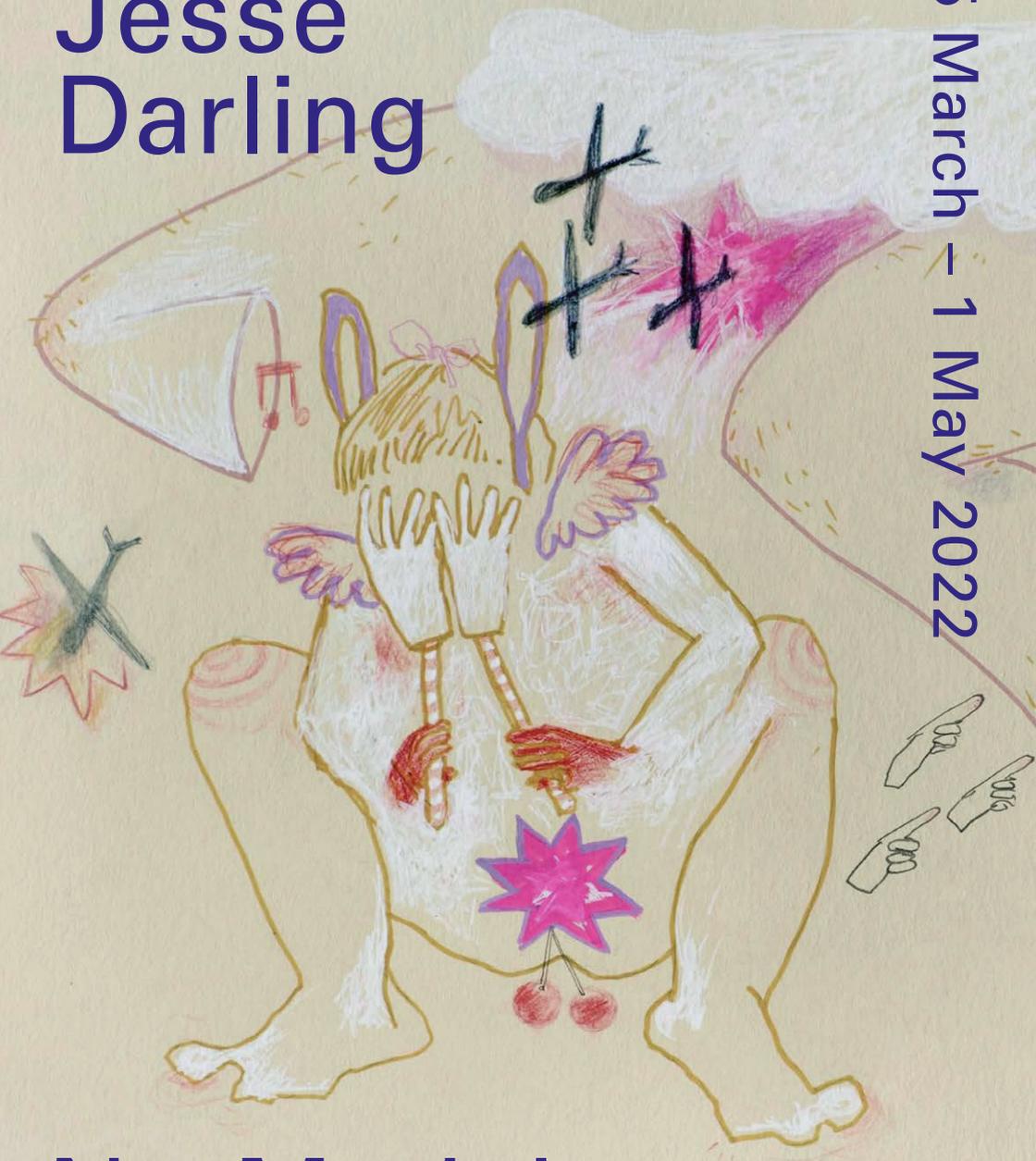


Jesse Darling

5 March – 1 May 2022



No Medals No Ribbons

About Modern Art Oxford

Located in one of the world's great cities of learning, Modern Art Oxford is a leading contemporary art space with an international reputation for innovative and ambitious programming. We promote creativity in all its visual forms as a progressive agent of social change. Our programmes, both in person and online, are shaped by a belief in dialogue between contemporary art and ideas, and celebrate the relevance of contemporary visual culture to society today.

Modern Art Oxford offers opportunities for audiences to be inspired, to enjoy, to learn, and to develop their creative potential.

Jesse Darling

No Medals No Ribbons

Jesse Darling (b. Oxford, lives and works in Berlin) has explored how systems of power – government, religion, ideology, empire, technology - can be as fragile and changeable as mortal bodies. The artist discussed their exhibition *No Medals No Ribbons* with curator Amy Budd during the installation period in February 2022.

Amy Budd: Can you explain the meaning behind the exhibition title?

Jesse Darling: It's a kind of repudiation of the whole triumphant 'retrospective' thing that goes along with a survey exhibition, so pretty much it is what it says on the tin. It's also secretly in reference to a distant relative of mine whose story I somehow came across recently. As a German prisoner of WWII he started fabricating artificial legs for his injured comrades from pieces of window frames, metal chairs, cotton batting, rubber from old tires, camp scrap and anything he could get, bribing the guards with chocolate and cigarettes for stove fuel. According to local news stories he made up to 300 artificial arms and legs, some of which had complicated jointing mechanisms. When the war ended and they sought him out for recognition and decoration, he refused everyone saying that it was best to forget what had

happened. His materials list looks a lot like mine though I'm not living through a war or making anything useful in this sense. And sometimes, though I think a lot about history, I think I would rather forget my own.

AB: Your artworks explore a wide range of histories, stories, legends, and myths. How do you develop your ideas? What is your starting point?

JD: I guess my ideas come from the same place as anyone else's – my upbringing, my education, my age, race, class, gender, whatever's been going on in my life or on the news at any time during my years as a person in the world. As someone who is quite clumsy and not very good at learning things I feel like I had to make up my own approach to working out the things I wanted to say – or the things that wanted to be said through me, despite me. Though I think every artist needs to do that. I start with an intuition and a set of muddled feelings without form, and then these find some kind of shape through the process. Often, I'm not sure what I've made until afterwards, and then sometimes I'm surprised, or disappointed. I say I'm not a conceptual artist, just an artist who thinks and sometimes reads a lot. But whatever drives my work, I can't get that from reading a book.

AB: How do you choose the materials you work with?

JD: The honest answer is that for most of my practice I just used what was cheap or free and easy to find. There's poetry in objects that everyone is able to recognise from their daily lives, like a shortcut to meaning. I find myself drawn ambivalently to petrochemical materials - steel and plastic, silicone. Plastic in particular is a zombie medium - bright, lurid, doesn't really decay - and it's made from



Jesse Darling, *Gravity Road*, installation view, Kunstverein Freiburg, 2020. Photo: Marc Doradzillo.



Jesse Darling, *Prototype*, 2018, 2019. Courtesy of the Artist and Arcadia Missa, London.

fossil fuels, which in a certain sense can be seen as the exhumation of the ancestors. Steel is a technology of coloniality and capitalism - industry, war. These materials have produced my body, in a manner of speaking, and they tell their own stories. You could say it's autobiographical, but my autobiography isn't just about me - it's a story about the enclosures act, the industrial revolution, the British empire, the transatlantic slave trade, Henry Ford, Walt Disney, the World Wars, mines and miner's strikes, the welfare state and its dissolution, the failed sexual revolution, Margaret Thatcher, Tony Blair, the twin towers, Brexit and Covid 19.

AB: Your work often addresses the fragility and impermanence of life, highlighting that “nobody gets out of here alive, and nothing is too big to fail”. Mortality is an important theme but am I right in thinking there is also a hopeful message in your work? That vulnerability is also a strength, and adaptation, resilience and change can be empowering?

JD: For me it's quite a hopeful feeling to know that even empires fall, kings topple, and governments are overthrown. To know that everything has its own end, even when it seems like the reign will be endless. Vulnerability is a given, like it or not, in everybody. It's what makes us alive. It's not that vulnerability is in itself a strength, but the fact of our mortality, our propensity to suffer in love, in conflict, under structural violence, and our animal need for nourishment and warmth is what our species has in common.

Universalism is such a melancholy white European thing but I'm attached to it because I believe in coalition and community despite everything. To acknowledge our universal vulnerability, at the level of the mortal body, is for me a way of thinking about trying to care for each other.

Artist Thanks

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Cover image: Jesse Darling, *Big Voice (Libidinal Economies 1)*, 2021. Image courtesy the Artist and Arcadia Missa, London.



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