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Soft Bodies | Exhibition Handout

Artists: Emma Cousin, Stine Deja, George Gibson, Aliyah Hussain and Anna Bunting-Branch (Potential Wor(l)ds), Robin Megannity, Sadé Mica, Jake Moore and Semi Precious, Sam Rushton, Megan Snowe, Xiuching Tsay.

Soft-body dynamics is a field of computer-generated graphics which creates simulations of soft materials such as muscle, fat, hair, vegetation and fabric. The increasing availability of this kind of software has given artists new tools to make work; manipulating 'digital clay' in limitless space. These 3D digital works are however primarily experienced via the flat surface of the screen, as still or moving images. This may prompt questions about the contribution these works make to how we experience, understand and imagine our bodies. Do these smooth interfaces ultimately leave us feeling distanced and disembodied - and is that necessarily a bad thing?

This exhibition places works made with these digital technologies alongside photography, painting, drawing, and print in order to consider the shared limits and potential of these mediums. In particular their ability to call forth worlds beyond their two dimensional surfaces. With figurative and abstract, actual and virtual content, *Soft Bodies* explores how these works might inform our experience of being in a body, with its own insides and outs, boundaries and internal worlds. In places the exhibition points towards experiences of the body that are beyond everyday language, considering the speculative potential of these works to inform our comprehension of the body in relation to politics, technology, the image, gender, race, sexuality and the future.



Emma Cousin, *Hook line and sink her* (2019), oil on linen, 1000 x 1200 x 20mm.



Emma Cousin, *Vaseline* (2019), oil on linen, 1000 x 1300 x 20mm.

The figures in **Emma Cousin's** (UK) paintings tug and shove each other across the canvas. They are often found to be poking, prodding and pulling at orifices and erogenous zones, as in *Hook line and sink her* (2019); named after the fishing metaphor which implies both a sense of deception and possession. *Oyster* (2019) references a method of farming oysters whereby they are cultivated on a rope. In Cousin's painting twisting limbs distort and combine bodies into a tower of people. It is hard to tell from the fleshy balancing acts in these works if the figures are fighting or supporting each other. The idea for *Vaseline* (2019) came from 'runner's nipple' the chafing or irritation of the nipple from clothing, often caused by running long distances in cold weather. The work imagines the erect nipple as a kind of radio knob used to tune the body into the frequencies of its surrounding environment. Like Vaseline applied between nipple and sports top we often encounter barriers when trying to listen to one another and the world around us. In all of her works the body is presented both metaphorically and viscerally as the site of sensation; emphasising the role that the body plays in processing and defining our experiences of communication, aging, strength, vulnerability, pleasure, pain and anxiety.



Sadé Mica, *Tests in Malham No.3* (2019), digital print on photographic paper, 420 x 297mm.

Sadé Mica's (UK) *Tests in Malham* (2019 - ongoing) sees the artist leaving the city behind. After first searching online, Mica set off to look for 'Janet's Foss' a waterfall in Malham, a small village, in the Pennines, at the southern base of the Yorkshire Dales. Setting up their camera and posing alone in this pastoral scene the works may be seen to continue the long romantic tradition of artists exploring the natural landscape. Mica is however more concerned with how the landscape might assist their sense of being centred in their self. For the camera, Mica performs textbook poses intended for male or female life models, who even without their clothing must still affect their gender with the specific angles of their limbs, head and torso.

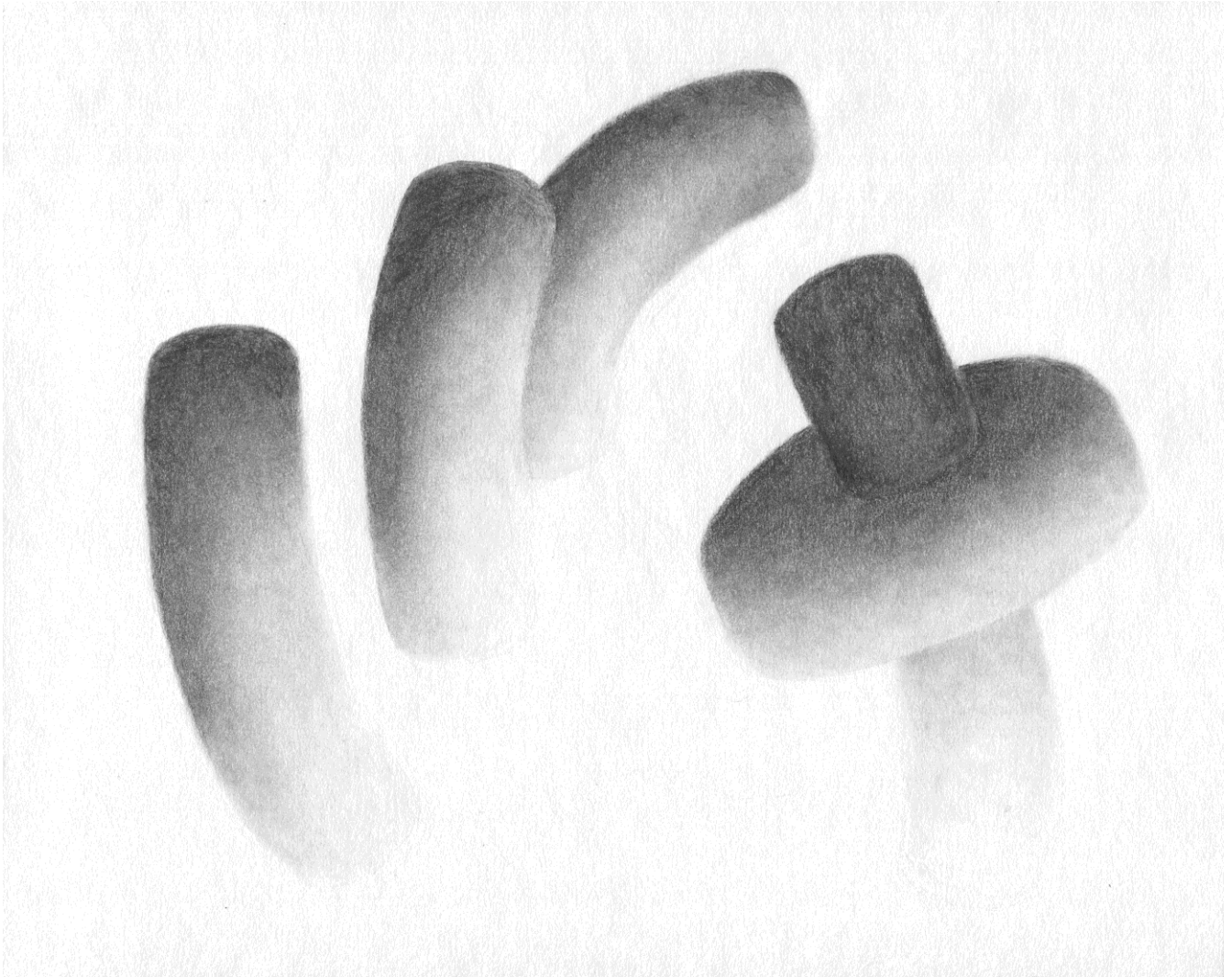


Xiuching Tsay, *Spoiling our Desire* (2018), oil on canvas, 1100 x 1250 x 40mm.



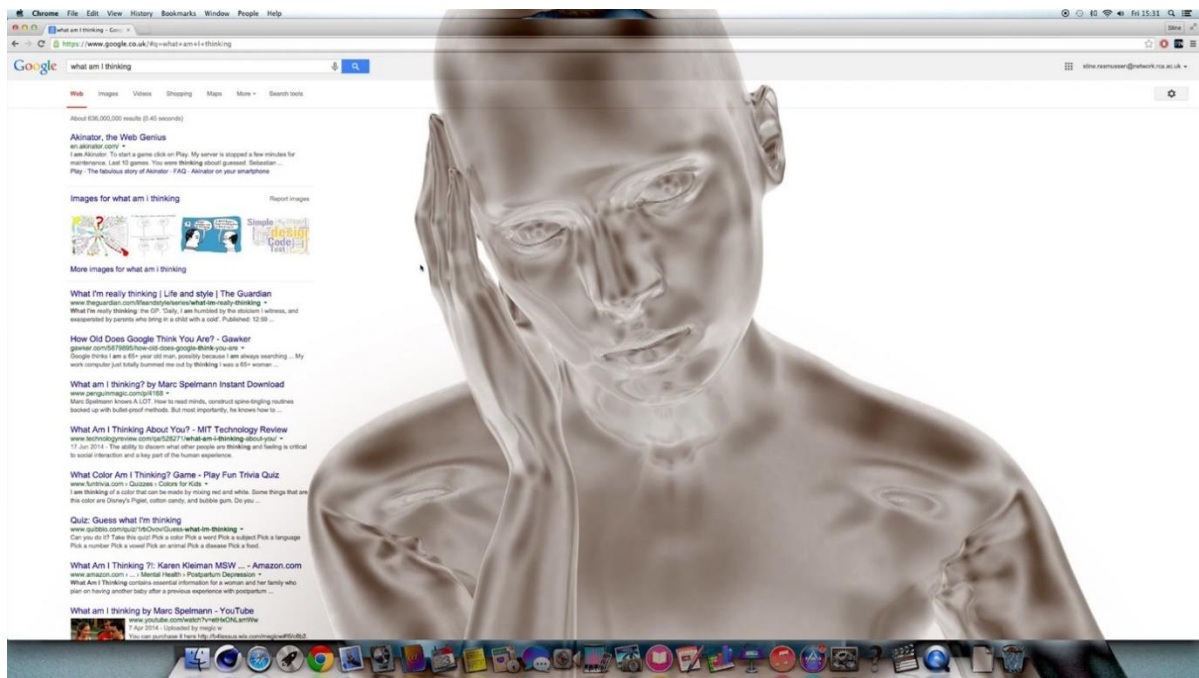
Xiuching Tsay, *Keeping away from the flood of melting sun* (2018), oil on canvas, 1400 x 1100 mm.

Xiuching Tsay's (UK/Thailand) paintings depict human forms melting into landscapes and seascapes which invert the inside and outside of the body. Strange objects which could be internal organs or alien machinery rise and fall in mountainous valleys. Traditional references to water, sun and moon are mixed with a contemporary palette, intertwining the sensuous, the spiritual and the unfamiliar. In these works, Tsay attempts to resurrect the essence of past experiences and rediscover their hidden characteristics. Something intimate is turned inside out for the viewer and left as an open-ended journey filled with dreamlike characters. Here abstract painting speaks more powerfully than any analytical description ever could about experiences of the body.



Megan Snowe, *Small Body 09* (2019), graphite on paper, 216 x 140mm.

Megan Snowe's (USA) series of *Body Drawings* (2019 - ongoing) is based on the premise that there is a sensual self that inhabits non-physical spaces: emotional, digital, and psychological. With these works, which she sees as a form of self-portraiture, Snowe attempts in some way to visualise sensations considering the possibility of depicting a non-flesh-based erogenous self. Rendering these forms with soft graphite as intimately sized works on paper (particularly in the context of the larger works in this exhibition) emphasises the fragility of this process; trying to grasp or give form to powerful but fleeting experiences.



Above, both: Stina Deja, *The Perfect Human* (2015), film still.

To watch the film visit: <https://stinedeja.com/THE-PERFECT-HUMAN-1>

Stine Deja's (UK/Denmark) *The Perfect Human* (2015) reimagines the 13-minute film of the same title by filmmaker Jørgen Leth. Leth's film depicts a smartly-dressed man and woman, whose actions and appearances are drawn attention to by a dispassionate, pseudoscientific narrator. Deja's version swaps the attractive young actors of the original with an androgynous digital avatar. The boundless white space created in the studio for the 1967 original is now the void of the computer screen in which the avatar is alone, but connected to an internet filled with other humans. Here we continue to consider such a notion of the perfect (or perfectible) human its actions, body parts and self-awareness.



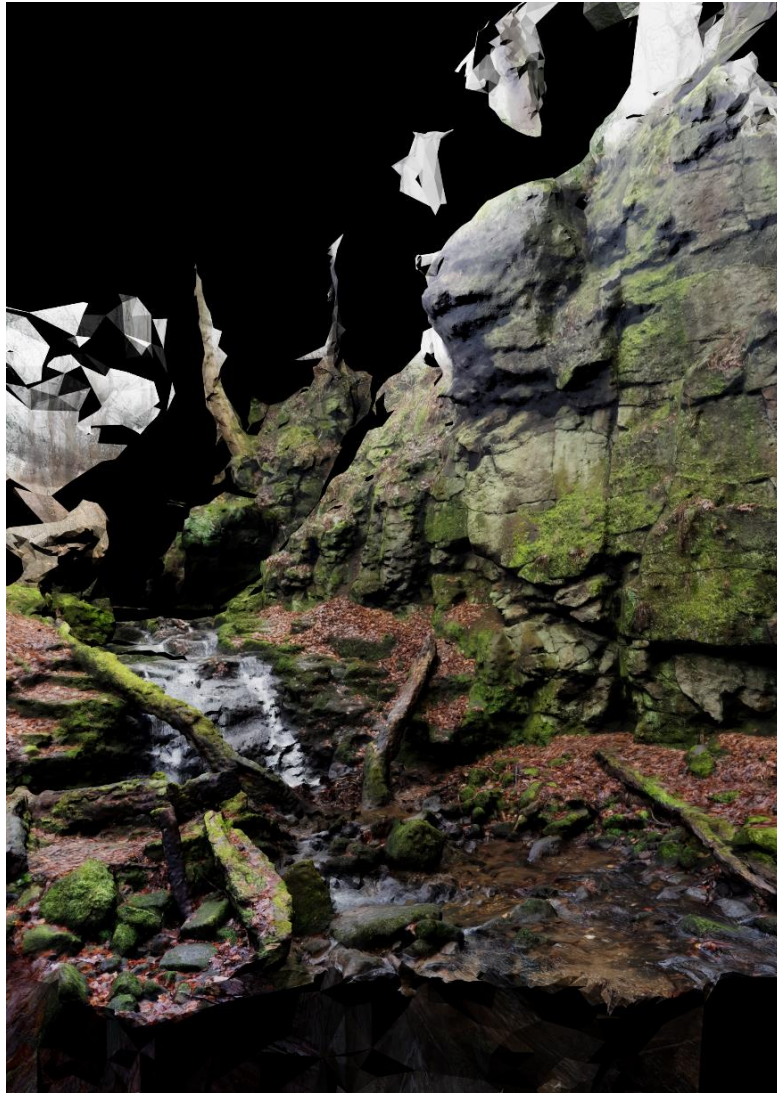
Above, both: Sam Rushton *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (2019), film still.



Sam Rushton, *Fossil* (2020), film still. To watch visit: <https://vimeo.com/411403412>

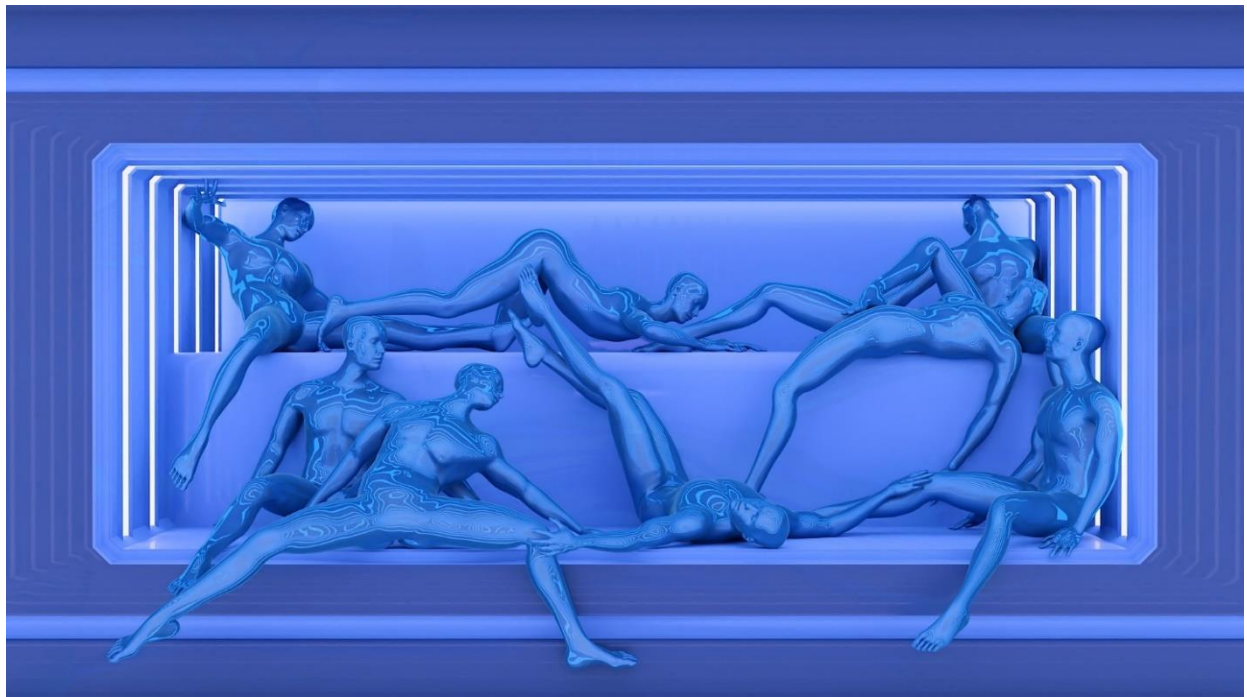
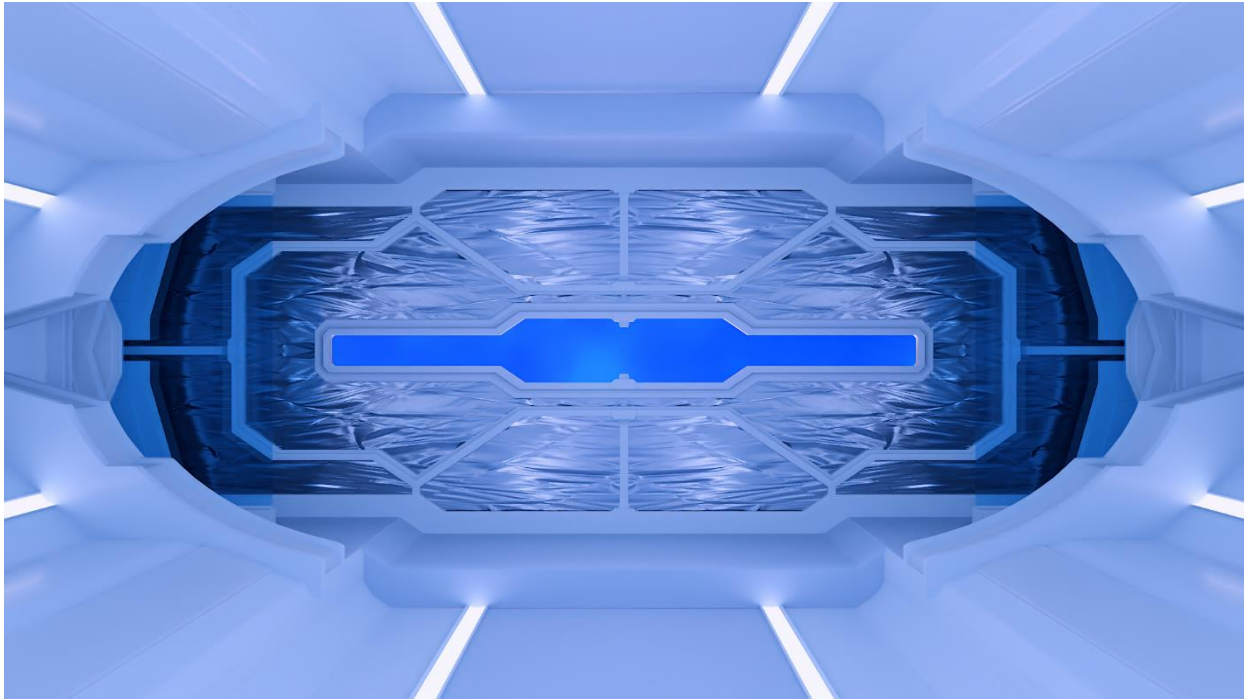


Sam Rushton, *Zoom (Descending), Zoom (Ascending)* (2020), film still.
To watch visit: <https://vimeo.com/411469712>



Sam Rushton, *Fossil* (2020), film still. To watch visit: <https://vimeo.com/411465184>

Sam Rushton's (UK) cybergothic animations are informed by philosophy, horror films and ghost stories. *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (2019) is a short digital animation which follows a character navigating a world where reading a new edition of Friedrich Nietzsche's *Thus Spoke Zarathustra: A Book for All and None* (originally published 1883–1885) causes people to mutate. The work reflects our increasingly polarised society where different ideological groups have such different points of reference that they no longer recognise each other as people they could communicate or reason with. The work ultimately asserts the power of words to change both mind and body. In *Ghosts* (2020) Rushton's digital aesthetics lend their own uniquely uncanny qualities to the archetypal gothic image of a human form veiled beneath a sheet. *Zoom (Descending), Zoom (Ascending)* (2020) is displayed on two monitors in a corner of the gallery space. Our point of view moves continuously in on the left and out on the right, moving us in and out of a digital model of a house and its surrounding landscape within an infinite number of models of itself. The work suggests an endless digital realm, and technology that enables us to hold incomprehensibly infinite worlds within worlds, in the palm of our hands. In *Fossil* (2020) Rushton contemplates a digital archaeology in an as yet unimaginable future where plant and animal species may be no more than a digitally archived memory.



Jake Moore and Semi Precious *Other Life* (2019), film still.

To watch visit: <https://www.jakedavidmoore.com/film>

As with other artists in the exhibition digital technologies offer artists like **Jake Moore** (UK) the opportunity to create worlds in which to explore alternative narratives, imagination and desire. *Other Life* (2019) is a computer-generated animation which combines an ultra-futuristic, sterile and vacuous aesthetic with undercurrents of homoerotic tension. The work is a collaboration between Moore and musician **Semi Precious** (UK). The soundtrack by Semi Precious has a yearning mood, which resonated with Moore, provoking the construction of a digital environment in which the boundaries of his lived experience can become more fluid. With visual references to gay bathhouses, cathedrals, and the backrooms of queer venues Moore imagines a technological utopia with an unstable core.



Above: Robin Megannity, *people are private* (2020), oil on canvas, 460 x 560 x 25mm.

Right: Robin Megannity, *Gossip* (2019), oil, wax and airbrush ink on canvas, 760 x 860





Robin Megannity, *Love mistake* (2020), oil and airbrush ink on canvas, 1000 x 1400 x 45mm.

Rather than actual objects, people or landscapes **Robin Megannity's** (UK) paintings begin with 3D digital models. Found online or constructed by the artist these models achieve convincing replications of light, surface, transparency and shadow; offering captivating illusions of materiality. Working with these models Megannity is able to engage with digital culture, and confront the aesthetic styles and problematics found in advertising, gaming and cinema. The incorporation of airbrush painting techniques at first appear like sections of digital print, as if the hand and gesture of the artist has been removed when in reality the opposite is true. The slick virtual objects and scenarios set up digitally by Megannity are muddled and confused by the failures, hesitations and affectations of the painting process. The finished works may replace the detachment of screen-based technology with the touch and material presence of painting, but somehow the 'unrealness' of physical properties reduced by digital algorithmic processing persists in their eerie surfaces. Ultimately for Megannity painting remains an important ground on to which 'the image' can be interrogated.

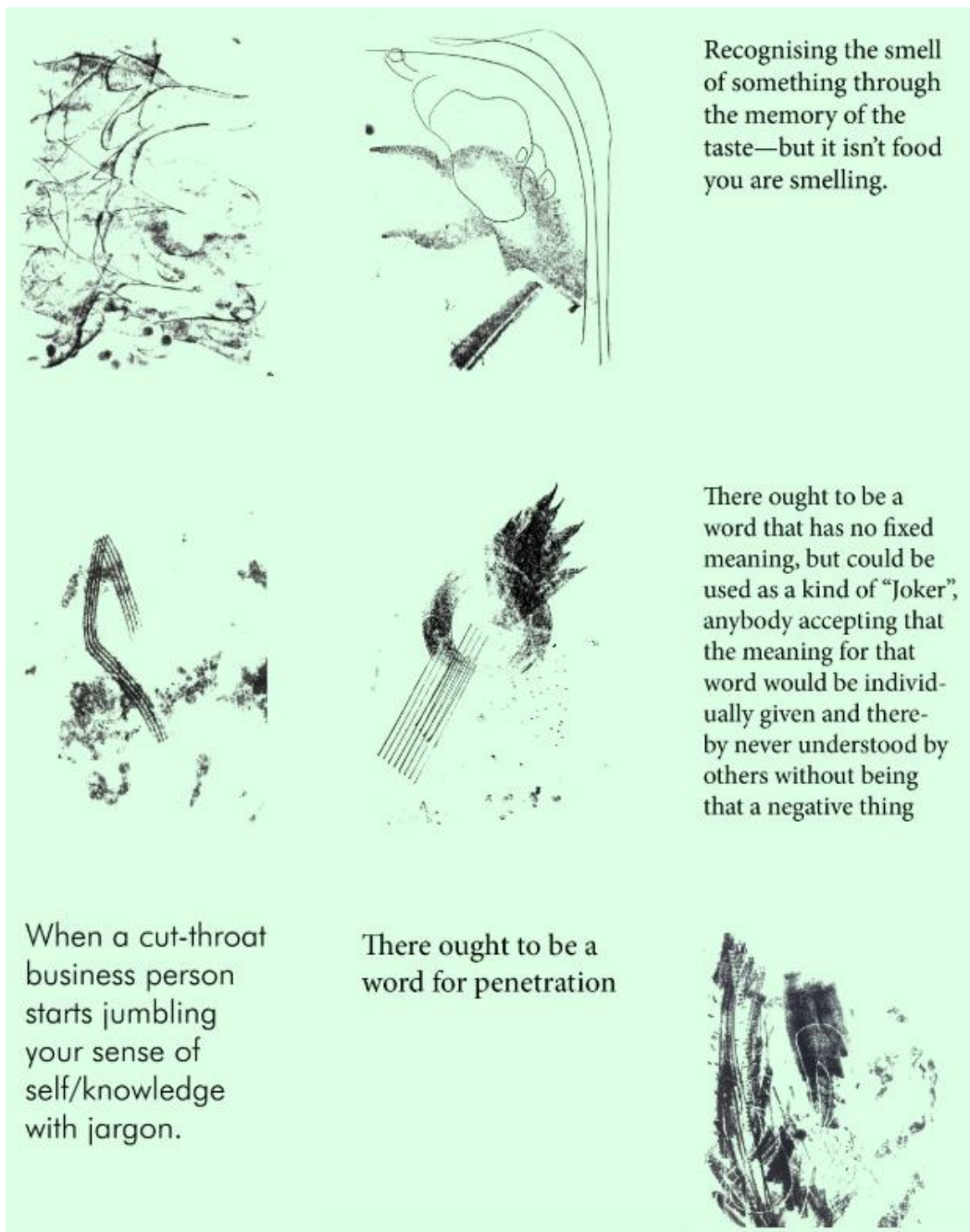


George Gibson, *Other Kin* (2020), digital mock-up of exhibition display.



To read *Other Kin* visit: https://issuu.com/georgegracegibson/docs/otherkin_digital_upload

As a book maker **George Gibson's** (UK) artistic research often takes the form of a kind of fanaticism. Exploring phenomena at the intersection of popular culture and more niche subcultures. For *Soft Bodies* Gibson has made a new book, featuring a foreword by Izzy Kroese, on the subject of 'Otherkin' (people who identify as non-human, typically as being wholly or partially an animal or mythical being). *Other Kin* (2020) includes depictions of human - animal shapeshifting, recurring throughout history from cave paintings and the artefacts of ancient civilisations to blockbuster movies. Appearances of this kind of metamorphosis in mainstream media are embraced as signs of solidarity with the alternative 'Otherkin' community. The pages of Gibson's book are printed with a risograph printer, a process initially used by churches, political parties and community groups as a cheap and quick way to distribute information. The pages of *Other Kin* however, are presented in a hand-bound hardback cover, like an occult tome; offered to the believers and also any potential converts to this movement of kinship with the non-human.



Extract from: www.potentialworlds.com

For *Soft Bodies* **Aaliyah Hussain** (UK) and **Anna Bunting-Branch** (UK) are presenting elements of their collaborative project *Potential Wor(l)ds*, as an exhibition piece for the first time. The artists have been working on the project since 2018. Inspired by the feminist-constructed language Láadan, they have been exploring the possibilities of moving from traditional ways of communicating (including speaking or writing in a dominant language like English) to more experimental, collaborative modes of expression. They have invited workshop participants to consider what there ought to be a word for, exploring this with text, sound and visuals in order to create content for an online dictionary (www.potentialworlds.com) which acts as an active resource and a growing archive of the project. Many of the 'words' created for the dictionary which consist of sounds, visuals and a definition, relate in some way to the body or our experiences of it. For *Soft Bodies* nine words have been selected by the artists from the dictionary. The words have been translated into a series of tablet like objects with speakers and installed in the gallery, intended to offer further interpretations of the exhibition and its themes.



Soft Bodies Exhibition install shot.

This exhibition recognises that we all have a body and we are all continually working out how we understand it, and how it informs our experience of the world. Art and technology offer us tools to explore the world and ourselves, to celebrate and interrogate it for better or worse. With mediums old and new art can be a reflection of its time, it can also be speculative about the future. In this exhibition, art's particular ability to occupy a space which seems alien and abstract but nevertheless direct and emotive is praised above all else. Art enables us to relate to the unfamiliar, the unrecognisable within ourselves and others. In this way it contributes to our ever developing understanding and ability to communicate with others no matter how different we may appear to each other.