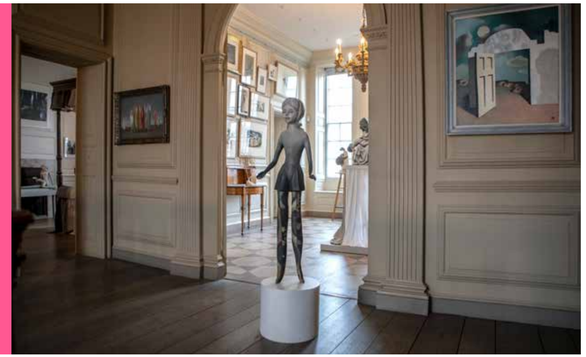
Cathie Pilkington
Working from Home

6 October 2018 – 31 March 2019



Twinkle, 2014, Oil paint on patinated bronze. Courtesy of the Artist
John Armstrong, *Feathers Conclave*, 1946, Tempera on board, Pallant House Gallery (On Loan from a Private Collection, 2016).
John Armstrong, *The Open Door*, 1930, Oil on canvas, Pallant House Gallery (On Loan from a Private Collection, 2004).
© The Estate of John Armstrong / Bridgeman Images

Overleaf, left to right:

Pietà 1: Playing Dead, 2018, Oil paint on jesmonite, fabric, wood and steel.

Good-Bed-Bad-Bed, 2018, Painted and quilted linen, jesmonite, plaster, wood, velvet, clay, and oil paint.

Still Life, 2018, Pegboard, plaster, museum display case, fabric, wood, painted paper, fluorescent tape, ribbon curtain, photographic prints, bronze, paint, clay, jesmonite, synthetic hair and light box.

Pietà 1: Playing Dead, 2018, Oil paint on jesmonite, fabric, wood and steel.

All images courtesy of the Artist. Photography by @mrperou

Working from Home

Neil Walton

Ascending the wide and well-lit wooden staircase of Pallant House Gallery's historic townhouse, you encounter the figure of a dreaming girl. This is *Twinkle*, one of Cathie Pilkington's characteristically doll-like sculptures — an impossibly slender, apparently levitating child-mannequin. With her eyes closed, she seems self-absorbed, concentrating, like a young clairvoyant connecting to some invisible domain or unconscious fantasy. The airy balcony at the top of the stairwell provides an intermediate space, a threshold that precedes the immersive, busy installation to come, and *Twinkle* is a kind of pre-pubescent psychopomp, a conductor of spirits, a border-crosser, guiding us into the exhibition.

In the four rooms that follow, it sometimes seems as though a poltergeist has been at work, disordering and reordering things, at times wry and mischievous, at others restless, unruly, manic, opening cupboards, revealing what had been discreetly tucked away, the private, the brushed under, the overlooked. In fact, Pilkington has done double duty as both poltergeist and exorcist, or perhaps some strange combination of both. There is something shamanistic in how the artist has transformed the upstairs galleries of the house with a mixture of her own works, various ad hoc pegboard constructions, stacked bedding, historic items from the Gallery's collections and archives, and other assorted trappings.

If the resulting assemblages sometimes evoke a 1970s cinematic horror-genre sensibility, resonating unexpectedly with the intermingled fragments of mid-twentieth-century British Surrealism, this is not incidental. In the first room, titled 'Strange Coast' (after a lithograph by Paul Nash), the head of a small figurine is shrouded with a swatch of bright red cloth. The redness makes a visual link to a detail in an adjacent photo of Barbara Hepworth. In this photo, Hepworth looks entirely at home on the strange coastline, perched crow-like on a black mass of seaweed, arms folded across her chest. The whole arrangement is reminiscent of a scene from the 1973 film *Don't Look Now*.

This persistent undertow of the uncanny, the melancholy and the deathly in the exhibition is more than a mere taste for the creepy. It is Pilkington's condensed, metaphorical analysis of the complexity of being an artist and a sculptor in current circumstances, intuiting a sense of what is dead and what is redeemable in art, or how that very deadness can be raised for expressive ends. She is doing the artistic equivalent of what Nietzsche called 'philosophising with a hammer', testing the idols to see if they are hollow.[1]

Pilkington is a border-crosser. She crosses traditional, modern and contemporary conceptions of art, not with a superficial eclecticism, but with an acuity that is both felt and thought. Certainly, she engages with the canonical themes and processes of traditional sculpture, with modelling and casting, with the skilful, even magically lifelike, imitation of nature that was praised by the ancients. You can imagine some classical poet, in ekphrastic tones, praising the mimetic virtues of Pilkington's superrealist polychromatic dog sculpture, *Dick*, who lies slumbering in an old fireplace in Room 8.

But Pilkington is not a traditional sculptor. Her mastery of sculptural techniques has not been passed down through some unbroken chain of academic training. She is self-taught, discovering, adapting and evolving methods as needed, partly drawing on her background in silversmithing. Craft and manual skill are occasionally important in Pilkington's practice. She deploys a meticulous handmade-ness, but of a kind that engages with the accidental, with the recalcitrant nature of messy stuff that slows down and enriches artistic thinking. In many of her works, virtuoso modelling either segues invisibly or patches awkwardly into other technical repertoires and artistic strategies. These perfectly refined awkward juxtapositions are tiny *memento mori* — reminders of the many and varied discontinuities that make traditional sculpting as a practice unavailable to us. Can anyone be Ghiberti or Michelangelo, Bernini or Canova today? Or does the fact that we do not live in the ways that made those cultural forms meaningful render this ambition impossibly quixotic? In Pilkington's work it is precisely her playful, forthright acknowledgement of the decline of monumental statuary into ornamental bric-a-brac that opens a narrow space for her figures to be poignantly expressive. Perhaps, somewhat like viewing the model *The 34 Gallery* in Room 5, we are bound to encounter the traditional forms of art at a remove. This is because we possess more than one idea of what art is.

Snowdon, *Barbara Hepworth on the Beach, St Ives*, 1964, Pallant House Gallery (Presented by the Artist, 2007).
© Armstrong Jones

We live at a time when several competing conceptions of art have currency.[2] For shorthand, let us call these ideas of art the traditional, the modern and the contemporary, but note that the latter two terms are used here in particular senses that I will now outline. Each idea of art has some force which it gains in a distinct way. For traditional art, continuity across generations and socially shared understanding is what lends its forms and meanings resonance. By contrast, the modern idea of art values new forms or ones that are discovered anew by the individual; their force depends on the sincerity and perceptiveness of the artist. The contemporary idea of art values doubt above all. Its force is in questioning every aspect of art, its mediums, conventions of viewing, institutional settings, and every attempt to create a stable boundary between art and everyday life. It should be clear that in the senses I have outlined neither 'modern' nor 'contemporary' mean 'of the present'. Indeed, the contemporary idea of art is already quite aged. The paradigmatic artist for this conception would be Marcel Duchamp, whose notion of the readymade was formulated over a century ago.

These three distinct notions of art emerged in a logical sequence over an extended period, especially in the case of the modern. This can be explained in various ways in art historical terms, but for our purposes the important point is that all three are currently available and all three can be recognised in some or other corner of the variegated field of current artistic practice. Because their values are so antagonistic, both artists and audiences are today presented with a quandary that is more or less visible. One response is to retreat into a kind of parochialism, by situating oneself securely within one concept and ignoring or railing against the alternatives. An artist today might attempt to work entirely within the traditional idea of art, but whether that can be successfully accomplished is a contentious issue. Another possibility is to acknowledge the essentially historical, troubled and messy condition of art now, and this, I suggest, is what Cathie Pilkington does.

It is ironic but true that art has become essentially historical because of the borderless character of contemporary art. Now that art can be a pile of folded blankets or a bottle rack, there is no particular way that it is supposed to look, no way to identify art from non-art through appearance alone. Instead, we must approach such non-traditional, non-medium bound work through the story of its making and by linking it to some earlier, already recognised work of art.[3] *Working from Home* explores this disorientating state of affairs in two directions — firstly, by placing more or less well-bounded, sculptural objects within a seemingly random collection of items, and secondly, by foregrounding how historically disparate artworks speak to each other and modify each other's meanings, often quite unexpectedly.

Working from Home is in many ways a continuation of previous projects by Pilkington in which she responds to a specific environment, moving into a space and inhabiting it with a miscellany of new pieces, earlier works and collections of paraphernalia, some of which ordinarily clutter her studio. Characteristically in her installations, Pilkington merges different kinds of space — the studio, the gallery and the home — blurring and blending differing registers of public and private, formal and intimate, emotional and intellectual. There is a gendered, feminine aspect to the situated and entangled, decentred character of this mode of working that can be contrasted with the masculine, self-contained, autonomous artwork, but this binary division is not reductive in Pilkington's oeuvre. She never entirely rejects the vertical, plinth-bound, whole objects of traditional sculpture, though her pedestals become tea trolleys or bedside cabinets. Indeed, it is the reluctance, perhaps inability, to narrow the repertoire of practice, a kind of pathological art historical hoarding, that gives her installations their immersive quality. Tellingly, Pilkington has described herself as 'a sculptural bag lady'.

The most ambitious piece in *Working from Home*, an installation entitled *Good-Bed-Bad-Bed*, could be seen as an example of high-end upcycling. This work radically refurbishes an eighteenth-century George Hepplewhite four-poster bed from the Gallery's historical furniture collection, strips away its canopy roof and converts it from a place of private rest to a stage set, within which is enacted a strangely stilted performance of female desire and frustration. At one end of the bed a female figure with loopy legs and breast eyes is seated. The bedspread on which she sits is stitched and painted with a curious pattern of segments narrowing to an apex like the vanishing point of a vast arid landscape, across which the blind and immobile woman is unable to gaze. The power of vision seems to have migrated instead to the repeated images of eyes on the surrounding drapes. The isolation of a female figure in this domestic desert carries many resonances, perhaps an echo of Andrew Wyeth's 1948 realist painting *Christina's World*, but in place of that picture's distant homestead, which at least holds out the hope of deliverance, there is a kind of stepped dais supporting a collection of faceless busts. As the work's title suggests, the whole ensemble sets up a series of binary tensions, between softness and hardness, private and public, comfort and alienation. The carefully crafted bedspread evokes the traditional shared female work of quilt making, but there is no happy family or community in evidence here. Rather, there is a conglomerate of disquieting muses in an ominous metaphysical bedscape, darkly evoking the line from a Sylvia Plath poem, 'This is the kingdom you bore me to'.[4] Another reference here is to the bed of Procrustes, the perverse Greek mythological craftsman, who by gruesomely fitting people to his furniture became a byword for cruel rigidity. For good measure, so to speak, a collection of severed limbs is stacked away in the nearby cupboard.

Working from Home contains many references to canonical sculptural tradition. One of the grandest sculptural themes in Western art is the pietà. Depicting the Virgin Mary cradling the dead body of Jesus, the pietà provides a subject rich in emotion, replete with formal and psychological complexity. Pilkington has included four variations on this theme, all made specially for the exhibition. In each case, she skews the expected pathos by introducing extreme stylisations, the weird solutions of a toy-maker, a two-sided head, a loopy limb, a face reduced to a geometric pattern. Such jarring details disrupt the unity of the subject, a tension between whole and part objects that is repeated throughout the exhibition.

Henry Moore, *Suckling Child*, 1930, Alabaster, Pallant House Gallery (Hussey Bequest, Chichester District Council, 1985).
Reproduced by permission of The Henry Moore Foundation

An important work to consider in connection with this is Henry Moore's *Suckling Child*, a piece from the Pallant House Gallery collection which inspired, and is exhibited alongside, *Pietà 1: Playing Dead*. This small alabaster sculpture is curiously indecipherable. The infant's head and hand clasped onto a breast are clearly articulated, as are a second breast and perhaps an incised vulva. But the mother's body is reduced to just these features, and the border between mother and infant body disappears somewhere round the horizon of the smoothly polished block. The oddness of the image thus created is partly a function of balancing representation with the exploration of pure abstract forms, masses, surfaces, and the intrinsic qualities of the sculpted material. This striking combination of formal wholeness and bodily fragmentation in Moore's work also speaks of a certain early life experience, the infant's sense of oneness with its mother, a feeling of plenitude and satiation, which, because it denies the mother a separate whole identity, can only be fleeting.

Pilkington's *Pietà 1: Playing Dead* also uses form to consummate effect, exploring, as always, the interface between sculpture and painting with inventiveness and originality. There are passages of great formal beauty: the swirls of hair, the pattern of drapery, large smooth masses contrasting with the precise delicacy of the tiny hands. But Pilkington's sculpture is also marked by disturbing shifts of scale, unnerving distortions and mismatching styles. Where Moore's sculpture gives us the infant's blissful sense of oneness, *Pietà 1: Playing Dead* conveys a fragmented, ambivalent experience of loss, separation and alienation. Here we are not drawn into the perspective of either figure and there is a lack of connectedness between them. The mother's breasts become surrogate eyes, with plug-like nipples to fit the dumb, expressionless mouth of the child. On the back of her head, the face — which both is and is not turned away — is something between a sex doll and a maternal version of Munch's *The Scream*. These features might articulate the painful ambivalence of motherhood, or it may be, as the title suggests, just a game played with shapes and lines.

The final room of the exhibition, titled 'Still Life', is split into two contrasting zones. One half is arranged like a living space with dark, mirrored domestic furniture. The other half of the room is dominated by a precarious, stacked structure with pegboard boxes, ribbon curtains and studio furniture. Here, as elsewhere in the exhibition, Pilkington has assembled small, intimate items and artworks in a way that emphasises the situatedness of art within lived experience. A series of diminutive heads, modelled in differing styles, amongst them Henry Moore's bronze *Helmet Head and Shoulders*, combine with the photos on the wall behind to create an effect which is somewhere between an archival display and a temporary shrine. The photos are portraits of the female artists Gillian Ayres, Bridget Riley, Prunella Clough and Elizabeth Frink. In each case the artist cuts a formidable figure, prominently holding a cigarette. Adding a strong female presence that partly compensates for the scarcity elsewhere in the Gallery of original work by women, they indicate, to paraphrase Mignon Nixon, a matrilineage of 'bad enough mothers' yet to be fully unearthed and celebrated from the cupboards of art history.[5] There is still more poltergeist work to be done.

1. Friedrich Nietzsche (2003), *Twilight of the Idols*. London: Penguin, p29.
2. See Richard Wollheim (2015), *Art and Its Objects*. Cambridge University Press. Especially Sections 60 – 63. Also Larry Shiner (2001), *The Invention of Art*. Chicago University Press.
3. See Arthur Danto (2014), *After the End of Art: Contemporary Art and the Pale of History*. Princeton University Press.
4. Sylvia Plath (2008), 'The Disquieting Muses' in *Collected Poems*. London: Harper-Collins, p74.
5. Mignon Nixon (1995), 'Bad Enough Mother', *October*, Vol.71. Winter, p82.

Artist's Acknowlegments

With special thanks to Simon Martin, Louise Weller, Jack Jubb and all the Pallant House Gallery team.

And my special team: Bella, Bob, Fran, Sir, Witchy and Woodsy.

ISBN 978-1-869827-81-6

Cupboard 1, Pegboard, lining paper, fluorescent tape, blankets and mixed fabrics.

Degas Doll 1, 2017, Painted resin. Courtesy of the Artist