

art
exchange

PRE- CARI- COUS

17.01.2023

Tom Armstrong
Daisy Blower
Tom Bull
Iris Gunnarsdottir
Elsa James
Dion Kitson
Rudy Loewe
Rebecca Moss
Paul Westcombe
Josh C Wright

17.02.2023

PRECARIOUS EXHIBITION AND ARTISTS

This exhibition creates a platform for artists who explore precariousness – from living within the permacrisis of UK politics, to navigating social justice and gender identity in an often hostile environment, while avoiding ‘bullshit jobs’ – and simply figuring out how to pay the rent.

While the artists in this show focus on the complexity of life in the UK today, they also reveal how communities can stabilise themselves, often creating a support structure of mutual aid and interconnectedness.

‘Precarious’ is a collective act of defiance by artists who utilise their imagination to reveal alternative ways of responding to their lived experience and the society we live in. It includes work by Tom Armstrong, Daisy Blower, Tom Bull, Iris Gunnarsdottir, Elsa James, Dion Kitson, Rudy Loewe, Rebecca Moss, Paul Westcombe and Josh C Wright.

TOM ARMSTRONG



www.tomedwardarmstrong.com

Tom Armstrong draws cartoons in a cold, wet farm building by the side of the A12.

He publishes regularly in the satirical magazine *Private Eye* and various independent zines, using the moniker T.E.A. He has recently completed a limited-edition book of cartoons entitled *Robotic Therapy Animals*.

For Precarious, Tom Armstrong has been artist-in-residence at the University of Essex, spending time with the campus community, creating a new body of work that responds to student life during the ongoing permacrisis of life in the UK post-Brexit.

Tom Armstrong also exhibits his work, including at *The Hay Games* at Firstsite, Colchester (2016) and *Urban Spaces* at Benham Gallery, Essex (2022).

DAISY BLOWER



www.daisyblower.com

Daisy Blower is a queer artist making sex positive, feminist artworks.

She is a set designer and with the inevitable closure of theatres during Covid 19 lockdowns, Daisy began to use her model making skills as a medium to explore the things that matter to her. These include grappling with the messiness of a queer feminist life; introspection, intimacy, queer agency and bodily remnants.

Daisy Blower lives and works in London. She is a founding member of the award-winning theatre company Bleeding Nora and winner of the Les Enfants Terribles Greenwich Theatre Award 2020. She has exhibited her models widely, including *Persona*, London, (2021), *Queer Art(ists) Now* at Space Station Sixty-Five, London (2022), *Façade* at the Holy Art Gallery, London (2022), and shares their latest work at queer art markets throughout the year.

TOM BULL



www.tombull.co.uk

Tom Bull makes sculptures in an absurd attempt to capture the lived experience within these dark, strange and untrustworthy times.

Through a landscape of folk, rural living, modernity and ritual, he investigates the tension and slippage between fiction and representation, violence and sensitivity, truth and mythology. With a wide range of tools and materials borrowed from architecture, model making, carpentry, farming and forestry, he employs a sculptural practice that

confronts and manipulates traditions, time periods, lore and genre. His recent work interrogates “country life” by challenging personal and collective issues around land, loss, community, wealth, access, labour and violence.

Tom Bull lives and works in London. He has exhibited widely, including *To Whom do you Trust the Spare Keys* at Airspace, Stoke on Trent (2019) *Groundwork* at Studio West, London (2022) and *New Contemporaries*, touring (2022-2023).

IRIS GUNNARSDOTTIR



www.irisdina.net

Iris Gunnarsdottir is an artist, maker and ceramist.

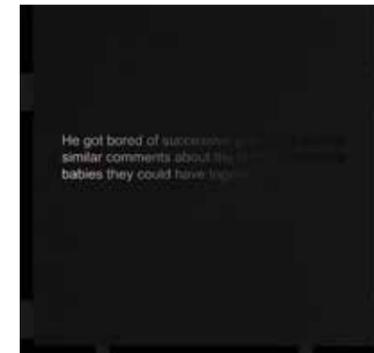
Through her work she explores concepts of equality from within a feminist framework, blurring the lines of gender roles and in doing so, challenging preconceptions that the Western world holds about gender identity. Her work is visualised and performed through video installation, photography and drawing.

While artist-in-residence at the University of Essex, Iris created communal activities to bring

students together, such as making their own piggy banks out of clay. These gatherings were the catalyst for further conversations about the impact of the cost-of-living crisis on students’ lives and form the basis of her latest film.

Iris Gunnarsdottir lives and works in Essex. She has exhibited widely including the *Shadows* at the Benham Gallery, Colchester (2022) and *The Interviews* at Art Exchange, Colchester (2020) where her work was displayed alongside photographs by Claude Cahun.

ELSA JAMES



www.elsajames.com

Elsa James is a British African-Caribbean artist and activist whose practice intervenes in the overlapping discourses of race, gender, diaspora and belonging.

Her Black British identity ignites her interdisciplinary, collaborative and research-based practice, located within the fields of performance, film, sound, text and socially engaged art. Since 2018, she has established a body of work focused on disrupting the Essex identity and cultural stereotypes,

affixed with an ambition to demarcate ‘Black space’ that shifts the pejorative, derogatory nationwide perception held about the county and its people.

Elsa James lives and works in Essex. She has exhibited widely, including *Othered in a Region that has been historically Othered* at Focal Point Gallery, Southend (2022), *New Contemporaries*, touring (2021) and in *Superblack* at Firstsite, Colchester (2019), an exhibition which she co-curated.

DION KITSON

www.dionkitson.com

Dion Kitson's work spans sculpture, film, collage, text-art and sound.

He explores how to infiltrate an unsuspecting, un-wanting, un-academic audience. His work deals with the reality of being an artist as he attempts to take on the outside world and put it into his work. Dion's practice is reactive and intuitive, and his work is both playful and pertinent to the current political climate and working-class culture. Film, sculpture and public interventions aim to reflect a pathos

of everyday life, subverted and situated in disguise.

Dion Kitson lives and works in Birmingham. He has exhibited widely, including *Me, My Brain, and I* at Koppel Gallery, London (2022) and *Hypha Presents* at Hypha Studio Mayfair, London (2022) and has staged interventions at the Frieze Art Fair (2022) and collaborated with comedian Joe Lycett.

RUDY LOEWE (RL)

Rudy Loewe is a visual artist exploring black histories and social politics through painting, drawing and text. Their approach to painting speaks to their background in comics and illustration – combining text, image and sequential narrative.

They began a Techne funded practice-based PhD at the University of the Arts London in 2021. Loewe's research critiques Britain's role in suppressing Black Power organising in the English-speaking Caribbean during the 60s and 70s. They are

creating paintings and drawings unravelling this history included in recently declassified government records.

Rudy Loewe lives and works in London. They have exhibited extensively including *Unattributable Briefs: Act One* at Staffordshire St Gallery, London (2022), *New Contemporaries*, touring (2022) and *NAE Open 22* at New Art Exchange, Nottingham (2022). They have also been invited to participate in the 12th Liverpool Biennial in 2023.

REBECCA MOSS

rebeccamos.co.uk

Rebecca Moss' practice explores an embodied and feminist relationship with landscape.

She draws on the idea of slapstick performance as subjectivity, transforming the way we relate to landscape as she emphasises a sense of reciprocity, that the landscape can act back upon us. We are not always in control. Moss' work takes the form of site-responsive absurdist interventions that are documented as short videos. These can be thought of as

precarious scenarios where an absurd idea is earnestly played out to a point of futility, chaos or crisis.

Rebecca Moss lives and works in Essex. She has exhibited widely, including *The Beano*, Somerset House, London (2021) *Survey II* (Jerwood Space touring 2021-2021) and will be showcasing her work at Fruitmarket, Edinburgh in 2023. She is also working towards a solo show at Focal Point Gallery in the summer of 2023.

PAUL WESTCOMBE

www.paulwestcombe.com

Paul Westcombe's work was – like so much great art – born of boredom.

Working as a car park attendant on a twelve-hour shift, Paul started drawing on whatever material came to hand: London Underground Travel Cards receipts, tiny tins of Vaseline lips salve and the paper coffee cups he'd just drained in an attempt to stay awake. These cups became the ideal surface for Westcombe's carnivalesque drawings of the neurotic thoughts that plague the mind in solitary

moments. With titles such as *Sex is Boring with Me, You're Hardly Ever Here And When You're Here, You're Bored*, they form a self-deprecating running commentary on his drawings' own unbridled visions.

Paul Westcombe lives and works in London. He has exhibited widely, including the Royal College of Art, London (2007), Liverpool Biennial (2010), the Whitechapel Gallery Open (2012) and *Vexations* at Imperial College London (2021).

JOSH C. WRIGHT

www.joshcwright.com

Josh C Wright's work hangs around the edges of cities, in the in-between spaces. He salvages a lot of his material from the skips outside of the encroaching construction projects, the present reminder of the ever-changing city.

His sculptures contain a sense of foreboding. They are precarious and stacked in ways that seem as though they could fall at any moment. It is as if they are inhabited with a sense of uncertainty and instability fuelled

by his own anxieties as an artist living and working on the edges of London.

Josh C. Wright lives and works in London. He has exhibited widely including *Hypha Presents* at Hypha Studios Mayfair, London (2022) and *Groundwork* at Studio West, London (2022). He recently curated a group exhibition titled *Lost in a Just-in-Time Supply Chain* at Hypha Studios, London (2022).

We would like to thank everyone who made this exhibition possible including:

Curator:
Jess Twyman
Curatorial Assistant:
Gisselle Giron
Technicians:
James Barnard
Edward Bennett
Comms and Engagement:
Hanna Jones
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Graphic Design:
Pavitt and Pavitt

We would also like to thank Harriet Cooper for always inspiring – and most importantly, the artists who have contributed their amazing work to this show.

ARTISTIC PRECARIOUSNESS

The subprime mortgage crisis of 2008 reminded us that capitalist structures are built upon precarious foundations. More recently however, there has been a sharp intensification of Britain’s rapid dwindling of social and economic conditions in which precariousness has come to define our very being. Indeed, it is surely no coincidence that, in 2018, the *Oxford English Dictionary* added “precariat” to its volume. Causes and symptoms of this state are not difficult to identify as such; one challenge, though, is grasping how a symptom becomes the cause of another symptom. The United Kingdom’s masochistic exit from the European Union is symptomatic of a deeper malaise, but it has caused the country’s lack of ability to recover from the COVID pandemic or deal effectively with the wider fallout from Russia’s attempted annexation of Ukraine.

Precarious is an exhibition of artists in which various forms of precariousness—economic, social, psychological—are registered and thematized within their practice. Artists are, of course, no strangers to precariousness for at least two reasons. Firstly, and most simply, because they belong to the same social body as much of the populace and therefore experience the same disenfranchisements and fears. While it may not always be their main “job,” artists are workers and art is a mode of labour. Producing art is neither a hobby nor an escape from economic reality. And secondly, artists have long been exposed to the precariousness built into capitalism. Hans Abbing, for instance, has outlined the ways in which the field of art constitutes an “exceptional economy” resulting in widespread—and almost accepted—poor financial remuneration. Furthermore, writers such as Gregory Sholette have demonstrated the semi-invisible class of art workers—the “dark matter”—that the artworld depends upon.

But the experience of precarity in relation to art potentially cuts far deeper than this. Whilst the perspective of Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello, as expounded in their book *The New Spirit of Capitalism*, has been much interrogated, it is nonetheless worth mentioning their claim it is *within* art and its attendant discourses that notions formative to post-Fordism—flexible working, labour as self-expression, collaboration, creativity and knowledge formation as

financially productive—were first trialled. And if post-Fordism is the umbrella term naming deindustrialization, the growth of immaterial labour, increasing reliance upon zero-hour contracts, the commodification of education, and generally socioeconomic precariousness becoming the hallmark of quotidian life, it might be suggested that art has a distinct relationship to precarity. Exposed to precariousness, however, art is capable of exposing precarity in turn.

The artworks in the exhibition enact that task in various ways. For the sake of simplicity, I will divide the works heuristically into two broad categories on the proviso that these should not be understood as either wholly autonomous or hierarchal.

Precarious Mapping

Precarity is a condition that manifests spatially as well as subjectively. Bricks and mortar were once eulogized as the ultimate safe investment. But in Josh C. Wright’s pieces the stability proffered by bricks becomes fundamentally illusionary, as is evident in his *Untitled* (2021). Wright usefully perceives the bricks in *Monads of the Urban Sea* (2020) as essentially “spinal” in terms of their formal arrangement and character, and in various ways this conjoins with late nineteenth discussions on Railway Spine, a seemingly newly-recorded medical condition in which the spatio-temporal dislocation and acceleration caused by train travel “caused” psychological disturbances which what would become renamed Shellshock and later as Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. Simply put, new experiences of space and time were the cause of traumatic subjectivity. Here in Wright’s work we have something like the opposite: rather than a new experience of space engendering mental anguish as per Railway Spine, we instead observe how stress deriving from precarious economic situations is registered as uncanny quasi-architectural spaces.

Tom Bull’s work moves us from the urban to the rural with his *And All That Haunted Nigh Had Sought Their Household Fires* (2022). Its title references Thomas Hardy’s 1900 poem “The Darkling Thrush,” but the subtle optimism of that poem is replaced with something hinting towards the darker edges of folklore and rural culture. Indeed, as much as the rural has

become the desired location for wealthy urbanites looking for a quieter life, the countryside stills remains an area of poverty haphazardly connected to the national grid in terms of internet and heating. Moreover, rural locations increasingly become a desired place for second homes, a situation which both suggests how the affluent are seeking escape from the rat race but also results in property becoming unaffordable for those rooted in those locations. Offering no warmth, the log burner sculpted here is less a sign of comfort than a reminder of loneliness.

In Paul Westcombe’s practice there is both a sense of the ennui generated at work entwined with the little pieces of resentment, or even Nietzschean *ressentiment* (the small acts of impotent vengefulness that those disempowered desire towards those defined as more powerful). Empty time passed in humdrum employments is given transitory meaning through small acts of creative resistance. The works in this exhibition were produced whilst Westcombe was trying to support his practice by working night shifts; the cups he has drawn upon were once filled with the coffee needed to keep awake him over the long anti-social hours. Paper coffee cups therefore become blank canvases, no matter how base the materials may seem, for drawings that uncomfortably provide insight into the wandering and imagination of the bored and frustrated artist. Existing somewhere between over-caffeination and hypnagogic consciousness, Westcombe’s drawings relay the anxieties – given expression through depictions of bodies becoming bio-machines that merge with the workplace – of the precarious labourer.

Questions of class are fundamental to Dion Kitson’s practice. While the experience of precariousness and worries about the cost of living are widespread through different levels of our society, it’s crucial to understand that such experiences may differ in intensity. Some sectors of society are able to mitigate economic dire straits, being able to tighten their belts, so to speak. However, many working-class families have done everything to reduce their outgoings, only to discover that they falling deeper into the red. Kitson’s photograph of a card machine, *It’s Only Paper*, is the embodiment of fear: there is no guarantee that cash will issue from it if your account is in arrears. The work’s title suggests the reassurance many seek to offer themselves, while also reminding us that the increasing dematerialization of money—its departure from the gold standard to its eventual mutation into electronic code—means that money is barely worth the paper it’s printed upon. Indeed, with contactless becoming the common method of paying for goods, the sight of money becomes fundamentally strange.

In moving towards the works of Elsa James and Tom Armstrong, mapping entwines people and spaces. *The Black Interior* is a series of screen prints consisting of black text upon black paper accompanied by audio. The

texts, existing on the cusp of visibility, document quotidian microaggressions experienced by black men in various settings; the audio collates snippets from popular British 1970s and 1980s sitcoms evidencing racist attitudes masquerading as humour. In this manner, the combination of text and audio indicate that the not-so-distant past stretches into, and continues to condition, our present. Outright racism transformed into microaggression does not entail societal improvement between then and now, but rather manifests how racism lingers consciously and unconsciously, overtly and in a more subterranean fashion, throughout society. Until the statements collected by James one day become historical sources, they function at present as testimonies to how structural racism renders the lives of black people horrendously precarious in manifold ways.

Armstrong’s contribution to *Precarious* is the outcome of a residency at the University of Essex. Bringing his typical wry humour, he has been quietly observing and picturing student behaviour around campus. In photography, it’s often believed that when sitter is unaware of being documented that they reveal their truest self. Here the same potentially holds true for Armstrong’s drawings, for it is during the unnoticed little actions around campus that anxieties and dreams are revealed. In this way, he maps campus life during a current cost of living crisis and in the face of their worries about the future. The resultant drawings occupy a sheet on paper: on one side is a single image that can displayed as a poster, whilst on the other is a series of pictures that can folded into a booklet. Armstrong has had printed hundreds of copies of these sheets and, in the democratic impulse akin to the manner of the artist Felix González-Torres, has made them free for visitors to take from the gallery.

Precarious Survival

Rebecca Moss’ video, *Thick-Skinned* (2019), presents herself—often the lead character in her short slapstick films—covered from head-to-toe in colourful balloons as she tries to force herself through an opening in a barbed wire fence in the countryside. As comical as the scene is, however, there is also a tragic poignancy here. The balloons serve as a makeshift armour for the protagonist who can either be understood as trying to breakout from an enclosed space or desperately breaking into a circumscribed territory that they have excluded from by climbing through the barest of gaps defended by numerous barbed wire prongs. Whichever alternative we opt for, Moss’ tragicomedy recalls to mind those seeking to escape from shattered societies, undertaking perilous journeys, in order to find a place of safety—only to be demonized in the right-wing press as invading hordes. Yet there is hope, too, in this grim determination to transgress borders.

Daisy Blower’s works are proactive responses the heightened precarity engulfing the cultural sector due

to the COVID-19 pandemic. Although many areas in that sector suffered, those that depend significantly upon live audiences—such as concerts and theatres—were especially endangered. Normally working for theatres by making models envisioning set designs, but unable to do so due to the pandemic, Blower began making models of domestic spaces as an art practice and alternative income stream. This instantiates a shift from the public space of the auditorium, configured as fictive scenography, to the private arena of the home. Yet privacy here is not identical to hiddenness or withdrawal. By sharing her private space, Blower also thereby invites other people to share their spaces.

Iris Gunnarsdottir's contribution is the second made specifically for this exhibition from a residency. Interviewing students at the University of Essex, Gunnarsdottir invited them to share their experiences of increased costs of living and the pressure this has on their studies. The interviews that comprise this work show the importance of creating space for others to speak, and, by the same token, the importance of listening to and acknowledging what those people have to share. *Piggy Bank*, building upon an earlier artwork, reproduces those interviews as films staging a conversation between herself as interviewer and another version of herself who speaks in the voice of the interviewee. This strategy grants each interviewee a degree of anonymity that encourages them to speak with a greater level of honesty about their income and prospects. Especially undergirding is the fear that higher education is, less than ever, the pathway towards financial autonomy and work security.

If many of the works in this exhibition evince diverse strategies for barely managing in this current model of capitalism, they all indicate that such "making do and getting by" is survival rather than testimony to the "indomitable spirit" of the "truly" productive worker or artist frequently imagined by neoliberal doctrine. It's barbarism to dream that enforced mere survival is the precondition for some pseudo-Darwinist survival of the economic fittest. As difficult as it may be, however, Rudy Loewe's tripartite *Groundwork* enjoins us to slow down, take a breath, and refuse consumerism's hyperacceleration. Crucial here, too, is recognizing how individuals are strengthened through communal being-together. Such being-together depends not on us all sharing a singular identity but instead, as the third panel of *Groundwork* demonstrates, in bringing together difference. It's through these actions and acknowledgments that a better tomorrow can be forged.

Matthew Bowman
University of Essex

PRECARIOUS PUBLIC PROGRAMME

LUNCHTIME TOUR

Thurs 2 February, 1 – 1.45 pm
Admission Free

Come along for a tour of Precarious with curators Jess Twyman and Giselle Giron. Together they will tell you about the ideas and inspiration behind the works on show which respond to the precarious times we live in.

ARTISTS' TALK

Tuesday 7 February, 6 – 7.15 pm
Admission Free

We are excited to be joined by artists Elsa James, Rebecca Moss and Josh C Wright who will offer personal insights about their work on show in Precarious. Chaired by Dr Matthew Bowman, with Q&A followed by a drinks reception.

STORMY WEATHER AHEAD? PRECARITY AND POLITICS TODAY

Tuesday 14 Feb
6 – 8.30 pm
Admission Free

In the spirit of mutual aid and interconnectedness creating a better society to live in, we are hosting a free supper of vegetarian stews and homemade bread.

The evening includes conversations from members of the Centre for Commons Organising, Values Equalities and Resilience (COVER), a new research group at the University of Essex who explore theories for creating, managing and promoting the "commons". This evening they will explore precarity and politics today.

Free – but booking is essential.
Head over to our website to find out more.
www.artexchange.org.uk

All events are in Art Exchange