We Contain Multitudes

Dundee Contemporary Arts, 7 February to 26 April

'We Contain Multitudes', installation view

'We Contain Multitudes' is a show of four disabled artists, Andrew Gannon, Daisy Lafarge, Jo Longhurst and Nnena Kalu. The exhibition grew out of a larger collaborative project, involving DCA, Collective Gallery in Edinburgh and Lux Scotland, which aims to create a more disabled-friendly Scottish art world by supporting research, commissioning and advocacy.

Of course, there is a difference between a disabled artist and an artist making work about their disability. While the four presented here are implicitly grouped under the latter, there are complexities to unpick in the way that disability is negotiated, manifested or elided in each of the artist's practices. In terms of specifics, Gannon's contributions combine sculptural works made from plaster casts of the artist's left arm, stopping just short of the elbow, with prints created by directly exposing his body on to the printing screen. The works follow on from Gannon's Fruitmarket show 'Impressions', 2022–23, in which polyp or orchid-like constructions are grafted together from several arm-casts. At once organic and alien-seeming, these pieces remind us of the ways in which disability has been both demonised and exoticised over the course of art history.

Gannon's vivid blue screenprints pay an ostentatious and ironic homage to Yves Klein's infamous *Anthropometries*, 1960–62, where naked female bodies were smeared with pigment and used as living paintbrushes. With names such as *Men's Health* and *Hey Baby*, Gannon's prints mirror the generically sexy or cool poses that the artist has affected atop the image – for instance, seeming to brush his hair back in rock-star fashion. The artist here nods to the pressures brought to bear on disabled masculine identity by the wellness and fitness industry which prizes physical perfection.

Longhurst's practice shares plant-life themes with Gannon's triffid, prosthetis-based sculptures. There is, for example, a huge wall-vinyl photograph, *A Dangerous Insinuation (detail)*, 2021–26, of a detailed patch of bindweed close to the artist's studio, speckled with pink flowers. The title, taken from a 19th-century botanical textbook, nods to the ways ableist culture has propagated comparisons between undesirable human bodies and non-human life, both flora and fauna. The recuperative gesture Longhurst performs is simple but effective. Simply let the bindweed – a pestiferous and invasive lifeform – be viewed in extreme close-up and let its endless vitality and singularity shine through. Similarly, *Crip (We Contain Multitudes)*, 2022–26, takes as its raw material video-stills of crawling bindweed. Each of the 143 framed photographs that fill one corner of the gallery has been created by printing out the same image at various sizes; these were then placed in the artist's studio on top of each other in a spiral formation, after which Longhurst waited for sunlight to curl the edges of the sheets. The resulting, subtly sculptural work is then itself rephotographed. There is a methodical, incremental working through of subtle visual metaphor here, testimony to the value of inhabiting what the artist has called 'crip time'.

Turner Prize-winner Nnena Kalu – the first learning-disabled artist to win the award – includes several painting and sculptural works. The five pieces which dominate the largest gallery space, *Hanging Sculptures. Norway/Dundee*, 2024–26, are constructed around frames of timber and plastic tubing. Everyday materials, such as adhesive and video tapes, textiles, threads and paper, have been thrown and coiled around one another, creating exuberant junk sculptures. Gallery copy describes these works as 'an extension of [Kalu's] physical movements', establishing connections with action painting and suggesting a kind of choreographic quality, although I struggle to see them as more than the sum of their parts: diverting, multicoloured assemblages of found material. Kalu's paintings are also constructed from repetitive coiling gestures, forming vortices and cocoon-shapes from acrylic, pen and pencil on paper. There are some interesting, tachiste-like textural effects created by scraping the surface of the picture.

Kalu's works bear conceptual parallels with Lafarge's much smaller paintings, seven of which occupy a wall behind a 'sick garden' comprising chairs and couches placed on fake grass, where visitors can read a book of the artist's poetry. Lafarge also works with numerous materials, painting with soft brushes and Japanese watercolours, sometimes painting on the floor to help manage the chronic pain of Ehlers-Danlos syndrome. Flowing from these specificities of context, Lafarge's work inhabits a softer, more aqueous realm than Kalu's energy-filled vortices. There are dots, spirals and flower-shapes swimming in pastel pinks, blues and yellows, while names like *The Invisible Worm* and *Black Tulip* hint at romantic and gothic intertextualities. In a nod to the disability that conditions her painting process, little bows of kinesiology tape secure the paper to its mounts – although the gesture seems, literally, peripheral to the work.

As with Kalu's paintings and sculptures, Lafarge's pieces are in some profound sense shaped by disability, and by the social barriers and gateways to its management. It is not entirely clear that they are, in any central way, *about* disability, at least not in the same way as Gannon and Longhurst's practices. This is not to touch on Lafarge's poems, and, in any case, it's not a criticism; rather, it's a point of contrast that might seem to be obfuscated by grouping four very different artists under the banner of disability. (The overcrowding of the largest gallery space rather compounds this conceptual muddle.)

In short, if Gannon and Longhurst are working with concepts and motifs that engage with some of the more pernicious cultural tropes around disability, Lafarge and Kalu are more inclined to abstraction. While their work is ineluctably shaped by the intensities of inhabiting disabled bodies, its value seems less bound up in its capacity to codify critique. Is something of the spirit of this work lost by presenting it as a commentary on the conditions of its making or, perhaps, is too much

claimed for it? These are questions I'm left with at the conclusion of a thought-provoking and, ultimately, life-affirming exhibition.

Greg Thomas is a critic, poet, and artist based in Glasgow. He has co-edited with Julie Johnstone, Edwin Morgan's *A Home in Space: Selected Concrete, Visual, and Sound Poetry*, forthcoming from Reaktion.

Abigail Reynolds: Walking A Capella

Newlyn Art Gallery and The Exchange, Newlyn and Penzance, 9 December to 2 May

Given the role that time plays in Abigail Reynolds's work, it might be useful to think of 'Walking A Cappella', shown in both Newlyn Art Gallery and The Exchange in Penzance, as structured by a pendulum swinging between control and release. On the one hand, the exhibition reveals a high degree of strategy, as Reynolds anticipates the viewer's movement through the galleries with precision, using alignment, obstruction and return to unsettle the viewing position while, on the other, there are moments that appear to be characterised by a kind of open-spirited naivety. Colour, transparency and surface are affirmed for their own sake, while the artist's narration in her own voice – in both the short film *Flux*, 2020, and the three-screen installation *A Book of Holes*, 2025 – appeals in an overly straightforward way to a received cultural idea of authenticity. The suspicion may arise that this innocence is itself calculated, that it ultimately serves strategy, but it is also possible that the oscillation between extremes is the point: a way of introducing turbulence, and of ceding control from the artist to forms of chance.

Gyre (Triptych), 2025, is one of the more recently completed works. On first encounter, it reads in an affirmative register: ornate steel frameworks support pieces of coloured and textured glass positioned in direct relation to the large windows of the Newlyn Studio gallery. Rather than resisting the difficulty of the space, Reynolds embraces it, doubling the window so that the iconic coastal view beyond is refracted through distorting lenses. Like several other works in the exhibition, *Gyre* has a backstory, here provided by *Flux*, a short film shown on a monitor nearby. Reynolds describes her engagement with glass-making techniques specific to the location:

Abigail Reynolds, *Untitled (film still)* from *A Book of Holes*, 2025

sand collected from local beaches, seaweed gathered and burned to produce ash, the 'flux' of the title, which lowers the melting point and aids the vitrification process. The film provides a narrative to support the sculptural installation. Yet it also exposes a weakness as the tone of first-person narration – focused on idyll, family and collective labour – risks reducing complexity to wholesomeness.

In the main gallery at Newlyn, the floor is held by a group of freestanding works, again using steel frameworks and coloured, textured glass – here sourced rather than made by the artist. *When Words are Forgotten*, 2018, is the largest of the group and the most resistant to stable interpretation. Shown previously in contexts that draw out its ecclesiastical associations, here the prefabricated materials emphasise an alignment with late 20th-century modern sculpture. The work seems to point simultaneously towards construction and dilapidation, a temporal ambiguity consistent with its origins (the work was made following a research trip exploring the sites of lost libraries).

Tol, 2016, and *Rock Pool*, 2024, are more contained by comparison. Less open to reconfiguration by their surroundings, they align more closely with early 20th-century sculptural traditions – an alignment underscored by the frame of *Tol*, appropriated from a print by Barbara Hepworth, whom Reynolds cites as a formative influence. These split loyalties produce a quiet argument within the exhibition, opening an undecidable space in which no single art-historical position settles comfortably.

A related tension structures the installation at The Exchange. Here, the arrangement of works anticipates the viewer's route through the space. Reynolds has spoken of her intrigue that visitors might be sent in directions requiring them to turn back, encountering one work again after seeing another. Along the way, the spot-lit glass constructions on tall plinths that make up *Masks 1–9*, 2023, initially resemble the hard-to-identify curios of an antique shop. But these objects reappear as props in the three-screen installation *A Book of Holes*, shown in the darkened space beyond. The film draws together references to fossilised remains, mining practices and unexpected formal correspondences across deep time. In this context, the 'masks' acquire a different charge. No longer curios, they begin to resemble figures from speculative fiction, a circular gathering of alien forms that gestures toward a future beyond humanity.

Considered as a whole, the exhibition suggests that Reynolds's most productive gesture is neither strategy nor naivety, but an unstable reach beyond both. The apparent co-presence of control and innocence indicates a risk, a ceding of agency that cannot be accounted for simply as calculation or belief. In 'Walking A Cappella', materials and images are allowed to work back against intention, unsettling both the viewer and the artist's own position. It is here, in that relinquishing of control, that the exhibition finds its most compelling force.

Neil Chapman is a writer and researcher based in Cornwall.