



# NO RESERVE

## I N F E M S

Intersectional Feminist Art Collective

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EXHIBITING ARTISTS

Adelaide Damoah  
Roxana Halls  
Wendy Elia  
Rebecca Fontaine-Wolf  
Macha Barnden  
Hatty Buchanan  
Mita Vaghela  
Lucy Cade

CURATED BY

Roxana Halls & Marie-Anne Mancio

COVER

Roxana Halls  
SWEET TOOTH  
Oil on Linen  
75x75cm

LEICESTER  
CONTEMPORARY

InFems (Intersectional Feminist Art Collective) is an organisation whose aim is to empower women and girls from diverse backgrounds to share their stories and become engaged with the arts.



## InFems: No Reserve

Marie-Anne Mancio

The site now occupied by Leicester Contemporary was once an auction house – a discovery which inspired our show's title. A 'reserve price' on an auction lot is an amount determined by the seller and disclosed only to the auctioneer. If a lot fails to reach its reserve, it is withdrawn from sale: a safe bet for the seller, then. There's something tame about the word reserve, though – to set aside, keep back, to refrain from making a judgement. Women are praised for being reserved; a quality rooted in notions of self-control and restraint. Conversely, a lot labelled 'no reserve,' will be sold to the highest bidder without having to reach a set threshold first. For the seller, it's more of a gamble; for the buyer, there's the potential thrill of acquiring something at an unprecedented bargain. It's this spirit that 'No Reserve' embodies. One of letting go, of not holding back. Of the limitless. Of taking risks.

Later, the auction house would become a bookmaker's – arguably a neat transition of function since both bidding and betting create the kind of adrenalin-fuelled atmosphere that can become addictive. Both the site's former lives are referenced in microcosm at the front of the gallery. There's the betting shop's display window that looks to Market street which locates it within a long tradition of trading. Historically, Leicester has always been home to migrants since Roman times. It grew a thriving textile industry, making it Europe's second richest city by 1936. 'Leicester clothes the world,' it was said. Guest artist Mita Vaghela, who was born and raised in nearby Wellingborough, describes contemporary Leicester as 'a destination place for sari and jewellery shopping... ; where we could buy Indian food and clothes.'<sup>1</sup> Her research-led practice which encompasses sculpture, film, food, photography, performance and drawing, centres on questioning her social heritage and the value of the female in Hindu society, exploring the extent to which women are complicit within patriarchal Indian culture. Several sculptures make up her MANufactured. Vaghela deploys disposable plastic shirt manufacturing collars and fashions them into a sari. Transparent, it is only when it is hung in



MANufactured Mita Vaghela, plastic shirt packaging materials, various sizes



MANufactured Mita Vaghela

a darkened space, several inches away from a wall with directional lighting, that shadows emerge. Through these shadows, we can begin to think about the woman who might inhabit her sari. The invisible is made visible. When Vaghela also displays jewellery made from the same materials but laid out like prize elements of a dowry, she is not only recycling the disposal, making something throwaway and of little value mimic something expensive to be treasured, she is also implying an exchange. What is that women concede in marriage? How high are the stakes?

Guest artist Macha Barden's witty sculpture Gallery shop/

<sup>1</sup>Mita Vaghela in email correspondence to InFems, September 2021



*Gallery shop/Sold out, Macha Barnden, installation, dimensions variable*

Sold out also references an absent female body. It is a shop where nothing can be bought, not because its items are priceless but because everything is already sold out. To all intents and purposes, it may as well be the closed shop to which it refers. Barnden based her stand on shop displays typically found in galleries, making the construction from drawers found on the street which she repurposed to fit her design. They sport pewter drawer knobs made from nipple casts collected from anonymous donors at De Montfort University. The stand holds studio pottery on the theme of



*Relic, Lucy Cade, oil on canvas, 122 x 153 cm*

birth: 'Dilated,' 'Post-Partum,' and 'Nipple Shield'; there's a 'Uterus Carafe with Menstrual Cups'; and 'My First Gallery' with miniature versions of superstar women artists's works, Marina Abramović; Meret Oppenheim's fur covered teacup; Rebecca Horn's piano: references that invoke the different senses. Every item relates in price to the cost of female medical procedures in the UK. There are parallels here between what is promised to women – the possibility of a career as a professional artist, access to so-called best practice treatment – and then denied. Barnden reflects that whilst women usually find themselves in the majority when they go to art school in the UK, once they leave their institutions 'they are often compelled to 'sell out', compromise and make small works to sell, rather than ambitious fine art pieces, whether because of conditioning, lack of access and connections or practical pressures.'<sup>2</sup> Likewise, access to many medical procedures or even diagnoses from HRT to heavy bleeding, PCOS and endometriosis, poor maternity care, post-partum care, hormone-based mood disorders and psychosis are inaccessible to most women.

Guest artist Lucy Cade's painting *Relic* 2021 (oil on canvas, 122 x 153 cm) approaches the subject of post-partum psychosis in a lyrical, visceral way. Cade writes that 'the majority of mental illness affects women, but the majority of the medical profession treating them are male. My work really speaks to many people not only women but also those who have suffered from any chronic illness (and the reactions and behaviour of a conservative medical profession) and who have experienced psychosis, in all its destructive glory. I both celebrate neuro-divergencies as heightened ways of experiencing the world, and also question the labelling of its 'varieties' as illnesses at all, highlighting potentially oppressive behaviours against it in society.'<sup>3</sup> A woman lies on the

<sup>2</sup> Macha Barnden in email correspondence to *InFems*, September 2021

<sup>3</sup> Lucy Cade in email correspondence to *InFems*, September 2021



floor, her cool blue body wound in loose brushstrokes that hint at the drapery of a shroud or at bonds. Arms outstretched like a prone Christ on the cross, she seems to be about to dissolve in drips. The ground beneath her collapses into abstract passages of painterly, bruise-coloured marks. She could be levitating, stretched out on a cloud. There's no escaping the flare of orange flames that threaten to engulf her in their climb towards the ceiling. Perhaps she's a sacrifice laid out for display or will rise, Phoenix-like, as in Plath's Ariel: Out of the ash /I rise with my red hair/ and I eat men like air. She's burning whilst two anonymous and ominous male figures sit on chairs in the background, seemingly oblivious to her fate. It's hard not to read them as consultants, calmly discussing their patient, making pronouncements on her case without consulting her. All this in a room with hefty concrete pillars and a glass curtain wall that reveals chimneys and scaffolding, more windowed buildings, maybe holding people with the ability to peer in and see her, to witness the spectacle of her pain, if they but looked.

In British Anglo/Greek Cypriot artist Wendy Elia's paintings from her 'Half-Naked' series (2004-2011), her lone women are fighting different battles, their emotions, no less deeply felt, lie coiled and concealed. Even if these women are not subject to the forensic medical gaze, their semi-nudity makes them targets nonetheless. Whereas the nude is arguably one of the most recognisable tropes of academic art, Elia calls her figures half-naked as if to draw attention to art history's spurious distinction. Traditionally, the Nude in art was thought of as noble subject matter, arranged in classical poses and displaying an idealised body. This was



*Nick (Champion) from 'Half Naked' Wendy Elia, oil on canvas, 166cm x 91cm*

in contrast to nakedness – a mundane state attained by the removal of clothes. As Walter Sickert wrote in his critique 'The naked and the Nude', 'when I speak of the nude I must not be understood to mean a man in bathing-drawers. Imagine Mantegna's Hercules and Antæus both in bathing-drawers!<sup>4</sup> A goddess cannot be naked, then, because she lacks clothes to begin with. Though not spelled out, the implication is also that nakedness arouses voyeurism, whereas the beauty of the nude is supposed – in the neo-Platonic scheme at least – to encourage aspiration to a higher ideal. Sickert recognised the silliness of privileging one state over the other (though arguably his own images of naked women are problematic for other reasons). In Elia's practice, the figures are almost life-size; there is no escaping their nakedness. It's a state we associate with vulnerability, the newborn. These figures are only half naked, though. As she explains of her process, 'I have no interest... in capturing someone's "inner personality" or character, though sometimes this might happen by default, as the poses are chosen/negotiated with the sitter and also whether the sitter is clothed, part clothed or fully naked before starting.'<sup>5</sup>

Elia stopped painting for a while and became a qualified Thai boxer and martial arts instructor, competing in the ring a few times. In her words, she lost a few teeth and developed a six pack, but then returned to art wanting to paint female fighters. Champion (Nick), 2006 (oil on canvas, 166 x 91 cm)

<sup>4</sup>Walter Sickert 'The naked and the Nude'

<sup>5</sup>Cited in <https://floatingcircle-rwa.org/2019/03/27/meet-the-artist-wendy-elia-rwa/>



is one of them. There's an open medal case at Nick's feet, the inscription clearly legible – "Muay Thai British Champion," a contact sport of kicks, thrusts, jabs, and clinches. Elia's practice of painting from life in most of her series including this one, sees her models lit from above and lends her figures a heightened realism that defies an objectifying gaze. We see Nick's green-blue veins and uneven breasts, her reddened hands held in tension in front of her vulva (note, too, how the latter's inverted triangle has an echo in the shadow beneath Nick's neck). Her fingers create circles like ovaries; bruises bloom on her shins. Her head may be tilted but that gaze is direct, her nakedness confrontational. Elia's subjects interrogate Laura Mulvey's hugely important 1973 essay on the male gaze. In keeping with intersectional feminism, we must now do more to consider the idea of a female gaze and what that might mean in an increasingly non-binary world.

We see another fighter in *Alex (Fighter)*, 2004 (oil on canvas, 166 x 91 cm). 'Ali' (a nod to Muhammad Ali) is spelled out in red letters on the edge of her black silk shorts, preceded by 'Lady,' yet she rebels against any of the usual connotations of that term. Hers is no "ladylike" pose of legs together, crossed at the ankles. Instead, she sits with legs apart, occupying space. It's a pose that several of Elia's sitters adopt in the series. Alex's boxing wraps are wound round her outstretched wrist; she could almost be bandaged, simultaneously pre- and post- fight. These wraps fall between her legs like a joke phallus, to gather in folds on the floor. (Elia uses a very similar pose with wraps for her 2015 self-portrait *Portrait of the Artist as an Old Woman* where she sits aloft a concrete throne). Alex's frown alerts us that she is deep in thought, perhaps beyond engaging with the rituals of the ring. Through the window, we see an evening sky streaked with yellows, oranges, pinks, rent through with the white tracks of the passenger plane which, in the post-9/11 era takes on an ominous significance. This is no country landscape; we are in a metropolis. The view is from the balcony of Tate Modern, London's high-rise blocks in the distance, their windows lit up, inviting us to imagine as we do with *Cade's Relic*, that there are more such lone inhabitants, waiting in private spaces to repel our voyeurism.



*Alex (Fighter)* from 'Half Naked' Wendy Elia, oil on canvas, 166 x 91 cm



It's Elia's *Woman with a Black Eye (Marija Malenica Croatian Champion)*, 2020 (oil on canvas, 120 x 130 cm) though that foregrounds the external marks sustained in battle. Like a soldier returning to the field, Malenica's injury is faint but visible and does not deter her from re-entering the fray. Whilst a black eye might conjure images of survivors of domestic violence, the painting's full title as well as the subject's sportswear, including the boxing wraps, and her athletic body, alert us to the fact that she was more likely injured during a pro boxing fight and that her opponent is probably more bruised. Given her status as a Champion, we don't fear so much for this woman. And yet the spectre of self-defence resides in this work too; especially now, as we are in the grip of a pandemic of violence against women. (Research from the Femicide Census considers that a woman is killed once every three days in the UK). The man beside Malenica may be her trainer but he is not the dominant figure his role suggests. Head bowed, he assists her with her wraps, like a servant dressing his mistress. And, like her fellow fighters in the 'Half-Naked' series, she fixes us with her gaze, daring us to take in her tattoos and that splayed hand with its red fingernails that is capable of wielding its power in multiple ways.

There is a lone figure in Roxana Halls's *Sushi*, 2014 (oil on canvas, 75 x 75 cm) but the mood is very different. A glorious sense of excess has replaced introspection. Halls's childhood desire to be an actor, a fascination with cabaret, research periods in Berlin (facilitated by winning the Villiers David prize in 2004), and her London studio which was once the saloon bar of a 1930s theatre, all contributed to her aesthetic. She constructs her own props, sets, and costumes with the same convincing magic as Kirsty Mitchell's photographic 'Wonderland' series, uses herself as a character with the lack of vanity and conviction we see in Cindy Sherman's transformations,



*Woman with a Black Eye (Marija Malenica Croatian Champion), Wendy Elia, oil on canvas, 120 x 130 cm*





*Sushi, Roxana Halls, Oil on linen, 75 x 75cm*

and creates scenarios that sometimes recall the abject scenes in Paula Rego. Referring to her 'Appetite' series to which Sushi belongs, Halls said, 'eating is so much more than a biological process. It is fraught with tension and expectation.'<sup>6</sup> Protesting societal expectations (that demand women show restraint around food, that polices their diets, rewards them for conforming to a particular body type, or insists they consume in a manner deemed 'sexy,') her figures rebel. They eat with their mouths wide open; they over-eat, not caring about the consequences on their appearance. Sushi is such a riot of complementary

<sup>6</sup>Cited in <https://blog.otherpeoplespixels.com/otherpeoplespixels-interviews-roxana-halls>

colours – blue fingernails against a shock of orange hair; green sushi at red lips – it seems to mock the minimal Japanese interior with its paper screen and lone bamboo shoot. Perhaps this character has fashioned herself after the traditional Japanese print, also blue and orange, on the wall but she has refused its sinuous lines in favour of a sensible shirt. There are neatly stacked piles of empty dishes (all hers) and the promise of more food to come from the conveyor belt behind. With a nod to Hopper, perhaps, she is still here when everyone else has gone home. But she has none of the melancholy of Hopper's late-night loners; this



*Sweet Tooth, Roxana Halls, Oil on Linen, 75 x 75 cm*





*Queen of Spoons, Roxnan Halls, Oil on linen, 70 x 70 cm*

is a woman who does not want to stop eating. Adroit with her chopsticks, she subverts the daintiness of a single portion of sushi by stuffing two in her mouth at once. And, freed from the constraints of her domestic interior, she does not even have to consider the washing-up.

In *Sweet Tooth*, 2012 (oil on linen, 75 x 75 cm) Halls uses herself as a model in an extravagant pink gown that looks like a cross between a bandage dress and a prom gown with puffed sleeves like overblown rose petals. She wears her hair in a too-elaborate style that seems to encompass pseudo-schoolgirlish plaits complete with garish green bows, Princess Leia style coils, and a cropped fringe; it's as if she cannot decide which hair pieces to use so uses them all. Her cheeks are doll-like, clumsily rouged. This excess of sugariness and arguably of signifiers that shout 'femininity,' this little girl nice made of sugar and spice, could recall the feminist strategy of exaggerating stereotypes in order to dismantle them. Instead, she tips so far that she hinges on the grotesque. Whilst she appears to conform to the expectation that she should smile, she immediately undercuts it by revealing black teeth, rotten from eating too many sweets. Indeed, there's just a single sweet left on the platter.

Meanwhile *Queen of Spoons*, 2015, (oil on linen, 70 x 70 cm) depicts a woman in a wild leopard skin basque or dress with a wig of lilac hair and a collar or "necklace" of spoons. A joke, perhaps, about her magnetism. A party trick. A reference to Dadaist cabarets with their imaginative costumes improvised from everyday objects. A witty inversion of the coronation spoon – an object rarely used for eating or even stirring but reserved (there's that word again) for anointing a monarch. Here the spoon is not stored away with the "best" cutlery or other ceremonial paraphernalia; it is displayed without reserve, in multiple amid its lesser companions. Quantity over quality. The notion of being 'born with a silver spoon' – an allusion to upper class privilege which has seemed to function in English society as an excuse for (men's) bad behaviour – might also be one that Halls, with her working-class roots, is keen to subvert.



Halls's large painting *Cecilia the Astonishing & her lovely assistants Masculinum/Femininum*, 2009 (oil on linen, 157 x 152 cm) is part of her 'Roxana Halls' Tingle-Tangle' series of eleven works originally exhibited at the Royal National Theatre, South Bank, London. The German Tingle Tangle arose from the vaudeville scene in the 1890s. These intimate theatre variety shows, a kind of cabaret, were often 'little more than a raised stage at the side of a cheap restaurant or pub, where aspiring (or down-and-out) entertainers would perform.'<sup>7</sup> Whilst some were reputable, more were peopled with male clients and soubrettes who sang risqué songs onstage, and then circulated among their audience selling erotic postcards, encouraging the consumption of alcohol, and advertising their services as sex workers. Whatever the term's origins – the clink of money on a platter passed around after acts is one suggestion – there's no doubt it was used disparagingly. Yet Tingle Tangle was popular in the 1920s and '30s (there are at least three German films of that era with that title) until many shows and sites were closed down by the Nazis who considered their satirical humour a threat. Several of the characters in Halls's series actually existed, albeit in other contexts such as British music hall. Halls found a reference to *Masculinum/Femininum* as Weimar performers, but no visual image of them so here she invents her own. In *Cecilia the Astonishing & her lovely assistants Masculinum/Femininum* the latter appear to be one person split in two, their genders blurred. Their orange hair piled high and ornate gowns are juxtaposed with men's garters and sensible shoes. This mirroring hints at the multiplicity

<sup>7</sup>Peter Jelavich *Berlin Cabaret* Harvard University Press, 2009, p21



*Cecilia the Astonishing & her lovely assistants Masculinum/Femininum*, Roxana Halls, Oil on Linen, 157 x 152 cm



of roles assigned to women in the burgeoning era of commerce, Americanisation, and the New Woman that characterised the Weimar republic. The protagonist herself, magnificent in silk pantaloons and brandishing a conjuror's top hat, points upwards where a bird takes flight on the shallow stage; it's not the traditional dove, though, so beloved of ordinary magicians, it's a magpie, that most opportunist of birds. A risk-taker; a thief of all things shiny. If Halls sees herself as a bit of a magpie, selective in her eclectic sources, foraging for costumes, then there is another bit of self-referentiality here: Cecilia is framed in a pair of ornate, smoke-filled mirrors that open like a giant clam, allowing us a simultaneous view of her head in profile and from behind in the manner of Renaissance portraiture. It's a reminder that isn't painting all just smoke and mirrors? As Melanie Duignan writes, 'In these economically embattled times, the Tingle Tangle pictures defiantly suggest how, through the alchemy of paint, an inventive aesthetic can transform the mundane - cardboard sets and charity shop costumes - into extraordinary spectacle. They also demonstrate the enduring capacity of painting to fascinate and beguile.'<sup>8</sup>

The Soho Girls of guest artist Hatty Buchanan also look back to a theatrical, unorthodox scene. Aged fourteen and a natural loner seeking an escape from convention, Buchanan found herself exploring 1980s Soho (London), thanks to progressive parents who dropped her off with a fiver for her cab fare home. It was a period when Soho's myriad subcultures were beginning to emerge into magazine culture. She remembers it as 'a beautiful, different world,' 'like a film set,'<sup>9</sup> its neons still holding traces of 1950s and '60s Soho. There, amongst criminals, poets, musicians, sex workers, fashionistas, drag and burlesque queens, she observed the unspooling narratives of a host of unconventional people. It is unsurprising that she returned to these colourful memories during 2020's lockdown,



*Sylvia from 'Soho Girls' Hatty Buchanan, typewriter ink, feathers, cotton, paper, 49 x 29.5 cm,*



*Doreen from 'Soho Girls' Hatty Buchanan, typewriter ink, rayon thread, linen thread, paper, 40 x 29.2 cm*

<sup>8</sup> Melanie Duignan 'Tingle Tangle' <https://roxanahalls.com/> <sup>9</sup> Considering art podcast <https://consideringart.com/2021/07/12/considering-art-podcast-hatty-buchanan-sculptor-12-july-2021/>



creating a series of drawings – patterns on paper made on a manual typewriter in a single ‘sometimes frenzied’ session using just one or two punctuation symbols (the very keys that sit at the margins of these typewriters like the communities she references.) Her Doreen, 2020 (typewriter ink, rayon thread, linen thread, paper, 40 x 29.2cm) and Sylvia, 2020 (typewriter ink, feathers, cotton, paper, 40 x 29.5cm) are a loose diptych. These conceptually elegant works, part of a larger series, appear to be abstract except most are titled after popular girls’s names taken from a 1944 census. Buchanan incorporates textiles traditionally associated with haberdashery: fringing, tassels, netting. As well as privileging the homespun over the standardised, and hinting at the patient, often unseen labour of sewers, these elements reveal a more playful side, evoking the extravagant costumes of Soho’s glamour girl performers who sported nipple tassels.

Elsewhere in the gallery, vibrant pink hues leak beyond the confines of a narrow, darkened room, pulsing a beat into the space. Like neon lights, these lure us towards Rebecca Fontaine-Wolf’s film (5 mins, 49, seen here on a loop). We are at once looking at it and standing in it, as the film spills out onto the glossy black floor which in turn reflects its ever-shifting images back at us. Tellingly, its title is *Metamorphose*, a verb, rather than the noun, metamorphosis. In the darkness, we catch glimpses of a naked woman, half-submerged in water, bathing. It’s not her linear progression from one form to another that we see; it’s an ever-evolving process that does not resolve in a final state. As Alison Sharrock writes in her essay ‘Noua... corpora: New Bodies and Gendered Patterns in the Metamorphoses’,<sup>10</sup> ‘it is, predominantly and disproportionately, female characters whose moment of metamorphosis becomes the focus for readerly engagement.’ Sharrock also notes that there’s a ‘very strong general connection between water and metamorphosis... This arises, at least in part, from the formlessness and the movement of water.’

In Ovid’s narrative poem, several female characters metamorphose into water. Sharrock cites the fate of water nymph Cyane who tries to stop Dis’s

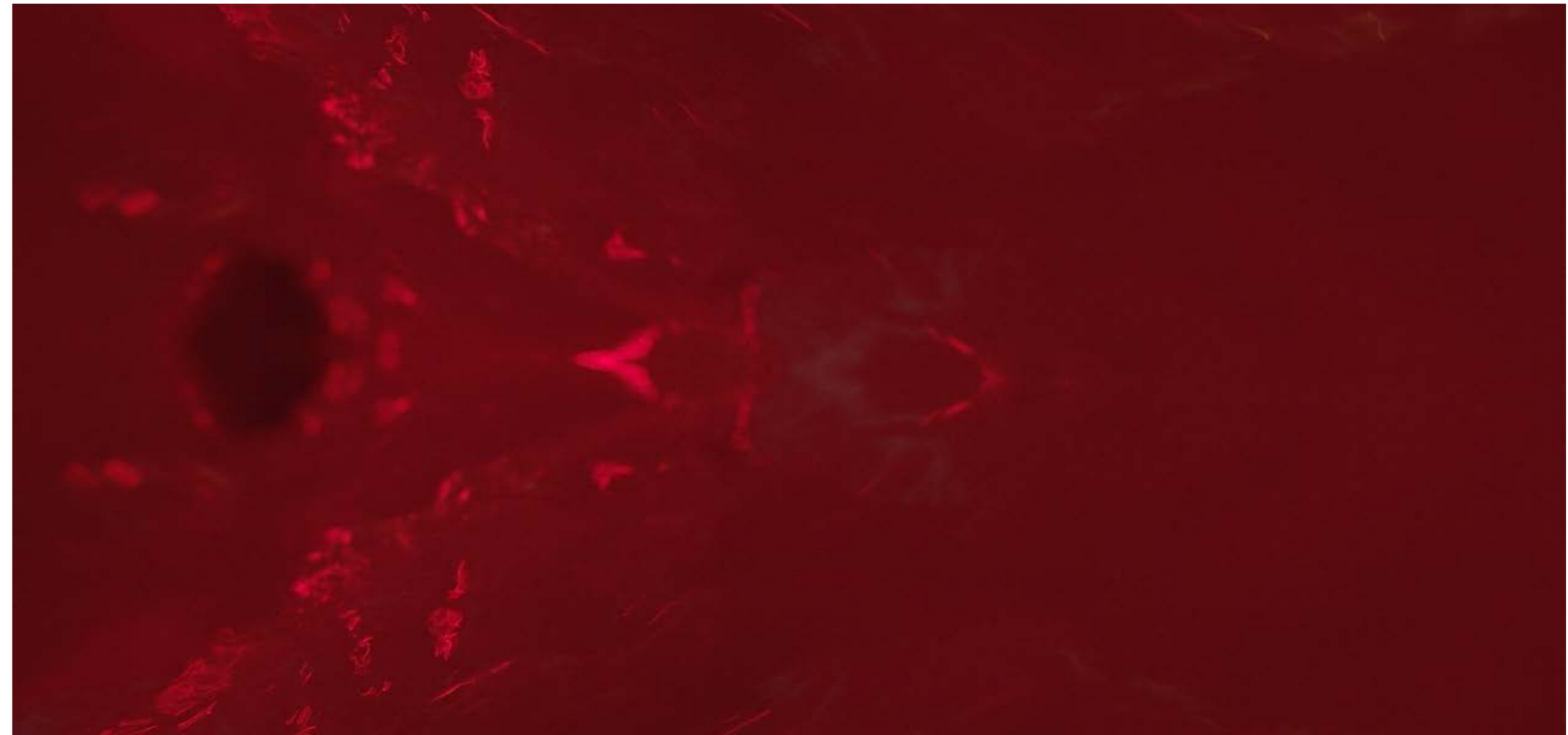
<sup>10</sup> *Diptycha*, Volume 17, 2020



*Metamorphose*, Rebecca Fontaine-Wolf, Install shot, HD Video, mono sound, 5 mins, 49



Prosperina. The god of the underworld retaliates by casting a spear into Cyane's pool (a symbolic rape) and, in her grief, she is transformed into the water itself 'whichever parts from the whole were thinnest became liquid first, her blue-green hair and fingers, legs and feet (for the passage into chill waters is short for her thin limbs); after these her shoulders and back and sides and vanishing chest slip away into slight rivulets; finally water in place of living blood flows through her violated veins, and there remains nothing of which you could take hold.' But even that is no guarantee. Nymph Arethusa sweats so profusely when she flees river god Alpheus that she turns to water whereupon her pursuer 'turned into his own waters, in order to mingle himself with [her]'. And where other female characters – Daphne, Syrinx – metamorphose into vegetation, their transformations are also necessitated by predators in pursuit.



*Metamorphose, Rebecca Fontaine-Wolf, still, HD Video, mono sound, 5 mins, 49*



*Malus III, Rebecca Fontaine-Wolf, Limited edition Giclee Print*



*Malus II*

Perhaps it's the memory of those stories that have led some viewers to find Fontaine-Wolf's film disturbing, to read a hidden menace there. Maybe it's the way blood seems to bubble up through the water or it's the sound of an accelerating heartbeat that we associate with fear or running away from someone. Or the horror trope of the female victim who is murdered in her bath. But what if it isn't blood from a miscarriage or a wound that we see, but menstrual blood? A celebration of the body's ability to bleed, to create life. A way of showing the body without reserve, of making us witness what society still treats as taboo and demands we conceal. Of replacing the abject with a material beauty.

The soundtrack, which began as a device for use during the editing process as a heartbeat to determine the film's rhythm, evolved into a key element in its own right. Like the visuals,



it gives us the sensation of being both within and without. There's the sound of Fontaine-Wolf's breathing captured during her walks up and down the Lisbon hills; those internal sounds of the body (how often do we hear rather than feel our own hearts beat?); the aftereffects of a noise which imprints itself, like the gong that left Fontaine-Wolf with a ringing in her ears. At points, it recalls the epic, timeless quality of a Bill Viola video; as if we are in the comfort of the womb. But the focus here is not the universality of Viola's 'everyman'; Fontaine-Wolf centres the female body, more specifically, her body and one which does not exist in a vacuum. Though it wouldn't be apparent to the viewer, the non-diegetic sounds that intrude on these intimate scenes are incidental noises – footsteps, giggling, whispering – that were happening elsewhere in the building as she was filming. Fontaine-Wolf's decision to include these chance elements (much as she has done in her painting practice) add another dimension to the film, rooting it in the concrete. They remind us that sometimes we can experience the most intense, extraordinary moments of connection to our own bodies whilst elsewhere the world carries on as usual with its mundane activities.

Like Fontaine-Wolf's photographic works (see her Malus series), there's also something incredibly sensuous about *Metamorphose*. We get a glimpse of a belly button, that wash of water that sneaks between legs and a breathiness that could come from sexual arousal. Red fingernails drag ever so lightly across a thigh. Milky white liquid slips over the body. The textured red darkness of the film is shot through with flashes of light and lurid pinks: now you see, now you don't. Just when we think we are getting a sense of the geography of our viewing point, it slips away from us. We seem to be both inside and outside the body simultaneously. The crook of an arm, hands, abstract into vulvic shapes mirroring themselves in yet another instance of doubling. A flare of light throws up a spray of red, a Rorschach ink blot, that blooms and dissolves. The screen splinters in two, splits off into geometric patterns like aerial shots of Busby Berkeley's synchronised swimmers, the body reproducing all by itself. The film's trajectory is circular, not linear; it rises and falls in not one but multiple climaxes. Even when

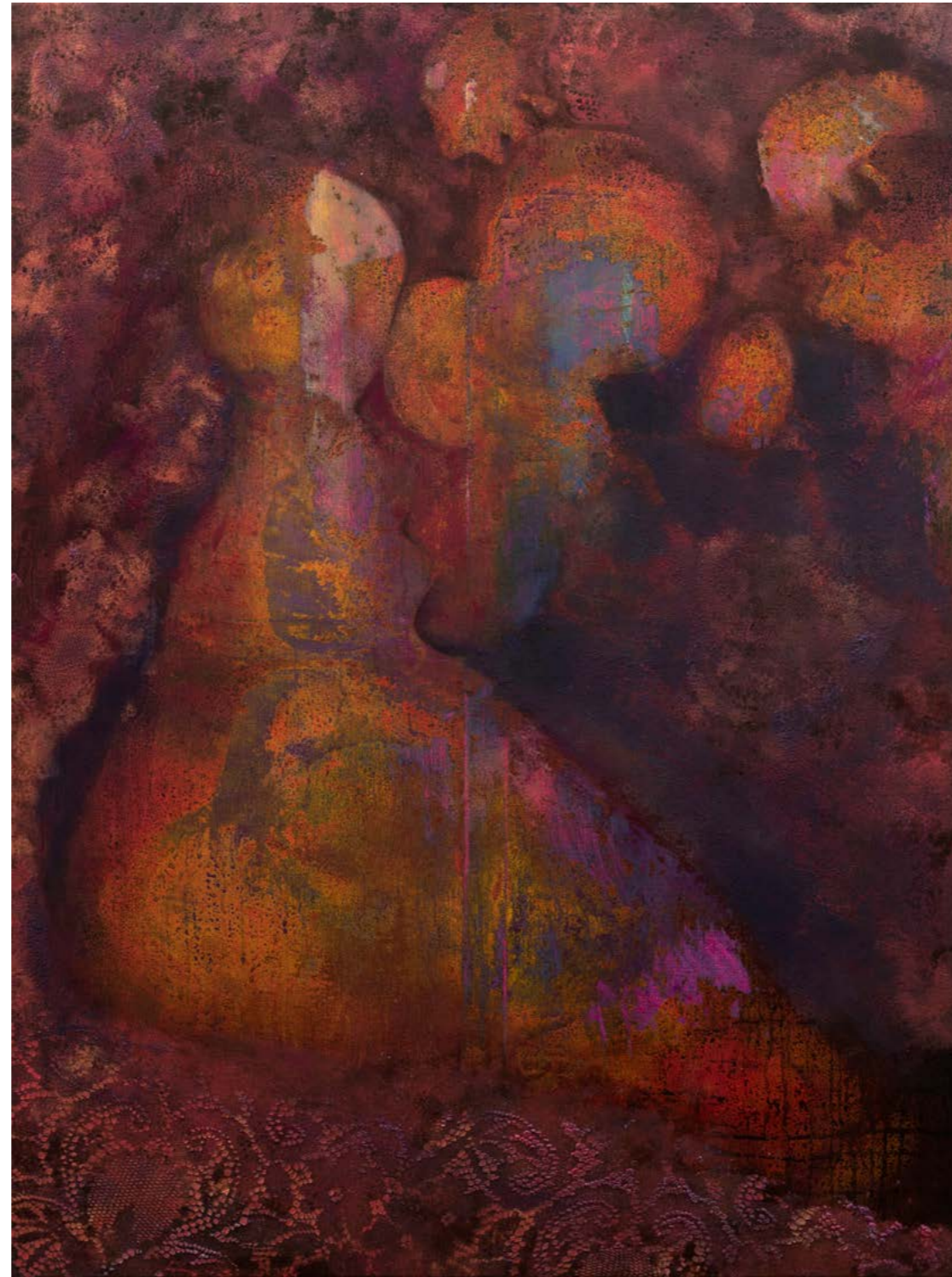


*Malus I*, Rebecca Fontaine-Wolf, Limited edition Giclee Print



the water, which soothed and cocooned before, becomes more agitated and its pink is fiercer, its sound more insistent, *Metamorphose* captures the exhilaration and fear of a female body in perpetual flux. Through monthly cycles and life stages (from girlhood to puberty and beyond), this body's ability to adapt and transform becomes an utterly compelling spectacle.

British-Ghanaian artist Adelaide Damoah's series 'Radical Joy' encompasses both works on paper and, here, on canvas created by pressing her body and pigment onto a surface. Damoah had already made a few colourful works a couple of years prior – one was gold, red and green against white and startling in its brightness compared to her usual aesthetic – but she set them aside and didn't think about them again; they were anomalies in her practice. This practice is rooted in the Ghanaian concept of Sankofa which believes it is important to understand the past in order not to repeat the same mistakes in the future and the present. With deliberate echoes of historic artists with whom she connects from the way the marginalised body of Ana Mendieta left imprints, through African-American artist David Hammons's body prints that themselves radicalised Yves Klein's to



*Or in the morning after sunrise, Adelaide Damoah, Shea butter, pigment and ink on canvas. No. 2. 101 x 76 cm*

Yayoi Kusama's repetitions and Carolee Schneeman's combination of the visceral and conceptual, Damoah's works are often intricately layered both literally and metaphorically. She mines her own family history and explores how it connects to the wider history of colonialism and Britain, describing this process as compulsive: 'It's an attempt to connect and ground myself to a heritage that is obviously there but which I feel somewhat and sometimes disconnected from because of being raised here [Britain] - and being a third culture individual like so many others. And it's also an attempt to understand myself and us through understanding this history. Our present circumstances are shaped by everything that has gone before. It's about the strangeness of memory and belonging. It's about different and multiple perspectives. It's about trying to find a version of the truth that fits. It's about uncovering the unknown and making it known again through instinctive and intuitive processes of art making through body memory.'<sup>11</sup>

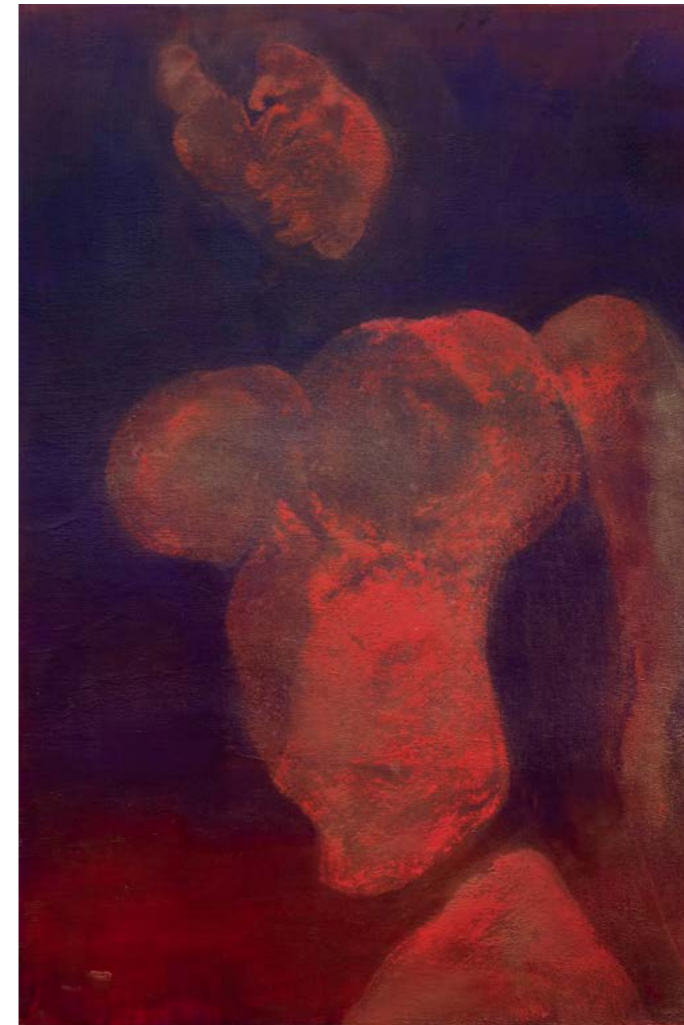
But engaging with the weightiness of these issues can become its own burden, take its own toll. Then the whole lockdown experience of 2020 added another layer of oppressiveness. Damoah reacted by becoming obsessed with hot pink and with playing around with colour. Rather than being driven by concept, by her usual sources of colonialism, feminism, or spirituality, she found herself wanting to revel in the process of just being in the studio and seeing what happened when she threw around pigment. Believing at that

<sup>11</sup>Email correspondence with InFems, September 2021

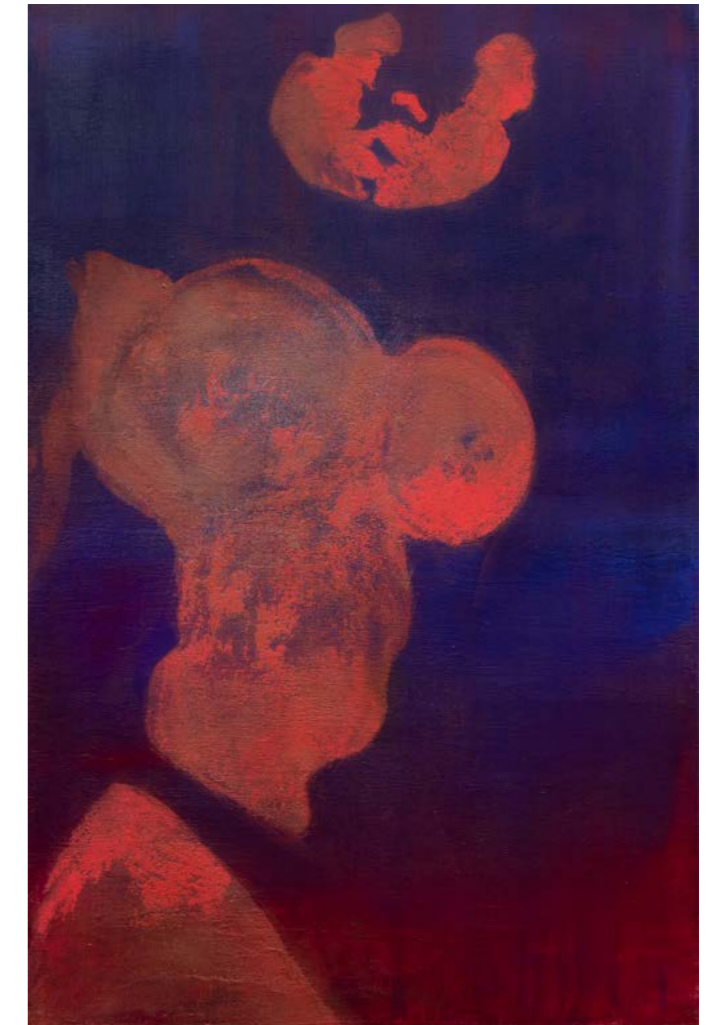


point that these works would never be seen by anyone else gave her a freedom to experiment (again, the advantage of 'no reserve'). As she returned to those brightly coloured works and elaborated on them, her colour palette shifted towards pinks, blues, purples: colours that felt healing, that provoked moments of joy. Later she would refer to 'Radical Joy' as a 'palette cleanser,' a break from those intense, meditative works that characterised her practice to date and will again. A breathing space before re-engaging with those issues which she has described as her lifetime's work. This opportunity to escape the negativity of the pandemic, left Damoah with 'a feeling of stepping out of something very dark into the light.' There's a riot of colours in the series: pinks, yellows, oranges, golds, coppers, sparkly whites, and cobalt blues and whilst these may darken as she works on them (she generally starts light and gets darker), the end result is less laboured than earlier multi-layered works on paper. This spontaneity transmits Damoah's celebration of the body-as-tool as a sensual entity. Whilst her practice typically puts her body under stress or references figures under duress, here she liberates it from those constraints and allows it to be a vehicle to express passion and desire, love and longing. In one diptych, figures reach for one another; who doesn't need to be reminded of that urge to consume another body (something many were denied in lockdown) or of the pleasure the body can bring to another and to oneself?

'No Reserve' is where the performative, the theatrical, extravagant gestures and trickster behaviours collide. It's about the refusal to conform to a predetermined notion of one's worth. That seems a very valid attitude for any woman to embrace, let alone a woman artist.



*Let me kiss your fingertips, Adelaide Damoah, Pigment and acrylic on canvas. 76 x 50 cm*



*Lick the tips of your eyelashes, Adelaide Damoah, Pigment and acrylic on canvas. 76 x 50 cm*



## INFEMS

### *Adelaide Damoah RWA, FRSA*

British-Ghanaian artist Adelaide Damoah works at the intersection of painting and performance within the context of colonialism, identity, sexuality and spirituality. After studying applied biology (BA Hons, Kingston University, Surrey, her subsequent career in the pharmaceutical industry was cut short following a diagnosis of debilitating chronic endometriosis. While convalescing, she dedicated herself to art.

Since her debut exhibition 'Black Brits' in 2006 (Charlie Allen's Boutique, London, UK), Damoah has exhibited in myriad group shows including Opera Gallery, Budapest, Hungary (2009); Bargehouse Gallery, London (2015) as part of the AACDD Festival; 'A Seat at the Table', 198 Gallery, London, 'Dispersed', Nubuke Foundation (+Chale Wote), Ghana; UNFOLD Festival, London; Article 10, Amnesty International, London, ACDF Festival, Lagos, Nigeria, and in 2018 at 'We Face Forward' Bonhams, London, Little Africa Des Gosses, Marrakesh, (Off the Tracks) as part of an artist residency. In 2019, Damoah was selected for 'No Room for Fear' with SMO Contemporary, BBFA Collective and Smithsonian in London, 'Under the Skin' (Royal College of Physicians Museum, London), and ArtX Lagos with Tafeta Gallery.

She has performed internationally including her ongoing 'Confronting Colonisation' project, #MYFACE Visual Diet, Cannes Lions Festival, Cannes, 'This is Me: The Inconsistency of the Self II' Musée national de l'histoire de l'immigration, Paris, Adidas 'Calling all Creators' performance Portland Oregon, USA. Past solo exhibitions include 'Supermodels', Nolia's Gallery, London (2008); 'Domestic Violence', Mayfair, London (2009); 'This is Us', Camden Image Gallery, London (2015) and 'Genesis', 1 Bedford Avenue, London (2018).

Damoah has works in private collections nationally and internationally. She is a member of the BBFA Collective which is represented by Tafeta Gallery, London. In 2019, Damoah became the first black artist to be appointed an academician of the Royal West of England Academy (RWA) and was an invited artist and selector at their open exhibition in Bristol.

[www.adelaidedamoahart.com](http://www.adelaidedamoahart.com)

### *Wendy Elia RWA*

Wendy Elia is a British painter of Anglo/ Greek Cypriot descent who trained at St Martins School of Art. She has exhibited widely and been a finalist in a number of national and international competitions including the National Portrait Gallery JPS and BP Portrait Awards (4 times), Sovereign European Art Prize, Ruth Borchard Self Portrait Prize, and the Threadneedle Prize. Her work is held in public permanent collections across the UK, including at the RWA (Royal West of England Academy), University of Essex, Swindon Museum and Art Gallery, Falmouth Art Gallery, and Priseman Seabrook Collection: 21st Century British Painting and in private collections in the UK, Italy and South Africa. She was recently the recipient of a grant from the Pollock-Krasner Foundation and in 2019 was elected as an RWA Academician. Notable commissions include Arts Council funded projects such as a portrait for the cultural Olympiad (converted into life sized posters and displayed on billboards, bus stops etc.) and 'Shifting Subjects: Contemporary Women Telling the Self through the Visual Arts' (Grimsby and Usher Gallery, Lincoln) exhibiting alongside Sarah Lucas, Miranda Whall and others. In addition to her many solo exhibitions, Elia has exhibited widely in numerous group shows, including a recent tour of China with the Contemporary British Painting collective and 'Strange Worlds -The Vision of Angela Carter' (RWA, Bristol). She has contributed to symposia in the UK and has been called upon to judge art competitions.

[www.wendyelia.com](http://www.wendyelia.com)



### *Rebecca Fontaine-Wolf SWA*

Rebecca Fontaine-Wolf is an interdisciplinary artist of mixed European heritage who grew up between Germany and the UK and currently resident in Lisbon. Her work is primarily figurative, focusing on self-portraiture and depictions of women in her direct surroundings. She is a co-founder of Infems : Intersectional Feminist Art Collective and former vice president to the Society of Women Artists (UK).

Fontaine-Wolf studied Fine Art at the University for the Creative Arts (2000-04) and was awarded the Chelsea Arts Club Trust Award Grant to complete her MFA at Wimbledon College of Arts (2013- 15). She's exhibited widely in both group and solo exhibitions at venues such as the the V&A, Mall Galleries and the RCA and has been invited to show for the Discerning Eye exhibition.

She was featured Hauser & Wirth's 'Herstory' Series on inspiring women in the artworld and her work has appeared in numerous publications including Aesthetica, Forbes, the Guardian, ID/Vice, Hunger, Wonderland and FAD magazines, as well as appearing on the BBC. Fontaine-Wolf's work can be found in public and private collections in the UK and internationally including the Standard Chartered Bank, 100 Mothers, Landmark collection and the private collections of Sir Tim Rice, the Earl of Mornington & Jemma Kidd.

[www.rebeccafontaine-wolf.com](http://www.rebeccafontaine-wolf.com)

### *Roxana Halls*

Roxana Halls has held numerous solo exhibitions including at The National Theatre, Beaux Arts Bath Gallery and Hayhill Gallery, Mayfair. Her work has been exhibited in numerous group shows including the BP Portrait Award, The RA Summer Exhibition, The Royal Society of Portrait Painters and the Ruth Borchard Self Portrait Competition and has been exhibited and auctioned at

Christies, London. She has twice been invited to exhibit work at The Discerning Eye exhibition. She was recently invited to produce new works for museum and touring shows including Kapow! held at Stoke Potteries Museum and Dear Christine which toured the UK in 2019 and 2020. She regularly exhibits with RCFA Gallery in Birmingham with whom she will hold her forthcoming solo exhibition in 2021.

Halls has been the recipient of several awards, including the Villiers David Prize, The Discerning Eye Founder's Purchase Prize, The Derwent Special Prize and the Elizabeth Greenshields Foundation Award. She has written articles for and has been featured in many leading art magazines including Time Out, Modern Painters, Wallpaper\*, Art of England, Artists & Illustrators, The Independent, The Sunday Telegraph, Galleries, The London Evening Standard, City AM, Airmail, Bust, Diva Magazine, Art North and Trebuchet and she was recorded in conversation at her London studio for BBC Radio 4's Only Artists.

Her commissions include Alan Grieve CBE, Chairman of the Jerwood Foundation, Debbie Bliss MBE, John Simopoulos, Emeritus Professor and has also produced a series of portraits for the BBC Arts production of Sitting by Katherine Parkinson, made for BBC FOUR to be broadcast in early 2021. She has created works commissioned by and for Arts Council England funded exhibitions and has contributed to symposia in the UK and been called upon to judge several art competitions.

A portrait of Roxana Halls was exhibited among a series of photographs of 30 women painters as part of the celebrations for the one hundredth anniversary of women's suffrage in the Upper Waiting Hall in the Palace of Westminster in March 2019. Her work is held in numerous private and public collections in the UK and internationally including The Discerning Eye Collection, St. Catherine's College Oxford, Brian Sewell, Katherine Parkinson, Bel Mooney, Rosa Bosch, Julie Burchill, Debbie Bliss MBE, Luke Jennings, author of the Killing Eve novels. In 2020



her portrait of Horse McDonald was purchased for the permanent collection of the Scottish National Portrait Gallery, which currently hangs in the gallery's Great Hall.

[www.roxanahalls.com](http://www.roxanahalls.com)

*Dr. Marie-Anne Mancio*

Marie-Anne Mancio trained as an artist in interdisciplinary practice before gaining a DPhil from Sussex University for her thesis *Maps for Wayward Performers: feminist readings of contemporary live art practice in Britain* and a subsequent MPhil (Distinction) in Creative Writing from the University of Glasgow. She has written for myriad publications including *Make* [formerly *Women's Art Magazine*], *Soho Clarion*, *Independent on Sunday*, and created online art history courses for Tate and Pearson's 'Love to Learn.' Mancio was a researcher and contributor to a retrospective of the *Theatre of Mistakes* (Raven Row, London). She was also awarded a Proboscis grant to write an A-Z around the *Theatre of Mistakes* archive. Mancio has lectured in art history nationally and internationally for institutions like Tate, Dulwich Picture Gallery, London Art Salon, The Course, and City Lit, and is an accredited Arts Society speaker who recently made a film for HENI talks on 'The Bed in Art' and was a guest on performance artist Oriana Fox's 'The O show.' Her research interests include conceptual art, women artists, and the representation of women and sexuality in art. As a sex work advocate, she has also written historical fiction featuring sex workers including her novella 'Whorticulture' about four migrant women in antebellum America and is currently working on a novel set in Caravaggio's Rome. Of mixed European and Uruguayan heritage, she runs international art history study tours through her company Hotel Alphabet.

[www.hotelalphabet.com](http://www.hotelalphabet.com)

**I N F E M S**  
Intersectional Feminist Art Collective

**LEICESTER**  
**CONTEMPORARY**

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BACK COVER

Metamorphose (still)

Rebecca Fontaine-Wolf

CURATED BY

Roxana Halls & Marie-Anne Mancio

DESIGN

Rebecca Fontaine-Wolf



