

19/01/2024—16/03/2024

OUR ROBORS

BEN SANDERSON

The exhibition consists of several wall-like works that are composed together to create temporary rooms within the gallery. The walls are created by reusing old paintings in various states: primed and painted, dyed, cropped and quilted back together again, pulped and pressed into rag paper. They have a more deliberate 'front' and a more accidental 'back', each playing a role in two different spaces. They hold smaller paintings, embedded and framed, a process that has involved sifting, sorting and reactivating a decade of old work.

“The fronts are where most of my energy goes. Top stitched and carefully placed blocks of colour fall into pattern, often punctuated by smaller paintings. Paintings have gone back to their material nature. The selected ones are pruned and arranged within their borders, walls of collaged thought.”

“The backs are the closest I have got to a fully improvised way of working; they surprise me every time. It's like crawling through a hedge. They hold all the waste subconscious thoughts. They are the bits I don't want to see or the bits I don't know what to do with. Often the fronts are trying to clear space in my mind or create less in the room, but the backs aren't planned for. The blank areas on the front are often found on the backs of old paintings. It's getting a bit confusing now, as the fronts are often made from old backs and the backs are made from old fronts.”

SOUTH WEST SHOWCASE

The South West Showcase is a recurring project, established by MIRROR in 2013 as a strategic response to the lack of talent development and professional exhibition opportunities for artists based in the region. The showcase aims to support contemporary artists working and living in the South West through a year-long programme of mentoring and support with an exhibition outcome, presenting a long-term commitment to profiling and supporting the practices of artists in this region.

ARTIST BIOGRAPHY

Ben Sanderson (b.1986) holds a BFA from Falmouth University, and in 2017 took part in Syllabus III, a roaming study programme partnered with Wysing Arts Centre, Studio Voltaire, Eastside Projects, Iniva, New Contemporaries, S1 Artspace, and Spike Island.

Selected exhibitions include: *Bridge the Tamar*, MIRROR, Plymouth (2023); *Exeter Contemporary Open*, Exeter Phoenix, Exeter (2023); *Thanks For the Apples*, Falmouth art Gallery, Cornwall (2022); *Your Foot in My Face*, Kingsgate Project Space, London (2021); *Green at an Angle*, Kestle Barton, Cornwall (2021); *Chicken Nuggets*, Pool School Gallery, Cornwall, (2019); *Can We Still Be Friends?*, Guest Projects, London (2018); *What is this place?*, Newlyn Art gallery and the Exchange (2017) and *Smile orange*, Cubitt Gallery, London (2016).

Sanderson has had a studio at CAST (Helston) since 2013 and has been closely involved with the development of the organisation from the start, as well as contributing to CAST's ongoing Programme of public events.

In the past few years, he has worked with Pool School Gallery, CAST-Off and many other independent projects, including work with dementia patients and with young people. In 2021 he was commissioned by Hospital Rooms to make a new work for Bethlam Mother and Baby unit, London and in 2023 for Cove Ward, Redruth.

EXHIBITION TEXT

Ben Sanderson, Dec 23

BEGINNINGS

I've been trying to find a path through the work, a way of describing where it started and where it is now. It started with figures. I used to collect history books from charity shops around Helston and pluck characters or stories from their pages. There was always an urgency to the way the image was grabbed, which was dramatically increased when I was introduced to the print room in St Ives by Naomi Frears. It's overwhelming now to think about the speed at which I used to make those paintings and prints. I'm still dealing with the mess it made. Anyway, everything started to change when I realised I hated those history books.

DEMENTIA

In 2016 I had a residency in a dementia care home and began to think about painting as a tool to capture fleeting synaptic connections. History was no longer linear, and conversation was grasping at threads. Images arrived like free associative speech in a therapy session. Paintings continued to build up in the studio, collecting moments from those conversations. Maybe there was something freeing in these sessions at the care home, listening to such fascinating timeless minds. I always felt strange about these paintings, as if they weren't really mine. I knew the ideas had to go somewhere else, so I just left them for years un-shown, stacked in a pile in the studio.

THE GARDEN

My last exhibition set out to investigate a euphoric feeling I had in a garden. For a while I thought nature could free me from the systemic depression I was feeling. It has been hard to write anything until now because my reflection is slow, a cloud of oppression weaving its way into the everyday. I had to find a space that allowed me to think and feel, speak and retract.

In partnership with CAST and Kestle Barton, I set up a sort of residency at Trebah Garden and it became an extension of the studio for three years. I organised walks in the garden with specialists (an ethnobotanical researcher, gardeners, a psychiatrist, a herbalist, artists, poets, friends) and these conversations seeped into my work. I still had very few words for these feelings. I knew the garden was helping, but I couldn't shake the control within it all. After stumbling across *A Book of Wildflowers* by Ian Hamilton Finlay everything became a metaphor: a well-kept edge, a ditch, weeds, a wild flower, the potted, the garden flower. I became fascinated by the ways that rogue, uncultivated, uninvited species meet and mix with the carefully selected ones. Power structures are echoed in the garden: naming, categorising, cultivating, displacing, collecting, selecting, weeding. I realised that the flowers I was painting in the studio weren't meant to be garden flowers. They were the ones that lived in the cracks of the pavement and were crawling up the walls. My time at Trebah left me questioning what happens at the garden's edge.

WHAT THEY HAVE BEEN

For a while I thought I could turn paintings into other things. I lived in a house in St Ives where Camilla Dixon provided accommodation for textile designers. Living around textiles in this way, I started to think about the weave of canvas and its material qualities. Paintings became more like fabric again and the pile of paintings felt like an endless scrap-bag of possibilities. During this time, I often left bits of painting in Sarah Johnson's indigo vat, I was taught to weave by Katie Schwab and made a shirt from old paintings with Millie Melbourne. Things followed – tea cosies, a mug, an oven glove, a football, a draft excluder, a pair of deckchairs, an awning for the café at CAST, a tent for outdoor workshops. These experiments opened me up to cropping images, the visual accidents that could follow this process, and the unintended reverse side of paintings. They also taught me how to use a sewing machine.

PAINTINGS

When I look at paintings, I like to drift through image and process, contemplating the then and now. I like practices that keep evolving. I reach for the bookshelf and my hand slips as I open *Now or Else* by Charline Von Heyl. The book falls open on the image of *Hibou Habibi*. Is that a black and white rug? How do lines like that meet with what look like the remnants of a bonfire? I find hope in the way two languages co-exist.

Walking up to an image, I like to look closely. I want to see how one layer affects another. I love paintings that play tricks on the eye and confuse any logic, layers that become harder and harder to unpick. Francis Picabia said 'If you want to have clean ideas, change them like shirts.' I stand in front of Picabia's painting *Halia*, made in 1929. Figures watch as a hand attempts to massage a furrowed brow. There is a startled stare as a dove teeters on the edge of a bath. Out of nowhere a bird of prey swoops from the jaw of a man. On the other side a hand falls from the shoulder it used to console. Everything shifts into a green blue haze that at any given moment could be a landscape. There is a woman looking down the whole time. I look up the word *Halia*, it means remembrance of a loved one.

DYES

Dyeing is a slow process to learn, alchemy passed down. I was introduced to natural dyes by Yemi Awosile when Open School East came to visit CAST. I haven't bought dyes off the shelf since. For a while everything turned blue in Sarah Johnson's indigo vats. A workshop with Naomi Hannam introduced me to weld and mordanting. Last summer I took part in a woad and gorse workshop led by Armored Carlyon of the Weavers, Spinners and Dyers Guild in Truro. The workshop was held on the land where, for decades, she has grown linen and natural dyes for weaving. Chickens watched as we discovered ancient processes. Seasonal colour is slow extractive work. To be effective in production, you take only what you need. Could industry ever detach itself from capitalist gain and look at the dye garden as a model of sustainability?

QUILTING

A few years ago my mum gave me a quilt she had been making since she was eighteen. It's built up of hexagonal shapes made from fabrics she had been collecting for years. The same sequence is repeated to form a rose-like pattern. Either she couldn't finish it or the pattern just kept growing. It now sits on my bed in a brilliantly uneven shape.

It led me to quilting paintings by following patterns that always seemed to fall a little bit out of sync. These patterns felt good, and I got obsessive about top stitching. The ability to chop and change meant patterns turned into collage, my studio could be plundered for material and I could combine different painterly pasts while trying to find an image. This process has reactivated years of old work. Paintings come together and fall apart opening a slow gazing eye on what I even think my practice is. Paintings don't sit in linear space any more. They become collective pasts.

SIFTING

Sorting through years of old work unearthed all kinds of bad paintings. I have been rooting through the back of my mind – people, animals, hands, a drone, a remote, flowers, flowers, flowers. Catching thoughts as they happened wasn't poetic. I was moving so fast, unable to slow down, there was no pause or way to pull these images together. Every work I made felt like another failed attempt to find a voice within the chaos.

The work I am doing now is in part editing and in part an attempt to find a deeper psychological impulse in the work. I need to connect with something tangible. Post-rationalisation sidesteps what it means to be deeply involved in a process. Time isn't linear in the studio; it is slow and constantly weaving.

THE BLENDER

Memories are difficult to control. Poetry seems to be a more accurate way to contemplate the way words interact in the mind. There is a blender in my studio which I use to turn offcuts and scraps of paintings into rag paper. As a surface it feels expansive in its state of becoming. The blender is collage accelerated and left to chance. The individual images become less important and the fragments build a kind of dislodged archive. Memory is embedded in the surface, comprised of small tangible moments. But the tangibility does not equal complete understanding and connection. The years and months turn into minutes and seconds, and everything begins to feel still.

LAYOUT

My architect sister told me about the comic, tragic and satiric stage sets of Sebastiano Serlio and they became the initial starting point for this show. Thresholds that jump between theatre and society. I began to think about how over time a theatrical setting made in 1545 could turn into something like a park or garden today. The layout of the exhibition has ended up echoing something of a formal garden setting. Symmetry which holds it all. However, the work itself resists this order. Espaliered and trained by the bamboo yet unruly in its nature.

BAMBOO

A bamboo's roots are as thick below ground as the growth above, except they are barbed, with shoots that twist and turn. I follow a root that leads me towards the wall that divides me from next door. The shoot has circumnavigated the whole garden, tunnelling through the soil. Scrolling down the wall, I try to zoom out of this small rectangle of land. Then the bamboo takes me on a psychological deep dive following thoughts left over from Tom Greenall's Deleuze reading group at CAST. Thinking through the rhizome, ideas that don't just end but keep evolving. Providing sustenance for my neighbour's bamboo has provided me with a near endless supply of structural supports for this show. I have been steam bending them with the help of James Smith so that walls can curve as they interact in the room.

FRAGMENTS

I remember the first time I saw Sonia Boyce's film *Exquisite Cacophony*, 2015 huddled around a makeshift screen in what is now the café at CAST. A freeform vocal improvisation between Minneapolis-based 'indie rapper' Astronautalis and Elaine Mitchener, a classically trained vocalist. Watching it play out was fascinating. Sometime later I remember a conversation with Sonia in my studio. She told me about a crocheted pouch she had seen in the museum next door, made from old bootlaces by a man in the war. She said it was good to see a boy using a sewing machine. It's funny the things you remember when you look back, perhaps insignificant but encouraging at the time.

In a reading group led by Elizabeth Price we read the Laura Grace Ford text *Sky Blue Connexion*. Elizabeth prepared us by saying to read the text as it flows out of your mouth. As I read out loud my voice began to shake. The text was about Coventry, the town where I grew up. It felt like Laura wove and twisted her memories into mine. It was a deeply surreal experience that made me nostalgic for C&A and the room scale architecture of the lower precinct. I felt the air turn black with thoughts of the city and how what was my every day is now a distant memory that keeps changing. While visiting Plymouth I've been thinking about the parallels between Plymouth and Coventry. Cities that were regenerated at similar times after huge devastation in the war. When I visit Coventry now I walk on top of the subways and think about where people used to sleep. Orange, black and white tiles, a Tetris in the mind.

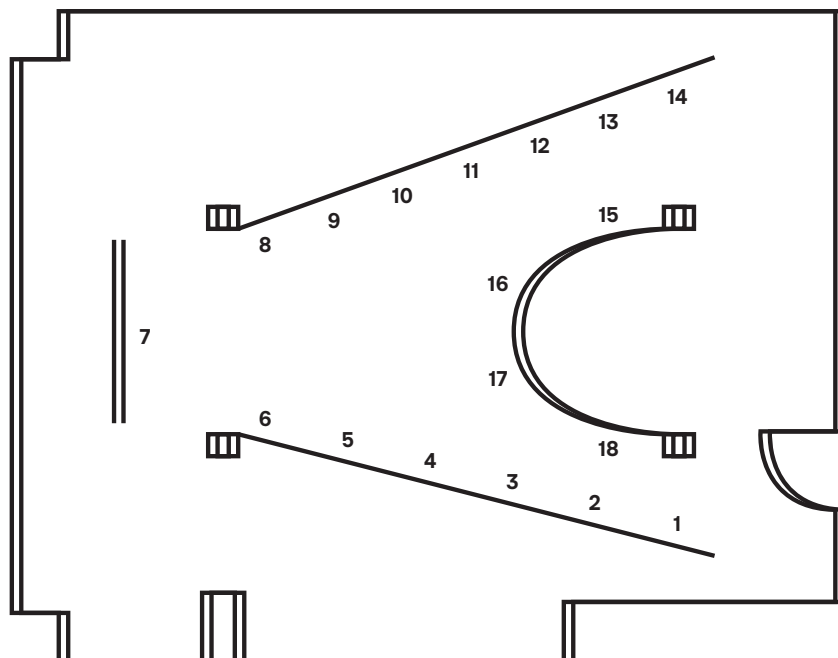
The combination of dyed and painted colour takes me back to a Richard Tuttle talk I went to at the ICA once with Eva Rowson and Aimee Parrott. I think it ran in parallel with the show *I Don't Know. The Weave of Textile Language* by Richard Tuttle, taking place between the Turbine Hall at Tate Modern and the Whitechapel Gallery. That full stop does a lot of work in the title. I remember thinking after the talk about art and language and the barriers that sit between the two. Explanations don't sit well in the studio. Shortly after the Tuttle talk I become aware of Ouroboros, the snake that eats its own tail.

The studio is a space to think through the insidious anxiety we are living in in this perfect storm. Working with my hands, using processes that leave time to think, connects me to this body in a way I can't express in a sentence. Words fall flat when you don't have the vocabulary. I tune in to the energy of a moment with tangibility – a thick or thin line, a scribble, or a more textured layer.

SPECIAL THANKS

Hannah Rose – for all the support and encouragement throughout
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OUROBOROS



1
Bramble
Ink, watercolour, monotype,
acrylic, charcoal, dye,
oil on canvas
88cm x 280cm
2023

2
Sprout
Ink, watercolour, monotype,
acrylic, charcoal, dye,
oil on canvas
139cm x 280cm
2023

3
Splice
Ink, watercolour, monotype,
acrylic, charcoal, dye,
oil on canvas
170cm x 280cm
2023

4
Index
Ink, watercolour, monotype,
acrylic, charcoal, dye,
oil on canvas
140cm x 280cm
2023

5
Lattice
Ink, watercolour, monotype,
acrylic, charcoal, dye,
oil on canvas
61cm x 280cm
2023

6
Flat Felled
Ink, watercolour, monotype,
acrylic, charcoal, dye,
oil on canvas
140 cm x 280cm
2023

7
Ouroboros
Handmade rag paper
148cm x 280cm
2023

8
Hypnagogic
Ink, watercolour, monotype,
acrylic, charcoal, dye,
oil on canvas
99cm x 280cm
2023

9
Breeze Block
Ink, watercolour, monotype,
acrylic, charcoal, dye,
oil on canvas
108cm x 280cm
2023

10
Osmosis
Ink, watercolour, monotype,
acrylic, charcoal, dye,
oil on canvas
153cm x 280cm
2023

11
Between Green
Ink, watercolour, monotype,
acrylic, charcoal, dye,
oil on canvas
170cm x 280cm
2023

12
Fecund
Ink, watercolour, monotype,
acrylic, charcoal, dye,
oil on canvas
85cm x 280cm
2023

13
Arras
Ink, watercolour, monotype,
acrylic, charcoal, dye,
oil on canvas
66cm x 280cm
2023

14
Ember
Painting rags, ink, watercolour,
acrylic, oil on canvas
102cm x 280cm
2023

15
Water Wheel
Ink, watercolour, monotype,
acrylic, charcoal, dye,
oil on canvas
150cm x 280cm
2023

16
Vault Azzurre
Ink, watercolour, monotype,
acrylic, dye, oil on canvas
140cm x 180cm
2023

17
An Exhausted Red
Ink, watercolour, monotype,
acrylic, dye, oil on canvas
155cm x 280cm
2023

18
Ear Worm
Ink, watercolour, monotype,
acrylic, charcoal, dye,
oil on canvas
172cm x 280cm
2023

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