The Covering

14 February – 20 March 2020

Cathie Pilkington,
Pierre Molinier
and Morton Bartlett

Room 2
44 Lexington Street
London W1F 0LW

Karsten Schubert London

2 Morton Bartlett's *Standing Girl* dressed by Cathie Pilkington as *The Covering Cherub*

The Covering incorporates the staged erotic photographs of Pierre Molinier and a doll by Morton Bartlett within an immersive installation by Cathie Pilkington. The display, which includes a diverse array of props and constructions, including blankets, mirrors and studio furniture, merges dolls, dummies and mannequins with themes and images from the sculptural canon and conjoins the precious and delicate with cheap and shabby materials.

Pilkington's reconfiguration of Room 2's Soho townhouse integrates these fragments into a formally coherent continuum, but one that is nevertheless punctuated by startling juxtapositions and awkward interruptions. Drawing attention to critical gaps and ruptures, Pilkington cuts lines through fantasies of the female body as a passive libidinal object to be manipulated.

The 'covering' of the exhibition's title suggests the literal sheltering or concealing of bodies and objects with screens, clothing, hangings and valances as well as the ritual adornment of sacred artefacts; but it also notably refers to the literary critic Harold Bloom's central image of the 'covering cherub'[1] as an ambivalent, composite figure, a 'demon of continuity' who blocks the artist's attempt to create a self-contained identity by setting before her the inherited and problematic baggage of art history and tradition. Most obviously in this exhibition the references are to the patriarchal legacy of Surrealism, a historical moment that in recent years has again engaged critical interest, notably by women artists.

Pilkington's own artistic identity too is composite. Her working methods alternate between a traditional studio-based practice, producing more or less self-contained sculptural objects, and a site-sensitive installation process of arranging elaborate extended tableaux that surround and complicate the tentatively completed artworks. Switching between these

modes is Pilkington's characteristic way of searching for a place for sculpture in the world, of confronting and working through what it is to represent the figure now; what it is to make bodies as objects and still employ the themes and techniques of an ancestral art. Her installations are a kind of cross-cultural fly-tipping that allow incongruously intersecting aesthetic worlds to appear side by side: the mismatched social registers of dolls and mannequins, statues and icons; peg-board constructions and painted bronze. Within these ensembles Pilkington's sculptural objects seem to extend into and merge with their surroundings, forming a single continuous artistic surface, a meta-medium of miscellaneous elements, of fabric, bodies, reflections and works by other artists.

This merging, boundary-blurring impulse in creative work was brilliantly characterised by the art theorist Anton Ehrenzweig in his classic text *The Hidden Order of Art* (1967). Adapting and revising Melanie Klein's psychoanalytic theory, Ehrenzweig gave an account of the creative process as a cycle of fragmentation, projection and reintegration. His central concept of 'dedifferentiation' refers to an integrated state in which attention is open but unfocused; like the Surrealists' psychic automatism, perception is submerged to a level at which elements are fused and obscure links are woven. In his preface to Ehrenzweig's book, Jean-François Lyotard describes how the artist's unconscious creativity lowers the barriers between inner and outer reality to form a single, limitless plane, a 'heterogeneous surface that includes skins, organs, streets, walls, canvases, instruments'. Lyotard calls this the radical 'laxity' of the phase of dedifferentiation, which produces an extended 'artistic body' that is 'beyond the body of the artist and beyond any body closed in on itself' and across which intensities are communicated between one unconscious and another.[2]

At many points in *The Covering* bodies are opened up, radically reinvented and liberated from familiar forms. Pilkington's iterations, or what we might call cover versions, of art historical icons such as the *pietà* typically combine the monumental language of canonical figure sculpture with the strange innovations and perverse polymorphism of the toy-maker. In her loopy limbs or bizarrely stylised heads there is a curious parallel

with Pierre Molinier's dark, intense erotic photographs. His fantasies of reconfigured anatomy are accomplished through painstakingly crafted images. Staged and shot in his cramped suburban apartment, then carefully retouched and re-photographed, they have a disconcertingly documentary feel despite the fastidious manipulations. Somehow the outrageous masked erotic figures serve to accentuate, and are somewhat upstaged by, the dreary ordinariness of the decor, the fussy rococo wallpaper and the patterned carpet. This contrast of libidinal expansiveness contained in a claustrophobic private space plays out a deeper contradiction. As Aaron Schuster has pointed out, the Sadean libertine is really a mirror image of the saintly ascetic.[3] Where the ascetic wishes to deny his carnal existence, the libertine is tortured by his perpetual inability to achieve an ideal of pure debauchery, his fantasy of absolute licentiousness always outstripping the humdrum physical limitations of the human body.

There is a compulsive quality to Molinier's image making, an exhilarating, transgressive mania in which resistances and oppositions are erased and the impossible is almost accomplished. Through strategic retouching, ingenious prosthetics and artistic sleight of hand, it seems that self-love can be finally and fully consummated. Perhaps this is the sexual liberation that Wilhelm Reich dreamt of. But ultimately Molinier's libidinal world is a solitary, solipsistic one; even on the rare occasions when it involves collaboration, other figures are merely extensions of the props and masks.

Regarding the relational character of art making, Ehrenzweig wrote:

> Creativity, then, may be self-creation, but it is possible only through social intercourse … The work of art is certainly not merely a projection and direct reflection of our inner world through 'self-expression' as is often assumed. It receives fragmented projections of our inner world only to nurture and transform them.[4]

In Ehrenzweig's theory of art, the phase of dedifferentiation is a central part of the creative process but not its entirety.

Its suspension of boundaries and sense of open possibility allow a formal and symbolic substructure to emerge, below the level of conscious attention but available to syncretic scanning. This is the 'hidden order of art'. But the state of dedifferentiation in itself can be a pathological avoidance of alterity, a sterile narcissism. In order to move beyond it, another state is required. This is what Ehrenzweig calls, adapting the terminology of Kleinian theory, the depressive stage. It entails an encounter in which the artist moves beyond the expression of arbitrarily directed drives and engages the otherness of the work with all its successes and failures, taking in or introjecting both the good and the bad.

To Molinier's erotic self-portraits Pilkington has strategically juxtaposed Morton Bartlett's *Untitled (Standing Girl)* (c.1950). She forms an ambivalent central presence. This particular doll sculpture by the self-taught hobby sculptor and commercial photographer has often been exhibited naked, even though Bartlett meticulously crafted her numerous outfits. Over a period of three decades he made fifteen of these half-scale figures, mainly girls, with studied and highly detailed anatomical precision. He never displayed them and they remained private during his lifetime, known only to a few acquaintances. However, he shot over 200 black-and-white photographs of his child-doll family, carefully lighting and posing them in hand-sewn, knitted and embroidered clothes.

In this exhibition, *Standing Girl* is clothed and born again under the new title *The Covering Cherub*. She has become a kind of pagan angel dressed in a futurist baptismal gown, a garment made specially for the show. The raised right hand in which Bartlett sometimes placed a basket of flowers or a clutch bag now bears a mysterious fabric sphincter-disc, like a sacred instrument in some intergalactic ceremony. Perhaps she is performing a ritual of reintegration and repair, atonement for the misogynistic lapses of Surrealism. This work continues a strand in Pilkington's oeuvre in which she engages with neglected or marginal artist-makers in recent history. By using *Standing Girl* as a found object, a *trouvaille*, Pilkington takes up the common Surrealist practice of sequential collaboration. As such, *The Covering Cherub* is a type of exquisite corpse.

Entering the second room of the exhibition through a ribbon curtain is like stepping into an interior within the interior, a dimly lit penetralium, a dedifferentiated place of birth and death. The walls are lined with hand-painted valances depicting differing shapes and styles of eyes, and hanging racks of prepared paper, while tarpaulins, fluorescent tape and makeshift claddings spread across the uneven floor. Stacked blankets and carpet underlay form swirling layers like soft geological strata. Within this makeshift indoor landscape the various sculptural objects seem ambiguously both preserved and about to be swept away in a textile avalanche. In the work titled *The Covering*, the blanketed figures appear like half-born adolescent foetuses.

Many of Pilkington's remakes of historical images, the *pietàs* and the Degas dolls, feature the motif of a two-sided head, mixing high-art Janus statues with a whole subgenre of topsy-turvy dolls that can be switched to be alternately happy or sad. In Pilkington's reworkings the faces are often blank or reductively stylised, as though a repressed voice is struggling to emerge out of the patriarchal sculptural tradition. The room as a whole presents a complex critique of this tradition. It is a non-linear, horizontalised scrambling of sculptural history in which a manic anxiety of influence switches back and forth with images of skilful mending and precise cobbling together.

Nearby, multiplied and distorted by an adjacent wall of decorative, metal-framed domestic mirrors, *The Kiss: Remain* is a remarkably faithful cover version of the iconic modernist original. Pilkington has preserved the essential features of Constantin Brancusi's 1907 stone carving on three sides of its block-like shape: with miraculous economy of means – just a small number of incised lines – two figures, male and female, emerge out of the simple mass. They are locked together, vacuum-packed, in a moment of inward-directed romantic fulfilment. On the fourth side, however, one large face bearing an empty, blissful smile has formed, like a giant instant-baby born spontaneously out of a simple embrace. This infant's ancient eyes are dark holes revealing the hollowness of the form. Despite the child's wide beaming face, it seems to be anxiously holding itself together in a pacifying cuddle.

These multiple, ambiguous, unstable gestalts are deeply symptomatic of Pilkington's artistic sensibility. In her work there is an impulse to dissolve form and erase categories, to blur the boundaries of high art and common culture; but there are also passionate, pathological attachments to the historical canon, to the sculptural object and to the process of making. These ambivalent investments impede, deflect and partially sublimate scattering vectors of unbound energy, an anxious holding together that reflects Ehrenzweig's creative phase of reintegration. In this phase the manic state in which all seemed possible or all seemed resolved gives way to 'the grey feeling of "the morning after"'.[5] It is a kind of mourning for the lost fantasy of an ideal work or the loss of unrealised possibilities, but correspondingly to a newly heightened perception of the actuality of what has been accomplished and an impulse to repair the now revealed fragmentation and incompleteness. Pilkington's pathological going on with sculpture is an engagement in the process of working through the encumbrances of history and otherness. As Bloom wrote: 'The precursors flood us, and our imaginations can die by drowning in them, but no imaginative life is possible if such inundation is wholly evaded'.[6]

Neil Walton

1 Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry* [1973], Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1997, pp.35 and 39.
2 Jean-François Lyotard, 'Beyond Representation' [1974], reprinted in Andrew Benjamin (ed), *The Lyotard Reader*, Blackwell, Oxford, 1989, p.164.
3 Aaron Schuster, *The Trouble with Pleasure: Deleuze and Psychoanalysis*, MIT Press, Cambridge MA, 2016, p.41.
4 Anton Ehrenzweig, *The Hidden Order of Art*, University of California Press, Berkeley and Los Angeles CA, 1967, p.223.
5 *Ibid.*, p.103.
6 Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence*, *op. cit.*, p.154.

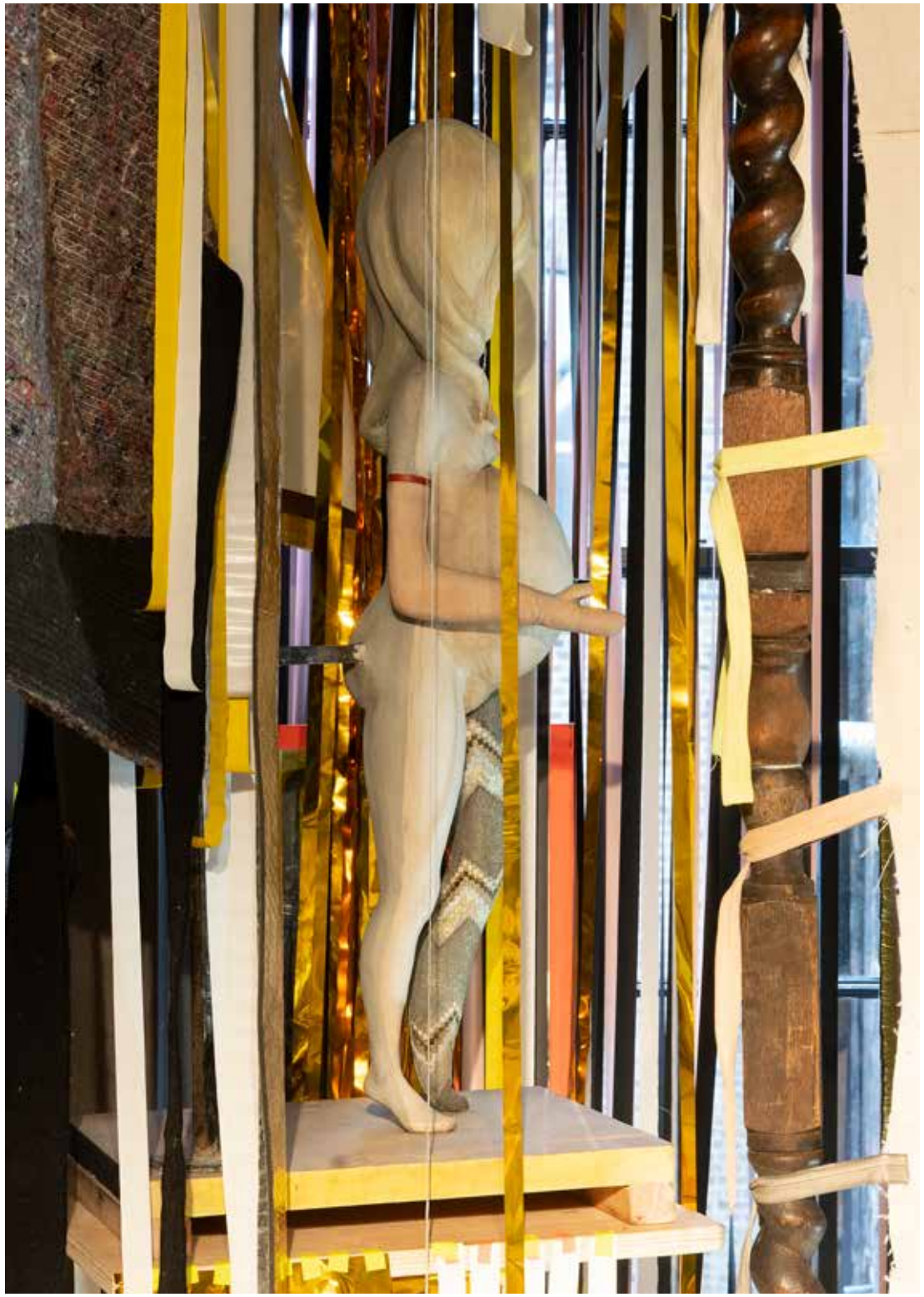
9 Pierre Molinier, *Autoportrait (Self-Portrait)*, c.1960
Vintage silver gelatin print, 16.8 × 11.5 cm

10 Pierre Molinier, *Éperon d'amour (The Love Spur)*, 1967
Vintage silver gelatin print, 14 × 18 cm

12 Pierre Molinier, *Luciano Castelli*, 1974
Vintage silver gelatin print, 18 × 12.5 cm

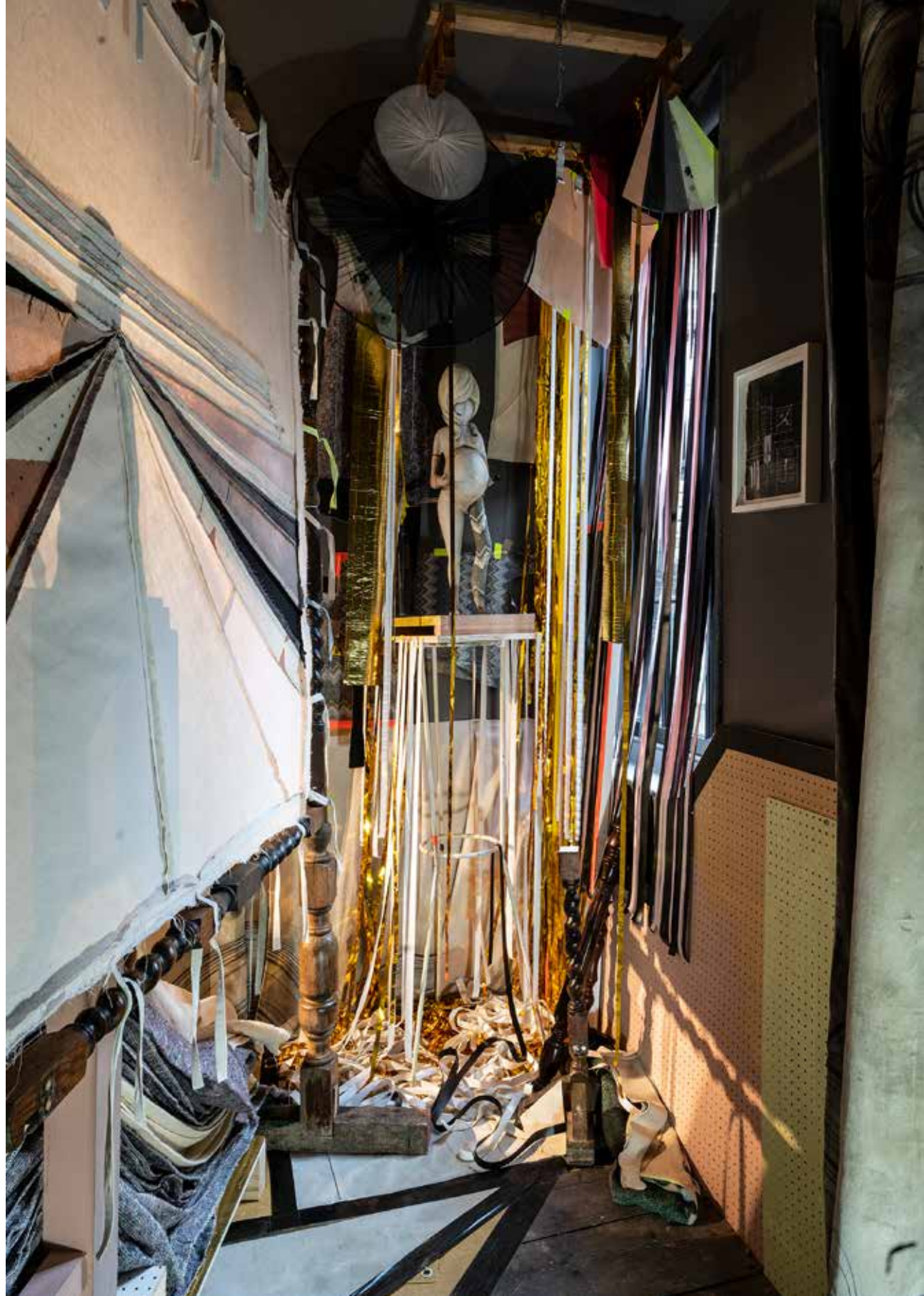
14 Pierre Molinier, *With the Doll on His Lap*, c.1960
Vintage silver gelatin print, 14.8 × 11.2 cm

15 Pierre Molinier, *Study for Mandrake se régale (Mandrake's Pleasure)*, 1967
Vintage silver gelatin print, 14.1 × 10.3 cm



18 Cathie Pilkington, *The Covering*, installation views

 Cathie Pilkington, *The Kiss: Remain* (top and opposite); *The Hushings* (detail, bottom)



22 Cathie Pilkington, *The Covering*, installation views

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Karsten Schubert London
46 Lexington Street
London W1F 0LP
www.karstenschubert.com

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