

TOIL & TROUBLE

HOW WE FIND OUT WHO WE ARE

APT GALLERY, 05-20 NOVEMBER 2022

AN EXHIBITION BY ALI DARKE, LUCY RENTON AND SUE WITHERS
DISRUPTED BY ERIC GREAT-REX

“It was such an exciting project for me, I felt like I could really let my imagination go, it had a lot of energy around it from the initial conversations with the artists to the final exhibition”

Eric Great-Rex (Public Discussion)

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Life did not take over the world by combat, but by networking.

Lynn Margulis, Microcosmos: Four Billion
Years of Microbial Evolution (1986)

If humans are to survive, they must participate in their own evolution. This means discovering, more than defining, ourselves through our engagement with others.

This show proposes a methodology based in conscious collective evolution, rather than self-determination, using conversation and rearrangement as an ethos for an exhibition that changes across its duration and becomes a catalyst for exploring how control of meaning is shared and surrendered in a group dynamic.

The initial installation of works will be agreed between three artists – Ali Darke, Lucy Renton and Sue Withers – whose practices intersect around axes of craft, the domestic and female labour, negotiate the boundaries of decorum; that which society deems appropriate in culture, language, behaviour and taste. Through the aesthetics of domestic decoration, the industry of grooming, and the unruly body they consider what is disparaged as feminine excess.

Invited to intervene in the show midway, Eric Great-Rex will have an open brief to 'disrupt', to alter and re-stage it. This activity becomes the focus for a public discussion between the artists and the 'Disruptor' and the re-staged exhibition remains open to the public. There are effectively two shows, before and after the 'Disruption', with a public sharing of the critical process of its alteration.

Surrendering control is inherently risky and parallels the productive uncertainty of studio practice. We also see installation as a productive site, foregrounding our belief that the exhibition is the beginning, not the end of the work/s.

Following the rupture caused by Covid, this is a key moment to reassess the experience of physical exhibitions, and the role of the artist as curator or as curated.

THE ARTISTS

Ali Darke studied at Wimbledon College of Art, the Slade School of Fine Art and was awarded a Professional Doctorate in Fine Art in 2021. Recent exhibitions include: *Between Walls*, Safehouse, London (2020); *Memento Mori* (2021) *Common Ground* (2022) Air Gallery, Manchester, *Vestiges*, hARTslane Gallery, London; *Wells Art Contemporary*, Wells Cathedral; *Micro-Vestiges*, One-To-Ten, Hastings; *Memento Mori*, Palazzo Ducale, Atina, Italy; Wirksworth Art Festival, 2022. She has attended residencies at Nottingham Trent University, Psarades, Greece; Ramsgate, UK; and Atina, Italy.

She works through drawing and sculpture in response to memory, myth, and the evocative language of psychoanalysis. Haunting echoes of loss and psychic fragmentation are viscerally expressed in materiality and form. Transforming discarded material by cutting, stitching, and stuffing, hybrid objects emerge. Playing with their dynamic presence in space, tests unsettling tipping points of beauty, absurdity and abjection. Suggesting a hinterland between the mind and the body where the unconscious leaves a trace, she discovers the unexpected and uncannily familiar.

ALI DARKE

BALLS (Detail) 2022

Work in Progress (Blanket, Upholstery Stuffing)

THE ARTISTS

Lucy Renton's practice is rooted in painting and printmaking, also in an expanded way with sound and experimental music, showing in the UK, Europe and Japan. Recent exhibitions include *Cluster* Letchworth (2021), *Enough is Definitely Enough!* (2019–20) and the *Bummock* project with the Nottingham Lace Archive (2016–19).

Her work explores our relationship with interiors playing with the value of the decorative in contemporary art, evoking domestic motifs in site-specific installations and paintings. The work draws on historic textile and wallpaper design and craft processes, celebrating their seduction through colour, and the psychological overload of excessive ornament and the endless repetition of pattern. Ideas of 'home' contribute to this work: what engenders a sense of a safe territory of belonging, or a dream of a different reality?

Lucy Renton studied at St Martins and the Royal College of Art and was awarded a Professional Doctorate in Fine Art in 2019.

LUCY RENTON

Juliet (Detail) 2021

(Acrylic, Household Emulsion Paint on Linen)



SUE WITHERS

Yellow Token (Detail) 2021

(Balloon, Feathers, Panel, Sand, Tights)

THE ARTISTS

London-based artist, curator and educator, Sue Withers studied Fine Art at Leeds Polytechnic and Wimbledon School of Art and has just completed a Professional Doctorate in Fine Art at the University of East London. She holds several teaching qualifications, and spent twenty years working in Further & Higher Education. Always keen to collaborate she co-founded Proof, an artist-run curatorial project dedicated to artists' multiples, and the use of domestic and 'non-gallery' spaces in 1998.

More recent co-curated exhibitions include *Between Walls* at Safehouse, London (2020) *Research Space* (2019) and "*Loving Care*" (2021) at the Way Out East Gallery, London.

Spanning printmaking, photography, video and sculpture, her work explores the construction of female identity through consumerism; the pursuit of perfection, acceptance or visibility through the acquisition of possessions. It examines the influence of class and the dangerous or transgressive qualities of that which is often considered frivolous: colour and fashion.



ERIC GREAT-REX

Art Trophy (Detail) 2022 (Ceramic)

THE (ARTIST) DISRUPTOR

Eric has recently retired from academia after 30 years teaching on undergraduate, post graduate and doctoral programmes. He was a Fulbright Scholar in the early 80's when he was based in New York researching a range of non-silver photographic processes. On returning to London he taught at a number of Art Schools including the RCA, RA and the Slade. He has exhibited in the UK, the USA and China with works in the Royal Academy Summer Exhibition – Shanghai Honggiao Contemporary Art Museum, Shanghai, China – Silas Marder Gallery, Bridgehampton, New York – Edinburgh Printmakers, Scotland and the Multiple Store, London.

His practice over the last twenty years has used ceramics and printmaking as the principal mediums. His recent work has drawn on ideas around commemorative and transitional objects, exploring how we venerate our daily lives and the stories we tell ourselves in order to make sense and give meaning to our experiences.

INSTALL ONE

(CURATED BY THE ARTISTS)



Lucy Renton, *Dusty 2* (Sequins, pins, Dimensions Variable) 2022

Ali Darke, *The Ugly One* (Blanket, upholstery stuffing, linen, salt, net curtain, W45 x D45 x H250cm) 2022





“Fabulous show by three very talented artists — massive thanks for being so courteous and generous with your time today – Can’t wait to see what happens later with artist Eric Great-Rex who’s going ‘to disturb’ somehow the existing show by adding, taking away... Love the concept”

Visitor (INSTALL ONE)



From Left: **INSTALL ONE**; Ali Darke, *Don't Look At Me* (Display cabinet, blankets, H170 x W105 x D35cm) 2021
and *BALLS: Fringe, Flounce and Frill* (Blanket, fringing, silk, upholstery stuffing, W35 x D35 x H35cm) 2022
Lucy Renton, *Baubly* (Hobby clay, gloss paint, crystal trim, W20 x H40cm) 2022



Lucy Renton, *Baubly* (Detail)
(Hobby clay, gloss paint, crystal trim, W20 x H40cm) 2022



From Left: **INSTALL ONE**; Ali Darke *BALLS: Fringe, Flounce and Frill* (Blanket, fringing, silk, upholstery stuffing, W35 x D35 x H35cm) and *Hold Me* (Coat hangers, blanket, net curtain, salt, stuffing, W63 x D23 x H210cm) both 2022
Sue Withers, *Supersized Luxury Slippery Surface #02* (Inkjet print on glossy vinyl on Foamalite, W85 x H115cm) 2021



Ali Darke, *Hold Me* (Detail)
(Coat hangers, blanket, net curtain, salt,
stuffing, W63 x D23 x H210cm) 2022



From Left: **INSTALL ONE**; Sue Withers, *Supersized Luxury Slippery Surface #04* (Inkjet print on glossy vinyl on Foamalite, W85 x H115cm) 2021
Uncalled for Adornment (Overflow) (Gesso panel, curly bows, plastic tray, W25 x H45cm) and
Uncalled for Adornment (Pinch) (Gesso panel, plastic wall mount, balloon, W25 x H25cm) 2022

INSTALL TWO

(CURATED BY THE ARTIST DISRUPTOR)



Lucy Renton, *Dusty 2* (Sequins, pins, Dimensions Variable) plus Eric
Great-Rex *Artists' Plates* (Ceramic, 3 x W53 x H53cm) 2022

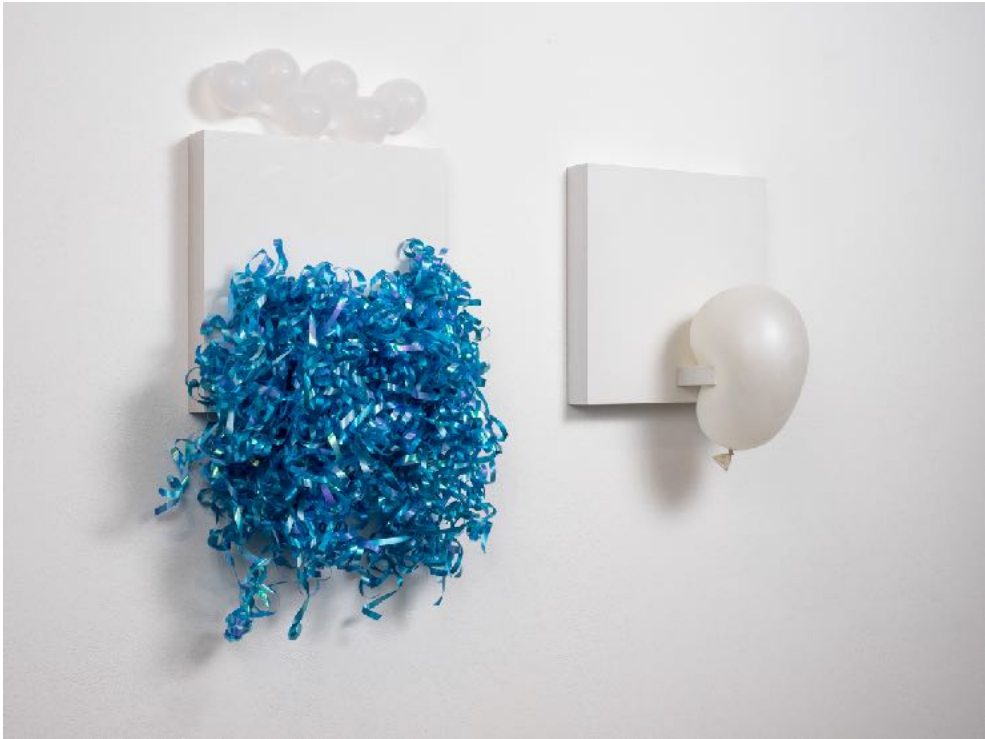


From Left: **INSTALL ONE;** Lucy Renton, *Dusty 2* (Sequins, pins, Dimensions Variable) 2022, Sue Withers, *Waste Products (Platforms 1 & 2)* (Timber, carpet, waste bin, tissue box cover, tissues, W160 x D75 x H25cm) 2021

INSTALL TWO; As before, plus Eric Great-Rex *Artists' Plates* (Ceramic, 3 x W53 x H53cm) 2022

Sue Withers, *Waste Products (Platforms 1 & 2)*
(Timber, carpet, waste bin, tissue box cover, tissues,
W160 x D75 x H25cm) 2021, plus Eric Great-Rex, *Useful
Button* (Ceramic, W5 x D5cm) 2022





From Left: **INSTALL ONE;** Sue Withers, *Uncalled for Adornment (Overflow)* (Gesso panel, curly bows, plastic tray, W25 x H45cm) 2022
Sue Withers, *Uncalled for Adornment (Pinch)* (Gesso panel, plastic wall mount, balloon, W25 x H25cm) 2022

INSTALL TWO; As before, plus Eric Great-Rex, *Called for Adornment (Flag)* (Ceramic, ribbon, ping pong ball, W20 x H25cm) 2022



From Left: **INSTALL ONE;** Lucy Renton, *Juliette* (Acrylic on canvas, upholstery tacks, W64 x H185cm) 2021
Ali Darke, *Don't Look At Me* (Display cabinet, blankets, H170 x W105 x D35cm) 2021
and *BALLS: Fringe, Flounce and Frill* (Blanket, fringing, silk, upholstery stuffing, W35 x D35 x H35cm) 2022
INSTALL TWO; As before, plus Eric Great-Rex, *Romeo* (Ceramic, ribbon, silver button, W16 x H16cm) 2022
and *Look at Me* (Ceramic, plaster, Dimensions Variable) 2022





From Left: **INSTALL ONE;** Ali Darke, *Don't Look At Me` (Detail)* (Display cabinet, blankets, H170 x W105 x D35cm) 2021 and *BALLS: Fringe, Flounce and Frill* (Blanket, fringing, silk, upholstery stuffing, W35 x D35 x H35cm) 2022

INSTALL TWO; Ali Darke, *Don't Look At Me` (Detail)* as above, plus Eric Great-Rex *Look at Me* (Ceramic, plaster, Dimensions Variable) 2022

Lucy Renton, *Posey*
(Hobby clay, gloss paint, ink, ribbon, W12 x H200cm) 2022





From Left: **INSTALL TWO**; Lucy Renton, *Parkhouse Parade* (Acrylic on canvas, upholstery tacks, W45 x H180cm) 2021
Eric Great-Rex, *Don't Rain on my Parade* (Ceramic, Dimensions Variable) 2022
Lucy Renton, *Decline and Fallpaper* (Acrylic on canvas, W88 x H208cm) 2022

“Often as an artist, if you're making work in the studio and then you put on an exhibition, and it somehow dies. And you're just waiting. You make it public, but it's separate and it's kind of finished. It might generate something or might not, so it was a way of trying to make the exhibitions still be a living thing and a generative thing for the artist”

Lucy Renton (Public Discussion, 2022)



RESEARCH FORUM

APT GALLERY, 18 NOVEMBER 2022, 14.00-15.30

A DISCUSSION FORUM BETWEEN THE ARTISTS AND INVITED ACADEMICS,
RESEARCHERS, STUDENTS AND OTHER CREATIVE PROFESSIONALS.

THE THEMES BELOW WERE EXPLORED THROUGH A SERIES OF
PROPOSITIONS, AS DESCRIBED ON THE FOLLOWING PAGES.

| INTERVENTION | COLLABORATION | TRANSLATION | SUSTAINABILITY | PERFORMATIVITY |

ART IS A CONVERSATION

When you enter the conversation, it has already started

ART IS A CONVERSATION

When you enter the conversation, it has already started. You must work it out as you go along. No one will ever explain if you got it 'right', whatever that means. Even the really popular people don't control it. All you can do is swerve it a little bit. Or try to dominate it. Or try to make it more interesting for the other people. Or try to make everyone laugh. Or try to fit in. Or try to stand out. Or just listen to the others. In any case, the conversation will probably go on after you have left.

MEANING IS AN ARRANGEMENT

MEANING IS AN ARRANGEMENT

If the organisation of the objects is as important as the objects themselves, why is a gallery show a 'fixed' thing? Why can't it change during its life? (Perhaps this is already the case, and a show changes its meaning when we are not looking, and we don't know, because we only see it when we visit.)

ART IS ONLY A CONVERSATION IF IT IS NOT TREATED AS CONTENT

IS THE CONVERSATION TO PLEASE OTHERS OR TO OFFER A NEW PROVOCATIVE WAY OF UNDERSTANDING?

A SINGLE OBJECT TELLS ONE STORY WHEN PLACED WITH ANOTHER OBJECT THERE IS A DIFFERENT STORY

**IS ART ALWAYS IN THE MIDDLE?
NEVER AT THE START AND NEVER ENDS?**

IS ART BETTER WHEN IT IS WITH OTHERS? OR DOES 'IT' WANT ALL YOUR ATTENTION FOR ITSELF?

DOES A CONVERSATION HAVE TO BE A VERBAL ONE? IF NOT THEN HOW IS IT COMMUNICATED CLEARLY?

CAN THINGS EVER BE THEMSELVES?

OBJECTS HAVE A TENDENCY TO SHIFT — OR MAKE A LIFE OF THEIR OWN — THEY AREN'T NECESSARILY IN OUR CONTROL

THE WORK IS BIGGER THAN YOU ARE

A good musician makes the whole band sound better. In

ART IS NOT A MESSAGE MEDIUM

THE WORK IS BIGGER THAN YOU ARE

A good musician makes the whole band sound better. In our lifetime we have seen artists become celebrities the way musicians, models and actors are famous. While this helps to bring art to a wider audience, does it also risk reducing the work to an aspect of the artists persona? Is there a place for art that is not dependent on the personality of the artist? Or is their identity the key? What if you made art with the intention of making others look good?

ART IS NOT A MESSAGE MEDIUM

Humans have used all sorts of media to send messages, from pigeons to emails, from hieroglyphics to morse code. What if art is not the best way to send messages, so we have to find something else to do with it? Can it be used to create experiences? Are experiences different from messages?

THE WORK /
EXHIBITION
SOMETHING TO
HIDE (INNERMOST
SECRETS) BEHIND?

ANXIETY OR
EXCITEMENT —
WHAT IS — IS
THERE — 'RISK'
IN THIS

ART IS ALWAYS
AN EXPERIENCE
FROM DIFFERENT
PERSPECTIVE

WHAT IF THE
ARTISTS CARE
MORE THAN
OTHERS DO
ABOUT WHAT
'THEY' DO?

IT SHOULD BE
ABOUT THE
INTEGRITY OF
THE ARTWORK
AND NOT THE
ARTIST

COLLABORATION —
COMPROMISE V
COMPETITION — HOW WE
GROW BY WORKING
TOGETHER THOUGHTFULLY

CAN AN ARTWORK
BE EXTRAVERT
AND MADE BY AN
INTROVERT? AND
VICE VERSA? OR
DOES IT REFLECT
THE ARTIST?

I FEEL THAT
SOMETIMES ART IS
LIKE A BLACK HOLE
IF YOU STAY TOO
CLOSE YOU CAN BE
ABSORBED.....

HOW DO WE
THINK AROUND
'A WORK'S'
OWN AGENCY?

PUBLIC DISCUSSION

APT GALLERY, 19 NOVEMBER 2022, 14.00-15.30

A PANEL DISCUSSION BETWEEN THE ARTISTS AND AUDIENCE,
CHAired BY ANDREW BRACEY

“I visited this show and talk right at a point of immense struggle within my practice where I had lost sight of why I was making my current work. Being with the work and then part of this discussion has restored some flow”

Visitor (Public Discussion)

“Because one of the things that that's really struck me about the show and where it's come together is that it comes from a place of friendship, of care, of sharing of things... it's a friendly convivial coming together, so my first question is whether you're still friends?”

Andrew Bracey

“The showing is about a network and talking to people, and having a conversation and the work being a catalyst for conversation, rather than a sort of artefact in that way”

Lucy Renton

“I think your point about friendship is interesting. And the idea that actually the first person to come in to interrupt needed to be a friend. Because we were doing it for the first time it needed to be somebody that we trusted and that we knew wouldn't come in and obliterate us”

Ali Darke

“[Stutz says] it's about the people you make your relationships with... that help[s] you pass into this other space of endless possibilities. And he's right, the more connections you've made, and the more effort you've put in to make those connections – even if there's a kind of fear with it – the rewards are so much greater”

Eric Great-Rex

“We kind of wanted to establish something that we felt had a longer life than just one exhibition, So we needed to work towards some kind of, framework”

Sue Withers

“When you bring an artwork into a gallery, it's finished, or that it's finished its role for the artist, and now it's over, to be something for others. And, like kind of saying the exhibition is not finished, it's ongoing, it's going to change... That seems to me, like quite a studio state of mind, of still finding other possibilities for what the work can be. So is that right? Is it about extending the life of the studio, as it's seeping into the gallery.

Andrew Bracey

“Although you can find a thematic connection between our works around this idea of decorum or indecorum, and possibly feminine production, in some ways, it's actually having a process that will allow us to incorporate other people as we go along... a process of exhibiting, which is more expanded and more open to include other types of people, other types of work, maybe even other disciplines”

Lucy Renton

“The idea of the provisional nature of the exhibition, there's a Stuart Hall quote that I love, which is every exhibition is a temporary stabilisation, and that's all”

Audience Member

“[What we're] trying to do, is to open up that conversation about who makes the meaning of an exhibition. And so it would be fantastically hypocritical to not recognise that this is a very particular section of society, and that if we want to continue making this, re-making this and trying new things, we have to put an effort into creating a wider community of disruptors and bringing other artists into it”

Sue Withers

“Actually, what was really good, because we've got this kind of other process, and somebody else coming in, it takes the weight off your own production. So suddenly, it wasn't the exhibition – even now we're sitting talking about the process, and what happens when working with people rather than like, what my work means, which I don't always want to talk about, you know. So I find that quite liberating, because it means we can continue to work together, to work with other people, and it's not always focused on our own production”

Lucy Renton

"[You were talking about] the feminine as being something to be hidden away or to be not on show and this idea of excess as being a kind of antidote"

Andrew Bracey

"[The original] connection between us was this idea of decorum and behaving well. And growing up being told constantly, you're making a spectacle of yourself, and that's something, you know, going to an all girls school, that was the last thing you did – you did not show off"

Ali Darke

"The idea of colour being secondary and feminised and cosmetical, secondary to line, you know, line being rational and higher quality"

Lucy Renton

"... back to gender being sort of inherently here in some form, or femininity. And I was thinking what did it feel like to be a man today, to come into that feminine place? And how could you, you know, actually be that disruptive? Because there must be some level at which that will also be quite a difficult thing to do – to offend anyone"

Audience Member

"It's kind of uncovering the things that the audience never sees, which, you know, is usually quite disruptive"

Eric Great-Rex

"The way he's chosen to interpret his role as a disrupter, it's a generous disrupter. And I think normally we do use the word disruption – or it's normally in the context of something negative – but actually, it doesn't have to be"

Ali Darke

"We know that in a group show like this, we know that your work changes by what it is next to, and part of what you've done is move some of the works about, and some of them stay. But this idea of putting things so close in proximity that they become the work is a different thing"

Andrew Bracey

"It definitely comments on curation as a whole doesn't it? I mean, I was speaking to a friend recently who is a painter, and she had been curated in an exhibition. And the curator was very adamant, like, it's gonna go here. And she said, I wouldn't I wouldn't dream of disagreeing with that. That's what the curator said. But if she had disagreed, it would have been a form of disruption"

Audience Member

"I just wondered if you ever had any conversations about future iterations of this having another stage, which would be a response to the disturbance"

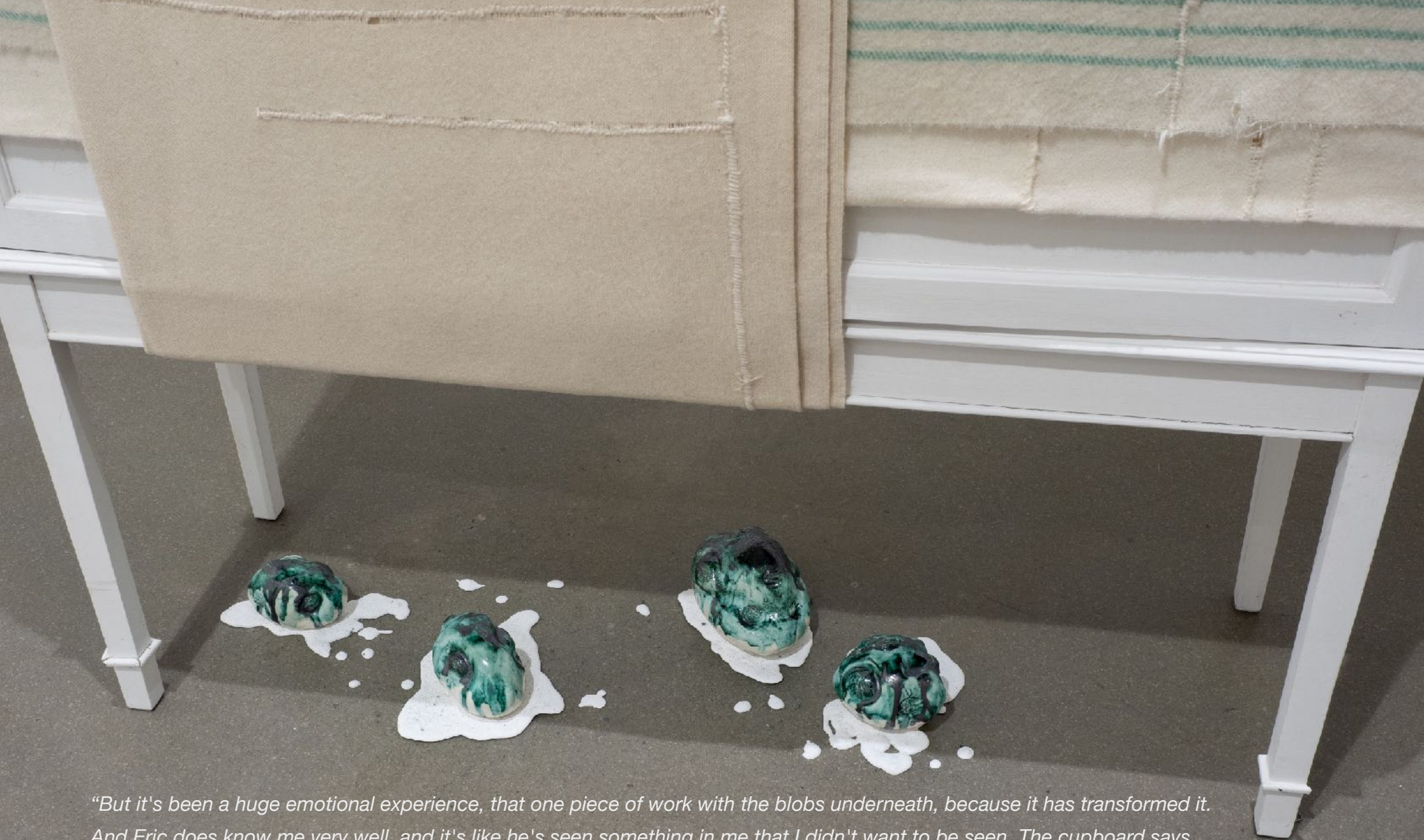
Audience Member

[We considered if] the disruption could be publicly staged, which is also an opportunity for it to be a kind of jointly disrupted thing, isn't it? If you have an audience to a disruption, then why aren't they actually participating in the decision making about the disruption?"

Sue Withers

"It takes a lot of effort to continue with an art practice, because you need resilience, people don't talk about it – not everyone sticks with it, and not everyone can work their way through it, because it's not an easy thing to do. But it's such the best community to belong to"

Eric Great-Rex



“But it's been a huge emotional experience, that one piece of work with the blobs underneath, because it has transformed it. And Eric does know me very well, and it's like he's seen something in me that I didn't want to be seen. The cupboard says don't look at me, which, of course, is an invitation to look, but it's that ambivalence that we have as women, as human beings, as artists, that we kind of want to be seen, but we don't want to be seen”

Ali Darke (Public Discussion, 2022)

Eric Great-Rex, *Art Trophy* (Ceramic, W36 x H60cm) 2022

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"I felt really honoured when Ali, Sue and Lucy asked me to be part of this, because I thought, well, they must trust me. This is kind of a big thing to come and ask me to do this. And then I thought about where it is; it's in a gallery where there's a huge studio space. And then I thought about all the artists that will plough ahead, to keep making work, who maybe don't get so much commercial success with their work, but they're dedicated and committed. And they add and create something, and give to the artistic community. So I thought, I'm going to do something that really celebrates that"

Eric Great-Rex (Public Discussion, 2022)

Eric Great-Rex, *Artist Plates* (Ceramic, W53 x H53cm) 2022



Sue Withers, *Rural Hurly Burlly* (Basketball hoop, fake flowers, ribbons. Dimensions Variable) 2022

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We would like to express our sincere appreciation to all who helped us produce this first iteration of the Toil & Trouble project.

We are especially grateful to Eric Great-Rex for accepting our invitation to disrupt with energy, enthusiasm and exceptional generosity, and to Andrew Bracey for his interest, insight and willingness to travel to chair our Public Discussion.

Special thanks to Andrew Moller for documenting the exhibition, and the individual works, with his characteristic care and attention to all the details.

The contribution of APT should also be acknowledged, from the gallery committee for recognising the potential of our proposal to the warm welcome from Sarah Walsh and Kate Arkright – we have really appreciated exhibiting in such a well-prepared, professional and supportive environment.

Finally, thanks to our partners for the many ways in which they have supported our joint endeavour, for their long-standing encouragement, practical help and advice, intellectual stimulation and humour.





Sue Withers, *Clutch* (Cotton rug, balloons.
Dimensions Variable) 2022

Design: *Sue Withers*

Photography: *Andrew Moller*

Propositions: *Lucy Renton, Rob Flint*

Transport: *Ali Darke, Rob Tygner*

Recording (Additional Audio): *Jasper Tygner*

A.P.T

Administrative Director: *Sarah Walsh*

Gallery & Buildings Coordinator: *Kate Arkwright*

Gallery Technician: *Paul Malone*

© The Artists (Ali Darke, Lucy Renton,
Sue Withers and Eric Great-Rex)

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School
of Art

A·P·T
Art in Perpetuity Trust

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