



Any Other Business

an exhibition by CHA X5 at Gasleak Mountain

Opening Friday 13th October

Runs until 29th October, open weekends and by appointment



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Pádraig Condrón (Gasleak Mountain) had a chat with Rohanne Udall and Paul Paschal (CHA X5) about the exhibition

Pád: Many people complain about working in offices or corporate environments in a way that's quite safe. It's always "Oh, I hate Mondays!", rather than "God, this job makes me depressed, literally depressed." The work in this exhibition feels like it steps over that boundary into something more messy.

Paul: A lot of this work is interested in those kinds of boundaries. The embroideries, *The Stewards*, are all portraits of people who hold roles of institutional office. As part of their job, they have agreed to have some image of themselves on a press release or their organisation's website, available for public scrutiny. We've taken these images, and used them to draw these portraits, without asking for their consent. It feels a bit perverse; we're testing the distant contact formed between us and them by these institutional structures.

Rohanne: As a work, *The Stewards* isn't holding these people accountable for anything. It's just saying that this exhibition has been somewhat dependent on the organisation this person works for. Our use of their image is a minor transgression, given how much power some of these individuals – like Michael Gove – hold, and how significantly their actions can affect us.

Paul: The tensions of public-private, and personal-professional, gets more complex when we consider that most of these Stewards hold positions that aren't public office, but are within organisations dependent on public funding. Or they're in organisations like Severn Trent, which are private companies that hold some public contract to offer some essential service.

Pád: You once described the fires as being "ossified gestures of piety". It makes these institutions sound religious.

Paul: There's an intensity to that religiosity – ritual and sacrifice – that might seem distant from contemporary workplaces. But someone giving years of their life to an organisation feels pretty hardcore.

Pád: I used to work at Boots. Staff would walk around with gold badges; you got a silver badge for 15 years, and a gold one for 20 years. You might not have done it for a badge, but you would still wear the badge.

Rohanne: In the arts, people often carry a complex sense of distance or proximity. Even if you're part of an institution you can see yourself outside of it, or working against it. But if you give 20 years of your life to something – even if you're critical of it – it can't not matter to you.

I see the fires, *Thoughts and Prayers*, as the efforts of these individuals. So many people feel so constrained by the organisations in which they work, but they are still trying to do something, or make some small change. These efforts might be more or less visible, or have more or less impact, but here the many flames are anonymous and at the same scale. The title gives a slightly critical edge to how valuable these people's sentiments might be – but it seems important to us that in their roles, these people still care. The monoprints of *Burn Out* emphasise the beauty of their efforts, even if they make us wonder what might be left of them after.

Paul: I'm curious about how people in these jobs deal with their sense of responsibility. Some people go so far beyond their job description. What is enough for us to live with ourselves, and for us to live with each other?

Pád: How does this relate to the drawings on glass?

Rohanne: These drawings show groups of people, isolated or in contact, in different states of coherence or mess. They're framed by this harsh title, *Pull Yourself Together*. How much can we ask of people in these roles to hold themselves together, in order to do the things we require of them?

This work always reminds us of being in offices or meetings when someone bursts into tears. Or ourselves bursting into tears. Or people who are not actually crying, but are always so close to it, and on the verge of a nervous breakdown. Many arts organisations strongly invite emotion to be present in the workplace; we are encouraged to bring our 'full selves'. But what parts of ourselves? And to what degree? How do our institutions require us to make ourselves available to, or border ourselves off from, one another?

Paul: *Self Possessed* is the flip side of this. What is at risk when someone holds their shit together too tightly, and can articulate and stick to all these perfect boundaries? To us, this figure feels demonic.

In contrast, *Public Intimacies* plunge us into the messiness of contact. The posters list all these different collisions between these two bodies. Some are very banal, and others are violent or sexual. It becomes tricky to establish the line between what might be 'appropriate' or not.

Rohanne: Again, this might be especially the case in the arts, where there is often a very strong expectation of friendliness.

Paul: We're in an interesting moment, post-#MeToo, that often idealises us giving or withholding our consent in advance of our encounters. But I suspect there is always a slipperiness and uncertainty at play in any kind of social contact. Rather than trying to erase that uncertainty, I'm interested in feminist approaches to acknowledging, dealing with, and living with that mess.

Pád: It was interesting for us at Gasleak to think about which Stewards were relevant to us. We realised how few institutions we feel connected to, or rely upon, which is partly out of choice, but partly due to circumstance.

Paul: Is that a symptom of austerity? Our expectations of support have been so whittled down. Should Gasleak expect to receive leadership or support from, for example, the new director of Nottingham Contemporary? Is this person partly responsible for the visual arts community across the city, or should they only be looking after their own organisation?

There are also figures from different kinds of organisations among the Stewards, including non-professionalised groups like Nottinghamshire Pride. Can we value these roles and structures of support alongside more formalised institutions?

Rohanne: I think the wreath can act as a metaphor for how individuals are drawn into these structures, which somehow hold themselves together despite the fact that every individual element is actually pushing away to the outside. The title, *Things Fall Apart*, comes from a poem by W. B. Yeats, that was then used as a title by the novelist Chinua Achebe. It speaks to the colonial and managerial anxieties of things falling into chaos.

Paul: Many conversations within institutional critique can quickly blame people working in institutions. This project tries to offer a more compassionate address, that can identify some of those pressures and tensions of these roles.

Pád: I do think this exhibition is part of a wider interest currently in institutional critique. Gasleak is not an institution; and so rather than hinting at any internal critique, I think this exhibition encourages visitors to think about how the work relates to their own experiences of working in organisations – within or beyond the arts.