

## **MPhil & PhD Exhibition 2024 reviewed by MFA Year**

A collection of anonymised reviews by MFA Year 1 students of the recent Annual PhD Research Exhibition which took place in the Burren College of Art Gallery February 1 - 23rd 2024.

These reviews were written as an assignment for Dr Áine Phillips's Professional Studies class.

### **Katerina Gribkoff**

Blooming Reflections: A Textured Journey into Nature at the Burren College of Art

The 2024 PhD Research Exhibition at the Burren College of Art is currently hosting an eclectic display of artistic exploration. Among the seven other brilliant PhD candidates contributing to this collective showcase, a standout exhibit is an enthralling collection of works by the artist Katerina Gribkoff, whose creations are a testament to ecological ingenuity, consideration, and excellent craftsmanship.

The focal point of this collection revolves around the four small flower beds which Gribkoff meticulously crafted last spring. What sets this exhibition apart is the artist's innovative use of a found steel air duct as the foundation for the frames of four small, suspended handmade quilts. These quilts, each distinctly referencing the plants cultivated in the garden beds just outside the gallery, are a harmonious blend of form and function, repurposing materials to breathe new life into the discarded; The artist employs up-cycled cottons and linens dyed with an impressive and warm, earthy palette which Gribkoff co-collaborated with nature to achieve. The vibrant hues of double black hollyhock, coreopsis, weld, cosmos, marigold, and iron lend an organic authenticity to the quilts. The careful inclusion of botanical prints on the fabric, made from fresh flowers and petals, provide an intimate connection to the source of inspiration, which bridges the gap between the observer and the natural world.

Complementing these textile wonders are two large 35mm film photographs printed on hemp paper, framed with wood salvaged from an old garden bed. These photographs offer viewers an additional visual narrative, softly capturing the artist's journey through a medium that adds depth and nostalgia to the collection. Gribkoff's choice of materials for framing resonates with her focus on repurposing materials, which adds to a cohesive conceptual and visual narrative throughout the exhibition.

Small gelatin bioplastic pieces, delicately embedded with dried flowers and leaves from the garden, also surround the photographs and quilts. These translucent fragments serve as windows into the artist's creative process, enhancing the overall immersive experience of the exhibition.

The absence of signage in the gallery space adds an intriguing layer to the viewer's interaction with the art, leaving them to interpret and connect with the works on a more personal level. This absence invites viewers to reflect on the pieces in a way that encourages a deeper engagement with Gribkoff's narrative, fostering a connection with nature that extends beyond the gallery walls.

While the lack of signage does leave out some context for those unfamiliar with Gribkoff's research and work, it simultaneously underscores the universality of the artist's message. The exhibition becomes a powerful call to action, encouraging viewers to develop a more profound connection with nature in their own backyard. Gribkoff's work stands as a testament to the transformative power of creativity in fostering a deep and personal connection with the world around us. Until February 23rd, this collection invites all to embark on a delightful sensory journey, which will leave an enduring imprint on the viewer and reminds us of the importance of engaging with nature in our immediate surroundings.

### **JD Whitman**

JD Whitman's body of work consists of several prints of stereoscopic photographs as well as edited black and white photos and monochrome moulded plastic sculptures that are displayed in a horizontal and a vertical group on two walls of the gallery. The exhibits in various bright, sometimes lively colours quickly catch the eye. The structures depicted in the black and white photographs and the forms of the sculptures are clearly related to each other. The cast parts seem to imitate the microscopic structures in their form. In some of the sculptures, parts of ropes are incorporated, which are presumably found objects from beaches, discarded by the fishing industry. The fanned-out ropes add a liveliness to the respective sculptures, as if they were micro-organisms with many tiny little legs. It is unknown if the magnified forms are in fact micro-organisms or micro-plastics or something else.

Another white semi-translucent sculpture has some fine particles added, that look like sprinkles of industrial origin. The work and the presentation are aesthetically pleasing but also evokes many questions relating to Whitman's research that obviously deals with an important topic.

Whitman is an ocean advocate with an academic background in Fine Arts and Photography and her artistic work is focused on anthropogenic impacts on ecosystems, especially on marine life.

### **JD Whitman (2nd review)**

Initially, the sculptures drew me in with their vivid hues and interesting form. Comprising brightly coloured pieces reminiscent of dollops or pools, each element hangs delicately on the wall, drawing the viewer in with its vibrant energy. Crafted from discarded plastic purge scraps, these sculptures not only serve as artistic expressions but also as poignant reminders of our throwaway culture's consequences.

What stood out to me in this body of work is its commitment to sustainability. The accompanying blurb, detailing the origin and significance of the materials used, is available only via QR code, ensuring the entire artwork remains waste-free. Learning about the process of injection moulding and the staggering volume of plastic waste generated annually provides essential context, anchoring the artwork within larger social and environmental narratives. It encourages viewers to reflect on their own role in perpetuating or challenging the status quo. There is a certain uniformity in form which initially left me wanting to see more variety. While the colours vary, the shapes remain largely consistent, potentially limiting the collection's visual depth.

However, after reading the description, it is precisely this uniformity that underscores the artwork's underlying message. Like the countless plastic caps churned out by manufacturing processes annually, these sculptures echo a sense of mass production and uniformity, highlighting the scale of waste generated by our society's penchant for convenience and disposable resources. Here, the repetition of form serves as a deliberate choice, driving home the artist's critique of consumer culture.

While the collection may exhibit some limitations in form diversity, its conceptual depth and engagement with pressing societal issues more than compensate. By transforming plastic waste into objects of contemplation and dialogue, the artist offers a powerful commentary on consumerism, waste, and the urgent need for change. In doing so, they remind us that art has the power to inspire action and foster meaningful conversations, even in the face of seemingly unconquerable challenges.

### **Kat Cope**

A Call to Grounding: Action Equals Courage

The work of Kat Cope consisted of an interactive installation in the smaller project room. I found that it was a place of reflection, grounding, and intentionality. Blocked off from the rest of the gallery space by blackout curtains, a small label outside in legible type beckoned the viewer in, to sit if desired, and to participate in the tapping exercises within.

The space is purposefully lowly lit, allowing for the projection on the far wall to have presence while also highlighting the artificial landscape with two seating options in the center of the room. Next to the entrance was a tall collar on a shelf with clear signage with an invite to 'please try on the collar' which gives a clear signal that the viewer can indeed interact with the object in question.

The projection on the far wall is of the artist, Kat Cope, alone on the limestone pavement with Irish stone walls behind them. The collar that is part of the installation is worn by Kat in this film. They perform a series of tapping and breathing exercises with an intermittent close-up of them saying "By being here today, you have taken action. Action equals courage. You don't need to be any different than you are right now. We are wonderful in this moment." The projection then proceeds to show a view from inside the headpiece, then a view of driving by an endless line of Irish stone walls.

Since the viewer was encouraged to wear this same collar, I proceeded to place it on my shoulders. There is no top to the collar – it is an irregular cylinder cut open at one point to allow the viewer to see through a narrow gap, much like horse blinders. The open top decreased the potential for claustrophobia. With no straight edge on the collar, it is formed with meandering lines and layers of mono-printed paper. The edges are thoughtfully covered in a non-sharp layer of finish, so nothing pokes the participant.

Collar on, I proceeded to the edge of the artificial landscape, faced the projection, and mimicked the tapping and breathing exercises that Kat goes through in the projection. I breathed in time, tapped in time, and moved in time with them, the collar obscuring my vision at times with my movement in a calming way.

From following Kat's work and artistic journey, I learned that they have Autism and ADHD, and that these diagnoses have influenced their art practice. I too have received recent diagnoses of the same conditions and felt a greater appreciation for their installation with this knowledge. Kat's installation is clearly labeled with what is allowed to be interacted with, how to engage, and the engaging itself is guided and calms an overstimulated mind.

Their installation encouraged me to return to my body and its functions amidst a busy exhibition opening night. Kat's installation was a carefully crafted quiet space for those who may have a myriad of sensory issues.

### **Kat Cope (2nd review)**

Kat Cope's exhibition is in a side room of the gallery space, and is blocked off with a curtain to create a dark secluded room from which to interact with a video performance and the objects such as a blinder collar and representative replicas of limestone pavement or bark and vertical stool like objects. The video has an invitation to participate along with the breathwork and tapping exercises presented in the video. Kat's video performance serves to create a space of personal reflection and positivity. The repeated message throughout the video describes taking action by being present and reminds us that "we are wonderful in this moment." The outfit in the video and the objects present could be representational of the rings of a tree or an outer shell. The way the collar opens up to reveal the face and the words could describe showing the inner layers of one's self. The way the collar opens and closes with the breath work presented in the video is visually striking and leads to my conclusion of this being a representation of revealing the inner self. The audio message is repeated a few times throughout the video which creates a strong link to meditative practices such as returning to the breath and the grounding nature of meditation. Overall the atmosphere presented is quite a soothing environment.

Ways that the work could be presented to further initiate the viewers' connection to themselves would be to have the audio and video match up a bit more. However, if that was done intentionally it could be representative of a slight disconnect with one's self. If this was intentional pushing these boundaries just a little further into the realm of

discomfort could present a striking visual contrast with the audio. It was a bit unclear if the 'stools' and 'bark' in the middle of the floor were meant to be interacted with or not. With the interactive invitation to participate in the breathing exercises and even wearing the collar, I would have liked a bit more direction on how to interact with the middle section of the work. There was also an unfortunate overlap of the audio from a separate piece in the gallery that was almost overwhelming the space and intruding on the peaceful aspect of the relaxation exercises that were in this section of the show. This is not a reflection on the artist but rather a clash of gallery use. For future iterations of this piece maybe opting for something a little sturdier than the copy paper tags for the object labels and participation instructions would also be a good idea, though I did enjoy the cohesive 'tree aspect' and layers that all the materials harken to.

Overall I love the layout of the space and the way everything fits together cohesively. All of the physical objects seem to belong together with the video and I enjoy the space that's been created in this little world.

### **Ling Liu**

Ling Liu's extraordinary sound and monumental ink brush scroll installation is nothing less than an encounter with a sensitive, sophisticated and confident creative force. Five immense Chinese scrolls suspended, floor to ceiling, rise up like a forest of trees powerfully defying the constraints and aesthetic of traditional horizontal scrolls. Liu's standing sentinels, at 20 feet tall, are visually enthralling with energetic calligraphic abstraction tumbling down each vertical surface like streams of dark water in an angry wind. At the heart of this installation rises a ghost-like multiplicity of voices, together and alone, singing, reciting, overlapping, in and out of sync. The sounds and rhythms of Chinese words and tonality - voiced by the artist herself - lift and fall like a religious chant inducing a form of synesthesia between ink and sound. The visual and sonic combination create a darkly spiritual atmosphere and I felt as if I was entering a portal where mournful souls beckon and call from a world beyond.

According to the artist, *Hearing Rhythm, Seeing Rhythm III* is meant to do that and far more: "From the visualization of rhythmic rules to the integrated sonic-visual spaces; from the experimentation of contemporary art within the framework of Chinese aesthetics to the application of traditional aesthetic yijing and atmosphere into multimedia sonic-visual spaces, this series of works, as a systematic attempt to reclaim the traditional rules of rhythm as well as to retrieve pre-modern history and traditional culture, has come to its third stage."

Liu's research-based practice is informed, but not restricted, by her extensive academic and professional background in Chinese ink brush painting, photography, sound, and new media. She freely challenges traditional ink brush styles as seen in a horizontal series of small abstract works behind the installation that break their paper edges with intense, organic forms and strokes. Two of the works are cleanly sliced through the frame of paper and mounting board, defying the convention of the form.

Liu's gestural ink work is in dynamic conversation with contemporary Chinese experimental ink brush artists such as Wang Dongling, but it is her cross-media quest for a trans-temporal unified theory of aesthetic expression that I find most compelling.

I delighted in how Liu pushes the forms of ancient tradition away from their historic roots, only to reveal through, sound and surprise, a cultural essence far older and more visceral than traditionally allowed. Liu deconstructs the Chinese aesthetic within its own terms. And while she does not overtly reference the vested patriarchy within traditional Chinese art and calligraphic practice, her transgressive approach to remastering the elements of tradition suggests a savvy feminist understanding of the transcendent, evocative and inclusive nature of ink, water, rhythm, and sound.

### **Joe Hendel**

Joe Hendel's contribution to the PhD show at Burren College of Art was a three-part, hourlong performance entitled "hypermasculine thriftcore hangnail pixel art human hyperbolic outsider" in which the artist directed the audience

towards a variety of ends, with themes of masculinity, artificial intelligence, authorship and agency woven throughout. Complex and serving multiple ideas, the work defies brief description; it combines equal parts performance and participation, AI generated images and collaborative painting, all with the frenetic energy and admirable pageantry of a carnival act. At various times the audience was prompted to listen, to follow, to discuss and to create, while the artist interacted, directed, posed and joked. The finale consisted of viewers photographing the artist sitting in front of a newly painted canvas, in his newly painted body, and concluded abruptly and anticlimactically, as if highlighting its performative, circus-like nature; lights out, curtain drawn, the ringleader is exhausted.

With a piece like this, maximalist in its breadth, with a lengthy sequence of parallel activities and verbose showmanship, the implications come in hot and plentiful. And that might be the point; as with maximalism in most forms, the audience is not expected to leave with one takeaway or have one experience, but rather to acknowledge the limits of their attentional resources and meditate on what sticks. Indeed, to weave the complexity, absurdity, and robust activity of the piece into a single entity (let alone a single interpretation) would be Sisyphean. And I would imagine that this cognitive overload was the intent of the artist. In his past work, Handel has created massive archives of AI generated images and produced immersive theatrical works exploring chaos, chance, and the ambiguity of the performer's agency, so it is in keeping with his body of work that the viewer is offered an overwhelming number of angles of attack and modes of interpretation, forced to bushwhack their way through the brush of tangled, related elements. And though it was indeed immersive and collaborative, it might be more articulate in a less constrained environment: the piece seemed to be begging for more time, more space, and more discussion, almost as though a workshop format would better serve the performance's ends.

The work clearly operated within an ecosystem of the interesting topics of gender and authorship in the contemporary digital era. To those ends, the artist-as-commanding-genius, together with the tired expectations of the well-socialized adult white man, allowed Handel's stylized, attention-hungry, directorial performance to guide the viewer through a kinetic experience, and the artist's final presentation in all of its absurdity somewhat comically subverted the seriousness of the exalted male presence that he had just embodied immediately prior. It was no mistake, then, that amidst the densely populated tumult and creation of multiple artworks, the artist himself had merely provided the orders, his final stance one of singular glorification, with the creative labourers and collaborators dismissively out of frame. A poignant denouement to the show.

### **Fadwa Bouziane**

When I began my walk through of the PhD exhibition at Burren College of Art, I felt ungrounded and a bit frustrated. There weren't title cards, a title sheet, or any indication which artist made which piece due to unforeseen circumstances. I had to ask around to figure out whose work was whose, and to learn Fadwa Bouziane would be doing a performance later on at the left side of the gallery with a sponge and a ceramic bowl of vibrant blue paint. Fadwa didn't announce her performance nor did Conor McGrady, the dean of the college when he announced another artist's performance. I was able to confirm this was the artist's choice later on.

Fadwa quietly began her performance on a ladder. She made slow and decisive marks on the wall from right to left, filling in her stencilled marks I only noticed as the performance progressed. She wrote a phrase in Arabic, finishing off the last small strokes with her thumb covered in paint before packing up the ladder and leaving the exhibition space without a word. After the fact, I found out that the blue pigment Bouziane used was a ground stone from Morocco, where her family lives. It's a historically and culturally significant pigment used for protection that adds a personal, sentimental touch to a provocative work.

This specific piece greatly benefited from the lack of a title card or packet because the only way to access the meaning of this work was for the audience to go out of their way to look up the Arabic translation on their phone or to find a fellow audience member who already translated it. It put the emphasis on action over conformity to academic and gallery standards which strengthened the intent of the work, which roughly translates to "liberation from intellectual colonialism."

Fadwa's work was an excellent response to the contradictory nature of white, straight, male academic art institutions telling students they can do whatever they like to create new research, but only if it conforms to the pre-established institutional formats. The PhD exhibition lacking a packet listing all the artists and their works was not intentional, but as Fadwa's piece rejected the typical academic art show format as a matter of course, her performance was strengthened by lacking the typical indicators of an institutionally accepted art exhibition. The performance was executed with confidence and all of the elements, intentional and not, served its goal of critiquing institutional academia dominated by and still upholding straight, white, male perspectives.

## **Helle Helsner**

Helle Helsner's (2nd year PhD) work in the recent PhD exhibition at the Burren College of Art, Ireland, was in the form of 4 handmade artist books. The pages were highly textured, with an overlay of natural pigment such as lime, charcoal and sand in an impasto-like manner.

The books invited the viewers to actively engage in the process of seeing in 2 ways. First, because it was tangible, viewers could hold the books and feel the texture rich surfaces as well as see the strong graphite lines, hence making the work multi sensorial. Secondly, the scattered, yet intriguing text was obscurely written about constellations and the human experiences of connecting with nature. The presence of the orange paper dots denoted the constellations- natural but human made.

The books, however passionately made, lacked an entry point. The viewers' confusion to read the work was valid upto an extent. While viewing an abstract piece of work as such, the text inside the pages of the book was the only way one could comprehend the work. This subtlety should absolutely be pushed into revealing something while keeping other things hidden. A title in text or a statement would have been an excellent way of leading the viewers' mind to engage with the work more proficiently.

The technical nature of the work, such as book binding, paper selection, drawing and the usage of colour fitted quite well with the idea of a direct interaction of humans with nature. In fact, it may be a pro more than a con that Helsner was able to bring in this connection in a gallery like setting through a minimalistic methodology of book making.

The display could have attracted more attention had it been placed on a specific kind of a table that would have alluded to the project. The placement of the table could have been in the centre with a good amount of lighting. Helle Helsner's proficiency with working with material and technique is compelling, while the ideas continue to be on the periphery.

## **Helle Helsner (2nd review)**

Helsner's books are made of incredibly thick paper with a rough tooth, each page is part of an accordion fold, which suggests that each page is a section from a much larger piece, inviting the viewer to contemplate the evolution of the artwork as the pages progress. Most of the pages are covered in a chalky black, with copper and lavender highlights, over layed by abstracting lines. There are four books in total, two being larger than the others, however the theme of the contents remains similar throughout each piece.

Though the build of the books suggest a rough, earthen theme, this leaves it difficult for the reader to thumb through them, as the pages remain stiff, and the material used to colour each page feeling like it threatens to crumble apart at each movement. Through the abstraction done on each page, it can be difficult to discern an overarching theme throughout the pieces. However, the use of continuous pages suggests the passage of time, along with neon orange dots that appear like the sun passing over the sky.

This series of books fits well with Helsner's other work, resembling both her drawing and sculptural work. The roughness of the paper harkens to her work in copper sculpture, which contains a rough surface from the process of casting the metal, as well as her use of lines over patches of colour to suggest form and movement.

Helsner's practice appears to fit into the subgroup of artists who take interest in the classical way of craftsmanship, using old practice in conjunction with contemporary, in order to better understand the workings of a process no longer used. These books fall in line with this notion, by being constructed in a simple, yet effective manner, which allows the viewer to ponder the artwork used in making the books themselves, and not just what they contain.

## **Lea Farrell**

Lea Farrell's piece meets viewers at eye level. The texturing and details in the drawn work must be viewed up close but the whole of the work can only be viewed in its entirety by stepping back. The viewer is confronted by a composition of fragmented faces placed within small boxes, their only connection being electrical cords running through them. The arrangement forms a grid surrounding two empty frames. The composition seems to form some kind of machine version of a family tree. The vacantness of the frames instills the viewer with a sense of anticipation, as if waiting for the grid to be powered up and the entire machine to suddenly come alive. Perhaps then something would fill the empty frames like screens. However, this anticipation is short-lived, as the viewer soon notices that the electrical cord is merely hot glued to the sides of the frame. It becomes apparent that the machine is a fabrication of potential, an illusion of connectivity and function.

Lea Farrell constructs this shoddy machine to comment on the fragility and hollowness of human connection in the modern age. The importance placed upon technology and its ability to bridge distances and bring people closer together is questioned as the chords that are used to link us together only create a false sense of connectivity and limit the nature of true interaction. The choice of dark blue and black coloring accentuating the feeling of quiescence that permeates the piece. The style of mark making used to create the boxed faces edges on disturbing and no one face can be seen completely. Only a lip and a chin or an eye and forehead are pieces of information given by each cube, highlighting the lack of true connection and able communication between them.

Lea Farrell creates a thought-provoking narrative on the nature of human connection in the digital age; forcing us to question the authenticity of our relationships and examine our modes of connectivity and social bonds. The viewer is made to reflect upon the dissonance between the technological advancements that promise to bring us together and the reality of our disconnected existence.

## **Lea Farrell (2nd review)**

Lea Farrell's work, *Untitled, 2024* captivates the viewer with a wall installation featuring hand-constructed and painted boxes connected by black wire around two empty black frames. Blue pigment saturates each square, accentuating the energy within black and white tonal shifts. Pieces of human forms surround each side, creating a visually dynamic and thought-provoking composition that explores the interplay of color, form, and space. The vacant frames invite viewers to engage actively, fostering contemplation and self-reflection within the artwork. Farrell is currently pursuing a practice-based research MPhil in fine art at the Burren College of Art, focusing on drawing as the central element in her body of work. Her pieces employ layering and gestural lines, capturing the essence of movement and human interactions.

The wall installation reflects a nuanced engagement with spatial dynamics through an examination of the arrangement, distribution, and movement of boxes on the wall. The fusion of materiality, drawing, and play positions the work within the current conversations on the intersection of traditional and modern artistic expression. In an analysis of the work, the deliberate separation of human figures and open frames serves as a deconstructive exploration of societal norms surrounding interpersonal dynamics. Frequently, individuals held in high regard find placement within these frames, symbolizing respect and honor. The deliberate emptiness within these frames contributes to a holistic and emotive experience, prompting contemplation on absence, presence, and societal expectations.

The exhibition, lacking titles, artist descriptions, or bios, presented a challenge in comprehending the collective narrative and intentions. Dim lighting cast overly dark shadows, hindering a full appreciation of the installation.

In summary, Lea Farrell's *Untitled, 2024* intricately blends materiality, drawing, and spatial dynamics, sparking self-reflection. It invites viewers into a contemplative realm, questioning preconceived notions and fostering meaningful dialogue.

### **Lea Farrell (3rd review)**

Lea Farrell's work, *Untitled, 2024* captivates the viewer with a wall installation featuring hand-constructed and painted boxes connected by black electrical wire around two empty frames. Blue pigment saturates each square, accentuating the energy within black and white tonal shifts. Pieces of human forms surround each side, creating a visually dynamic and thought-provoking composition that explores the interplay of color, form, and space. The vacant frames invite viewers to engage actively, fostering contemplation and self-reflection within the artwork. Farrell is currently pursuing a practice-based research MPhil in fine art at the Burren College of Art, focusing on drawing as the central element in her body of work. Her pieces employ layering and gestural lines, capturing the essence of movement and human interactions.

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