

# Rebecca Ackroyd in conversation with Marta Orsola Sironi



Rebecca Ackroyd (1987, Cheltenham, UK) lives and works between Berlin and London. Ackroyd describes her practice as an “ongoing snowball,” a way of making through making in which elements of abstraction and figuration collide into a coherent but enigmatic language. The artist creates body-like sculptures, immersive installations, drawings, and paintings, reflecting on themes such as memory, psychoanalysis, the body, and fragmentation. Moving in-between time and space and the interstices of her own research, Ackroyd investigates the intertwined unfolding of personal and collective history and foundational aspects of human experience. On the occasion of the 60th International Art Exhibition – La Biennale di Venezia, Kestner Gesellschaft with the support of Peres Project presents the exhibition “Rebecca Ackroyd: Mirror Stage” held at Fondaco Marcello, curated by Attilia Fattori Franchini and part of the Collateral Events programme.

“In our lives, nothing is thought, everything is done”.  
Annie Ernaux, Shame

**MOS:** I would like to start with a basic question. Can you please describe your practice?

**RA:** I draw inspiration from a broader sense of culture like literature, film or general information and relate them with a more personal and individualised experience. For example, the title of my recent show, “Period Drama”, held at the Kestner Gesellschaft in Hannover, was inspired by the film genre. I was fascinated by the idea of setting something at one moment in the past and seeing how it could become romanticised or embody a feeling of nostalgia. The exhibition itself was a reflection on the more general concepts of time and body. I prefer to put myself in a position where I can simultaneously be present and detached from the work. On the one hand, every project reflects a particular point in my life and what I am thinking at that moment. On the other, I am always slightly removed from it. I have always been interested in these dynamics of intimacy and distance. I like the idea of being a viewer of myself and what I am making. I often start from a feeling rather than from a definitive idea. At the start, there is usually a moment when I do not know what that feeling is and where it is going. Mine is a process of making and thinking through making. I try to explore how I can be at the centre of something while not in control, not knowing where it’s coming from and where it’s going. My practice results from a continuous accumulation of content, of ideas and imagery picked up from anywhere really. It’s like an ongoing snowball, becoming bigger and bigger while I try to understand what’s happening. I think about many things simultaneously, and I am more interested in how complicated things are rather than trying to simplify them, I don’t mind if the process becomes a bit boggy.

**MOS:** Do you see your work as an ongoing process, or do you conceive series of works?

**RA:** I conceive series of works, but I see them as an ongoing conversation. I like to think about how they might all be showing together and how they would be in dialogue. Every project depends on the space I’m working in and on a particular idea. The show in Venice, for example, is a follow-up of the one in Hannover: the works have a direct visual connection, but the latest ones have taken a step forward.

**MOS:** Can you tell us more about your upcoming exhibition in Venice: ‘Rebecca Ackroyd: Mirror Stage’, Collateral Event of the 60th International Art Exhibition – La Biennale di Venezia, Curated by Attilia Fattori Franchini, presented by Kestner Gesellschaft, which is opening on the 20th of April at Fondaco Marcello?



*Residual glare II, from the series Singed Lids, 2019; sculpture, steel, epoxy resin, polyurethane resin, plaster, paraffin wax. 184 x 106 x 78 cm (72 x 42 x 31 in).  
Courtesy the Artist and Peres Projects.*

**RA:** The title “Mirror Stage” directly references the Lacanian idea of a toddler’s first encounter with themselves as a body in the mirror. The concept of fragmentation is fully present in my work and in making this show in the back of my mind was an idea of the self; concerning its division into the child and the adult and the attempt to marry these two ideas of who we were and who we have become. In another way, I was thinking about the fragmentation of time and experience. How the sculptures are shattered and encountered in different moments is linked to film and the displacement of images and experience. The show is at Fondaco Marcello, an old tobacco storage building on the Grand Canale built around the Sixteenth Century. To me, Venice is a very haunting city, the history is palpable when walking through the meandering streets. Moreover, it’s impossible not to think about water there. I wanted the idea of that fluidity and reflection to be present in the show. There are references to a sort of bathroom space with metallic and mirrored structures, I wanted the viewer to become another fragment in the works and be reflected into the room in a choreography of legs, arms and body parts.

**MOS:** Can we go deeper into this idea of fragmentation?

**RA:** It’s not really something I’ve consciously thought about, but more truly has gained significance through repetition. I’m interested in how close-ups partially reflect a bigger



*Shutter Speed, 2023. Installation View at Musée d'art contemporain de Lyon, France. Photographed by Blaise Adilon. Courtesy Musée d'art contemporain de Lyon and Peres Projects.*

whole that can’t be seen entirely - the drawings are always on torn pieces of paper - I see them as partial sentences where some are figurative and give a sense of the whole while others remain abstract. The sculptures are an attempt to lift a moment from life. For me, casting is a sort of photograph, a transient frame of a life still going on. I often work with my family so the idea of these limbs ageing or disappearing is something that is very prescient, there’s a sense of trying to cling onto to something that’s out of reach. This idea of loss also relates to names - or more specifically a maiden name. In previous works, I inserted my mum’s, Ironside, as a way to think about the erasure of a name through marriage and, subsequently, a part of a person’s history or past. I wanted to turn it into a physical object, a real presence in a room. More recently I’ve been considering the splicing of films stills to create a sequence or narrative. The sculptures I’m working on now are repetitions of one action, stretched and repeated until it almost disappears, pulling apart a throw away gesture. I think of them like words you repeat until they become abstract sounds. While preparing the show in Hannover, I was reading Annie Ernaux’s, “The Years”. In the book she describes many family photographs and how the portrayed moment disappeared, leaving a picture meaningless to anyone apart from the people in it or those who knew them. I love this idea of generic experience - at once relatable but also utterly meaningless.

**MOS:** Another masterpiece by Annie Ernaux comes to my mind: “Shame”, the story

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matic memory that echoes throughout her life. In the book, Ernaux analyses her past through a detached lens, dissecting and reassembling the text of the world surrounding her family and carrying an “ethnological” study of herself. The first step is to examine pictures and keepsakes, trying to recognise herself in the photos of that twelve-year-old girl. Then she compares them to archival copies of the 1952 Paris-Normandie newspaper to re-enter the “innocent unfolding day” she had known before the incident. Still, she can’t reconcile her memory of the past with its actual records. In “Shame”, the reader witnesses the parallel yet always intertwined unfolding of personal and collective history. A similar dynamic can also be found in your practice, for using family members’ casts, mixing personal references with collective images, and so on.

**RA:** What spoke to me in Annie Ernaux’s work is her way of collecting a life through diaries and memories, they are often banal everyday accounts of an ordinary life. However, when you put them all together, they create a historical





The Mulch, 2018. Installation View at Peres Projects, Berlin. Photographer: Matthias Kolb. Courtesy Peres Projects, Berlin.

document which made me think about the Diary of Samuel Pepys and how our knowledge of history can be informed by one person's viewpoint. I like historical fiction as a genre and the possibility of visualising a particular time through fiction. I started to think about this more while talking with my mum about her past, growing up in the UK post-war and being in London in the Sixties and Seventies. We started recording these conversations as non chronological events and when put together they created a disrupted narrative of a life that read almost as though it was from multiple people. One of the accounts we recorded was about her grandmother, who had hair that reached the floor, there were only a few snippets of information about her that had been passed through other family members and we have no idea of the accuracy of these accounts. This made me think about the romanticisation of a familial history and how the mythology of someone's family is a powerful tool to build a sense of identity or, in some people's cases, self-importance. I am interested in this kind of historical

recollection and in particular its link to psychotherapy and self-excitation. It's a process of understanding how memories lie to us and how we constantly mythologise our past or our perception of it. There is a distortion between 'what really happened' and our experience of it on an emotional level, how two people can go through the same experience and have totally different accounts of it.

**MOS:** Many of your installations are frozen footage of an unfolding drama. You try to capture the genesis of an event, its "visceral now", and the link between collective history and individual memory. You place yourself and your artwork in between, inhabiting the instant and resonating through memory. You aim to present a complex relationship between periods and the recurring ordeals and themes that persist across them. Please tell us how you consider this relationship and how you explore it.





*JUNE I*, 2018; sculpture - steel rebar, chicken wire, plaster, wax, synthetic hair, acrylic glass, 106 × 79 × 142 cm (42 × 31 × 56 in), (RA14722). Courtesy Peres Projects.

**RA:** We all are containers of memory and knowledge and are also very transient in our experiences and lives. I often think about life as a container leaving behind fragments of us. I suppose what I'll leave behind are my works: I obviously don't know what will happen to them but I think about how they would become a visual record and create a timeline of sorts. For my recent show in Hanover, I considered the displays and support structures museums use to piece together fragments of archeology. For instance, a rudimentary structure piecing together the limbs of a Greek statue. Fusing this as a template idea I used tree trunks, heavy Victorian furniture and pieces of wood taken from the museum's basement to build ad hoc sculptures for the cast resin body parts. I was also thinking about the materials' life cycle and how we imbue functions and meaning on it. I wanted them to feel alive, almost animated but they were also constructed from found objects, so retain a sense of an objects history or former ownership.

**MOS:** In your practice, you present the viewers with complex installations and body-like sculptures. Moreover, your drawings reveal fragmented body parts and symbols of scattered machinery. By isolating human details and presenting them as self-standing monuments at the core of your exhibitions, you transform them into abstract narrations, creating your own enigmatic yet coherent language. Can you tell us more about the theme of the body in your analysis and its role in creating narratives? How do you conceive the relationship between abstraction and figuration through the body and its anatomical details?



*Period Drama*, 2023. Installation view at Kestner Gesellschaft. Photographed by Volker Crone. Courtesy the Artist, Peres Projects, Berlin.

**RA:** It's not necessarily something I consciously think about, it's just part of the way I work. In relation to figuration and abstraction, there are moments when I am very direct in addressing a subject or idea and others when I want a work to be more nuanced and exist between familiarity and abstraction. I like to layer a lot of content into the works, which happens through making and collecting different objects or images that are part of an ever growing archive. I want the process to flow instead of being too prescriptive. As far as I am concerned, everything relates to being a body. Many paintings and drawings I make are abstract, anatomical or portray one body part, they are zoomed in. Some recent drawings reference hair as a way to talk about the self, life, growth, change, sensuality, dirt and loss. Some others are more abstract, with psychedelic spirals and turbines relating to an idea around time and Hitchcock's *Vertigo*. I like the relationship between the abstract elements in the drawings and the paintings, that can become more psychological. On the other hand, the sculptures are much more rooted in the present and the reality of being a body. This is why casting is so important to me. The figures become standing actors: they are a direct lift from time, from a moment of life that becomes fractured through how I make it.

**MOS:** Quoting Alexander Wilmschen in his curatorial text for "Period Drama": "[...] she treats the body as an 'open and fragile architecture', [...] Observed by hidden eyes [...] this structure appears as a sign of the fragility of human anatomy and architecture, revealing their mutual dependency". Can you please explain this relationship between body and architecture?

**RA:** When planning a show, I always think about the architecture the works will be shown in. My project for the Venice Biennale is related to how the venue retains a sense of time. I am interested in how history sits and positions itself in space. I've worked with mediums in previous exhibitions to talk about the invisible traces of bodies that inhabited a building, thinking about the idea of an unseen presence in a space. Venice has an eerie feeling, and when wandering through the empty streets in the early morning, you feel the history. It's that evocative emptiness I am interested in. Empty buildings retain a specific atmosphere as if we were living with history: something unsettling is always present. This is something I love about Italy: how cities have been built on and among their past, the ruins exist among the new builds.

**MOS:** Witnessing your exhibitions, fac-



*Period Drama*, 2023. Installation view at Kestner Gesellschaft. Photographed by Volker Crone. Courtesy the Artist, Peres Projects, Berlin.

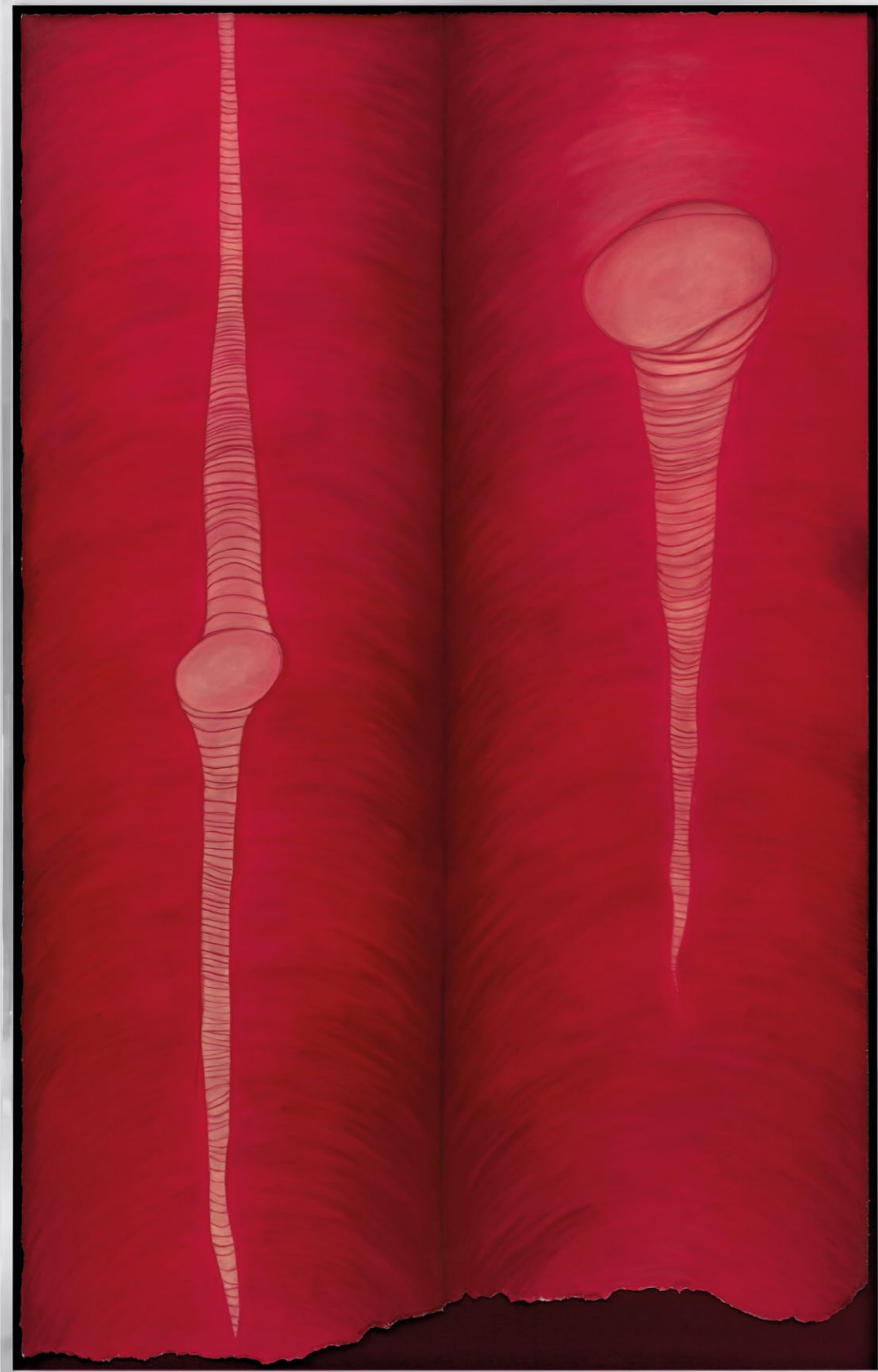
ing the concept of ruins and of being present in present times, seems like witnessing a sort of archaeology of nowadays. You take a picture of a moment as it is and blow it up. Eviscerate it. In your research, it is possible to perceive the approaches of both an archaeologist and a therapist, drawing or taking notes in a notebook, especially when you explore the idea of the subconscious or of time.

**RA:** I never wanted my work to be autobiographical. It's not about me, but it undoubtedly comes from me. It's like the symbol of the diary you mentioned: certainly, the person writing is implicitly inside it, but then the recording is generic in some ways. We all have a sort of generic experience of life, but that is what makes it so extraordinary. Hearing someone tell you their story of something mundane and ordinary is fascinating. Something I am keen on is the concept of storytelling.

**MOS:** Planning an exhibition is storytelling itself. You told me you work in a relationship with the space. My first question is: How important is the set design for you? How does scenography, memory and unconsciousness intertwine in your work? How do you proceed when you approach a particular venue? What is the dialogue you seek with it? Do you intend your installations to be site-specific?

**RA:** Scenography is really important to me, and the way I alter things referring to the space is something I usually decide pretty early in conceiving a show. Then, all the work evolves in relation to this. Depending on the space, I think



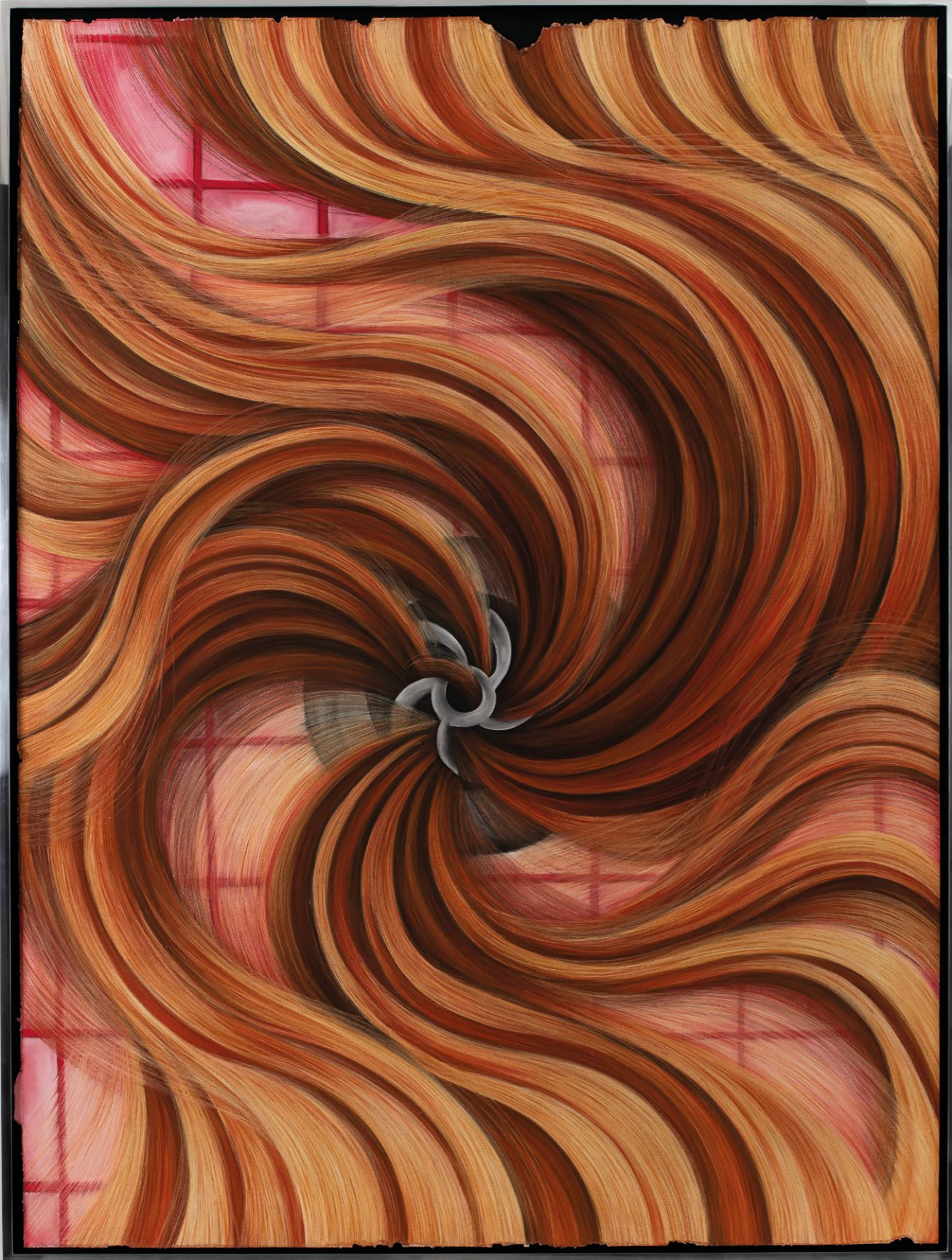


*World view*, 2020; drawing - gouache, soft pastel on Somerset satin paper, 241 × 152 cm (95 × 60 in); Framed Dimensions: 248 × 158 cm (98 × 62 in). Courtesy Peres Projects.



*1,000,000 eggs*, 2020; drawing - gouache, soft pastel on Somerset satin paper, 165 × 130 cm (65 × 51 in). Framed Dimensions: 173 × 136 cm (68 × 54 in). Courtesy Peres Projects.





*Rapid*, 2022; drawing, Gouache, soft pastel on Somerset satin paper 184 × 137 cm (73 × 54 in). Courtesy the Artist and Peres Projects.



*Empress VI*, 2023; painting - Oil on linen 250 × 250 cm (98 × 98 in). Courtesy the Artist and Peres Projects.

about something different in every exhibition. The works are site-specific in that sense but they also exist beyond that context as individual pieces. Maybe moment-specific is a more accurate way of describing it. With the show in Hannover, for example, I decided to place a different carpet in each space, which altered the mood of the exhibition. For the first floor, I chose a brown floral carpet, which, coming from a British perspective, had a particular meaning and set of references. It reminded me of a pub or the houses I've seen listed for sale online. It was a tool for speaking about ageing and setting a jarring backdrop for the sculptures to be installed on. On the other hand, the red carpet on the ground floor was intended to evoke an intense basement or dream space, I saw it as the belly of the exhibition. I am interested in this act of redefining the feel of a place through subtle interventions.

**MOS:** In your opinion, what is the viewer's role in engaging your exhibitions?

**RA:** I don't think about the viewer when making the works. I need to make them from a place where I don't really think that someone will see them. When I install an exhibition, I try to feel how the pieces feel in that space. I am so aware that my intentions are lost as soon as the show is seen by somebody else. I have to become able to lose control and allow other people to have their own experiences of what I have done. Once it's in the world, it is not mine anymore. In the new works I'm making for Venice, I'm thinking about how the viewer will be reflected in them and become a fragment within them. But I am not thinking about how the public will react or what they will feel. You can't describe someone else's experiences for them. They have to experience it themselves.