Session 1: History of Collecting – Chaired by Harriet Loffler (Curator, The Women’s Art Collection)

Professor Helen Rees Leahy (Professor Emerita of Museology, University of Manchester): A Woman’s Place (is in college)

Abstract

This paper considers The Women’s Art Collection as a process of institutional self-fashioning. The aim is to offer a critical reading of the Collection as both spatial practice and affective experience within the architectural frame of Murray Edwards College. The paper also explores how the social and the symbolic production of space is generated through lived experience in proximity to the art collection.

What kinds of viewing practices are accommodated within the college buildings and how is an audience for the collection constituted through the spatial construction of everyday life? Given the gendered identity of the collection – and of Murray Edwards itself – can we usefully theorise the conditions of its display and reception through the same lens?
The paper explores these questions through three critical concepts, each of which is (in different ways) freighted with the practice of gender: collegiality, domesticity, and performativity. To place these ideas in context, the paper will compare Murray Edwards with three contrasting display spaces: St John’s College and Kettle’s Yard, both Cambridge; and the Barbican Art Gallery, London. Each is connected to Murray Edwards – institutionally or architecturally – and, as the paper argues, each stages a gendered practice of visuality in contradistinction to the daily apprehension and institutional ethos of The Women’s Art Collection.

Biography

Helen Rees Leahy is Professor Emerita of Museology at the University of Manchester. She was the founder and director (from 2002–2017) of the Centre for Museology at Manchester and was appointed the first professor of Museology at the university. Prior to her academic career, she worked as a curator and museum director for 17 years and has organised numerous exhibitions of art and design. Helen has written about practices of collecting, display, interpretation and reception in the art museum, for both academic and professional publications. Her book, Museum Bodies, was published in 2012. She now lives in north Wales and her current curatorial projects include exhibitions at Ruthin Craft Centre and Hawarden Castle. Helen read Philosophy at New Hall (now Murray Edwards College), 1979-1982.

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Lucy Howie (PhD Researcher, University of St Andrews) and Alina Khakoo (PhD Researcher, University of Cambridge): The Artist in Residence and the Formation of a Feminist Art Collection: Kettle’s Yard and the Women’s Art Collection from 1985-1993

Abstract

From 1977 to 1993, artists including Dhruva Mistry, Mary Kelly, Sue Arrowsmith, Veronica Ryan, Zarina Bhimji and Jo Stockham spent highly generative periods as artists in residence at Kettle’s Yard. Funded by Eastern Arts and the Henry Moore Foundation, and in partnership with Cambridge University colleges, these residencies offered studio space, room and board in a college, free use of the University’s academic resources like lectures and libraries, and an exhibition at Kettle’s Yard.

There were multiple crossings between the Kettle’s Yard artist residency scheme and The Women’s Art Collection. Most obviously, Mary Kelly’s residency at Kettle’s Yard and New Hall (now Murray Edwards) between 1985–1986 led to the formation of The Women’s Art Collection. Later, in 1989, Stockham undertook a year-long residency with Kettle’s Yard and Corpus Christi College, during which her studio was the former women’s chemistry laboratory in Newnham College. The Women’s Art Collection subsequently acquired a print by Stockham from this residency entitled Human Geography, which was inspired by the maps, scientific instruments and measuring devices that the artist encountered at the Whipple Museum.
This paper will focus on the unique period of cross-fertilization between artists and academics facilitated by the Kettle’s Yard residency scheme as it unfolded concomitantly with The Women’s Art Collection. Using Stockham’s work as a point of connection and as a case study, this paper will explore questions including: how does the format of the artist residency lend itself to the formation of a feminist collection? What are the feminist politics of the artist residency when considering it as a holding space for creative practice with no formal requirements? And what is the disruptive potential of the artist in Cambridge who moves between and challenges strict boundaries of academic disciplines through their practice?

**Biography**

Lucy Howie and Alina Khakoo are PhD researchers based at the University of St Andrews and the University of Cambridge respectively. Howie and Khakoo are both interested in histories of art-making in Britain in the 1980s encompassing feminist, racial, gender and sexual politics during this period. They are co-leaders of the Radical Art in Cambridge research project that explores the lost history of radical arts activity in Cambridge in the 1970s–1990s.

The Radical Art in Cambridge research project has so far conducted extensive archival research, oral histories, and a roundtable discussion with speakers from the Cambridge Darkroom, Kettle’s Yard and Coracle Press. Additionally, the project has hosted an archival workshop on the St Matthew’s Photo Workshop and an archive display, screening and discussion on the artist-in-residence scheme at Kettle’s Yard. We are interested in developing the project further through an exploration into the formation of The Women’s Art Collection in relation to the Kettle’s Yard artist-in-residence scheme.

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Dr Una Richmond (Independent Art Historian), *Legacy: The Women’s International Art Club*

**Abstract**

Founded in 1898 and disbanded in 1978, the Women's International Art Club (WIAC) was a professional group of female artists who contributed to British art culture by hosting annual exhibitions in London, regionally and internationally. The club offered an inclusive environment, providing a platform, often denied elsewhere, to exhibit their work, further artistic careers and establish networks, creating a legacy for future generations of women artists. This paper situates the WIAC within this framework, providing an historical backdrop to the establishment of The Women’s Art Collection (WAC). It will explore the significance
of the WIAC through several of the thirty artists in the collection who exhibited with, or were members of, the club.

For much of the twentieth century, membership and committee involvement within male-dominated exhibiting groups was limited for women, but the WIAC provided female artists autonomy and agency through self-management. Anthea Alley and Anne Redpath were WIAC committee members, with Mary Fedden and Anne Bruce both former chairwomen of the club. The WIAC allowed many unsung women artists opportunities to exhibit by providing a platform to achieve exposure and recognition; Agatha Shore showed with the club almost continuously from 1910 to 1950. This paper will also discuss the way in which the WIAC provided a welcoming environment for lesbian and queer artists, including sculptor Mary Spencer Watson and painter Nan Youngman. In addition, it will reflect on the reluctance of some artists to be associated with a women-only group. As a student, Wendy Taylor was put forward by St. Martins to show with the WIAC in 1964 but she was reluctant, preferring to be judged as a sculptor not as a ‘woman’ sculptor.

Biography

Una Richmond completed an AHRC-funded PhD at the University of Sussex in 2023 with the thesis ‘No Second Sex in Art: The Women’s International Art Club 1950-1978’. She is interested in restoring the visibility of twentieth century women artists and questioning canonical art historical narratives through the study of all-women group exhibitions. She published an article on WIAC sculptors in the Sculpture Journal in March 2023 and later that year was the academic advisor to the exhibition Sheer Verve: The Women’s International Art Club 1878-1978 at the Ben Uri Gallery, London, curated by Sarah MacDougall.

Session 2: Challenging Hierarchies of Genre – Chaired by Elisabetta Garletti (PhD Researcher, University of Cambridge)

Eliza Goodpasture (PhD Researcher, University of York), The Porous Temporality of Gwen Raverat

Abstract

The study of art made by women has often been characterised by a desire to find within it radicality – both aesthetic and political. Imposing a progressive, forward-looking narrative upon women artists can obscure the complex temporalities that colour their lives and work. Labelling all women ‘pioneers’ for pursuing art eclipses those who looked back or worked conservatively. The porousness of the temporal boundaries between eras, aesthetic styles and ways of existing as an artist and a woman is richly nuanced and layered.
This paper explores the work of Gwen Raverat in relation to these research provocations. The slipperiness of time in her work and her self-conscious engagement with the legacy of her Victorian youth creates a textured narrative of time that disrupts conventional assumptions about ‘progressive’ women artists. In observing that Raverat looked backward as much as, if not more than, she looked forward, this paper seeks to problematise the narrow way feminist art history can be written.

Building on the foundational work of Linda Nochlin and Griselda Pollock, the paper questions the system of value still used to judge ‘great’ art. Art like Raverat’s woodcut illustrations and her post-Impressionist-style landscapes does not meet the standards of ‘greatness’ that are measured against twentieth-century male artists. How can her work, and the work of artists like her, provoke new understandings of what makes art great, and how our hierarchies of aesthetic value remain limited? And how can feminist art history grapple with the complexities of art by women that looks backward?

Biography

Eliza Goodpasture is in her final year of PhD study at the University of York. Her research examines friendship between British women artists working around the turn of the twentieth century. Her research has been supported by the Paul Mellon Centre, the British Association for Victorian Studies, the Association for Art History, and Graduate Women International. She has held positions at the York Museums Trust, Bowdoin College Museum of Art, Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, and the Frick Collection. She writes regularly about art, books, and culture for the Guardian, FT, ArtReview, and elsewhere.

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Rachel Boyd (PhD Researcher, Laing Art Gallery and Northumbria University, Newcastle Upon Tyne), Still Life: Nerys Johnson and the configuration of practice through pain

Abstract

Nerys Johnson (1942-2001) was curator of the Laing Art Gallery, Newcastle Upon Tyne and latterly, Durham Light Infantry Museum. In 1987, Johnson retired due to the chronic and complex nature of her rheumatoid arthritis, becoming an esteemed painter of flowers from within her home-studio in Grey Street, Durham. Nerys Johnson was experiencing what anthropologist Pam Block has described as ‘unplanned survival’: comprehending how to live alongside a condition which was once considered terminal (Block: 2020, 70).

Practice, a strategy of doing things, can be framed as both a coping mechanism for pain and fatigue and a calculation of risk, as well as resources. Petra Kuppers writes that crip time often operates from within a climate of scarcity dictated by pain: ‘many disabled people
speak or type or gesture to the blossoming of attention in attenuation, in waiting, in abeyance’ (Kuppers: 2017, 30).

This paper will argue that Johnson’s expression of artistic practice was not merely a way to delineate crip time; practice made Nerys’ life more livable, forming the impetus around which she lived and worked. Johnson’s radical embrace of bodily and material disintegration through her practice sought to reiterate her agency by documenting the changing capacities of her self. Pain was thus not conceived as a passive object to be avoided or endured but rather, frames the intentions around which Nerys Johnson’s approach to still life was invented, adapted, and developed.

Biography

Rachel Boyd is in her second year of a PhD at Northumbria University. Her research explores the intersection between co-production, care and community in expanding notions of artistic practice supported by women. Her PhD, a Northern Bridge/ AHRC Collaborative Doctoral Award, centres on the Laing Art Gallery’s recent acquisition of the archive and collection belonging to the disabled artist-curator Nerys Johnson (1942-2001). This body of research will contribute to an upcoming retrospective of Johnson’s life and work, curated by Rachel, which will open at the Laing’s Watercolour Gallery in January 2025. Rachel previously formed part of the editorial team for Disability Arts Online, an online arts journal supported by Arts Council England, which actively profiles the work of disabled artists from across the UK. She is currently a trustee of Surface Area Dance Theatre, a deaf-led organisation working across live and digital performance with an international reach.

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Kat Chimonides (Writer and Artist), Pose for a Portrait? The Agency of the Subject in the Work of Rebecca Fortnum and Ishbel Myerscough

Abstract

Sit for a portrait, pose for a life class. Pose for a portrait? Not a camera snapshot, but a prolonged time of keeping still. As still as possible, yet blinking, breathing, my gaze moving. I’m looking at the artist while they look at me, I see what’s going on in the room. In this paper I will use my experience as an artist’s model to address the work of Rebecca Fortnum and Ishbel Myerscough, considering how their artworks were made and questioning the agency of the subjects. Fortnum’s drawings of L’Inconnue de la Seine depict the death mask of a woman unknown, her body recovered from the Seine in the late nineteenth century. In Ishbel Myerscough’s painting, her young son looms large on the canvas, the colour palette sombre, at odds with the presumed vibrancy of youth. I will focus on the stillness of these artworks and how this stillness relates to the artists’ oeuvres.
Biography

Kat Chimonides is a writer and artist from Norwich. Her research explores life drawing, the life model character in works of fiction, and the nude in visual art. With seven years’ experience as an artist’s model, Kat approaches her research through the model’s gaze. Recent work appears in This is not a biography* published by The Yellow Paper.

Session 3: Thinking Across Media – chaired by Dr Amy Tobin (Associate Professor in History of Art, University of Cambridge; Curator of Contemporary Programmes, Kettle’s Yard)

Valentina Gajardo (Director, The Grange Arts Festival and The Grange School, Chile), Thread Stories: Symptom and Narrative of Time in the Artwork of Chilean Artist Francisca Aninat

Abstract

This paper explores the thread symptoms and narratives present in the visual production of Chilean contemporary artist Francisca Aninat. Arpillera 3 in The Women’s Art Collection, a mixed media work with sewn fabric, is the starting point to explore Aninat’s poetics. The thread, in this case, operates as matter, as well as a fragile symptom of self-presenting forgotten times, with reference to the perspective of art historian Georges Didi-Huberman in Confronting Images.

New questions have emerged in Chile since the return to democracy in 1990 – crossed questions that are marked by social unrest and the pandemic. Fibres are being used as an art strategy to problematize the recent past in Chile. Artists are revisiting the use of thread, knots and stiches as a socially involved language. Here, the narrative takes shape across symptomatic, fragmented and participatory proposals attempting to recollect the memories of those unheard voices.

While working in collaboration with transient communities – immigrants, hospital patients, craftspeople and everyday workers – thread and stiches have become traces of time in Aninat’s work. The displacement of the image here has the intention of reconstituting an account of individual and collective times. In conversations during their workday and in settings where time is punctuated by routine, Aninat prompts people to reminisce about their homeland, their childhood, their memories and times. As conversation flows, the artist invites them to depict spaces, to collect objects and to use threads as memory conjures them taking shape through thread stories.
Biography

Valentina Gajardo is Director and co-founder of The GRAF, The Grange Arts Festival. As an art historian and curator, her aim has been to create a porous flow between arts, education and society, in the pursuit of making visible the work of unnoticed artists and contemporary practices in Chile.

Her research reflects upon those thread narratives and symptoms present in the Chilean and Latin-American art production since the return to democracy, weaving artwork into their untold stories still awaiting in silence.

She leads The GRAF and publishes an annual book that gathers the participatory co-creations along with renowned artists, educational and cultural institutions, including the international collaboration with Museo Nacional del Prado Madrid.

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Dr Ruth Jones (Artist and Independent Curator), Performing Care: Feminist Strategies within the Practice of Emily Perry

Abstract

Against the idea of the autonomous individual whose concerns revolve around himself and is always hailed as the epitome of social progress and individual freedom, we can ask what this celebration of individual autonomy obfuscates: who does the work to allow for that individual to emerge and thrive?

Emma Dowling, The Care Crisis, 2021

Against the idea of the artist as an isolated, autonomous, male genius, Narcissus Nature Morte Mukbang stands as a feminist rebuke that subverts this stereotype. Emily Perry’s performance piece, made in response to Gayle Chong Kwan’s Cockaigne, can be seen as a feminist strategy for making. It is the contention of this paper that the collaborative nature of Perry’s performance mirrors feminist readings of care, as an interconnected endeavour rather than individual one. The paper argues that the manner in which care is valued in society, and by extension how those who care are valued, is revealed through Perry’s work.

This paper will consider the implications of the artist’s choice to delegate the performance and how this allows the traditionally established relationships between the viewer and the work to be interrupted. It will examine the gendered performance of care, its reception by audiences, and how the use of parody and humour reveal the tenuous grasp that women have over their autonomy and agency when they undertake caregiving roles.

Biography
Dr Ruth Jones is an artist, independent curator and lecturer. She is the director of artist charity and studios The Old Waterworks in Southend-on-Sea in Essex. In 2023 Jones graduated from the University of East London with a professional doctorate in Fine Art. In 2022 she was awarded a British Council Venice Fellowship at the Venice Biennale. In 2017 she founded the Agency of Visible Women, an intersectional feminist artist network based in Southend-on-Sea. She was commissioned by Focal Point Gallery as part of their FPG Sounds project in 2022 to produce a new experimental sound performance inclusive of BSL. In 2021 Jones was awarded a residency with arts organisation Metal. She is a member and co-curator for the international research collective, What’s Your Location?. Jones lectures at the University of East London on the BA Fine Art Degree.

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Dr Susannah Henry (Design Lecturer, Guildhall School, London), *The Women’s Art Collection as an Experience of Feminist Scenography in Three Encounters*

**Abstract:**

The experience of visiting The Women’s Art Collection at Murray Edwards College for the first time in February 2023 was a welcome respite from the ‘matrescent’ (Raphael, 1975) landscape of learning to parent alongside returning to work in academia but was also surprising for being an experience of feminist scenography. While curator Carolee Thea frames curation as akin to an act of theatre direction (Thea, 2009), this paper contends that The Women’s Art Collection and its relation to the materiality and atmosphere of the Murray Edwards College building is more appositely framed by the practice of scenography – also known as performance design.

Using definitions from the field of expanded scenography, in which performance space is not limited to being the place in which performance happens but may itself be the event of performance (McKinney & Palmer, Hann, Lotker & Gough) alongside Eve Sedgwick’s offer of ‘beside’ as a generative term for unpacking an encounter with an artwork, and set within the context of scenography as a method for staging feminism, this discussion will frame encounters with three artworks in The Woman’s Art Collection as experiences of feminist scenography.

This paper aims to highlight an overlooked dimension of The Women’s Art Collection, in which feminist scenographic encounters - beside artwork and through space - nourish and ‘diffract’ (Barad, Haraway, cited by Sayal-Bennett) the plural identities of the visitor, whether new parent, creative practitioner, academic, or all of these.

**Biography**

Dr. Susannah Henry is a practice researcher in scenography with special interests in performance space and the relationship of the scenographer’s story to their practice, which
she frames as Autoscenography. Susannah teaches collaborative performance-making at Guildhall School, London and is co-convenor of the Scenography Working Group for the Theatre and Performance Research Association (TaPRA). Following twenty years of professional practice as a performance designer, Susannah’s current research interests are manifesting the time and space of new parenthood through scenography and articulating a queer-feminist approach to scenographic practice. Susannah lives in Essex, UK with her partner Rhodri and her son Ivor.

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Session 4: Agency and Creativity – Chaired by Dr Alyce Mahon (Professor of Modern and Contemporary Art, University of Cambridge)

Georgia Kelly (PhD Researcher, University of East Anglia), Isabel Rawsthorne: A stranger coming towards us in the dark?

Abstract

This paper focuses on Isabel Rawsthorne and Alberto Giacometti. The aim is to demonstrate some of the art historical complications which arise from Rawsthorne’s connections with Giacometti. Despite often being better known for her appearances in the portraiture of Giacometti and Francis Bacon, and dismissed as a muse to her male contemporaries, Rawsthorne has recently become the subject of research as an artist in her own right. Due to her close association with Giacometti and biographical links to French philosophers, there is a temptation, when discussing Rawsthorne, to refer to the same philosophical frameworks as those used to discuss Giacometti, namely, the existentialism of Jean-Paul Sartre and the phenomenology of Maurice Merleau-Ponty.

Comparing selected works by Rawsthorne and Giacometti, this paper will demonstrate some of the issues that can arise from this, as well as ways in which reference to these philosophical movements can promote narratives of postwar existential art which heroise the male artist, objectify women, and struggle to account for a figure such as Rawsthorne who was both the subject and creator of portraits. The paper will argue that these narratives have contributed to some misinformation on Rawsthorne but will also suggest some ways in which we can reconfigure our understanding of existentialism and phenomenology to offer an account of portraits both of and by Rawsthorne.

Biography

Georgia Kelly is a PhD student at the University of East Anglia, focusing on Isabel Rawsthorne, portraiture and feminist responses to existentialism and phenomenology. Kelly
is interested the relationship between modern art and philosophy, especially that of Sartre, Merleau-Ponty and Beauvoir, and the extent to which these writers illuminate or limit our understanding of postwar art. Kelly is currently looking at feminist responses to existentialism and phenomenology as ways into understanding the art of Isabel Rawsthorne. Before pursuing a PhD, Kelly studied History of Art at the University of Kent and the Courtauld Institute of Art.

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Katy Shahandeh (Graduate Teaching Assistant, School of Arts, SOAS, University of London),
Reclaiming Feminine Narratives: History, Memory, and Identity in the Art of Soheila Sokhanvari

Abstract

This paper examines some artistic works by contemporary Iranian-born artist Soheila Sokhanvari with a specific focus on her exploration of collective feminine memory and identity. Sokhanvari’s art is deeply autobiographical and closely intertwined with her identity as an Iranian woman, significantly influenced by Iran’s socio-political upheavals. Focusing on pre-revolutionary Iranian women as symbols of an Iranian feminine self, Sokhanvari counters Western media’s portrayal of veiled Iranian women. Through reimagined visual narratives, she crafts a realm of magic realism where each depicted woman becomes a vessel for Iranian feminism and her own self-discovery.

Sokhanvari’s visual representations serve as tools to reclaim and reinterpret historical events through a feminist lens, encouraging viewers to critically assess established hierarchies and consider alternative viewpoints. Beyond personal memory, her artworks encompass shared experiences, interweaving historical contexts with contemporary symbols to construct a composite fabric of collective memory across cultural landscapes. In doing so, her work stimulates discussions on the interplay of gender, history, and identity.

Her deliberate use of abstract and surreal forms highlights memory’s fluid nature and individual subjectivity, prompting contemplation of how personal recollections influence broader historical narratives. Sokhanvari’s art suggests that memory can serve both as a source of empowerment and a means for re-evaluating historical injustices. Her works, therefore, transcend mere imagery, representing a powerful narrative of resilience, identity and defiance against skewed representations, inviting viewers to journey into her world, one where history and memory converge in a vivid tapestry of colours and emotions.
Biography

Katy Shahandeh is a British-Iranian academic and researcher affiliated with SOAS, University of London. Her scholarly focus centres on contemporary Iranian women artists and the complexities of gender and identity in their works. Her academic interests cover non-Western art, notably Iran, and include feminist art histories, gender, and postcolonial studies. She examines how gender and cultural identity influence art in non-Western contexts, particularly Iran, and explores the impact of colonial legacies on cultural expressions. Her work aims to give voice to marginalised perspectives and broaden the understanding of non-Western art and gender issues.

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Dr Catherine McCormack (Academic Lead, Sotheby's Institute of Art; Lecturer, University of Oxford), Undoing the Framework of Phallocentric Art History: Matrilineal and Horizontal Networks in the Women’s Art Collection

Abstract

Using Rose Garrard’s Models Triptych: Madonna Cascade (1982) as a point of departure, this paper will explore some female ‘genealogies’ in The Women’s Art Collection as a way of rethinking the frameworks in which women artists and art history have been contained. While Garrard’s sketched copy of seventeenth-century Dutch artist Judith Leyster’s self-portrait alludes to the matrilineal influence of historical women artists on later practitioners, other works in the collection visualise alternative female networks and friendships of influence in less linear and more horizontal ways.

These include the personal friendship between Ishbel Myerscough and Chantal Joffe and their experience of motherhood, and between Monica Sjöö and Judy Chicago (who met at The Women’s Art Collection). Drawing on archival research at The Women’s Art Collection, and using Griselda Pollock’s theorisation of feminist genealogies, this paper will explore these networks, and argue for their contribution to a different process of historical narrative, one that mingles with the domestic, the maternal and the personal and in doing so strays from the dominant patriarchal model of art historical discourse.

In such, the paper argues that this narrative is better represented less by Garrad’s image of Leyster but by the work’s cascading frame, which as it detaches from the wall and fails to contain the painted image, leaves gaps and potential for other ways of thinking about historiographies of women’s art-making.

Biography
Catherine McCormack is the Academic Lead of the Study Abroad programme at Sotheby’s Institute of Art (University of Manchester) and lectures in art history at the University of Oxford (Continuing Education). She is the author of the non-fiction book *Women in the Picture: Women, Art and the Power of Looking* (2021), and her most recent publications include ‘The Femme Fatale, or, Let’s Not Lose Our Heads’ in *Femme Fatale: Gender, Power, Gaze* (Kunsthalle Hamburg 2022); ‘Here’s Looking at You Maillol’ in *Maillol: A Different View* (Kunsthaus, Zurich, 2022). In 2019-20 she was guest curator at Richard Saltoun Gallery where she curated the two-part show ‘Matrescence and Maternality’. In 2024 she is co-convening a symposium on goddess feminism at The Women’s Art Collection.