

Charlotte Cullen

Charlotte Cullen's practice is a ghost story. Artist and organiser Charlotte Cullen makes things, broadly informed by the material, social, cultural and environmental position that steel and its production inhabit, questioned through the traces of touch which occur through material. This encompasses sculpture, installation, mark-making, print, text and finding forms of documenting gesture. Cullen's practice is shaped by the body and care, explored through the animacy of matter and how these material, physical concerns intersect with social class, migration and gendered identity. The landscape, and issues of land ownership, situates this encounter; muddled, uprooted, re-routed, and as site of familial and historical myth-making.



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Study for a Shield after Battle, install at Patriot Hall, Wasps studios. Edinburgh .2021





Study for a Shield After Battle (A preparation of daffodil), aluminium .2021



Study for a Shield After Battle (Goddess of Lead), Mild Steel and aluminium .2021



Dalida, Alluminium, cable ties .2021



Study for a Shield After Battle (Goddess of Lead), Mild Steel and aluminium .2021



There is something visceral about Charlotte Cullen's work. It is the knots in your stomach, the lingering trace of emotional impact, a tentative salve on still hot wounds. Bitumen and metal are contorted around themselves, each other, precariously existing despite, because of, their scarred surfaces.

Cullen's past work has incorporated everyday objects into precarious sculptures revealing the cruel optimism of financial hardship and aspirational working-class cultural memory. This show blends past and present. Lingering emotional affect collides with actions that almost appear to still be happening. From this perspective at least, it feels like a work-forever-in-progress.

The past here is evidenced not through written or spoken record but through its undeniable trace embodied within the materials themselves. In a world built for impossible neatness, the artworks' (and artist's) existence is an insistent reminder of the 'failure' and support of the bent, the broken and the queer.

- Dr Hali Santamas



The Bride (1 – 6), bitumen on white card .2021



Study for a Shield after Battle, install at Patriot Hall, Wasps studios. Edinburgh .2021



Held Comfort Under Brat come Bride, mild steel, melted plastic bin bags, cable ties, seasonal flower (yellow) .2021



Loomer I, aluminium .2021
A Scuttle, a haunting, bitumen, twig .2021



Child, mild steel, plaster, cable ties .2020



Loomer II, mild steel and aluminium .2021



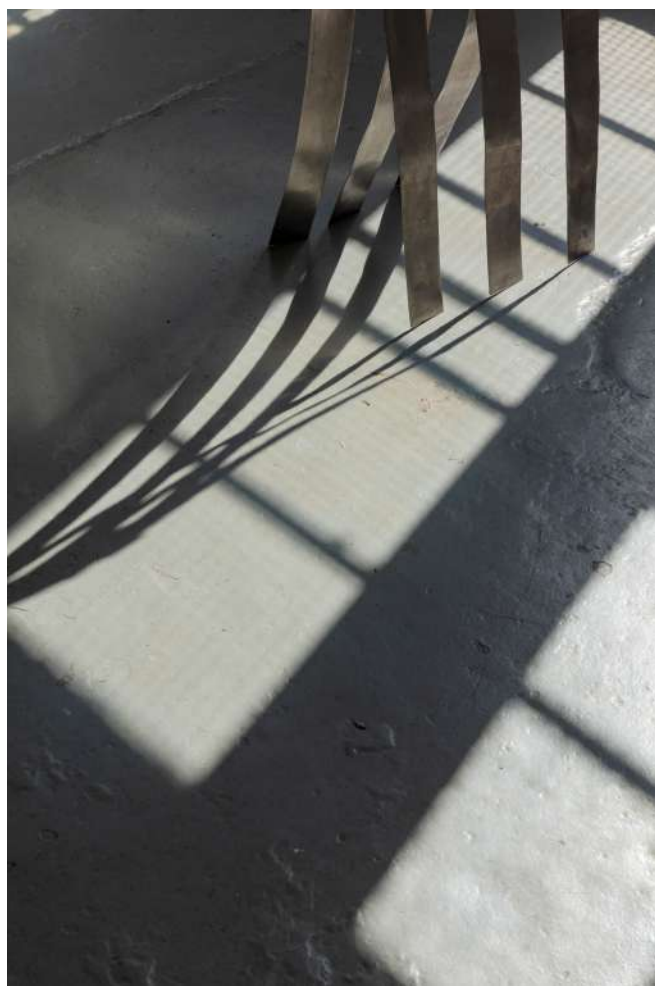
Untitled, stone .2021



Study for a Shield After Battle (fragments), black ink on white somerset paper .2021, *Study for a Shield After Battle (Inherited on Passing Tongue) I, II, [diptych] III*, black ink on white somerset paper .2021, *Come known under fired skies*, salvaged metal grating, mild steel, plaster, cable ties, yellow ribbon, season flower (yellow) .2021



Untitled, mild steel, fabric, bitumen, cable ties .2021, Untitled, mild steel, plaster, cable ties, seasonal flower (yellow) .2021, *Loomer I*, aluminium .2021, *A Scuttle, a haunting*, bitumen, twig .2021, *A Wound Held Dear (Fragments from Guard of the Watergate)* steel off cuts, wood .2019 – 20

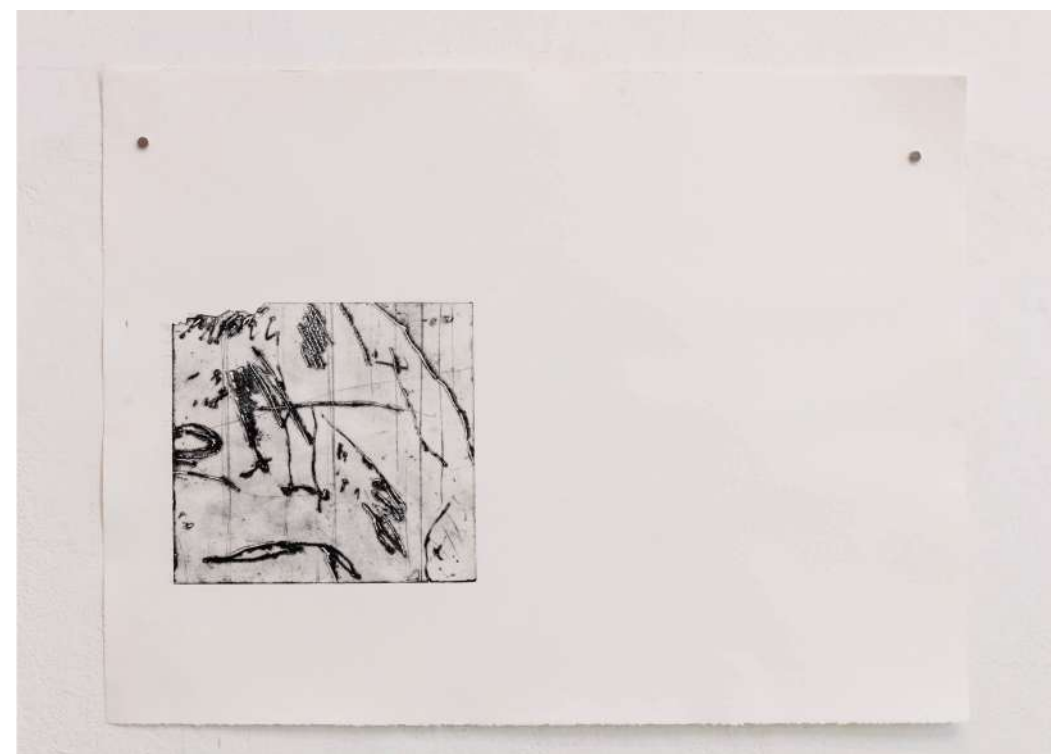
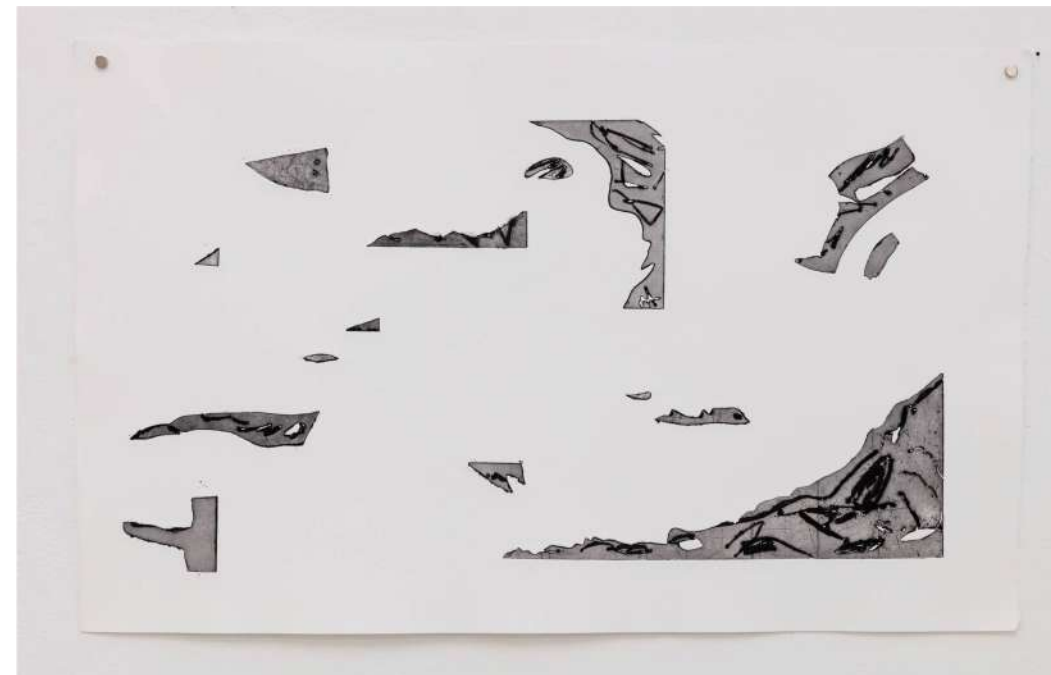
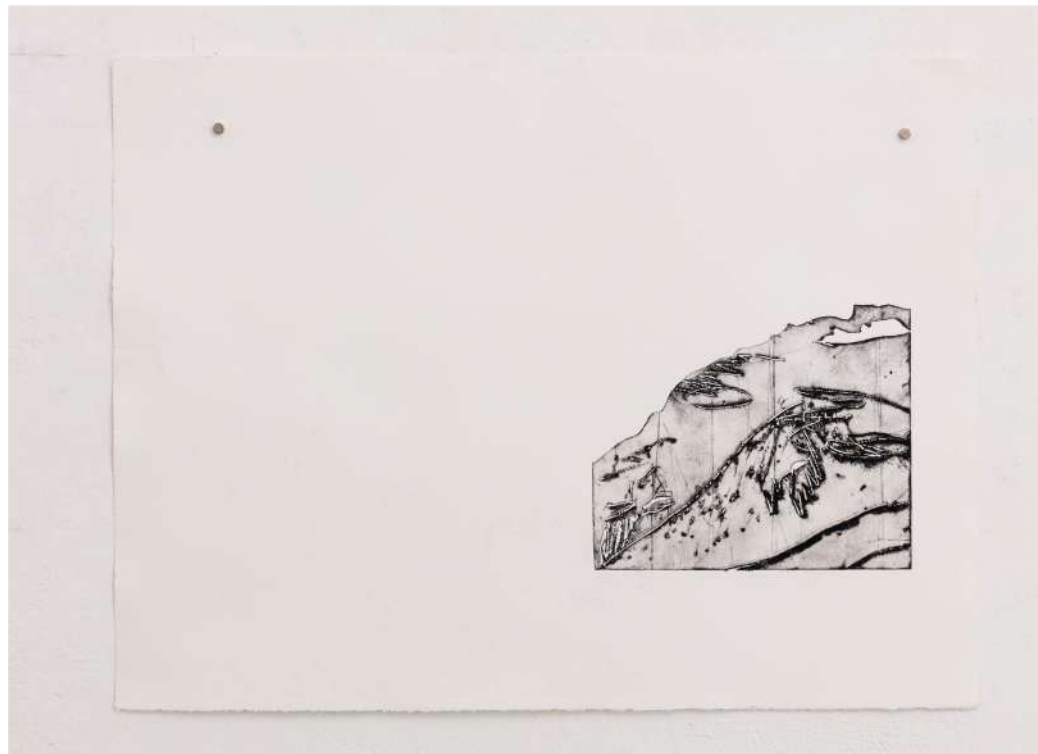




They might Fight, tin .2021



Study for a Shield after Battle, install at Patriot Hall, Wasps studios. Edinburgh .2021

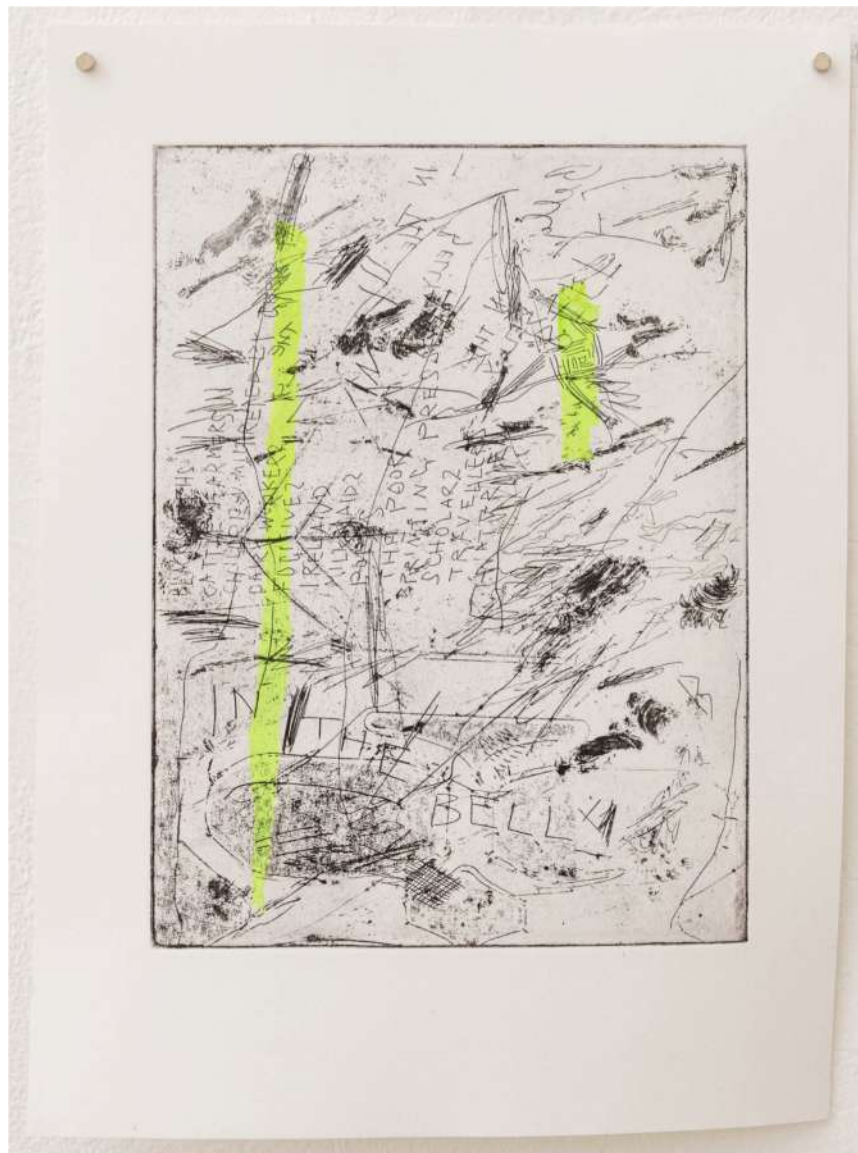


Study for a Shield After Battle (fragments), black ink on white somerset paper .2021
Edition of 3, 420 x 594mm

Study for a Shield After Battle (Inherited on Passing Tongue) I, II, [diptych] III, black ink
on white somerset paper .2021 Edition of 3, 420 x 594mm



Following the Ghost, I, II, III etching, black ink on white somerset paper .2021
Edition of 10, 148 x 210mm

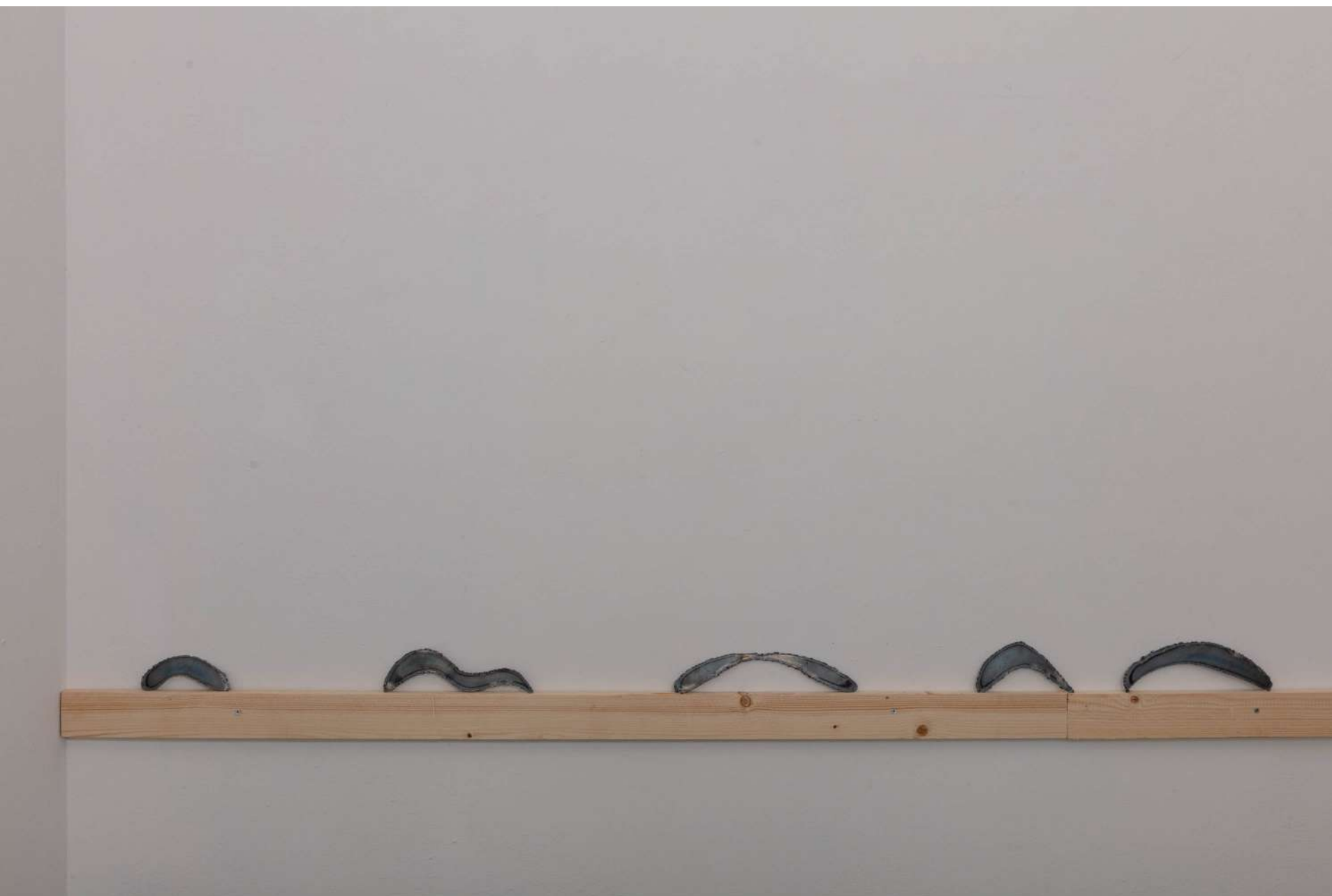


Marrow (A word inside a stone) I,II, III tissue paper and black ink on white somerset paper, etching with chine-collé .2021
Edition of 6, 148 x 210mm

Study for a Shield after Battle (Inherited on passing Tongue) and *Study for a Shield after Battle (fragments)* evidence the patina and process of sculpted metal. Gestural marks created through plasma cutting evidence the action of heat and pressure, alongside historical marks from the metals production made visible through the printing process. Collapsing the boundary between 2 and 3 dimension, these prints interrogate the surface and histories of metal, fragmented lines become a trace which suggest a landscape while congealed and trapped ink belies the physicality of the printing process. *Study for a Shield after Battle (Fragments)* gathers together off-cuts from the artists workshop to reframe use, wear and purpose. The prints become evidence of process, of action, of battle.

A direct engagement with the land, *Following the Ghost* were created by dragging etching plates along the path of former mill workers in Armley. Each plate evidences a section of the journey, stopping when the supports broke, a decision which allowed the final form to be guided by process and action. This new form of mapping denies historical barriers created by power but evidences a gestural and intuitive response to a landscape marked by the workers who lived within and shaped it.

Considering the etchings made by school children on desks, the act of etching became a marker of a visual language which gives evidence to lives lived outside of dominant structures of control. A way of physically marking out space as an act of rebellion and act of documenting presence. These etchings were created in layers of process, so that marks became blindly added to throughout each layer and included gestural making, notes and other forms of graffiti which speak to other landscapes, migration and a playful escapism. A layer of chine-collé in a neon lime is shockingly unnatural, an aesthetic counter to the etched surface which references forms of mapping techniques which evidence use of buildings, and signal areas marked for development or clearing. This subtle nod to geographical framing positions the prints as a space which counter institutional mapping.



A Wound Held Dear (Fragments from Guard of the Watergate) steel off cuts, wood .2019 – 20

Well-steeled for battle

ANGUS REID admires a unique transformation of metal into nuanced artworks of alienation, identity and social conflict

CHARLOTTE CULLEN makes work from steel and aluminium. It has sharp corners, torn edges and a bleak industrial monochrome and the rough surfaces on her assembly *Studies for a Shield after Battle* bear the traces of assault.

From the metal plates she makes prints – when pressed into paper, the identity of the battle reveals itself and at the centre of the show are two sequences of three small prints, each whispering the sources of her work.

Marrow I, II and III are like the random messages scratched into a school desk or a battered bus stop. It is not the content of the words that speak, so much as the invocation of a conflicted adolescence.

While the fantasy of ancestral battles lurks behind the work, the real ones are those of alienation, gender identity and social conflict and you feel her empathy with the agonies of the ordinary, universal teenager.

Following the *Ghost I, II and III* extends this fascination with arbitrary mark-making into the very material of steel. Her own delicate rainfall of micro scratches liberates the expressive grey tones and softness of the industrial material, as though it had its own tale of battle to tell and its own sombre relationship to trauma.

The material is a metaphor for the human body and the show teases out these complementary inside stories, one human and the other elemental. It then dares to explore

them as three-dimensional presences.

The first steps towards a surprisingly joyous assertion of a queer aesthetics, these scratched and war-torn sheets of metal – carriers of unexpected intimations of inner life and memory – arise, balance themselves and find ways to stand up together and suggest purpose and motion.

It is refreshingly genderless, a far cry from the sanctimonious narcissism of Anthony Gormley's endless repetitions of his own naked body, and it recalls the post-minimalist school of which the short-lived

American sculptress Eva Hesse was the leading light.

But Cullen has reconfigured the aesthetic into another culture, another experience of class and our own historical moment.

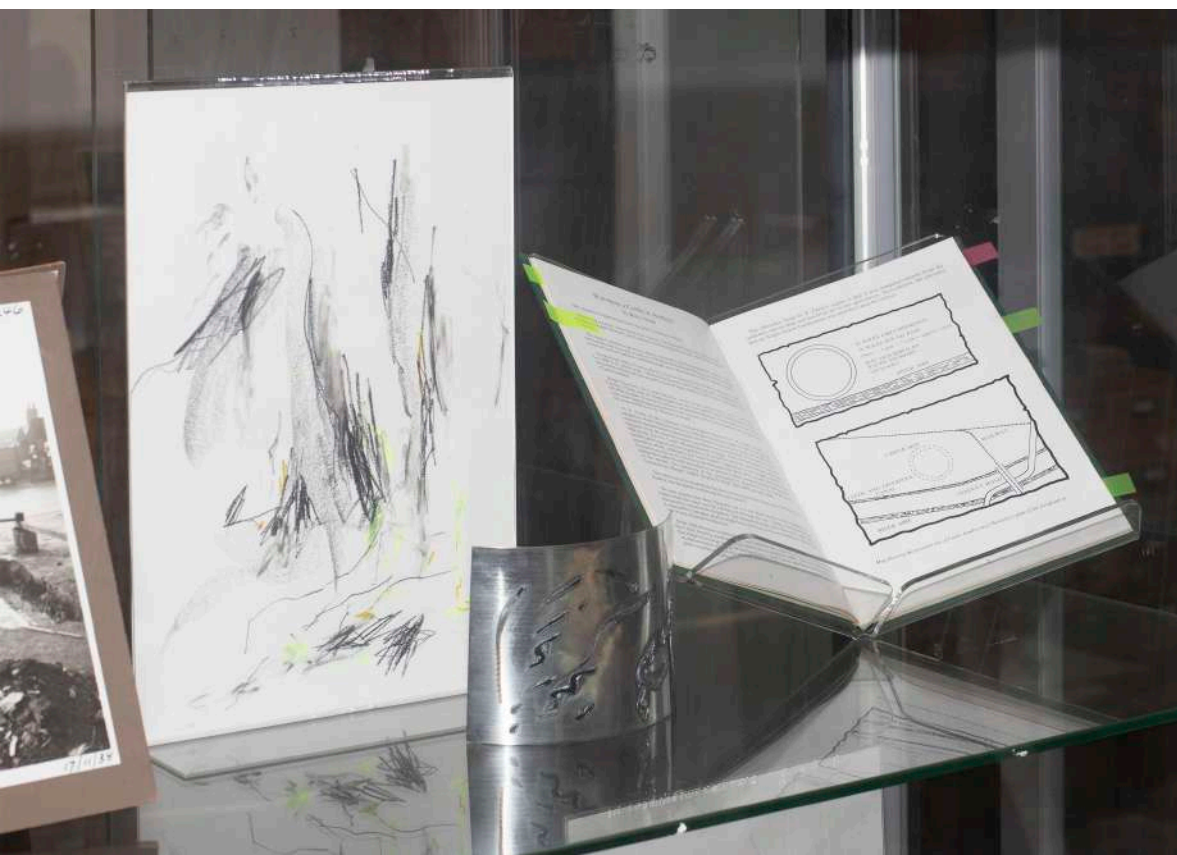
It greets the needs of the present without sentimentality and with clear eyes. The show expresses a burgeoning confidence in its own unexpected and mysterious beauty.

This is a new community of queer subjects that are becoming sure of themselves and beginning to dance. A shame they only had the briefest of showings last weekend.





I am the merry-go-round horse dragging up the earth beneath me .2020-21
Collections intervention in the Local and Family History Department in the Leeds Central Library.



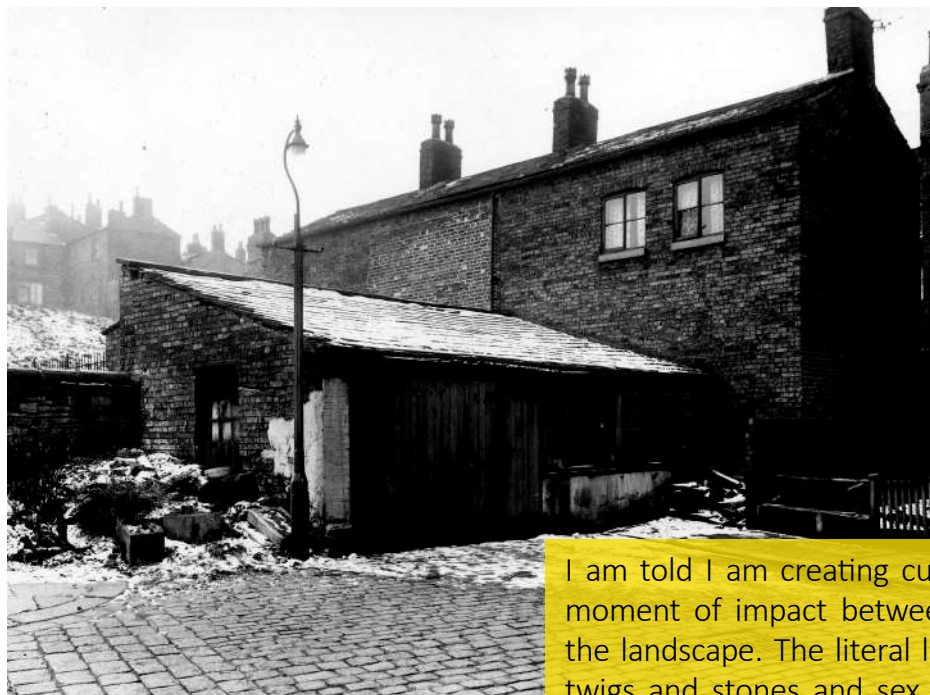


I am supposed to be thinking about nature, adventure. Great expanses of open space and unknown pastures. But this is not what I know and not where I can start. I don't know where I fit into these histories of rolling hills and scenic landscapes. I do not know what mushrooms to eat or when berries are ripe. I wondered where this knowledge was lost if it was ever gained in my ancestry. City women, towns women, in jobs in factories and cleaning and reception desks with broad smiles have no use for this knowledge. Rather the chippy down the road is knowledge, how to feed a family of 6 with what's to hand when you can't cook.





My grandad was a farmer in an early life, before training as a nurse and before becoming a builder when he came to England for work. He led the build of a hospital in my home town. To build I understand, an urge to collect and structure, to nurture or find shelter. Every time I passed the hospital in my youth my parents would tell me proudly how my grandad built that, and as I aged I told my own friends with pride. Nothing I build has such longevity though. For a long time that was the point but I find my mind drifting to a sense of solidness. The hope of something that weathers. My mind drifts to derelict plots and the patches of land hemmed in by development I return to or pass in my day to day. There's a longing in what they have lost. Hope in pockets of what remain. My other grandad found work at the Stanton iron works when he moved to England. When I am alone in the metal workshop or the studio, shaping steel, my mind sometimes drifts to the noise, heat and bustle informed by old films and media representations of the kind of work I imagine him undertaking. He was short and purposeful and I've always felt that you could see the Cullen in me. Physically. My features tie me to a landscape across an ocean and not the one I stand in now, untethered. I see my grandad in the land around me, physically, in the Stanton Iron Works manhole covers across the UK. A physical representation of this memory across geographical and historical borders.



I am told I am creating culture by this initiation of a moment of impact between myself and my place in the landscape. The literal landscape with its mud and twigs and stones and sex and debris and divots and shit. But I don't trust words I cannot hold and culture is not a thing but a construct to withhold. Culture exists by its creation of another without. Herbert Read contends that in culture lies the potential of fascism, a place to argue the lack of in others. I suspect those that talk about culture are not really looking closely at what I am proposing as I am not interested in production or aesthetics or possession or creating a cheerful scene. This is not for but of. That chippy paper, or the birds fighting over the leftovers feel more rooted in this landscape I want to unpick.

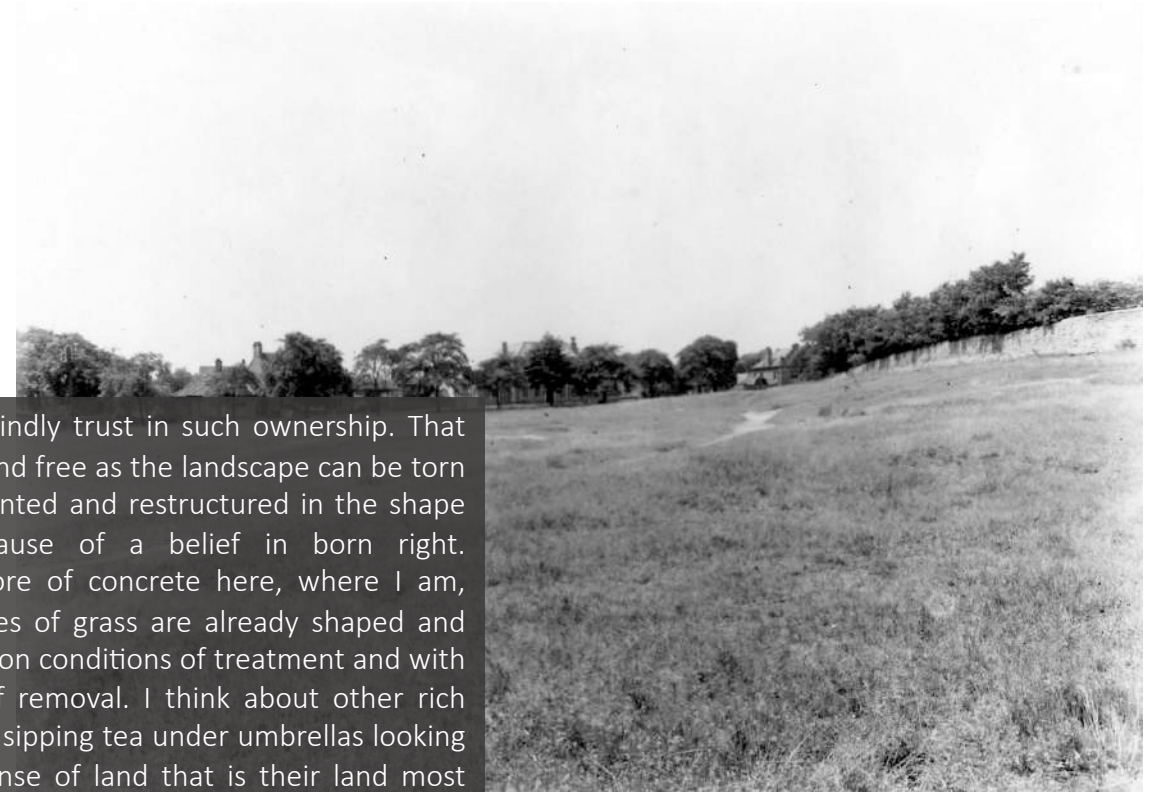


You need to get your hands dirty to understand a thing. Weigh it. I wonder where the different parts of me fit into the landscape. Mathew Parkin writes that queerness is muddy, that it is of and for the body. A physical and slippery metaphor. The shape of a thing which is hard to grasp. I want to pick at the landscape to find my shape within it. I draw it to get closer to it. I collect it, mud and twigs and oddments that are of or out of place.



This landscape I find myself in, untethered, is already shaped and bordered. Manhole covers link back to their site of production, careful outlines within laid roads which border this landscape and lead my path. I think about the upper classes as exaggerated caricatures, as this is as close as my understanding of their experiences can reach. A rough and playful shape of a thing from my removed understanding. I think of them in their tweed uniforms riding horses to chase down animals across brambles and fields. Large expanses of land that they destroy to improve the hunt. Digging out the roots, locals, for simplified entertainment.





It seems alien to blindly trust in such ownership. That something as wild and free as the landscape can be torn down, rebuilt, replanted and restructured in the shape of somebody because of a belief in born right. Landscape feels more of concrete here, where I am, within which patches of grass are already shaped and pruned and offered on conditions of treatment and with the constant risk of removal. I think about other rich folk, in frilly dresses sipping tea under umbrellas looking out at a wide expanse of land that is their land most likely. An ownership over neat and trimmed vegetation, aesthetically arranged flora. The rich own their land, they prune it and cut it back to be in the shape of them. And I think about the scene in Mary Poppins of merry-go-round horses performing the same task of the hunt. Each character riding a corresponding pastel hued horse representative of the characters aspirations as they free themselves from the merry-go-round contraption to join the hunt alongside cartoon horses, sprinting across fields, trudging up the cartoon earth beneath them. A literal digging up of the earth because they do not fit the narrative. I am the merry-go-round horse, dragging up the earth beneath me with my jutting out parts. I am too angular to be muddy, too dense to be slippery, but like the merry-go-round horse my history is unstable, I might be washed away in the rain like in the story.



It is not enough to watch only lively Bodies .2020



(being with) Breaking Ground, serf, Leeds .2020



Preliminary studies for a shield after battle .2020



Guard of the Watergate III .2019



Retreat of the Warrior (Bones of the Waterhorse) III .2019



Retreat of the Warrior (Bones of the Waterhorse) I .2019

Retreat of the Warrior (Bodies of Water) .2019



Retreat of the Warrior are an ongoing sculptural development throughout my practice wherein scavenged and ephemeral materials entwine with formal material enquiries in metal and clay. Site is enacted as geological space for excavation, symbiotic (un)learning, resistance and healing. Intergenerational trauma, sickness and the body are manifest as material, physical encounters

These sculptures enact warriors in retreat during battle, seeking safety and a place to heal from the ground, to take respite so to fight again. The work is weed like, finding methods and materials from the ground to build and restore as intuitive gesture. Twigs become additional limbs, protruding from a metal vertebrae to make new appendages, clay is dug from the ground to heal wounds, while broken materials from man-made waste create hybrid new attack strategies in the warrior's arsenal.

These sculptures take on a bodily presence through the embodied process of their production. Scrappy, precarious and connected to each other through tubing, twigs and other materials they become a pack of anthropomorphic beings. Clay protrusions and natural elements give body and shape to these sculptures but wither and crack. This relationship between the ephemeral material to the metal body is explored by allowing the broken pieces to build while new elements are built during exhibition, the work growing and mutating during presentation.

Often bodily in scale these sculptures have been exhibited in solo presentations and group exhibitions. When working with others the sculptures, through conversation with other exhibiting artists, have grown and developed as interventions. Engaging with and growing out of the space they are exhibited the Retreat of the Warriors have taken up space through their scale, have been found sneaking within rafters, built as intervention within damaged areas of a space or have removed tiling in the floor, ceiling and other supports to tunnel across space or reground within the space available.



Workshop developed for No One Belongs Here More Than You as part of UKNA Skegness weekend for SO Festival .2019



Reading in response to Matthew Parkin Vaseline for Poor Image Projects, University of Leeds .2018