

# HEADS AND TAILS

ABIGAIL LANE







# Heads and Tails

## Cover

*Every Man Is Torn*, 2018 - 2019  
Cotton embroidery onto shirt,  
broom, EVERY MAN IS TORN  
label  
130 x 36 x 30 cm  
Photo: Doug Atfield, 2023

## Above

*Heads and Tails* including  
*Wound Man* by Mathew Weir.  
Left to right, Top to bottom:  
*Tributary*, *Eye Eye*, *Heads Will  
Roll*, *Enough Rope*, *The Crux*,  
*Our Glass*, *Tight*, *Ravine*,  
*Ground*, *Might*, *Hollow*, (*Wound  
Man* by Mathew Weir, 2021),  
*EXIT*  
Embroidered calico, blood on  
paper and frames 12 of 83 x  
65cm + 1 of 49 x 39.5 cm  
framed  
Photo: Doug Atfield. Abigail  
Lane, *Heads and Tails*, The Art  
Station, 2023

## Right

*Heads and Tails (Jam)*, 2023  
Cotton embroidered onto  
calico, oak frame  
83 x 65 cm  
Photo: Tom Carter. *Five by  
Five*, Incubator gallery, London,  
2024

This publication is A Complete Arthole Production  
Design and layout by Abigail Lane and Paul Fryer 2024





# Jigsaw Woman

In André Breton’s semi-autobiographical narrative *Nadja*, he recalls “...MAISON ROUGE consisted of certain letters arranged in such a way that when seen from a certain angle in the street, the word MAISON disappeared and ROUGE read POLICE”. This word play - the deconstruction and reordering of language - was one of the many surrealistic games so loved by Breton. Another game that he would play with fellow poets, writers and artists was the now well-known *Exquisite Corpse*. This drawing game involving the folding of paper as each individual person secretly adds a part, only to reveal at its end the monstrous and entertaining creations that resulted. The works that were in Abigail Lane’s exhibition *Heads & Tails* at The Art Station in 2023, play with similar arrangements and rearrangements, where things appear and disappear, move from visible to invisible, and where tricks and illusions are everywhere. Not only is it the aesthetics of magic that influence Abigail; the ordinary objects and props used to perform magic - the “magicians toolbox”, as she calls it. It is also the invisible techniques and sleight of hand employed by the magician whose purpose is to transform, delight and entertain, that can be seen throughout many of her works.

Felt underlay lined the entrance and corridors of The Art Station's former post office and telephone exchange building. Displayed on top of this material were a number of open boxes with bars. These hold captive a variety of embroidered British birds, the extended threads being the only parts that break free. A soundtrack of birdsong plays in the background, yet this has been overlaid with the crashing of pots and pans, the clapping and cheering taken from BBC sound footage during the covid pandemic. This work is Abigail Lane’s. The unique manipulation of the environment and sensory experience proves this and sets a scene. But she also chose to invite three guest artists providing subtle interventions and disruptions. Maybe Glenn Brown, Gavin Turk and myself were also chosen as a psychological way out of her own work, to serve as distraction and decoy when needed.

The *Zig Zag Lady* series, consisting of six freestanding sculptures, act like Breton’s ‘Mason Rouge’ and the game of *Exquisite Corpse*. We see body parts or the suggestion of bodies; holes, legs, heads, hands and feet. These motifs appear and re-appear in much of Abigail’s work and when combined with the apparel of human presence such as shirts, boots, shoes and jumpers, they act as a stand-in for the body. At times, nature and the body alarmingly become one: acorns are eyes, boots become feet or vice versa. Often clothing has been embroidered, making it part readymade, part modification, a process we also see in the choice of materials: fabric, wool and string, glass eyes, wax and a blackbird’s nest. The list seems endless, always incorporating and adding new features

It is our relation to the sculptures, our angle, that determines how and what we see. Stacks of what appear to be balancing wooden crates are viewed from one position, while from another these open up to a diorama of sorts. They are sculptures to be walked around and looked into. It’s not just how they are seen - our point of view - it’s also what is seen, the details within these boxes, details for which Abigail is willing to risk the idea that something may be missed or not seen. What matters is that these details are present, however hidden or concealed, and the way in which the small parts make up the whole. They are visually complex, a collage of imagery, of nature and the body, reconfigurations of the human form that still appear to acknowledge the three basic sections of top, middle and bottom. These rearrangements of the body are echoed in Abigail’s use of word play and anagrams, a key part of her practice. Maybe it’s possible to view much of the work in a similar way - as a breaking up and reordering, then a putting back together again in a new way. After all, this is also something of how a life can be and often is lived. One *Zig Zag Lady* work has the subtitle - *MissALaneous*. *Miss A Lane / miscellaneous* - a group or collection of something made up of different kinds. The detritus from a Hoover bag, a group of friends, body parts. The signature of a person who is anonymous. To *Zig Zag* is also to avoid or to dodge. A notorious Second World War double agent called Eddie Chapman was given the code name ‘Agent Zig Zag’ for exactly that reason: as the historian and author Ben Macintyre puts it, “so named because they were never entirely certain whose side he was on. “If a man could zig, he could always zag”.

These sculptural works of Abigail Lane’s were inspired by Robert Harbin’s magic trick invention ‘Zig - Zag Girl’, where a magician places - usually a woman - in a vertical cabinet of three sections, inserts blades and moves the body parts around to then reveal them rearranged and apparently disconnected yet still with the ability to move, wave and wiggle. Harbin’s trick could now be seen as, and is, a misogynistic act to contain and manipulate the female body, not forgetting that this is all done for the pleasure and amazement of an audience. While Abigail is aware of these ideas she is not setting out simply to be critical: she adopts the form, highlights how sculptural such tricks are and wonders how art and magic connect through the desire to make something appear from nothing, to disappear, to transform, to reveal, to conceal and most importantly to allow the suspension of belief.

While the magic trick is performed live on stage, Abigail’s titles for the *Zig Zag Lady* series give the impression of something more domestic, evoking the chauvinistic idea of a woman having a child, moving from the city to the country, the home maker under patriarchy. As their bracketed sub-titles suggest - *Country Life*, *Has-been*, *She’s Febreze*, *Child of Chaos* - these reference the home and certain stereotypes of domestic life. In this sense, the works might seem like self-portraits, but her trick is to simultaneously create escape from the domestic, moving around and outside it somehow. They are defiant, ironic and they turn self-analysis onto the viewer.

There are a series of photographs of the escape artist Harry Houdini holding and making wax casts of his own hands. He intended to reveal the falsehoods of spiritualism and to denounce it as his issue, in part, was the exploiting of people’s grief for money. His own wax hands were examples of “floating spirit” hands used during séances” made to uncover what he called “fraud mediums”. One of these photographs, from 1923, shows Houdini placing his enlarged, wax covered hand into a large glass jar of water. In one section of Abigail’s *Zig Zag Lady* series, *She’s Febreze*, 2023, two cast arms and hands cut off just above the elbows, are viewed in an open box. One points down as if entering a certain space, an invisible or imagined substance, much like that seen in the Houdini photograph. The other pushes against the floor of the box as if the rest of the body, if seen, would be doing a handstand.

There is a tension here between the two positions, one light and almost lifeless, the other, tense and ridged. Both casts, taken from her own limbs or those of a friend (she sometimes uses the body parts of friends to cast from as well as their gifted other items in her sculptures) are painted in what looks like the green algae of pond or river water. The arm facing down has a gradient from pink flesh colour to murky green/yellow, while the hand coming up from the base goes from the green down to a muddy brown, as if sinking into the mud of a river bed. On top of this box, and seemingly caught between the boxes is the cast of a pink balloon, filled with air. I can’t help thinking of drowning, of the lungs filled with air but under pressure, ready to burst; of a body drowned by water and becoming, even transforming into, its environment; of the push and pull of life and the claiming back of life by nature. Didn’t Houdini challenge this and the capacity of his own lungs by escaping from drowning in his famous *Water Torture Cell* and *Bridge Jump* tricks?

The fusion of magic and domestic space is a theme that runs through much of Abigail Lane’s work. For a while now she has been saving dust from her home and studio and using this material to make sculptures and casts - literally turning a domestic chore into another form of work. As she has said: “you just use what you’ve got, even if that is rubbish”. This recalls Picasso’s often quoted remark about incarceration - “I would be almighty in my own world of art, even if I had to paint my pictures with my wet tongue on the dusty floor of my cell” (*Der Monat*, 1949). Abigail’s approach is less overstated: as dust gathers, she is busy gathering dust from the space around her. More specifically, more practically and even more matter-of-factly, she does the hoovering. She does the housework that needs to be done. A mundane activity that becomes a dual game, with the idea of making something from collecting and holding onto what is usually lost or discarded. Think of Warhol being asked to participate in the 1972 exhibition ‘Art in Process’ at the

Finch College Museum of Art, New York, where he vacuumed the gallery carpet and then displayed the vacuum cleaner. Some of this dust which Abigail accumulates has been used to cast house bricks which are stamped and titled, *Re-Make Re-Model*. The ephemeral material of the inside is used to form the external object manufactured to create that inside. She refers to the use of this material as “the ultimate self-portrait” being not just of the body but the inhabited space of that body. There are two artists to whom it could be said she has some affinity who had their own approaches and responses to dust. René Magritte complained about unsold paintings accumulating dust, a sign of inactivity and lack of success. Marcel Duchamp along with Man Ray created the photographic work *Elevage de Poissière* (*Dust Breeding*), 1920, an image of dust that had settled onto a section of Duchamp’s *Large Glass* work, which he proceeded to fix to the glass with varnish later. When Francis Bacon’s studio was dismantled and moved from its location in South Kensington to the Hugh Lane Gallery in Dublin, the archivists even catalogued and re-installed its dust.

In Peter Greenaway’s 1988 film *Drowning by Numbers*, a young boy named Smut has many rituals and games. He invents ‘Hangman’s Cricket’ and ‘Sheep and Tides’, with his final game being suicide: “This is the best game of all, because the winner is also the loser, and the judge’s decision is always final”. Death is the subject, and the film revolves around three women and the drowning of their husbands. Each time a death occurs, be that human or animal, Smut sets off a firework. “A violent death is always celebrated by a firework”. He paints a number next to the scene to categorise and document, something Abigail is keen to do with her own work by using boxes and plinths to capture objects behind glass or Perspex, and by incorporating labels into many of her works.

A scene in the film shows in close-up Smut striking a match to light a firework following a drowning. One could see Gavin Turk’s painted bronze *Spent Match*, 2005, that sits at the bottom of Abigail’s *Zig Zag Lady* (*Has-been*), 2022, as a remnant of Smut’s actions. Is it the match used to light the symbolic ritual to mark a death or simply the image of a residue, a remainder like the dust that Abigail gathers so carefully in other works, transforming the leftover into a work, an act of creation?

Arsonists will often leave their matches behind, assuming that they will be lost in the flames. But to quote from Val McDermid’s book on forensics, “the powdered rock in a match head contains the fossilised remains of single-cell algae called ‘diatoms’. A diatom’s shell is made of silica, which is abrasive enough to help you strike the match, and tough enough to endure extremely high temperatures. Each of the 8000 known species of diatom has a unique shell structure, identifiable through a microscope. Different brands make their matches using powdered rock from different quarries. If forensic scientists can spot the diatoms, they can identify the match brand”.

This idea plays into Abigail’s desire to hold on to what can be lost; her interest in forensics, evidence and fragments. She is fascinated “in the way histories are made and crimes are detected from scraps”. Greenaway’s film is also set in the Suffolk landscape, taking in the Victorian water tower and lighthouse of Southwold, not far from Saxmundham, and from Abigail’s studio and home. One can’t help feeling the work for *Heads & Tails* has somehow emerged out of this particular circumstance. Who would consider the image of a bird behind bars, as in her *Doing Time* series, if they didn’t feel a sense of entrapment? This is not taking into account the recent lockdowns and enforcement of rules due to the pandemic. Abigail makes reference between her entrapped birds and the news reports from Italy in 2020 of people singing from their balconies during this time. But Abigail Lane has always been an artist interested in escaping, magic and disappearing tricks. Maybe her move from urban Hackney to the flat East Anglian landscape was some kind of getting away. And getting out of something is always getting into something else, even in Smut’s final game, you both win and lose. Maybe the act of making is a form of escape, to lose oneself, a displacement activity of sorts. It is telling that when walking through the first small room of The Art Station exhibition one was confronted by a coffin size box standing upright. A knitted woollen jumper hung inside with the words *Escape Artist - Escape Artist*, 2017. A confession? A warning? Get out now while there is still time! Out of what and into what?



Glenn Brown's Drawing 6 (after Greuze/Grimaldi), 2017, makes reference to our connection to nature. If Peter Greenaway's film focuses on death and decay in the life-cycle, then Brown's drawing could be seen as the seed from which something is grown again. Two appropriated images from art history, a face and a tree, overlaid, rendered in exquisite line become one and at the same time oscillate between the two. One thinks of Apollo and Daphne in Ovid's Metamorphoses, Daphne turning into a laurel tree to escape the advances of a love struck Apollo. Brown himself has made references to the myth of the Green Man, the folklore motif about the cycle of life, death and rebirth. The Green Man - a face amongst shrubbery, plants and roots emanating from the mouth - is an image that can be seen in many British churches. It is not known what exactly this symbolism references but one narrative suggests that when Adam and Eve were thrown out of the Garden of Eden, they took with them seeds from the tree of good and evil. When Adam died, his son Seth planted the seeds in his father's mouth. From this a tree grew, and this tree was used to make the cross on which Jesus was crucified.

As if in acknowledgement of this narrative, next to Brown's Drawing 6, Abigail Lane's Crucifixion, 2020 was positioned. Three linen panels forming the shape of a crucifixion, each embroidered with black cotton reminiscent of the fine lines of Brown's ink drawing. In two panels, black cotton emanates from silhouetted hands, just as the wounds of Jesus' nailed hands or wrists dripped blood. Where the loincloth would be in the usual religious iconography the third horizontal panel depicts the V-shape of a vulva. Again, threads flow like the hands making a connection between the blood of Christ and the lost blood of menstruation, while also bringing to mind the roots of a tree. The bronze sculpture, Mole Hills, 2016, was placed on the floor in front of both these works evoking the digging up of something, the burial or planting, life and death or again, an escape.

Giving the appearance of small mounds of earth the trick is only revealed by the knowledge of the bronze materiality. This offers playfulness and also shifts our perspective. It shows that what we think we see and understand is an illusion. The apparent lightness of dirt has actual physical weight. It is heavy and our belief has been brought into question.

My drawing, Wound Man, blood on Paper, 2021, was chosen by Abigail as a guest work to be included along with 12 of her embroideries. At first I thought it would replace and take the space where one of her works would be taken out, but in a grid hang of three rows of four, it pushes the bottom right frame out of the way, which then hangs separately to one side as if trying to get away from the others (EXIT, 2022). The embroideries, again with strands of thread hanging, are stitched in red and depict the outlines of body parts.

As Rozsika Parker notes in her study of embroidery, "Embroidery was on the one hand expected to be the place where women manifested supposedly natural feminine characteristics: piety, feeling, taste, and domestic devotion; and on the other it was the instrument which enabled a woman to obliterate aspects of herself which did not conform to femininity" (The Subversive Stitch /Embroidery and the Making of the Feminine). Abigail Lane takes these characteristics mentioned by Parker and destabilises them. She makes the stitch a tool with which to challenge and question expectations of embroidery, femininity, sexuality and so-called domestic devotion.

They look like crime scenes, like the traces of evidence or erotic encounters. Bums and feet, heads and hands, are separate and isolated. They feel like part of a bigger narrative, of a life lived and what remains are the stains and spills and the fading memories. I think of the scars on my own body, by accident or design, and how these are understood within my own personal and private history and only by me. My drawing is created with my own blood and illustrates different points of pain throughout

the human body, with different weapons depicted. There are parallels in both our works between the fine lines, between the uses of a needle in the creation of the works, the piercing of a surface, calico or skin and between stitches that may be needed to heal a wound.

I realise that what draws me to Abigail's work is the residue of matter and what can be interpreted or understood from details. How something spent, gone, wasted or apparently not present might be transformed into something tangible – and how magic and games within a domestic setting can be important to escape from something or someone.

I have come to a large London library to try and finish writing this text. It is quiet, but I still find a place to isolate myself from others, from the few people tapping away on laptops. I sit in an aisle lined with books and looking up I start to read some of the titles - Forensic Medicine and Toxicology, The Jigsaw Man - The Remarkable Career of Britain's Foremost Criminal Psychologist, The Mad the Bad and the Innocent, The DNA Detectives, Insanity and the Law, Time of Death, Speaking for the Dead, Reflection in Action ... This can't be by coincidence.

Text by  
Mathew Weir

Edit for Heads and Tails newspaper 2024  
Originally published at [www.dorispress.com](http://www.dorispress.com) August 2023.  
Heads and Tails, Abigail Lane at The Art Station 2023, [www.theartstation.uk](http://www.theartstation.uk)



**Taken from the cutting room floor of the edit and saved by MissALaneous:**

(i) Importance in the unimportant is important to her.

(ii) Smoke and Mirrors: Lane has spoken of an interest in various museum display methods, how cabinets and plinths, glass cases and boxes can be used to enhance the value of things, not just as a way to protect something from the elements - from ageing and deterioration, but to make precious and to give status. These things have another function, and that is to reflect. I recall reading somewhere that Francis Bacon insisted that all his paintings should be behind glass so the viewer could see themselves as witness to the brutality and violence of his depictions... In Zig Zag Lady (County Life), 2023, mirrors are used to reflect and give a more delicate and tender view than that of Bacon. Reflected from the top of one of the boxes (one sees that) in the neck of a jumper (where the head should be) is a blackbird's nest and inside, as if revealing a precious secret, three delicate eggs can be seen.

(iii) Many items, especially the clothes used in the sculptures, have labels. Usually these are the type found sewn into any school uniform, the ones identifying the item as the property of that child. 'Every Man Is Torn' read the unseen labels of the shirts embroidered with hands. Other works are annotated with 'Supernatural', 'Escape Artist', 'MissALaneous', 'Wandering Star' and more... I imagine a teacher reading this in a child's school uniform, 'Child of Chaos'.





*Crucifixion, 2020*

Linen stretched onto wood frames, black cotton  
Triptych: Panels 1 and 2, each 24 x 30 x 2cm. Panel 3, 60 x 30 x 2 cm.  
Overall: 122 x 86 x 2.5 cm

*Molehills, 2016*

2 painted bronze molehills  
38 x 33 x 14 cm and 23.5 x 20 x 75 cm

GUEST WORK: Glenn Brown, *Drawing 6 (after Greuze/ Grimaldi)*, 2017.

India ink on polyester film over cardboard in frame  
54.5 x 45.5cm

Photo: Doug Atfield. Abigail Lane, *Heads and Tails*, The Art Station, 2023.





Left and right  
*Zig Zag Lady (Has-been)*, 2022, including appropriation of guest artist Gavin Turk's *Spent Match* 9/40, 2005  
 Plywood, Perspex sheet, brass wire, glass eye, plaster and house dust casts, stretched calico, black cotton, curtain, fishnet tights, shoes, stretcher bars, painted bronze *Spent Match* by Gavin Turk  
 170 x 82 x 40 cm



Below left and right  
*Zig Zag Lady (She's Febreze)*, 2023.  
 Plywood, Perspex sheets, painted jesmonite casts, embroidered pajama top, nylon washing line with pegs, cotton embroidered fabric stretched over wooden frame, painted plaster, castor wheels  
 170 x 72 x 40 cm

Abigail Lane, *Heads and Tails*  
 The Art Station, 2023.

Photos: Doug Atfield, 2023

# ZIG ZAG LADIES



The birds are placed inside boxes with bars. Recently, you have also produced a series of sculptures based around Robert Harbin's famous Zig-Zag Girl magic trick, in which the magician's assistant, placed inside a box, is cut into three parts. Has the box become a motif that obsesses you?



You need a structure of some sort to depict ideas and to present that manifestation but at the same time I like to jostle with the assumed norms of presentation; plinth, frame - and, after all, a gallery which is in itself a cabinet of sorts. It feels impossible to me that structures that 'present' would not be considered part of a work's entirety. So it's not so much that the box motif obsesses me, it's just that the relationship is integral. Ways in which we accumulate, categorise, archive and display objects to sell and tell our histories have always interested me.

The *Zig Zag Lady* magic trick offers me the notion of a three part cabinet which can house and divide three parts of a body so that three different objects or environments can be presented alongside while simultaneously offering a whole being of sorts ... something like the exquisite corpse game. I enjoyed putting together individual works or scenarios that might represent head, torso or limbs, top middle and bottom, but I soon realized the joy was that each part could represent more than one thing at the same time - is this hole a mouth, an eye or a vagina? As in a dream it need not be exclusively one or the other of course.

I introduced older works or fragments to new and even works of other artists. They inspired each other - a curation of sorts. I love to jumble things across time as I think the art world asks us to be overly linear about such things and imposes a too particular value system on timelines and authorship. Artworks, like all objects, can and do have multiple lives and its good to mix this up.

After a while a *Zig Zag Lady* would sort of assume its own persona and its title would develop that. *Has Been*, *She's Febreze*, *Child of Chaos* and so on.

Like my loose threads, the apparently movable 3-part box structure offers the possibility of transition and the need to get involved as a viewer since different angles and heights reveal different things. I was able to make some compartments more precious than others or to colour the atmosphere with the use of Perspex sheets to encase some sections. These slide in and out of position, something like the metal blades of the original magic trick, which apparently slice the assistant in a manner that she should not be able to survive - but she does and there is the thrill!

(Excerpt from interview with Semiose, Paris)



Right

*Zig Zag Lady (Spiral Milk)*, 2022  
Plywood, Perspex sheets, embroidered pillowcase fabric, embroidery hoop, embroidered skirt, metal sphere, painted plaster casts, castor wheels  
170 x 71 x 40 cm



# ZIG ZAG LADIES



Left

*Zig Zag Lady (MissALaneous)*, 2022  
Plywood, Perspex sheet, calico, polystyrene balls, wood bark, elastic, cotton embroidered pajama fabric, tweed, pin, wooden stretcher bars, label MISSALANEOUS  
170 x 80 x 40 cm

*Human Resources*, 1992-2020

Plywood, Perspex and mirror sheet, cork, rubber-stamp soles, leather, RIGHT and LEFT labels, Castor wheels  
Box Height 27 x 59 x 40 cm (shoes on top)





Right

Zig Zag Lady (*Country Life*), 2023, including appropriation (print) of guest artist Mathew Weir's painting, *Waterfall I*, 2015

Plywood, Perspex sheet, mirror sheet, blackbird nest, plaster, wool jumper, dressmaker body, tree resin, wax, paint, acorn cups, embroidered curtain, digital print onto Perspex, rubber boots, castor wheels.  
Height 170 x 68 x 40 cm



# ZIG ZAG LADIES



Right

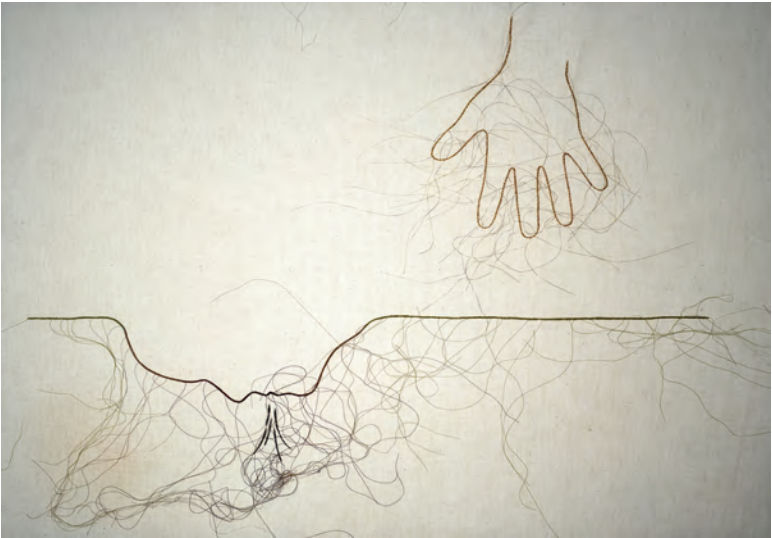
Zig Zag Lady (*Country Life*), 2023, including appropriation (print) of guest artist Mathew Weir's painting, *Waterfall I*, 2015

Plywood, Perspex sheet, mirror sheet, blackbird nest, plaster, wool jumper, dressmaker body, tree resin, wax, paint, acorn cups, embroidered curtain, digital print onto Perspex, rubber boots, castor wheels.  
Height 170 x 68 x 40 cm





# LAND ESCAPES



Left

*Land Escapes:*  
*This Island Earth, Murmuration,*  
*Your Presence, Glasshouses, 2023*  
Embroidered calico  
Sizes top to bottom:  
55 x 70, 54 x 63, 52 x 69, 55 x 70 cm

Photos: John Spinks

Above

*New Season, 2021*  
Cotton embroidery onto stretched fabric  
56 x 45 x 5 cm

Photo: Doug Atfield, 2023

Below

*No Mans Land, 2022*  
Embroidered cotton shirt and hazel stick







*Everything But Now, 2022*

Assemblage including: Painted stick of Willow and Corfu driftwood with leather base, stretched wool with curtain, embroidery and felt, framed digital print with linen and embroidery, plaster and house dust cast, anthracite  
Overall arrangement 155 x 150 x 60 cm

Photo: Doug Atfield. Abigail Lane, Heads and Tails, The Art Station, 2023.



This is the record of an interview (imagined) with a visitor to the exhibition Heads & Tails at The Art Station in Saxmundham.

**You spent some time in the exhibition and I saw you looking closely at what was there. Did you come to any conclusions? At least tell me something about the experience. I was there too, and have some ideas – nothing very definite. How would you begin? Do you have a theory or a proposal?**

Well, I would say that I felt I was acting in a composite artwork, for I was often on show to myself, mirrored or reflected. The exhibits, mostly on casters, could be moved or had been wheeled into position, perhaps in relation to light from the window louvers. There were few captions, although there were bits of writing such as EVERY MAN IS TORN (No. 21) – from a song of the 1990s, I think. Exhibit titles give one some kind of guarantee about acceptable meanings. If we know what something is called we often feel assured. As many of the exhibits were made up of frames and compartments I could also see that there could be alternative arrangements which would give different readings.

**You were, in other words, confused, although I don't expect you to admit it.**

No, in EVERY MAN IS TORN I noticed that the cotton inset which took up most of the frame was carefully attached to its textile base by small safety pins, equally and neatly set. I could easily understand the kind of attention and concentration that had gone into that aspect of the work. I wasn't confused at all in that respect, but my understanding was based on physical experience of doing things by hand in ordinary contexts. So, there are things that words say and mean, and there are other phenomena that are understood physically or even routinely through experience. Words, by contrast, are quite tricky – not always clear. I might even see no. 21 as a kind of confessional self-portrait or life story, although not one that is very openly admitted by the artist. I can make up my mind to some degree or hazard a guess from the available material.

**You must have been confused or at a loss from time to time! Or do you have some kind of innate insight into mysterious arrangements. What, for instance, did you make of BANQUET 22, with its pieces of gold and waxed legs – in the Green Room?**

Yes, I can bring it to mind. There are two tables, each supporting a wax-cast leg. The leg to the right, I see, has two gilded toes, and the one to the left has a couple of electroplated golden walnuts attached to a metal spring. I saw it or experienced it as a basic exercise in counting. There was a large ball of compacted human hair in the assemblage and some mineral casts of compressed balloons. That is to say, there were things on show, easy to identify and to put together as one looked. They were on a table and could be taken for 'a banquet'. You might say that it is a blasphemous scene in relation to the scriptures. It is a possibility, and I can't ignore it. In a Surrealist piece you might get weird and suggestive juxtapositions but think nothing of them. In this case, however, the sparing display suggests that it is an arrangement with a meaning. Perhaps it is an experiment with a few stressed items: two legs, two toes, two walnuts and one lump of hair (a hairball – perhaps as you find in animals' stomachs). It is a pleasure to be pointed this way and that, and to be asked questions that you can only answer provisionally – make your answers up even. Maybe the artist's gift is to make us (me anyway) take things seriously. I can't just put Banquet 22 to one side as a caprice. I would say that Abigail Lane has the ability to play games seriously, or to make me, at least, wonder.

**What about the bird embroideries which are a major part of the exhibition? How do you understand them? Do you see them as ecological pieces, or as a mystery series?**

Well, they were exhibited in context, with a lot of complex bird noise played as a background to the main installation on the ground floor. That is probably how we usually hear anything, as part of a mixture made up of different pitches and volumes. It is the kind of mixture I was aware of in the main room upstairs, for I could sometimes hear trains passing on a nearby bridge and the sound of trees moving in the wind. Long ago we understood things as distinct items to be studied individually. A specimen might represent a class, and the bird motifs point back to that time – which is to some extent still with us. The embroideries are caged, behind metal bars, and the birds' song lines look to some degree like spilt and dried blood, residues of suffering. We are, though, lulled into a sense of comfortable normality for the pieces look like bits of domestic decoration beginning to disintegrate. I once saw a collector's panel of dried butterflies thrown out with broken and skewed wings- I was reminded of that. The images are contained or held on prepared and decorated fabrics which contrast with their desiccated outpourings. The overall title DOING TIME supports the idea for it invokes the solitude of prison life and its immobility.

There are a dozen birds on show, from a thrush to a blue tit – like a useful list of common birds of G.B. They are in 12 cages with 4 or 5 bars apiece. They are made from thousands of stitches, virtually beyond counting, and the thin threads of their played songs can't be counted. So, we are introduced to a world where we can identify the occupants, from an Observer's Book, before moving into Infinity. We've been put through a small exercise, more or less without being aware of it before being moved into the large project space which deals with bigger items in more evident sets.

**You are trying to tell me that there is some kind of analytical process at work. We then turn from counting and assessing to being**

**surprised?** Yes, in the Project Space you will come across examples of affable Surrealism: see the upper row in Zig Zag Lady (Country Life), no. 23, where an unravelling woollen jumper holds, at the neck, a partly concealed bird's nest with an egg. It is a companionable surprise, and you may recall as a child coming across a bird's nest half hidden in a hedge. And there are boots somewhere in the same series that leave naked foot-marks visible in a mirror down below. Well I never! I'm entranced by the juxtaposition or by any idea embodied in the image even though it might be part of a three-container arrangement. In some of the sets, such as the Zig Zag series, I give up trying to make sense of the groupings. All I can do is to look at them and commit them to memory – and entertain any connections that come to mind.

Why, for example, a giant spider in a case next to a bound up red-cross outfit? The bird series taught me to be thoughtful, but that is no longer enough.

**Yes, you can think about the exhibition and follow a line of thought, but do you find it compelling? I mean, does it have some kind of supplementary value or attraction? Does it have a tone or a mood? You are not going to spend time looking at an exhibition that is no more than 'interesting' are you?** There is a sort of consistent feeling to it all, a sort of gravity – I might say. For instance, on one of the landings there is a piece called RE- MAKE RE-MODEL no. 7, of whitish bricks in good condition. They are said to be of dust and plaster, with the dust taken from the bag of a vacuum cleaner. It is a subdued memorial, I thought, for vacuum dust contains just about everything mixed up including road dust blown in and particles of human skin, residues shed as we go about our daily work. There is more house dust in no. 28 – black bricks, I recall. Decay is on the agenda, and plays a considerable part in the bird imagery in DOING TIME. Abigail doesn't insist on this kind of bad news, but it is sometimes evident or to be guessed at in, for instance, those wounded shirts that crop up – heart spaces. The Young British Artists are/were usually more blatant in their remarks. She is more sidelong, more symbolic – as in the heart-shirts. This is more or less pointed out in the succinct foreword to the exhibition in the brochure, which looks like a wiring diagram – very precise. The exhibition that she managed at Rutland (with Lala) also had a melancholy tinge to it for it was made of lost objects hung up for inspection – including a lost hearing aid found in the forest – c.f. the household dust shed unthinkingly and processed into bricks.

**What were you looking at exactly? Did you decide? Was it a show of individual pieces or an ensemble where everything connected?**

It fitted together, like a world where everything was complementary – or where I felt that it was, and could compare, for example, one Zig Zag Lady with another. Thinking of which, I was also pushed in the direction of Matthew Weir, represented by Waterfall II. He was also the author of Wound Man in the drawings section, no. 19. Like Abigail he seems to point to an implication of the human with the natural, as is the case with Glenn Brown –Greuze head, no. 34, with foliage and green woman implications. What the exhibition did was to involve me in a kind of world or some kind of cultural ensemble in which the body is implicated in other living material (material that transformed, like the burnable anthracite in no. 29). So, I would say that the exhibition presented a way of seeing that needed to make use of quite a lot of complementary evidence, one thing reflecting on another.





*No Words*, 2019  
Embroidery on stretched canvas  
35 x 27 cm

Photo: Doug Atfield 2024





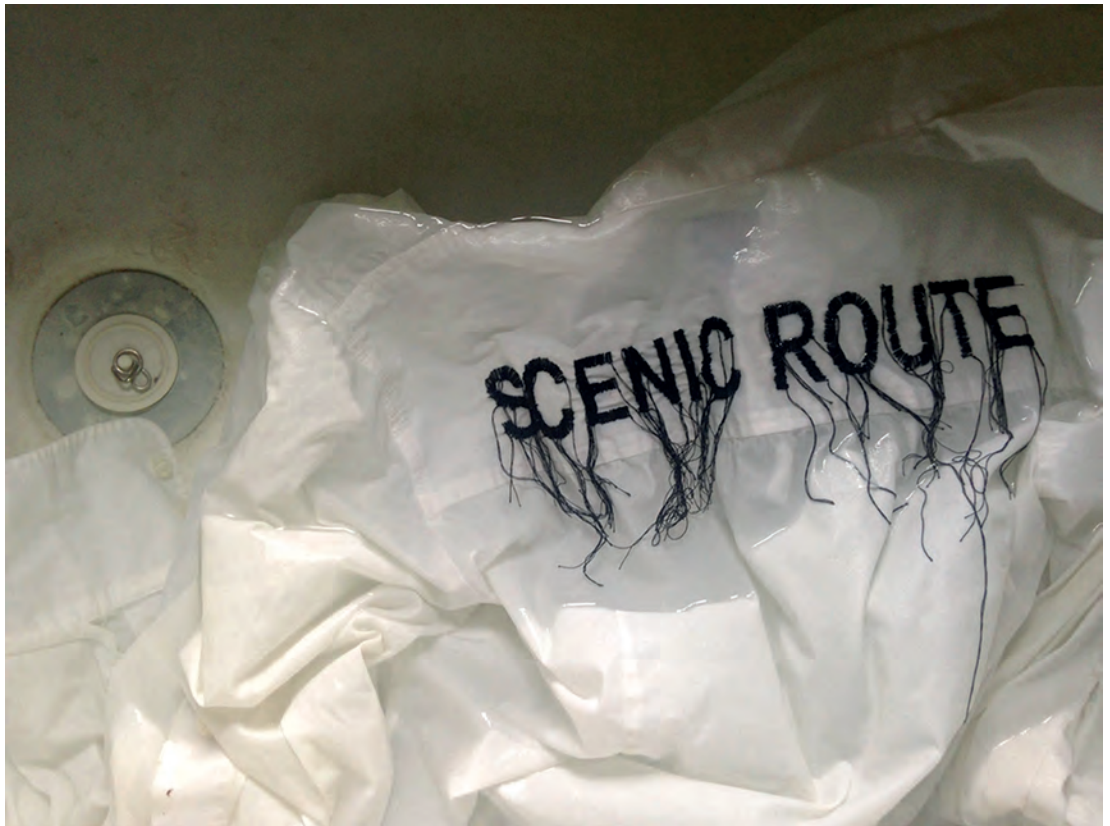
*Banquet, 2023*

Plywood, Perspex, wax casts, gold leaf, brass wire, human hair, gold electroplated walnuts 2 parts, each 75 x 120 x 85 cm. Objects on top.  
Photo: Doug Atfield. Abigail Lane, Heads and Tails The Art Station, 2023.









*Scenic Route*, 2021, Photograph on di-bond



*Dust Die*, 2020  
Resin and vacuum cleaner dust





*Zig Zag Lady (Country Life)*, 2023 Detail  
Ply, mirror, Perspex, painted plaster, blackbird nest,  
wool jumper, dressmaker's body, tree resin

Photo: Doug Atfield, 2023



# HEADS & TAILS. ABIGAIL LANE.

John-Paul Stonard  
October 12 2023

OBJECTS IN SIMPLE PLYWOOD BOXES, or vitrines, stacked or in rows. Traces and gestures, evidence, but all indirectly so. Nothing telling you — us — whoever might wander in — what to think. Yes, no, maybe. Here perhaps, or not here. Or both. Heads & Tails, as Abigail Lane calls her exhibition at the Art Station in Saxmundham.

Displaced things, literally so — the middle of three stacked cases juts out, giving a 'contrapposto' to the body implied. They might be self-portraits, the artist present through signs of her absence. Yes, no, perhaps... In Zig Zag Lady (Has-been), 2022, a glass eye on a dark coil of brass wire looks down, but cannot see her two arms, cast in plaster and house dust (all that housework, all that accumulated time), nor can the glass eye see the lower box, where a pair of stilettos dangle provocatively in fishnet tights, and a dark triangle is formed of black cotton, and someone has left a spent match down there, although the glass eye can see neither that it has been cast from bronze, nor that it is the work of another artist (Gavin Turk), interpolated here as an alien spark, a catalyst.

Mirrors lead you to the next boxed body, a trussed torso embroidered with a red cross, a hospital sign, so that the two outstretched legs cast from plaster in another vitrine might have once been broken, and the embroidered spider's web of cotton and wool some affliction that might or might not require treatment. Three Piece Suite (2022) makes you — one — think of something upholstered, conventional, uncomfortable. A horrible suburban euphemism, a memory of childhood, the ne plus ultra of comfort, giving none. The lost meaning returns — suite, something that follows, here as if in a game of consequences, or those incongruous, monstrous creatures emanating from the minds of the Surrealists in their high-stakes version of the game, the 'Exquisite Corpse'. Three Piece Suite seems like such a living corpse, a riddling body substitute.

Another, Zig Zag Lady (MissALaneous) (2022) provides the clue, in the punning title, to confirm that this is indeed a lost self-portrait, a 'substitute' portrait — another Surrealist invention (think of Francis Picabia's young woman represented by a spark plug, in Portrait of an American girl in a state of nudity, of 1915). A curved section of bark has been cut with two round eye holes, and attached with elastic to a white cushion. A night mask, perhaps, or a metaphor for a terrible hang-over — a woodentop, a barkhead.

These teetering, body-part structures are a form of object poetry — plywood poetry, perhaps. The mood is one of disclosure, a revelation of something highly personal. The vulnerability of tiny warm birds' bodies, unravelling in their embroidered forms, held in faux-caged boxes on the walls. Threadbare lives. The ethereal, infrathin melodic line of birdsong, competing with the ever-growing hum and growl of human life. The atmosphere is dampened by walls clad with a carpet underlay with flecks of colours, a sort of

light-hearted, optimistic riff on Joseph Beuys's sound-deadening rooms clad in rolls and panels of dark grey felt. Quiet, the corridors and galleries seem to say: a hand held up to urge silence, an end to distraction — listen. On a long, letter-box-shaped piece of fabric, the embroidered lines of two splayed legs become, at the centre, a hand, covering the sex, signalling to us to pay attention. Stop.

Think. The outstretched hand, a sign of presence, like those images of hands made on rock walls throughout prehistory, stencilled in red and black, waving to us from time before time, a time before history. These palms sign to us from Heads & Tails (2023): twelve drawings of body parts, blood red cotton embroidered on thin calico: feet, head, hands, seen from below, above, loose threads dangling like vagrant corpuscles or veins, whatever the thinnest threads are weaving our bodies together. Self-portraits hanging by a thread, perhaps. Titles all repeat the same phrase — Tributary (Heads & Tails), Eye Eye (Heads & Tails), Heads Will Roll (Heads & Tails). Dangling threads transform into viscera, or perhaps overgrown hair, like the black yak's hair that Chinese artists embroidered on their textile images to show a bearded god or giant. But here the body is that of a woman, the artist herself (perhaps) rendered schematically, turned inside out. The final drawing at the lower right of the group, an elegant pair of walking feet, is displaced by a stylistically alien drawing, done in rust-coloured blood (literally), a standing male figure, pierced and hacked and knocked about by clubs and hammers and arrows and the like, seemingly copied from an old woodcut or engraving (almost definitely German). It is an interloper, an interpolated image from a different hand and mind (the artist Mathew Weir) another foreign spark, another catalyst. 'Every Man is Torn' read the words embroidered on another textile hanging nearby — torn how? A world of difficult choices, of pointless political divisions, a world of wasted imagination is resolved in poetry, in the art. Here you can have — or at least see — both sides simultaneously. Heads and tails. Front and back, inside and outside. Yes, no.... maybe?

In such evocative spaces, corridors and rooms still thick with the atmosphere of an older world of work, of local bureaucracy, these poetic objects and images become part of a little theatre, a drama that unfolds as we navigate around. Works of art become a sort of evidence, props in a performance, backstage clues to a drama being played out on the other side of the curtain. In a table vitrine, ephemera are arrayed for inspection: two marmite-coloured bricks made from resin and dust, some six-sided dice from the same dark greasy substance; a set of homemade bank-notes — the 'International Art Currency', of 'Manifestations' printed with the images of artists, and the promise, from Abigail Lane, to 'pay the bearer the sum of one Manifestation'. What might such a Manifestation be — another disappearing act? Objects themselves are caught in the act of escape. Two pink cork-platformed shoes rest on a low plywood box: Human Resources the title reads, a work made over a period of twenty-eight years (1992–2020). They must be the artist's shoes, then, a spectacular yet uncomfortable pair only rarely put into service. Bespoke works of art labelled

'Right' and 'Wrong' (making the work's label, 'RIGHT and LEFT labels', intriguingly wrong — or right?).

Escape is staged right before our eyes. Two mole-hills appear, incongruously, on the gallery floor — cast in bronze, of course, to dissuade us from testing them with a toe. Do moles escape into their holes, or is this where they temporarily surface to snuffle at nocturnal nourishment? Do they disappear down the same holes? Here they appear more like evidence of a prisoner's tunnel — the captive wearing the black knitted gloves, whose shadow we seem to see flitting around the corner as we turn into each room. Alongside another interloper, a highly elaborate ink drawing on translucent paper of a female head inclined downward, gazing in wonderment at the bronze molehills; a riff by another artist (Glenn Brown) on drawings by two earlier masters, Jean-Baptiste Greuze, and Giovanni Francesco Grimaldi. The skating, curlicue lines, a derivation of the mannerist imagination, but also one that saw in every line, as Hogarth put it, a moment of beauty, the ink lines of the drawing are living things, like the dark threads tumbling from the embroidery hung alongside. Crucifixion (2020) shows two ink-black hands outstretched, emanating dark threads; less like hands into which nails have been hammered than the gloves of a disappearance artist, one who becomes an apparition solely of hands and sex, shown by a black triangle from which threads hang, gathering in a single line, neatly forming the line between legs hanging in thin air.

Bodies appear as if only to stage their riddling disappearance, deliberately losing the thread, proving the act of making art itself as a form of escape. Lane's accumulation of self-portraying objects amounts to an aesthetic confession, that of being a terminal escape artist — perhaps. In white thread, the words appear on a black jumper kept in a plywood locker, like the costume for a performance where the artist has already left. Every act of artmaking is an act of redefinition, of recalibration, a tiny (or not so tiny) escape from all the art, and ideas about art, that have come before. A pair of escape artist gloves, black and knitted, just beginning to unravel, are caught in the lid of a closing vitrine — just in time.

Originally published on John-Paul  
Stonard's Substack On Art  
[jpstonard.substack.com](http://jpstonard.substack.com)







Above and Left

*Three Piece Suite*, 2023  
 Triptych comprising: cast plaster, dust, cotton embroidered onto wool, wooden stretcher, fiberglass torso, fabric, wool, string, steel, wood, Perpsex  
 134 x 48 x 258 cm

Photo: Doug Atfield. Abigail Lane, *Heads and Tails* The Art Station, 2023. (Installation view with *Three Piece Suite*, *Heads and Tails* and *Every Man Is Torn*)



Left

*On the Blob*, 2023  
 Plaster, hoover dust and spray paint  
 30 x 33 x 27 cm  
 Photo: Doug Atfield. Abigail Lane, *Heads and Tails* The Art Station, 2023.

Below

*Escape Artist*, 2017-2023, *RE-MAKE RE-MODEL*, 2020 and ongoing  
 Knitted wool, hanger, plywood locker, 2 house dust and plaster bricks (in vitrine)  
 Photo: Doug Atfield. Abigail Lane, *Heads and Tails* The Art Station, 2023.

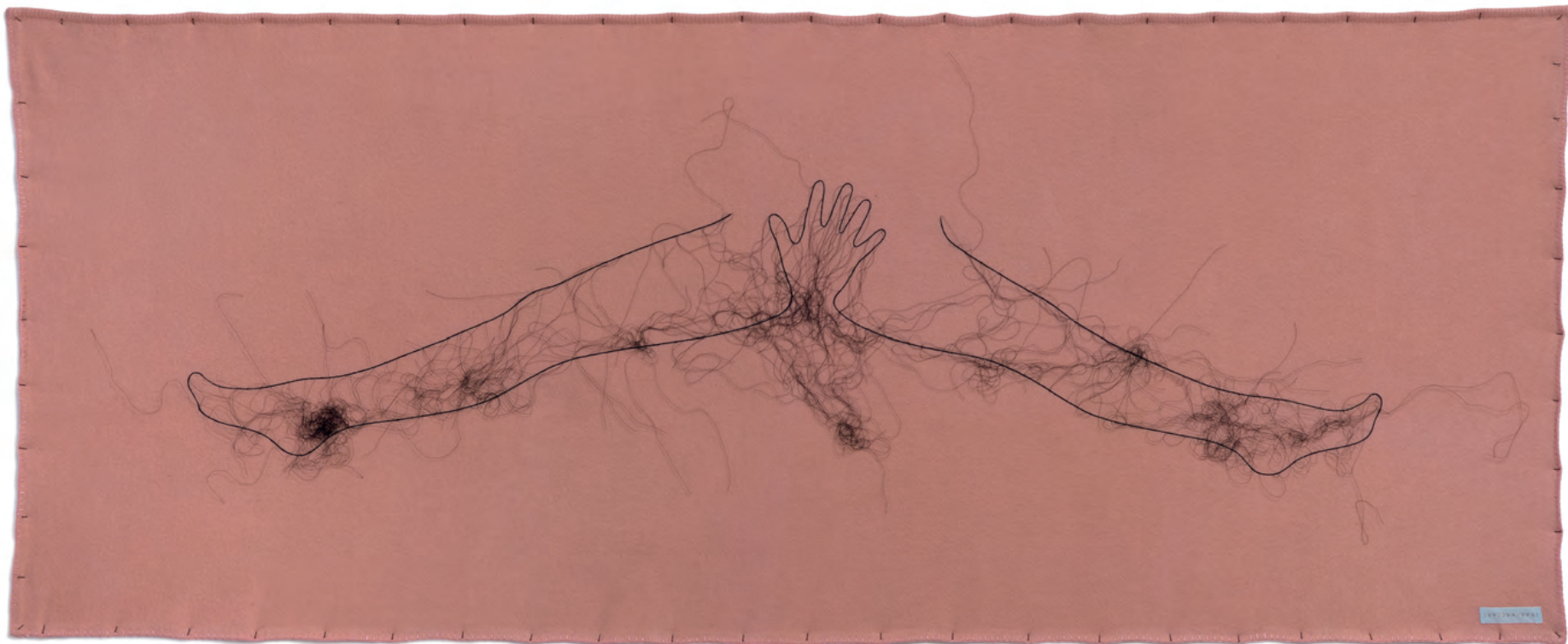




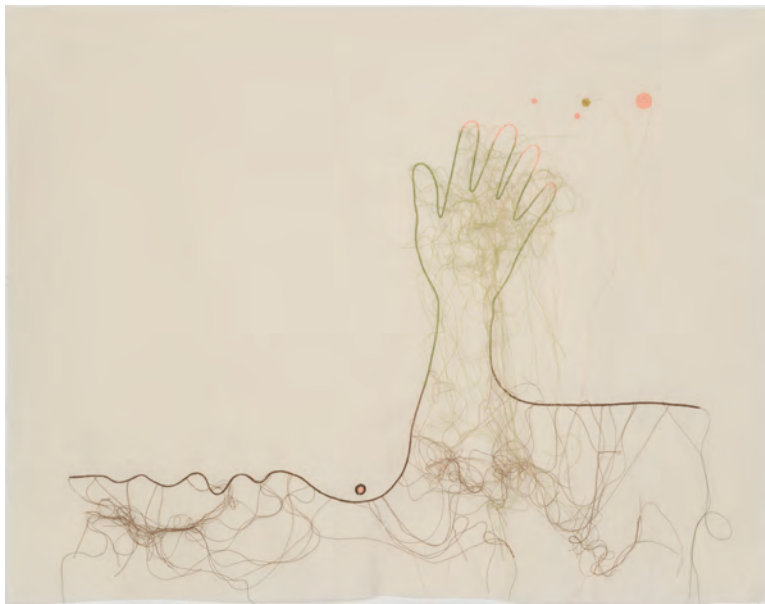


*Heads and Tails (Canal)*, 2024  
Embroidered calico  
54 x 70 cm  
Photo: Doug Atfield, 2024





# SUPERNATURAL



Left

*Spring, 2024*  
Embroidered calico  
54 x 70 cm  
Photo: Doug Atfield, 2024

*Winter, 2024*  
Embroidered calico  
54 x 70 cm  
Photo: Doug Atfield, 2024

Above

*Supernatural, 2023*  
Embroidered cotton onto wool blanket,  
SUPERNATURAL label, oak frame and pins  
114 x 250 cm  
Photo: Doug Atfield, 2023

Below

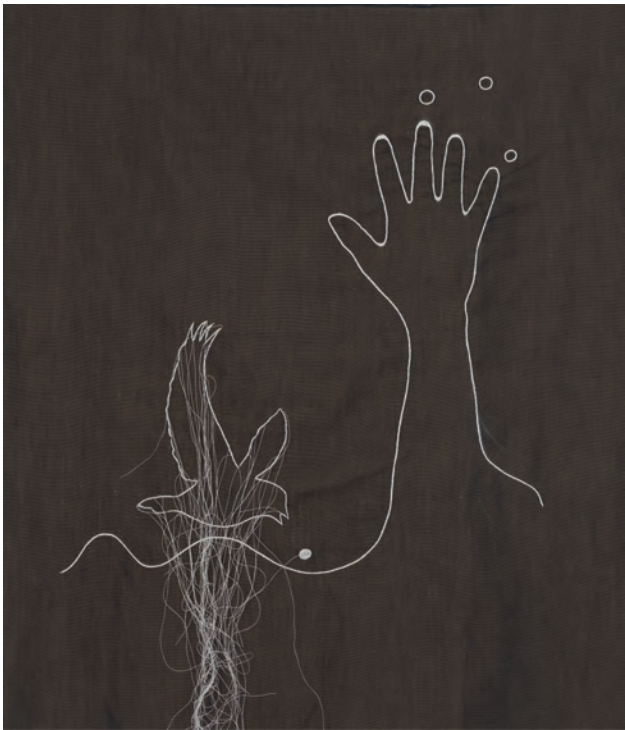
*Who's There, 2020*  
Digital print, linen  
52 x 42 cm  
Photo: Doug Atfield, 2024



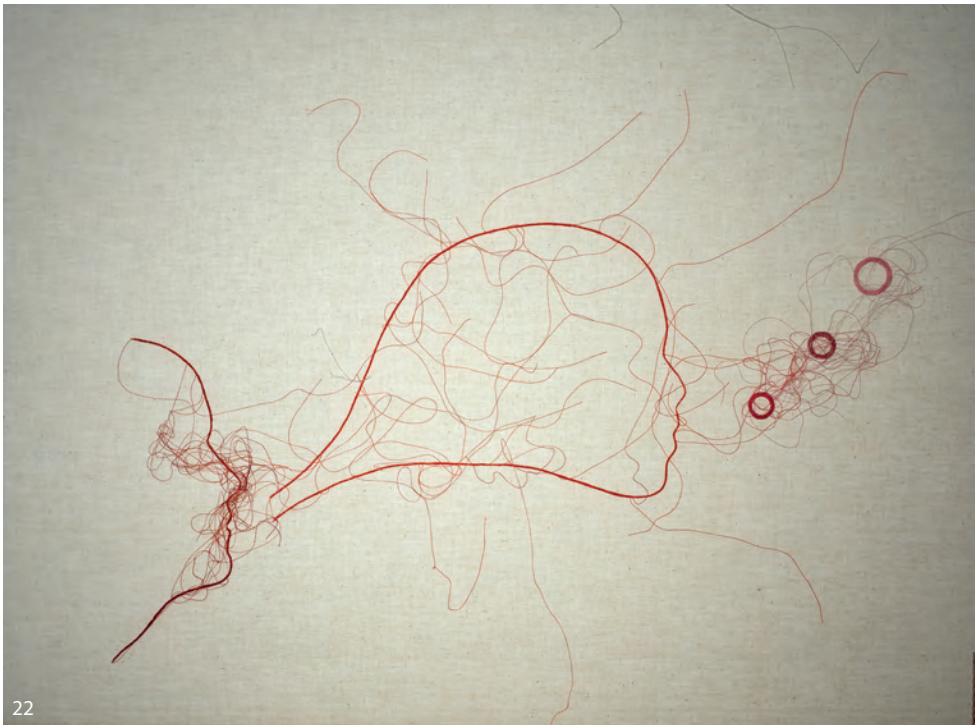




Top Left  
*Export (after Agnes)*, 2024  
Embroidered fabric  
70 x 62 cm  
Photo: Doug Atfield, 2024



Middle Left  
*Import (after Agnes)*, 2024  
Embroidered fabric  
70 x 62 cm  
Photo: Doug Atfield, 2024



Bottom left  
*Divide and Rule*, 2021  
Embroidered calico fabric.  
70 x 53 cm  
Photo: John Spinks

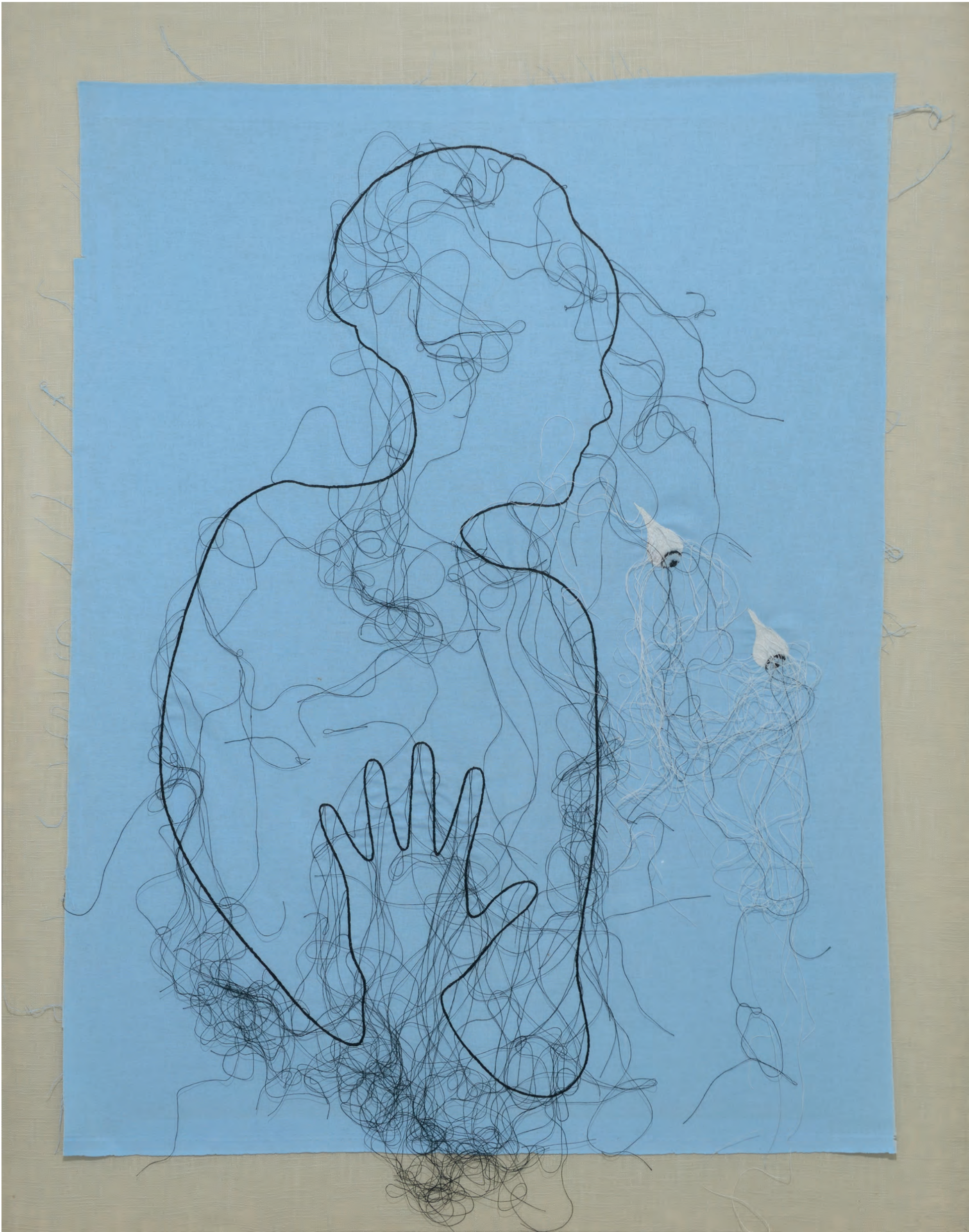


*Dionysus and Every Which Way*, 2022  
Embroidered wool  
105 x 51cm and 104 x 58 cm  
Photo: Doug Atfield, Abigail Lane, Heads and Tails  
The Art Station, 2023.

*Zig Zag Lady (Child of Chaos)*, 2022 Detail  
Ply, Embroidered wool, buttons, resin dice cast with house dust  
Photo: Doug Atfield, 2023







SEER, 2024  
Embroidered cotton fabric.  
Framed 83 x 65 cm.

Photo: Doug Atfield, 2024



The series *Doing Time* is made up of embroidered birds set in boxes closed off by bars. Previously, your works have featured all kinds of animals - cats, dogs, insects, pandas, snails...that have been variously molded, filmed, photographed, inserted into photomontages, impersonated using costumes and even mummified. What significance do animals have in your work?

We are also animals - the most widespread primate living among all the other species, but we have assumed superiority over the rest as we employ, farm, manipulate and dictate territories. We have forever depicted them with wonder, awe and gratitude but as our subjects somehow. Animals are caught between forces: their natural behavioral instincts and the will of Homo sapiens to dominate and control them. Domestication is an interesting, complex agreement. Almost all the animals depicted in my works are trapped in some way: by the bondage of harness or wraps, weight of cover, the limitations of screen or frame. They are caught in the light and in the web of their structures. I think we are similarly torn; between our own base instincts and the frameworks, agreements - the armor we develop to navigate workable relationships and societies. Its complicated and the layers of spirit seem to be tangled in all of us, but perhaps we get an oblique view of ourselves when we consider other animals; they present a glimpse out of our window to a state more pure and innocent than our own but they also prompt a kind of mirror in which their appearance, behaviors and circumstances offer a glance at our own physiological nuances, dilemmas and situations.

These embroidered birds are represented without eyes, yet with numerous dangling threads. Your meticulous attention to the details of their plumage convey an air of naturalistic precision. What particular meaning do you give to these details?

My *Doing Time* birds were mostly embroidered during the period of our own lockdown, ironically brought about by the pandemic, assumed by many to have been spawned in wet markets where the horrendous containment and abuse of wild beings takes place at the dictate of humans. We noticed and delighted at the re proliferation of wildlife and the calls of birds that warm spring, their song amplified in the silence of our suspended activity. At the same time we received reports that people were singing from the balconies of their homes in Rome. It wasn't long before people everywhere were clapping and banging on the perches of their own doorsteps in support of their essential workers (who were in more danger yet less confined) ... but this new ritualistic behavior revealed that people needed to be heard if they could not see their world as normal life would have allowed.

My birds have no eyes (or legs) and have been framed in structures that are both cages and windows whichever way you wish to position yourself. The birds can be both 'them and us'. I like to show the boxes nestled into walls lined with felted wool carpet underlay, which is made from recycled fragments and strings of our material waste. My intention is that the gallery space itself becomes something of a nest or a padded cell allowing further confusion as to our own position.

I took as much care as I could manage to control the threads in which the embroidered colorful bodies were stitched and embedded into small pieces of fabric - fragments of old pillowcases or pajamas - but I left the cotton extensions to run wild from these roots.... to give life, movement, voice, potential and freedom as some stray between the bars. Once settled in their boxed worlds, I later fancied that these unpredictable threads became the bird's own nests as they balled up and tangled of their own accord.

(Excerpt from interview with Semiose, Paris)



Above

*Doing Time (Great Tit)*, 2020  
Embroidered fabric, Painted MDF, stainless steel  
44 x 36 x 12 cm  
Photo: Doug Atfield, 2022

Below

*Doing Time*, Installation at Semiose, Paris, 2024  
Photo: Aurélien Mole, 2024







*Doing Time: Blue Tit, Gold Finch, Wren, Chaffinch, Song Thrush, Nightingale, 2020-2022*





*Holy Swift, 2023*  
Embroidered fabric panel set into floor with lights  
60 x 70 cm x variable depth  
Photo: Richard Ivey. Installation at *Big Women*, Firstsite, 2023

Opposite

*Holy Swift, Zig Zag Lady (Spiral Milk), Doing Time (Jay and Blackcap Female)*  
Photo: Vanessa Fristedt. Installation at *Big Women*, Firstsite, 2023









**DOING TIME**