

**Marek Sullivan**

## **Emii Alrai, 'Passing of the Lilies'**

At the beginning there is an arch half-hung across the entrance. More of a mass than an arch, maybe more like crepe paper. Weightless in mid-air, it has the appearance of stone and hence of heft. I'm told it's actually light, being made of polystyrene predominantly.

The arch hangs on steel brackets clamped onto steel pillars that inhere in the gallery's structure. The room would collapse without them. Air flows around the arch. You can see the gap where sun and dust should be.

Outside the gallery is the street, which is straight and square and gives onto the Shard. It is raining and a river is flowing down the road. A net both connects and contains: each node is constriction and axis. London's net extends everywhere, props up roofs, pumps power down circuits, sets the temperature of the sea and holds a child hung on a grape of air at the back of her bombed, burnt-out lung. All power concentrates at the end of a steel bracket, where sun and dust should be.

Walking through the arch is not like walking through an ancient place of worship. Walking through it is like the sensation of cupping wind.

Air fills clusters of vessels lying on the flat fake stone, deadening the lilies inside them which take on the appearance of rot. From a particular angle I'm maybe looking at the remains of a last supper,

like in that Johnny Cash video with grapes and the taste of something bruising.

My phone says, Israel: 212; Hamas: 10. Twenty eyes for an eye, twenty teeth for a tooth. But what are metaphors metaphors of?

What is the value of the shadow of a golden chalice?

The vessels are the colour of verdigris and it is impossible to tell that the colour is fake. Or rather, that the substance that the real colour points to is unreal. But what would be real about copper if it was really copper? Would we feel warm inside, like the way we feel when right is split from wrong?

Around the room metal supports jut out from walls, cradling unfound objects as in prayer. The objects lean on the supports but the supports would not be there without the objects [obvs]. Metonymic-dialectical intervention in the politics of ostentation, ironic commentary on the mummification of meaning, magnification of extractive colonialism's bleeding edge, interrogation of the aesthetics of theft – these objects hold out for something.

Since I cannot pick them up I cannot know their weight. The support knows their weight for me.



*Emii Alrai, Passing of the Lilies, 2021. Installation view at Jerwood Arts. Commissioned for Jerwood Solo Presentations 2021, supported by Jerwood Arts. Photo: Anna Arca*

## Freya Dooley, 'Temporary Commons'

There's an atmosphere in here.  
Fungus crept up the wall  
took root among us.  
There's an atmosphere in here.

Now I am a spore.  
Am I dreaming or can I hear  
I dreamed I called you on the telephone  
Playing next door?

There's an atmosphere in here.  
The waters are rising!  
It's been raining for days!  
Can't even remember what sun's like.

I'm a shit-stained bluebottle  
fly on the wall of every state-  
sanctioned social interaction,  
including but not limited to:  
late-night-TV collaborative viewings  
and plans for the weekend barbeque.

Every time I'm here in the gap  
between halls, I remember  
the hot rush, the thickening rot.  
Convection radiators turn air  
at the boundary wall.  
Somewhere a pipe is leaking.

The neighbours are starting to itch  
from the same tick  
the same tock.



*Freya Dooley, Temporary Commons 2021. Installation view at Jerwood Arts. Commissioned for Jerwood Solo Presentations 2021, supported by Jerwood Arts. Photo: Anna Arca*



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## Bryony Gillard, 'I dreamed I called you on the telephone'

Illness is the night-side of life, a more onerous citizenship. Everyone who is born holds dual citizenship, in the kingdom of the well and in the kingdom of the sick. Although we all prefer to use only the good passport, sooner or later each of us is obliged, at least for a spell, to identify ourselves as citizens of that other place.

Susan Sontag, *Illness as Metaphor* (1978)

Read, therefore, this narrative at your leisure, & without emotion – for all has ended happily.

Frances Burney, 'Letter from Frances Burney to her sister Esther about her mastectomy without anaesthetic' (1812)

TW: suicide, illness, grief

Hey it was good to talk yesterday, and to meet you in the flesh. Really good, also to meet Nell (?) and her dried pig ear.

After you left I kept thinking about the chewed edge of the ear and how you put the ear in a little jiffy bag before putting into your rucksack. It

reminded me of the sections of the film where Foxy nibbles the plastic limbs and starts to tear them apart, and how this was captured in a camera and sealed up into a film. Nell chewed on the green plastic frisbee, too. Wild!



Bryony Gillard, *I dreamed I called you on the telephone*, 2021. Still. Commissioned for Jerwood Solo Presentations, supported by Jerwood Arts.

We talked about physical and emotional pain, bereavement and disassociation. You mentioned that some members of your family had recently passed away, and that you were still processing this fact. I'm really glad that you felt able to share about that.

I keep going back to different aspects of the film. As Harriet mentioned in your Zoom discussion, when Foxy chews on the limbs it's like watching something happening to your own body and not being able to do anything about it. I guess it's difficult to reconcile our sense of self with nature's relentless turning, which pulls our bodies in different directions, often against our will. I like the part in your work where the moon appears as

a cold coin rolling across the sky, its time clearly not our time. I like the way that it resonates with the turning sewage works, dead zones that are, as you pointed out, full of insects and hence of the life of birds.

We also talked about how strange cluster headaches are. I mentioned that cluster headaches are sometimes called 'suicide headaches' because they are so painful (each year five people in the UK commit suicide because they cannot bear the pain). Apparently they are among the worst pains a human being can experience. I get them every other year from the end of March to the beginning of May, usually at the same time of day or night. Sometimes when I think about the headaches, I get a cold dropping feeling, like a stone let loose down a well, and my heart starts to thump. I cannot control this feeling, it just happens.

I imagine a worse pain than a cluster headache is having part of one's body removed. In your reading list for *I dreamed I called you on the telephone*, you have included Frances Burney's letter to her sister Esther about her mastectomy without anaesthetic. I want to include a section of the letter here, because it seems to capture something important about the notion of time and illness running through your work.

As you'll remember, Burney describes being "annoyed by a small pain in my breast, which went on augmenting from week to week". The small pain was breast cancer and Burney was eventually advised to undergo an operation to

“avert evil consequences”. The doctors would not reveal the date or time of the operation but promised to give Burney four hours warning “for sundry regulations”. In the event, Burney received only two hours’ notice yet even this was too long:

It was a dreadful interval. I had no longer any thing to do – I had only to think – Two Hours thus spent seemed never-ending. I would fain have written to my dearest Father – to You, my Esther – to Charlotte James – Charles – Amelia Lock – but my arm prohibited me: I strolled to the Sallon – I saw it fitted with preparations, & I recoiled – But I soon returned; to what effect disguise from myself what I must so soon know? – yet the sight of the immense quantity of bandages, compresses, sponges, Lint – made me a little sick: – I walked backwards & forwards till I quieted all emotion, & became, by degrees, nearly stupid – torpid, without sentiment or consciousness; – & thus I remained till the Clock struck three.

At the given time, Burney’s room was entered by “7 Men in black” who awakened Burney from her “stupor”. She asked herself why so many men had arrived without prior agreement but “could not utter a syllable”. The surgeon placed a veil over Burney’s eyes, though which she could make out the glinting scalpel blade. The surgeon plunged in the knife.

Your work reminds me that capitalism surrounds us with the fantasy of completeness. It future-proofs reality and abolishes entropy, while

simultaneously entropying itself through planned obsolescence. It is a metaphysics of calculated death, disguised by a veil of life. Or rather it sustains life only to the extent that doing so supports the generation of capital. One of its central conditions is the erasure of individual agency – the power to decide what is best for us at any given moment – either by denying choice outright, by limiting our choices to negligibly different options or by conditioning us to choose what works in capital’s interests. To the extent that all decisions are responses to finitude (the impossibility of carrying out all envisageable options, within an infinity of time), normative time, with its regular intervals, clock-ins and clock-outs, is central to the reproduction of capitalist life.

Yet in Burney’s account, time appears to flow unevenly, both in the weeks before her operation and during the two hours before the operation. This alteration in the normal flow of time is well captured by the term ‘crip time’ which you explained to me earlier. I looked up the term when I got home and found this definition, by Ellen Samuels:

*Crip time is time travel.* Disability and illness have the power to extract us from linear, progressive time with its normative life stages and cast us into a wormhole of backward and forward acceleration, jerky stops and starts, tedious intervals and abrupt endings. Some of us contend with the impairments of old age while still young; some of us are treated like children no matter how old we get. The medical

language of illness tries to reimpose the linear, speaking in terms of the chronic, the progressive, and the terminal, of relapses and stages. But we who occupy the bodies of crip time know that we are never linear, and we rage silently—or not so silently—at the calm straightforwardness of those who live in the sheltered space of normative time.

Crip time is therefore potentially revolutionary time: it stretches the edges of the sensible and makes new worlds possible against the oppressive structures of that press in on us. Like many others, I was furloughed for three months last year – a lucky coincidence as I would not have been able to continue working through the pain of a headache cycle. Humanity itself had become sick and we briefly entered a different kind of temporality governed by basic needs of food, hygiene, news feeds about covid, and new video communications like Zoom and Teams. Although capitalism eventually caught up, it was possible for a brief moment to imagine things differently.

After you and Nell left I picked up my partner from Ashton Gate Stadium where she’d just received her first vaccination. I imagined the vaccine coursing down her arm and up her neck, interacting with her blood and spreading out like a fire blanket over the last 15 months. Yet the fire continues to rage in India and Brazil, driven by vast economic inequities between the Global North and South. Amidst all the pain and suffering, the moon continues to rise and the

sewage works continue to turn and Nell keeps chewing on her frisbee. Your words: *Time has become rotten or worm eaten wood, the earth under me is full of trap-doors and the sense of being, which is life all that surrounds it and creates it, a thing taken and given irresponsibly and without warning as children snatching a toy. Sight, hearing, touch, consciousness, torn from one like a nest from a bird.*

As I'm writing, the sun is setting over the Somerset levels and I can hear birdsong. One of our cats has just eaten a fly.

I hope to see you again soon. Take care

x