending something and a compact form for memorizing it. The photograph is like a quotation, or a maxim or proverb.⁴⁴ The found image, those that I collect and am continually drawn to act within my practice as a universal 'Maxim or Proverb',⁴⁵ their stock nature as a symbolic statement for multiple histories, threads and spills of time; they become totemic, statuesque. Using the images becomes an attempt at time travel, to reveal layers of time, to control time.

These knitwear patterns and catalogues form part of the domestic archive that surrounded a collective subconscious during a particular time in history. They sat on shelves, tucked inside folders and books, never in a frame on a wall. The knitting patterns and pages from catalogues are part of a subconscious detritus, a sort of non-archive belonging to the recesses, creases... there, but not there, much like memory itself. I attempt to find the untouchable, the impossible in the faces of these women and children. They are my mother and I, but also and at the same time, you/they/them and nothing at all.

*Photographs, which turn the past into a consumable object, are a short cut. Any collection of photographs is an exercise in surrealist montage and the surrealist abbreviation of history. As Kurt Schwitters and, more recently, Bruce Conner and Ed Kienholz have made brilliant objects, tableaux, environments out of refuse, we now make a history out of our detritus.*⁴⁶

My interest in these staged studio images lies in their apparent voided context. I relish the space that opens between the photographer's attempt for the image to appear vernacular and the reality of the images purely mnemonic, staged, semiotic context which deliberately speaks of the universal experience of archetypes. Susan Hiller works in serial forms to engage with ideas of democracy in her work. In an interview with Darian Leader at The Lisson Gallery in 2016 she says, 'Seriality is a kind of democratic way of representing something, it's a bit like human beings, you know there are millions of us and each is different and yet we are all the same'.⁴⁷



James Ensor, *Masks Confronting Death*, 1888, oil on canvas

Egyptian wall painting, *Wailing Women*, c. 1370 BC



Taryn Simon, *Occupation of Loss*, 2016, Park Avenue Armory's Wade Thompson Drill Hall, exhibition view



It feels relevant for me that the choice of cultural detritus could be described as democratic, it being able to speak of the ubiquitous experience of loss. In his essay 'Working (with) the Dead: Agency and its Absence in the Use of the Found Image',⁴⁸ Andrew Dearman discusses the artist's use of found images as being a conversation between the maker, its subject (both often dead) and the artist. In a found family photograph there is a known narrative, but in images found in flea markets of strangers or in mass produced advertisements from the past, such anonymity offers opportunity for re-activation, re-interpretation. As performance... as theatre, they are stages and I can add filters and veils of paint in order to speak of my own trauma and loss. I try to speak through them, like a ventriloquist, perhaps like a spiritual medium.

*If the author is anonymous, the reader relies more heavily on a prior understanding of genre, register, and other more complex linguistic codes. In the absence of the voice of the first-person narrative/maker of a family photo album, the second-person listener/reader/viewer is forced to rely more on their understanding of the semiotic codes presented within the grid-like structure of the album than on the content of the images themselves.*⁴⁹

Like theatre, the mask of the non-identified (for these models are never named, they are always in some sense kin to the portrait of an unknown lady, the unknown sitter) can or attempt to function as a spokesperson for the signified, as Barthes says, 'In other words, the photograph is never distinguished from its referent—that which it represents'.⁵⁰ It is this possibility of the non-specific, the referent, the universal that draws me to them. The staged scenes of faux family happiness perform much like an early tableau vivant, the double meanings inviting layers of narrative much like a theatrical event.



Louise Bourgeois: The Woven Child at Hayward Gallery, 2022, installation view, photograph by the author

Victorian Hidden Mother Portrait, from the collection of Lee Marks and John C. DePrez, Jr., photograph, c. 1840s

*A photograph inserts the past within the present; the copresence of the past and the present staged by photography links it with theatre. Photography's theatricality stems from the possibility that one can address and be re-addressed by the dead.*⁵¹

In his book *The Dominion of the Dead*,⁵² Robert Pogue Harrison discusses mourning rituals across vast periods of history including ancient Egypt and Victorian Britain. The use of the hired lamenter paid to perform acts of grieving at funerals in order to comfort the bereaved, to distance and make their grief easier to objectify, signified through others, was normal practice for generations and current culture does not allow for this. Moirologists is the name given to such paid performers; their theatrical interpretation of collective loss would alleviate the individual voice, creating visualisations of choral cacophonies, a 'community of voices sharing in the lament of the bereaved'.⁵³ The found images of women and children that I use to act out my own grief could be considered my chorus of lamenters whose physiology closely represent the specific, becoming not only my publicly facing mourning theatre but also talismans, protectors. 'Ritual lament helps assure that the psychic crisis engendered by loss, especially in its initial stages, will not plunge the mourner into sheer delirium.'⁵⁴

Through her 2016 project 'An Occupation of Loss,'⁵⁵ Taryn Simon addresses the important history of public lamentation, what it means to have silenced these lost cries. She interrogates the abstract spaces that grief generates and explores questions of fact and fiction, the stage being a necessary space for the embodiment of grief. Through sculpture, performance and polyvocal sound the work gives precedence for our need for public displays of textual weeping.

*I was looking at the space that grief and loss generate and how it is performed, and that line between something that is scripted and authentic and how we process that when the object of loss is not present, when there's no body at the centre.*⁵⁶

*But if photography seems to me closer to the Theatre, it is by way of a singular intermediary (and perhaps I am the only one who sees it): by way of Death. We know the original relation of the theatre and the cult of the Dead: the first actors separated themselves from the community by playing the role of the Dead.*⁵⁷

It is interesting to me how these stock images invite us to connect familial imagery with historical contexts, placing us within our own experiential realm and fusing phenomenological associations, always unique and specific yet belonging as part of the universal. The space found between, as Barthes says, 'the studium' and 'the punctum',⁵⁸ meaning the general interest versus the thing about an image that pricks, perhaps wounds, is where I make work. These heteronormative women and children act as the studium, their banal non-specificity becoming purely semiotic leaves a space for embellishment. I would describe what I do to them as the punctum, the wound made. It could also be conceived as a loving act, an attempt at re-birth, an apology, a burial. Their apparent prosaism makes me feel I can do anything to them, remove the surface, re-make. It is always possible to repeat if there is remorse over the destroyed original. All I need to do is scroll through eBay to find the same book again, and select 'buy it now'. Await the post, sort, cut, discard... analogue rituals, performed again and again.

I find a familiar model peeping out through her dusty pastels and I feel comfort. I can repeat the act of re-ordering and detournement but with a different outcome. Reparation. I think of the game of telephone, the first word like the found printed page destined for inaudibility. We want the original word to become incomprehensible (much like faded memory or dream recall). We pretend to desire the original phrase, wanting instead the inaudible nonsense. I wonder who these unknown women and children are. I am aware of my envy at the love shown by their overzealous parents who noted their child's beauty and took them to the studio to be photographed. I can see the child's lack of consent, awkward poses and worried eyes. Through their arrested gaze, an omnipresent knowledge displayed by their passive refusal to move forward from this eschatological moment captured by the shutter and again imprisoned through process and print. The gaze of the dead, the look of the living. Through my interventions/abstractions, the everyday mass-produced image becomes a series of reinterpreted negative spaces and nonsensical narratives that are easier to digest in their theatrical format than the actual memories and the absence of memory I am experiencing. Louise Bourgeois is recorded as saying, 'I have been a prisoner of my memories and my aim is to get rid of them',⁵⁹ and I wonder if the act of making art is a purging, an obsessive-compulsive disorder that tries and tries to destroy memories.



Alexis Soul-Gray, *The Orange Eaters*, 2022, oil on linen

Alexis Soul-Gray, *Caught in the act*, 2021, charcoal on paper

Photograph of my mother blindfolded with her brother, c. 1960



I long to own the jumpers and cardigans. I search for them in flea markets, charity shops and car boots, scroll through eBay and Pinterest finding more and more references to them yet never finding them physically, for they are rare, moth eaten. I cannot afford them. They are out of my reach much like my lost mother herself, trapped in the silent world of these analogue images. I try to retrieve her, reach for her hand out of the printed page, repeating, knowing I will always fail. I think I am looking for her clothes really, those that she easily discarded. She was a designer in her early 20s, and studied printed textiles at The Royal College of Art in the late 1970s. She lost her portfolio on the tube after a meeting at Liberty's, London. Her work was lost, all of it, except two sketchbooks that I have.

Clothing that is worn, as fabric, has a capacity to absorb. It's a porous material. The painter's canvas is a large fabric that wears its own reality. Bodies are similar to paintings and vice versa. The clothed body, like a painting, shows something visible that is partly invisible.⁶⁰

The photograph is vaguely constituted as an object, and the persons who figure there are certainly constituted as persons, but only because of their resemblance to human beings, without any special intentionality. They drift between the shores of perception, between sign and image, without ever approaching either.⁶¹

Being traumatized means continuing to organize your life as if the trauma were still going on—unchanged and immutable—as every new encounter or event is contaminated by the past.⁶²



Chantal Joffe, *Story*, 2020, oil on canvas

Sometimes I am asked why I never work from actual photographs of my mother (for I have many), but I cannot. It is too sad, and I prefer to feel numb. I try to do it and I achieve one painting that I refuse to show and sell because it feels like a fragment of her body. I visited Chantal Joffe's show *Story* at Victoria Miro Gallery.⁶³ As I walked around the show, I could feel my heart racing because I understood it all, she had tapped into the universal yearning for the mother. It felt as if I had been plunged back into my childhood through hers, but I feel sad because the children in her painting titled *Story* are being read to and I have no memory of her reading to me. I can feel her in the room, I am moved to tears.

Frankly, I don't know how she did it, but when I first saw *Story* I was almost overwhelmed by a set of physical memories about how it felt to sit in similar configurations at a similar age. I remembered my mother as I had experienced her then, the good ship, the safe harbour, and I remembered how it felt to drift, anchored and at ease, able to journey in imaginative space, guided but not trammelled by the familiar repetitions of a story, the familiar fact of her body.⁶⁴

She belongs inside *Habitat* magazines and Laura Ashley catalogues. She is stuck in the immobile world of staged 1980s fashion photography. I am drawn to their hazy permed melancholic poses swathed in pastels. Romanticism of the 1980s nodded to the pre-Raphaelites, fulfilling a romantic fetishist need in me. Laura Ashley created dresses inspired by costume, using museum archives. She copied dresses from the late 18th and early 19th centuries. Every teenager could become a character imagined from history, speak to and feel them through attempts at dressing up. Much like Viscountess Hawarden with her daughters,⁶⁵ she dressed them up and posed them to 'reduplicate', meaning instead of simple duplication, two things being the same as one another, to reduplicate was an attempt 'to make or perform again'. To make again seems to invite the possibilities of alternative endings and this reminds me of the saying, 'to live life through your children'. References to dressing up, mirroring and reduplication weave through my practice as an attempt to communicate with oneself and with the dead.



Laura Ashley Advertisement, 1980s, photographic poster

Lady Clementina Hawarden, *Clementina Maude, 5 Princes Gardens*, c. 1862–63, photograph

The Return to Oz, 1985, film still



I think about Dorothy staring into the mirror at Ozma.⁶⁶ She speaks to her from another realm and like this mirror scene I stare into these printed images trying to find an answer, speak to her, return home. But instead, I end up with a fantastical land that probably owes much to the Oz films and my obsessive watching of them as a child. Dorothy⁶⁷ after all escapes into a land of alternative versions of her family members and those that she fears. The farm workers become the scarecrow and tin man, aunt Em the good witch and so on. Before she enters Oz we hear her sing from the depths of her loneliness and despair, longing for rainbows and lemon drops. She creates a reverent version of the actual rather than the real in order to process trauma. Children do it, I do it.

I recently purchased a 1988 Laura Ashley bridal catalogue from eBay.⁶⁸ I am surprised how much I paid for it. In one photograph the mother tenderly holds the hands of 3 young girls all dressed in soft pastel pinks and purples, they are dancing. I imagine them singing 'Ring o ring o roses'... A-tisshoe! A-tisshoe!

We

all

fall

down.⁶⁹

I would have been seven at the time this photograph was taken. I stare at their fake laughter. Where was I at that moment? Was I happy? The girl to the right looks a bit like me, she is wearing a dress very similar to the dress I wore to your wedding. I remember walking into Laura Ashley. The location of the shop has left my memory, but I remember standing in the entrance of a wooden room and gazing at the sailor dresses. I think you were holding my hand. You wore a floral gown to the wedding that you chose that day. We wore white sailor dresses, I wanted them in every colour. I have lost all of them as I have lost you. The repeat of this analogue collecting creates a sense of comfort, like a favourite bedtime story read out loud or listened to on a tape, you can rewind. Trauma cannot be outrun, only worked through. I cannot go back, but I will keep trying to find my way through.



Laura Ashley Bridal Catalogue, 1988, photograph

Alina Szapocznikow, *Self-portrait - Herbarium*, 1971, polyester and polychrome wood

Cornelia Parker, *Cold Dark Matter: An Exploded View*, 1991, wood, metal, plastic, ceramic, paper, textile and wire



*These symptoms play out bodily, in the form of anxiety, an upsurge in energy designed to defend the subject from the events repetition, to make the subject ready for an overwhelming that has already happened. This is bound to a repetition compulsion to return to the moment, to fix it, to survive it, intentionally.*⁷⁰

I find a mask within these images. The melancholia performs a play where the women and children become puppets, actors and dolls where I can play out memory, test out alternative endings. I often remove the surface of the printed image manually, hoping for a kind of poiesis, a re-birth. The pressure and repeated rhythm of this motion perhaps mimics a stroking or anxious rubbing, like a child may do unconsciously to a toy or its caregiver. The images of women and children are always taken from knitwear catalogues and knitwear patterns. Referencing the warmth of the wool, the analogue motion of the hand-crafted knit, the looping and weaving of textile garments attempts to fulfil a haptic longing, a need for her touch. I fetishise two things in my life: clothing, especially old clothing, clothing with a past, and photographs. And it was not until recently that I understood that my desires for each were woven closely together.⁷¹

There is no skin only ashes in a pot, buried. The weave of the canvas and the surface of the found papers act as a referent for the female body (her skin), at once useful and decorative yet also pierced, stapled, sewn into and glued, much like her cancerous body. There is an embodiment of the female/mother/self in this fabric that seems to be in a battle with the male counterpart inherent in the historical act of painting. Like my treatment of paper, there is a repeated physicality to the pushing into and removing out of the weave of the canvas or linen, perhaps like an epidermis or hide. In her discussion about the works of Alina Szapocznikow, Griselda Pollock⁷² describes the artist's sculptures of the traumatised body as being fragmented, body parts disarticulated and reconstituted: 'This new configuration of incomplete or composed or fractured bodies, it's no longer possible to hold to this apollonian or Venusian ideal, you have to do life, death, disease, illness, mortality and sex in a different language.'⁷³

*I think what I'm doing is taking something that's very familiar to people and then in a way by exploding it or changing its physiognomy make it more porous and more open to meaning and I'm very interested in when something's just about lost it's identity and then when it's liberated from its identity it can be re-interpreted and be something very different.*⁷⁴

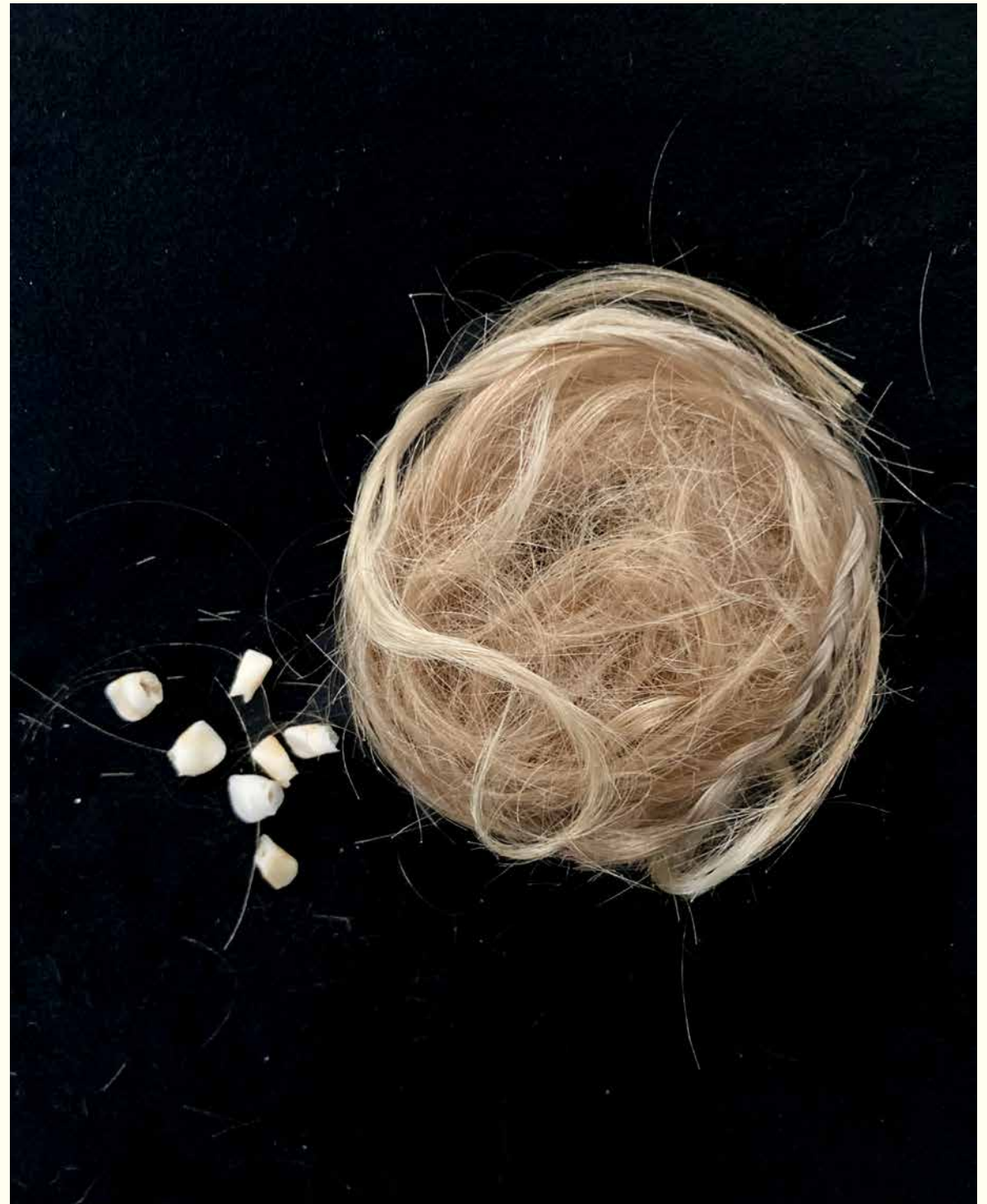
*This object is my mother, it's not just some functional object. It's charged with memories of her, but for me it is her, it's my holy relic I suppose.*⁷⁵

*No wonder we surround ourselves with memory objects, and with elaborated photographs in particular. One's sense of self, of identity, is buttressed by such objects.*⁷⁶

*...the right of an object to expire at its own natural rate, and to remain interesting as it does so.*⁷⁷

OBJECTS

Photographs by Alexis Soul-Gray,
2022



Hair and Teeth



Sampler by My Mother



Broken Pearl Necklace



Ceramic Fragment with Bee



My Mother's Scarf



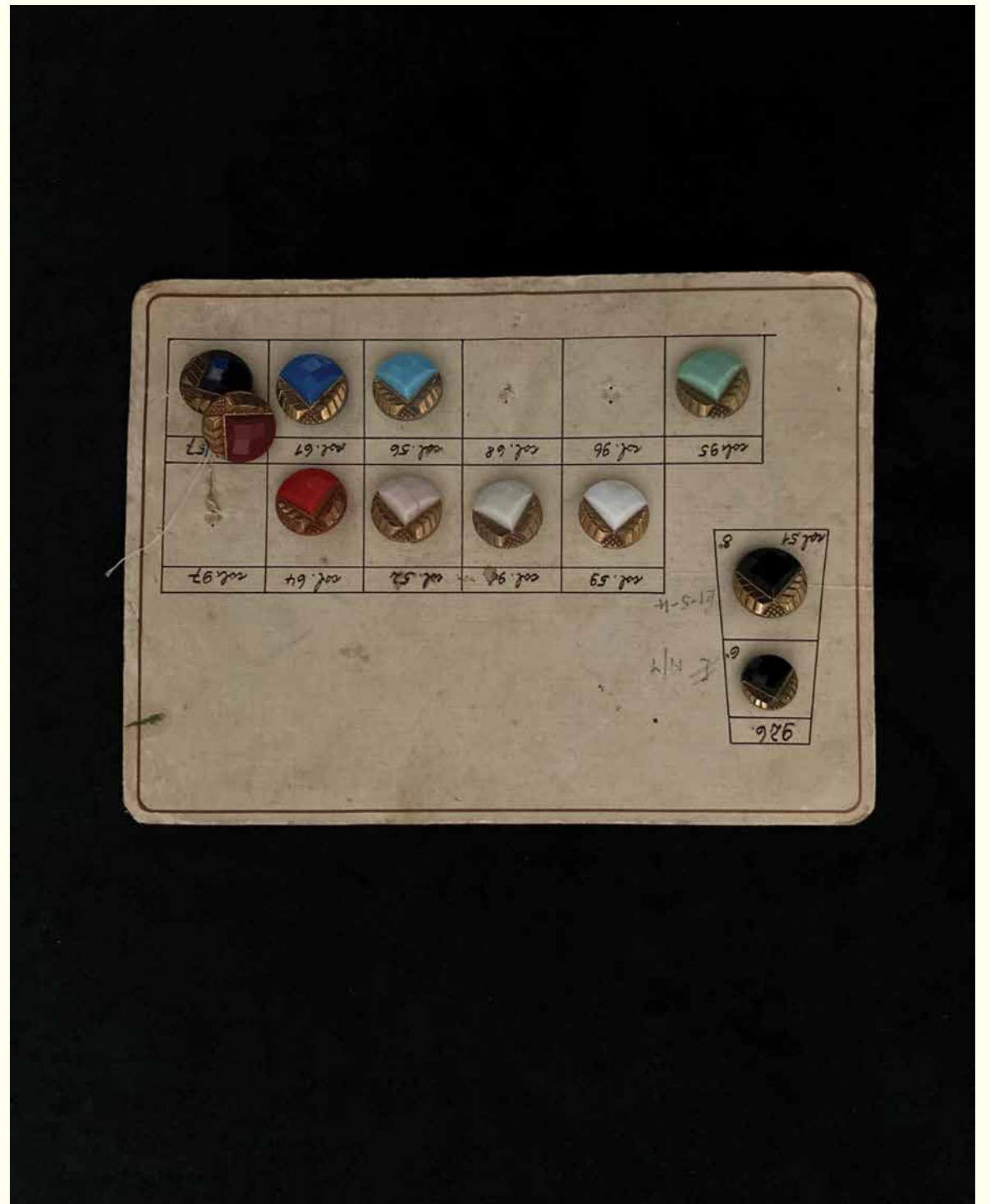
Distressed Found Object



My Mother's Necklace



Ceramic Pieta



My Mother's Buttons



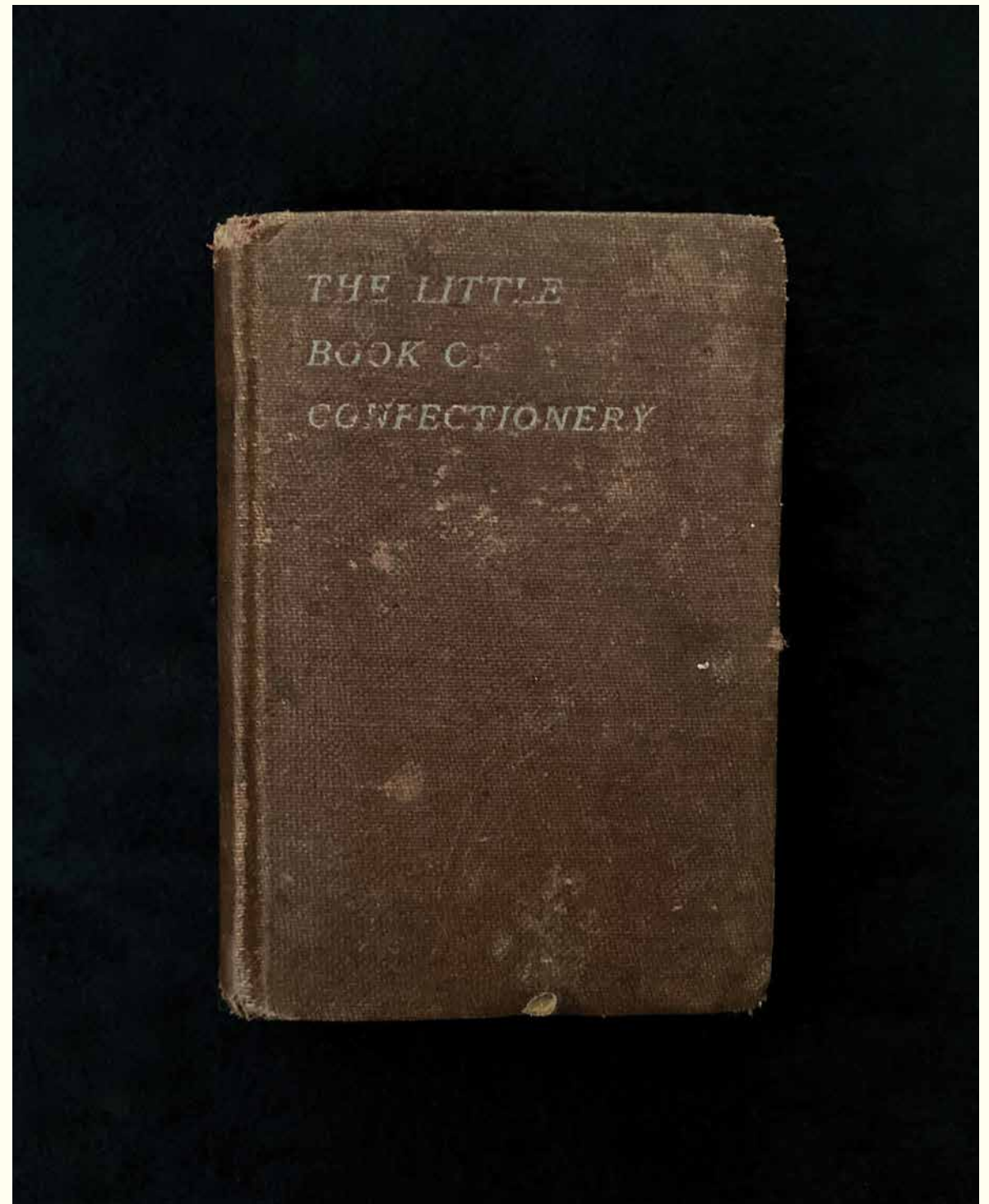
Distressed Found Object



My Great Grandmother's Frog Purse



My Mother's Sketchbook from RCA, late 1970s



My Great Grandmother's Book



1980s Girl's Dress



Victorian Scrap Album Containing Mourning Cards

My heart has been shattered into a million pieces; I don't know where to find all the bits, they will never stick back together again right. They will form a different picture, like spot the difference. Except it won't be a piece of jewellery or its missing diamante, it will be the re-arrangement of the flickers of light in my eyes, or how I can't stay for long at Bond Street station. My life is more complex, but there is beauty in its new form... I find you in every file, every cupboard, drawer, storage box. You are in every song, picture and stained glass window.⁷⁸

I remember walking in the hospice garden with you. The tiniest steps, I held both your hands whilst steadying your back. Blades of grass. You told me you were a bee, and I knew they had given you too many drugs. I keep finding bees, they have come out of the sea twice and now I have one tattooed on my wrist.

I remember being in the aftercare room in the hospital. As you regained consciousness you opened your eyes a little, tears welled in them and you said 'I am so frightened Al'. I was so frightened at this unending torture. I went to get tea.

*The more I focused on her fine face
And gazed in awe at her graceful form,
Waves of exultant emotion overwhelmed me
With a force like nothing I'd felt before.
Love encouraged me to call out her name
But shock had sent a hammer-blow to my soul;
To see her there, in such strange surroundings
had stunned my senses, almost stopping my heart.
Then she lifted her head towards the light,
And her face was so fine and ivory-white
That its wonder stung me. I stood there bewildered,
As if mesmerised for evermore.⁷⁹*

REMAINS

Your skin, smooth like the finest kid skin gloves. Poison perfume. Lavender. Those evenings in France with Van Morrison playing, eating sliced avocado, tomatoes and onion with crushed garlic and olive oil. Dancing with you aged six on the parquet flooring in the living room at our house outside West London. It's got to be 'Perfect' by Fairground Attraction. In moments it is perfect, and I want more of you. Your perfume through the front door as you return late from work, curly dyed red hair, wide glasses. Knitwear. Your knitted skirt and matching jumper hanging in the wardrobe with your Laura Ashley wedding dress. Pale colours, romantic florals. Printed cottons and silks. Fragments of cloth. Your sewing box with the metallic threads. In your dressing table drawer that blusher you bought for your wedding in the town hall made of golden balls from the Body Shop. Almonds. Geraniums. Your clicking jaw as you ate. Horses. I haven't mentioned the horses yet, how you nearly died twice on a horse. Alfred Munnings. George Stubbs. King's College Choir, the words. Swimming with you in the lake near Provence. The holiday we never had in Portugal. Watching you eat oranges. Your body rigid and pale. The blood falling like a lava lamp from the upper part of your torso, pigment slowly leaving the skin a sick hue, deep alizarin crimson residual sediment pooling under the translucent veil as your heart stopped beating. The death rattle silenced. I peel your defiant semi rigor mortis fingers from my hand, I stand up, the police come to interview us. They strip your body. I walk away. It is Christmas time.

I remember sitting and reading during our final summer holiday in southern France. I cannot remember the year, but there were wildfires burning in the distance. We discussed evacuation. It was so hot that bats were diving into the pool and drowning, I tried to scoop them out of the water and lay them in the sun to dry out, I saved a few. You didn't know it was your last holiday. I read Sylvia Plath and you told me not to, you wished I wouldn't, not because it wasn't brilliant, but Plath and you shared a commonality. Both of you had left their two young children in a house and tried to kill themselves. Plath managed it probably due to her isolation at the time. You were found by dog walkers and saved.



A photograph of my mother, 1970s

Pearl Manuscript, c. 1400, illustration

Edvard Munch, *the Dead Mother*, 1899–1900, oil on canvas

Wisconsin Death Trip, 1999, film still



*It's four in the morning, the end of December
I'm writing you now just to see if you're better*

*Yes, and Jane came by with a lock of your hair
She said that you gave it to her
That night that you planned to go clear
Did you ever go clear?⁸⁰*

*I feel sometimes as if I am about to die soon. That my body is ill.
I hope this is trauma left behind,
I don't want to die I just want to love my children and paint.
But a painting is about your own mortality⁸¹*

*In that moment she thought of the one from whom her heart and soul
had come and she cried out⁸²*



Alexis Soul-Gray, *Self portrait
with children*, 2003, photograph

The Cut-Out World

- 1 Alexis Soul-Gray in conversation with Gemma Blackshaw, 1 November 2023.
- 2 *Playing with Pictures: The Art of Victorian Photocollage* (Art Institute of Chicago, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Art Gallery of Ontario, 10 October 2009–5 September 2010), <<https://www.metmuseum.org/exhibitions/listings/2010/victorian-photocollage>>
- 3 Kate E. Gough, *Untitled (ducks)*, c. 1870, photograph <<https://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O83338/untitled-ducks-photograph-gough-kate-e>>
- 4 Soul-Gray in conversation with Blackshaw, 1 November 2023.
- 5 *Ibid.*
- 6 *Ibid.*
- 7 Soul-Gray in conversation with Blackshaw, 1 November 2023.
- 8 *Ibid.*

Immutable Fragments

- 1 *Fragmentation of Memory*. Wikipedia, 2021 <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fragmentation_of_memory> [accessed 27.03.22]
- 2 Fay Ballard, *Breathe*, 2018, Freud Museum, London, Youtube [accessed 12.05.22]
- 3 Cornelia Parker, *The Great Women Artists*, Apple Podcasts, 2020 [accessed 05.05.22]
- 4 Paul Gallico, *Snowflake*, 1971 (London: Michael Joseph)
- 5 Ted Hughes, *The Iron Man*, 1989 (London: Faber & Faber)
- 6 Celia Paul, *Self-Portrait*, 2022 (London: Vintage)
- 7 Taryn Simon, *A Living Man in France*, 2015, Youtube [accessed 21.05.22]
- 8 Virginia Woolf, *Orlando*, 2020 (London: Penguin Classics)
- 9 Paul Gallico, *Snowflake*, 1971 (London: Michael Joseph)
- 10 Dignitas is a Swiss non-profit member society providing assisted/accompanied suicide to those members of the organization who suffer from terminal illness.
- 11 Sylvia Plath, *The Bell Jar*, 2001 (London: Faber)
- 12 Jane Wildgoose, *The Wildgoose Memorial Library*, <<http://www.janewildgoose.co.uk>> [accessed 26.03.22]
- 13 Jane Wildgoose, email to author, October 16, 2020; unpublished notes (2013) written in preparation for doctoral dissertation: *Jane Wildgoose, 'Collecting and Interpreting Human Skulls and Hair in Late Nineteenth-Century London: Passing Fables & Comparative Readings at The Wildgoose Memorial Library. An artist's response to the DCMS Guidance for the Care of Human Remains in Museums*, [unpublished] PhD thesis, Kingston University London, 2015.
- 14 Sam Mills and Thom Cuell, *Trauma: Essays on Art & Mental Health*, 2021 (Disley, Stockport, England: Dodo Ink)
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Matt Burrows

THANK YOU

Alexis Soul-Gray (b. 1980, UK), lives and works in Devon. She earned an MA in Painting at The Royal College of Art, London (2023) and a BA in Drawing at Camberwell College of Arts, London (2003). She is an alumni of The Royal Drawing School, London, having completed the Postgraduate Drawing Year in 2007. Solo exhibitions include The Arts Club, London (2024); Bel Ami, Los Angeles (2023); Liminal Gallery, Margate (2023); Wetterling Gallery, Stockholm (2022); Irving Contemporary, Oxford (2022); Exeter Phoenix Gallery, Exeter (2022); and Delphian Gallery, London (2021). Recent group exhibitions include *The Drawing Biennial 2024*, Drawing Room, London (2024); *The Guts and The Glory, Bo Lee and Workman*, Bruton (2024); *Liminal Salon*, Liminal Gallery, Margate (2023); *Paper*, Tristan Hoare Gallery, London (2023); *Conscious Unconscious*, Pippy Houldsworth Gallery, London (2023); *Women Celebrating Surrealism*, Islington Arts Factory, London (2022); *What Was Lost*, PAPER Gallery, Manchester (2022). She was the winner of the Delphian Open in 2021 and recipient of The Elizabeth Greenshields Foundation Grant in both 2021 and 2022.

Gemma Blackshaw is Professor of Art History at the Royal College of Art (RCA). She is the originator of the RCA's CARE research group, which theorises creative research methods as means of caring for histories, bodies and materials, and co-editor of its two anthologies: *CARE(LESS). A Supplement to ON CARE* (Ma Bibliothèque, 2021) and *I care by...* (Research Communiqués: RCA School of Arts & Humanities, 2022).

CONTRIBUTORS

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Alexis Soul-Gray, *The night before*, 2007, pencil on paper

