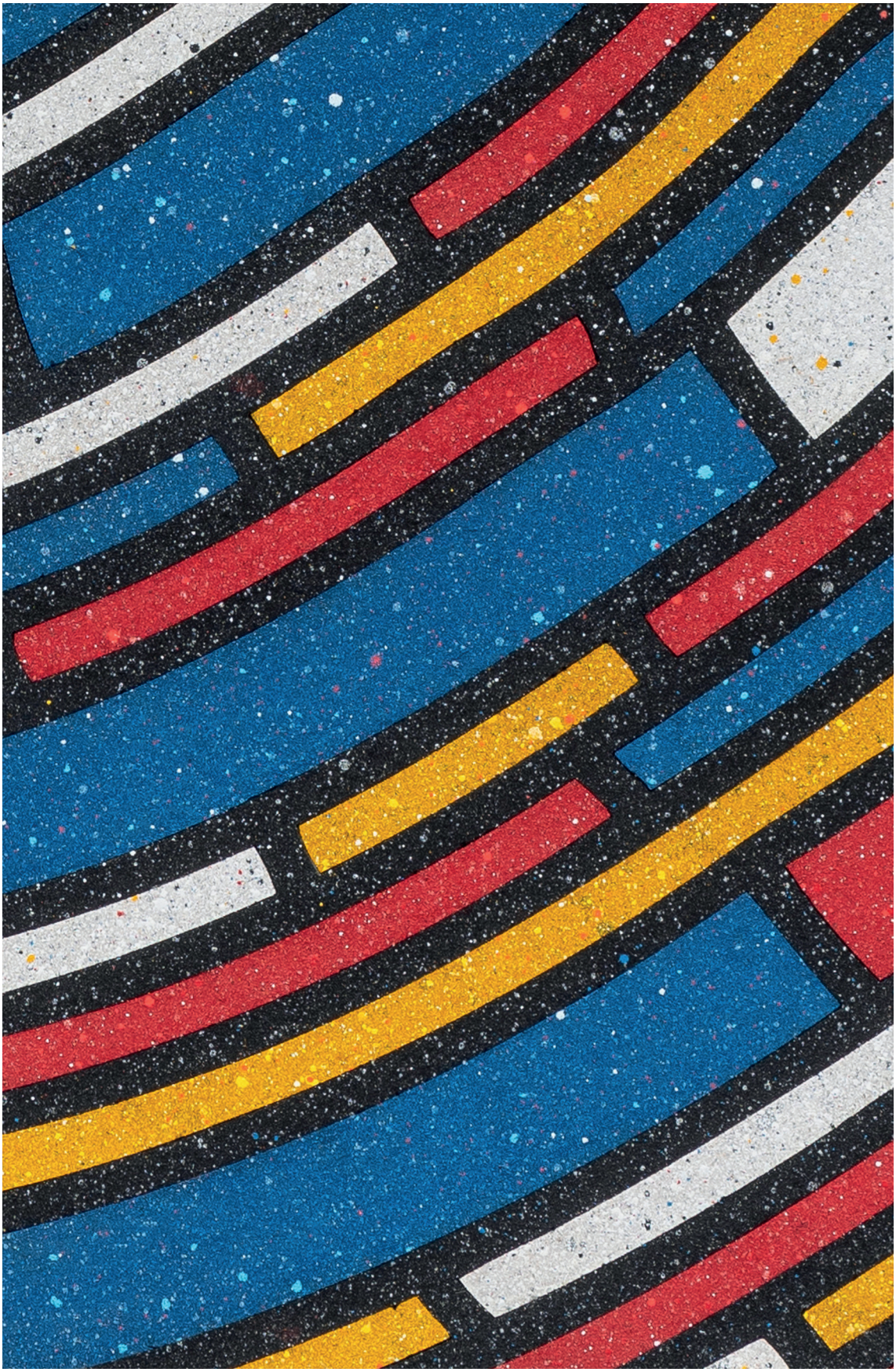


This is a conversation that took place between curator Jes Fernie and artist Rhys Coren between August 2019 and February 2020.

Jes Fernie: There's a video by Bruce McLean called *I Want My Crown (2015)* that I just can't get enough of. I think I like it for the same reasons I like your work: it's beguilingly simple, incredibly democratic, full of humour, wit and energy, but contains multiple stories if you go looking for them. Do you recognise that in your work?

Rhys Coren: I just watched that Bruce McLean work for the first time. I actually watched it three times in a row because I hadn't seen it before and I really liked it. If I think about some of the words you've used to describe both my work and *I Want My Crown*, I would say I aspire to that rather than recognise it. The word 'beguiling' is interesting – I think of that as being charming and deceptive. It interests me that there's a sense of simplicity in my work that may be illusory. I really like the idea of democracy, too. It sounds naff, but I've described the surfaces of my paintings as democratic. Each component part of the image sits side-by-side rather than on top of one another like painted layers. As for humour, I think my understanding and appreciation of it has changed over the years, from one-liners and sarcasm to something I hope is more generous and subtle.

The thing that sounds most familiar to me, however, is the idea that there can be multiple stories in one work. I go on about this a lot, but I make work to communicate. And, as a form of communication, an artwork can contain countless unfinished and quite disparate ideas. That's something I have a great affinity with. Even pieces that appear literal and singular can have multiple, simultaneous references, some of which are quite contradictory: "I like red, I like texture, I like flatness, I like lines, I like shapes, I like Stuart Davis, I like Elephant and Castle, I like intimacy, I like walking, I like music, I like looking, I like feeling, I like blue, I like space, I like simplicity, I like yellow, I like complexity."

One thing that feels really different in Bruce McLean's work from anything I might do is the presence of Bruce himself. Despite my work being packed full of bits of me, I want it to be there so I don't have to be.

Jes: From far away, your wall-based works look like paint applied to surface. On closer inspection, it becomes clear that it is incredibly precise marquetry made up of spray-painted and laser-cut board. As you say, there's a whole load of contradictory elements here (drop shadows / flat surface, a hand-drawn quality / machine aesthetic, hard lines / soft shapes, playfulness / rigorous attention to detail). This complexity is potentially disastrous but you manage, somehow, to keep it all together in a tightly conceived frame.

You say you make work to communicate and connect with others. What is it that you're hoping to communicate in this conversation, that your work

isn't able to do?

Rhys: This constant movement between intuition and analysis in the way I work involves moments of fluidity that I need to punctuate with conscious examination. I get these subconscious feedback loops where works feed into other works, and that can be self-generative and very exciting. But it can also be a distraction, as I have conscious ideas and motives that I want to get in there.

This conversation is one of those moments of analysis, and whilst I work best alone, I deconstruct and understand things better through interaction with others. I've never tried to orchestrate a conversation like this before – as something tangible and accessible. It felt like it was worth a try. Like a lot of the work I make, this conversation is a by-product of something I have to do anyway, so why not shape it in a way that's sharable? I've shied away from doing any sort of press release in the past – they feel too brief and didactic, and they're often so unsatisfying. It makes more sense to publish something after a show rather than before it's opened.

Exactly what I want to communicate, I'm not too sure at this stage. I want to experiment with a form that is a bit more direct and which runs parallel to my work. In you I have someone that – through your role as a curator, facilitator, disseminator and producer of many different artists' work – speaks art and English. You are a great translator.

I'd be interested to know more about your experience working with artists; about the similarities and differences you see in approaches to making work?

Jes: I recently read an interview with Swedish artist Mamma Andersson who said that the process of making paintings "is like breathing; it's very natural. I don't use my brain... just my hands." This is maybe a bit disingenuous, but it's one end of the spectrum.

David Sylvester and Francis Bacon talk about 'clarity and chance' in their seminal interview *The Brutality of Fact*. Here's Bacon: "I want a very ordered image but I want it to come about by chance…One wants a thing to be as factual as possible and at the same time as deeply suggestive or deeply unlocking of areas of sensation other than simple illustration of the object that you set out to do. Isn't that what all art is about?"

Many of the artists I work with make installations or performances, working with fabricators and teams of people. I think a lot of them would say that they use both intuition and analysis but that their best ideas come when they are looking at them sideways on, i.e. not in the studio but in the shower, on a walk or doing up their shoelaces. This is slightly different to painting, but I think the principle is the same: store up enough knowledge, intent and thought in order to ignore it all and arrive at something meaningful and strange.

Rhys: Mamma Andersson's approach is one I struggle with, maybe because it's the one I am most envious of: a trance-like state where you become a conduit for something greater – like Hilma af Klint's theosophical imagery. I'm too anxious and self-conscious to do that. Or maybe I'm a bit too sceptical? I have moments in that zone, but I soon find I need to edit and steer myself back on course, or make a note of the old course so I can circle back later. It's like a more cognitive me has to police a more visceral me. This shifting back and forth is exhausting as well as productive. Every time I move from one to the other, it's like I'm doing it for the very first time and I have to learn how to do everything all over again. It makes me feel stupid.

Jes: Tell me why you like walking. I like walking too.

Rhys: In short, it's meditative.

My switch from cyclist to pedestrian happened when I started my post-graduate course. It felt like such a monumental privilege to study art again and I didn't want to waste time with the adrenalin and anger that came as a result of cycling through central London. So I started walking, and I was lucky enough that the journey from my home to art school took a manageable forty-five minutes.

There are obvious physical benefits to walking, but the thing I noticed most was a change in my mood and my ability to think and remember things more clearly. There was all this extra time to listen to music, podcasts, audio books and audio pieces that I'd made in preparation for animations. I would even sketch out paintings in my mind or have conversations with myself about my work. I was measurably less stressed and more productive. It's quite mundane, but it was a real revelation for me.

I live in Elephant and Castle and studied at the Royal Academy. Each day, I passed through Waterloo, crossed the Thames into Piccadilly via Charing Cross and headed into Mayfair. I synchronised with City workers and got to know the buskers by name. I saw motorcades of various diplomats, politicians and even the Queen. Tourists, tugboats, Big Ben and the Trafalgar Yodas formed a unique backdrop to my twice-daily trips.

Now I work in Elephant and Castle as well as live there, so my walks are more circuit-like around the soon-to-be demolished shopping centre. On one walk, I pass the corner shop from Dexys Midnight Runners' *Come On Eileen* music video.

Jes: I was brought up without a car and have really long legs. I think walking is inscribed in my DNA. My twenty-three minute journey from home to train station is significantly less glamorous than yours, involving Kwik-Fit, an incredible number of roundabouts and three sex shops.

Walking is a solitary pursuit for me that brings with it a kind of white noise and an adherence to a rhythm that is built up over the course of a walk. I'd like to think I get loads of emotional, intellectual and professional things accomplished on these

walks, but in truth I think they are more like a linear fug that propels my body into a space that's free of any external demands. Heaven!

All the works in *Shape of Story* allude to the experience of walking through urban space, pounding the pavements, looking up at buildings, trees and clouds. There's one painting that's a bit more tangential – *Up and down (I'm up the wall)*. It looks like an overactive CT scan. Is there a connection between brain activity and physical exercise here? And how much of all this is related to the birth of your son?

Rhys: When my child was born, I set myself some homework to keep myself sane during those first few months of sleeplessness. Inspired by a book that accompanied Bob Godfrey's *Do-It-Yourself Cartoon Show* that was on the BBC in the 70s, my aim was to learn to animate a 'walk cycle' from scratch. Most of the figurative animation I do involves rotoscoping, which means drawing directly over film stills, so to invent a figure from scratch and make it move in a convincing way seemed a skill worth learning. Once I got the hang of that, I moved onto old Disney tutorials that showed me how to animate a character's walk in a way that conveyed different emotions. After a few months I'd created this animated character that was caught in an infinite walking loop of shifting moods. In the absence of being able to walk myself, I experienced it through this avatar. This formed the basis for *Straight & Narrow (If Only)*, the animated piece in *Shape of Story*.

Up and down (I'm up the wall) is based on a diagram of the hippocampus, a part of the brain connected to memory and nicknamed the 'seahorse'. Walking can increase your capacity for remembering, apparently. The title of the show, *Shape of Story*, comes from Kurt Vonnegut's lecture 'Shapes of Stories', where he maps out the individual paths of fictional characters on a graph, using good and bad fortune on the Y-axis, and time (beginning to end) on the X-axis. By tracing a line through a character's good and bad fortune over the length of a story, a shape emerges in the form of a diagram. Despite the tongue-in-cheek tone of the lecture, the idea of a journey through life taking a visual form really resonated with me – it felt more tangible. From there I began to research medical drawings associated with the mental and physical benefits of walking, which is where I learned about the 'seahorse'. I ended up with three types of image: graphs showing narrative structure, medical diagrams, and representations of cityscapes that helped me move between literal and metaphorical journeys.

Jes: I'm very aware that as a curator I am one step removed from the work. It's artists who must attend their own private views, update their website or post something on social media with their skin metaphorically flayed – representing the work / playing the clown / climbing outside of themselves in order to be able to walk through the door / give the audience what they want / not give the audience what they want. It seems to involve a complex mix of nonchalance and exquisite attention, which contrasts so hugely with the solitude involved in making art. What mask do you wear when your work moves from a private to a public setting?

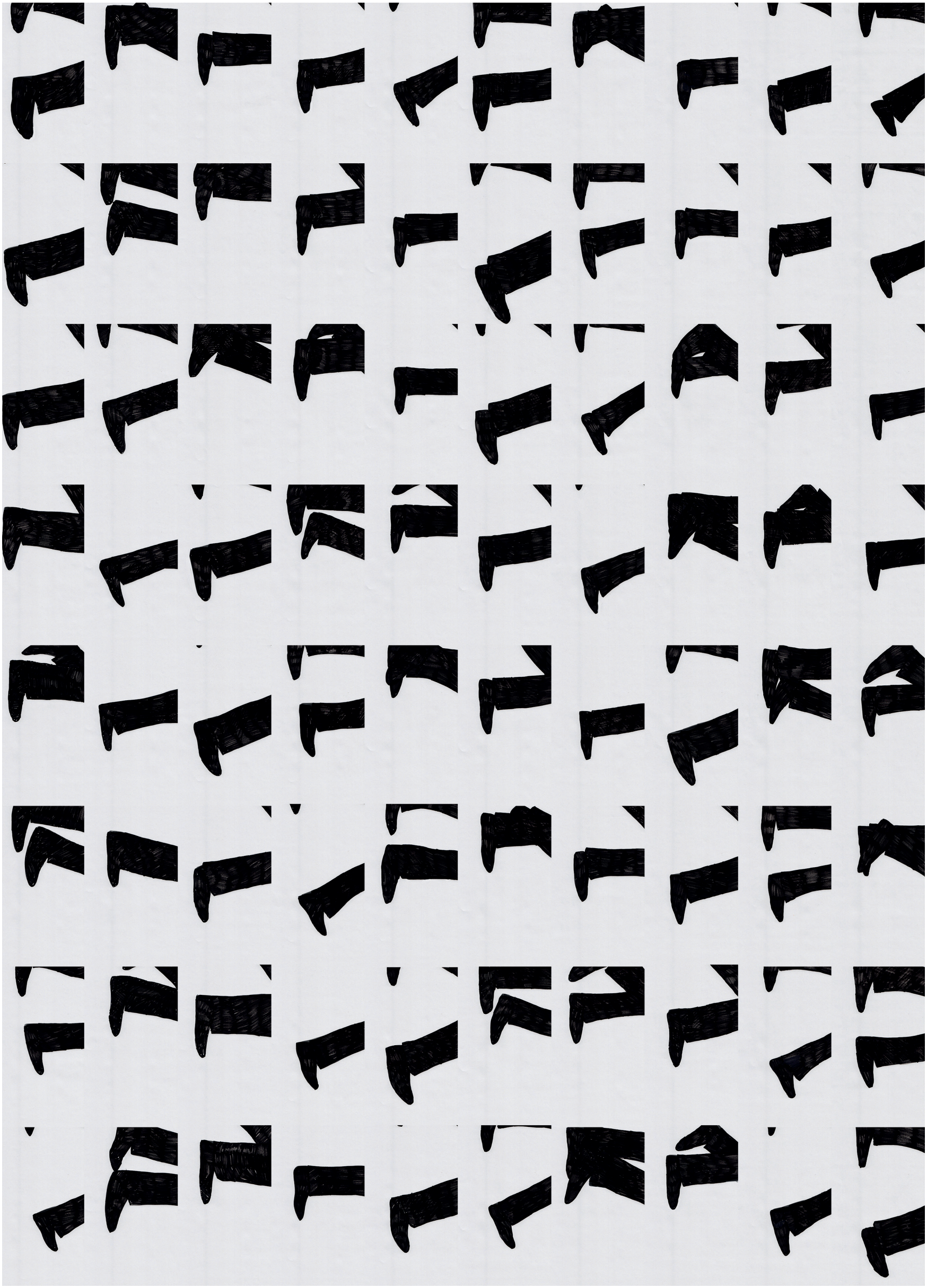
Rhys: It comes back to the idea of duality. Artists have to move between – or hold simultaneously – two modes of being that are often contradictory. We are the professional amateurs, the educated autodidacts, the disciplined dreamers, the intuitive analysts, the social loners. There seems to be a pattern, right? Form versus content, public versus private, selfless versus selfish, conscious versus unconscious, high versus low, good versus bad, safety versus risk, order versus chaos, repetition versus change.

Painting and animation, the two types of media in which I most often work, feel contradictory. There seems to be conflict in the sense that moving image works override still ones and rhythm and duration override imaginary space. It's like trying to read with the TV on. But, at the same time, this paradoxical relationship is productive for me. I like making paintings that compete with animations and animations that compete with paintings. The strength of a painting is its stillness and the ability to embellish and emphasize tiny detail, to create a space that never changes so that your eye can graze across it. The strength of an animation is its rhythm and real-time duration, where images replace other images in sequence, often accompanied by diegetic sound and non-diegetic music. But if an animation can take some of the qualities of painting, like composition and colour, or a painting can feel screen-like and communicate a sense that it holds a world beyond the edges, then that's pretty awesome.

In terms of my relation to the public sphere, I can be crippled with social anxiety one day, and on those days there's not much that can be done to persuade me to crawl out of my shell and wear a different mask. On others, however, I can be high on dopamine and nothing phases me. You're right, though. There seems to be an endless tightrope, with constant conscious and subconscious micro-adjustments being made. Again, on some days that can be quite overwhelming, on others it feels like second nature. I find that putting the work before myself or any personal goal alleviates most of that worry.

Jes: Another duality in *Shape of Story* is public space and private reverie – particularly evident in *Straight & Narrow (If Only)*. The contrast between the sound of footsteps on pavement and slowed down love songs (when you put the headphones on) is stark and creates the sense that we are taking part in an infinite physical as well as emotional journey.

Rhys: I thought a lot about how I could have the footsteps and the street ambience as an anchor to the physical world, but also use the hypnotic, visceral nature of music as a way of transporting the viewer to a place of heightened emotion. I decided to play the footsteps into the space, pitched down and really bassy, then have the music playing on headphones. I love how listening to



music creates a sense of privacy, even if you're wedged on the tube or pushing through a crowd… or in an art gallery.

All the tracks are taken from mix tapes I make using songs with the word 'love' in the title; an ongoing project that acts as a survey of alternative love songs. For this piece, I slowed each of the songs down to match the *bpm* of my walking heart rate. I liked this direct bodily connection. Also, even the most upbeat disco hit sounds melancholic when pitched, which allows a reading of the music that is adjacent or 'sideways on'. I thought a lot about watching that animation before and after you put the headphones on. There's an activation of sorts that comes with the music. Which, thinking about it now, relates to the way you described your experience of walking: "a linear fug that propels my body into a space that's free of any external demands." I like that.

The way the exhibition is laid out allows your reading or rereading of the work to shift. You see the paintings, so read them as pictorial spaces, then experience the animation with the street sounds, then put the headphones on and hear the slowed down music. Finally, you go out past the paintings again, but only after you've experienced literal, real-time rhythm through movement and sound. On a personal level, as a viewer, that changes something in me, and I experience the paintings slightly differently – like I'm conditioned differently. The thing that holds all this together is the lighting. It's pretty dim in there.

As for the infinity thing, that was almost certainly inspired by that homework I set myself – the forever walking avatar.

Jes: The increasingly prevalent requirement of artists (and writers and musicians) to represent themselves, particularly through social media, involves all sorts of conflicting and potentially fraught issues and emotions. (How much do I give away? Will the work lose its potency? What's the difference between my work and what I say about it?) This all impacts directly on the way that art is experienced and written about. Beyond blockbuster shows, gallery attendance is on the decline – people are satisfied to 'see' the work online and enter a narrative, of sorts, with its maker.

However seductive your paintings are in digital form, it seems so important that they are seen in person – in order to examine the cracks and splashes, to forge an intimate relation with the work beyond surface appearance.

Rhys: An online image is a placeholder for the real thing. I hope my work has both a close-up and a far-away quality, and seeing a small image on a phone is no different to seeing a work from a distance. The aim is to draw you in. For me, it's about creating a sense of intimacy. The reward for getting closer to a painting is a whole new perspective involving texture and detail. That seemingly naïve, hand-drawn line is actually precisely cut; every component part is a separate piece that's been individually handled, coloured, textured and assembled. It seems fucking backward that seeing art in real life could become secondary to seeing it digitally.

I think the healthiest way to approach how you present your work online is to see it as a necessary evil for sharing what you are doing in the real world. I like the democracy of Instagram and how people can connect with others so easily, skipping the usual avenues guarded by gatekeepers. The downside of that, however, is encouraging attention seeking, over-sharing and a complete loss of potency and tactility in the real life stuff. There's no quick, like-fuelled hit that can compare to seeing something 'IRL'. The absolute worst thing about Instagram, though, is seeing endless holiday cocktail photos from those in the art world who don't have the sensitivity to realise that the overwhelming majority of artists can't afford to do that.

Jes: I first came across your work at Seventeen in 2017 when I was looking out for artists I might work with on a permanent commission for a very public site in Hanover Square, central London. I became excited by the idea of bringing this small-scale, animated marquetry to a much bigger scale and public prominence – the colour, noise, movement of the work reflecting the colour, noise and movement of the city streets. This leap, into a bigger scale and broader public realm, is it exciting for you?

Rhys: Exciting? That's an understatement. I was – and still am – totally blown away. We've been working on it for almost three years now, and it still hasn't fully sunk in that it's happening. And, yeah, it's a huge leap from gallery-based, 60cm x 60cm paintings made from small, individually cut pieces, textured and pigmented by miniscule droplets of paint, to a 9-metre-long, public-facing, terrazzo mural, but I felt like I could make something intimate even at this sort of scale. Ultimately, that's what's important to me. A good friend once told me that big work pushes you back and small work invites you in, which is a rule I adhere to more often than not, but this big work is going to be at the foot of a giant building in a tight central London backstreet. There is no being pushed back. Rather, you'll be forced to pass along and below it, close enough for it to engulf you. My hope is that you'll feel like you're in it and everything else is blocked out for a moment or two.

The bit that's hardest to get my head around is the duration – the forever-ness. It isn't anything I've had to think about before, but I've had some recent experiences at Dia:Beacon and Chinati that have given me some understanding of long-term installation. Until then, I had this image of, say, Donald Judd's work in a gallery setting, perfectly controlled and sterile. But, in reality, in Marfa for instance, the seasons and weather and time of day all play a part in your experience of the work, revealing something different each time. And then there's the fact you can visit and revisit and it is, in fact, you who changes. I tricked myself out of freaking out about the longevity of it by thinking about all the little moments within other moments going in and out of focus depending on who passes by and when.

Jes: So much of what people feel is specific or unique about the era in which they live is often an echo from previous decades or centuries. "Painting is dead!" "We are living in the worst time in human history." "Society is fragmenting" – it's just a way of applying meaning to a system that is fundamentally incomprehensible. This is Francis Bacon in the 1960s: "…all art has now become completely a game by which man distracts himself". He was talking about the fact that the introduction of photography meant that painting no longer had a documentary role in society, but that could easily have been written in 2020.

Rhys: I like that art has the potential to, at times, distract – to transport you to a space or a moment that is totally yours and out of reach from corruption, like a moment of transience through meditation or something. Not that I know anything about meditating, although I have tried. My novice attempts are little more than a disorientating and confusing ordeal. I'm a long way off replicating the same level of otherworldliness I've experienced when dancing to Blancmange's *Game Above My Head* at Moor Places, Sylvester's *Over and Over* at Horse Meat Disco, or Love International's *Airport of Love* at World Unknown, but I hear it's possible. At those moments, I was somewhere else entirely. To be in a state of permanent escape, however, seems unhealthy. In fact, 'unhealthy' doesn't do that justice. It would be total hell.

Until *Rock-hard Aura and the Lost Explorer*, the show I did at Grimm's New York space in 2018, the first show I did as a parent, my aim as an artist was to only ever be positive – to use my practice as a way to be my best, most optimistic self. As a person, I am prone to rumination, worry and negativity, so I made a conscious effort to evade that. I wanted everything I put out in the world to be celebratory, but the perfect storm of current affairs, age and parenthood made me realise that the dogmatic pursuit of positivity in my work was a dereliction. For the Grimm show, I let some of my less cheery thinking in. But I offset that with the reintroduction of a cartoon line. That simple gesture allowed me to sneak in some quite desperate imagery – explosions, toxic waves, destruction. In hindsight, I was clearly thinking about the world I was bringing a new life into. For *Shape of Story*, I was able to go one step further and address personal worries more explicitly – mental health, anxiety, self-betterment.

Learning about the activities of the artist collective Group Material, specifically the work of Doug Ashford, Julie Ault and Felix Gonzalez-Torres, was a massive influence. What I got from them was, and I paraphrase badly, aesthetics and seriousness don't need to be mutually exclusive. This gave me permission to combine melancholy and sadness with the very visual or colourful or almost joyful. You can be elated at the arrival of your first child, but also tired, lost and borderline unhappy. All of a sudden you have this amazing, precious, vulnerable little thing that comes before anything, and it is terrifying and beautiful in equal measure. That complexity, however daunting and seemingly muddled, was something I wanted to try to express in my work.

Jes: This combination of vibrancy and melancholy is at the core of Pop Art – and particularly the work of Stuart Davis – whose retrospective at The Whitney in 2016 you've referenced in *E & C (In Full Swing)*.

I'm looking at your titles now – this shift in mood is clear. Titles of previous works are more celebratory with a rhythm that references pop lyrics and contemporary culture: (*In your lips I sense a danger (you've got the eyes of a stranger)*, 2017; *Pop, times two, measure the beat. Dance the dance, dancing feet*, 2016) whereas the titles in this exhibition reflect a more sombre tone (and are much shorter!): *Mood*, 2019; *Ain't no*, 2019 and *Up and down (I'm up the wall)*, 2019.

Rhys: My life's changed a lot. I'm in a contemplative phase. Learning to be a parent has made a load of things from my own childhood resurface. Then there's the climate and Brexit and the Tories. I'm not quite so upbeat anymore and my titles must reflect that. The phase where the titles were super upbeat was my 'I can't believe I'm at the fucking Royal Academy' phase. I felt like the character from the Fast Show who thought everything was brilliant. It's hard to convey how annoyingly positive and driven I was as a postgraduate student. My route there had been a long one, so I didn't mess around.

Jes: What made the journey so circuitous?

Rhys: After school I went to art college because I could draw. I chose education as a way to leave my hometown and experience a life elsewhere. It turned out that the BA I did in Bristol, a course I picked for its proximity to my favourite skate parks, had amazing, young, London-based but not London-born artists running it. Those tutors sewed a seed in me, and they made me believe that someone with my background could be an artist. And, by that, I guess I'm partly talking class, but I'm also talking in terms of geography and culture – I grew up in a provincial naval town in the 80s and 90s. But I'm very lucky that I had a family open to continuing education, and I started my BA in the early 2000s when it cost next to nothing to do, which meant I could afford to try something like that without any real ambition. My time there wasn't constantly weighed-up against life-changing debt.

By the time I left, I knew I wanted to pursue art, but I also knew I knew nothing. In cultural terms I was incredibly naïve, so I embarked on what turned out to be a seven-year journey to catch up. In that time, whilst making my own work behind the scenes, the majority of my output was collaborative, editorial or curatorial. I co-founded and ran exhibition spaces and edited publications on and offline. My work wasn't good enough, but I wanted to contribute to my community somehow, and being active and constantly around other artists was immeasurably important for the development of my own work.

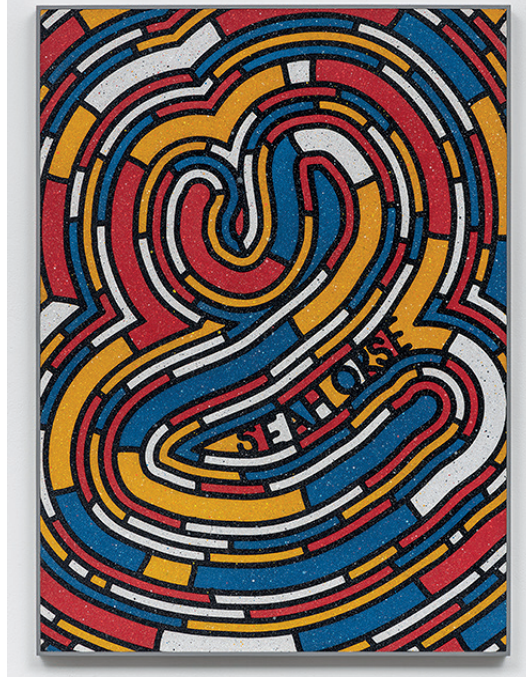
This self-educating phase was also my peak hedonistic, escapist phase. Which was coupled with my peak precariously poor phase. I stayed up all night learning to animate. Then, in the days, I read or visited galleries and museums or did the least amount of paid work I could to scrape by and buy more time to learn – which was anything from manual labour to hipster journalism. Just as that lifestyle was beginning to take its toll on me, as I was a thirty-year-old who animated in his bedroom, never paid rent on time and was always anxious, I got onto a postgraduate course.

Jes: This is an important part of the story: the shift in your work from escapism to something that has a greater sense of humility or honesty about it. You say that this is connected to being a new parent, but could it be also something to do with the future your child has ahead of him and the times in which we live – an era of environmental collapse, the repercussions of which will play out for centuries to come. I certainly feel that everything has changed, and with that comes a deep sense of melancholy and sadness (and anger!).

Rhys: I realise now that the work I made at the RA was my way of analysing my escapism. As a child, I lost myself in TV, cartoons and sport. Then, as an adult, it was dance music culture. All of those things featured heavily in my work, and at the RA I could escape into art about escaping. Now, though, it feels like I'm starting to tackle some of the things that caused me to want to escape all the time, allowing that process to feed into the work.

It's a terrifying thought, but there's a little person watching me and emulating a lot of what I do. I need to take responsibility for myself, both physically and mentally. I have to be more mindful and conscious of any baggage or complication I bring and I need to keep challenging myself. Until now, my usual coping or 'repressional' mechanisms (to quote some Zapffe) were very much rooted in isolation and distraction. But, without being able to disappear or get fucked up when the going gets tough, I'm struggling a bit. I'm constantly on the look out to find new ways to alleviate stress – through walking, diet and education for example.

I have this overwhelming sense that there's a much greater need for social responsibility and community, made even more necessary by the current political climate. Oh, and of course, the actual climate. At the very least, I don't want to be complicit through my ignorance.



Up and down (I'm up the wall), 2019
spray paint, acrylic, pencil on board
62cm x 45cm

Rhys Coren is an artist based in London, UK.
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Jes Fernie is an independent curator and writer based in Essex, UK.
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Shape of Story was a solo exhibition of recent work by Rhys Coren at Seventeen, London, September 2019.
www.seventeengallery.com

Rhys Coren's permanent work for Hanover Square in London was commissioned by Great Portland Estates and curated by Jes Fernie.

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