

Cathie Pilkington
Estin Thalassa

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Room 2
44 Lexington Street
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Estin Thalassa

The first and foremost danger encountered by organisms which were all originally water-inhabiting was not that of inundation but of desiccation.

Sándor Ferenczi, *Thalassa: A Theory of Genitality*, 1924

*There is the sea, and who shall drain it dry ...
it knows no poverty.*

Clytemnestra in Aeschylus, *Agamemnon*, 458 BC

There is the sea and there is the sea. A good sea and a bad sea. There is the blissful, cradling, oceanic deep, the amnion that in phantasy we long to return to. Then there is the sublimely malevolent roil of destructive waves and their angry backwash of retribution. As a repeated decorative motif, the sea, the goddess Thalassa, flows and ripples through Cathie Pilkington's current exhibition, an installation that develops and extends the dissolving tendency of her previous work. In earlier shows, Pilkington conveyed ambivalence about the traditional sculptural canon through pieces that were technically heterogeneous, visually disjointed, and precariously assembled from disparate high and low cultural sources, their unity barely holding. Additionally, in the context of site-specific installations, sculptural objects were almost lost in an enveloping tableau of assorted elements, pegboard structures, blankets, branches and bric-a-brac. Both of these strategies are still evident here, though perhaps they are more pathological than strategic, or perhaps pathology is being strategically deployed. But now they are augmented by a new disintegrative tactic of camouflaging three-dimensional form with elaborately painted surfaces against the framing backdrop of similarly decorated screens and hangings.

Painting assiduously modelled sculptural works is a long-established part of Pilkington's repertoire. In an early work, a boy-mannequin titled *Homunculus* (2003), the boldly checked suit and naturalistically painted features signalled something

particular, a demotic take on figurative sculpture as commercial doll or folk art effigy. In 'Estin Thalassa', the fusion of painting and sculpture is pressed much further and for different reasons. The elaborately decorated surfaces of objects are visually and thematically entangled with a series of layered canvas screens and draped and folded fabrics that divide the space. Sculpture and painting are aggressively dedifferentiated, to borrow a term from the psychoanalytic art theorist Anton Ehrenzweig.³ Sculptural objects obscure and complicate the hangings behind them, and the paintings seem to devour and incorporate the sculptures.

These artistic moves of merging and dissolving within and across works and practices can usefully be seen in a broader art historical context. So where traditional aesthetics conceived of and valued artworks as independent, bounded objects displaying unity and completeness, modern and contemporary art have tended to deconstruct this integrity. Sometimes this has been through explorations of what in Kleinian psychoanalysis is theorised as the part-object. An exemplary case would be Constantin Brâncuși's ambiguous forms abstracted from the body, which seem indeterminately both whole and fragmentary. Or else the rupturing of harmonious wholeness has worked through decentred serial repetition, as with Marcel Duchamp's readymade items hijacked from the pulsing flow of the production line.⁴ Pilkington's work washes to and fro across these strands of traditional, modern and contemporary sensibility without settling anywhere. On one hand she shows a passionate attachment to the intensively handmade procedures of the studio, and yet these same artefacts subsequently undergo a crisis of dissociation. They are split off and distanced from the intimacy of their facture, becoming estranged readymades. Pilkington has spoken about how there are different speeds of making and thinking in different phases of her work. One could also speak of different distances. Modelling processes are slow and close up, as is the meticulous over-painting of forms. Found objects are drawn in gradually. They accrue and migrate around the studio in varying combinations and dispositions. The process culminates *in situ* with a much faster, semi-improvised installation phase in which everything that has been made,

painted or collected is reassessed and redeployed, sometimes in unforeseen ways. But even here, in the final installation, there is a sense of contingency and fluidity. Pilkington often brings the trappings of the studio, armatures, racks and trestles, into the exhibition space. Blurring the boundaries of studio, home and gallery space has long been a feature of her work; it also signals an equivocal resistance to finality.

Thalassa, the sea, is an apt reference for a show that visually floods the space and which, moreover, is inundated with loosely interconnected motifs, symbols and stylistic influences. Many of these motifs have an obvious historical point of reference, such as the sinuous foliage of Eric Gill's stark linear medievalism, the proto-Op art of Edward Wadsworth's Vorticist dazzleships and the pagan rhythms of Sonia Delaunay's geometric textile prints. Others are more dispersed and pervasive: a certain archaic-mythic feel, a domestic-surrealist mood mixed with the feeling of musty ecclesiastical decor. In this exhibition, art history is tidal and meandering rather than fluvial and sequential; imagistic flotsam accumulates chaotically, or rather according to unconscious, syncretistic currents, eroding the vertical paradigm of the Oedipal canon.⁵

In certain traditional or modern modes, art is defined by its vertical chain of filiation – links of respect for, or aggressive rejection of, some or other vision of strong predecessors. In this way of thinking, as Richard Wollheim has put it, the history of art is a vast Oedipal conflict – 'a conflict in which the sons win, if they do, by becoming parents'.⁶ Pilkington's work plays ambivalently with this structured, hierarchical lineage of the canon, a patriarchal order that was previously explored in *The Ancestors* (2019), the installation she created collaboratively with Alison Wilding at the Royal Academy. As if to underscore this point, the current exhibition features a large symmetrical tree motif, like an arboreal emblem of filiation, painted in the centre of an enormous star-shaped doily. In contrast with the delicate, homely lace edging, it is a malevolent image of persecution and paranoia; the tree's boughs and branches are crowded with threatening arrows and surveying eyes. This is no consoling symbol of cultural continuity or an eternal cosmic order. Although references



6 Cathie Pilkington, *EstinThalassa*, 2021
Resin, oil paint, steel, velvet and felt-tip pen, 85 × 50 × 32 cm

to sculptural tradition abound in the exhibition, in the place of Oedipal lineage there is a swirling thematic instability, with references to domestic spaces, toys, dolls and blankets interspersed among monumental images. There are disturbing inversions of scale in the show. The intensively modelled and painted figure sculptures have a monumentality that belies their small size, whereas the painted screens seem like vastly enlarged illuminations or marginalia from some ancient, stained parchment. It is characteristic of Pilkington's work to take the neglected, discarded or peripheral embellishment and place it centre stage.

A key work in the exhibition is the sculpture titled *Estin Thalassa*. Simultaneously diminutive and monumental, it is a tour de force of artistic condensation and displacement. The child is a parent in this ambiguous double-headed figure, based in part on nineteenth-century topsy-turvy dolls. The work's title, which is also a quotation from Aeschylus, is lifted directly from Eric Gill's first carved figure. Where Gill's carving shows a young girl curled awkwardly, foetus-like, to fit her into some now lost architectural scheme, Pilkington's sculpture shows an alarmingly juvenile mother who seems to be giving birth to her own identity. As with much of the imagery in the exhibition, it could be understood as a poemagologic phantasy, a term invented by Ehrenzweig to describe art's self-reflexive symbolisation of the act of creation. Ehrenzweig drew attention to how frequently art features submerged themes of death and rebirth, scattering and containment. Drawing on a wide range of anthropological and mythic material, he described how this imagery mirrors the various internal psychological phases of the creative process as the artist fluctuates between more or less unconscious and differentiated ego states in a rhythmic ebb and flow. At the deepest oceanic levels of phantasy, the divine child absorbs the creative powers of both parents. She impregnates, bears and expels herself in a single, undifferentiated act.⁷

Girl's World is a sculpture that reinvents the accidentally uncanny 1970s hair-styling toy as a tweenage girl-sphinx, outwardly serene but awkwardly articulated to her various parts and facets. Simultaneously clumsy and elegant, mysterious and self-possessed, she manifests the oscillating, liminal states of

adolescence. The twisting locks of her cloud-like hairdo merge into the turbulent frieze behind her, and the way her eyes have migrated and multiplied from her mask-like face to her lion body emphasises the impression of fragmentation. With the frame-like plinth below, she seems to be the enigmatic guardian of obscure pubescent drives that might be buried among the folded blankets and deflated footballs.

The most complex piece in the exhibition is *The Deposition*, a layered mass of fabric hangings and drapery suspended from an oversized, decorated wooden rack that dominates the first room and envelops the spectator. It variously resembles a rail of second-hand clothes, a vestry of ceremonial robes or the tinsel backdrop of pub stage curtains. The work's title makes multiple references: to the looping swags of shroud material that feature in various artistic treatments of Christ's descent from the cross; to undulating patterns of sedimentation in rivers and coastal features; and to the unseating of authority. The largest elements are panelled cloth forms, like huge amniotic sacks that could inflate to a monstrous size. Their richly painted patterning creates a rhythmic intensity that spreads downwards onto an improvised taped tarpaulin floor covering. Pilkington has spoken of the strong personal associations fabric and materials have for her, their ability to be rolled and stacked, draped or stretched, their closeness to, and substitutability for, the body. Interleaved within the folds and strata are assorted images from canonical art and folk culture, visual predecessors that have been ambivalently internalised in the exhibition. The whole ensemble is like an airing of Pilkington's personal dirty-glittery art historical laundry.

The interweaving of vertical and horizontal registers continues with another piece, titled *The Scattering*. It is a scene of pathos, playful and tragic, with fabric animal carcasses looking exhausted, emptied out, heaped and strewn across the floor. Over their slumped skins and fleeces are painted rhythmic patterns and eyes that have drifted and resettled from the hollow sockets of sculpted heads elsewhere in the exhibition. These simplified silhouettes, partially filled with plaster, have a presence somewhere between stuffed toys, fairground horses and religious symbols like Francisco de Zurbarán's *Agnus*

Dei (c.1635–40), the poignant image of a lamb that is barely breathing and trussed up for sacrifice.

These ambivalent animal motifs recall an earlier sculpture, *Mother* (2010). In this work Pilkington presented a variation on the fairy tale ‘The Wolf and the Seven Little Kids’: a goat mother is stitching the torn, depleted body of a larger, toy-like animal. In a swerve from the original story, the goat mother seems to be desperately mending and rescuing her offspring. This echoes a key tenet of Kleinian aesthetics which suggests that all creation is underpinned by the remorseful mending of a good inner object that has been attacked in sadistic unconscious phantasy, a ruined self, a damaged parental imago or a lost world. The artist’s challenge, then, is to give the fullest expression to both the phantasy of aggression and to the ensuing reparative impulse, to the tensions and relations between death and life instincts. Crucial to the success of this is the depth at which the death instinct can be faced and acknowledged.⁸ This returns us to an earlier question: does the core of Pilkington’s art lie with the disintegrating impulse of a manic pathology or is it rather a strategy for the restitution of a lost object, specifically, gathering the torn limbs of a deeply problematic sculptural tradition? But here, at least, the dichotomy is left open. In this as well as other matters, Pilkington remains a border-crosser. The alternatives of good sea and bad sea flow into one, not a manic denial of death but a willingness to work with complexity unresolved.

Neil Walton

- 1 Sándor Ferenczi, *Thalassa: A Theory of Genitality* (1924), quoted in Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1973.
- 2 Aeschylus, ‘Agamemnon’, in *The Oresteia*, trans. R. Fagles, Penguin, London, 1977, l.959.
- 3 Anton Ehrenzweig, *The Hidden Order of Art*, University of California Press, Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1967.
- 4 Mignon Nixon, ‘o + x’, *October*, 119, Winter 2007, p.6.
- 5 *Ibid.*, p.19.
- 6 Richard Wollheim, *On Art and the Mind*, Allen Lane, London, 1973, p.151.
- 7 Ehrenzweig, *The Hidden Order of Art*, p.187.
- 8 Hanna Segal, *The Work of Hanna Segal: A Kleinian Approach to Clinical Practice*, Free Association Books, London, 1986, p.204.



11 Cathie Pilkington, *Girl's World*, 2021
Resin and oil paint, 35 × 78 × 20 cm



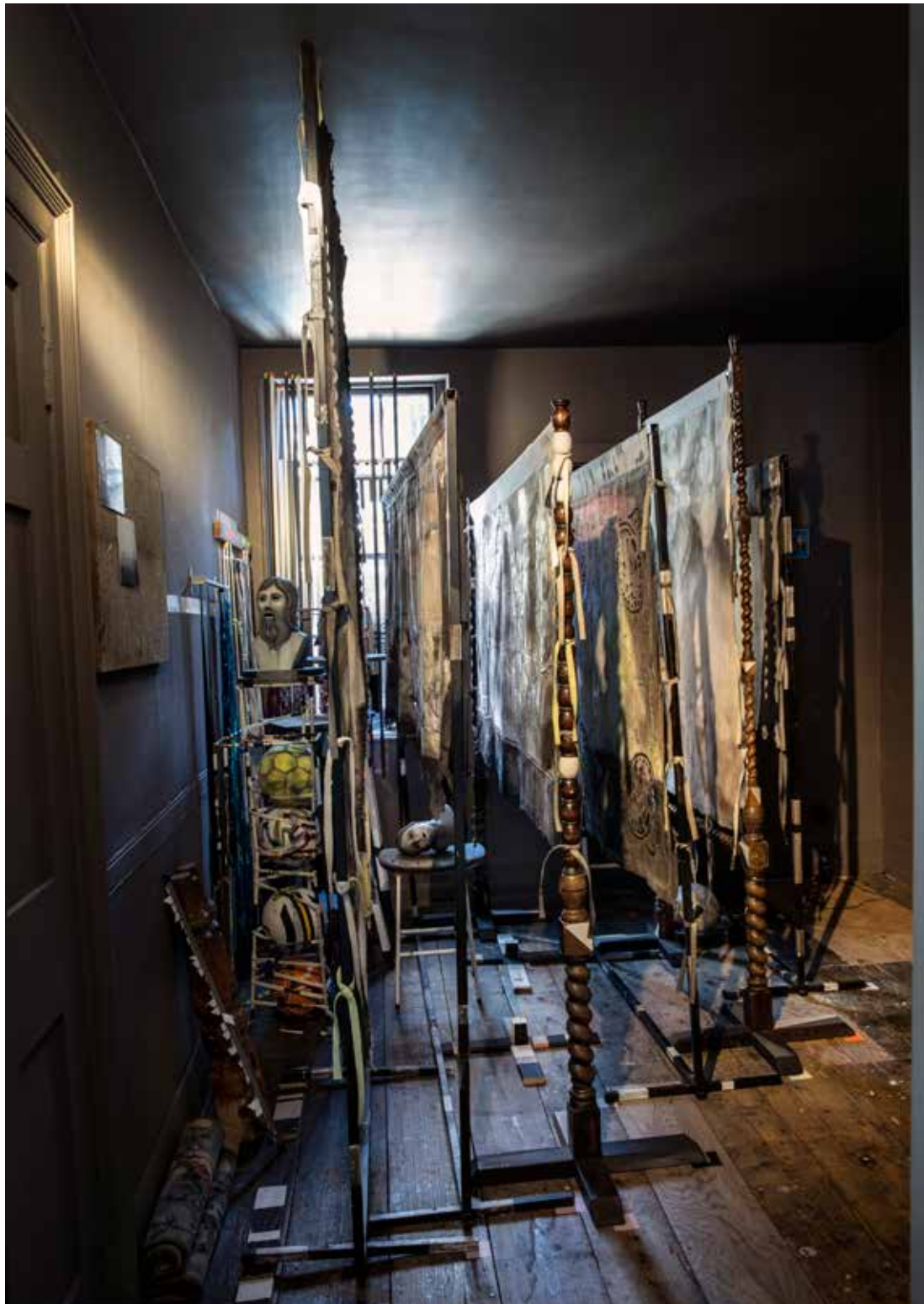
12 Cathie Pilkington, *Night Sea Journey* (detail), 2021
 Left to right: *The End*, *The Shallows*, *The Flood*, *Climacteric*, *The Ark* and *Target*
 Fabric works on stands: cotton, linen, wood, steel, paint and felt-tip pen, dimensions variable



14 Cathie Pilkington, *Night Sea Journey*, 2021, installation view



15 Cathie Pilkington, *Wakeman and Messenger (Dazzle)*, 2021
Resin, steel, footballs, linen and oil paint, 154 × 30 × 30 cm;
Resin, wood and oil paint, 130 × 83 × 33 cm



16 Cathie Pilkington, *Night Sea Journey* and *Wakeman*, 2021, installation view



17 Cathie Pilkington, *Fragment (St Sebastian)*, 2021
Resin, oil paint, wood and metal, 71 × 37 × 32 cm





20 Cathie Pilkington, *The Deposition*, 2021
Linen, velvet, wooden plinth, felt-tip pen, mixed fabrics, tarpaulin and gaffer tape, approx. 255 × 205 cm



21 Cathie Pilkington, *Cosmic Tree*, 2021
Cotton, acrylic paint and felt-tip pen, 208 × 208 cm



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