

# The Human Animal – some post exhibition reflections and images for those who couldn't make it to the show.

A quick bit of background for those who do not yet know, I have just completed a twelve month project funded by the Arts Council under the Developing Your Creative Practice (DYCP) remit. Prior to lockdown, I had just completed my master's degree and subsequently won the Emery Prize, which created a follow on opportunity to work with The Old Fire Station - an art hosting space located in central Oxford. With support from the then resident curator, Sarah Mossop, I was in the process of applying for funding, but due to covid's mass closures and funding cuts the exhibition at OFS was promptly cancelled after which I suddenly found myself adrift. In the interim, I decided to apply for a DYCP grant so that I might continue to develop work under the guidance of my longstanding mentor Brian Catling RA. I had also made a promising contact in zoology who was keen to support the research element of my development. The application was successful, and I looked forward to a dedicated period of exploration, which looked set to launch until both of my collaborators became seriously unwell. While the zoology professor was driven under by symptoms of long covid, this difficult period of time tracked Brian's ultimate demise. While our creative association continued throughout his illness, the interactions inevitably centred around friendship and mutual support. Brian was always there for me, but sadly this was the one show he would never get to see. At last, I felt dreadfully guilty about showing the works he had conceived and directed – namely images of me in states of performative experimentation, the elements that had previously brought our work into such close alignment. In the end I included just one of these photographs in the exhibition although there are in fact many more.



*Photograph taken by Uwe Ackermann*

Circumstances naturally impacted how I approached the work. My topic, the Human Animal, was destined to examine human nature through the lens of the animal kingdom, reframing our behaviours and reminding us of certain organic truths. But in the midst of trying to make sense of all the pain and deep affection that I was feeling, my thought process moved that much deeper. The scientific arm of my research was picked up by a neurology professor with an interest in both animal and human consciousness. Discussions moved towards the very fabric of existence and different forms of perception, the versatility of carbon as the basis of all beings. I was genuinely struck by how carbon, the matter of stars, not only evolved to be autonomous and conscious, but also developed a capacity to love.

Matter becoming aware of its own agency contained a certain inevitable logic that I could grasp, but for it to feel love seemed just incredible to me. But later, having witnessed my dear friend's health wither away, I felt that in all its great abundance, we are but carbon's plaything, just a bit part in its game. Through all the magic, wonder and joy, there is so much pain we are destined to carry. That is the foundation of being a human animal.



*Photograph taken by Uwe Ackermann*

*I was looking at the felt suit made by Joseph Beuys and noted that one held at the Tate had been eaten by moths. Being that moths have become one of my enduring motifs, I decided to make a version of the felt suit being destroyed by my moths. My thoughts on carbon evolved the idea as creatures multiplied and took over the very fabric of the coat.*



My project continued at a solid pace. The new exhibitions manager, Amy Beddow, was so incredibly generous and easy to work that the possibility of a solo show came into fruition. Prestigious Korean curator, Professor Youngchul Lee, visited me following his installation at the Korean pavilion in Venice. I decided to show him the relatively humble space at the Old Fire Station where I was due to work and to introduce new associate Amy. Before I had the chance to make any formal introductions Youngchul appeared brightly at the top of the gallery stairs. Having promptly located Amy, he had informed her that I would also be requiring the upper floor to exhibit my work. Amy took this unusual and somewhat cheeky request in good spirit while I panicked about having to make enough work to fill a suddenly enormous area! However, this single decision proved pivotal as it drove me to be more productive, the works that I showed gained breathing space and the building was transformed from its typical community vibe to that of a professional gallery, something that had not been attempted in a while.



The wonderful Amy Beddow!



*Photograph taken by Uwe Ackermann*

Youngchul spoke to me on the importance of creating a narrative, which can carry the audience through an exhibition, helping them to access the works on show. I tend to develop work with site specific consideration with pieces corresponding to each other and the architectural surroundings, but this was the first time I had utilised an overarching narrative that operated like an umbrella, creating a layer embracing the work. The idea was that one entered a darkened space occupied by nature where the birth of all things became possible, the audience then moved to an intermediary space called Divination, which represented man's attempt to make sense of the organic world into which he was born. The final space offered a brightly lit heaven where humans could find enjoyment, play and pleasure.

I discovered that planning in this way enabled me to structure my time in the studio more effectively, keeping my schedule on track. It also meant that I was able to curate most of my work before it arrived on site, which allowed for a relatively quick, stress free installation with some enjoyable last minute problem solving. Curtains were installed to break up the space creating apertures from one area to the next. The use of light, shade, and even shadows brought about surprise elements. The opening event was conducted in partial darkness with attendees given torches or asked to use their phones. It was beautiful and fun. With around one thousand five hundred visitors to the show, there was much positive feedback. The invigilator noted that for the first time in his seven years working in the space, there was an unprecedented amount of engagement. Most people loved the show while a handful hated it, but there was almost no indifference, which we both considered a big win. My favourite comment was that my work should be shown in the Ashmolean!





*Photograph taken by Uwe Ackermann*

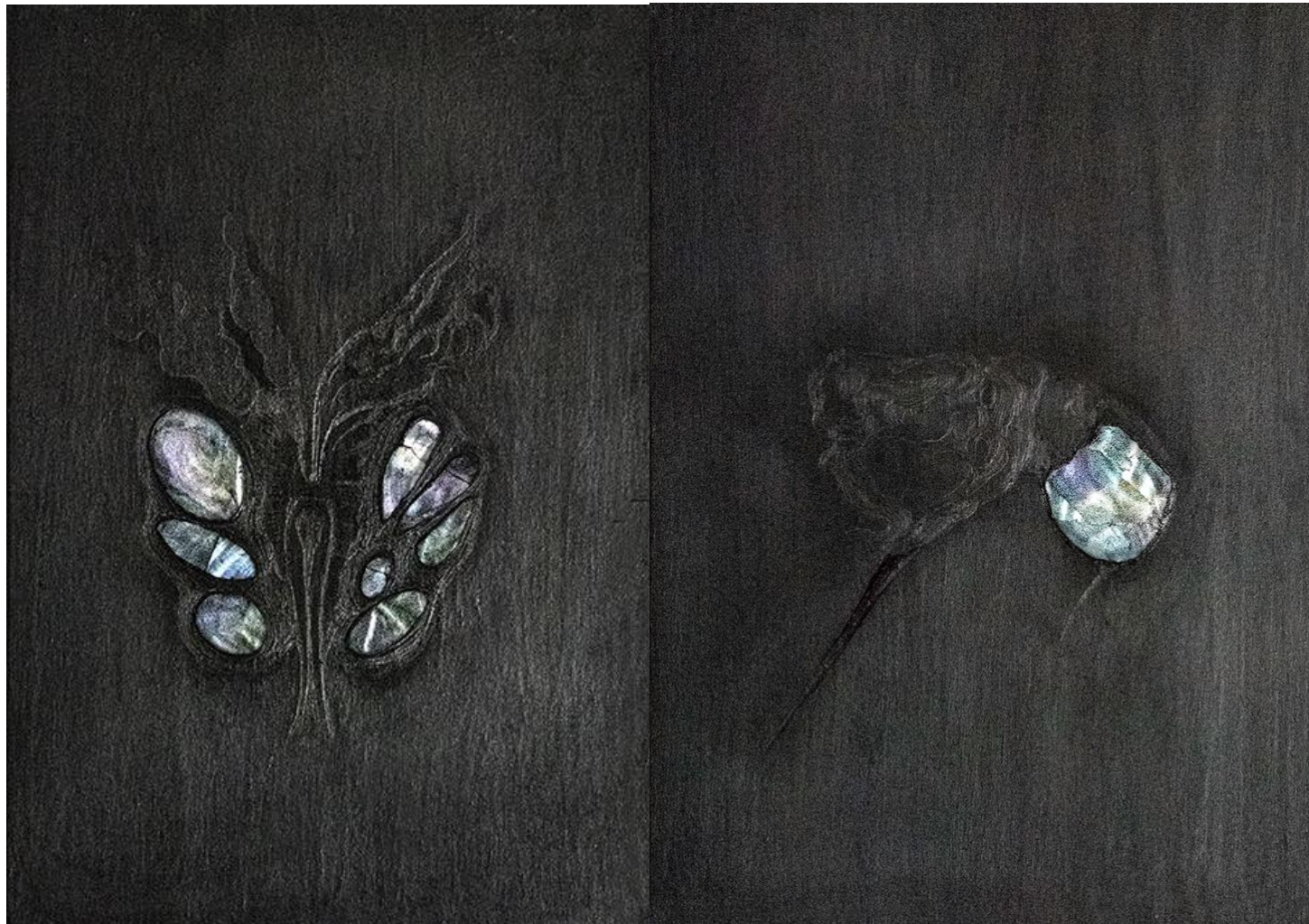


*Photograph taken by Uwe Ackermann*



Throughout the year, I was in constant dialogue with Brian, but I am deeply grateful to the brilliant people who stepped into the breach serious illness creates, guiding my emotional health along the way with good wine, entertainment, and brilliant conversations. Under the stars I discussed philosophy, the nature of existence and even my family heritage, a topic that has long been buried out of sight. I overcame longstanding creative blocks and started to enjoy making without the crippling stress from which I usually suffer. I developed a better structure for making and gained confidence in my abilities. In an atmosphere of play and support, I was able to resolve new experiments with graphite powder and nacre.





*Photographs taken by Uwe Ackermann*





*Photograph taken by Uwe Ackermann*



The signature technique that I employ which layers smoke over pigmented leaf was developed further by applying graphite and oxidised metal.



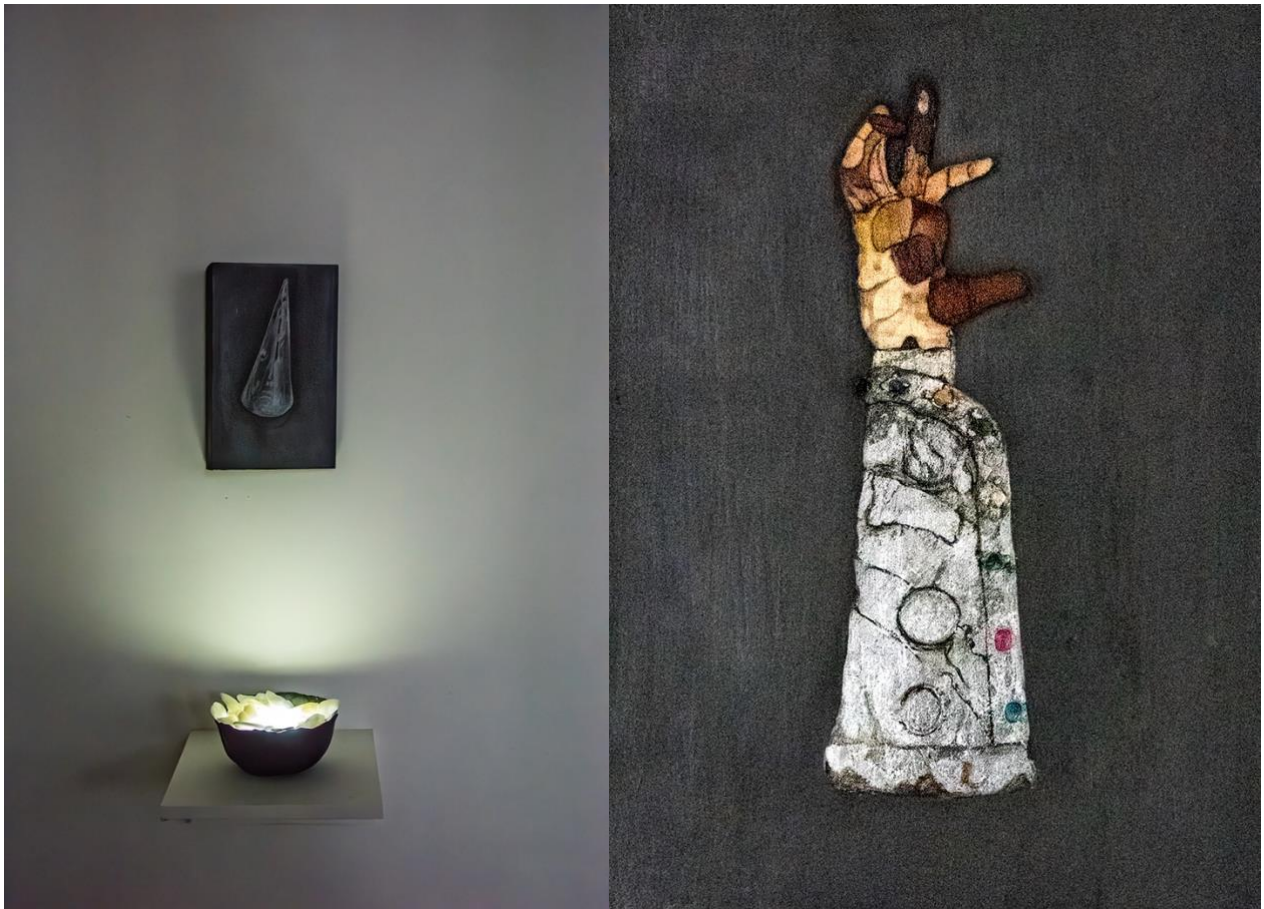
*Photograph taken by Uwe Ackermann*



*Photographs taken by Uwe Ackermann*



My work became inseparable from my dialogue and friendship with others. Brian's feedback, our shared ideas, my supporters all became part of what was being made, the complexity of ideas and multiple viewpoints coalesced. The show represents a community with many individuals presented within the forms chosen.



*Photographs taken by Uwe Ackermann*



*These 'nutz' represent world renowned Art Historian Professor Martin Kemp. He offered to review the show but has since decided to conduct an interview exploring my ideas.*





*Photograph taken by Uwe Ackermann*

*Even my kitten Mei made her way in.*



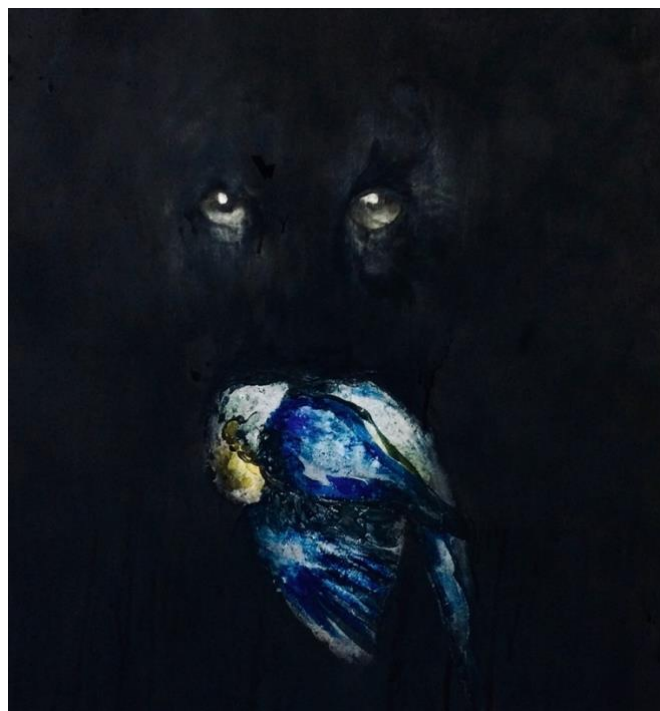
*Photograph taken by Uwe Ackermann*

*Woodlouse engraved into marble. A private motif with great significance.*

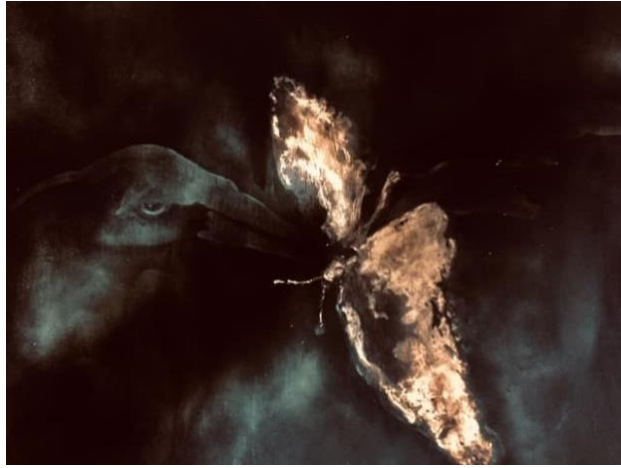


*Photograph taken by Uwe Ackermann*

*This period of research allowed me to build upon existing language with my moths evolving into fabric and bone china.*

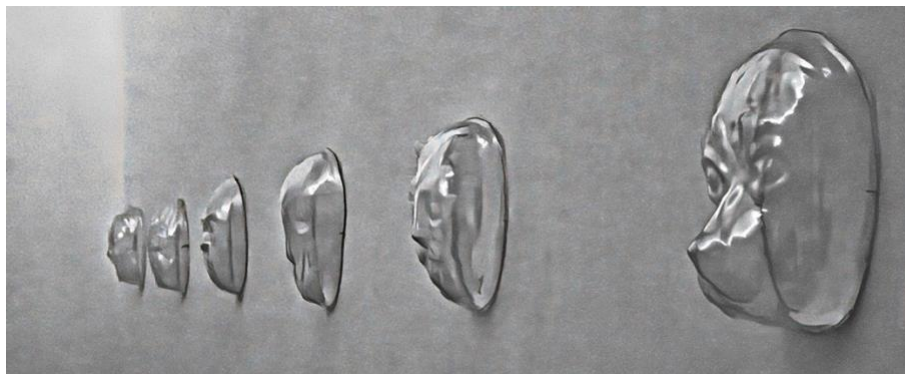


*...but also a chance to grow from older works.*



So, what's next?

The show has inspired future works that are more ambitious in scale including a Ruth Asawa inspired wire piece with porcelain moths that I hope to enlarge and an exploration into fused glass for my masks.



*Photograph taken by Uwe Ackermann*



I am looking to apply for more Arts Council funding, and I am in provisional talks with curator Youngchul Lee about a potential collaboration in 2025. In the meantime, I hope to gain exposure in London and other cities, which will in turn drive me to continue developing my practice. There have been various enquires regarding sales and in time I do hope to find a gallery to represent me, but in the meantime, I am concentrating on building a collection and developing my visual language.



*Photograph taken by Uwe Ackermann*