

We have seen footage of these women wearing saris and sandals in the sunlit workshop. We hear that two of the workers are sewing pants, and the others are either affixing labels or appending elastic waist bands. In the dimly lit space, taking in the regular burst of activity of this needle or that machine idly operating, we start conjuring up the gestures being made in India: the handling of the garments, the positioning of the fabric, the adjustment of the labels – the space around the machines seems to vibrate from this remote activity and does not look so grey anymore. The speeches of the opening are scheduled during a break at the clothing factory. The resuming buzz of the machines will bring the addresses to an end.

In her practice, Guinan habitually makes minimal interventions into art and non-art contexts which often require complex logistical and administrative configurations. For *126* © Kerry Guinan, 2014, she temporarily changed the name of a gallery under the terms of a sponsorship agreement, drawing out issues of intellectual property rights. For *Sell Nothing*, 2021, she installed a series of billboards promoting nothingness in Limerick City. For *Portraits*, 2019, a precursor to the present work in its exploration of networked simultaneity, ten people from across the world were paid to pose for a connected live portrait for the duration of the opening hours of their exhibition in Dublin, a web camera on the screen enabled them to watch the visitors in return.

For *The Red Thread*, Guinan speaks of the desire to bring the global production of commodities to a human, intimate level. The project developed through The Complex's Art Factory's open call, which invited experimental projects to be developed within the supported environment of the organisation. Further public support enabled the formation of a production and documentary team and a residency in Bengaluru in February. The film by Anthony O'Connor, accompanying the exhibition, follows the social relationships that developed through the making of the work.

As I'm writing this review, images of Gian Maria Tosatti's installation for the Italian pavilion at the Venice Biennale, *History of Nights and Destiny of Comets*, are circulating online. One of them shows a vast warehouse filled with industrial sewing machines. I'm first struck by the similarities and then by the differences in the manifestation and intention of the two artworks. In collecting materials from closed workshops, Tosatti recreates the experience of a factory floor and plays to the notion that our societies are post-industrial, a notion which Guinan's work necessarily challenges in focusing on the workers and industries that we, in the global north, still rely on.

To understand the complex systems that support how we feed, dress or inform ourselves is one thing, but they feel abstract and out of the grasp of our imagination. Through the transmitted pressure of a foot on the pedal of a sewing machine it is the entire body of a worker making our clothes that Guinan conveys in the gallery. Colloquially, a red thread ties together disparate parts into a common narrative, and one can't help also recalling that it is by following Ariadne's thread that Theseus made it out of the labyrinth.

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Emii Alrai, 'A Core of Scar', installation detail

## Emii Alrai: A Core of Scar

Hepworth Wakefield, 7 April to 4 September

Three huge wedges of polystyrene, painted to resemble weathered rock, intersect the gallery space of Emii Alrai's show at Hepworth Wakefield. 'A Core of Scar' was commissioned by Iniva as part of a three-year programme, Future Collect, intended to both explore and increase the diversity of gallery collections in the UK; the work will be added to Wakefield's permanent collection upon the exhibition's conclusion. Alrai's practice has often used effects of weathering and scarification, along with faux-naïve modelling techniques, to bring connotations of immense age and museological rarity to objects crafted from cheap or throwaway materials, such as air-dry clay or polystyrene. The resultant ambience was previously evident in the artist's 2020 show at the Tetley in Leeds, 'The High Dam', where the central, boat-shaped sculpture suggested some fantastical hybrid of global myth and history, a Viking ship burial containing Mesopotamian artefacts.

The present selection of objects does not so much mimic ancientness as assert its own, singular presence: there is a quality of worked-over animation to the huge drifts of plastic that gives them something of the quality of giant talismans or objects of worship. Stuck in the top of each formation are rows of metal armatures supporting glass vessels, each based on a clay prototype moulded by the artist, bearing the marks of its rough-and-ready forebear. The artful vulgarity of form might bring to mind Jean Dubuffet; Alrai's reference points for the work include Ian Auld (1926–2000), a Brighton-born potter who set up a pottery department in an art school in Baghdad and became influenced by Persian ceramics.

The sensory and tactile qualities of the sculpture are given depth and intensity by some awareness of the contexts that gave rise to them. Research undertaken in close collaboration with curator Amber Li – whose work on the show is also supported by Future Collect – took Alrai from a glass studio just south of John O'Groats to Land's End via Gordale Scar in the Yorkshire Dales. This UK-wide tour of jagged rock formations and coastlines, from the abrupt edges of the Scottish north-east to Cornwall's vaulting cliffs,

also took in human-made sites of spiritual significance: the Hill o' Many Stanes in northern Scotland, the Devil's Arrows in Yorkshire and the Nine Maidens in Cornwall. Considered in relation to this fieldwork, 'A Core of Scar' seems to become an assemblage of endings; the 'cliff-faces' (as the artist calls them) express something of the violence of abutment and isolation, a closing-off or sealing-in with oblique resonances in the new nativist Britain. Their allusion to standing stones perhaps explains something of their enigmatic pull.

Most strikingly, the almost fleshy texture and hue of the rock-faces brings to mind bodily mass and volume, and it's in this sense that the ideas of scarification implicit in the show's title take on their most pointed relevance. Landmasses contain within their seams and scars the evidence of their own slow drift across the earth, of their shaping and splitting by glaciers - violent motion played out over millennia. There is a faint analogy here with diasporic narratives: stories of bodies that contain the buried trauma of relocation. In its broader suggestions of somatic form, each drift of plastic with its upward-reaching arms - extending strange offerings in supplication, friendship, or aggression - seems to become a sprawling amalgam of human bodies, conjoined or congealed into a single mass.

To the rear are three vitrines containing photographs, sketches and ephemera such as animal bones that serve to document - or perhaps fictionalise - the show's conception. The Gott Collection of maps, sketches and architectural drawings, documenting the 18th-19th century landscapes and cultures of Yorkshire, was a particular touchstone for Alrai. A cabinet of objects related to the exhibition's Yorkshire origins is accompanied by two featuring materials from Cornwall and Scotland. These cases contain, as it were, the conceptual bones of the show, reflecting the artist's interest in performing and redefining museological processes. A set of accompanying quotes includes an excerpt from Ursula le Guin's *Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction* which adds further layers of potential significance to Alrai's glass vessels: 'we've all heard all about the sticks and spears and swords ... but we have not heard about the thing to put things in, the container for the thing contained. That is a new story.' It's a testament to the sensory richness of this artist's work, however, that her sculptural forms ultimately stand apart from the cultural, political and intellectual contexts they evoke, holding a strange and wordless resonance of their own.

**Greg Thomas** is a critic and editor based in Glasgow.

## Performance

### Lonnie Holley: The Growth of Communication and The Edge of What

On a Saturday evening on central London's Shaftesbury Avenue in the 'work-in-progress' venue Stone Nest, Alabama-born artist and musician Lonnie Holley sat behind his keyboard. A patchwork quilt wrapped the keyboard almost completely, except for the keys on which Holley's ringed hands gently rested. The quilt was made by Mary McCarthy using recycled materials and is based on one of Holley's woodblock prints. It features a profile of a face, framed by different blue patches of fabric. The wrapped keyboard becomes an artwork itself, encompassing Holley's multidisciplinary practice as a whole.

Holley's performance at Stone Nest on 14 May marked the opening of his exhibition 'The Growth of Communication' at Edel Assanti, which features salvaged objects that he collected during recent trips across the UK. These objects were assembled around the same time he filmed *The Edge of What* - a site-specific performance film organised by Artangel and set in Orford Ness, a former military testing site during the world wars that is now a nature reserve for migrating birds.

On the face of it, the common element between the performance, the exhibition, and the film is their tangible connection to the UK; what really connects them, however, is how Holley assembles singular sounds and discarded objects into complete songs and artworks that portray a complex interplay of racial injustice, poverty and the environment as a collective problem (it is perhaps no surprise that his family thought he would be a preacher given his capacity to stir crowds).

Holley began his performance by clarifying that he 'chose songs about the world' that reflected the present. Often referred to as 'improvisations' - he never performs the same song twice - Holley's songs can only be relived through one's memory. The lyrics I remember most vividly are, 'I was in the nest when the war broke out', repeated with intensity and echoed by his former student, Lee Baines, as he supported Holley on stage with vocals and guitar. While listening to this song in particular, I could not help but think of one of Holley's works on display at the gallery, *I Knew They Were Mine*, 2020, an assemblage consisting of an old wooden

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Candida Powell-Williams, *Tilt Shift*, 2021. The artist. Courtesy the artist.