

FIGURE

Issue 24

CONVERSATION WITH MADISON BYCROFT

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FIGURE



GARGOYLED

Plaster, resin, jesmonite, wolfs taxidermy tongue, enamel, rope, hook, variable dimension, 2019.

**CONVERSATION WITH
MADISON BYCROFT**



Installation view of “Gong Farmer, Shit Stirrer and the Maiden of Grief”,
1646, The Hague, Netherlands, 2019.

Rémi Guezodje

First, I would like to know how you first encountered art and according to you, how did you become an artist?

Madison Bycroft

My mother sent me to a Steiner School in Australia, where there was an emphasis on creativity. In some ways, art was treated quite traditionally there, but it was also very broad. We did painting but also stone carving and weaving, for example. As a kid, I made theatre productions with friends that we would then perform to ourselves, I made *Take That* mix tapes, and wrote codes. I started college in South Carolina as a painting major, but it wasn't until later after quitting school and travelling for a couple of years, once back in Australia, that I began to think of myself as an "artist".

Rémi Guezodje

Do you have a specific memory that confirmed your interest in art?

Madison Bycroft

As a ten-year-old, I made a performance where I filled a plastic bag with water, stabbed it with a stick, and then watched the water leak out.

Rémi Guezodje

You often create around a narrative weave or its destruction, your work has even been referred to as “narrative fragmented sculptures”, would you consider that a work of art needs a narration or a subtext?

Madison Bycroft

I like the idea of weaving—that there might be several contributing “parts” to a gesture, or to a story. I try to work around something, instead of “on” it, or “about” it ... which invites fragmentation. HP Lovecraft’s famous *Call of Cthulhu* starts: “the most merciful thing in the world is the inability of the human mind to co-relate all its contents”. What is implied is that this inability is merciful to us, but I think the “contents” here could also be the object of mercy.

Rémi Guezodje

And what do you think about the term “narrative fragmented sculptures”?

Madison Bycroft

I guess it’s apt. I work associatively—where one thing is related to another, and then another, and collectively they become a constellation, which is another word for a fragmented narrative, perhaps. Resonances are found in many ways: in theory, colour,



RUSES AND REFUSALS: DIOGENES

Sculpture with jesmonite, plaster, fake tongue and found shoe, video, 60 min, 2019.



Exhibition view of “Future, Former, Fugitive”, Palais de Tokyo, Paris, France, 2019.



OWL RELIEF

Plaster, jesemonite, acrylic paint, 2D animation on digital monitor, 20 second loop, 2019.

rhythm, form... and sometimes are inarticulable. I like to make worlds instead of discrete works... things are stretched outside of themselves...

Of course, there is a specific idea or reference or intuition that is foundational to the work, but whilst I hope there is some trace of that, somewhere, I'm also quite happy to be betrayed by the material, or watch it wander off, hide, and become something totally different. Explanation kills the cat.

Rémi Guezodje

In the case of your films or performances, what is your process, do you write before creating, or do you do it all along?

Madison Bycroft

I think there are different approaches for different parts of my practice. My recent films have become much more textual, and scripted, with characters that speak. My so-called “writing practice” though is honestly closer to damp notes in the bottom of my bag, stuck together with a forgotten banana.

When I work with scripts, I am not totally loyal to them. I like to improvise parts, let “mistakes” live on, and leave space for other performers to try something if they want.

My drawing practice is the least scripted part of my work. I was on residency in Marseille in 2017 and wanted to do something with my



RAG OF CLOTH, ODE TO THE VAMPIRE SQUID

Video, 8 min, 2015.



ANTIHERO

Performance with: Lauren Abineri, Madison Bycroft, Jules Chapple, Carly Fern,
Matt O'Brien, Danielle Reynolds, Costumes: Silvia Romanelli,
Australian Centre for Contemporary Art, Melbourne, Australia, 2019.



BUREAU OF NEUTRALITY AND THE HALF SUNG

Video, 24 min, 2016.

hands that was meditative. I bought some chalks and tried to make images without strategy or plan. I wanted to follow the drawing as it was happening. Now it is shifting a bit—I am thinking more about composition before beginning, and repeating forms that I enjoy.

Rémi Guezodje

Your work seems to revolve around questioning the notion of identity through the dissolution of the idea of self, is art a matter of identity to you?

Madison Bycroft

Sometimes I don't feel like I'm very visible in my work but then people also tell me the contrary. But self-representation is not my intention. I have been performing a performance lecture for the last two years called *Mollusc Theory: Soft Bodies*. After one iteration, someone described the work to me as being a performance of so many different Madisons, such a proliferation of subjectivities, that by the end you have no idea who Madison is. I feel that this is perhaps an appropriate descriptor for my practice in general.

I am interested in identity politics only via multiplication, or complete negation. I oscillate. On the one hand, it is, of course, important to recognise and give space to identities that may have been silenced for example, but I also want to relate beyond identity



MOLLUSK THEORY: SOFT BODIES

Image to accompany performance lecture, digital collage, 2017.



THE MOLLUSK THEORY

Performance, Live Works Performance Act Award, Trento, Italy, 2017.

markers, or to think in ways that do not fix this as this or that or any other thing.

If I think of myself in the negative and strip away the words that have accumulated around me, then perhaps I might become so light that even with a whistle you might blow me away.

Rémi Guezodje

The notions of drama, theatricality and a so-called “performance of everyday life” cross your work from the beginning, often playing with titles, referring to deadpan theatre and burlesque comedy, or creating performances that resemble theatre plays, how do you define your work regarding these concepts?

Madison Bycroft

I, in fact, love the formal structures of classical theatre—the wings, the *souffleur*, the chorus, the backdrop, stage wagons, pulley systems, the orchestra, the script, the epilogue, etc. These structures can also be found framing the performances of self in everyday life, where staging has a relationship to surveillance, state sanctioned visibility and what performances are “acceptable”. Deadpan performance, for example, might be a form of resistance that refuses to comply with what is acceptable. Excessive theatricality, on the other hand, can not only be used for pleasure, but as a mirroring tool, reflecting performances that might have become so-called



**CUTTLEFISH DISGUISED AS A SUNBURNT MAN
ON THE PRECIPICE OF DEATH**

Chalk on paper, 100 × 150 cm, 2019.

**CUTTLEFISH DISGUISED AS AN OVER-EGGED MAN
WITH A BRUISED EGO**

Chalk on paper, 100 × 150 cm, 2019.

naturalised to the point of invisibility. Masculinity might be a good example of this.

Rémi Guezodje

Looking at the evolution of your work, I would say that there is a certain idea of aesthetic proliferation as you progress in time. Is there a rupture in your aesthetic journey? What visual choices do you do differently?

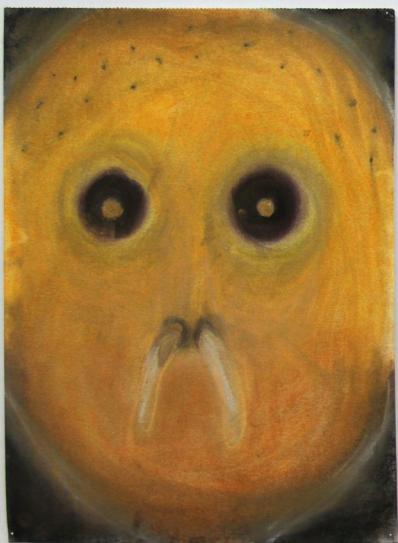
Madison Bycroft

When I was doing my undergrad, I was constrained by financial, spatial, temporal and confidence economies. I used my own body and voice a lot; it was cheaper and easier to direct myself.

Performance, at that time, was practically non-existent in my art school—and when it emerged, it was always to the camera. It was only years later, when I went to do my MFA in Rotterdam that I encountered live performance, reading, sound performance, etc., happening within an art context. Performance was hyperactive. One of the tutors asked me to justify the camera in several of my very early works. I think this was a rupture in my work. I began thinking differently about attention, exchange, and my own demands.



Exhibition view of "Je, Me", Adélaïde Gallery, Marseille, France, 2017.



COMPOSED BODIES

Chalk pastel drawings, 29,8 × 40,5 cm each, 2017.



COMPOSED BODIES #9

Chalk pastel drawings, 75 × 110 cm, 2017.

Rémi Guezodje

You use costumes as political statements, you also play around with homophones to underline the relations between differences.

Would you say that you use the theatre—as an oral tradition and staging technique—as a tool for social criticism of the art world or our gender and social condition?

Madison Bycroft

Yes, but I would also say that I use it as a tool for self-criticism, or self-mockery even. At what point does social criticism become more knowledgeable-than-thou-ness and give way to a proclivity to preachiness... But then again, thinking of the dead pan, for example, as a strategic mode of giving nothing, of refusing compliance, is immediately political. Maybe everything is political. Perhaps what I mean is that I don't have any answers, just lots of questions and confusions.

In relation to the art world, I have been thinking about the politics of judgement and how we “read” work, how we make decisions about what we see and the performativity of that looking.

Rémi Guezodje

How do you tackle that in your work?



RUSES AND REFUSALS: THETIS

Four channel digital video, colour, sound, 60 min, 2019.



Installation view of “Gong Farmer, Shit Stirrer and the Maiden of Grief”,
1646, The Hague, Netherlands, 2019.

Madison Bycroft

I like to dress up and dress down surfaces, revealing and concealing bodies. My masculine and feminine drag characters are also part of this—the presence of multiple gender and identity performances, as opposed to only drag kinging, are important, it helps me avoid thinking, reinforcing or reproducing essentialist binaries. Perhaps a somewhat plastic ‘i’ emerges iteratively through these performances, that are at once a critique, a parody, and a proposal. My recent performance at Palais de Tokyo and the Australian Centre for Contemporary Art, included costumes designed by Silvia Romaneli. She fabricated these elegant and extreme gowns out of duvet covers—they take up a lot of space. When a group of performers wearing them huddle together, they create a visual continuum, they share a surface. It was important to me that the costumes could obscure the body entirely, be taken off, and used as a blanket or covering. They are very explicitly revealing and concealing bodies.

Rémi Guezodje

Is there a parallel in between the art scene and the theatre scene in your work, extending to a critical opinion towards the art world?

Madison Bycroft

There is certainly theatricality to “Networking”, “name dropping”,

and the way that we represent ourselves in artists statements, interviews etc., but these things are not art-world specific.

Rémi Guezodje

What is the status of the wallpaper in your work? It seems to go beyond the idea of a backdrop and gives a context to your work.

Madison Bycroft

I think it is a world-making device. It gives a mood or a tone or an environment in which to frame or situate the other work.

But I also don't want it to be thought of as secondary... I think perhaps that is why my large-scale drawings are often somehow excessive—to help them be a competitor for attention. I am not really interested in making a “field” in which the “figure” becomes actualised and stands out... I like that a visual experience can be labyrinthine or noisy and over-generous.

Rémi Guezodje

When did you start making large-scale images?

Madison Bycroft

The first ones were for an exhibition at CAC Bretigny in 2018; then I made a set of three that were installed on a pulley system for the Rennes Biennale. Those for Rennes are in some way my favourite



RIDOS TEAM

Four panneled chalk drawing, chalk on paper, 800 × 500 cm, 2019.

and least favourite. The pulley system is very cool—I was inspired by *A Night at The Opera* by the Marx Brothers, but it also got me thinking about how quickly worlds can change, the guillotine motion is fitting. These first drawings were so decorative and compositionally confused ... there was no organizing principle. I like that but I also feel that it is quite difficult to look at them. Too-much-info, and excessive detailing are perhaps a scream, or a tool that might distract a viewer, a detour or a red herring. I hope that it makes difficult capturing, or that the process of reading is unsettled.

Rémi Guezodje

Theory, text and concepts seem to have a great importance in your approach, can you talk a bit about the concepts, authors, books that influence you the most? Is art a theoretical matter for you?

Madison Bycroft

Last year, someone wrote a short text about an exhibition I was in and said that I used an associative methodology. It was a simple observation that resonated with me. Association can happen in a very indirect way—but I'm not talking only about the free association... For example, last year I read Anne Carson's incredible book *Eros the Bittersweet*. The book references literature from Ancient Greek Lyric poets to contemporary writers and weaves

together poetic thoughts on eroticism, identity and narrative. She references this Italo Calvino book, *The Non-existent Knight*, a short tale about a knight who thinks and behaves as if he exists but really does not—he is just a shiny suit of empty armour. He is all surface, and the world is reflected in his surface. At the same time, I was looking at the *babuinerie* that proliferated in the margins of medieval illuminated texts. Provocative images added by the readers of texts—copulating nuns, lots of penises, rabbits, and my favourite, fighting snails. The snails reminded me of Calvino's knight—they too are bolstered up with armour bigger than their body. Making my two snails fighting guardians *mon amure* surely holds all of this within it.

I move between writers who are working with history, gender or subjectivity and writers who are sort of playing with or writing about language. I like to focus on specific aspects of language and appropriate them or use them in a misplaced arena. Homophones might make me think of non-homogenising solidarity and the Jolly Roger, erotic intransitivity that does not take an object. The passival, a form of the middle voice, can completely overthrow the way we think of animacy.

Rémi Guezodje

Your work often flirts with the ineffable, yet you link the body to the text, exploring language as human contact, wanting to perform



AFTERNOON

Video, 27 min, 2018.



BUREAU OF NEUTRALITY AND THE HALF SUNG

Video, 24 min, 2016.

language itself, to embody the act of thinking, why is that? Could you define the notion of “middle voice”?

Madison Bycroft

The middle voice is a verbal category outside “active” and “passive”; it might be both, neither, or something else altogether. I wrote my master’s thesis on the middle voice and tried to think it as a mode of being in the world and tried to find it in the work of others. For example, Roland Barthes uses the neutral as a third term that baffles the paradigm of duality. In French, I think it would be similar to the reflexive—*je me lave*—I am washing and being washed at once. Translation is perhaps middle voiced—a certain passivity is necessary to invoke the primary voice, listening and hospitality too.

Rémi Guezodje

One could think of art as a language, do you think there is a paradox in wanting to make art out of an impossible translation, of what is incommunicable?

Madison Bycroft

For a long time, I was convinced only by the violence of language, especially in naming and taxonomical practices. I wanted to work

with what did not fit into language, and the paradoxes therein. Weird fiction uses the ineffable to describe the monstrous, the absolute horror of what cannot be described. How can you talk about the in-articulable? Negative theology is also a form of literature of the unwritable—and has been used by mystics as a way of talking about a god that is infinite or absolutely nothing. X cannot be named, but we have nonetheless called X, “X”. This is “apophasis”—speaking away or unsaying—I think it is used in my practice as a kind of methodology: the possibilities found in the impossibilities of language.

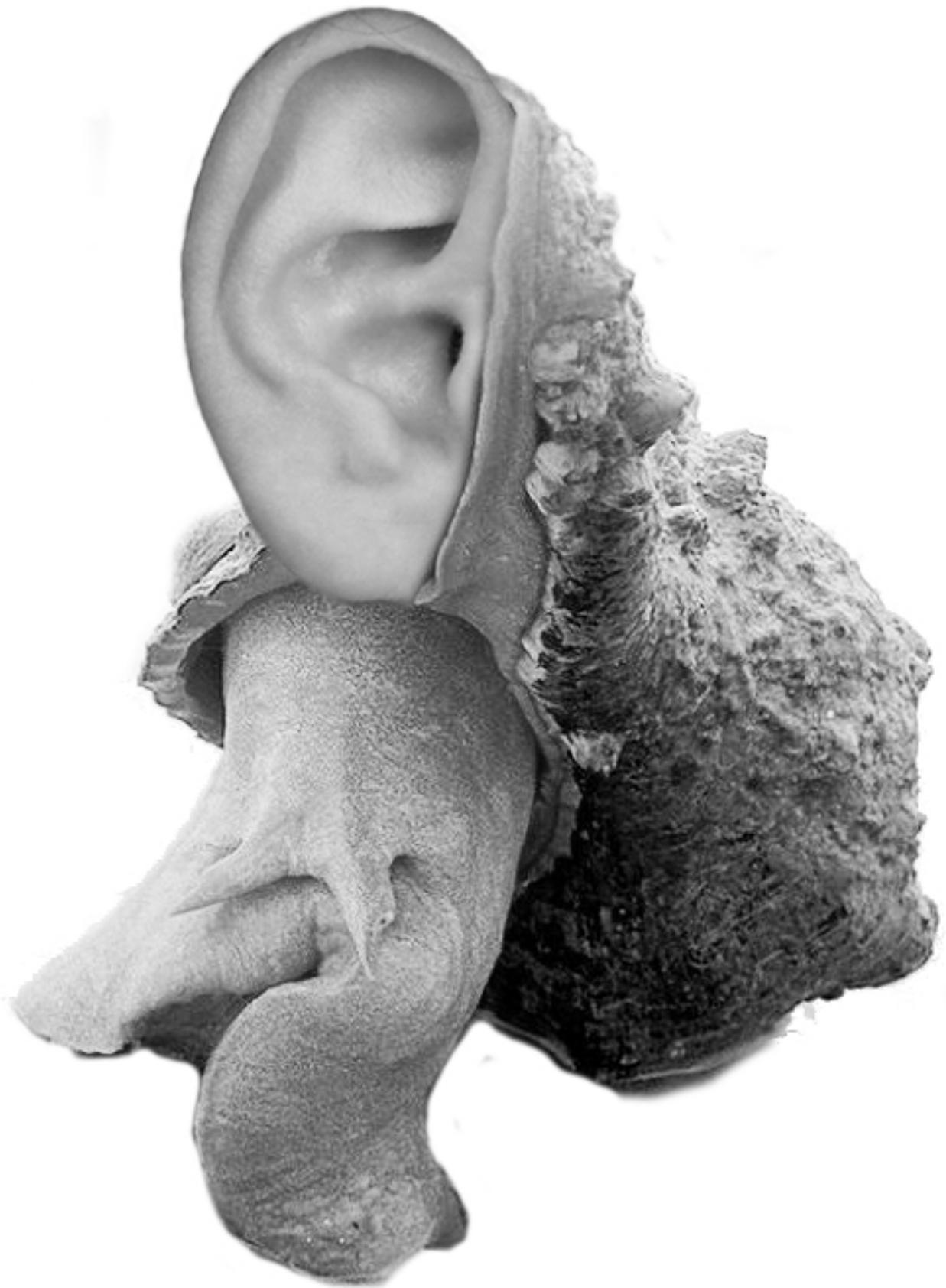
More recently, I have been less fixated on negation, becoming interested in different affirmative linguistic patterns. In Brittany, I learned recently that the speaker, via specific accent on the end of a word, can specify a location’s proximity to the sea.

Rémi Guezodje

On the subject of the sea, can you talk a bit about the octopus and how it is linked to the matter in work?

Madison Bycroft

Discovering weird fiction fuelled my love-fire for cephalopods. The tentacular, the amorphous, the strangling, the vacuum, the gelatinous are all octopodian descriptors that are also used in Weird horror. The cephalopod is an escape artist, fleeing from



CONCH EAR

Digital collage, 2017.



ROUTE CUTTER

Plaster, bubble wrap, beads, trimming, fake eyelashes, paper mache,
acoustic foam chenille, microfibre, 2018.

linguistic capture. It is not surprising that cephalopods are often referenced as the closest thing to alien life on earth. They know in a decentralised way—hapticity is emphasised and writing in ink that they disappear behind—perhaps they are also writers of negative theology.

Rémi Guezodje

Through your exhibitions there are different iterations of the same pieces, moving a work from one space, installation to another; is coherence—even in confusion—important in your work?

Madison Bycroft

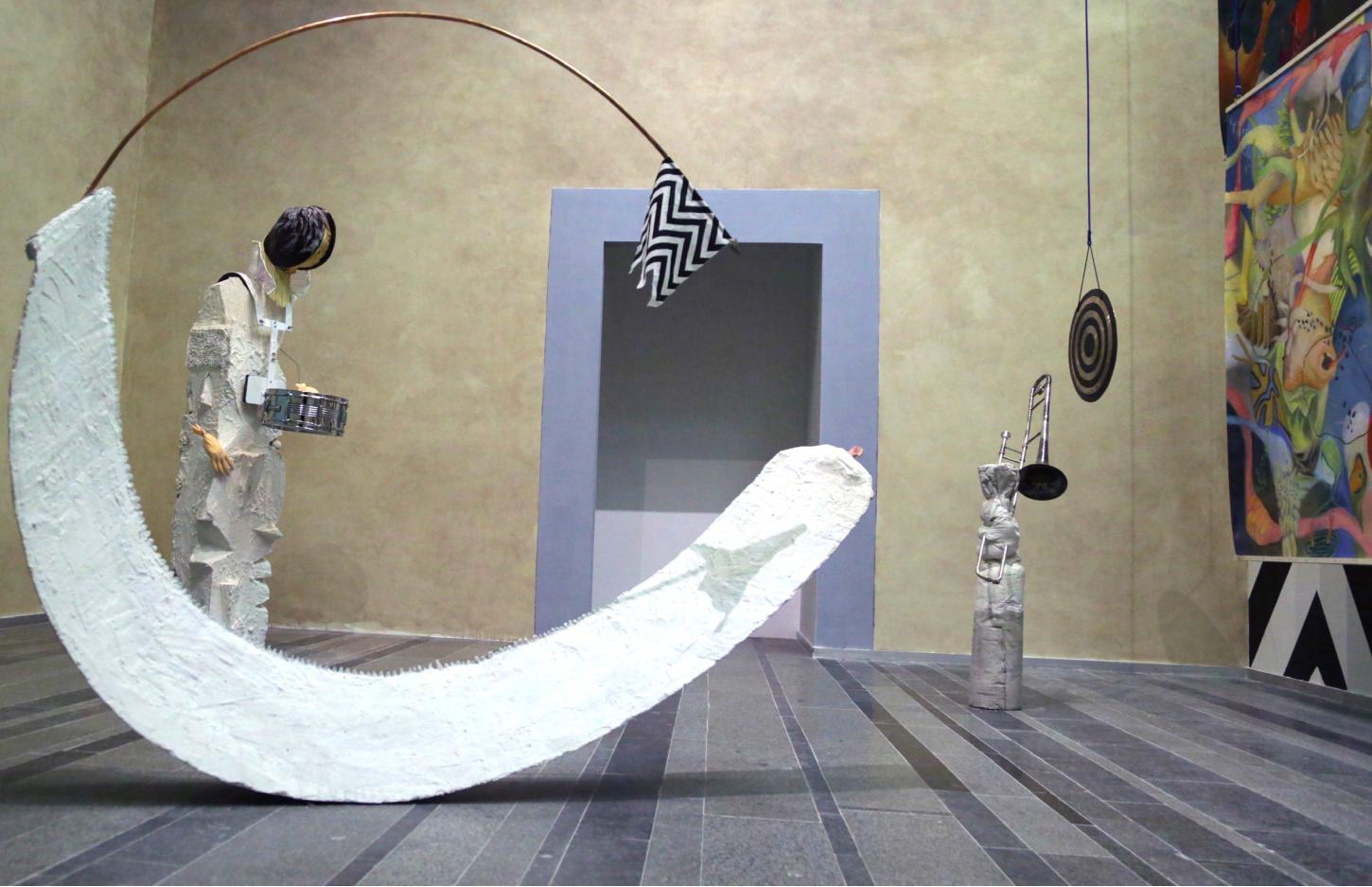
I don't know. On one hand I don't want to make work that is only baffling—Moe from the Simpsons' definition of the postmodern comes to mind: “weird for the sake of weird”; but I am interested in our inability to make sense of something, and how to view in a way that does not try to constantly curtail things into systems and structures that we use to stay sane. How do we cope in confusion?

Rémi Guezodje

In an exhibition, do you think there is a special way for a viewer or a visitor to look at your work? What is your personal relation to contemplation?



Installation view of “Future, Former, Fugitive”, Palais de Tokyo, Paris, 2019.



DEAD PANNE AGAIN (THE BOAT, THE FIELD COMMANDER)

Exhibition view of “Future Generation Art Prize”, Pinchuk Art Center, Kiev, Ukraine, 2019.

Madison Bycroft

I would like to look in a way that follows without closed meanings—without holding things in place. I want to read with the door ajar, so that a whistle can blow it open. I think it's possible to understand in our gut, on our skin, our moustache hairs, or with other antennas. But I also find value in errant textuality—misrecognition and illegibility and poetics of error. Things are not in their proper place, they are disordered, to the side or aslant. This misplacement can be jarring—the order of “shouldness” is called into question.

Rémi Guezodje

Through your work, you often trick the viewer, questioning perception and what seems true or false which leads us to directly dive into the story we think you are telling us.

Madison Bycroft

As a kid I dreamt of being a spy.



JOLLY ROGER AND FRIENDS

Video, 60 min, 2019.

Madison Bycroft, Figure Figure 2020
Courtesy of the artist

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