

Eileen Agar

Bernice Donszelmann

Catherine Ferguson

John Gibbons

Della Gooden

ARTHOUSE1.

London 2018

The Secret Life of

STUFF

The Secret Life of Stuff:

In the summer of 1936, Eileen Agar took a trip to Ploumanach in Brittany. Fascinated by rock formations which seem to exist with more meaningfulness than geology can quite explain, she took numerous photographs and painted a watercolour called 'Thumb Rock'.

Decades later in the 1980's and towards the end of her life Agar turned again to these natural motifs. It was a return not so much to the subject matter of landscape itself, as to the strange anthropomorphic or animalistic hauntings which she first caught glimpse of in Brittany all those years before. Inspired by her photographic endeavours of 1936 and propelled by the inconsistencies of memory and the subjective nature of her imagination, she foregrounded new meaning into a notable series of paintings on canvas. Many have not been seen in public since they left Agar's studio on her death; they, and their making, inspired the premise for this exhibition.

The manner of Agar's return to motifs that she first encountered in the 1930's reminds us of the importance of *the unconscious, imagination and intentionality*; potent forces that determine so much, but which remain elusive. The title of this exhibition alludes to the curators' curiosity for the collaborating and instrumental role that materials play in actualizing these invisible forces; forces we sense and which we yearn to see.

The work in this exhibition necessarily comes from diverse practices and features a broad range of materials and processes: Eileen Agar and Catherine Ferguson are painters; Bernice Donszelmann uses projections and language; John Gibbons' sculptures are made from stainless steel and Della Gooden's pieces use shadow, graphite and objects.

Three written contributions attempt to contextualise the concerns of the curators: 'Thumb/Rock' by Catherine Ferguson is a gentle imagining of the moment Eileen Agar painted her watercolour 'Thumb Rock', in 1936. 'The Incompetent Investigator' by Della Gooden considers how we encounter and interpret the world. 'Presence' also by Della Gooden, is a musing on the unconscious as an embedded entity in her 'life-world'.

Catherine Ferguson & Della Gooden, 2018

Eileen Agar

WE THOUGHT IT WAS FLAT, BUT IT WAS ROUND ALL ALONG



*"I've enjoyed life
and it shows through"*

Eileen Agar

Eileen Agar dancing on a rooftop, 1937
photograph taken by Joseph Bard

© Eileen Agar Estate
& courtesy of

The Redfern Gallery, London

In 1936 Eileen Agar was invited by Roland Penrose and Herbert Read to participate in the *'International Surrealist Exhibition'*, the first Surrealist exhibition in the UK. Agar became known for her playful collages, natural found objects and sculptural assemblages such as *'The Angel of Anarchy'* 1936-40, in the Tate Collection.

The curators of *'The Secret Life of Stuff'* however, are interested in a less well known body of her work, made much later in the eighties and which they came to call her *'Rock Series'* (after being shown the work in the Redfern Gallery archives). They subsequently found a brief reference in the Tate Papers by Ian Walker, referring to these paintings as *'Objects from a Landscape'*.

Many of these paintings have never been exhibited and those that have been, were not companioned as they are here, with their source photographs from 1936 (significant to the curation of this exhibition). Six paintings from the *Rock Series* are seen here, as well as a watercolour, *'Thumb Rock'*.

The *Rock Series* paintings intensively re-vision the Ploumanach landscape, but despite marching quite determinedly away from the reality of the locations in Brittany, each painting can, nevertheless be easily matched up with a source photograph; an origin. For example, the looming central mass, in *'Rock III'* (opposite page) can clearly be seen arcing over the heads of the holiday-makers in Agar's 1936 photograph *'People on the beach, by the rocks in Ploumanach'* (right). Similarly, the twisting tower of fossilized beasts



*People on the beach by the rocks
in Ploumanach, 1936*

source photograph, 1936



Rock III, 1985

acrylic on canvas, 61 x 61 cm

in *'Untitled'* (page 4) most certainly evolved out of *'Photograph of rocks at Ploumanach'* (page 5).

Across these paintings Agar consistently subjectifies specific rock formations, celebrates their singular and monumental presence, morphs them into fantastical re-incarnations and 'soups up' their environments. The brutal orange sky in *'Rock III'* (left) isn't tempered at all by the bright supernatural 'ReadyBrek' glow that frames the top of the main rock. A sickly sun in *'Rock II'* (page 5) hangs above heavily caricatured rocks that sit like a family group on improbable nuclear-green grass.

Agar shows no interest in allowing people to occupy these apocalyptic distortions. If she photographed them in 1936, they are not welcome in the 1980's. Life of a sort, does prevail; odd little groupings of half-formed animals and birds can be found melded into foliage, or hidden in the crevices and shadows of the rock surfaces. Even parts of the rocks themselves spring forth gargoyle-like creatures, for example a mutant sheep's head and a melting turtle in *'Rock III'* (left). Invisible to the casual glance, once discovered, these visions operate as something not quite credible, perhaps even something invented in the process of looking. It's possible to believe no-one else is aware of them, and so there is a need to describe what has been seen. Within the parameters of her own inventions, Agar makes room for the viewer's imagination; hinted at, half there, half not... we can join up the dots our own way.



far left:

Bum Rock, 1985

acrylic on canvas
61 x 61 cm

left:

Untitled, 1985

acrylic on canvas
61 x 61 cm



Photograph of the rocks at Ploumanach, 1936
source photograph



Rock II, 1985
acrylic on canvas
61 x 61 cm

Thumb / Rock

*'But if almost the whole of our past is hidden from us because it is inhibited by the necessities of present action, it will find strength to cross the threshold of consciousness in all cases where we renounce the interests of effective action to replace ourselves, so to speak, in the life of dreams.'*¹



Thumb Rock, 1936
watercolour on paper
20 x 28 cm

I imagine Eileen, back in the 1930s, selecting a viewpoint. She is by the sea in Cornwall or France. The wind blows, in the distance an horizon line, heavenward the film colour of sky, ahead the catch of light on the moving waves, spaces of unimaginable depths and distances. But it's not the light or the panorama that she is particularly interested in. For instance, she notices in the distance a protruding rock formation; immovable against the backdrop of cloud and wave.

Time to sit and stare. Time to make a painting. She has gathered together a portable box of watercolour paints, a block of watercolour paper (cold pressed, probably) some favourite brushes (a mop and a round, at least) a soft pencil, a pot of water and, I expect, absorbent paper or fabric so that she can apply just the right amount of colour, just the right amount of water. Habits of practice.

Where to begin? An empty page. She knows enough not to try to repeat an original moment of great success – a would-be blueprint for today. If there ever was such a time, she is a different person now and the world has changed. Instead, she knows it is a messy process. However, the first attempts are always haunted by the idealism of best-made plans and of paintings remembered. Time to let that go. With each dab of the brush she becomes conscious of motivations and instincts distinct from the purposefulness of picture-making and her mastery of the medium. Memories return but they move at such

speed it's impossible to catch them. Perhaps what flashes into her mind are fragments from previous visits to the coast, clambering over the surface of rocks, sea-bathing, the splash of water, the play of reflected light and, perhaps as she sits in that place, fragments of ideas and images from previous painting excursions.

It's true that before she even begins there is knowledge and expectation. There were painting materials to choose from, conventions to be learned and mastered and paintings to be encountered. The art school was already there, as were ideas and expertise and exemplars to be admired and to become familiar with. However, it is also true that there were paintings that Eileen never saw, things never known, places never visited and experiences yet to be had.

The faraway rock is a silhouette against the sky reduced to the size of a thumb. Something about it is strange and unrecognisable and, for a moment, fascination replaces purpose. The thumb is in front of her holding a brush but then, as its tip moves across the surface, the memory of a fragment of her body irrupts involuntarily. It is an irretrievable infantile memory of something very close, a memory of breath, corporeal and intimate. It is as if the novelty of this combination makes time stand still.

It could be that for Eileen, in this paradoxical moment, the similarity of the shapes she sees signals the awareness of a profound difference beneath such visual continuity, each form revealing something of the other. As she sits at some distance from the rock those unconscious minute perceptions from which this identity "rock" emerged come into force in the act of painting. Beyond the image of its solid, monumental form an inner perception of its existence over time forces itself into her mind. She paints with the awareness that its surface and contour

are the expression of the earth; aggregated particles, sedimented, stratified and shaped by rain, wind and sea over the time of millennia the tiniest bunch of cells which have divided and differentiated according to her genetic code.

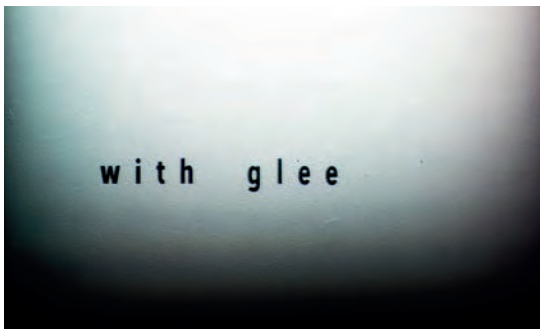
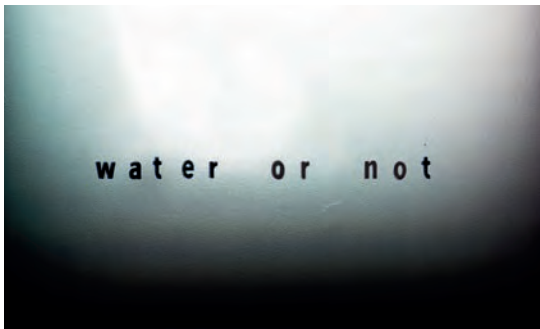
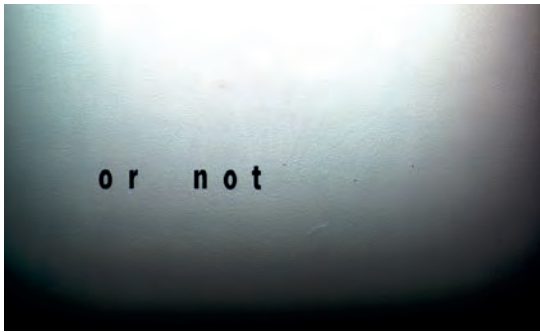
With painting, it is only really possible to imagine how the next brushstroke added to the surface will change the overall picture, and it is equally impossible to imagine the effect of obliterating and of what is lost. This is a condition of the (productive) limitation of the surface. But what if that which is lost remains, paradoxically, as a presence in the work? What if the 'underneath' of painting return in the sensation of its final image? By this I don't necessarily mean what has literally and physically been covered over, as we may be able to imagine in an oil painting, but the 'underneath' of perception, as it were. This would include, as with 'Thumb Rock', memories of rocks and thumbs but also everything else from our past that we were not conscious of perceiving at the time, what the writer Walter Benjamin referred to as the 'unlived' of perception.

Perhaps the moment when time seems to stand still is this paradoxical moment when the painting holds, on its surface, this unconscious past as a sensation that is deeper than the image. By the same token, this moment is one when the surface holds time apart; a moment when everything returns, but not as a chronological past, rather it is in flux, open to new interpretations and thus with a future equally as undetermined.

Catherine Ferguson, 2018

¹ Bergson, H. (1991) *Matter and Memory*, trans N.M. Paul and W. S. Palmer, New York: Zone Books p15

Bernice Donszelmann



MESSAGING

The tangible stuff of language could be considered to be the soft discharge of air from our mouths when we speak, or the texture of a pen mark on paper. The structural, phonological and functional systems of language aren't tangible, as such, but they are stable and a shared constant; a quiet, hidden 'knowing' that assists the propagation and successful communication of our thoughts.

Everything ever written is the result of a thought of some kind, and for Bernice Donszelmann it is the exploitation of the implicit and unconscious forces that live within words and language that drive her recent rhythmic texts, *'Another Sea Swell', 2018* and *'it or not' 2018*, which are seen in both gallery spaces.

In place of a pictorial surface that can be navigated at will, there is a system of delivery that controls the attention; a conveyor belt for the eyes. Words slide in from the right, like an information delivery screen on a station platform. The speed of delivery anticipates the speed of decoding and for the reader/viewer, there is a distinct physicality by way of the standing, the watching, and the waiting; the gaps between words are as full as the words themselves; visually and temporally.

Each word or phrase, tied by time and space to others, bounces a trajectory of meaning towards the next. Irregular discourse patterns and unusual syntactic or lexical choices offer up awkward and surprising connections which cause hesitation and reflection. A branching, fluid process in the mind is at odds with the regular, unchanging stream of delivery that doesn't pause or change as it repeats on loop.



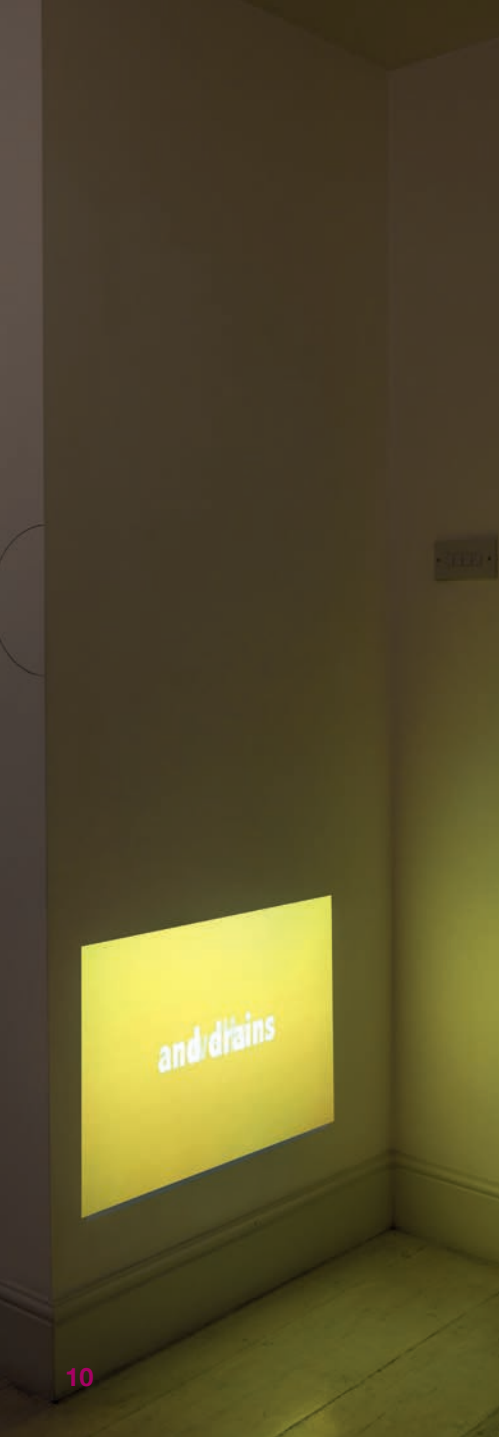
It or Not, 2018

2.5-minute looped video projection)
(also on opposite page)



Another Sea Swell, 2018

2-minute, looped video projection



The Incompetent Investigator

I once tried to watch *'Reservoir Dogs'* but it came to that scene with the ear and I had to shut my eyes and scramble for the off button. I think I was unsettled by the re-contextualization of violence into a witty, cool moment. The funky soundtrack and the actor's improvised 'dad-dancing' somehow mis-aligned the horror, making it all the worse to bear. Tarantino clearly wasn't the first director to refigure brutality; I recall a similar failure when I tried to watch *'A Clockwork Orange'*.

By propelling an antagonist within an exaggerated plot, making him/her party to contrary or extreme perspectives, story-tellers can powerfully present the limits of their own imaginary world, so that the rest of us can come close to imagining it too. Optimally, by acknowledging something on the fringes of consciousness, or that which is just outside the usual levels of tolerance, we can achieve some kind of return on the investment. It is hoped that afterwards (assuming we haven't scrambled for the off button) we will have discovered a different version of the world, and the stuff encountered there. We might consider ourselves changed, educated, even culturally enriched; our imaginations expanded.

I read somewhere that children (contrary to popular belief) have little or no imagination, because imagination is nourished entirely by what we already know of the world. Children have less experience to draw on, so it follows they would be less able to speculate. A child doesn't fear a strange noise in the dark because s/he is able to imagine the monster in all its gory detail; that child's fear is the appalling abyss of not knowing. The vulnerability of being unable to consider a plausible explanation is where true terror lies. No matter how obscure our fantasies seem and whatever strangeness we think we dream, imagination is rooted in and built around, what we have already witnessed and have already processed.

By collecting evidence for how things seem, and using it to build our own, sensible world, we are free to imagine not the abyss but rational explanation, and likely outcomes. Such theories of the world in our heads can pre-suppose the wonderful, the thrilling and the sensuous too...no need to anticipate only the horror. This seems like a way to function, to get by.

So, we gather information to construct a world we believe to be concrete, our story and our lot. Isn't it the greatest story ever told? Doesn't the plot blow your mind? ...but wait, doesn't something slightly niggle from off the page? from behind the camera?

Tarantino and Kubrick exposed my incompetence; I failed to collect. I failed to admit something outside my levels of tolerance; am I the only one to switch off and cook dinner? There is a far greater sense of failure in not collecting evidence for what seems ultimately unknowable and infinitely unimaginable: pain and death. On this I am a child again, fearing strange noises in the dark.

An unsatisfactory outcome for any investigation of the world is inevitable because I have to look outside of myself for what I seek. I endeavour to understand what is 'other' to myself, when everything that is 'other' to myself must be sensed and directed back into me, by me. Must I depend for revelation on such a flawed method?

I am obliged to not just present the world to myself, but to **re**-present it to myself. Whatever I get, is filtered through me and a world so heavily cloaked with my own consciousness is surely rendered inscrutable. I fear on a good day I'll get just a reasonable copy of reality. On a bad day? ...how wrong can things go?

Della Gooden, 2018

...a delicate fog infusing the sharp edges of memories. I have no authority here. Sorrow roams randomly; an object of independent means

SORROW

a dog's head

...I've stroked a dog's head three times,
thus generating subsets:

soft-warm-velvety-brown-nice
itchy-rash-red
snappy-jaw-jerk-panic

These are all triggered simultaneously
everytime I see a dog

a childhood song

...having manifested itself many times previously as something joyful, this sits on my shoulder waiting to be something else on Friday

PRESENCE

Something is here,
I am accompanied.
I call it 'Presence'.
It wields great power
and it breathes with me

my sock

...is black and mostly keeps my foot warm.
I take it for granted. It's mine.

All my socks are there for my benefit,
and they can shut up.

Would I feel the same about a tree, which is alive?
...Maybe, if it gave me shade, or fruit to eat.

I might call it mine if I'd planted it,
or it happened to be in my garden

Giotto's angels

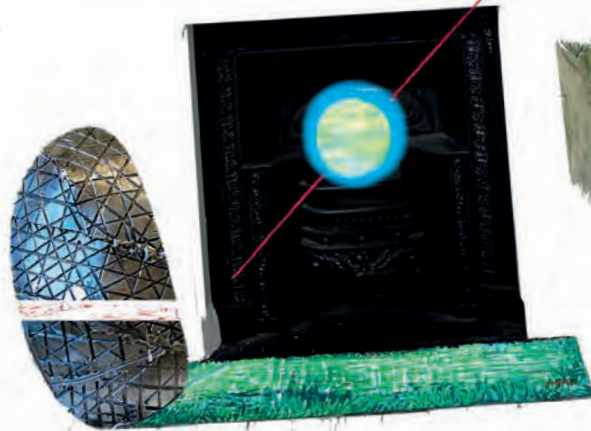
...are pressed solidly into me,
just as they are pressed into
that blue in the Scrovegni Chapel

that dead cactus | Sant Pere Pescador | Lily-White Marcus | and a strange dust lands on your hand... and on your face | purple lupins | nerve pain: dripping ice-
water, | the sound of 70's strap-on roller skates on tarmac | warm bones | aweeeengh aweeeengh | sunsets: Le Rayon en Vert, the Pacific, Gosfield Lake
| Starsky's cardigan | that odd twitchy arm from behind | a conker in a pocket | | a humpback whale in the water below | gravity | wooden chair | Sugar Mouse

Presence
is everything I know and sense;
a bewildering life-world of the formed
and the forming.

Some is
deep rooted

some floats
on the
surface.



An integrated system that I carry wherever I go.

Sharing my
orientations

The more
I encounter

the more
I find.

A pulsing creature bound
to body and mind.

Is it really just
a 'reasonable copy
of reality'?

Catherine Ferguson



Spectrum, 2018

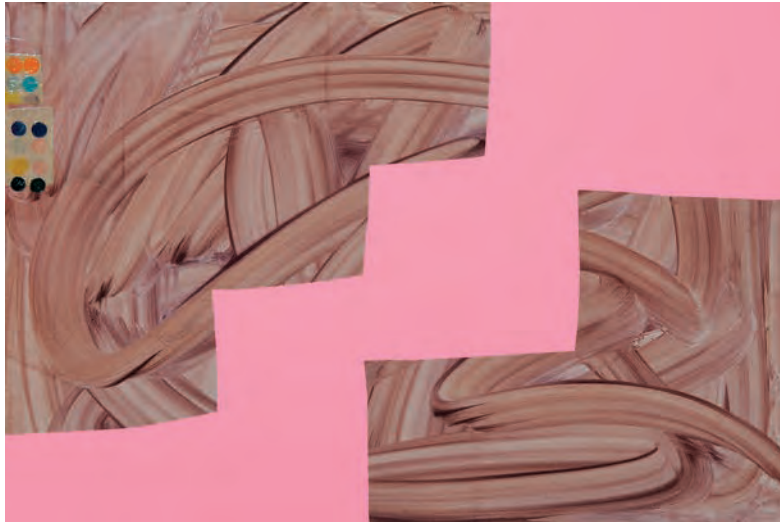
acrylic on aluminium 148 x 148 cm

NOTHING IS FINISHED

It is an oft-made assumption that a painting leaves the artist's studio finished; with nothing left to be done. The viewer gets paid in full, with an immutable object imbued with artistic intention, all wrapped up in a bow....

No. A painting must make many journeys without the artist's say-so, and the best paintings leave the studio with something not yet visible.

Catherine Ferguson's paintings enfold an admiration for various pictures from different historical periods. You wouldn't be able to identify the work of Caravaggio, for example, but these paintings were made with his works in mind: fragments and passages and memories juxtaposed with work by others. In their making the paintings explore, unfold and try to reveal the invisible, unconscious forces which make Caravaggio's work so compelling; not as a theoretical idea but in practice, through the composition of specific materialities of paint and surface.



Out of the Smooth, 2018

acrylic & masking tape on aluminium
60 x 40 cm

Out of the Smooth (above) has its own networks of meaning drawn from another place, and other work. It has an accumulating 'presence', a rationale for its own existence and sustains itself within a specific logic and origin but this, in itself, must not be mistaken for the key. To live within the viewer's 'presence' it must offer traction to the 'outside' by inviting its own revision and by provoking a dialogue with the viewer for this very purpose. It must then be pressed, turned over, placed into a new world and absorbed into a new 'presence'. We need to think with it and meet somewhere in the middle.

These paintings are generative, offering continuous turnover on tap; there for the drinking.

Framing of the Earth, 2018

acrylic on aluminium
50 x 50 cm





Coupled Colour, 2018

2018, acrylic on aluminium, 30 x 30 cm



British Summer, 2018

acrylic on aluminium, 30 x 30 cm

INFINITE STREAMS

"Being alone in the studio with nine abstract sculptures by John Gibbons was not my idea of being alone. The studio was occupied; in fact, it doesn't feel wrong to say it was peopled." (Della Gooden)

Convention dictates that the materials used by artists should be known and listed. At most exhibitions there are labels on walls or A4 sheets of paper telling us: *oil on canvas* or *acrylic on board* ...indeed the work found in this exhibition and on these pages is qualified in just this way, simply because it is expected; but isn't there more to say about the STUFF of Art? Are we focussing on the pedantic, rather than the enlightening?

Gibbons' work in this exhibition is made from stainless steel but it has an identity forged from a myriad of alternative, potent, and less visible influences; like the way his arm moves, the limit of his stretch and the arc of his wrist. What about the conversation he had just before he touched the metal? And didn't the degree by which the light in the studio had elevated the lustre of the surface, encourage him to scratch just *here*... instead of just *there*? Pieces like '*She Moves / Her Hair*' (right) are the consequence of infinite streams of happenings; interactions, actions and counter-actions between the artist and the world.

She Moves / Her Hair, 2015-16

stainless steel, varnished, 47.5 x 35 x 50 cm

(seen with tewo of Eileen Agar's source photographs and with yellow reflections from Bernice Donszelmann's projection '*Another Sea Swell*')



For / Giveness, 2016-17

stainless steel
29.5 x 27.5 x 26.5 cm



So, stainless steel, the material *substance* of Gibbons' work, is just one 'ingredient' of an infinite number that we can only guess at. With such complexity with regard to potential 'materials,' the artist's intentions are inevitably collaborative and negotiated. For example, the gentle striations, deep hatched lines or circular burnished markings found on any of these pieces couldn't have occurred if both the artist and the steel hadn't agreed in advance that it was a good idea.

The sculpture of John Gibbons exceeds the material *substance* it is made of and carries the movement of an internal life out into the world. The physical processes of working with metal are technical, skilful and forceful; at the end there is an object, and there is a surface. This surface speaks so eloquently of its history, it bears the trace of a relationship to the materials used and the processes by which its unconscious capacities, there from the start, become actualised in the end. Far from being about the physical properties of metal, these capacities were waiting to connect with the DNA of the sculptor, his capacities and inheritances, in order to breathe new life into the world.

The vitality encountered and the pull of this work is not in its inertness and stability as art object constituted from metal, but in its potential to move beyond that state, away from such literalness.



Altar / For Those, 2016-17
stainless steel, 50 x 37 x 30.5 cm
(seen with 'Framing of the Earth'
by Catherine Ferguson)

Della Gooden

STUFF HAPPENS

Della Gooden's recent work *'The Call'* has been mutating on a studio wall all year. Whether it is one large whole, or a series of individual pieces scattered across a surface, is hard to tell. Metal circles lean and twist in the air to form relationships with graphite lines; which in turn swivel, change size, even vanish. It is a dance of co-operation and rejection, stability and flux; and all the while shadows directed by the sun, grow and shrink. It is spatial, transient and time-based.

The flat white wall lends anchorage and an open surface that is complicit in allowing imaginary spaces to emerge: the friction of a surface when it meets the softness and glide of a pencil creates a place for the invention of depth and the circles' weightlessness and enclosing of space contradict our own experience of gravity, which holds us down.

In a practical sense, the role of the artist in this shifting parade feels no more or less significant than that of the sun. The sun moves the shadows, the artist fixes a circle at a new angle, rubs out a line, or lengthens another. Such developments are absorbed and waited upon... more change will occur. Meanwhile, zones of intensity become identifiable from the herd, even possible to name like constellations in the night sky. *'Dinner Plate'* (right) and *'Egg and Spoon'* (opposite page) were so discovered.

Line 15
(from *The Call*)
graphite on
wall
dimensions:
28cms long



Dinner Plate, 2018
graphite line drawn on
a corner

dimensions:
the size
of a dinner plate



'Dinner Plate' is no mystery; a single graphite line drawn halfway around a dinner plate starts and finishes on the corner of a wall. With such an aspect, it is reasonable to think that the corner's vertical edge might aid the formation of a closed, finite shape. Basically, we might expect to see a semi-circle... and of course we do. However, the disposition of an extruding corner is that it advances towards the space it bounds. It juts into the room, towards the viewer, providing 270 degrees of space around it. This architectural condition, in combination with our tendency to move as we look, means that from some positions *'Dinner Plate'* hovers on the edge of a surface that falls away and the corner of the wall becomes the would-be diameter of an imaginary full circle. This isn't a literal experience, it is a sensed, something felt.

Egg and Spoon, 2018

graphite circle drawn on the wall,
plastic-coated metal & one shadow
Dimensions variable according to the length of shadow cast.





Elsewhere in this exhibition there are two larger, site specific installations: *'Treaty'* (opposite page) and *'One Line, one Ladder, one Painting'* (left) which, as implied by its title, has three components. Firstly there is the gallery roof-access ladder (a fixed architectural feature) Behind the ladder sits *'Line 22'* (a slanted graphite line on the wall) and finally there is the blue, left-hand side edge of Eileen Agar's painting *'Untitled', 1985* (which is hung on the other side of the partition wall). The work is visible by the alignment achieved when standing at one particular angle; front-on. Look across the room from a different place and it doesn't exist.

One Line, one Ladder, one Painting, 2018

components: 'Line 22', the roof access ladder and the left, blue edge of Eileen Agar's painting 'Untitled'

Dimensions variable to the visual field



Treaty, 2018

architectural recess, wooden pole, wooden hoop, paint,
2 linear shadows and 2 elliptical shadows
(their colours determined by warm and cool bulbs)
Dimensions: floor to ceiling, recess width 1.5 metres



from left to right:
Eileen Agar 'Rock II'; John Gibbons 'Altar/For Those'; Catherine Ferguson 'Framing of the Earth';
John Gibbons, 'For/Giveness'; Catherine Ferguson, 'Ghost'; Della Gooden, 'Dinner Plate'; Bernice Donszelmann, 'Another Sea Swell'



from left to right:

*Eileen Agar 'Rock II'; John Gibbons 'Altar/For Those'; Catherine Ferguson 'Framing of the Earth'; John Gibbons, 'For/Giveness';
Catherine Ferguson, 'Ghost'; Della Gooden, 'Dinner Plate'; Bernice Donszelmann, 'Another Sea Swell'*

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