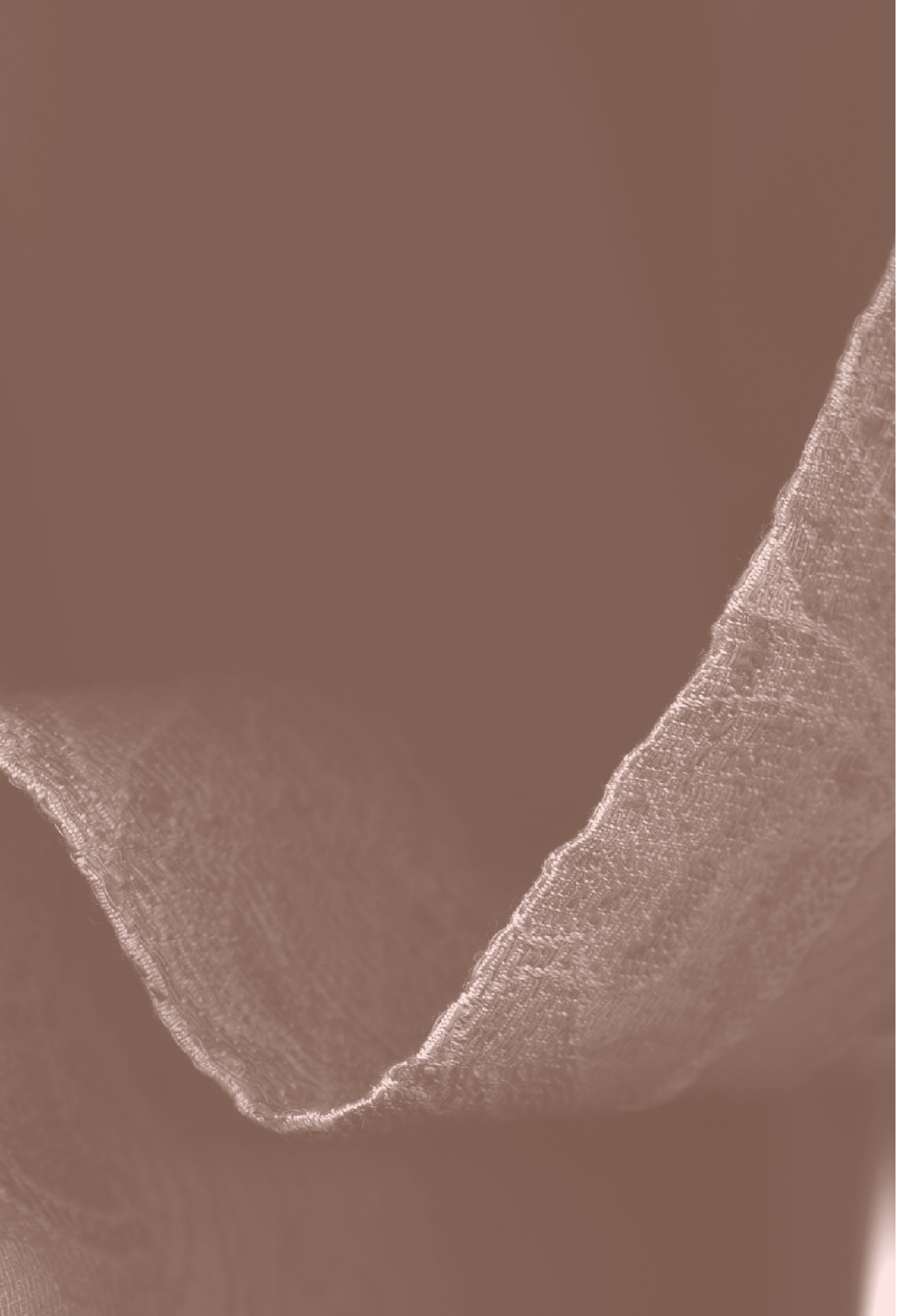
Embodied Dreaming

Sheila Gaffney



These at least were things she could remember, photo by the artist 2015

Marianna Tsionki
Curatorial Introduction

Embodied Dreaming 1 (Dublin 1965), photo: Jerry Hardman-Jones 2014

The title of the exhibition is inspired by Sheila Gaffney's doctoral thesis titled *Embodied Dreaming as a Sculptural Practice*.[1] In the process of theorising her own practice of making, she turns to object relations theory, more particularly British psychoanalyst Christopher Bollas' notion of 'embodied dreaming' as integral to the process of embodiment, namely the construction of *the self*.[2]

The exhibition is representative of her entire oeuvre, bringing together for the first time a number of sculptures, drawings, video installation and image works, lightboxes, as well as unseen process-based models, and research material, highlighting the importance of process in her practice. It features key works and achievements from her career, yet avoids being classified as a retrospective. Instead, it revisits selected works from the artist's back catalogue through the lenses of *Embodied Dreaming* as a curatorial method.

1. Sheila Gaffney, *Embodied Dreaming as a Sculptural Practice informed by an idea in the psychoanalytical writings of Christopher Bollas* (Doctoral thesis, University of Huddersfield, 2019).
2. Christopher Bollas, *The Mystery of Things* (London: Routledge, 1999), 128.

Sheila Gaffney is a sculptor whose work is known for its intricate blend of contemporary themes and craftsmanship. Gaffney's work often explores themes of identity, memory, and the passage of time, creating a dialogue between the personal and the universal. In addition to her sculptural practice, Gaffney is also a dedicated educator, sharing her knowledge and passion for fine art with students and emerging artists. Her teaching is an extension of her practice, fostering a deeper understanding of the artistic process. She is Professor of Research (Innovation & Development) at Leeds Arts University.

For four decades, Gaffney has developed a diverse body of work encompassing various forms—sculpture, mixed media and site-specific installations, drawing, photography—demonstrating her versatility and profound engagement with materiality and form. The materiality of the work is central to Gaffney's artistic practice. She is deeply invested in the physical properties of her materials and the processes involved in working with them. This hands-on approach allows her to engage with her art on a tactile level, creating pieces that are as much about the process of making as they are about the finished product. Central themes in Gaffney's work are issues of identity formation, class, gender, memory and multigenerational ethnicity, constantly intersecting with research-practices of sculptural making. She frequently delves into the concept of memory, using her art to render fleeting moments and ephemeral experiences. This focus on the transient nature of life is evident in her choice of materials and techniques, which often involve processes of decay, transformation, and regeneration.

As a feminist artist, Gaffney's work engages with sculptural forms, feminist theories of life-writing and psychoanalytic aesthetics, exploring their interconnections through sculpture, drawing, and scholarly writing. The Girl—a deep and persistent fascination in her artistic practice—appears in multiple works as a psychoanalytic motif, which uncovers unconscious processes and gains insight into underlying psychological conflicts, desires, and emotional states. Her interest in research focuses on navigating the complexity of sculptural making. She is deeply intrigued by the processes that drive creativity, and develops mechanisms which aim to balance the conscious and the subconscious, memory and reality, tradition and innovation, theory and practice. She recognizes that, having found solutions, she continually poses new questions that emerge from the practice itself, evolving a sculptural language that is intimate and delicate, yet powerful and resilient. For Gaffney research-practice methods are both outward and inward-looking, often reflecting a keen interest in how art can embody and articulate complex social experiences and ideas. Her practice is marked by an ongoing dialogue between the act of making and theoretical inquiry, resulting in a body of work that is both materially rich and conceptually dynamic.

By reconstructing fleeting moments captured in family photographs, Gaffney has crafted a range of small bronze sculptures as registers of lived experience and an existential pursuit of a sense of belonging. However, family photographs here do not operate as memory objects but as 'little segments of the world in a moment of time'.[3] For the exhibition, Gaffney has also created a series of new, site-specific mixed media wall assemblages of drawings and giclee prints, the latter being details sourced from personal family photographs, which cover the walls of the exhibition space, transforming each surface into a *canvas of dreams*.

Light is central to *Others* (2009), a series of lightboxes created in close engagement with the clothing and costume collections—a historical archive of local attire—during her residency at the Cliffe Castle, Keighley. Remaining faithful to her fascination with understanding embodied memory, she continually explores and enriches her insights into the subject using innovative approaches and meticulous research. In this instance she developed scannograms, a method of visual representation where close ups of the selected garments are captured using a flatbed scanner. During this process Gaffney experimented with light and accidentally discovered the *flame* effect, which upon improvement she later reproduced in the majority of the images, already resisting precision and realistic representation.

Reworked especially for the show at Blenheim Walk Gallery, *I saw what you did...* (2005), depicts a metaphysical process of *becoming*, a visuality that moves between dream and reality, evoking different states of memory and consciousness. The work is closely associated to Bollas' ideas of embodiment, expanding the artist's interest in the formation of identity and the concept of subjectivation. An uncanny, luminous sculptural figure stands in the centre of the exhibition space, as a symbol of a 'child's experience of witnessing events in the world',[4] causing curiosity and desire for further exploration. Made of wax and incorporating a donated Super 8 Film Home Movie, the moving image sculpture invites us to examine visual records of family activities, alluding to children's lack of self-observation as 'embodied dreaming that brings elements of inner life into the world'.[5]

3. Sheila Gaffney, Class Forms, 2014, see: *www.sheilagaffney.com/index.php?/exhibitions/class-forms*
4. Sheila Gaffney, *Witness Project*, 2004–5, see: *www.sheilagaffney.com/index.php?/projects/witness*
5. Bollas, *The Mystery of Things*, 128.

The work signified an important transition in her practice from creating installations and interventions to producing free-standing sculptural pieces.

Gaffney's legacy lies in her ability to bridge the gap between tradition and innovation, creating art that is rooted in histories but speaks to contemporary issues and experiences. Her work is a testament to the enduring power of craft and the importance of maintaining a connection to the past while forging new paths in the present. Through her art and teaching, she continues to inspire and influence the next generation of artists, ensuring that her legacy will endure for years to come.

We extend our heartfelt gratitude to Griselda Pollock for her invaluable contribution to this publication. Her insightful essay and dedication have significantly enriched the content, and we are deeply appreciative of her expertise and commitment. Thank you to Ashleigh Armitage for her outstanding work in designing and organising this publication and RSS Press for their indispensable support. We would also like to acknowledge the Blenheim Walk Gallery's International Advisory Board for their ongoing support and Leeds Arts University for making this exhibition possible. Special thanks to Leeds Arts University 3D Workshops, Academic Computing, and Estates teams for generously offering their expertise and assistance in the production of the exhibition. To Ruth Viccars, Curatorial Assistant, for her continued efforts and commitment in bringing our ambitious exhibitions programme to fruition. Most importantly, we would like to thank Sheila Gaffney for entrusting us with her work. Blenheim Walk Gallery is privileged to host Sheila Gaffney's *Embodied Dreaming*, and share her influential work with our communities.

To the Table, photo: Jerry Hardman-Jones 2009

To the Table, photos: Jerry Hardman-Jones 2009

Untitled, photo by the artist c.1999

Griselda Pollock

Untitled, photos by the artist c.2001

How did I find myself being invited to write about the sculpture of Sheila Gaffney? We have been academic neighbours for many years in terms of our places of work. We also share a history of thinking art with feminist consciousness and exploring feminism through artistic practice.

To situate this 'conversation', I need to go back deep into my early encounter both with contemporary art and feminism half a century ago. That was when I first confronted the following questions as a rookie art historian, a passionate feminist, and new to the kind of contemporary art that was conceptually informed but still deeply modernist in terms of commitment to materiality and the processes of making:

What prepares us for an encounter with an artist's work? What do we bring to this encounter? How do we allow the encounter to bring us into a conversation with the work in its own operations and ambitions?

footNOTES, photos: Jerry Hardman-Jones 2003

Preamble, 1974

In 1975, I persuaded an artist-art historian colleague to allow me give some of the lectures on the new course he was then preparing for Fine Art students about recent painting and sculpture centred in New York. His outline of lectures included no women artists. I challenged this absence. Where were Lee Krasner, Helen Frankenthaler, Joan Mitchell, Grace Hartigan, Alma Thomas, Louise Nevelson, Eva Hesse, Anne Truitt, Agnes Martin—just for starters? He replied: 'Since I know nothing about them, *you* do the lectures. Choose three'.

As an activist feminist but still barely an art historian who was specialising in 19th century European art, what did I know about modernism, let alone recent developments in painting and sculpture in New York since the 1940s and now in the 1970s, developments that were hardly yet in the art history books? Abstract Expressionism was already being documented in triumphant tales of the US-American modern *masters*. A show of *New York Painting and Sculpture* at the prestigious Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York in 1970 presented an all-male affair, except for two paintings by Helen Frankenthaler. As an academic I was, however, being trained to discover what I did not know. As a feminist, I also *desired* to know something different. I accepted my colleague's challenge, despite being terrified to speak about contemporary art to fine art students already learning to make it.

For my three lectures, I focussed on one painter, Helen Frankenthaler (1928–2011) and two sculptors Louise Nevelson (1899–1988) and sculptor Eva Hesse (1936–1970). Hesse had just died in 1970 at a tragically young age and was being mourned by both the official artworld—a memorial show at the Guggenheim Museum in 1972—and the emerging feminist community. Like Louise Nevelson, Eva Hesse had featured in New York feminist art critic Cindy Nemser's fascinating interviews with contemporary artist-women, first published monthly in the newly founded *Feminist Art News* and then collected in Nemser's book, *Art Talk*: *Conversations with Women Artists* (1975). Nemser's interviews had first alerted me to the widely exhibited sculpture of Louise Nevelson, one of whose works I could actually have seen in the Tate, in London—if it had been on show.

In 1965, Nevelson had presented to the Tate *An American Tribute to the British People* (1960–64; 311 x 442.4 x 92 cm), a monumental gold-painted wooden assemblage that looked like a glorious medieval altar-screen. Born in Russia and living in New York, Nevelson was an acclaimed abstract sculptor, collecting wooden table legs, staircase spindles and broken doors from discarded furniture she founded on the streets of New York. Painting the wood white, black or gold, and boxing these relics of a changing city like piles of cartons from the streets, Nevelson constructed almost Mayan monuments to domestic rejects from this most vertical of modern cities.

What did I know about the kind of thinking and feeling that was generating such sculpture using found materials? I had to puzzle my way into each work and each practice by asking very simple questions: What was I seeing? How was it made? Why was it this size? Why this colour? How did the works occupy space? What did their presence do to me?

And then more difficult ones: what do these works ask of me as I share the space of an other's created world in their silence and stillness? I had not yet acquired either a phenomenological or a psychoanalytical vocabulary that later helped me to understand the effect of such artworks. It was clear to me that the typical art historical narratives of style and progress I was being taught would get me nowhere.

What fascinated me was the difference between Nevelson's use of rejected bits of domestic 'sculpture'—that had been turned and shaped by hand or machines but carried the intimacy of lived spaces and conveyed a desired decorum—and Hesse's poured latex sheets or latex-covered skeins of rope and funny-erotic forms that set off uncanny, visceral bodily sensations alongside their breathtaking beauty. Yet, in the wake of her early death, Hesse's biography was being invested with a myth of fragility which, however, hardly touched on the event that pressed most deeply on her life and psyche: the deadly jeopardy that being Jewish in a fascist society had placed on her, her family and her communities across Europe.

Both sculptors worked with their materials in ways that enacted different modes of situatedness (migration, refugeehood, foreignness, accommodation to a new culture and society, living in a city, being a woman, being an artist). Seeing their works, I was enriched by recognising their evocation of situated knowledges and their affective linings. Their sculptures solicited public viewing and critical appraisal but, at the same time, they could incite subjective resonances. With that phrase I am not implying that we project our own feelings onto the sculptor or the sculpture, or even imagine her/his intentions. *Subjective* here signals the capacity of an artwork to incite in a viewer, via its formal and material operation, memories or associations that have formed the subjectivity of each of us as a thinking, feeling, remembering person who is being affected by colours or images that, like a stone cast into a dark lake, stir up ripples, and almost give those formless, moving depths a shape. I was learning to recognize how the sculptures created new forms and processes for *evoking* lived, embodied experience and its elusive affects.[1] Abstract, these sculptures made the unspoken palpable, sharing, unknowingly perhaps, a kind of tacit knowledge that was being given a form, or finding a new form through each artist's singular sculptural practice.

During that first exposure to the critical and quizzical gazes of fine art students as I took my first tentative steps as a lecturer on contemporary art, I realized that many of the students were already themselves, even then, conversing with sculptors such as Eva Hesse, Lynda Benglis, Marisol Escobar, Hannah Wilke, Louise Nevelson and Louise Bourgeois. Since then, I have been continuously educated by further 'encounters' with artists, and this essay celebrates a conversation with Sheila Gaffney.

1. Affects are simultaneously bodily and psychological states. Affects are to the emotions like colours, causing changes in our moods without being specifiable. They bring about change in us but are not entities. I am *affected* by grief, by sadness, loneliness, or abandonment. Affect is less specific than an emotion, closer to a mood, a state or a disposition. See Ruth Stein, *Psychoanalytic Theories of Affect* (New York: Praeger, 1991).

Before, now…and after, photos by the artist

2000

Girl Series (detail), photo: John Podpadec

1993

Pussy Pelmet, photo by the artist 2000

Girl Series (detail), photo: John Podpadec 1993

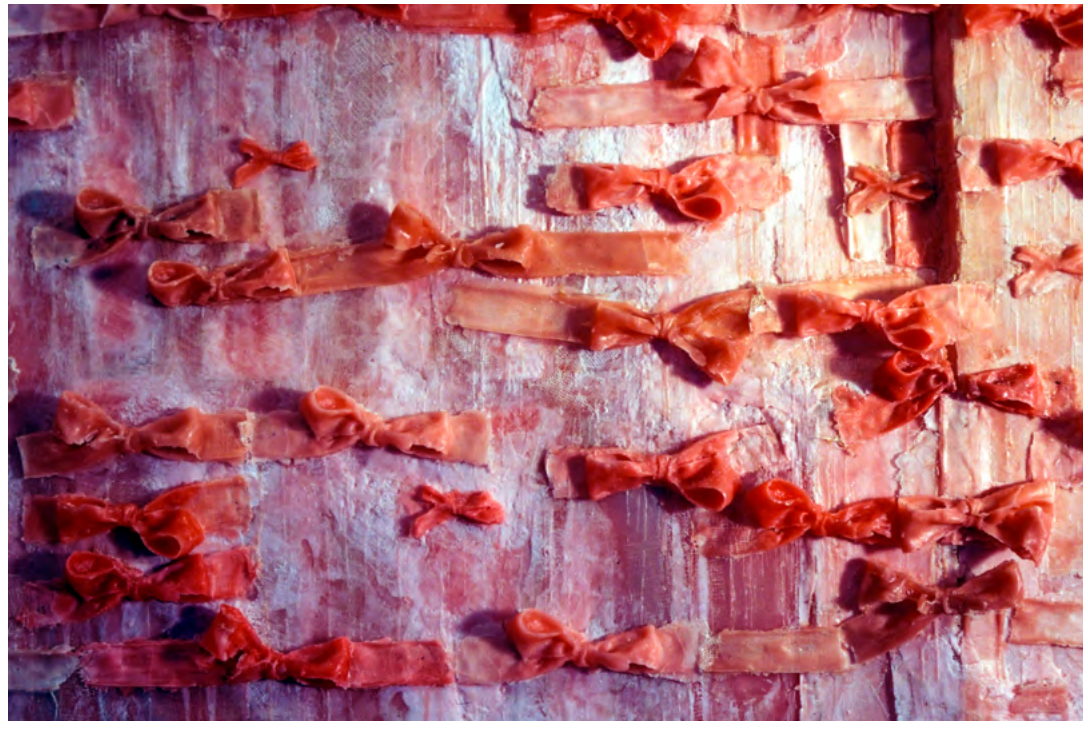
Mum said you should always brush your hair, photo: Jerry Hardman-Jones 2015

One other diversion to the 1860s

I need, however, also to jump back more than 100 years to another early lecture, this one on a group of American women sculptors living radically independent lives in Rome, then the hub of Western sculptural production surrounded by both classical and Renaissance examples. Dubbed by novelist Henry James 'a white marmorean flock that had settled on the seven hills of Rome', this group of women sculptors included the white artists Harriet Hosmer (1830–1908) and Emma Stebbins (1815–1822) who created the Bethesda Angel in New York City's Central Park, and the African- and Native-American sculptor Edmonia 'Wildfire' Lewis (1844–1907) who, we have since discovered, came to London at the end of her life and is buried in Kensal Green. These artists congregated in Rome to make sculpture in the classical way, through observational drawing, modelling in clay, overseeing the enlarged plaster casting and then the pointing and heavy carving in marble, followed by the sculptors' own hands finishing their works. They were also commissioned to create monumental sculptures to be cast in bronze, and there is a wonderful photo of a diminutive Harriet Hosmer high on a scaffold finishing or examining the final surface of her 3-metre-tall sculpture of an American statesman.

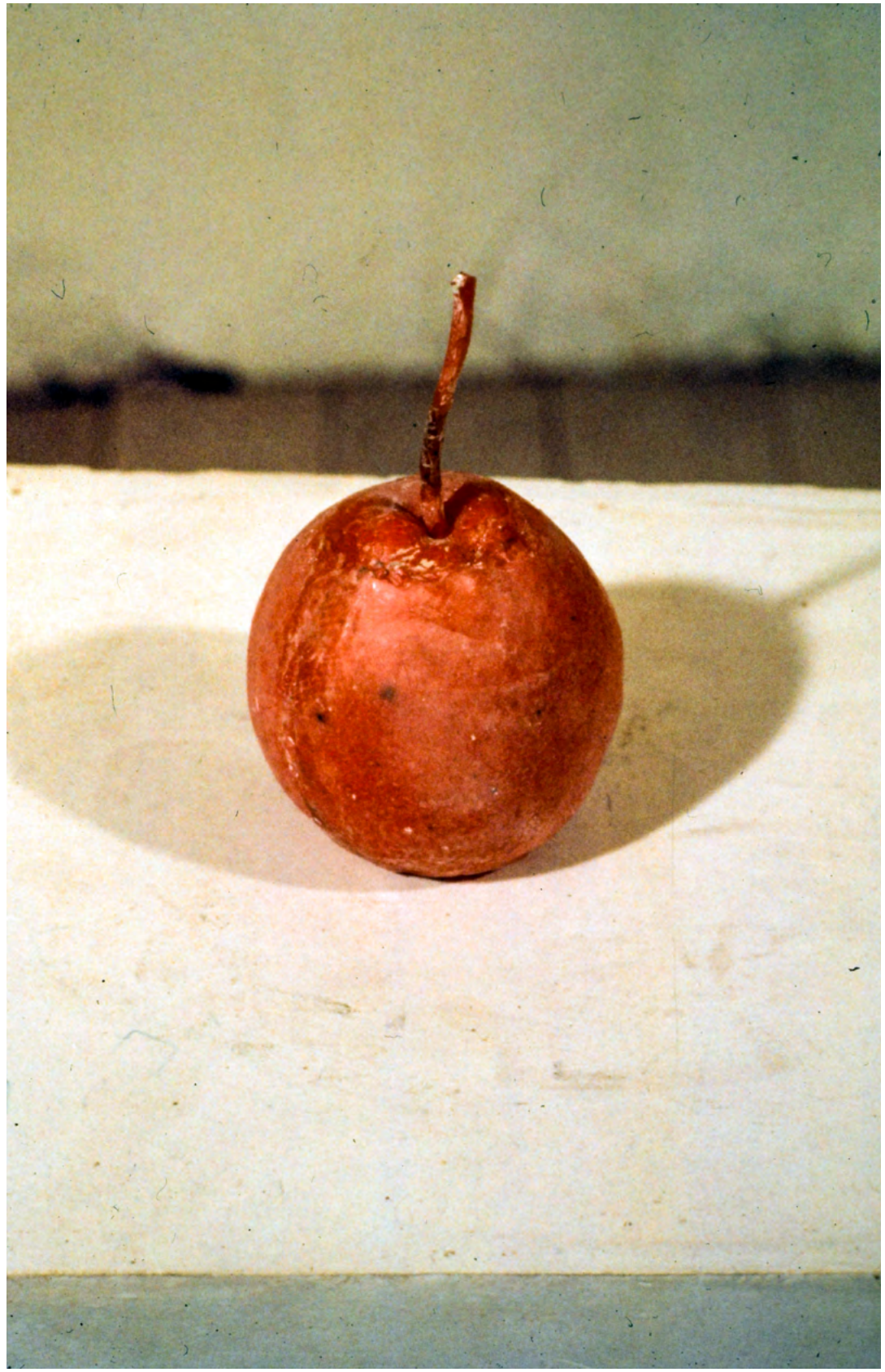
I am using these 'stories' to arrive at Sheila Gaffney's work because her practice is beautifully poised between a deep commitment to this longer history of sculptural making—observing, hand-modelling, casting, finishing, installing, situating—and the transformations of the field of sculpture resulting from women's radical interventions in sculpture since the 1950s, and specifically when art making encountered the challenge and the enlargement created by the feminist cultural revolution of the 1970s. Grounded in the still-relevant studio traditions of sculptural making, Sheila Gaffney's work explores the heart of feminist thinking: situated knowledge and art that seeks forms for the diversity of lived experience through attentiveness to materiality and to making as an inscription of a subjectivity only discovered through both, and through the practice itself.

How She Became Not-He, photos: Jerry Hardman-Jones



1994

Girl Series (detail), photo: John Podpadec 1993



Dressing Table Vanitas (left) *All At See* (right), photos: Jerry Hardman-Jones 2018

Finally,

My first observation is that Sheila Gaffney's sculpture transforms its viewers by the relation of scale to space. As three-dimensional physical objects, sculptures resonate with our own sense of embodiment, place, and both physical and imaginative relations to something other than ourselves. Thus, the installation of sculpture is itself an integral part of its *affectivity* and its immediate sensory effects on our movement in space. Both Sheila Gaffney's sculptural process—involving the touch of her hand in modelling and the projected vision of the works in space in their solitariness and presence—and her installations work with scale, or rather, the radical transformation of sculptural scale, showing how the small, the intimate, the anti-monumental, the everyday can be as affecting and significant as anything grandiose.

It is no wonder that of all the works in the remarkable assembly of contemporary women sculptors that curators Anna Douglas and Kerry Harker created at the Hepworth, titled *If Not Now, When? Generations of Women in Sculpture in Britain, 1960–2022,* the Guardian critic Hannah Clugston selected Sheila Gaffney's *Mum said you should always brush your hair* to start and illustrate her review. Something so tiny and so condensed held its place in a monumental gallery through its affective power to hold us before it.

The sculptor had mounted on a table a tiny cast figure of a girl. The sculpture is cast from a wax model made from a photograph. Thus, the sculpting has isolated this 'moment' of the past to make us now pay attention to the expressive stance of this sturdy yet vulnerable girl-child. This is the child the sculptor once was, but whom the sculptor re-encounters as another self, firstly in the uncanny frozen moment of the photograph of that past event, and then in her modelling and casting of the image as a sculpted figuration that stands before the viewer when mounted on an old-fashioned hand mirror, which becoming cast metal, offers no reflecting face.

To situate such an intense, small in size, but grand in scale combination of child, mirror, and table in a very large room, reveals the power of Gaffney's capacity of distil into sculptural form the invisible elements of both the presence of the body and gaze of an observer, and to hold before us all memory itself. At one level, the sculpture embodies perhaps her own memory taking the shape of her child's body. Yet this pose, stance and moment in time has been distilled into sculpture from a photograph that suspended time forever. Then there are the memories that her singular, sculpted child might incite for those who take time with a figure that embodies gender, childhood—and through details of form, stance, dress, and time—addresses class, place and loss.

Sheila Gaffney has a special affinity for the language and affectivity of clothes. They date the images or locate specific periods of history. She has taken an item such as a cardigan (that almost disappeared social document of mid-twentieth century class and gender in Britain) or she has snatched a moment of the past stilled in fading photographic presences in the family album, and created sculpture through their materialization in her knowing sense of the long history of sculptural practice—and what has been missing from it. Traces—images, garment, relics, casts—are given their place in our world. They become art, however, by their being so vulnerably placed in space, offered to our gaze that is, I suggest, tamed and seduced precisely by the radical daring of Gaffney's ever-sure choice of scale and installation. Surfaces, heights, supports, relations between objects, are as sculpturally calculated as each object itself has been worked in being modelled, cast, placed on them.

Wunderkammer, the female gaze objectified, photo: Jerry Hardman-Jones 1994

Reflecting on Making

Wunderkammer, the female gaze objectified (top),
La Poupee (bottom), photos: Jerry Hardman-Jones 1994

After decades of making, Sheila Gaffney sought another language through which to explore what had compelled her attention, what had held her before a feeling or a thought that demanded materialization in a new form. Her reflections led her towards those thinkers for whom the relay of psychic intensities, our bodies and our imaginations, had early in the twentieth century demanded an entire new discourse: psychoanalysis. Far from being distracted by theory, psychoanalysis has led her back to the studio and the space of making.

So, I suggest that Sheila Gaffney's work creates both material and psychological relays between medium and memory. Hand modelling physically involves bringing formless materiality into evocative, resonant, affecting form, what art historian Aby Warburg termed a *pathosformel*, a formula of affect. Formula is neither pure form nor content: it is a combination, *form*ulated where *form* itself carries affects: pain, sorrow, longing, enchantment, wistfulness, grief. Art can be, as it were, charged—like batteries with electrical force—with emotional resonance, not just cognitive or narrative content.

Memory is not inert, stored like cans of beans in a cupboard. Memory slumbers until awoken, often unexpectedly, by a word, a smell, a colour, an image that may become a transport across time to summon up images that come back into focus, with all the colouring of their still powerful affects and buried emotions. Photographs play an important role in these processes and in feminist memory work. Writing in 1981, Julia Hirsch was one of the first to identify and analyse the socio-psychological meanings carried in *family* photographs. She writes:

Lumps of experience, rites of passage, grains of poignancy, and promise: all of these turn us into artists, sorting through life in search of shapes and events, which our cameras will turn into symbols and allegories... Family photography is not only an accessory to our deepest belongings and regrets; it is also a set of visuals that shape our experience and memory.[2]

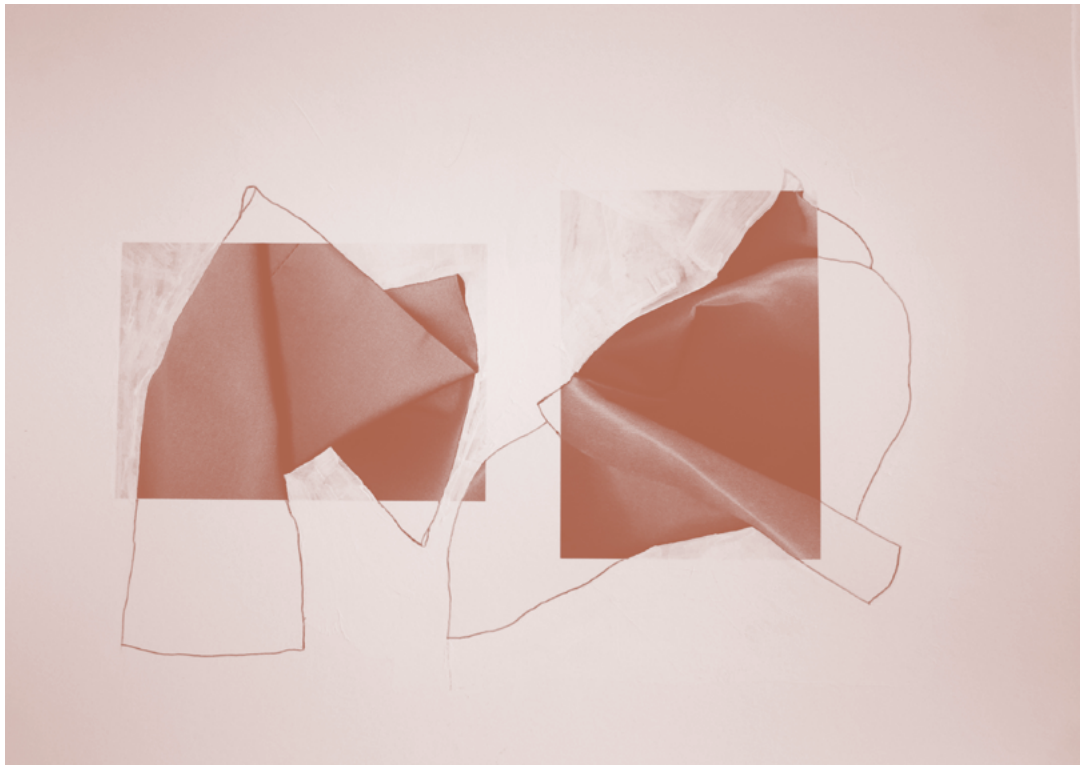
Studio practice, photo by the artist 2024

2. Julia Hirsch, *Family Photographs: Content, Meaning and Effect* (New York & Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981), 13.

Skirt, photo by the artist 2021

Liberty ICOM5.2000, photo by the artist 2009

Redcardi ICOM1.1300, photo by the artist 2009



Untitled, photo by the artist 2011

Curtains, photo: Jerry Hardman-Jones 2019

Making Art with Feminist Consciousness

Sheila Gaffney's practice as a sculptor was formed at a critical moment in 1970–80s, when a renewed feminist consciousness not only recharged political agitation for an end to discrimination against women, but also created a cultural revolution across literature, cinema, theatre, performance, dance and the visual arts. This double helix, this entwining of political impulse and creative consciousness, made possible a politics of the personal and a personal inflection of situated experiences such as class, ethnicity, family, location, sexuality and life-worlds hitherto examined sociologically, but not yet aesthetically.

Between minimalism and the emergence of the conceptual shift in art in the 1960s, the encounter between feminist consciousness and artistic practice dramatically intervened in contemporary practice. Artists did not, however, abandon, the stimulation and revelations of the stricter modernist dogmas of 'truth to form' and 'fidelity to medium'. Despite the huge impact across art schools of the work of American sculptor Eva Hesse, that I personally witnessed during my teaching days at Canterbury School of Art and in Leicester Polytechnic, feminists were, at this time, not typically thinking *sculpturally*.

This is why Sheila Gaffney's sculptural practice is so significant. As a feminist artist, she shared an interest in questions of embodiment, but it seems she sensed that this required an expanded understanding of figuration itself as a necessary site of affective formulation. This would have to be moulded from the deep understanding of the history of sculpture as making: observing, 'seeing' the body through hand and eye but also in terms of *how* the hands of a sculptor could translate a stimulated memory into a material presence.

In my conversations with the sculptor, I noted her comments on why she chose to work with modelling and casting. These processes, she explained, 'enable me to materialize things that churn in the mind'. Sheila Gaffney has thus bonded the heritage of sculptural skills to a feminist inquiry into being, difference, memory and time that equally entangles such concepts with the many threads of social experience.

Feminism helped us to acknowledge and find new forms—spoken, painted, sculpted, photographed, performed—for spaces of intimacy, of gendered 'becoming' from childhood to adulthood, of the relations with others, of those spaces of affective labour that had been dismissed as domesticity. Feminists were not, however, a single mob. Class division, ethnic difference, different forms of desire do not fracture feminism so much as complicate its forms, allowing it to acknowledge the complexity of all our social existences.

I suspect that this is one cause for Sheila Gaffney's distinctive choice of scale and her always innovative use of bases or places on which her sculptures stand or rest. We, the viewers, are changed phenomenologically when 'worlds' are reduced in scale. We move in close. We bend to look. We become still, slowed down, adjusting focus. Unlike Alice after having drunk the shrinking potion, we learn to recall for ourselves the forgotten internal child we once were in a world too large and baffling for us.

The Girl—rather than the neutral, hence default male, child—is a figure of fascination for Sheila Gaffney. The Girl is both a figuration of time, and hence of memory. It is also a transport to questions of gender, family, place. Memory figured as The Girl evokes an uneasy presence in a world not entirely accepting, hospitable, or safe.

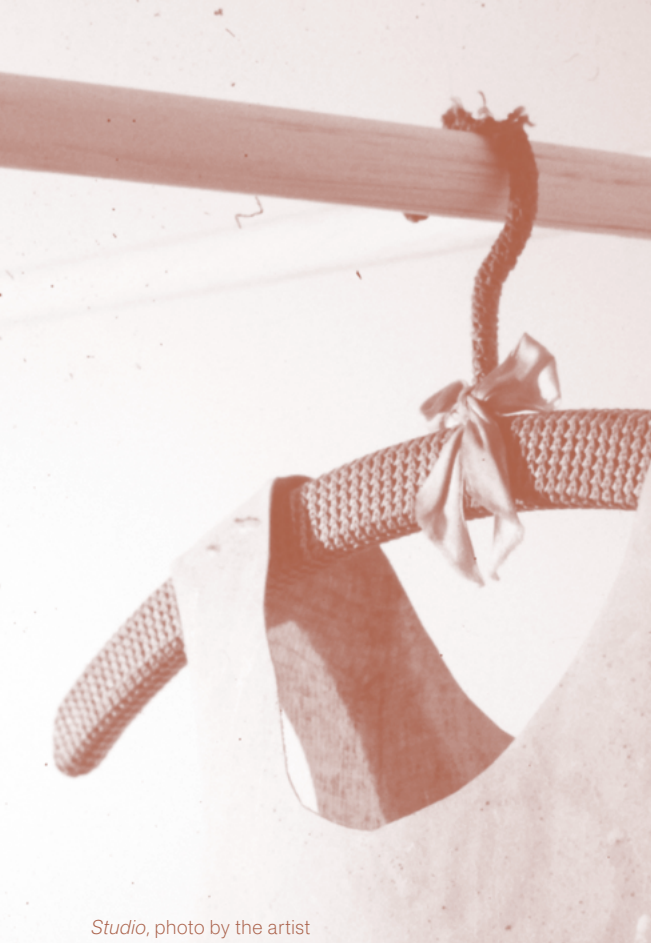
There is a special relay in Sheila Gaffney's work as she 'makes' a sculpture from a photograph that is the preserver of an instant of her past. By being suspended forever in that instant of photographic capture, repeated contemplation of what was 'stilled' elusively generates the movements of sculptural making. We need to be slow here. When a feeling compels the artist to make a work, it produces an imagined possibility, a projected spectre of a work that might become. How that still shapeless possibility and the driving impulse will become a *made* thing, a sculpture, involves a weaving of time, delay, repeat, judgement, adjustment, anticipation, anxiety and decision making: technical, material, dimensional, processual, all driven by desire and assessed as accumulating knowledge, in the hands, the eyes, the mind. This introduces not only the deep philosophical questions about how 'the flesh of the world' (philosopher Merleau-Ponty's haunting phrase) becomes a created form. It also involves the fact that we do not know what we are doing. This is the lesson of psychoanalysis and its deep revelation of what makes art creative, and our experience of art as a discovery of the 'unthought known', a phrase used by analyst Christopher Bollas.[3]

Sheila Gaffney has written about her engagements with psychoanalysis, especially with those analysts who understood that the aesthetic process of making and our experience of encounters with artworks escape the conscious mind. Sourced from Freud's great discovery, the Unconscious, and affectively coloured by phantasy that mediates between the Unconscious and consciousness, the aesthetic domain is affectively charged by our earliest 'encounters' with the world, with light, colour, things, objects and those 'objects' that, perversely, psychoanalysis theorises as the adults around the infant on whose care it depends for life. Different schools of psychoanalysis explore the very emergence of what analysts term *subjectivity* (being a speaking, feeling, thinking person) in the overlapping residues of our later pre-natality (the aesthetic impact of sound, rhythm, pressure, light, awareness of an unknown other) and the earliest phases of our post-natal encounter with, and dependence upon, 'objects', that is people who nurture us in our absolute dependency. Sheila Gaffney found in the writings of Object Relations psychoanalyst Christopher Bollas (b.1943) terms that accorded with her own processes of making, for the articulation of which she was seeking a more theoretical formulation. By combining the seemingly most disembodied psychic process, dreaming, with the term *embodiment*, Sheila Gaffney's practice and her own theoretical reflections on the process of making sculpture, becomes for her *embodied dreaming*.[4]

3. Christopher Bollas, *The Shadow of the Object: The Psychoanalysis of the Unthought Known* (London: Free Association, 1987).

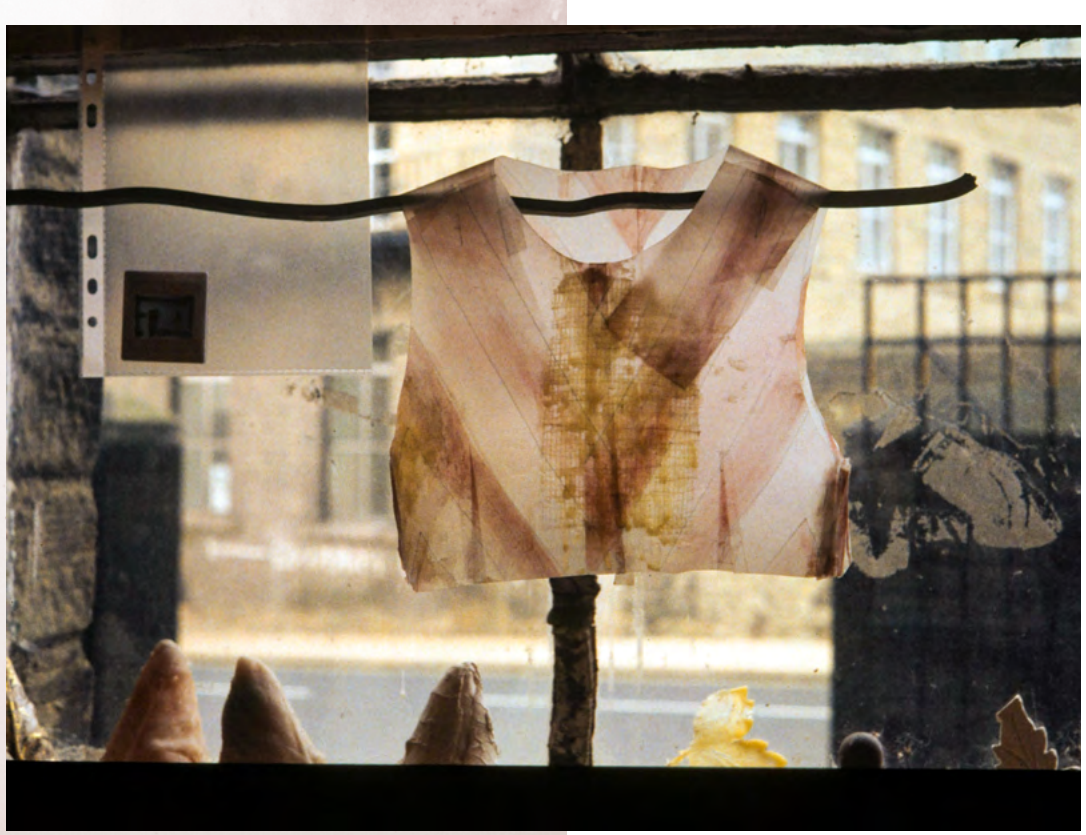
4. Sheila Gaffney, *Embodied Dreaming as a Sculptural Practice Informed by an Idea in the Psychoanalytical Writings of Christopher Bollas* (Doctoral thesis, University of Huddersfield, 2019).

Button, photos: Richard Littlewood 1992



Studio, photo by the artist

c.2005



Sand casting, photo by the artist

2018

Art, Thought, Making

Class Forms, photo: Jerry Hardman-Jones 2014

The fact that Sheila Gaffney is also the author of a book of this title (forthcoming) based on her doctoral research in practice, represents an important but misunderstood development in contemporary artistic practice as it finds itself inside a system of higher education. This has necessitated a problematic formulation of artistic practice as research. Sheila Gaffney has negotiated this through a sculptural practice informed by theories of being—phenomenology—and theories of subjectivity—psychoanalysis.

Certain models of research function easily within the academic framework. Others do not. There is, in the general research community, be that the social or hard sciences, and even in the humanities, little understanding of artistic practice itself and its modes of knowing and questioning. There is also less understanding of what research is or can be in the artistic community. Practising artists in the commercial world make work without the dread of *research assessment*. They are worried about critics, dealers, collectors, curators. In the university environment, there is now accountability. Let me offer some thoughts.

Research, I suggest, operates at the intersection of two axes—validity and significance. *Validity* requires us, as researchers, to look around, to map out of the context and the moment and thus to situate ourselves in the larger conversation. We then discover if we are, or can be part of, this or that conversation with other serious inquirers also thinking about important, or overlooked, or necessary questions. Our work becomes valid in this wider context. *Significance* results from being able to find a point of entry into that conversation that opens up a space or a new vista, or adds a new take, or shifts the questions.

I think both axes are relevant to artistic practice, especially since we now term art as practice. But it is also a form of thinking. Writing about Sheila Gaffney's work, I asked myself this question: 'What factors made her work possible?' This is the validity question, and it involves building a context for her education and sculptural choices. So, I was thinking about the multiple legacies for sculptural practice available to an art student at Camberwell School of Art and then the Slade in the later 1970s and early 1980s. I imagined her visiting the first British Eva Hesse exhibition at the Whitechapel Gallery, London in 1979. I also imagined her during those same years maybe reading *Spare Rib*, as well as haunting the London galleries, visiting shows, attending conferences on women in art education, seeing the installation of Helen Chadwick's *Ego Geometria Sum* (1983) or Chadwick's *Of Mutability*, an astounding installation reclaiming the female body, dreamworlds, and new materials at the ICA in London. Five artist-women selected the second Hayward Annual in 1979, reversing the typical sexist hierarchy by showing 16 women and 7 men, including sculptors Liliane Lijn's *Wave Guide* (1977–8) and *Four Figures of Light* (1978) and Wendy Taylor's massive knot built of bricks, as well as conceptual feminist artists Mary Kelly, Alexis Hunter and Susan Hiller, and artists dealing with Irish experience and the struggle in Northern Ireland such as Rita Donagh, one of the selectors. Did she discover the anthology *Framing Feminism* (1987) to expand her creative engagements with feminism, discussions of class experience, challenges to racism, daring uses of new and canonical materials to embody a range of lived experiences in 'expanded' forms and materialities? I imagine her having to live through periods of intense racism and ethnic hostility—and equally forceful challenges to racist attitudes—in an incompletely decolonised, still imperial Britain.

The feminists of that critical moment spoke about class, about gender, about race, about sexuality, about photography, about families. As artists, they pushed the possibilities of both modernist and post-conceptual art to its limits in order to find ways of making art *informed* by the consciousness of women, *inflected* by memory, and *excited* by a new freedom from a modernist regime, without abandoning its wonderful possibilities for thinking with and through materiality and both the established and the novel ways of making, even defining sculpture. The latter was central to what became conceptual art.

But then we come to *significance*. This requires me, as researcher, to discern the distinctiveness of a practice as a thoughtful intervention made from that context of possibilities. The artist works from inside several worlds, a public one we might call of the artworld, and the less visible one, her own, that she carries within from a lived life. How to give both a form? This leads us to close reading of Sheila Gaffney's knowing, and informed practice as a sculptor of Irish heritage working during a period of intense anxiety and indeed violence in Northern Ireland and the British mainland during the anguished years of rising neoliberal conservatism while being part of and witness to the energies of the women's, gay and lesbian, and anti-racist movements.

For Sheila Gaffney, memories of family and places, times and events, are shot through with complexity. The sculptural question becomes a matter of finding not only a form, but a process, a scale, and a format that might *touch* an invisible past, stilled into fading photographs in the family album, and give its still-resonant, affective charge a place in the world of art, now, and for others. Situated knowledge meets an evolving studio practice that alone can give the unthought known a figuration. One work that haunts me is her cast of a child's torso, '*I saw what you did*' (Patrick Studios, 2003), that captures the awkwardness of a young child's shoulders and back. The hollow body fragment becomes a space, viewed down the open neck, for the projection of fleeting moving images date stamped by their low grade, but intensely coloured pre-digital technology. Fluidity of movement of past worlds simulates water and prompts the phrase 'a pool of memory'. The semi-transparency of the cast animates the fragment of the photographed child's body that has so repeatedly drawn Sheila Gaffney to the child's stance, and in other works the buttoned shoes and short socks, the planted feet. Like the shoulders, these elements speak to and of that curious combination of vulnerability and determination only rediscovered when we find these curious, frozen moments of our gendered, classed, located 'becoming'.

Becoming leads me finally to one of Sheila Gaffney's practices: *casting*. This scoots me back through Eva Hesse's castings in latex and fibreglass to Harriet Hosmer's bronze *Clasped Hands of Robert Browning and Elizabeth Barrett Browning* (1853), celebrating the bond between the two poets. Casting forms that evoke a body or body part, which the hand has modelled from its tacit knowledge derived from close looking, also alienates us from the body so as to see it anew, since as embodied folk we can only know bits of our bodies but never really

understand our embodiment. We need to see it as other to learn to feel it ourselves. The distance needed to imagine it, perhaps even to experience it, is created by sculpture.

Some sculpture asserts itself. As Sheila Gaffney told me in conversation, much sculpture shouts its pompous presence as if saying: 'Look at me!'. Its presence effaces mine before it. Everything in Sheila Gaffney's practice rejects the phallicism of sculpture that demands our submission to it. Instead, the careful emplotment[5] of her exhibitions works in space to *solicit* our encounter with the works. Her exhibition practice, that via its objects already *figures* aspects, even fragments, of embodiment through the casting of legs, or feet in shoes, or shoulders, of tiny figures, makes us aware of embodiment, our own.

Then her work makes plain the fact that there is no '*the* body', '*our* body'. Age, class, ethnicity, health, history, location—all singularise each body, while these social situations and heritages form commonalities of experiences that are unevenly shareable because of multiple levels of difference. Sculpture is a singular art-form and art space for the exploration of both difference and shared communities of difference. In place of the false universalism of 'the human body' or of 'Man', class-race-sexuality-generationally-attuned feminist thought, and artistic practice, speaks in quiet, located, propositional, inquiring voices.

Figurative not abstract, based in traditions of sculptural processes of making, yet also profoundly conceptual, theoretically enriched and intrigued by difference, Sheila Gaffney's sculptures are not objects. Their emplotment in space and scale for our encounter with their formally captured worlds evokes a socially situated psychic life to which she evocatively gives the title *embodied dreaming*.

"*I saw what you did...*", photo: Jerry Hardman-Jones 2005

5. Curating a show is an employment of a structure of viewing or moving through the space. Most curation involves very careful thinking about the lines of sight, and potential conversations or clashes between objects. Also, there is an implied or even proposed pathway, sometimes chronological, sometimes thematic, sometimes based on discovered dialogues between works once installed. Emplotment works with the viewer's experience of the encounter in mind. I am borrowing emplotment from narrative theory but it seems very relevant to understanding the staging and the experience of an exhibition.

St Lucy, photo: Jerry Hardman-Jones 2018

"I saw what you did...", photo: Jerry Hardman-Jones 2005

Jean Allen ICOM 1.1000, photo by the artist 2009

SHEILA GAFFNEY is a sculptor with a long commitment to crafts and the material object. Her research encounters sculpture, life writing and psychoanalysis. It investigates their relationship through sculpture, drawing and scholarly writing. She has particular interests in the relationships that exist between the traditional processes of modelling and casting and identity formation, class, gender, and multi-generational ethnicity, exploring these themes through exhibitions, published articles, conference contributions and her doctoral thesis *Embodied Dreaming as a Sculptural Practice*.

She is Professor of Research (Innovation & Development) at Leeds Arts University. Her work was recently included in the survey exhibition *If Not Now, When? Generations of Women in Sculpture in Britain, 1960–2022* exhibited at The Hepworth Wakefield and Saatchi Gallery London. Previously she has been Artist in Residence for Bradford Metropolitan District Council Museums, Galleries & Heritage (2007–9) and at First Direct Bank Plc (2001) to celebrate Arts Council England's UK Year of the Artist. Accolades include winning the NATSOPA Award for Sculpture, Vikki Oppenheim Blum Rites of Passage Travel Award, Arts Council England Individual Award and Yorkshire Arts Development Programme Research & Development Award.

GRISELDA POLLOCK is a feminist postcolonial and social art historian and curator. Professor *emerita* of Social and Critical Histories of Art at the University of Leeds, she also created the transdisciplinary Centre for Cultural Analysis, Theory and History (2001–21) and in 1992 developed a dedicated *MA in Feminism and the Visual Arts*. As a feminist art historian and cultural theorist, she was awarded the Holberg Prize in 2020, CAA Lifetime Achievement Award for Writing on Art in 2023, having received in 2010 CAA Distinguished Feminist Award for Promoting Equality in Art.

Her classic texts are *Old Mistresses*: *Women, Art and Ideology* with Rozsika Parker (1981; 4th edition: 2022 Bloomsbury) and *Vision and Difference* (1988). More recent publications include *After-Image/After-Affect*: *Trauma and Aesthetic Transformation* (Manchester University Press, 2013), *Charlotte Salomon in the Theatre of Memory* (Yale University Press, 2018), *Mary Cassatt* (Thames & Hudson [new edition in colour] 2022), *Killing Men & Dying Women*: *Imagining Difference in 1950s New York Painting* (Manchester University Press, 2022) and *WOMAN IN ART*: *Helen Rosenau's 'Little Book' of* 1944 (Yale University Press, 2023). She has curated many exhibitions, the most recent is *Medium and Memory* (HackelBury Fine Art, London, catalogue available).

MARIANNA TSIONKI is a curator, researcher and educator working at the intersection of contemporary art and ecology. She is Associate Professor & University Curator at Leeds Arts University, overseeing Curatorial Programmes, Collections and Archives management and Library Operations. She is concerned with the role of curatorial and institutional practice in a time of ecological crisis, with particular focus on methodologies of alter-institutionality and critical pedagogy.

Her current research project focuses on decolonial eco-visualities, eco-feminist practices, and local ecological knowledge, as methods of developing kinship networks and interspecies modes of life, with a forthcoming book *We Live Like Trees Inside the Footsteps of Our Ancestors* (Berlin: K. Verlag, 2024). Previous curatorial projects and writing have focused on the Anthropocene's ever-evolving social and ecological transformations, global ecologies of resource exploitation and humanity's post-industrial relationship with nature.

Her writing features in several edited volumes, exhibition catalogues and peer-reviewed journals, published by Sternberg, Palgrave Macmillan, Wetlands, and dpr-barcelona. Among her curated projects are the exhibitions *Oliver Ressler*: *Hothouse Planet Breakout* at Blenheim Walk Gallery, Leeds (2024), *Marwa Arsanios*: *Who is Afraid of Ideology*? at Blenheim Walk Gallery, Leeds (2022), *Kyriaki Goni*: *Networks of Trust* at SixtyEight Art Institute, Copenhagen (2022), *Meteorological Mobilities* at Apexart, NYC (2020).

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