

A Child of Divorce: Autofictional Painting and Social Critique



Exegesis in support of practise-based thesis

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Abstract

This practice-led research project uses drawing, printmaking, and oil painting to coalesce personal experiences into a multi-dimensional and mutable image of my life through an autofiction framework. The inconsistent and contradictory nature of autofiction allows me to express the material of my life with some distance, where I can emphasise absurd moments and heighten tension in order to critique my experiences of unmet social expectations. Additionally, self-invention enables me to re-image my memories with control over the narrative that I might not have had during the initial experience while acknowledging the impossibility of accuracy. *A Child of Divorce: Autofictional Painting and Social Critique* forms a personal archive by accumulating created images in different mediums that respond to events and objects in my life that are often absurd, synchronous, sad, or morally suspect. When brought together into an exhibition, the individual works in this project produce connections between each other that can be both contradictory and synchronous, aided by the use of text and titling. Through the partial fictionality of the works, I critique my experiences with social alienation, low-wage precarious employment, and the (dys)function of family relationships and friendships.

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Attestation of Authorship

I hereby declare that this submission is my own work and that, to the best of my knowledge and belief, it contains no material previously published or written by another person (except where explicitly defined in the Acknowledgements), nor material which to a substantial extent has been submitted for the award of any other degree or diploma of a university or other institution of higher learning.

Signed,

9th May 2023

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Introduction

This practice-led research project uses drawing, printmaking, writing, and oil painting methods to depict personal experiences that coalesce into a multi-dimensional image of my life. An autofiction methodology allows me to express the material of my life with distance and narrative clarity. The individual works explore a variety of personal events that encompass the mundane, transitional, synchronous, absurd, sad, and morally suspect. This project traverses several cities where I have lived, but its subjectivity lies here in suburban Tāmaki Makaurau, as this place informs my perception of my past.

Autofiction is primarily a literary genre that combines fiction and autobiography. Though its origins are literary, the field has expanded to encompass non-writerly forms of expression, such as painting. Unlike strict autobiography, a work of autofiction can adopt factual fabrication and stylistic and formal invention alongside the intimacy of its revelations. Historical details can be bent to the story's advantage through the medium's embrace of factual instability, allowing the author to use personal events and actual people as narrative material. Autofiction considers how a "self" might emerge through experimentations with the concrete materiality of language, structure, and composition, and can encompass additional paratextual elements, such as footnotes and titles.¹

I transpose autofiction from its literary origins and apply parts of it as the methodology of my image-making project. This framework challenges me to use formal elements of image-making—such as colour, line, texture, composition, titling, and transparency—in union with narrative to convey the tonal demands of a personal story. I create circuitous links between works through installation and compositional parallels. Doing so engenders synchronic moments, where similar images or elements are installed simultaneously. This strategy of making and installing broadens narrative relationships by drawing attention to similarities in seemingly dissimilar moments, memories, or references. I nudge the viewer towards their intuitive perceptions through suggestive visual and narrative relationships. Many of my artworks explore real personal events that I find baffling, emotionally challenging, or implausible. Autofiction's distance can act as a break between the event and myself, giving me the opportunity to find humour or see the absurdity in what I otherwise find unfunny.

The overt subjectivity of autofiction provides an intimate environment to discuss social issues such as sexuality, trauma, or individual isolation. Autofiction's narrative tradition has been explored by writers such as Maria Stepanova, and artists such as Kyoko Idetsu,

¹ Teresa Carmody, "On Autotheory and Autofiction: Staking Genre," *Los Angeles Review of Books*, September 17, 2021, <https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/on-auto-theory-and-autofiction-staking-genre/>.

Nick Austin, Marie Shannon, Tala Madani, and Philip Guston, all of whom will be discussed further in this document.²

Within my work, personal narrative enables me to critically explore some of the social structures of Tāmaki Makaurau with which I often find myself in conflict. Many of the experiences I document stem from navigating social expectations that I find alienating or opaque. These expectations, when unmet, cause conflict within social environments such as my family or my workplace. I hope that by speaking personally, I can converse with an audience about suburban alienation and social discord. By exploring personal subjectivity in this way, the project hopefully works across both empathy and absurdity.

A Child of Divorce is built upon material from my life, which I bring together to form a personal archive through exhibition. Gathering this material is an ongoing process of recording amusing, poetic, or evocative moments through drawing, photocopying, and note-taking. I record events as they happen or as the memories rise to the surface, building a bank of material to draw upon. This collection also includes images drawn from my own memory, films I've seen, and books I've read.

Personal belongings from my living environment meander into the artworks as symbols and find their relevance via their connection to a recent experience. Sometimes, a necklace or a book that has been blended into my living environment, untouched for some time, will resurface and solicit recollection. The objects—costume jewellery, self-help books, children's tchotchkes—are mementoes from my life, and signify to me reciprocity, loss, and conflict in relationships. Though the objects I depict may seem reticent, they each stand in for a story, and the process of image-making is the pursuit of expressing that story. I experiment with the aesthetic methods used for representing objects and use my aesthetic decisions to guide how an audience might interpret these objects, rather than trying to replicate them accurately.

I use cartooning, image transfer, and tracing to integrate and apply images to the artwork's surface. These drawing processes began organically through my desire to draw "real world" objects and my struggle with accurate perspective and scale. Cartooning is a mode through which I can note down interactions with a swiftness that expresses tone and gesture. Big arms, big hands, and big fingers pointing. *There is no ambiguity about what is happening here.* Additionally, like autofiction, these methods allow fidelity to the object itself with a degree of chance, mistake, alteration, and slippage. These processes result in an image that no longer represents the original object or memory but becomes a new object independently. I can amalgamate representation and personal subjectivity by treating the works with autonomy.

² These artists have not explicitly stated they are working through an autofiction framework, but this is a reading I am applying to their artwork.

Largely, the works in this project distil personal stories into single images and are intended to contain the essential ingredients for a viewer to comprehend the story. These single images are then amassed during installation to form another type of collection. Through this, I reflect on how memory condenses lived experience into a compilation of images or reduced impressions of images. By communicating my personal stories to an audience, I question how identity and self are constructed through story.³

Chapter one of this exegesis will discuss my compositional methods, such as note-taking, writing, and drawing, and how these relate to contemporary autofiction writers like Maria Stepanova. I will unpack the role that memory has in story-making and how I use memory's instability as a springboard to weave in fictional elements. In relation to this, I will talk through how an event—from my past or present day—is processed and selected as the subject for an artwork.

Chapter two will discuss how the artworks created within this project can express an image of my life. I explore how I approach the project as an archive, where varied life events and material qualities come together on the same plane. Through this approach, a “whole” is created, where synchronous and esoteric connections between works can be drawn. I will unpack the methods I use in building the archive, such as appropriation, compositional arrangement, material hierarchy, and the role of titling.

Chapter three asks how autofiction is used as a form of social critique, as literary and painting forms share a spectrum of mimesis to the author's lived environment. I will discuss how I apply autofiction methods of social critique to my personal experiences with social alienation, low-wage precarious employment, and the (dys)function of family relationships and friendships.

3 Jonathon Sturgeon, “2014: The Death of the Postmodern Novel and the Rise of Autofiction,” Flavorwire (Flavorwire, December 31, 2014), <https://www.flavorwire.com/496570/2014-the-death-of-the-postmodern-novel-and-the-rise-of-autofiction>. In reference to autofiction, literary critic Sturgeon describes how the self is a living thing which shifts in response to how we construct personal fictions.

Chapter One:

Autofiction as Methodology

Autofiction originated as a literary genre that combines autobiography and fiction.⁴ Within autofiction, the *fiction* is often emphasised over the *auto*. Elements are lifted from the author's life, such as demographic details and allusions to actual events or characters. These elements are drawn upon to build an invented story.⁵ By working in this genre, authors can distance themselves from the events depicted, opening up territory to discuss political or ethical concerns with a freedom not possible if the text was based purely on the author's life, such as in memoir.⁶

In autofictional novels, the protagonist is explicitly the author, whose continuous presence as protagonist generates a confrontational "reality." However, the elements are often only loosely tethered to the author's life, raising ethical questions about the narrator's reliability.⁷ As a reader, we are challenged by how much we should trust them and their portrayal of characters, which can have real-world effects on interpersonal relations.

The formal elements an author might base on their actual life vary by text. This uncertainty puts the reader in a position of trying to distinguish fact from fiction.⁸ Plot, characters, chronology, and locations are all open to authorial manipulation, and the genre rests on the self as unstable, and on identity as something that can change unpredictably.⁹ By treating character in this way, the inconsistent behaviour of the formal elements lends itself to both the character in the text and the author's identity outside of the text as a constructed entity.

I use an autofiction methodology to explore personal experiences of unmet social expectations, where I personally have "fallen short" or have been let down by others.¹⁰ I apply several methods of the genre to my painting practice, namely narrative that is in proximity to the author's life (but not exactly overlapping), and an unreliable narrator.¹¹ I do this by pulling from my own experiences and turning them into a partially fictional story. I use many similar biographical details such as

4 Christian Lorentzen, "Sheila Heti, Ben Lerner, Tao Lin: How 'Auto' Is 'Autofiction'?" *Vulture*, May 11, 2018, <https://www.vulture.com/2018/05/how-auto-is-autofiction.html>.

5 Katherine Hill, "The Elena Ferrante in My Head," *The Paris Review*, January 29, 2020, <https://www.theparisreview.org/blog/2020/01/29/the-elena-ferrante-in-my-head/>.

6 Lorentzen, "Sheila Heti, Ben Lerner, Tao Lin."

7 Carmody, "On Autotheory and Autofiction."

8 Lorentzen, "Sheila Heti, Ben Lerner, Tao Lin."

9 Tim Parks, "How Best to Read Auto-Fiction," *The New York Review of Books*, July 9, 2020, <https://www.nybooks.com/online/2018/05/25/how-best-to-read-auto-fiction/>.

10 An example of falling short might be feeling unable to address a mistake I have made due to social consequences. An example of being let down by others is feeling a friend is less invested in a friendship than I am, but is not making this explicit.

11 These are some of the methods of autofiction, but not all.

names, locations, and visual resemblances, which suggest accuracy to real life. By meddling with different components, the narrator (myself) is inconsistent between artworks. Some bear a firmer similitude to me than others, and the difference protects me from the stakes of making artwork intimately related to my life.

This mode of making engages moral questions of historical accuracy, self-invention, and individual identity. Self-invention enables me to re-image my memories and identity, but with a control over the narrative that I might not have had during the initial experience. This fluidity particularly applies to traumatic or embarrassing memories, which are harder to discuss. The partial fictionality of my identity within this project means I can better speak to my broader concerns by shaping personal accounts to fit the themes I explore. In particular, the changing nature of my friendships, my experiences working in the poorly paid hospitality sector, and my relationship to the suburban environment of Tāmaki Makaurau and the people within it.

Objects “Just as They Were”

Russian autofiction author Maria Stepanova’s *In Memory of Memory* finely weaves poetry, historical account, family diary entries, descriptions of photographs, essays on memory, and narrative prose.¹² The tome—decades in the making—peels open historical temporality, allowing the reader to experience the emotional and physical consequences of exploring one’s histories. The protagonist “I” is untethered as Stepanova winds through stylistic modes. As a reader, we don’t get a clear indication of Stepanova as she inhabits the role of protagonist, researcher, and literary writer. Though we are told stories of Stepanova’s ancestors—Russian Jews and Holocaust survivors—the story is really that of Stepanova. She creates a dialogue around found familial letters and photos, from which follows prose in a back-and-forth conversation. Reconstructing family accounts, she imprints her contemporary subjectivity whilst pushing family memories to their factual brink.

In *In Memory of Memory*, Stepanova muses that our contemporary photo-ridden lives have “become arranged into a chain of images.”¹³ My project is an arrangement of images that embraces the slow, and the methodical, in counter to the swift digital photograph. One of the approaches I take in *A Child of Divorce*, is the rendering of objects through painting. Like many of the objects explored in *In Memory of Memory*, my painting *A Gift from a Friend I Don’t Speak to Anymore* is based on an object of personal significance that represents to me a longstanding friendship. The visual content of the painting doesn’t indicate what it might signify. However, the artwork takes on meaning through its titling and its contextualisation with other paintings in this project that also speak to personal relationships or events as evidenced through objects.

12 Maria Stepanova, *In Memory of Memory*, 1st ed., trans. Sasha Dugdale (London: Fitzcarraldo Editions, 2021).

13 Ibid., 72.

A Gift From a Friend I Don't Speak to Anymore is a painting of the book cover *La Mano*, which is a photographic survey of hand gestures from the Musée d'Orsay. My closest friend at the time gifted me this book on their return from a European trip. The painting hovers between reality and fiction as I set to redefine what our friendship means to me today. The title exaggerates the current state of our friendship, where I re-image the consequences of our increasing distance. I have encountered difficulty discussing this painting because of the posterity of a written document. As an image gives more space for nuance and ambiguity, somehow, the painting seems less fixed or certain. This tension between the written word and the painting is at the forefront of my mind as I consider the repercussions of her reading this and my guilt over seeing her last week for the first time since making the painting.



Figure 1. Isabella Dampney, *A Gift from a Friend I Don't Speak to Anymore*, oil on canvas, 300 x 350mm, 2023.

Being and Non-being

I am currently working as a receptionist at an advertising agency. Sometimes, my days pass without experiential nourishment to substantiate the feeling that I live in the present. My mind is elsewhere, as if I am inanimate or non-being. I spend my days offering fast-food executives coffee. Occasionally I experience something which pulls me back into being, like an encounter with a childhood acquaintance who now earns six figures. This encounter is negative stimulation, but it is stimulation nonetheless.

These are the type of moments that I bring into my artwork. In Virginia Woolf's *A Sketch of the Past*, the author reflects on her childhood as a life dominated by what she terms "non-being."¹⁴ Bad days for Woolf are full of non-being, parts of the day that are "not lived consciously" but are full of the activities which must be done.¹⁵ For me, these states of non-being are punctured by moments of discovery that express mystery in otherwise predictable days, like when I have a sudden thought about an old childhood neighbour from Wellington and then see them drive past on Symonds Street with their distinctive vanity plate ("BE FREE").

In quiet moments to myself, such as when riding my bike or in the studio, memories resurface, allowing me to reflect on something stored away. My paintings pinpoint these punctures of delineated time between being and non-being. Arresting the moment through painting allows me to hold on to the mystery, making it a more substantial part of my life.

Mutable Memory

I re-image my memories by using them as the initial material for work. The method of written note-taking embraces the mutability of my own memories. I write down events as they happen or when a memory rises to the surface. My notes are made in short bursts, where I record a quote, a title, or a straightforward summary of what happened. These notes skimp on detail and focus on the concrete sequence of events:

"Saw a baby seagull die in the PWC pond (Christchurch)"

"Found \$20 in a church donation envelope by Pt Chev bus stop, Theo said, 'Bella, that's a fast road to hell'."

Working with my memories as unfixed and elastic, I embrace the psychodynamic process—where thoughts may unpredictably resurface.¹⁶ I seize the unconscious aspects of recollection by maintaining a note-taking practice and integrating it into my making.

¹⁴ Virginia Woolf, "A Sketch of the Past," (Essay), In *Moments of Being*, 2nd ed., ed. Jeanne Schulkind (San Diego: Harcourt Bracejovanovich Publishers , 1985), 70.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Sigmund Freud, *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. 19 (London: The Hogarth Press Limited, 1961), 20.

Given the complex ways in which memories are recorded, stored, and retrieved, it can be challenging to ascertain whether my memories of an experience are accurate.¹⁷ Accuracy used to concern me. It was one of the reasons I began this project. Through the cycle of recollection and making, I have discovered that factual consistency is beside the point.

The singular image that appears instantly in one's mind upon recollection cannot contain all the detail of what transpired.¹⁸ Memory is fickle and prone to suggestion by our emotional state. The controversial psychologist Elizabeth Loftus describes this as the "flimsy curtain that separates our imagination and our memory."¹⁹ When basing artwork on historical and diaristic accounts, there is no guarantee that the non-fictional aspects are accurate. An autofiction methodology embraces this "flimsy curtain," giving me, as the author, further freedom to integrate fictive elements into the spaces where factual detail has been purposefully or inadvertently lost.

In emotional experiences, our brain records the event with greater lucidity, disregards what it reads as superfluous, and retrieves other memories from similar events, linking them together in the brain.²⁰ I am intrigued by the idea that memory retrieval links memories in a chain. It feels analogous to my working approach, where each artwork spurs new ideas. This networked approach creates a generative flow where I can respond to seemingly unrelated moments in sequence.

I found this with the two paintings *Kicking the Cat*, and *My Host Family Had a Pet Turtle*. *Kicking the Cat* is a work that responds to a story my Dad told at Christmas one year. Dad had been painting the house, and the cat, which he called a "lazy bastard," was lying in the sun beside him. Dad got fed up with the cat, scooped his boot underneath him and flung him across the backyard.

Kicking the Cat initiated a flow of memories about instances I have seen of mild animal cruelty. After spending time in the studio with *Kicking the Cat*, I remembered that my host family in Argentina had a pet turtle which they kept chained to a tree during the dry summers and snowy winters. I had not thought about this turtle for over ten years. Selecting subjects is a delicate process, as each picture is an entry point to my memory network where new links in a chain of recollection can stretch onward to unpredictable places.

17 Jerome Groopman, "How Memory Speaks," The New York Review of Books, July 24, 2020, <https://www.nybooks.com/articles/2014/05/22/how-memory-speaks/>.

18 Georges Didi-Huberman. *Images in Spite of All: Four Photographs from Auschwitz*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 167.

19 Rachel Aviv, "How Elizabeth Loftus Changed the Meaning of Memory," The New Yorker, March 29, 2021, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2021/04/05/how-elizabeth-loftus-changed-the-meaning-of-memory>. American psychologist Elizabeth Loftus, who is controversial for testifying for celebrity defendants such as Bill Cosby and Harvey Weinstein, explains, "Our representation of the past takes on a living, shifting reality." Interpreting Loftus' statement, memory is unfixed and can be reconstructed when recalled.

20 Maria Konnikova, "You Have No Idea What Happened," The New Yorker, February 4, 2015, <https://www.newyorker.com/science/maria-konnikova/idea-happened-memory-recollection>.

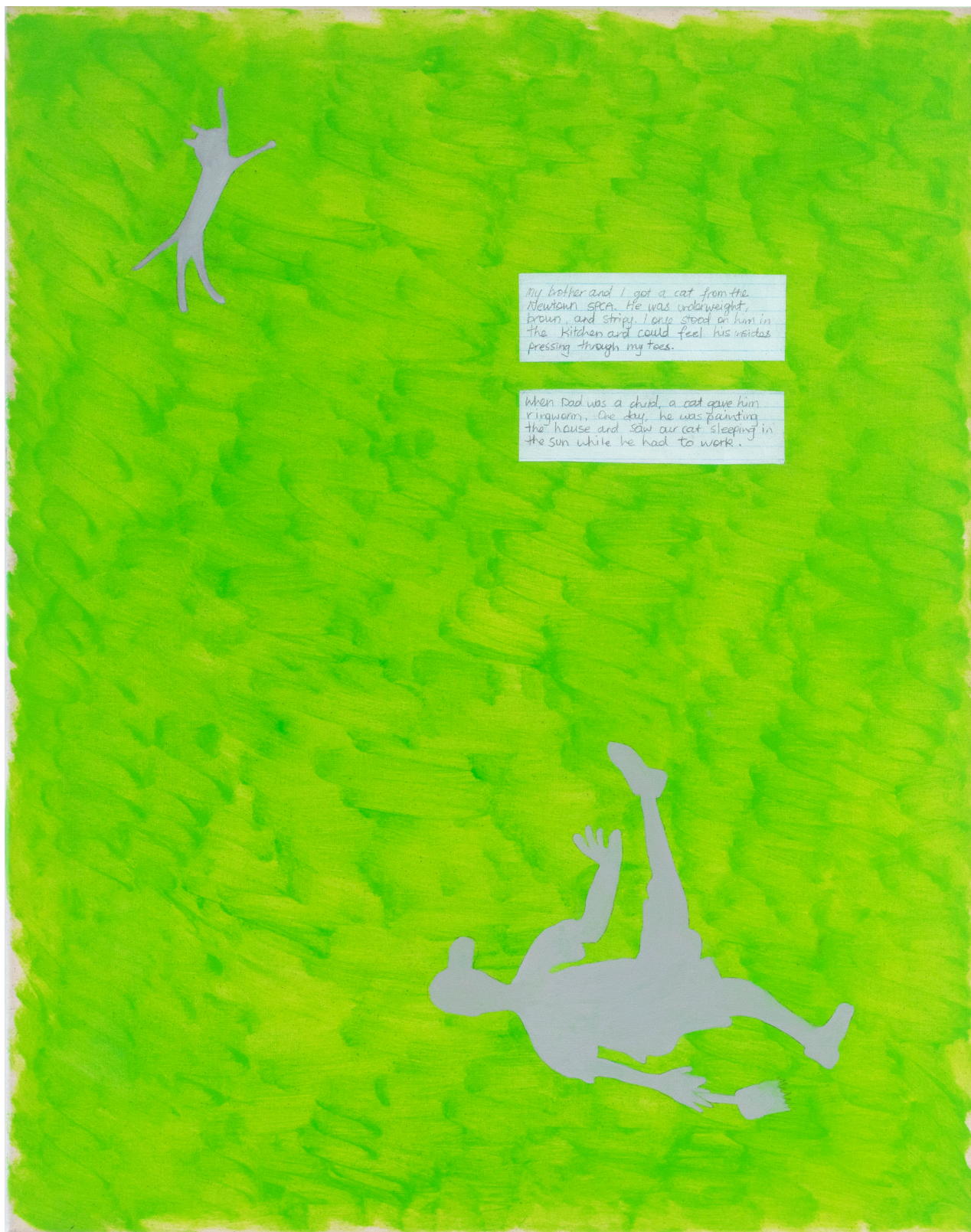


Figure 2. Isabella Dampney, *Kicking the Cat*, oil and graphite on canvas, 750 x 600mm, 2023.



Figure 3. Isabella Dampney, *My Host Family Had a Pet Turtle*, oil and charcoal on canvas, 350 x 500mm, 2023.

The Day's Lead Stories

Part of my studio practice is the recording and filtering of daily events and interactions. Many of my artworks begin with an event, whether it is the breakdown of a close friendship or an AUT Culinary School staff member calling me a bitch. In autofiction author David Sedaris' diary collection *Theft by Finding*, Sedaris records his experiences, from the mundane to the absurd, which unfold at his local IHOP pancake restaurant.²¹ Sedaris lists events as they happen, and the following day he surveys his list to find the "lead story."²²

Like Sedaris, I document my daily experiences in written notes to identify my life's lead stories:

The other day at work, Jenny, who cleans the office, came up to me and said, "I think I am going to die soon," I stared blankly at her. Walking off, she said, "I cannot stand this horrible life."

By maintaining a notetaking and writing practice, I externalise these moments unsentimentally. I had been sitting at reception alone for three hours and felt lonely. Jenny's words surprised me, and I struggled to process them independently. Though I did not intend to use this interaction for artwork, writing it down drew attention to Jenny and me as the agency's only two sub-contracted minimum-wage day staff. Jenny's comments reminded me of our shared loneliness at work, where we are excluded from work activities and perks given to the rest of the staff.

Renderings of Events Based on Memory

Throughout this project, some distinct approaches to artwork subject matter have arisen. As I have previously discussed, some paintings are of moments that pull me into being, and others are renderings of events based on memory. Occasionally, I get caught in a thought loop where an image or memory gets stuck, and by externalising the images through text I am able to exit the loop.

In *Kicking the Cat*, I wrote down a record of what happened and drew a cartoonish sketch based on the text. I used accessible tools, drawing with graphite on printer paper. I then photocopied my drawings at different scales, cut them out, and stuck them to the canvas to test compositions. From there, I rubbed charcoal on the back of the drawing and traced the front to transfer the drawing to the canvas. Using these efficient and tactile processes allows me to experience how a painting may materialise physically.

21 David Sedaris, *Theft by Finding: Diaries (1977-2002)* (New York, NY: Little Brown and Company, 2018).

22 Jesse David Fox, "David Sedaris's Best," *Good One: A Podcast About Jokes* (podcast), December 9th, 2020, 01:29:26, <https://podcasts.apple.com/ca/podcast/good-one-a-podcast-about-jokes/id1203393721?i=1000501712910>.



Figure 4. Isabella Dampney, *Kicking the Cat*, oil and graphite on canvas, 750 x 600mm, 2023. Images showing the charcoal transfer process of the photocopied drawings.

Externalising memories enables me to see the event as something outside myself. By making the memory physical, the experience no longer needs to be maintained within me—instead, the artwork functions as an independent record. Like a shopping list, I can trust the artwork to remember and remind me (even if it is inaccurate).

The diptych *Girlfriends* functions this way, enabling me to unpack significant changes in a friendship. The two paintings are of friendship necklaces, one blue and one purple. The film *Girlfriends* (1978), from which the painting takes its name, follows the disintegrating friendship between a photographer and writer.²³ My painting *Girlfriends* evokes the film's themes of female friendship and misunderstood values by drawing a parallel between this friendship and that of myself and my friend Jess.

The purple necklace is painted on finely woven cotton, which I sized twice, and primed four times, sanding between coats to produce a meticulously smooth surface. To position the image of the necklace on the canvas, I rubbed an oil pastel over the actual necklace and pressed it onto the surface, debossing the soft paint and transferring the pastel. Debossing the surface evokes the faint impression left on the body by the jewellery's touch. I painted the blue necklace on a heavy gauge Belgian linen, sized and primed but not sanded. The pink backgrounds suggest the specific love in female friendships by evoking the modern gender coding of the colour. The different surface textures alter the light refraction, rendering the heavy gauge linen considerably darker. *Girlfriends* draws a relationship between the separated necklaces and their smooth/rough surfaces as textural allusions to difference.

²³ *Girlfriends*, directed by Claudia Weill (Warner Bros., 1978), [criterionchannel.com](https://www.criterionchannel.com/girlfriends/).



Figure 5. Isabella Dampney, *Girlfriends*, oil on canvas, 175 x 125mm (each), 2022.

I see a similar approach in painter Kyoko Idetsu's 2023 exhibition *I want to wear a warm sweater* at Bridget Donahue gallery in New York. Idetsu works with scenes she has been a part of or witnessed, and treats the material with a levelled banality, where trauma and joy smoothly intermingle.

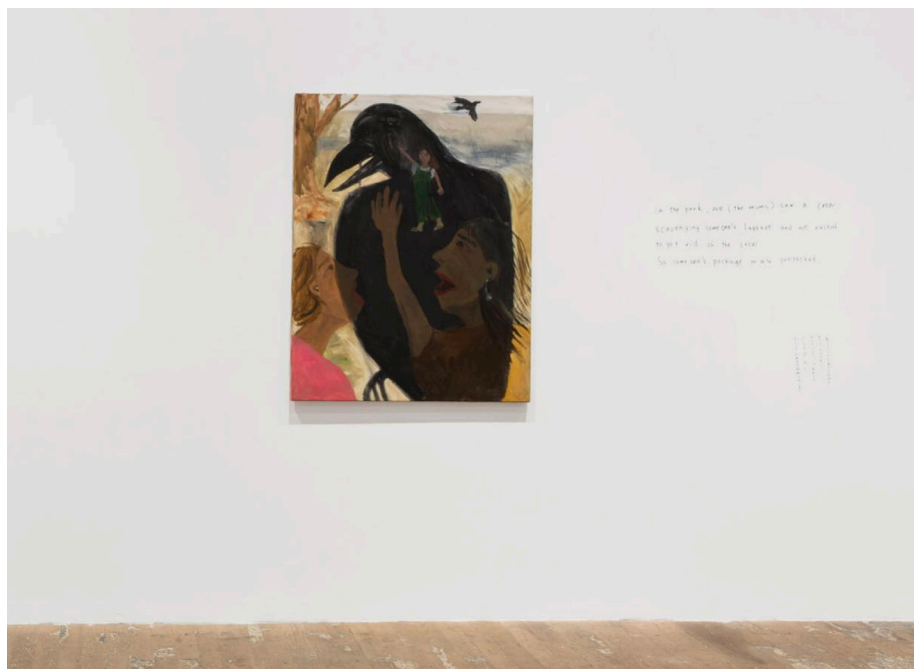


Figure 6. Kyoko Idetsu, *Park Security*, oil on canvas, 117.16 × 91.12 cm, 2022, Bridget Donahue, New York. Image courtesy the artist and Bridget Donahue, NYC. Photographer: Pierre Le Hors.

Idetsu's painting *Park Security* documents a moment in the park where a group of mothers, including the artist, shoo away crows scavenging through people's bags. A black crow fills the frame, turning its bald head and sharp eyes towards the viewer. The black paint is diaphanous, showing three figures through the bird's form. The figures wave their hands, mouths agape. In the fuzzy background, another crow circles, countering the settled crow gazing at its prey. The woman at the front blends into the painting's surface. Idetsu's balance of object precision and painterly fragmentation suggests an abstracted memory-like quality where the important details stand out. The viewer has an all-seeing perspective of the crow and the distressed women. Scrawled in pencil on the wall some distance from the painting is Idetsu's account of what happened. Her writing is small and delicate. Unlike conventional vinyl wall text, Idetsu's light-touch pencil is supplementary to the painting.

Idetsu's work shifts between scenes that depict home's intimacy and the sidewalk's generality. Observation links the paintings together, where each artwork is a small narrative shard filtered by the artist's subjectivity. Idetsu explores this temporality through artworks split over multiple canvases, "suggesting the narrative unfolding in her own racing mind."²⁴

²⁴ Johanna Fateman, "Kyoko Idetsu," *The New Yorker*, January 23, 2023, <https://www.newyorker.com/goings-on-about-town/art/kyoko-idetsu>.

Girlfriends (fig. 5), similarly seeks to slow down the narrative through the use of two canvases. The split and textural differences underscore the emotional binaries of estrangement and intimacy. Using these methods, *Girlfriends* enters a slippery territory, shifting between emotional truth, fictive embellishment, and factual experience. Unlike Idetsu's forthright pictorial style and additional text, *Girlfriends* sits in a more narratively ambiguous space, effecting a gap between the observer and the paintings.

Painted Word

Painted word is a method I use to lay down a story where I have extracted the critical elements, so that an audience can piece together a narrative more clearly than in other works, such as *Girlfriends*.²⁵ *Breaking News (one)* and *Breaking News (two)* experiment with reducing a story to its essentials through two different material approaches.

My family had two TVs: a small solid-state television in my parent's room and a slightly larger TV tucked into the built-in bookshelf in the lounge. When Dad moved out, his new place didn't have a TV. He came over one afternoon when he wasn't doing well and collected the small TV. I didn't know Dad was there, and the front gate was solid wood and heavy. Dad opened the gate, and the TV slipped and smashed to the ground. I saw Dad come inside the house, his hands with gashes through them. He didn't ask for help.

In *(one)*, I take a dunderheaded²⁶ approach to communication by printing the story on "A4 paper" and punctuating it with a doodle. The work replicates an A4 piece of paper to emphasise the juvenile nature of a short story redundantly illustrated. Multiple layers of acrylic primer, gesso, and opaque white acrylic tinted with cerulean blue and Payne's grey are painted with a soft sable brush and sanded meticulously between coats to replicate the cold blue-white of 80gsm standard printer paper. The crudeness of the charcoal transfer drawing contrasts with the laboured surface.

25 Woolf, "A Sketch of the Past," 72. Virginia Woolf describes this externalising as "Mak[ing] it real by putting it into words. It is only by putting it into words that I make it whole; this wholeness means that it has lost its power to hurt me; it gives me, perhaps because by doing so I take away the pain, a great delight to put the severed parts together."

26 A dunderheaded approach incorporates a simple "everyman" attitude through a crude drawing style and elementary signals (such as A4 paper). This approach allows me to broach uncomfortable subjects of conflict and tragedy with a light, humorous touch.

My family had two TVs: a small solid-state television in my parent's room and a slightly larger TV tucked into the built-in bookshelf in the lounge. When Dad moved out, his new place didn't have a TV. He came over one afternoon when he wasn't doing well and collected the small TV. I didn't know Dad was there, and the front gate was solid wood and heavy. Dad opened the gate, and the TV slipped and smashed to the ground. I saw Dad come inside the house, his hands with gashes through them. He didn't ask for help.

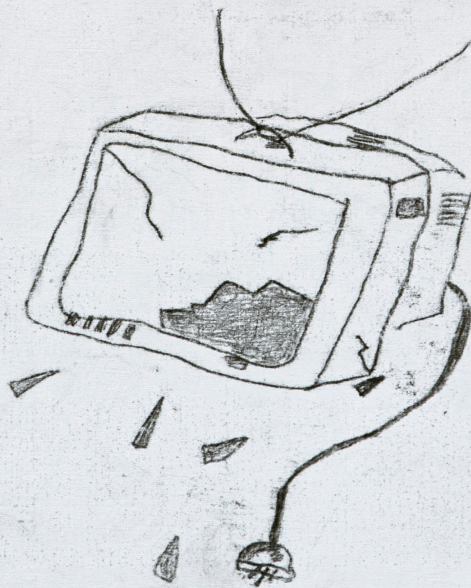


Figure 7. Isabella Dampney, *Breaking News (one)*, acrylic paint, inkjet print, and charcoal on canvas, 300 x 200mm, 2022.

New Zealand artist Nick Austin's painting *Magnetic Poetry* is a silver-painted diptych shaped like a fridge/freezer. Painted onto the "fridge" are five sheets of paper adhered with colourful letter magnets containing child-like scribbles, lists, and invoices. *Magnetic Poetry* uses mimicry, displacing personal notes and parent/child intimacies into the gallery space. For Austin, this image captures his experience of fatherhood, in which the fridge is an egalitarian surface where the family gathers. The magnets and the "Happy Birthday" song addressed to a group of historical figures are specific. However, Austin also uses the painting's objects in a generic sense, pointing towards *childhood* and *parenthood*. In particular, a half-erased pencil note, "Once there was an eraser," is deep Dad joke territory. *Magnetic Poetry* uses the painting's subjects and their material treatment as shorthand to suggest narratives an audience could make about their family life. *Breaking News (one)* similarly uses canvas scale, material mimicry, and text to convey narrative about parenthood/childhood relationships.



Figure 8. Nick Austin, *Magnetic Poetry*, acrylic on canvas, diptych, 150 x 55cm overall, 2016. McLeavey Gallery, Wellington. Image courtesy the artist.

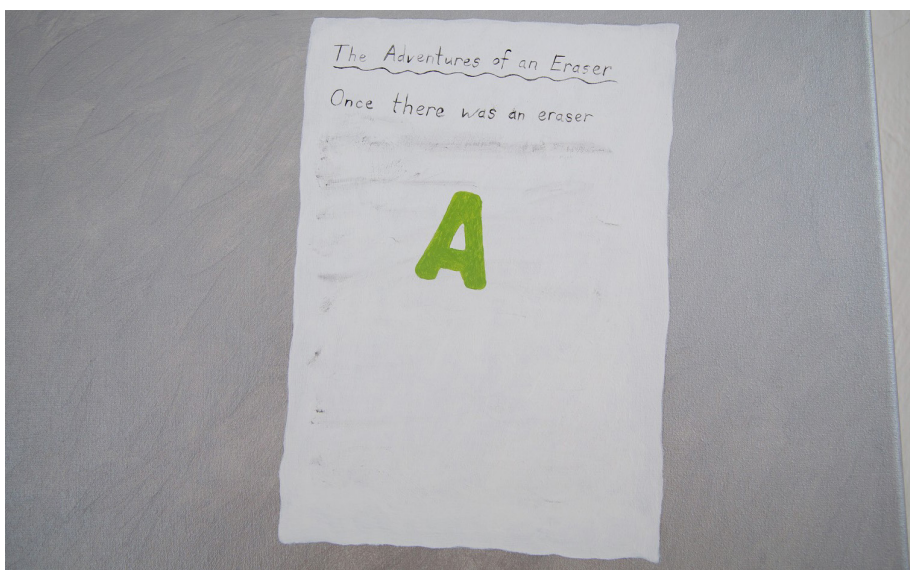


Figure 9. Nick Austin, *Magnetic Poetry* (detail), acrylic on canvas, diptych, 150 x 55cm overall, 2016. McLeavey Gallery, Wellington. Image courtesy the artist.

Like Austin, I shift between a child/adult sensibility by working between puerile sketches and sentimental writing. Re-working multiple versions of an idea develops a minimal composition, extracting the key narrative elements. *Breaking News (two)* explores temporal tension through the material interplay of imprecise sloppy charcoal and thick, sticky oil paint. The two distinct planes of the painting indicate a vitality to this personal record, one in which the body is grounded, but the world outside, like the charcoal, is unfixed. Unpacking the same subject as *(one)*, *Breaking News (two)* reduces the story to a few objects. The painting explores the flexible nature of personal narrative with a sparse composition of figurative layering.

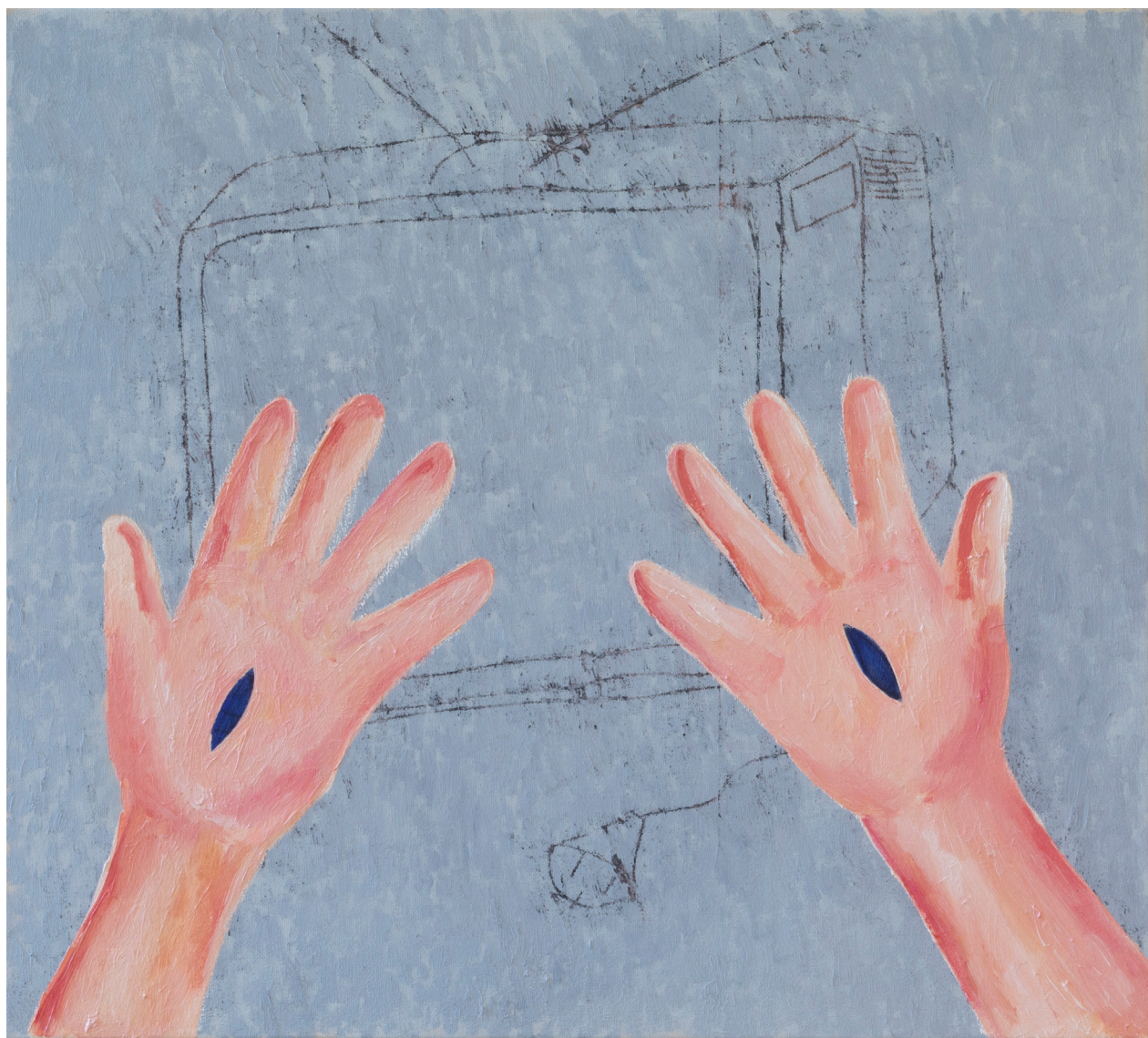


Figure 10. Isabella Dampney, *Breaking News (two)*, oil on canvas, 450 x 500mm, 2022.

Chapter Two: An Archive Creating Images

In this project, a kind of personal archive is formed through the accumulation of created images that respond to events and objects in my life. *A Child of Divorce*—the archive—is a multifaceted “whole,” within which no single image represents the definitive story. The shifting arrangement and relationship between the images puts the reading of the archive into a continual state of flux. Through its creation within an autofiction framework, my archive embraces mutability, subjective nature, and the difficulty of achieving factual veracity.

Archive

In my archive the works enter into connections with one another, creating new relationships in the present between past events. This has the effect of flattening time, where multiple temporalities concurrently exist. Here major and minor events—materially (sketch, note, oil painting, print) and existentially (recalling a friendship, feeling responsible for the death of a pet)—live on the same plane.²⁷ Through the image-making process, I re-write memories, remove them from the past and pull them into the present, where they all exist simultaneously. A flattened approach to time, material, and existential concern reflects French philosopher Michel Foucault’s conception of historicism. He contends that history comprises countless meaningless events that are “lost” and cannot be recalled, despite a desire for events to have necessity. In this reading, our history is an indecipherable, entangled mess, and so it must be arranged and written.²⁸ This project acknowledges this historicism, where I need to decipher that which is seemingly meaningless and disjointed to me.

Though my archive strives for wholeness, it cannot strive for completion. My engagement with the archive expresses the gaps and subjectivity that the form cannot overcome.²⁹ French philosopher Jacques Derrida defines the archive as something which is impossible to complete, but whose drive to enlarge itself never ceases.³⁰ Each addition to my personal archive recontextualises all works within it, because the collective moves as a whole. In this way, the archive

27 Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations* (London: Pimlico, 1999), 246. In this work, Benjamin discusses the importance of a non-hierarchical approach to history and the responsibility to a society receiving the fullness of the past: “A chronicler who recites events without distinguishing between major and minor ones acts in accordance with the following truth: nothing that has ever happened should be regarded as lost for history. To be sure, only a redeemed mankind receives the fullness of its past—which is to say, only for a redeemed mankind has its past become citable in all moments.”

28 Michel Foucault, *The Foucault Reader*, ed. Paul Rabinow (London: Penguin Random House, 2020), 89.

29 James T. Hong, “The Suspicious Archive, Part I: A Prejudiced Interpretation of the Interpretation of Archives,” *e-flux Journal* 75, (September 2016), <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/75/67172/the-suspicious-archive-part-i-a-prejudiced-interpretation-of-the-interpretation-of-archives/>.

30 Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*, trans. Eric Prenowitz (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1996), 68.

cannot be closed—it exists in defiance of fixed meaning.³¹ By remaining present to the continual shifts as additional artwork enters the personal archive, I am able to make each work respond to the one proceeding, like a chain of images which can be re-sequenced as needed. I see the exhibition *A Child of Divorce* as a version of the archive, which the audience moves through when they visit the exhibition. Each viewing experience creates a new outcome as each audience member interprets the sequence and relationships between artworks.

Some material in *A Child of Divorce* are directly appropriated from my environment, such as quotes (*I Pulled the Fingers to See What Would Happen*, fig. 23), film props (*Local Area Woman Caught Same Elevator As “American Psycho” Killer*, fig. 15), and personal jewellery (*Girlfriends*, fig. 5). I classify these materials as “found,” where I lift the material from its original context and reposition it within the archive. This method allows me to connect my ideas to the ideas of others in the “outside world,” while sharing personal moments with a public audience.

Objects and the people surrounding one’s life, and their documentation, aid in the fabrication of identity. New Zealand photographic and video artist Marie Shannon uses the intimate and banal moments of her immediate surroundings as material for her work. Shannon’s work *Coaster* is a photographic print of a love note on a bent, water-damaged coaster set on a jet-black background. The work is part of Shannon’s 2005 series *Love Notes*, which collects love notes between Shannon, her partner, and their son to form an impression of their family. Shannon allows the audience into her intimate sphere by making private material the subject of her photo. Her subtle manipulation of the coaster through rich black framing shifts the photograph away from a mere representation of an object.

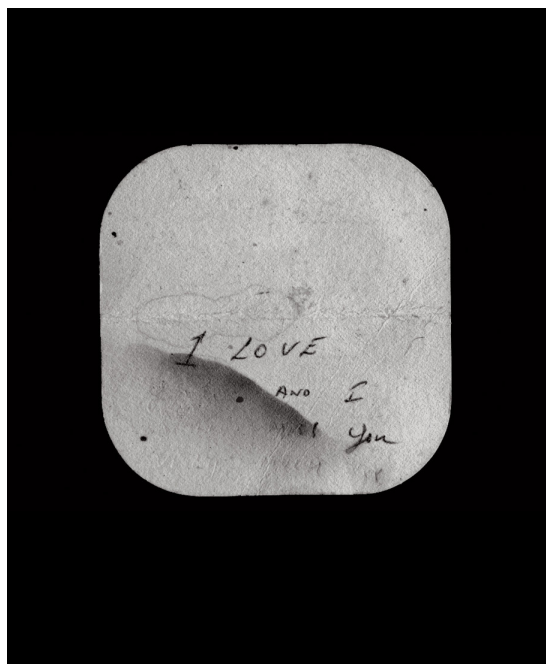


Figure 11. Marie Shannon, *Coaster*, selenium and gold toned silver gelatin print, 500 x 400mm, 2005. Trish Clark Gallery, Auckland. Image courtesy the artist.

31 Ibid.

Making Connections

My friend Kate recently returned from Berlin. I had not seen Kate for five years, so I woke at 3am last Sunday morning to meet her at the arrivals lounge. Kate and I lived together before I moved to Toronto. For my 23rd birthday, Kate had given me *Important Artifacts and Personal Property from the Collection of Lenore Doolan and Harold Morris, Including Books, Street Fashion and Jewellery* by Canadian artist and writer Leanne Shapton.³² The book parodies an auction house catalogue, tracking the possessions of a (fictional) middle-class couple whose relationship has dissolved and whose belongings are now up for sale.

Straddling two forms—catalogue and artwork—the book adheres to a catalogue format but is intricately designed and printed on an art monograph's soft-textured paper stock. Like most archives, these represented objects have been selected from a larger group for documentation and preservation. The catalogue spans clothes, photographs, trinkets, jewellery, and braziers. The accumulation of these artefacts, drawn together into this catalogue, forms an impression of the couple's shared life. Some possessions are embarrassing in their drama, such as a white noise machine smashed with a hammer. The photographs become flat and ridiculous as these precise moments in their material lives are temporally fixed.

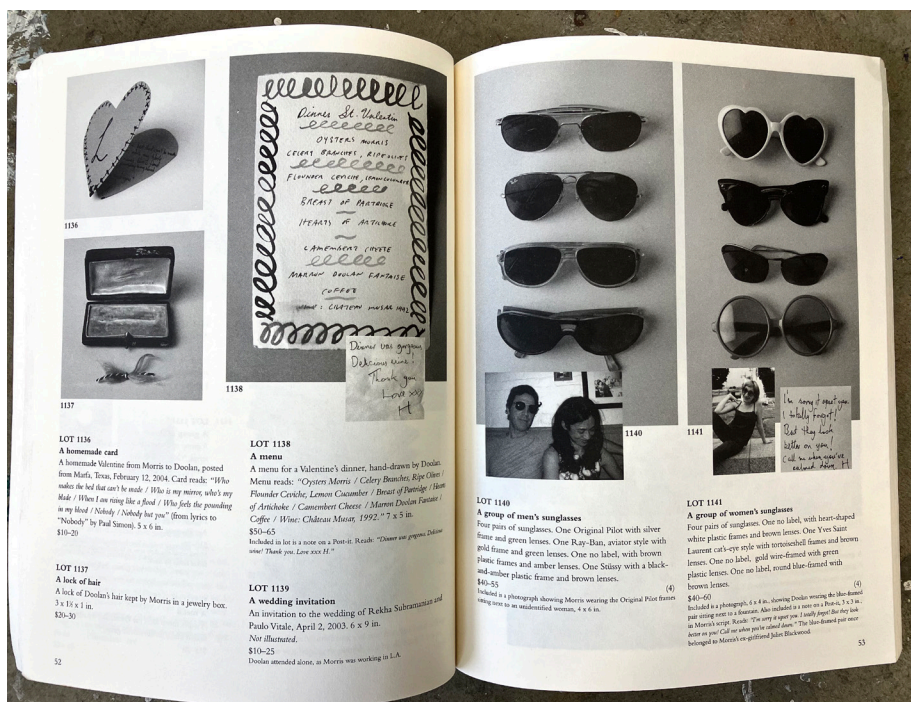


Figure 12. Image of a page spread from *Important Artifacts and Personal Property from the Collection of Lenore Doolan and Harold Morris, Including Books, Street Fashion and Jewellery* by Leanne Shapton, 2009.

32 Leanne Shapton, *Important Artifacts and Personal Property from the Collection of Lenore Doolan and Harold Morris, Including Books, Street Fashion and Jewellery* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2009).

Each time I finish an artwork and consider the next, I am reminded that there is no way to demonstrate the fullness of life. Through this project, I explore how constituent artworks interrelate and affect each other. I see this conversation between the works *A Birthday Present From Kate* and *Two Toy Dogs*. A few days after my friend Kate arrived from Berlin, I completed *Two Toy Dogs* and started writing about our friendship. Sitting in my lounge, I saw the sun-bleached green spine of Leanne Shapton's book and pulled it from the shelf. It was Valentine's Day, the same day as the book's fictional auction. The dainty dogs on the front cover bore an amusing resemblance to my watercolour *Two Toy Dogs*. I embraced this compositional synchronicity by mimicking the green book cover through screen-printing and oil painting.

Through painting, synchronous events can be concretised, allowing the whole body of work to function as an impression of my life. Recognising these synchronicities is an act of my subconscious seeking out pattern recognition.³³ I draw attention to this by creating or highlighting similarities between artworks. The arrangement of these works together in the archive then creates a setting where an audience might share in my thinking by being provided with an opportunity to recognise these synchronicities themselves.

Like these spatial links, each image I make has a different rhythm and speed. Some works like *Two Toy Dogs* are rendered in a burst of energy with quick material processes, whereas others such as *A Birthday Present From Kate* are meticulously made. This material approach relates to the pacing of my storytelling, where narrative elements unfold in an image at varying speeds depending on the work. This rhythmic control impacts the audience's movement through the particular iteration of the archive and their impression of the work, and consequently, their understanding of the project's narrator (me).

33 Sigmund Freud, 'The "Uncanny",' in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, trans. James Strachey, Anna Freud, and Alix Strachey, Volume XVII (1917-1919) (London: The Hogarth Press and The Institute of Psycho-Analysis, 1955), 234.

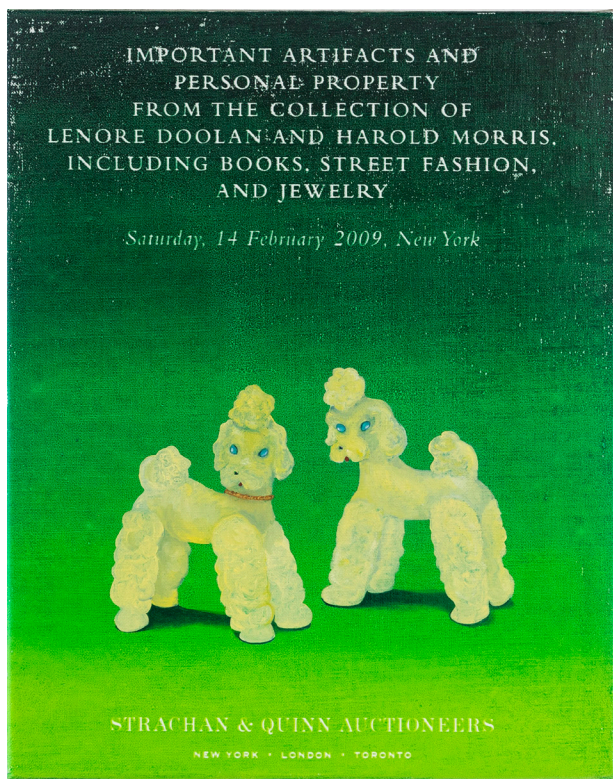


Figure 13. Isabella Dampney, *A Birthday Present from Kate*, screen-print and oil on canvas, 500 x 400mm, 2023.



Figure 14. Isabella Dampney, *Two Toy Dogs*, watercolour and graphite on paper, 70 x 100 cm, 2022.

Image Arrangement

By connecting what appears to be disparate moments from my life, I try to make sense of events via physical proximity and through drawing compositional parallels between images. I am afforded narrative flexibility through arranging and sequencing details within an autofiction framework. American writer Ursula K. Le Guin writes concerning narrative: “I am engaged in the manoeuvre of rationalisation—of rendering sensible-seeming something that is not sensible in the least. In the course of this manoeuvre, the character of the original image is falsified.”³⁴

I apply Le Guin’s reading of narrative when drawing moments together for an artwork in a process of trying to make sense. In my diptych *Local Area Woman Caught Same Elevator As “American Psycho” Killer*, I explore the relationship between my former workplace and the protagonist’s place of work in the Hollywood thriller *American Psycho*.³⁵

The Toronto Dominion Bank Building has 56 floors and 32 elevators. Canoe, where I worked as a Server Assistant for \$14 an hour, is a luxury restaurant on an upper level. Guests include the secretive Confrérie des Chevaliers du Tastevin society and a business executive who made the largest charitable donation in Canadian history. I watched *American Psycho* for the first time after returning to New Zealand. Although *American Psycho* is set in New York, it was filmed in Toronto. As the film climaxes, serial killer Patrick Bateman hurriedly returns to his executive office. As I watched him enter the lobby and wait for the elevator, I realised that Bateman and I had shared the same elevator to get to work.

By sequencing the two paintings—one of the TD Bank Building and the other of Patrick Bateman’s famed business card—I can draw a line between these two independent entities to make plain an absurd link in my life. The absurdity of this situation is accentuated through the artwork’s formal play with scale. Both paintings in the diptych are the same size, rendering the business card huge, and the building tiny. The building’s original Canadian flag has been wiped clean, substituted with a surrender, highlighting my experience as a personal one of loss and frustration.

34 Ursula K. Le Guin, *Dreams Must Explain Themselves and Other Essays 1972-2004* (London: Gollancz, 2018), 84.

35 *American Psycho*, directed by Mary Harron (Universal Studios, 2000).



Figure 15. Isabella Dampney, *Local Area Woman Caught Same Elevator As “American Psycho” Killer*, oil on canvas, diptych 600 x 700mm (total), 2023.

Narrative Co-mingling

In 2022 artist Sophie Sutherland and I held a collaborative exhibition at Malcolm Smith Gallery in Auckland. My work in the show *Dorks, Losers, Lemons* traversed the imagery of my suburban lifestyle in Tāmaki Makaurau—personalised license plates, neighbourhood grievances, and petty theft. The exhibition allowed me to test hanging arrangements, and I experimented with cohabiting artworks such as *No More Mr Good Guy* and *City Vision Did This* to bring together the clashing narratives of the Chucky (the killer doll from the slasher franchise *Child’s Play* who is, perhaps counterintuitively, considered a queer icon to fans)³⁶ and the angry scrawl on a local tree stump that reads “CITY VISION DID THIS.”³⁷

The exhibition took a flattened approach to time, formulating an environment where multiple narratives co-mingle. The impression this created for me was one that drew together themes from the individual artworks rather than a direct focus on the subjects. In this case, I was pulling together personal experiences of suburban conflict to unpack the effects of social alienation on the populace of Tāmaki Makaurau.

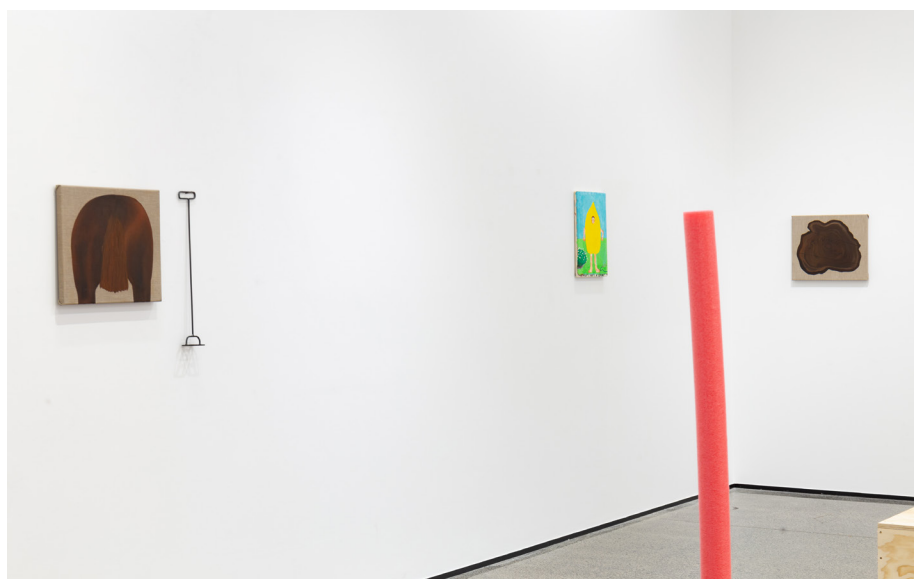


Figure 16. Close-up of paintings in *Dorks, Losers, Lemons* with Sophie Sutherland. October 2022. Photo by Lindsey de Roos.

³⁶ Scott Tobias, “From Slasher Villain to LGBT Icon, ‘Child Play’s’ Chucky Changes with the Times,” *The Washington Post*, June 26, 2019, https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/style/from-slasher-villain-to-lgbt-icon-child-plays-chucky-changes-with-the-times/2019/06/25/63ce7050-95ff-11e9-830a-21b9b36b64ad_story.html

³⁷ In the run-up to the Auckland local elections in 2022, disgruntled members of the public began tagging with permanent markers on the tree stumps that run along Meola Road in Point Chevalier. The trees had recently been felled in preparation for a new cycleway. According to the protesters, the political group City Vision were responsible for the tree removal as they were in support of the cycleway expansion.



Figure 17. Isabella Dampney, *City Vision Did This*, oil on canvas, 400 x 450mm, 2022. Photo by Lindsey de Roos.



Figure 18. Isabella Dampney, *No More Mr Good Guy*, oil on canvas, 300 x 400mm, 2022. Photo by Lindsey de Roos.

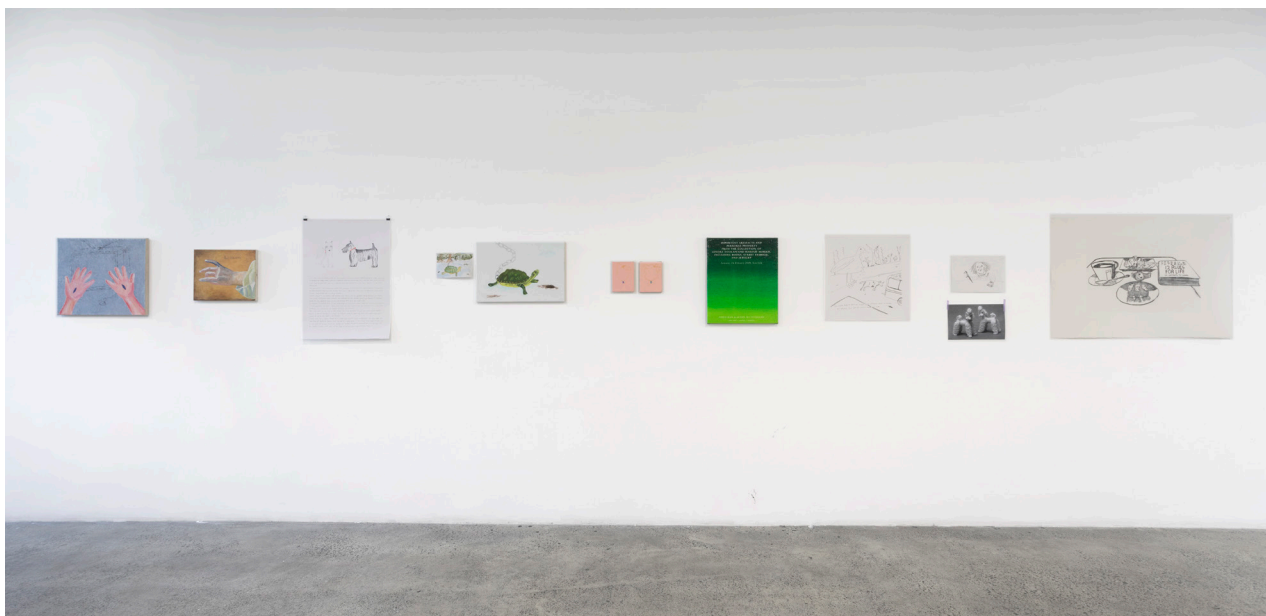


Figure 19. Testing out installation strategies in the studio. February 2023.

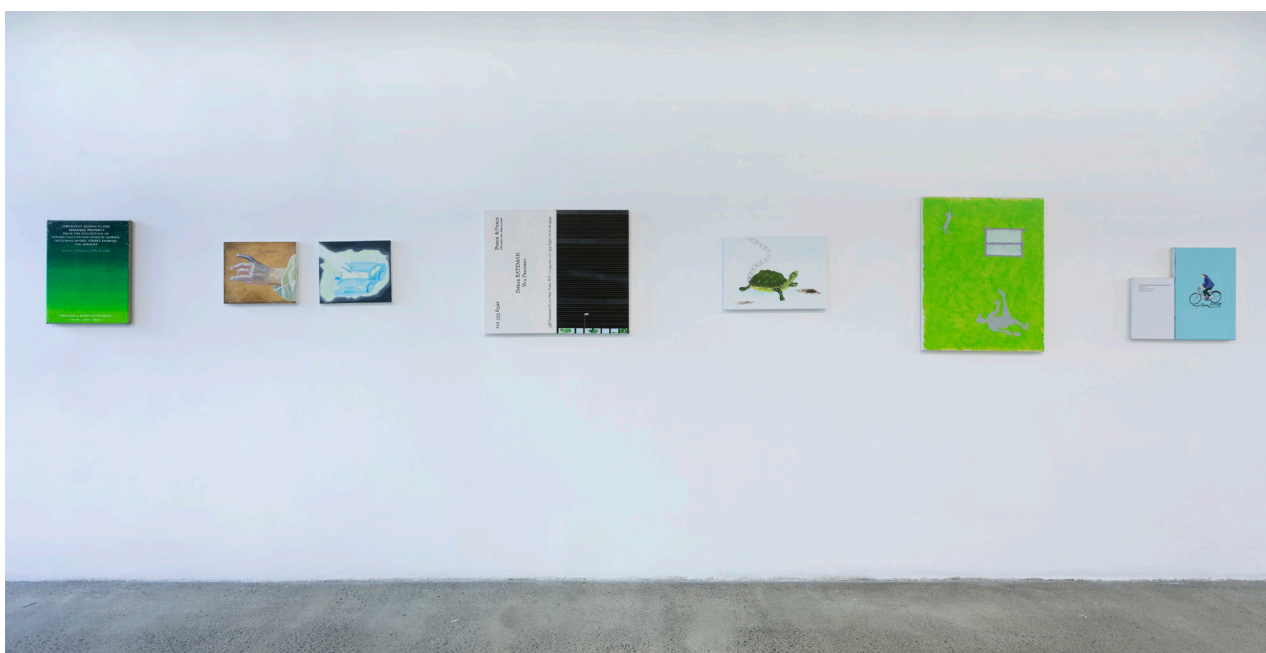


Figure 20. In these two installations, I am developing a non-hierarchical approach to hanging, emphasising relationships between some works. March 2023.

Titling as an Extension of Narrative

Over the course of New Zealand artist Michael Stevenson's career, he has shifted from creating absurd, conspiracy-laden fictions to re-creating material from real-life events.³⁸ Stevenson uses titling as a method to aid the audience's reading of his artworks. His titles are often poetic and supply context, such as his sculpture of a bike stand shaped like the Darwin fish symbol, *Like a Fish Needs a Bicycle*. Each of his projects, in some form, is focused on communicating a public narrative which might have slipped through the cracks. He often interweaves his replicas (and their related story) with other seemingly unrelated replicas, creating non-linear and anachronistic relationships.³⁹ His work *Hold Up to Live Camera* is a giant TV-ready cheque that mimics the one presented on an actual 1970s New Zealand telethon. In *Hold Up to Live Camera*, the title alludes to Stevenson's cynicism toward televisual charity events. He uses an active imperative tense to engage the audience, bringing a sense of present-day to a historical event.

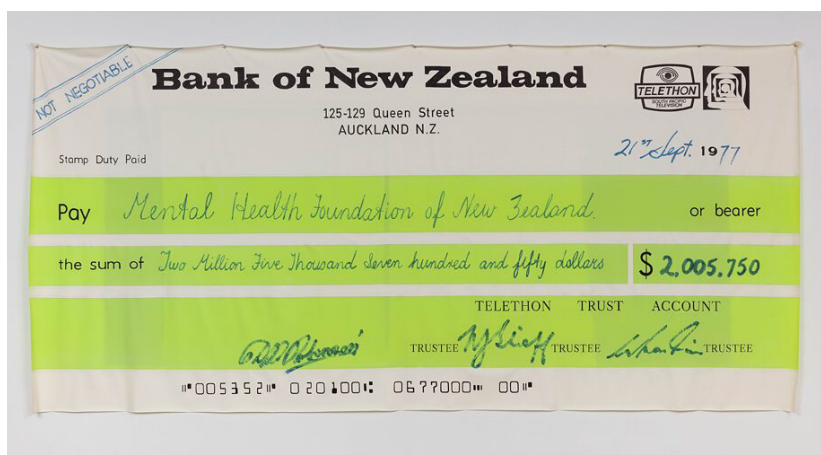


Figure 21. Michael Stevenson, *Hold Up to Live Camera*, ink on latex, 2021. Image courtesy Michael Lett.



Figure 22. Michael Stevenson, *Like a Fish Needs a Bicycle*, mixed-media, 2020/21. Image courtesy Michael Lett.

My work is often referring to a time which has passed and so, like Stevenson, I try to achieve a temporal shift through the phrasing of my titles. In *Local Area Woman Caught Same Elevator As "American Psycho" Killer*, the title is descriptive in the same way as a newspaper headline and embodies the attitude of hysterical media and hyperbolic self-mythologising. The title's tense implies contemporaneity, regardless of when the work in the archive is viewed. By directly quoting the film's title, I am clueing the audience in to *American Psycho*'s relevance to both paintings, not only the business card. The title enables me to introduce myself as a non-visible female subject via "*Local Area Woman*," introducing another character (alongside Bateman) and further complicating the artwork's reading. When exhibited, the titles of the works are accessible via a room sheet where viewers can read across that particular version of the archive.

³⁸ Robert Leonard, "Michael Stevenson," Robert Leonard (blog), 2003, <https://robertleonard.org/1143-2/>.

³⁹ Anna Gritz, "Michael Stevenson," Goethe Institute, Accessed February 23, 2023, <https://www.goethe.de/ins/nz/en/kul/sup/kuk/22708153.html>.

Chapter Three:

How Image-Based Autofiction Can Critique Social Expectations

An autofiction methodology (filtering events from my life through a fictive framework) allows me to surmount the risky business of depicting my social network. I use methods such as narrativisation, externalisation, mimesis, and authorial agency to critique the social expectations of my environments. I explore these moments through the lens of social expectations that are at odds with my own values. When collected, these individual moments form a whole impression of my life. Using different authorial voices, I explore dynamic ways of being that conflict with my true life, and the resulting works explore these fictional selves as aspects of my identity.

Social Expectations

Social expectations are contracts we enter in interpersonal relations. They are both the implicit and explicit social rules that govern how one might engage socially. Each artwork, whether depicting an object or event, stems from one of my social environments: my home, my studio, and my workplaces. The environment's associated social expectations inform the artwork's particular concern. In this project, I explore concerns including women's codes of propriety, workplace ethics, and the rules of reciprocity in a familial environment. Implicit rules regulate my interactions in a social-familial environment while explicit rules apply to my workplace environment, where conditions of behaviour are outlined in an employment agreement. However, in both cases I often find these social codes to be alienating or overly subtle.

In my painting, *I Pulled the Fingers to See What Would Happen*, an image of myself on a bicycle accompanies painted text that recounts the true story of myself flipping off former National Party leader Simon Bridges. By externalising this experience, the painting critiques the social expectation that politicians are entitled to respect as private citizens regardless of their negative cultural impact. Furthermore, this violation of social propriety is compounded by representing a woman's use of vulgarity. The painting also returns to the now-comic tale that 19th-century women riding bicycles were learning how to masturbate.⁴⁰ In a material sense, this fractured social commentary is mirrored in the cracked surface of the painted image.

40 Paris Marx, *Road to Nowhere: What Silicon Valley Gets Wrong About the Future of Transportation* (London: Verso Books, 2022), 161.



Figure 23. Isabella Dampney, *I Pulled the Fingers to See What Would Happen*, graphite on paper, and oil on canvas, 210 x 297 mm and 450 x 300mm, 2022.

My Familial Environment

Some of my artworks respond to familial environments densely laden with unspoken social expectations. I focus on reciprocity—the practice of exchanging things with others—and what happens when I get this exchange “wrong.” Familial reciprocity is often subtle and deeply specific to a cultural context. Much like transferring an experience to a painting, entering an alien family home makes me conscious of *my* home’s invisible social expectations.

The pencil drawing *I’m sorry Pato* narrativises my experience of feeling responsible for the death of my Argentinian host mother’s pet dog. My host mother Pato’s real name is Patricia, but she goes by Pato, which means duck in Spanish. Pato adopted many stray dogs. Each day as I left for school, the dogs would climb under the fence and chase me down the road. Usually, by halfway, they would give up and go home, but once, one of the dogs followed me all the way to the bus. That evening the dog didn’t come home. Pato spent three days looking for him and finally found him dead at the bus stop.

At the time, the pressure of maintaining good relations with my new host family and trying to understand how to be a good guest prevented me from telling Pato what had happened. In this drawing, I explore my sense of responsibility for the dog’s death. More broadly, I externalise my feelings about the social pressure of being a young person out of their depth, trying to understand how to respond to generosity. The drawing’s text translates as, “I am sorry, Pato, your dog escaped and chased me to the bus stop. I think my school bus killed him.” I retroactively fictionalise a more courageous self who could have apologised to Pato. This imagining demonstrates my autofiction method of authorial agency, as I use narrative augmentation to comprehend a real event.



Figure 24. Isabella Dampney, *I'm Sorry Pato*, graphite on paper, 60 x 60cm, 2023.

My Work Environment

Artworks that critique social expectations in my work environment more explicitly speak to specific social issues. In *Local Area Woman Caught Same Elevator As “American Psycho” Killer* (fig. 15), I respond to my experiences as a woman working in a male-dominated restaurant that was rife with wage-theft, verbal abuse, and misogyny.

The movie *American Psycho*, based on a novel by Bret Easton Ellis, is known for its critical view of consumerism, Yuppie culture, and misogyny. In this case, the method of appropriation sets the stage for societal critique in my artwork. The male chefs and owners at my previous workplace, Canoe, had the same fiery tempers as celebrity chef Gordon Ramsay. The restaurant’s social structure relied on women to perform the role of gentle hosts. In a culture of verbal abuse and wage theft, there was an understanding amongst staff that practising masculine stoicism by weathering the anger was the only way to move up the ranks.

Through connecting the film and my work experience, I draw a line to the film’s recognised subtext of troubled masculinity, as the act of appropriating keeps the source’s contextual threads somewhat in place. The main character, Patrick Bateman’s fictional workplace is unrelated to my real workplace, but both include intense competitive rivalries between colleagues, which appear petty from a distance. My artwork transfers the broadly recognisable critiques that this popular film makes to the more niche context of my former workplace.

Reward, Punishment, and Finding Humour

My 2022 exhibition *Feast of the Ass* at Te Tuhi gallery in Auckland featured a painting of a donkey with a carrot harnessed to its neck and a stick raised above its rear. The painting sits atop a commercial dishwasher, similar to the one I used as a dish hand in my job at a popular Auckland cafe. The work responds to my experience of low-wage labour by alluding to the donkey archetype of reward and punishment. As this exhibition featured a single painting, unlike the exhibition at Malcolm Smith Gallery, I contextualised the artwork in the hospitality industry by placing it upon the dishwasher. The work’s title draws from Russian philosopher Mikhail Bakhtin’s writings on the medieval carnival’s social function of tension release.⁴¹ Through this title, *Feast of the Ass* critiques the unfulfilled tension relief promised to low-wage workers in New Zealand, specifically upward mobility myths of home ownership and increased buying power.⁴² Using language from medieval times in a present-day context, I make fun of the promised feast by suggesting that it is not what it was advertised as. Instead, the low-wage and struggling middle-class of New Zealand are left ass-licking.

41 Mikhail Michajlovič Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. Iswolsky Hélène (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1984), 75.

42 Melanie Nolan, “The Reality and Myth of New Zealand Egalitarianism: Explaining the Pattern of a Labour Historiography at the Edge Of Empires,” *Labour History Review* 72, no. 2 (August 2007): 119, <https://doi.org/10.1179/174581807X224560>.



Figure 25. Isabella Dampney, *Feast of the Ass*, oil on canvas, dishwasher, 2022. Photo by Sam Hartnett.



Figure 26. Tala Madani, *Oven lit nude*, oil on linen, 96.5 x 111.8 cm, 2018. Portikus, Frankfurt. Copyright the Artist. Image courtesy of David Kordansky Gallery and 303 Gallery, New York.

The commonality between the painting *Oven lit nude* by Iranian-American artist Tala Madani and *Feast of the Ass* is that both express an unease toward everyday routine. Her work often probes forbidden thoughts through her exaggerated depictions of socially unacceptable behaviour. In the tragi-comic *Oven lit nude*, a naked figure is painted shoving their head into the back of a gas-lit oven positioned in a dull grey space. The painting, made while the artist was pregnant, responds to the duality of the oven as a place of birth and death.⁴³ Madani's painting amalgamates her body as a victim and as a sex object to confronting effect. I see this as her critiquing the expectations placed upon her as a new mother who is considered vulnerable but also objectified as vessel for new life. This contrasts with the loss of sexual identity as she enters motherhood.

Similarly combining vulgarity and political critique, Canadian-American painter Philip Guston's unfinished (within his lifespan) book project *Poor Richard* collects ink caricatures of the Nixon administration. The frontispiece depicts Nixon as a penis and scrotum, accompanied by his national security advisor Henry Kissinger as glasses, attorney general John Mitchell as a pipe, and vice-president Spiro Agnew as golf clubs.⁴⁴ This collection of objects foregrounds the bodily obsession of Guston's rage-filled graphic novel. Like *Feast of the Ass*, and *Oven lit nude*, Guston channels his anger and frustration through absurd caricature. All three artworks embrace lewd humour to puncture a sense of propriety around critique and the expectation of a "mature" argument.

⁴³ Jareh Das, "Tala Madani: 'I Don't Make a Conscious Decision to Subvert the Gaze'," *Ocula*, September 6, 2019, <https://ocula.com/magazine/conversations/tala-madani/>.

⁴⁴ Hyunjee Nicole Kim, "Philip Guston's Nixon Drawings Are a Lesson in Satire," *Apollo Magazine*, May 22, 2017, <https://www.apollo-magazine.com/philip-guston-nixon-drawings-satire/>.

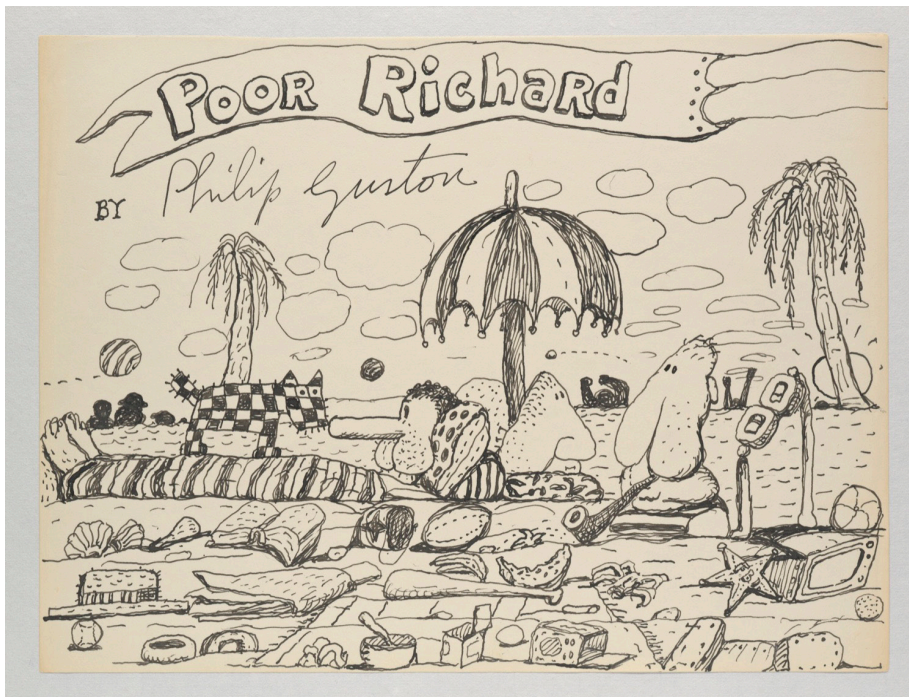


Figure 27. Philip Guston, *Untitled (Poor Richard)*, ink on paper, 26.6 x 35.2cm, 1971.
© The Estate of Philip Guston, Courtesy Hauser & Wirth.

Like *Poor Richard*, my screen-printed charcoal drawing *Google Maps Still Life, Café Where I Worked* is a collection of signifiers that together foreground my interest into the themes of class and masculinity. In the source photo from a Google Maps review of a café I used to work at, the customer has arranged their coffee, biscotti, luxury watch, and self-help book—by men’s rights figurehead Jordan Peterson—into a tidy composition. I caricature the photo through mimicry, drawing attention to the photographer’s performance of masculinity. The hulking watch is flattened into a wobbly doodle. The book title lifts from the page in a perspective mishap. *Google Maps Still Life, Café Where I Worked* channels my frustrations of working in an overtly masculine environment in the affluent area of lakefront downtown Toronto. By drawing the source photo in the exaggerated manner of a caricature, like Guston’s *Poor Richard* series, the screen-print adopts impudent humour towards the subjects depicted.

A clear reading of this particular work is disrupted via the difference in narrative tone between works across the project as a whole. These tonal shifts provide an ambiguous quality, questioning whether they are funny, tragic, or both. Overlaying multiple tones makes me, as the narrator and my re-imaged life, all the more unreliable. The proposition of these works circles back to whether others are in on the joke or if we are laughing alone.

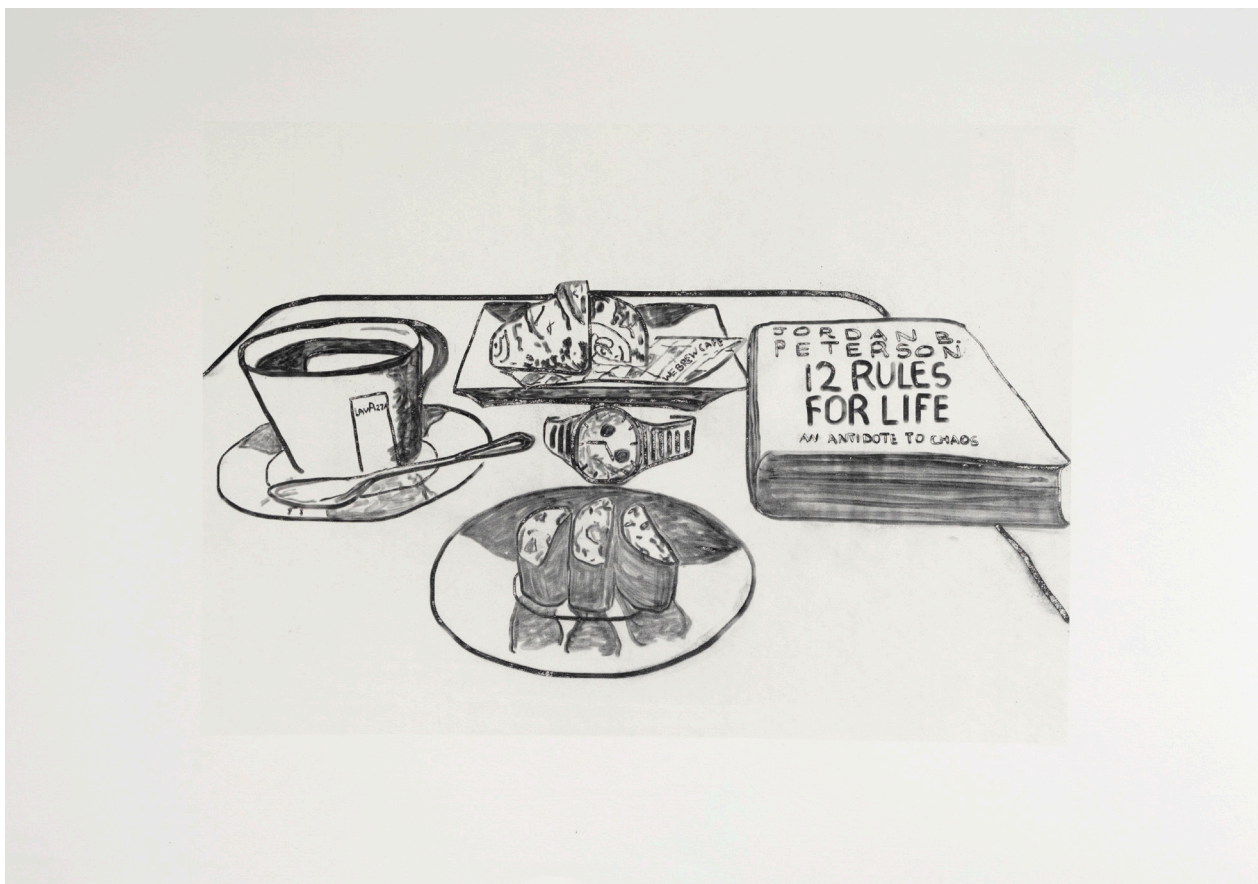


Figure 28. Isabella Dampney, *Google Maps Still Life, Café Where I Worked*, charcoal and print paste screen-print, 70 x 100cm, 2022.

Conclusion

Throughout this MVA practice-led research, I have established an autofictional painting, printmaking, and drawing practice to communicate stories within a singular frame and through the broader sprawling design of a personal archive. The methods of titling, re-imaging, humour, and image arrangement, work to connect artworks together to create a multi-dimensional image of my life that is slippery and unreliable – both to the viewer and to myself.

I am embracing the mutability of memory by using its inconsistent and unpredictable nature as material, understanding each memory as an access point to my memory network. This unfolding process has enabled me to develop a painting practice where each new artwork links together into a chain of images. The unreliable nature of memory has given space for me to focus on the narrative and tonal elements of an artwork, shifting my concerns away from factual accuracy. Understanding memory in this way allows me to move between different periods of my life with ease, bringing them onto the same plane of the present via image-making.

Exercising imaginative approaches to self-invention allows me to push past my own categorisation of binary good/bad experiences, re-imaging them so that I have greater control over the narrative. By re-imaging my experiences, I can further integrate my concerns around social expectations, where I use my own experiences as an entry into a broader narrative. Many of the artworks in this project are tonally ambiguous, moving between tragic, funny, or sad, complicating a clear reading of how the works sit in relation to each other. This project has opened my understanding of identity as a fluid and constructed set of narratives. In this way, I can redefine what it means for me to make personal work in a public setting and present a version of myself to an audience.

Developing autofiction as my main methodology means I can make work situated in a personal context but also have the freedom to explore more deeply into fictional or autobiographical territory as the practice requires. As part of this investigative process, I am finding the specifics of my social critique through the latitude of autofiction. By honing my thematic concerns, I have been able to better relate my work to the “outside world,” bringing an audience in. My intention with this is to engage with the viewer in a nuanced and empathetic reading of experiences. My own preoccupations with misunderstanding social expectations have been the concerns of my making for some time. However, the intensive focus on this subject matter over the project makes me feel present in my day-to-day, where I look forward to the moments that pull me into *being*, which have the potential to become material for the archive.

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Appendix I

Exhibition Room Sheet



Figure 29. *A Child of Divorce* exhibition room sheet, rear and front.

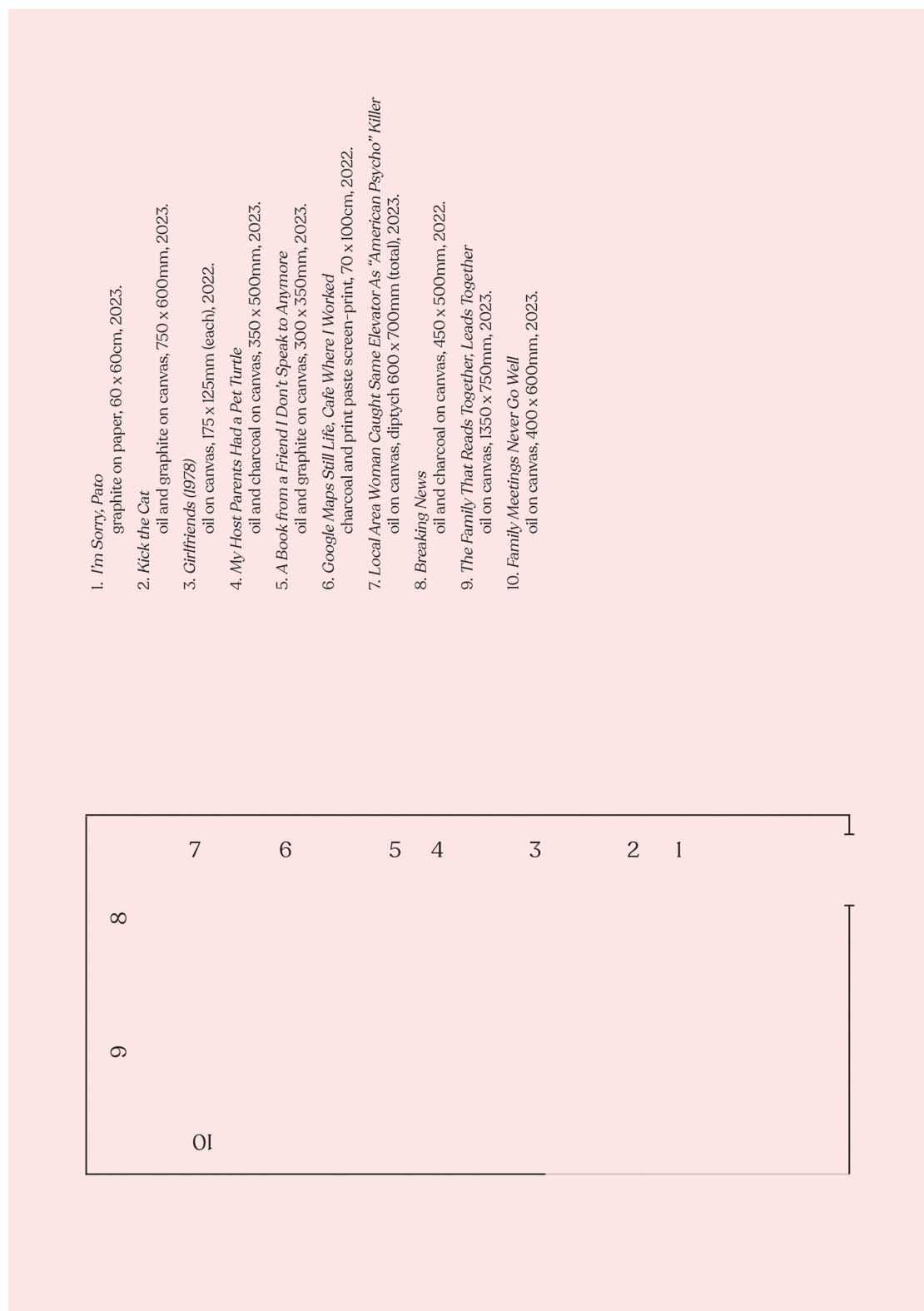


Figure 30. A *Child of Divorce* exhibition room sheet, interior.

Appendix II

A Child of Divorce exhibition documentation

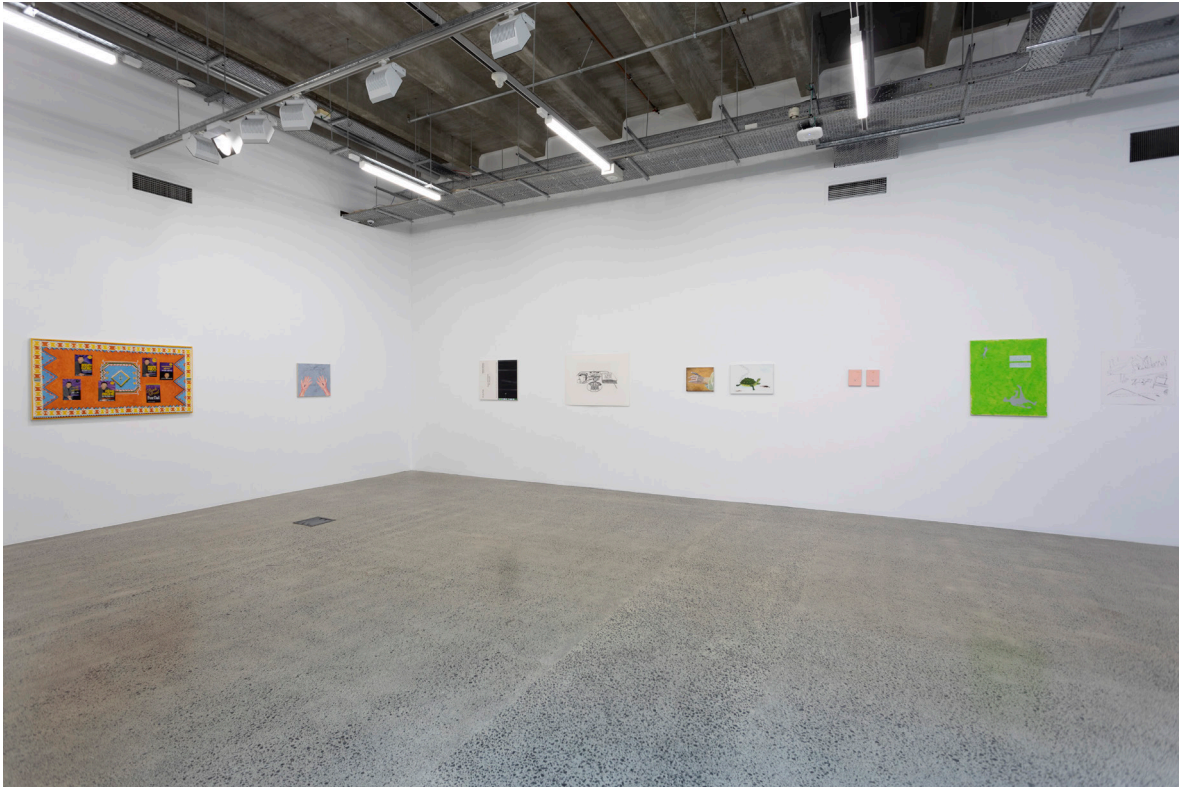


Figure 31. *A Child of Divorce* installation 1, photo courtesy of Paul Chapman.



Figure 32. *A Child of Divorce* installation 2, photo courtesy of Paul Chapman.

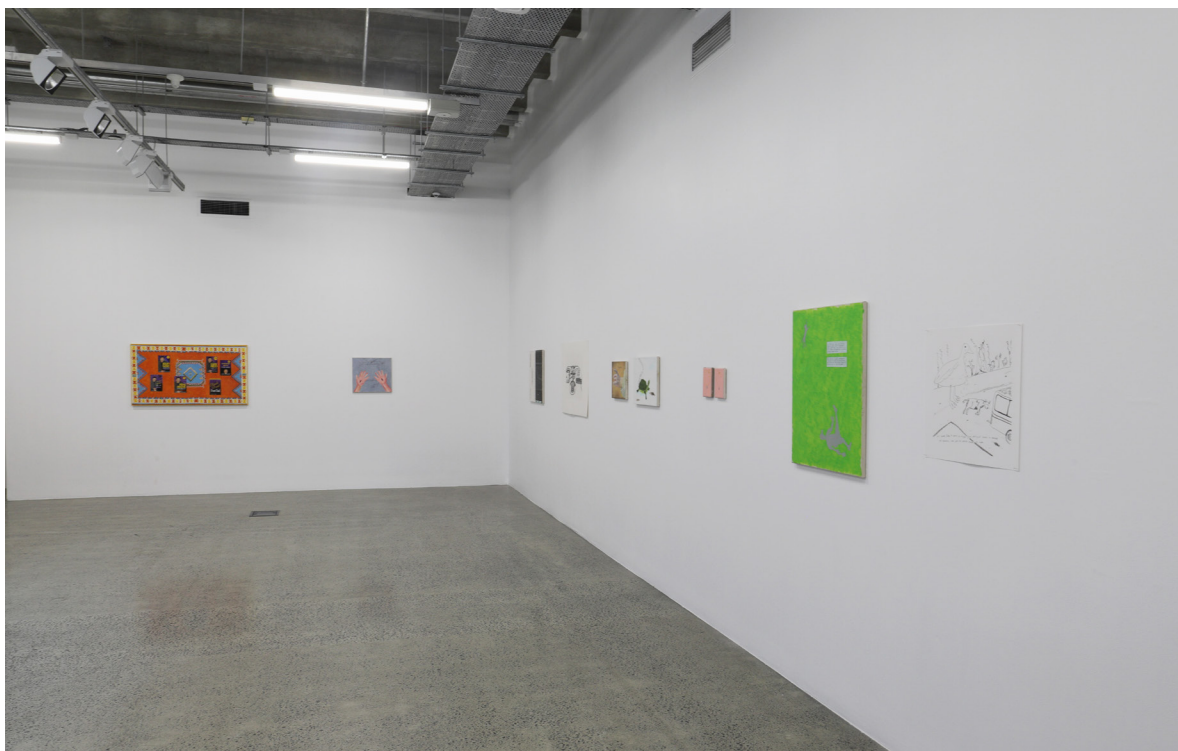


Figure 33. *A Child of Divorce* installation 3, photo courtesy of Paul Chapman.

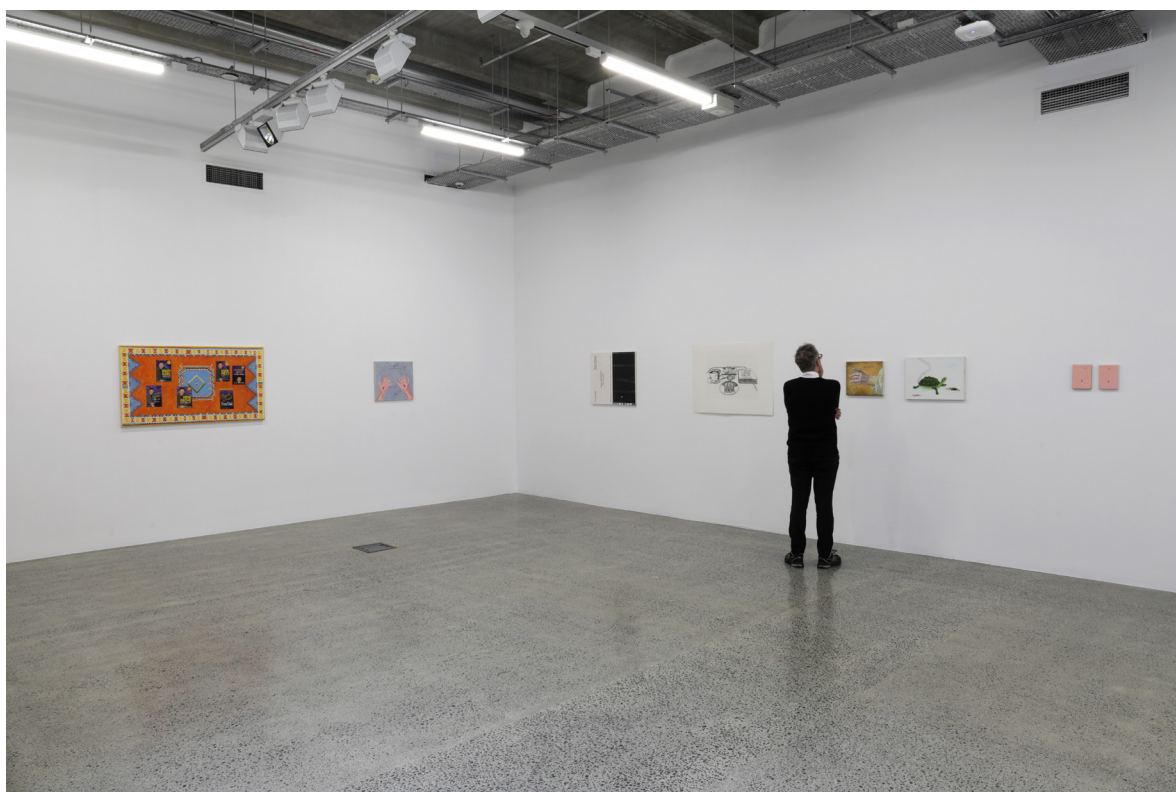


Figure 34. *A Child of Divorce* installation 4, photo courtesy of Paul Chapman.



Figure 35. *A Child of Divorce* installation 5, photo courtesy of Paul Chapman.



Figure 36. *A Child of Divorce* installation 6, photo courtesy of Paul Chapman.



Figure 37. A Child of Divorce installation 7, *The Family That Reads Together, Leads Together*, oil on canvas, 1350 x 750mm, 2023.



Figure 38. *The Family That Reads Together, Leads Together* (detail).



Figure 39. *A Child of Divorce* installation 8, *Family Meetings Never Go Well*, oil on canvas, 400 x 600mm, 2023.