20.05.2025 — Review

All Kinds of Hands: An Exhibition of Co-Produced Sculpture

The Storey, Lancaster
by Natalie Bradbury

Assunta Ruocco and Lou Dallyn, 'Assunta and Lou's After School Art Club' (2024-ongoing). Courtesy of Beki Melrose

In a cavernous, high-ceilinged room with smooth parquet flooring and a solemn, roped-off statue of Victoria and Albert at one end, a number of small visitors are busily – and noisily – disrupting the usual codes of the art gallery.

It's the family-friendly afternoon opening of *All Kinds of Hands*, a group show of sculpture at The Storey, a sprawling nineteenth century complex in Lancaster that was built to house galleries and spaces for reading, learning and making music, and is now used for a variety of creative activities.

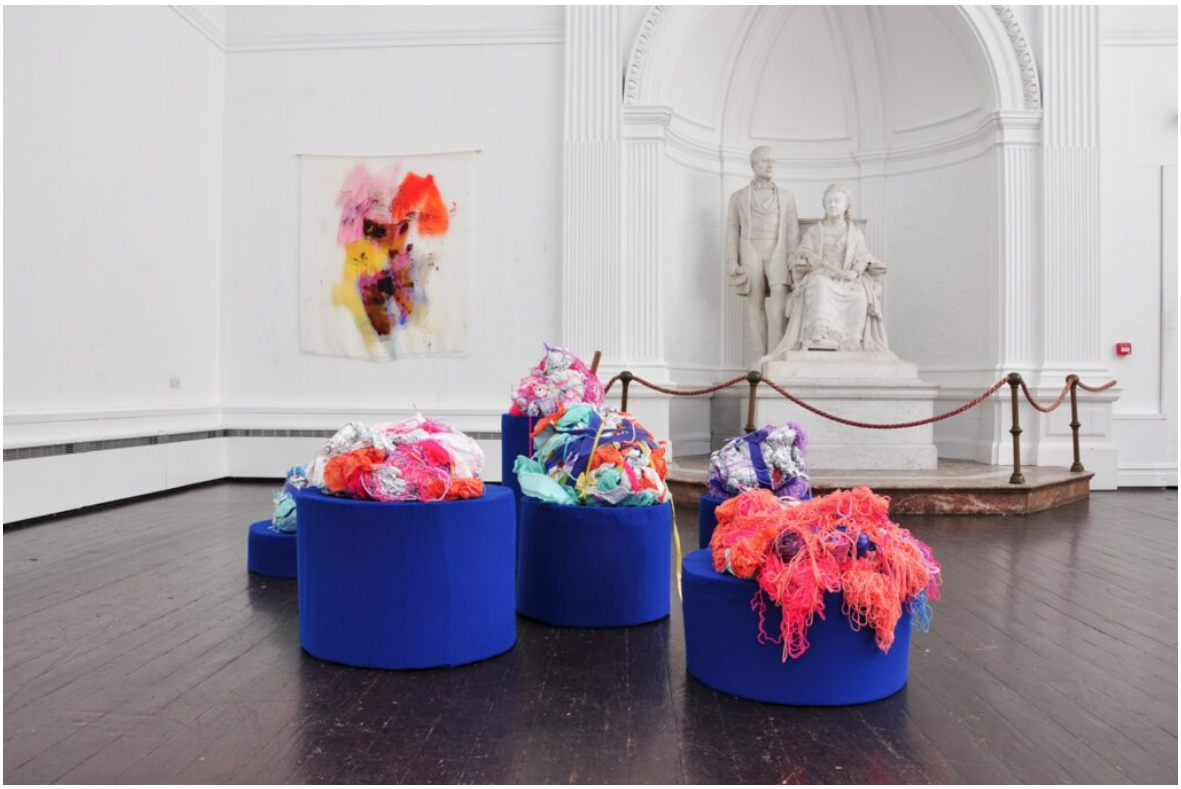
This is a welcome opportunity to visit an exhibition opening with a child; since giving birth to my daughter in 2024, I've taken her to as many galleries as possible, seeing it as a chance to talk to her about form, colour, materials, surface, process and gesture. Our experiences of visiting art galleries and museums, however, have been mixed. Whereas many galleries have dedicated programming strands created for and with families, at others we have been made to feel like a liability with the potential to cause expensive damage to irreparable and precious art objects.

Conceived of and curated by Lancaster-based artist and researcher Ellie Barrett, *All Kinds of Hands* seeks to subvert the usual hierarchies of making, materials and display. Although not explicit in every artist's practice, each of the exhibiting artists are mothers (the complex relationship between motherhood and art practice is acknowledged in the provision of a shelf of books that includes Hettie Judah's recent book *How Not to Exclude Artist-Mothers (and other parents)* (2022)) and all five create work that foregrounds the actions and input of a group of people rather than relying on individual authorship.

Colourful sculptures are spread out around this usually somewhat austere, white-walled space. They are displayed on low-to-the-floor plinths – as if designed to appeal to a child's vantage point – assembled in piles, spread out on the floor, or dangling invitingly.

The sculptures are made of materials that we're all familiar with and that invite tactile exploration. The children start to point, throw and shout; my tiny fourteen-month-old daughter pulls at a twist of tinfoil, hung from a crossbeam that's so high above her head it must be impossible for her to comprehend such a distance. These reactions are both an instinctive response to the materials and their arrangement in the space, and an innate desire to explore through the sense of touch as well as sight.

These types of reactions were hoped for and invited. Barrett's recent practice has focused on co-producing sculptures with children, starting after her own daughter, Nora, was born in 2021. Barrett saw her grappling with materials and realised it was really similar to what she was trying to achieve in the studio. This prompted a collaboration that included a joint residency with Nora at socially engaged arts organisation In-Situ, based in Pendle, Lancashire, in 2024. Earlier this year, Barrett scaled up this one-to-one working relationship with groups of under five-year olds at playgroups in Morecambe, Lancaster's neighbouring town.



Ellie Barrett, ‘Tangles 1-6’ (2025). Courtesy of Beki Melrose.

A key inspiration for Barrett’s process has been work such as ‘Scatter Piece’ (1968) by the American artist Robert Morris, a sculpture that, while appearing chaotic, involves the deliberate placement of industrial materials and objects across a room, suggesting the aftermath of an event. Whereas artists who created what Barrett terms ‘scatter sculptures’ in the 1960s were often lone men, Barrett has updated the process to incorporate other hands and actors in the making of the work, using everyday materials that don’t require specialist skill, knowledge or equipment. Each child’s approach to the materials, and what they got out of them, varied according to age and ability: even those too young to have sufficiently refined motor skills to fully grasp them were able to explore their sound and texture.

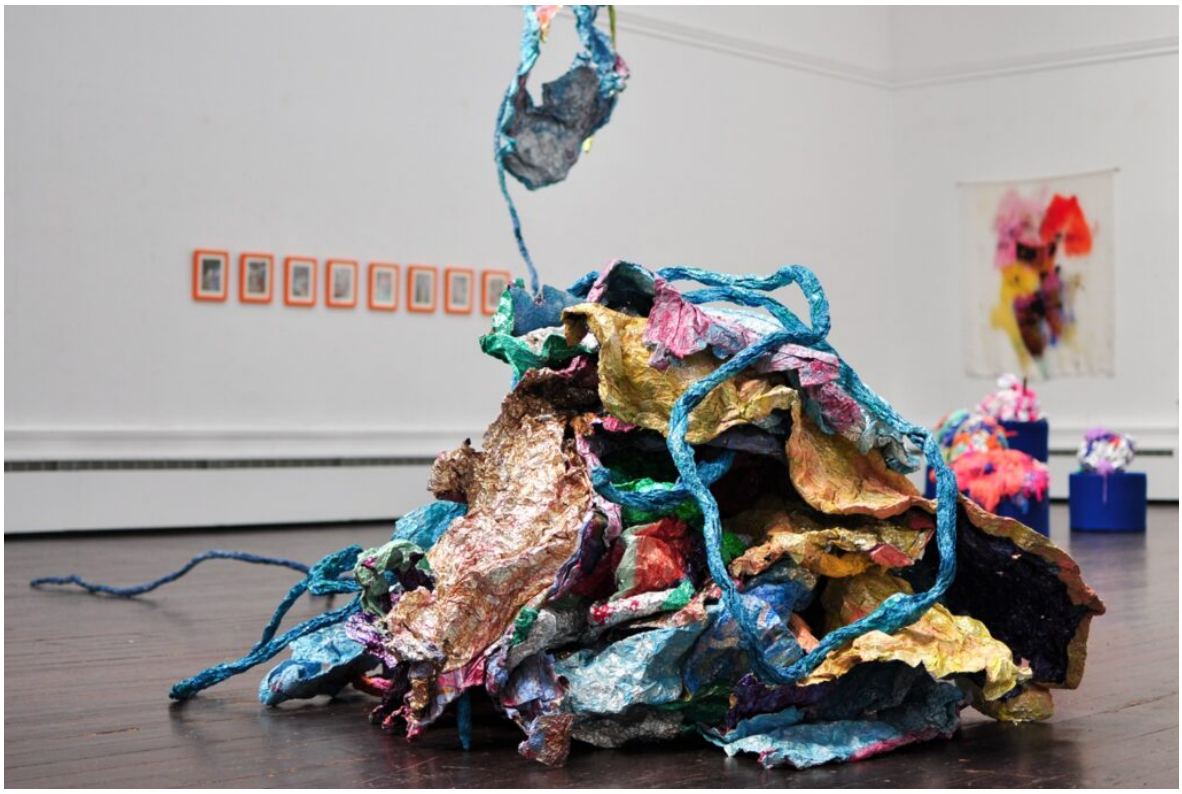
Together with Nora, Barrett also created banners bearing prompts for engaging with the materials, designed as jumping off points rather than prescriptive instructions. Children were asked: ‘Can you build a den?’, ‘What happens if you copy each other?’, ‘How does it feel or sound?’, ‘Does it rip, scrunch or unravel?’, ‘Can you join them together?’ and ‘Can you invent a new toy?’. These suggestions are displayed in *All Kinds of Hands*, alongside photographs that show child participants playing together and alone, pulling, stretching, building and tearing, wearing the materials and walking on them.

At each of the six playgroups Barrett attended, she reappropriated ‘tidy up time’ at the end of the session as ‘sculpture-making time’. The session’s

materials, along with other incidental detritus collected along the way, such as a plastic wrapper from a snack, were gathered up to create a sculpture.

The resulting pieces, 'Tangles 1-6' (2025), are displayed in the Storey on small, deep blue plinths that resemble soft play structures designed to be climbed or jumped on. At first sight, the 'Tangles' invite comparisons with the colourful flotsam of rope and fishing nets that washes up on the shoreline at the seaside. Coloured wool is wrapped around toilet roll and pastel-coloured pipe cleaners, then bundled together with masking tape like scribbles made into 3D objects. Nearby, visitors are invited to experience the process themselves, through a sculpture kit containing the same materials, but my daughter yanks at a loose thread on one of the 'Tangles' instead. Although there are no signs that say 'do not touch' – as we might expect to see in an institution – I worry that we're doing something wrong and find myself self-policing by telling her not to and trying to redirect her attention.

All Kinds of Hands has been a platform to test this work and how it goes down in a formal gallery setting. Participants in the playgroups and their parents and carers were invited to attend the exhibition and see the results; for many, it's likely the first time they've attended an art gallery. For Barrett, it has also enabled her to place the work alongside works by other artists who use participatory methods and collaboration.



Sarah Ryder, 'Loose Paintings' (2023). Courtesy of Beki Melrose.

Similar to Barrett's work, Sarah Ryder's sculptures 'Loose Part Paintings' (2023) use throwaway, lightweight, easily available materials: tinfoil covered

with acrylic paint. First shown at Tŷ Pawb in Wrexham as part of a play-themed project, children were invited to play with them during the course of the exhibition, altering their form and appearance. They will be reconfigured again the next time they are shown – the final presentation is different every time. In this iteration a stack of tinfoil sheets resembles a pile of children's coats, thrown off with abandon. A hanging sheet of foil is hollow in the centre, as if the middle has been removed. Going in and out of doors and gates, over and over again, currently entertains my daughter far more than any toy; Ryder's work makes me think of a portal, or an impromptu play tunnel, through which small bodies might hurl themselves. This is placed tantalisingly out of reach, while next to it a long blue twist of foil trails like a rope swing.

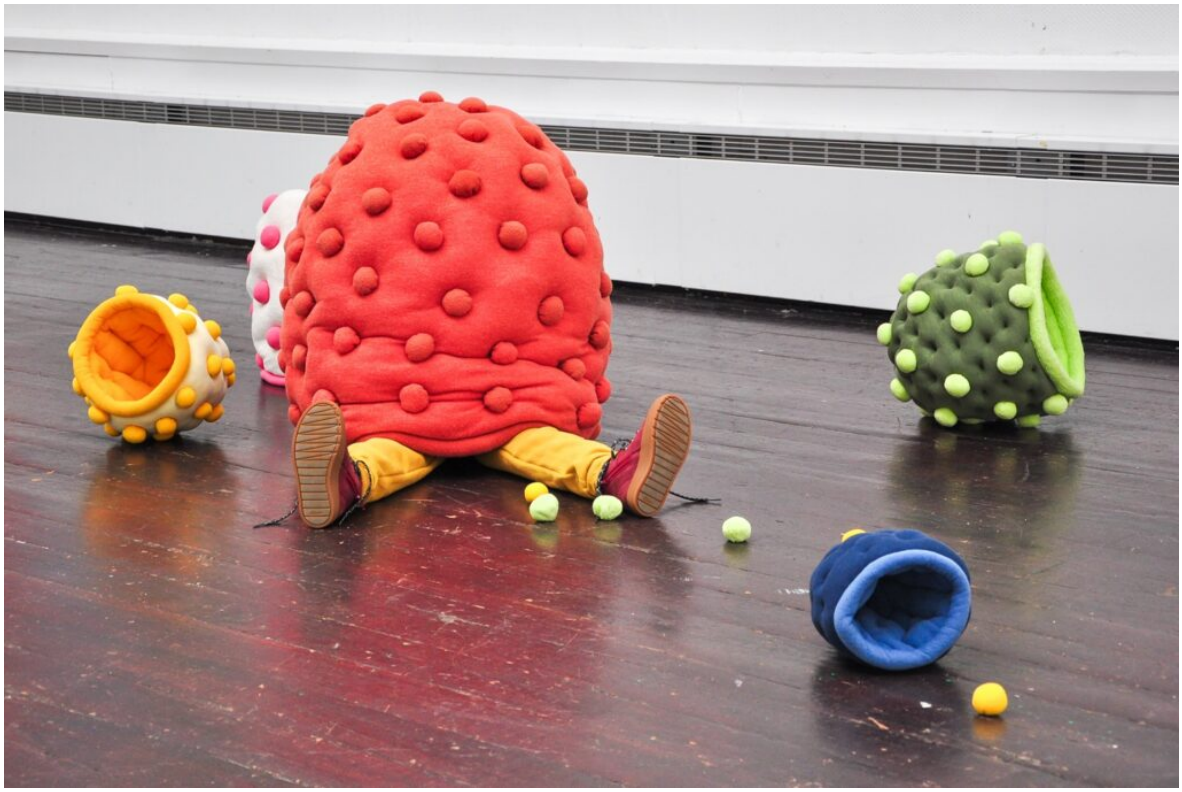
There's an immediacy to Barrett and Ryder's work which offers the materials in their raw state, mostly as they are, with the form of the work arising from the choices made in their assembly. Other exhibiting artists' work is more mediated and processed.

'Held' (2022), by Nisha Duggal, presents small, delicate sculptures in the form of glazed ceramics. Created with adult residents in Pendle during a residency with In-Situ, these unique objects are material mementoes of a project that encompassed walking, talking and exploring concepts of place and belonging. The clay was shaped by clenching and unclenching the hand, making a fleeting gesture – which we often perform unthinkingly – permanent and visible.

Unlike other participating artists, Duggal explicitly highlights some of the hands involved in the making of the work. An accompanying film documents the process, with a voiceover inviting participants to: 'Take the clay in your hand and squeeze. Think about the land of your ancestors, think about your connection to the land and breathe.' These words are repeated like a mantra as anonymous hands are interspersed with shots of the Pendle Hill and the surrounding landscape, with its traditional drystone walls. The camera navigates towards high and low, feet and the sky, as the manmade and crafted is contrasted with the landscape and the natural world. Resulting in matching pairs, each participant was offered one for themselves and invited to embed the other within a drystone wall in Pendle, the site of which is commemorated with a stone engraved with the word 'held'.

Other exhibiting artists take a longer approach to collaboration, working with others over a period of years. 'Hats' (2016) was created with Beata Podstawa's son, then aged eight, who made decisions on how the work developed. A child-sized figure is splayed on the floor. Over his head and torso, he wears a round, quilted textile sculpture in a vibrant shade of red

that envelops all but his legs like an inverted sleeping bag, bringing to mind an oversized hat or space helmet. Poking out are two small legs, made of stuffed trousers and shoes – laces casually untied – that while anonymous are recognisably those of a young child. Around him are several smaller textile pieces. Familiar in a non-specific way, they look like giant pieces of soft fruit, children's TV characters, fancy dress costumes or outfits for surreal sports mascots. Seed-like bright green and yellow pom-poms spill off the headwear, scattered around the boy. My daughter immediately runs and grasps the pom-poms, fiercely resisting my attempts to prise them away from her. Around an hour and a half into the preview I notice that these loose pom-poms have disappeared; I later discover that they were subsequently found underneath another sculpture, presumably placed there by small hands, following some sort of childish logic.

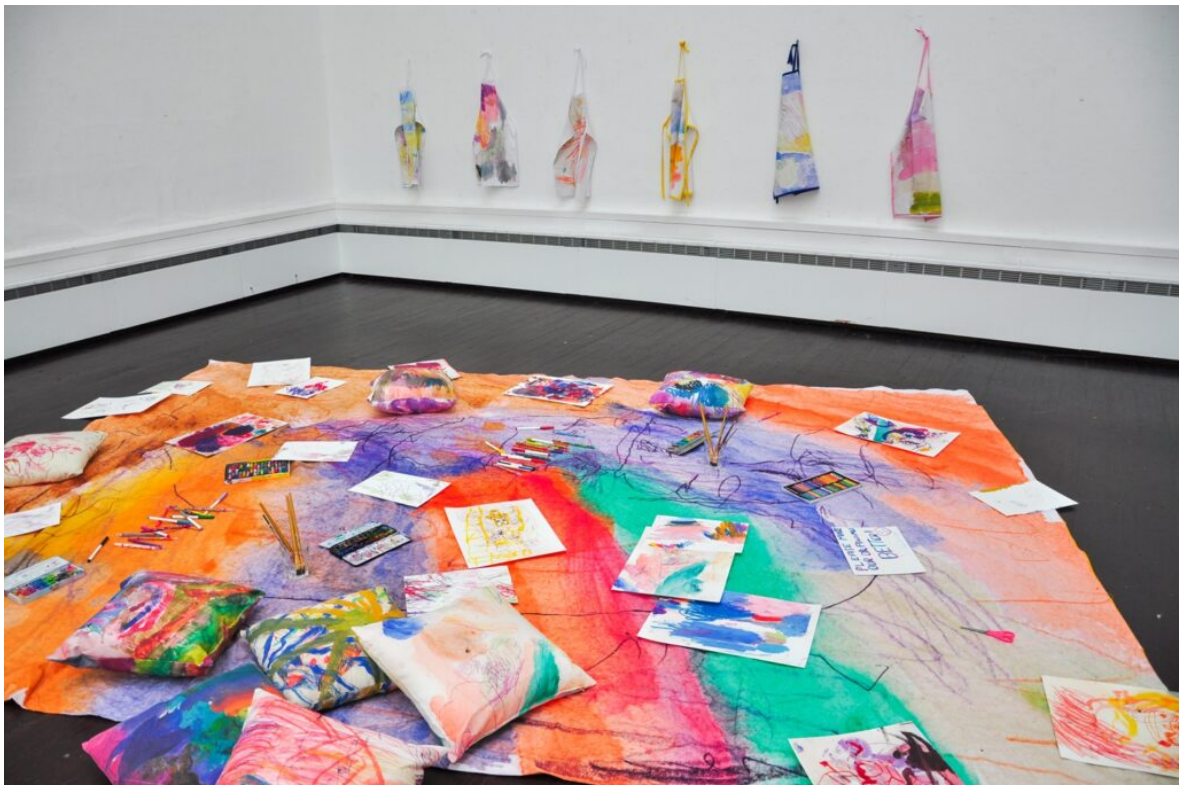


Beata Podstawa, 'Hats' (2016). Courtesy of Beki Melrose.

For this showing of the work, Podstawa has created a companion piece, 'Tracksuit Time Traveller' (2025). Two smaller figures, fashioned from Ken dolls and Jesmonite stand and sit on plinths, contemplating 'Hats' while sporting scaled down versions of the headgear from the earlier artwork. Acknowledging the fact that Podstawa's son is now aged sixteen, the helmets are more to-scale and less all-enveloping, enabling his personality to emerge from beneath and reflecting his and his mother's changing relationship to the earlier work, which developed through the ideas and input of both.

In common with Barrett, Assunta Ruocco's work, 'Assunta and Lou's After School Art Club' (2024-ongoing), directly references the impact of motherhood upon her practice; for many artists and mothers, the boundary between domestic and working space, and between childcare and creating art, is porous.

'Assunta and Lou's After School Art Club' is the most immediately collaborative project in the exhibition, taking the form of an interactive sculptural environment in which both Ruocco and her nine-year-old daughter Lou act as workshop facilitators. Drawings, chosen by Lou, have been translated into functional and wearable textiles: stitched onto a large, waterproof piece of quilting cotton which has been laid out on the gallery floor, and printed onto cushions and denim aprons hanging on the wall to be used by gallery visitors. Watercolour paints and oil pastels (both of which quickly and predictably go into my daughter's mouth) are spread around, accompanied by an invitation written in childish handwriting to 'Please make our drawings better!'. Given that part of the Storey was home to Lancaster College of Art for a period in the mid-twentieth century, it feels entirely fitting to be asked to take up pens and paintbrushes: Ruocco and Lou's approach has much in common with the exploratory, imaginative methods of art education that began to be popularised at this time.



Assunta Ruocco and Lou Dallyn, 'Assunta and Lou's After School Art Club' (2024-ongoing). Courtesy of Beki Melrose

Close by is a printer-copier, which my daughter quickly discovers, with some glee, makes sounds and noises as you press the on-off button. This enables

drawings to be copied and printed, allowing workshop participants to create different versions simultaneously and throwing into question the notion that an artwork has to be 'finished'.

Eventually, my daughter makes a dash for the door and the long corridor outside the gallery space, where her excited shrieks reverberate up and down. Ultimately, though, an opportunity to repeatedly climb up and down a staircase to the upper levels of the Storey – where the former art school was housed – holds her attention for far longer than the art itself.

All Kinds of Hands is a fun experiment and starting point for exploring collaborative practice. The exhibition challenges my assumptions about the way I automatically act in an art space and look at work, and I find myself pondering all kinds of questions around hierarchy, attribution and authorship. Who gets to decide the final form of a co-produced artwork? Should each participant in the creation of a collaborative artwork be individually named? How does exhibiting a co-produced artwork on a plinth in a gallery change our relationship to it and our perception of it? The sculptures in *All Kinds of Hands* suggest there are no easy answers, and that the approach will depend on the particular artist, collaborators, artwork and context in which it was created.

The exhibition makes me think about the sociological concepts of social and cultural capital, and how these affect people's access and attitudes to viewing and creating art. I'm used to seeing and talking about different types of art, and comfortable and familiar with gallery spaces and previews, but how might my reaction to the work and processes involved differ if I wasn't? I also wonder how artists and academics can measure the impact of co-producing artworks like these on participants (particularly children), both in the short-term and over a longer period of time. Does it encourage them to visit art galleries, get involved in future projects or stimulate their own, independent creation, or does it remain a one-off experience? Barrett's project will culminate at a symposium later this summer, which should provide a forum to grapple further with some of these questions.

All Kinds of Hands, *The Storey, Lancaster, 2 May 2025 – 11 May 2025.*

A symposium, How to Make Sculpture with People*, will take place at Morecambe Library on 6 September 2025.*

Natalie Bradbury is a writer and researcher based in Greater Manchester.

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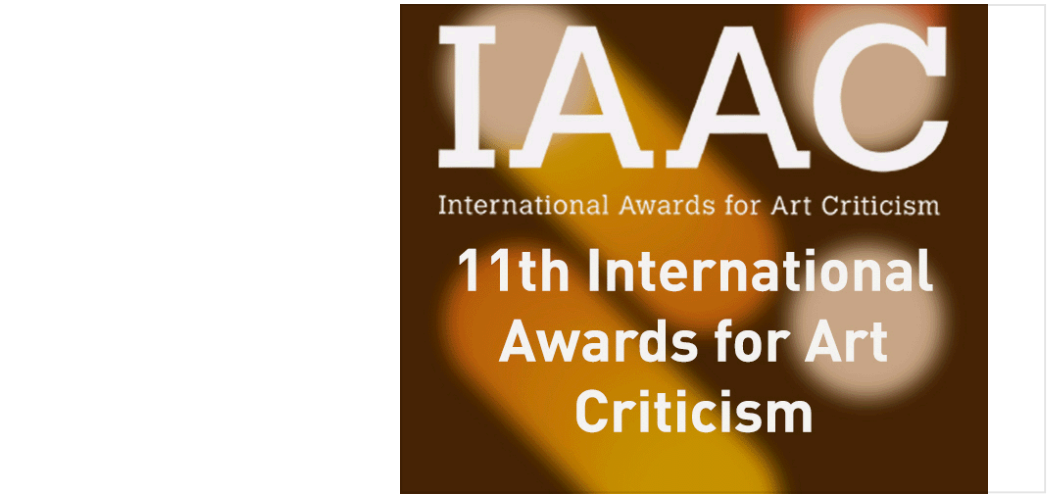

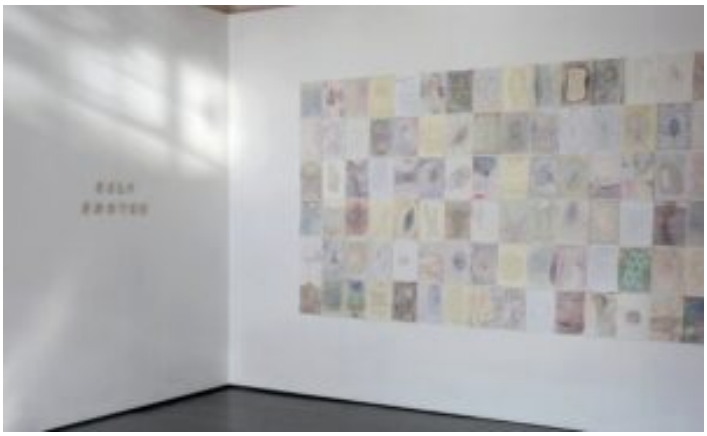

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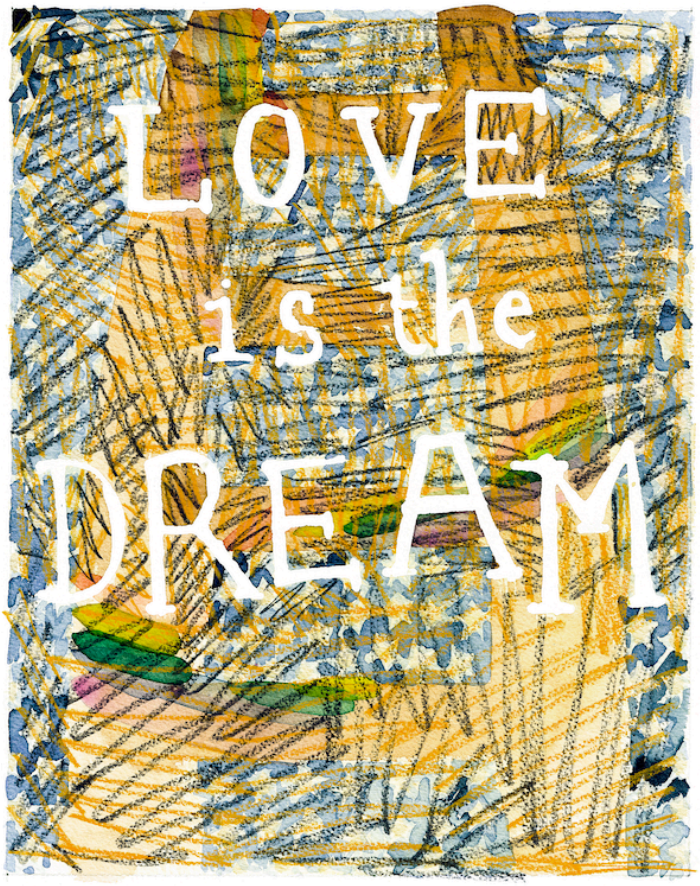

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