

ARTHOUSE1.

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The Secret Life of
STUFF

PREVIEW

THURSDAY 6 SEPTEMBER

DRINKS RECEPTION

6.30PM - 9PM

EXHIBITION OPEN

7 - 29 SEPTEMBER 2018

ARTHOUSE1.

cover: Della Gooden *'Egg And Spoon'*.
2018. Graphite on wall, plastic coated
metal and shadow lines.
size: variable depending on the light

The Secret Life of Stuff

Eileen Agar

Bernice Donszelmann

Catherine Ferguson

John Gibbons

Della Gooden

In the 80's Eileen Agar made a powerful series of rock paintings using photographs taken in the 1930's and by drawing on memory and the subjective nature of her imagination. The curators of 'The Secret Life of Stuff' explore notions of the unconscious, and intentionality in Agar's work, and in the work of Catherine Ferguson, Bernice Donszelmann, John Gibbons and Della Gooden, where complex meaning emerges from the materiality of the work itself; immanent forces are found in the object and the materials used to make it.

Curated by Catherine Ferguson and Della Gooden

THE INCOMPETENT INVESTIGATOR

I once tried to watch *Reservoir Dogs* and got as far as that scene with the ear. First I shut my eyes, then scrambled for the off button. I think what unsettled me was the re-contextualization of violence into a witty, cool moment. The funky soundtrack and the actor's improvised 'dad-dancing' somehow misaligned the horror making it all the worse to bear. Tarantino obviously wasn't the first director to refigure brutality to this effect. I recall a similar failure a few years later when I tried to watch *A Clockwork Orange*.

In seeking to define and propel an antagonist, by implementing plot dilemmas and introducing us to contrary or extreme perspectives, story-tellers can powerfully present not just what they themselves can imagine of the world, but what the rest of us can imagine or come close to imagining too. Optimally, the 'listener', by admitting stuff on the fringes of our consciousness or tolerance, can achieve a good return on the investment. After the experience, assuming we had the imagination not to scramble for the off button, we might consider ourselves changed, educated, even culturally enriched. We have learned about the world and the things we might encounter there.

I read somewhere that children (contrary to popular belief) have no or little imagination, because imagination is informed entirely by the 'known world'. No matter how obscure our fantasies seem and whatever strangeness we think we dream, imagination is always rooted in, and built around, what we have already found out. The tone and scope of our imagination has great bearing on who we have become and on what sense we have already made of the world. The less we know, the less we can speculate. A child doesn't fear a strange noise in the

dark because a specific danger can be imagined in all its gory detail. The fear is in the abyss of not knowing. The inability to consider plausible explanation, eliminate danger - that is where true terror lies. By collecting evidence towards the consolidation of a known, sensible world, we are free to imagine not monsters, but the most rational explanations and likeliest outcomes. Such theories of the world in our heads can pre-suppose the wonderful, the thrilling and the sensuous... no need to dwell just on the horror. It's a way to function.

So, we gather the information and construct a concept of the world, our 'known' world, by which to live. We each believe our 'known' world to be concrete, material, our life, our story and our lot. Isn't it the greatest story ever told? Doesn't the plot blow your mind? Doesn't something niggle from off the page? Whilst admitting that Tarantino and Kubrick have exposed my incompetence, I don't think I am the only one that can't find the information I need to explain the ultimately unknowable, and therefore infinitely unimaginable: pain and death.

The truth is, an unsatisfactory outcome is surely inevitable if the world I seek to know is beyond myself, and if I must depend for revelation, on what I already know. I am trying to understand what is 'other' to myself, when everything that is 'other' to myself is sensed and directed back into me, by me. I am obliged not just to present the world to myself; I must represent it to myself. The real world is cloaked with my own consciousness, rendering its secrets almost inscrutable. I fear that what I discover is possibly, on a good day a reasonable copy, but not the real thing. On a bad day... how wrong can things go?

PRESENCE

There is *presence* in my life and it wields great power. I am accompanied. It is everything I know of, feel and that is waiting to be: a bewildering assortment of the formed and the forming. It is a whole, integrated system that breathes in and out with me and I carry it wherever I go. A pulsing creature, bound to my body and mind, inclusive of my choices and actions, sharing my movements and orientations; it is my life, and everything else. I can't accept that all this is just '*...a reasonable copy... not the real thing*'.

At the moment, *presence* is coloured by my sorrow, but a wealth of other *stuff* resides there too. Some of it is deeply rooted, some floats on the surface, it is anything and everything; the more I encounter, the more I can find.

Here are five examples:

— *my sock*

— *Giotto's angels*

— *my sorrow*

— *a dog's head*

— *a childhood song*

my sock has some aesthetic appeal; shape, colour, size and texture, but primarily it keeps my foot warm and protected, and stays securely in place until I want to take it off. Yes, I take it for granted. The sock is mine. I consider all my socks to be there for my benefit and they can shut up. Would I be similarly unappreciative of other *stuff*, such as 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 strangely pressed into my *presence* in the same way they are pressed into his sky at the Scrovegni Chapel, in Padua.

my sorrow is a delicate fog that infuses *presence*, and which develops sharp edges around any useful companions it can seek out. I have no authority here; it is an object of independent means.

I believe I've stroked *a dog's head* just three times in my life and each time meaning was created. Recently, *soft-warm-velvety-brown-nice*, previously *itchy-rash-red* and *snappy jaw-jerk fingers away-panic*. Each is on the same circuit, referencing the others, and all are triggered when I see a dog.

Having manifested itself many times previously, *a childhood song* is right now repositioning itself alongside recent events.

WE THOUGHT IT WAS FLAT
BUT IT WAS ROUND ALL ALONG



'I've enjoyed life, and it shows through'

Eileen Agar dancing
on a roof at Mougins 1937
Photo taken by Joseph Bard
©Eileen Agar estate, courtesy of
The Redfern Gallery

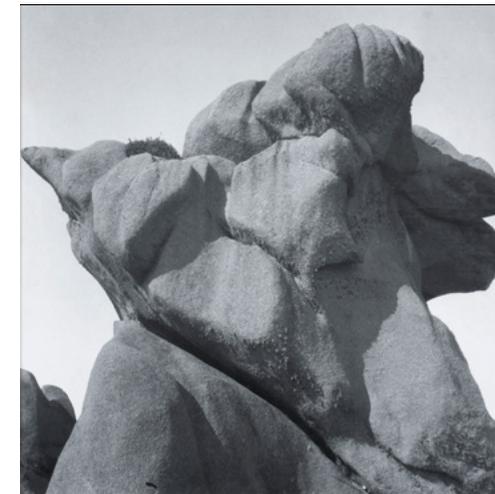
Eileen Agar was born in 1899 and died in 1991. Artists working today face different cultural and technological influences, but in matters of physiology and psychology, or what could be called 'being human', Agar had access to the same things the rest of us can be assumed to have access to now. So what is different? I might say it's just a change in the wind. A collective awareness of other possibilities for how things are and how they 'become'. A matter of philosophy, and consciousness; after all, the earth was always flat until it was discovered to be round...

In Agar's day the subjectivity of the artist was a force to be reckoned with. The viewer was presented with an art object where meaning was sought only from within the boundaries of the artist's will and understanding, even 'genius'. In the 30's, Agar was labelled a surrealist, and

so additional boundaries of meaning restricted the way her work was viewed at the time.

In the mid eighties, towards the end of her career, Agar made paintings of rocks that were informed either by photographs she had taken, or watercolours she had made decades earlier, in the 1930's. By revisiting this natural motif, filtered by time, recorded by previous endeavours and influenced by the inconsistencies of memory and the subjective nature of the imagination, she produced a series of powerful paintings. They are a relatively unexplored aspect of Agar's output, and are being seen here for the first time in many years (courtesy of the Agar family and The Redfern Gallery)

It is the 'object' power of these paintings, as detachable from her psyche and *Zeitgeist*, which is compelling today. Each has a history of its own, and an intensity of *presence* that embraces, and is inclusive of each painting from the series. Seen together and with their source photographs or watercolours, they are a tour de force of materiality.



Agar's Source Rock, 1936 Photograph

Della Gooden, 2018



Eileen Agar 'Rock 8', 1985 Acrylic on canvas 61 x 61 cm



Eileen Agar 'Untitled', 1985 Acrylic on canvas 61 x 61 cm

NOTHING IS FINISHED

It's 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, and the best paintings leave the studio with something not yet visible. **Catherine Ferguson's** paintings achieve significance by inviting their own revision, provoking a dialogue with the viewer for this very purpose.

'*Out of the Smooth*' has its own networks of meaning drawn from another place, and other work. In other words it has an accumulating presence of its own, a rationale for its own existence. To be meaningful beyond it-self, to become *stuff* in my *presence*, requires traction to be given to the 'outside'. I need to press and turn it over into my world, absorb it into my *presence*, but I must think with it too. We meet somewhere in the middle!

This painting will never be finished because I will never finish finishing it and neither will anyone else, as long as they know where to begin. It offers continuous turnover on tap; it's there for the drinking.

Della Gooden, 2018



Catherine Ferguson 'Out of the Smooth': 2018 Acrylic & masking tape on aluminium 60 x 40cm



Catherine Ferguson *'Couple Colour'* 2018 Acrylic on aluminium 30 x 30 cm



Catherine Ferguson *'British Summer'* 2018 Acrylic on aluminium 30 x 30 cm



STUFF HAPPENS

Perhaps everything needs to be part of a larger whole? The generative consequences of relationships formed by the hoops, graphite lines and shadows of my recent work, bring me to believe this is probably true. The hoops strive to form partnerships with the graphite lines around them, which similarly alter their angle, change their size or even vanish. It is the cooperation and tension *between* components that determines the 'whole' stays in a healthy state of stability and flux. Concrete changes repeatedly occur, whilst all the time lines of shadow pace back and forth, directed by the lights above and the sunlight through the window. It is spatial, transient and time-based.

My role in this shifting parade feels no more or less important than that of the sun; **it** moves the shadows, **I** move the material components. If I fix a hoop at a higher level, or rub out a line, it is because that is what should happen. Such developments are absorbed and waited upon; more change will occur... until it's all over.

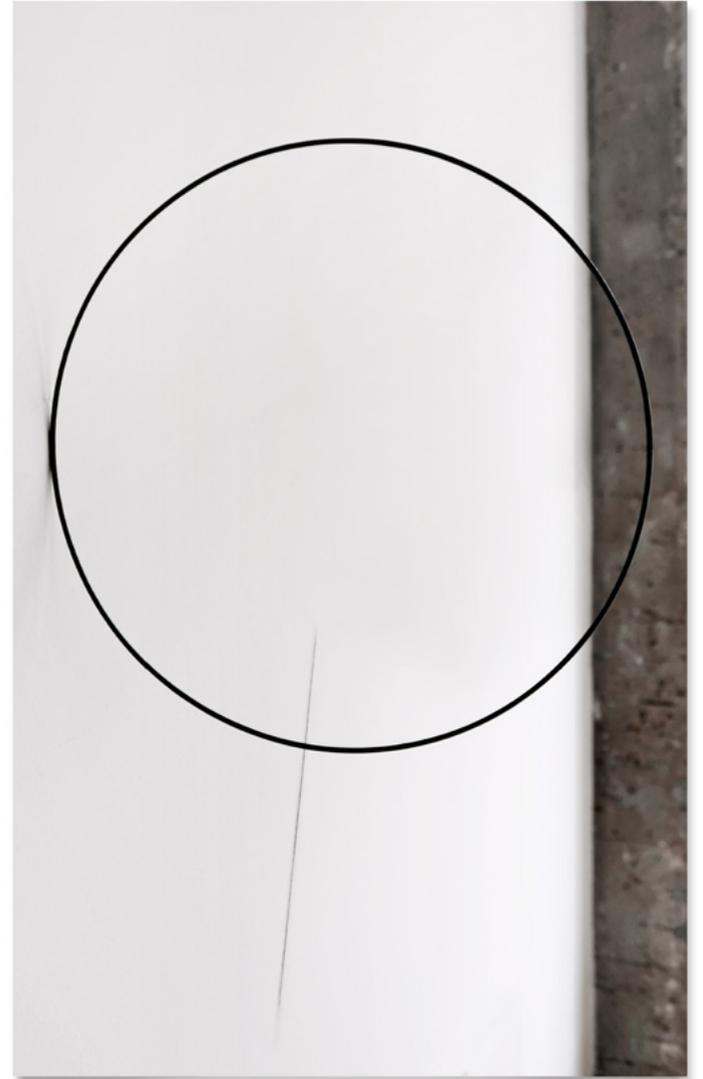


During this inter-activity and 'inter-passivity', zones of intensity become isolated to my eye, identifiable from the herd, even possible to name, like constellations in the night sky. *'Egg and Spoon'* (front cover) was discovered this way. As a component of the whole, *'Egg and Spoon'* leaned inwards to its left, compositionally savvy of a hoop nearby. Exhibited here, on its own, it maintains that orientation. Although the original reason for leaning left is no longer valid, there are new reasons. It is now an assemblage itself, its components must relate internally, and leaning left is a solution.

I also began to pick out larger groupings, like *'The Call'* - on this catalogue page. This was a looser arrangement that mutated very quickly into something else. Did *'The Call'* actually exist on that wall at all? After all, it was my eye and the camera that chopped the hoop at the left in half. I think the only version, the real one, exists on this page.



Della Gooden
'Line 13' 2018 Graphite on wall
42 cms long



Della Gooden
'Replete' 2018
Giclee print 15.5 x 25"

T r a i l i n



Bernice Donszelmann 'Foot'. 2017 Video projection



MESSAGING

The tangible stuff of language might be considered as the soft discharge of air from our mouths when we speak, or the texture of a pen mark on paper. The structural, phonological, lexical and functional systems of language, are not tangible, but are relatively constant and known; rules for propagating successful communication.

Everything ever written is the result of a thought of some kind and for **Bernice Donszelmann** it is the implicit and unconscious forces that live within words and language that drive her rhythmic compositions. Projected in an intimate space, the viewer is also the reader and there is physicality by way of the standing, the watching and the waiting.

ANOTHER sea swell



and



Bernice Donszelmann *'Another Sea Swell'*. 2017 PowerPoint projection

In place of a pictorial surface that I can navigate at will, there is a controlled system feeding my attention, a sort of conveyor belt for my eye. Like the information delivery screen on a London tube station, words slide in from the right, at a pace empathetic of my decoding speed. The gaps in between are as full as the words themselves; visually and temporally... a reminder that stuff in my *'presence'* can be what isn't there and what doesn't happen.

Each word or phrase, tied by time and space to the others, bounces a trajectory of meaning towards the next. Irregular discourse patterns, unusual syntactic and lexical choices offer awkward or surprising connections that cause hesitation and reformulation - a process at odds with the fluid stream of delivery that won't allow me to pause or go back; but it's ok, I know it will return.

Catherine Ferguson and Della Gooden, 2018

INFINITE STREAMS

Being alone in the studio with nine sculptures by John Gibbons was not my idea of being alone. The room was occupied; in fact it doesn't feel wrong to say it was peopled. They were waiting for me to arrive, silently assembled in a circle, sitting on plinths that might just as well have been chairs. There was nowhere else to stand except at the centre of this group; from there I held their gaze, and at that moment, they knew they would be judged. How can art objects have such an effect?

Conventionally *stuff* is seen as something solid and immediately available to the senses. If instead, it is 'anything and everything' (e.g. an event, a feeling, a colour or an interaction) then it follows that an art object has an identity forged not only from a solid substance (clay, marble, metal) but also from a myriad of other intangible things. *'She moved/Her hair'* is of course made from metal, a solid substance, but that substance arrived in the studio with a past. The stainless steel John Gibbons chose to use is an alloy of an alloy, designed to be corrosion free and have lustre - so I could say this piece is made of a scientist's ingenuity and generic functional beauty.

'She moved/Her hair' exists as it does, because of infinite streams of happenings and interactions with the world, and we don't acknowledge their role. Just one of these, I'd call *compatibility of intention*. For example, the gentle striations and deep criss-cross lines on the surface couldn't have occurred if both artist and art object hadn't agreed in advance that this was a good idea.

The shocking vitality I encountered in John Gibbons studio and the pull of work like this, is not in its inertness and stability as an art object constituted from metal, but in its capacity to move beyond that state, away from such literalness.

Della Gooden, 2018

John Gibbons *'She Moved/Her Hair'*, 2015-16 Stainless steel, varnished. 47.5 x 35 x 50 cm





left *'For/Giveness'* (detail) 2018 Stainless steel, waxed 29.5 x 27.5 x 26.5 cm
above *'Duality'* 2017 - 18 Stainless steel, waxed 59 x 41 x 30 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



Eileen Agar 'Thumb Rock', 1936 Water colour on paper, 20 x 28 cm

I imagine Eileen, back in the 1930s, selecting a viewpoint. She is by the sea in Cornwall or the South of 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 (not/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 monumental presence of the rock, now a shape to be delineated on the page, is suddenly accompanied by an inner perception of something formed on a much smaller scale. The thumb-shape has grown, fleshy and functional, from 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 returns 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.

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