

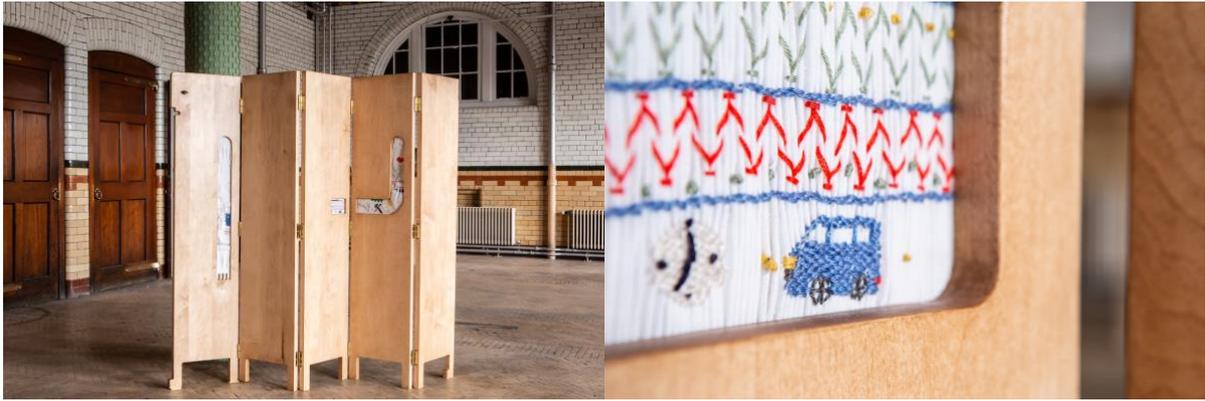
Platform: 2019

Essay by Chris Sharratt



Platform: 2019, installation view. Photo: Sally Jubb Photography.

Sculptures made from upholstery foam, gnome-like non-humans living on a landfill site, Kate Bush videos re-enacted by a fanboy – the works in this year’s Edinburgh Art Festival Platform exhibition are diverse, playful and never short of ideas. Featuring four artists, this showcase for early-career Scotland-based practitioners is selected by open call and there’s no stated theme beyond the ‘emerging’ status of its participants. There are, though, connections to be made between the work of Anna Danielewicz, Joanne Dawson, Harry Maberly and Suds McKenna – the Glasgow-based artists chosen by festival director Sorcha Carey and selectors Monster Chetwynd and Toby Paterson. Most obvious, perhaps, is the sense of performance that ripples through their art, a feeling of things having happened or being about to occur. It’s an atmosphere of action and expectation that is teased out by curator Rachael Simpson in the way that these very human-scale works are positioned and presented in the space – a former Victorian fire station that still retains its shiny glazed wall tiles, indulgent wood panelling and other original features. The very opposite of the anonymous white cube gallery, it’s an environment to work with rather than against – a notion that Joanne Dawson in particular embraces.



Joanne Dawson, *What Protects by Hiding*, 2019. Photo: Sally Jubb Photography.

Dawson has turned the history and architecture of the building into both inspiration and actor. Hers is a subtle intervention that mixes the domestic and the world of work through a process of embroidery, woodwork and a commitment to collaboration – for Platform, Dawson’s research led her to work with a Glasgow-based cabinet maker and the UK’s oldest pleating firm. The space’s two supporting pillars are wrapped from top to bottom in green pleated fabric, their hard surfaces enveloped and softened. Next to one pillar is a beautifully-made room divider, created from five wooden panels with delicate brass hinges. With its sphinx-like head and feet and curiously calm demeanour, it imposes itself on the space with a kind of disarming, cool arrogance. Look closer, though, and in a series of cut-out shapes that resemble a hand, an arm, a leg, an eye, there are embroidered symbols of work, life, nature.

Representing various trades and jobs, from gravediggers to fire fighters, they adorn white fabric that has been smocked – a process of gathering the material to create structure and elasticity, and a style which is most associated with the smock shirts of pre-industrial agricultural workers. What at first seems subdued is in fact teeming with the noise of history, the labour of working people, the gendered roles of making. Embodied in these forms are both the skills and expertise of contemporary craft and the past activities of many. It’s as if Dawson has created a kind of stage set, but one that has the drama of its own story embedded within it.



Suds McKenna, *Pink Head* and *Glasgow Central*, 2019. Photo: Sally Jubb Photography.

If Dawson's craft-focused works convey the sense of a stage on which to perform, Suds McKenna would seem to have brought along a cast of idiosyncratic, seemingly marginal characters. There's something strange and a little unsettling about the people in McKenna's slightly tragic, almost comic drawings and sculptures. Dark and crudely intricate, the three etchings of Glasgow street life that hang here have something of Max Beckmann's famous *Die Hölle (Hell)* series about them. Like Beckmann, McKenna's roving eye is interpreting the world around him, but this contemporary view is much more forgiving in tone than the German's damning verdict of 1919 Berlin. With a cartoon aesthetic that enlists everything from Robert Crumb and *The Beano* to the ancient forms of Pictish and Celtic art, the cacophony of the crowd is tempered by empathy. Here we are, all in it together, all trying to cope with the speed and chaos of the everyday, these warmly inquisitive works seem to suggest.

McKenna characterises the process of making his street drawings, which he does in-situ, as a kind of performance and this is carried through into the two sculptural figures in the exhibition. Both began life as on-the-spot sketches – the starting point of their 3D forms can be found in the etchings on display. Possessing a cartoony mix of abstraction and playfulness, they are constructed from upholstery foam and 'carved' using an electric knife – the kind you'd use for a Christmas turkey, McKenna explains. There's a rickety, live-wire DIY-ness to them that acts as a counterpoint to the more sombre etchings. That roughness to the sculptures, a feeling of possible collapse, is deliberate and important. McKenna says he wanted to work with a material not associated with sculpture and that he watched a lot of 'cosplay' costume tutorials on YouTube to learn about working with the foam. The materials, the process, the finished work – it all feels *of* the crowd, rather than *about* the crowd.



Harry Maberly, *A Kate Bush Story: It's me, I'm Cathy!*, installation view, 2019. Photo: Sally Jubb Photography.

From crowds to audiences – the work of Harry Maberly is performative in the most literal sense. In two short film pieces that play on monitors displayed at shoulder height on MDF plinths, Maberly earnestly if comically re-enacts the videos for Kate Bush singles: her 1978 debut *Wuthering Heights* and 1980's *Babooshka*. Maberly describes the works as fan videos that stem from his fairly recent discovery – in the last few years – of Bush's music, although they also display a touch of the absurdist humour seen in some of his previous art projects.

Originally conceived for YouTube rather than a gallery setting, viewing them with headphones on in a public space feels incongruous, if not slightly ridiculous. At the same time it transforms how they are interpreted, because here, in this place, in close proximity to McKenna's slightly wonky sculptures, the videos ask to be viewed as more than just a young man fulfilling his dressing-up fantasies while miming to 40-year-old pop hits. There's something going on here about how pop history is perceived and experienced by millennials (Maberly was born in the early 1990s as were the other three artists); about the move from consumer of culture to participant; about male and female sexuality and changing ideas of masculinity/femininity. An 11-minute film, *A Kate Bush Story; It's Me, I'm Cathy!*, screened in a small room off the main space, provides some context for the two videos, offering behind-the-scenes insight into their making, from the lo-fi dancing-around-a-field aesthetic of *Wuthering Heights* to *Babooshka*'s filmed-in-a-studio professionalism, complete with props and costume changes. Projected onto a large screen, it feels more in keeping with what we might expect from a gallery film, as dogged fandom manifests itself in an obsessive attention to detail which can only ever miss its mark because, well, Harry Maberly is clearly not Kate Bush. Appropriately, the film is available to view on the artist's YouTube channel.



Anna Danielewicz, *Voun Town*, 2019. Photo: Sally Jubb Photography.

Anna Danielewicz describes her multi-faceted installation as ‘a satire on human vanity’ but she has bigger things on her mind than the narcissism of our social media habits. Addressing environmental crisis and capitalist economics, her work is rich in ideas and dripping in black humour. At its heart is the short story, *Voun Town*, a *Gulliver’s Travels*-style tale of the curious non-human Vouns – described as ‘between a verb and a noun’ and ‘not unlike a very authoritative garden gnome’ – who our human narrator stumbles upon when chased into a forest. The work’s many layers are reflected in the different elements that are used to bring it to life: a performed audio piece listened to on headphones, bespoke sculptural chairs in adult and small child (Voun?) sizes, hexagonal ceramic tiles, the story in booklet form for visitors to read and take away. The Vouns, we are told, live and work on a secret landfill site. Among their characteristics is a commitment to collectivism and strictly implemented work roles such that ‘each individual Voun is defined solely by their occupation’, to the extent that when not working they curl up and sleep. The allusion to theories of the division of labour and its alienating impact on individuals and society is clear, with Danielewicz describing the Vouns’ regimented approach as both ‘a consequence and an expression of resistance to market capitalism’.

Written with a Swiftian flourish and recounted in a tone of puzzled learning as each new and unexpected aspect of Voun society is revealed, this fantastical tale of tiny non-humans and their disruptively parasitic relationship with what we discard is witty, engaging, perplexing. Danielewicz puts the viewer in the midst of this off-kilter drama as we sit in the distinctive chairs, arranged in an almost-circle that appears to have been fractured to form two groupings, each including large and small chairs. The artist often works in a performative way and the installation was conceived with this in mind, creating a point of physical engagement with this speculative world.

Voun Town left me wanting more. That’s the thing with this kind of exhibition; bound by the limitations of space, resources, time, it is by its nature a snapshot, an introduction to these artists’ practice. I’d like to see a whole exhibition of McKenna’s electric knife-carved foam sculptures, more of Dawson’s collaborative works, another Kate Bush video from Maberly perhaps? It will be fascinating to see what they all do next.

October 2019 – Chris Sharratt is a freelance writer and editor based in Glasgow.

About *Platform*

Platform is an annual showcase for artists at the beginning of their careers. Selected from an open call by Monster Chetwynd and Toby Paterson, four artists based in Scotland – Anna Danielewicz, Joanne Dawson, Harry Maberly and Suds McKenna – have been supported to make and present new work as part of the festival.

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