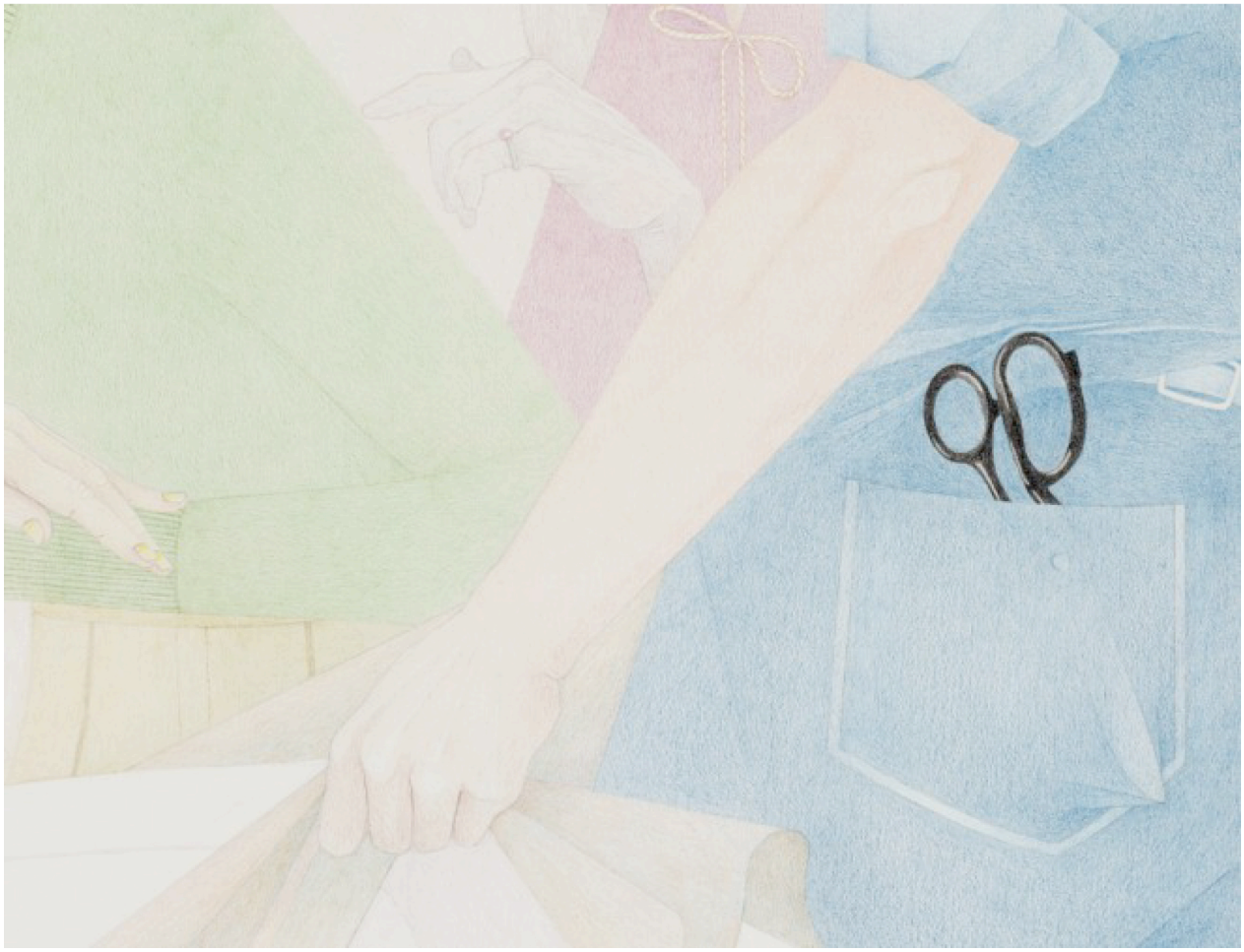
BURLINGTON CONTEMPORARY

Donna Huddleston's drawings
Isabel Seligman

Exhibition Review
16.01.2020



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by Isabel Seligman • 16.01.2020

With its overtones of Christian redemption through suffering, Donna Huddleston's recollection of her years as a student at the National Institute of Dramatic Art in Sydney skilfully conjures the monomaniacal atmosphere of an intellectual hothouse:

> The hours were long, the regime was brutal . . . The students of theatre design were, it transpired, supposed to suffer.

The Exhausted Student, Huddleston's first solo exhibition in a public gallery in the United Kingdom, presents a suite of drawings and sculpture set in a theatrical environment. The display examines notions of creative ambition, sacrifice and intellectual labour in a manner that is both demanding and enjoyable, examining why, how and at what cost, the show must go on.

This is not the first time that Huddleston's work has focused on such microcosms of society. A compellingly ritualistic depiction of her high school netball team, *The Warriors* (2015) similarly examines a crucible of identity formation through large-scale narrative drawing, its relationships forged in the heat of adolescent intimacy. To delve deeper into her own life experience, it is fitting that Huddleston turned to Tennessee Williams, who transmuted the pain of his upbringing and fraught relationships with his overbearing mother, alcoholic father and mentally troubled sister Rose into works such as *The Glass Menagerie* (1944) and *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1947).

Williams's spirit, its feverish intensity and nervous exhaustion, presides over the exhibition. Most of Williams's characters enter, or exit, his stories at the end of their tether, and Huddleston's exhibition text, which accompanies rather than explains her drawn and sculpted works, quotes the not-quite-defrocked priest Shannon at the conclusion of *The Night of the Iguana*: 'I cut loose one of God's creatures at the end of the rope'. Williams himself suffered a nervous breakdown at the age of twenty-four, unable to square the demands of his menial job and his creative ambitions. His mother described his routine while he worked as a clerk at the International Shoe Company between 1932 and 1935:

> Tom would go to his room with black coffee and cigarettes and I would hear the typewriter clicking away at night in the silent house. Some mornings when I walked in to wake him for work, I would find him sprawled fully dressed

across the bed, too tired to remove his clothes.[1]

The 'culture of professional crises', in which the students of theatre design collude, has a distinguished history, and Huddleston is a worthy inheritor of Williams's eloquent chronicling.

Set against maroon fabric panels, *The Exhausted Student* is a monumental drawing made up of eight conjoined sheets and rendered with a miniaturist's attention to detail FIG. 1. Using the composition of Raphael's *Deposition* (1507; Galleria Borghese, Rome) as the drawing's armature, Huddleston conveys the figures in a jewel-like palette familiar from *The Warriors*, in which each of the girls' elaborately laced shorts sings a different colour. The fabric panels add to the presence of the drawing – recalling the purpose of Raphael's panel as an altarpiece – while also conjuring the acoustic cladding of educational establishments, theatres or churches FIG. 2. The drawing's colours are built up in translucent layers of *Caran d'Ache* pencil in what must be an incredibly laborious and time-consuming process, rendering the figures ethereal and luminescent. Each of the supporting characters is assigned their own colour, while the student – standing in for Raphael's dead Christ – is garbed in white. This highlights her jaundiced pallor, the whites of her upturned swooning eyes and the blue veins visible through the skin of a convulsed hand, a paintbrush jammed between its splayed fingers in the place of Christ's stigmata.



Fig. 1 Detail of Fig.2.

If the exhibition is conceived as a theatrical environment, it is one consonant with Williams's lyrical stage directions. The St Louis apartment in *The Glass Menagerie* is described as being entered by a fire escape, 'a structure whose name is a touch of accidental poetic truth, for all of these huge buildings are always burning with the slow and implacable fires of human desperation'.[2] In Huddleston's display light from the street is cast through a lime green textured glass door **FIG. 3**, evoking the cold light of Williams's

Southern Gothic hotel lobbies, dingy apartments and private mental institutions.



Fig. 2 *The Exhausted Student*, by Donna Huddleston. 2019. Coloured pencil on paper, 145 by 226 cm. (Courtesy the artist; photograph Angus Mill; exh. Drawing Room, London).

Another of Williams's stage directions in *The Glass Menagerie* speaks to the character of many drawings in the exhibition:

> The scene is memory and is therefore nonrealistic. Memory takes a lot of poetic license. It omits some details; others are exaggerated, according to the emotional value of the articles it touches, for memory is seated predominantly in the heart.[3]

Indeed in its wealth of telling details, and omission of others, *The Exhausted Student* takes on something of the quality of a manic episode or fever dream. Some of the drawing's details are imbued with an ominous significance, others seem strangely absent or uniform (such as the figures' idealised anatomy) and the viewer tries to weave a narrative out of a multitude of clues. In an exhibition examining the pragmatics of intellectual labour it is both appropriate and refreshing that the artist does not provide an overdetermined explanatory text but asks the viewer to do the majority of the interpretative work themselves.

A blue paintbrush has a gleaming drop of something gathering at its tip. In the back pocket of one figure's jeans, tailors' shears bulge

menacingly through the diaphanous fabric, like Chekhov's gun waiting to go off in the final scene FIG. 4. The figures' clothing is adorned with softly militaristic touches (epaulettes, footstraps, buckles, chains), while a ring on a gloved hand is a fashion familiar from Lucas Cranach's depictions of Judith holding the head of Holofernes. In the place of Mary Magdalen is a blonde woman clad in a green poloneck and slacks, whose face appears to be covered in scales. Perhaps this is the tutor Huddleston swore she saw turn into a lizard. Adding to the air of absurdity, this figure also references Williams's *Night of the Iguana* where the eponymous animal is captured to be fattened and eaten, only to be cut free by the play's protagonist in a last-ditch stab at self-respect, 'a little act of grace'.



Fig. 3 Installation view of *The Exhausted Student* at Drawing Room, London, 2020. (Courtesy the artist; photograph by Angus Mill).

The lizard skin is picked up in *The Call* FIG. 5, a drawing of a woman dressed as a Velázquez Infanta, her bodice and wide crinoline covered with reptilian scales. Other parts of her dress appear delicately veined, like a sheath of overlapping leaves, or faceted like a cocoon. Two crystal pendants nestle between her breasts, and her gloved hand clutches a telephone, its spiral cord knotted and unravelling, beneath a furrowed brow and wild eyes. This torso,

encircled by phone cord, chain and crystal pendants, is repeated in *The Instant* FIG. 6, where its simplification as a mannequin-like female bust and placement opposite an enigmatically rhyming architectural setting, suggests a certain entrapment. The building's mirrored arches appear as smooth pill-like forms, and intensify an underlying atmosphere of containment and restraint. The domed arches are those of the Brutalist St Peter's Seminary, Cardross, Scotland's most famous modernist ruin. Although it was conceived as a grand theatrical space of theological education (owing a great debt to Le Corbusier), the building was practically rendered obsolete the year before it opened, when the Second Vatican Council of 1965 dictated that priests should be schooled in the community rather than remote institutions such as St Peter's. The increasing need for alterations to the ambitious building (its architects Isi Metzstein and Andy MacMillan were nicknamed the 'Alter Boys') further emphasised the project's sense of hubris, pathos and betrayed idealism; the building was finally abandoned in 1987.



Fig. 4 Detail of Fig.2.

Elsewhere a mysterious sculpture reminiscent of a large cowrie shell or beached animal is constructed out of layers of papier-mâché and birch tar FIG. 7. The smooth gessoed surface is rubbed away in places to reveal layers of *Financial Times*-pink newsprint in a manner reminiscent of Pierre Huyghe's *Timekeeper (Drill Core)* sculptures (2014–ongoing), in which the artist sandpapers a hole in a section of museum wall to expose the coats of paint used to decorate successive exhibitions. The whole is supported by a plinth of soap, its palpable weight acting as a counterpoint to the manic energy of *Schnapps* FIG. 8, in which a chorus of gun-toting, Clockwork Orange mascara'd cowgirls line dance, fringed bikinis flying.



Fig. 5 *The Call*, by Donna Huddleston. 2019, pencil on paper, 72 x 106 cm. (Courtesy the artist; photograph Angus Mill; exh. Drawing Room, London).

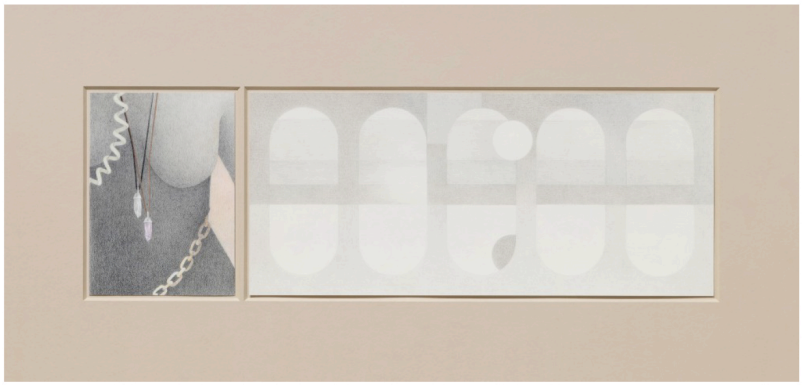


Fig. 6 *The Instant*, by Donna Huddleston. 2019. Coloured pencil, silver and gold

point on paper, 25 by 90 cm. (Courtesy the artist; photograph Angus Mill; exh. Drawing Room, London).

While the exhibition's narrative finds its source in Huddleston's personal biography, and might seem a world away from the large-scale drama of contemporary politics, they are not so far apart as they might seem. As the pace of life continues to increase and every hour of the day is optimised for productivity, her 'culture of professional crises' is no longer confined to the art school. Exhaustion is a contemporary epidemic, as well as a badge of legitimacy for the high-powered professional. In the day of the twenty-four-hour news cycle, social media alerts and always-connected portable devices, we might enjoy a certain sense of nostalgia for the days when exhaustion was self-imposed in the service of art. 'Within the globalist neoliberal paradigm, sleeping is for losers', notes Jonathan Crary in *24:7: Late Capitalism and the Ends of Sleep* (2014).[4] In his book *Dangerously Sleepy* (2013) Alan Derickson, a historian of health and labour, explored the 'cult of manly wakefulness' – the less you appear to need to sleep, the stronger you are perceived to be. Margaret Thatcher famously claimed to survive on four hours a night; Donald Trump has reported sleeping between three and five. In opposition to this hyper-masculine posturing, Huddleston is at pains to emphasise the collaborative nature of artistic efforts, and the importance of human relationships in creating and sustaining meaning. A contemporary conception of competitive rest and wakefulness is at odds with Huddleston's interwoven cast of characters. As the exhausted student is bodily supported and borne up by her fellows, Shannon's closing words from *The Night of the Iguana* conclude Huddleston's text: 'I can make it downhill but not back up,' to which comes the response 'I'll get you back up the hill'.



Fig. 7 *Untitled*, by Donna Huddleston. 2019. Papier-mâché, soap, gesso, pencil, birch tar, 70 by 50 by 90 cm. (Courtesy the artist; photograph Angus Mill; exh. Drawing Room, London).



Fig. 8 *Schnapps*, by Donna Huddleston. 2019. Pencil on paper, 69 by 85 cm. (Courtesy the artist; photograph Angus Mill; exh. Drawing Room, London).

Exhibitions details Donna Huddleston: The Exhausted Student
Drawing Room, London
28th November 2019–1st March 2020

Footnotes

1 T. Williams: *Notebooks*, ed. M. Bradham Thornton, Newhaven and London 2006, p.xi.

2 T. Williams: *The Glass Menagerie*, New York 2011 [1944], p.57.

3 *Ibid.*

4 The book also forms a cornerstone of the exhibition *24/7*at Somerset House until 23rd February.