

sense of the fear instilled by the government in its own people in the name of counter-terrorism.

A different kind of emotional distance grew out of the performance *Bees in a Hive of Glass* by photographer Sarah Dobai and writer Tom McCarthy, staged in the South Quay Boatshed, a storage space in the harbour filled with old pallets and the reek of fishing nets. While performers in brightly coloured outfits gleamed under studio lights and moved around structures resembling office cubicles or bus shelters made of transparent and primary colour panels, Dobai photographed them and video cameras captured their movements for live transmission on a monitor. It wasn't clear whether the photography was for the benefit of the performance or for the artists' archives. A voice read a prose poem by McCarthy against a background of ambient sounds. A pigeon flew across the shed and came to roost above the performers. Time turned gummy. Any rapport that might have been developing between the performers repeatedly gave in to the forthright relationship between model and camera. Watching Dobai's industrious back from the audience, I felt cut loose from the action on stage, and once my spectatorship started to feel redundant, the issue of the performers' stage presence became moot and I left.

I visited over the second and final weekend of the Biennale, and saw just a fraction of what was on offer over the nine days of the festival, but the generosity of the curatorial approach was evident throughout. It was there in the collaborations between artists and with local businesses, and in the encouragement given to artists to take risks with new forms and techniques, including *The Trees that Yield*, 2018, a plant-based menu devised by artist Hannah Lees for the Horsebridge coffee shop, and *Ash Walks*, a series of artist-led walks curated by Rose Thompson of The Ash Project. A response to the epidemic of dieback disease affecting the country's stock of ash trees, which threatens to transform the British landscape, the series runs through the summer and into September, giving anyone who missed the festival in June a chance to experience the Biennale. ■

**Ellen Mara De Wachter** is based in London and author of *Co-Art: Artists on Creative Collaboration*.

## Danielle Dean and Jeanine Oleson: Landed

Cubitt London 18 May to 24 June

'Landed', a two-person show of work by Danielle Dean and Jeanine Oleson, is the final exhibition of Helen Nisbett's 18-month curatorial fellowship at Cubitt. For this show the gallery has been divided into two distinct spaces with both Dean and Oleson showing film installations, the two works arranged to face each other as though in conversation. The way that the films play in turn, each waiting for the other to finish before they begin, adds to this sense that there is an exchange taking place and emphasises Nisbett's overarching exploration during her fellowship of interpersonal relationships and how their characteristics can be reflected and reconstituted. This point is made poignant when, in an accompanying event where the artists converse in person, they point out that their work has been shown together before, but neither of them saw it and only found out later via a review that the sound from their films had been bleeding into each other.

Both works, Dean's *True Red Ruin (Elmina Castle)* and Oleson's *Crossed Wires*, explore technology, but refreshingly they do so without resorting to visual cliché and instead consider the topic in an expanded sense that looks beyond commonplace anxiety around hand-held devices and the internet. Dean introduces the term 'castling', making an explicit link between feudalism, colonialism and the way that corporations and wealthy individuals behave now with regard to land and communities. Elmina Castle sits on the Ghanaian coast, and was erected in 1482 by the Portuguese, the materials for its construction having been shipped wholesale from Portugal. This was the first building of European origin in Sub-Saharan Africa, and constitutes a very early example of the prefabricated construction techniques that are now familiar the world over. Dean's second example of 'castling' is located at Cuney Homes, an affordable-housing complex in Houston, Texas, the artist and her sister playing the two leading roles. Dean describes 'castling' as a cultural technique, constituting trade, ownership and surveillance, and connects this to the self-surveilling individual who self-exploits even through language by using the terms of capital to refer to



**Jeanine Oleson**  
*Crossed Wires*  
2017 video

floor  
*Perspectus...a...um*  
2017

their own actions and choices. This is represented in the film, but with ambivalence: a political understanding of individual behaviour is undercut by the function of desire, as emphasised by the bright-red digitally generated castle walls and painterly landscape backdrops that surround the projection.

Oleson's parallel installation also alludes to ethical arguments around how land and labour are unevenly distributed, but she too is interested in how these are shot through with more immediate bodily responses or, as Olson herself put it, she is interested in both confusion and pleasure. As with Dean's concept of 'castling', Oleson doesn't focus on any one contemporary device or form of technology, but rather on the materials that support contemporaneity, in this case copper. Following the mining and processing of copper through the eyes and adventures of a group of naive-seeming characters, Oleson elucidates how, despite the illusion of authority that personal perspective offers, we are implicated in processes and frameworks that are beyond our individual control. Oleson describes this as part of a wider practice of teaching ourselves that we are not outside of or absolved from the things we hate. This is represented beautifully and coherently with *Perspectus...a...um*, 2017, a digitally designed and hand-woven piece that also appears in the film, and uses a grid pattern to reference 20th-century art history, early perspectival technologies and digital three-dimensional imaging. In the low light of the gallery, the sightlines of the woven grid unnervingly retreat into darkness. Throughout the copper-processing narrative of *Crossed Wires* the characters on screen play with the viewer's perspective, at one point the bright mouth of a cave as seen from inside is inverted into a flapping piece of black fabric, and the characters are alternately seen as bright spots in the darkness and dark spots in the brightness. Similarly, in *True Red Ruin* the viewer is sometimes positioned in the place of the phone that the characters are using to the video themselves, and sometimes further away watching this unfold. With these forthright visual devices both artists are able to discuss urgent ethical and environmental issues in a way that generously welcomes the viewer into the conversation. ■

**Lauren Velvick** is an artist and writer based in Manchester.

## Meriem Bennani: Siham & Hafida

**Stanley Picker Gallery** Kingston-Upon-Thames  
16 May to 14 July

'What we went through!' This softly spoken exclamation occurs part way through Meriem Bennani's 30-minute video *Siham & Hafida* in a 'climatic' meeting between the two titular characters in a generic hotel cafe. Both are *chikhates* (singers) from different generations of the musical tradition *aita*: songs written in a Moroccan dialect that have historically relayed subversive messages of dissent and resistance to locals under French occupation, which lasted until 1956. Hafida's exasperation arises when describing this history, which she believes is gradually disappearing. We learn how Hafida's musical education and continued performing is intertwined with the political turmoil from this period.

The press release further clarifies the division that is played out between the two, where the original anti-colonial politics have been 'softened' by contemporary renditions, if not outright disregarded: no new songs are written, Moroccan state support of traditional singing has encouraged a populist and perhaps apolitical reading of its melodies by artists, and audiences are now seemingly devoid of contextual information. In what appears in direct opposition to the less technologically mediated social context in which Hafida learned, Siham claims independence from this tradition and *chikhates* by mixing this oral training with online research, seeking to connect to a younger audience via social media. 'I had to do laundry for a *chika*,' Hafida states, to gain access to the training required, 'she [Siham] just sings along to tapes ... you have to know how it functions, singing is not enough.'

This essentially single-channel video is made up of a series of scenes in which both singers are followed with a handheld camera and filmed rehearsing, cooking, answering questions, talking to friends and talking about each other.



**Meriem Bennani**  
*Siham & Hafida* 2018  
video installation