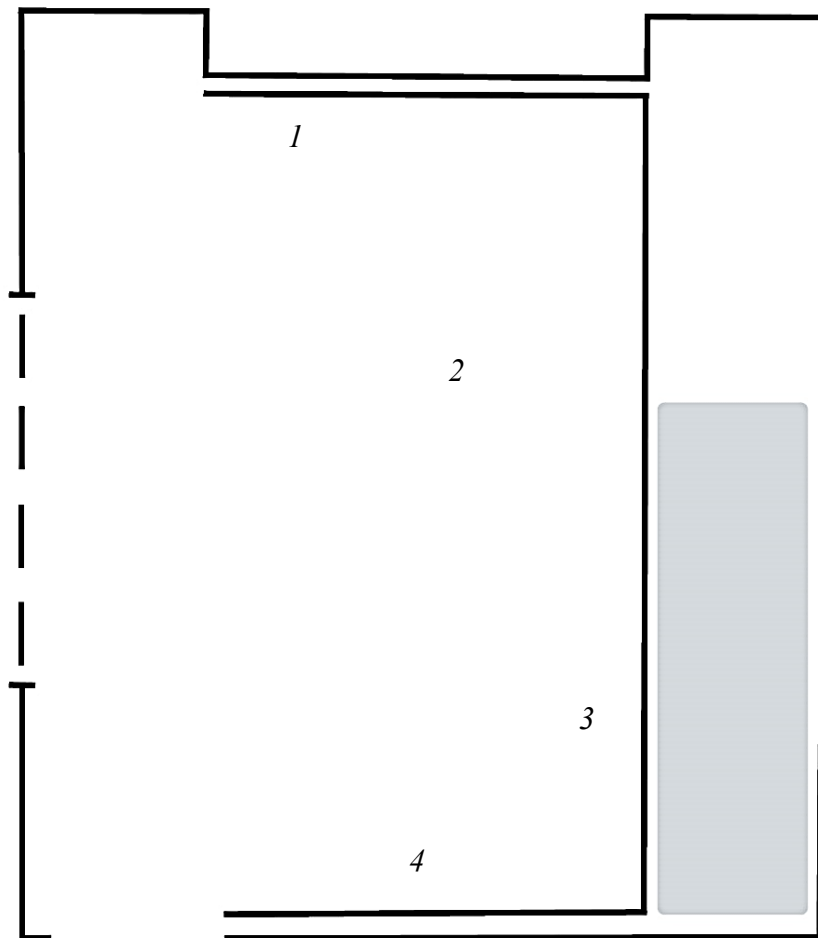


The Closest Witness

Nancy Allen

Opening Wednesday 8th February 2023

9th Feb – 5th Mar 2023 open by appointment



1. Composite Rubbing, 2022
charcoal on paper up against placemat,
laundry bag, cupcake tray, framed
99.5 x 75 x 3.5 cm
2. A Grasp Per Pebble, 2023
metal mesh, pebbles
46 x 87 x 76 cm
3. Platter Press, 2023
Foil plates, vintage wallpaper
140 x 100 x 8 cm
4. Underside Survey, 2023
Colour photocopy on paper, magnets
63 x 50 x 6.5 cm

The Closest Witness

The act of making is always close to hand. Crunching, pressing, grasping and rubbing; materials hold and are held, they fill and contain through a myriad of opposing forces.

Cobblestones are caught in a tender embrace, as mesh is moulded and concedes to their form. Scrolls take up residence in the hollows left by some absent master. A spectre of chevroned brickwork. A formal call and response.

The works and the processes employed in their making, speak of intimacy, proximity and care.

Cast-offs, clearance items and urban detritus are plucked from the theatre of the market place, through a discerning process of selection. Printed wallpapers, industrially pressed foil plates and lace give way to further compression and manipulation. Some collapse under-pressure, others are held in suspension, as though caught mid sentence. A delicate balance of forces imposed on a familiar domestic vernacular.

Material culture is the closest witness. Notions of taste and domesticity, craft and design come into conversation through patterned surfaces, modular sections and materials of yesteryear. Assembled and transposed to the gallery, each telling of their environment and conditions of circulation, they are put under another type of scrutiny. Another type of gaze. The sculptural works are at once brazen and caring. Delightfully aware of onlookers. The perfect host.

Absent Master

Shelved in an archival storage facility in northwest London, between buttercream walls and parquet floors, are three hundred cellulose bodies known as squeezes. Dehydrated, pulpy impressions, at a one-to-one scale.

Angkor Wat / Cambodia.

Palenque / Mexico.

The Alhambra / Spain.

Predating photogrammetry and three-dimensional scanning in the field, archeologists and explorers of the 19th century required a cheap and mobile method of reproduction, through which they could bring the world home.

Squeezing petroglyphs, epigraphs, monuments and facades was a rough act of intimacy. Sodden paper is pounded into sodden rock, thoroughly dried, gently prized, and treated with linseed oil or fat. In its bereft state, the squeeze is a near-perfect negative,. On occasion, this heavy handed and aqueous process led to a removal of matter. Painted surfaces could lift and peel, sticking in flakes to the interior of the paper mould. In the case of fragile faces, aggregate could loosen and become lodge itself into the drying mulch like claw-set garnet.

The sleepy facsimiles at Blyth House, record every line, contour, and crevice of their absent master. The fatty odor of linseed clings to them.

The impressions are rarely exhibited. They live their lives in museum back rooms, attics, storage facilities and archives, yet each gnarly and foxed paper mould is a record of an act, and artifact in its own right. Dislocated, inverted, more than a mere facsimile.

Saturn's Moons

The hazy forms that Galileo first read as ears were in fact a lively choreography of hoops and ribbons, that we understand today as rings. A dazzling cosmic mixture of shattered asteroids, comets, water ice and dust.

Far from inert, the rings undulate, wave, expand and contract. The concentric streams of white, gold, brown and rose, are cut, shaped and contained by a hand-full of silver skinned celestial bodies, known as shepherd moons. Orbiting in close proximity to the gassy giant, the shepherd moons herd strands of icy aggregate and particles through an act of mutual repulsion, producing crisp edges, twists and waves.

Herd as an act of containment without which Saturn's rings would gradually spread and dissipate across space.

Prometheus, pale and porous, herds the 'F' ring into a thin band, a mere 60 miles wide. Another, smaller satellite ploughs through the same ring, carving out arcs. Epimetheus and Janus orbit Saturn so closely that the strength of their gravitational interaction causes them to swap orbits every four years. The lengthiest of slow dances.

Text by Sophia Simensky

