Eothen Stearn

Talbot Rice Residents



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Artist Intro

Eothen Stearn uses her multi-disciplinary practice to question and confront existing structures of power – both religious and political – particularly when this control impacts upon private spaces and personal liberties.

Stearn often begins the process of making work with writing, before it develops and finds form as performance, textiles, sculpture, sounds or radio plays. She evolves her thought process through making, and doing, allowing her varied media to coexist, to riff and feed off each other. The works are often driven by autobiographical experience, and fueled by imagination with Stearn taking a diaristic approach in creating work that is intimately personal and confessional.

Stearn explores the politics of the everyday from a feminist and queer perspective. The policing of love and the body are of specific importance, in particular the historical suppression and contemporary discourse around the social liberties and reproductive rights of women, non-binary, trans and queer peoples. She often incorporates craft processes in her work. Citing the history and politics of traditional female labour practice, as well as the social and collective histories intrinsic in handmade production methods. Stearn draws upon historic stories and icons, religious figures and spiritual symbols to build a vocabulary of resistance within her work. Coupled with the use of language and tropes of science fiction, she looks to both the past and the future to reflect upon the present.

Stearn's outcomes regularly take the form of performances in the public sphere. In addition to her art practice she is a musician, playing and performing with several bands. The directness of this action and by placing her own body and voice at the centre of the work lends it an immediacy that is integral to the power of the message. Combined with the other diverse elements of her practice it creates a potent, multi-faceted, ever-evolving body of work.



Midsummer, 2021.
Photo courtesy Pádraic E. Moore

A more communal, transcendental emotion

Pádraic E. Moore, 2021

At the time of writing footage is circulating widely across the internet of the shooting of a white stag by police in an industrial estate on the outskirts of Liverpool. The shooting occurred days ago, after motorists reported the animal wandering on the verges of a motorway. This is one of many occurrences in recent months that seem loaded with ominous symbolism. I've always been somewhat prone to apophenia, but this tendency has been heightened by plague-induced anxiety. Now I see hidden messages everywhere; clues that might offer information pertaining to our collective fate. In Celtic mythology the appearance of a white stag indicates the thinning of boundaries between our world and the spirit realm. Apprehending such a creature was believed to presage a particularly momentous event or period of great change.

I thought of Eothen Stearn when reading the reports of this shooting. I imagined she would find the symbolism of the event as poignant and compelling as I do - for she is drawn to the allegorical and archetypal. Stearn uses elements from folklore and mythology as a source in her work; episodes and entities are selected and repurposed so that they resonate with the specifics of our present moment. This is exemplified by her recent audio piece *Sentient* (2020) a radio sound work commissioned by Radiophrenia, Glasgow. In this audio piece a narrative unfolds; a twenty-first-century jogger encounters ancient entities on her daily exercise outing to the local burial mound. Using music and sound, Stearn's monologue merges ancient evocations with the now time. The piece evokes a particularly memorable scene from Virginia Woolf's

Mrs Dalloway (1925) in which she describes an old woman singing "an ancient song" opposite Regent's Park tube station. The narrator muses that no matter what happens in the world, this old woman will still be there in "ten million years," because her song has soaked "through the knotted roots of infinite ages".

In recent months Stearn has been developing new work around Boccaccio's *De Claris Mulieribus (Concerning Famous Women)* dating from 1361-2. Boccaccio's book is essentially a compilation of biographies of historically important women presented alongside women from mythology such as Eve and Juno. The book is an apposite source for Stearn, not least since its form resonates with her own approach; weaving together seemingly disparate content with woodcuts. Boccaccio's medievalism resonates with the contemporary moment, in which a resurgence of various social phenomena echo those of the Middle Ages.

Stearn and I first met in 2016 at an event entitled Ectoplasm that I organised at 1646, a project space in Den Haag. Conceived as a rumination on the phantasmagoric fluid once thought to bridge material and immaterial worlds, Ectoplasm involved live performances and sculptural interventions, which were activated over the course of the evening. One of the subjects explored was how historically, ectoplasmic phenomena were produced as part of theatrical and performative occurrences. This was an auspicious situation for Stearn and I to converge, for we have both remained interested in many of the ideas touched upon that night and continue to draw upon them in various ways. An idea or strategy of particular importance to us both is that of channelling, of surrendered authorship so that the body becomes a vessel; of inviting in what ostensibly appear to be external authors or actors.

In recent years Stearn has been adopting tropes from spiritualism such as the séance, and using it as a framing device that permits her to collate together content of different registers for public events. This format also creates a sense of unity from diverse contributors and to some extent removes hierarchies and distinctions from whatever they are contributing to these semi-improvised happenings.

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Artist research, woodcut illustrations from Giovanni Boccaccio, *De Mulieribus Claris,* 1487. Courtesy Centre for Research Collections, University of Edinburgh.

In a performative lecture entitled Sheela Na Gig that took part at the Proefpark de Punt in Rotterdam in 2017, Stearn used images and music to weave together subjects including local mythology, the supernatural, "the body as a prism for new modes of thinking", Denis Diderot, Jean Genet, vagina loquens folklore and experimental 1970s porn. More recent events such as the "séance" at CCA Glasgow, have been influenced by the legacy of Hildegard von Bingen and again reveal Stearn's interest in the polyphonous potential of the group.

A persistent aspect of Stearn's work is the creation of moments of intimacy on the edges of the artworld. Stearn recuperates an attitude of improvisatory creativity where atomised individualism is dissolved via activities or atmospheres that bring about temporary collectivity. For over a decade Stearn has been initiating events and workshops in which she assumes the role of guide or team leader. An early instance of this was Sunset Sheerness from 2007 in which she "recruited" 15 strangers via now defunct social network sites and brought them on a trip to watch the sunset at Dungeness in Kent. Documentation of the event shows a motley crew bathed in twilight, connected by a shared experience of something at once both quotidian and profound.

When Stearn and I met online last spring a subject to which our conversation repeatedly returned was the impact that confinement and the reduction of physical social encounters was having upon us. Attempts to generate some sense of togetherness via online conduits had ceased to work and online substitutes had begun to make the feelings of isolation worse. Stearn's interest in sociability and collectivity is one of the factors that has led her interest to shift toward making music recently – collaborating with bands Difficult, 2PLY and Nightshift, the latter of whose debut album *Zoë* was released in December of 2020. A factor motivating Stearn's movement into making live recordings for dissemination is the desire to have experiences with fellow artists and audiences that are less restricted by the structures that have emerged around visual art, underscoring the veracity of the assertion Dan Graham makes in his 1984 video essay, *Rock My Religion* that "Music expresses a more communal transcendental emotion which art now denies."

A key element of Stearn's output is the production of potentially functional art objects which look as though they are made for use in the domestic sphere. For several years she has produced ceramic Janus heads, which bear more than a passing resemblance to the artist herself. The form of these evokes that of Bellarmine jugs or "witch bottles" that were once widely used for protective, talismanic purposes. Stearn's notes on these objects is instructive, providing an insight into her sense of affinity with Janus, the bearded or beardless god of gateways, time, thresholds and endings.

I chose to invoke the spirit of doorways, beginnings and transitions, at times abstract, concrete, sacred and profane. I fashioned Janus, sculpted my own double-faced vessels that could talk about theatre, masks, drag and sci-fi. I queered Janus, doused him in my glazes and fantasies, giving an alchemical make up. All varying in their colour and style, with drippy, hi-gloss glaze, crying, gushing watery tears, hollowed out, some containing candles, others containing plants. These ventriloquist vessels are adjacent bodies, relations, relatives, lovers or strangers within proximity.



Janus Head series, 2017-ongoing.
Ceramic, dimensions variable.

Stearn is interested in pointing to the hierarchies between different artforms but also embracing disciplines associated with craft. This is exemplified in another ongoing series of alluring textile works that she has been producing over the past few years that are a hybrid of tapestry and quilt. These objects are deeply coded, carrying connotations of comfort, warmth and safety but also community, resistance and protest. An earlier tapestry from the series (entitled *Preciado Picnic*) features an interlocking circle motif adapted from a traditional wedding band quilting pattern, aiming to add another layer to the structure in which contents rest. This work is embellished with a selection of elements: embroideries of X chromosomes, sperm, a lesbian labrys (a double-bladed battleaxe), trans symbolism, symbols representing sex stains, DNA, food (an aubergine), toothbrushes, a tea bag, marijuana. A more recent tapestry entitled *Glyph Picnic*, was hung like a heraldic banner or a welcoming flag at an exhibition in France last year at La Maison Populaire, entitled *NO NO DESIRE DESIRE, La clinique du queer*. This project sought to address some of the implications of spaces accessed by communities of people identifying as queer being closed during the first waves of the pandemic.

During our conversations late last spring Stearn sent me an image of one of these tapestries hanging in her back garden in Glasgow. The image evoked another I've been looking at of late, a photograph of artist Madge Gill (1882-1961) in her back garden, taken in the 1940s. In the 1920s Gill began communicating with her spirit guide Myrninerest. Contact with the entity continued without interruption throughout the rest of her life and resulted in the generation of a variety of countless drawings, writings, knitting, crochet-work and piano-playing. Stearn may not be a spirit medium, but she does seek to channel the impetus of her antecedents, tapping into the essence of their creative energies. And like the work of Gill, her work takes any number of forms that merge with other areas of life. Moreover, Stearn is one of a legion of artists working today who – out of necessity – has devised idiosyncratic vocabularies and methodologies that borrow much from mystical traditions. Stearn's art is concerned with consciousness-raising but also with

carving out and defending those moments and sites where communality and tenderness can flourish. The apparatus used by Stearn often appears jerry-built and improvisational and yet it is reinforced by a silent, elegant strength. In a world where a techno-rational objectivity dominates such moments and sites feel more important than ever.



Glyph Picnic, 2020. Textile (embroidered detail).
Courtesy Gallery Maison Populaire, Montreuil, France.
Photo: Simon.e Thiébaut.


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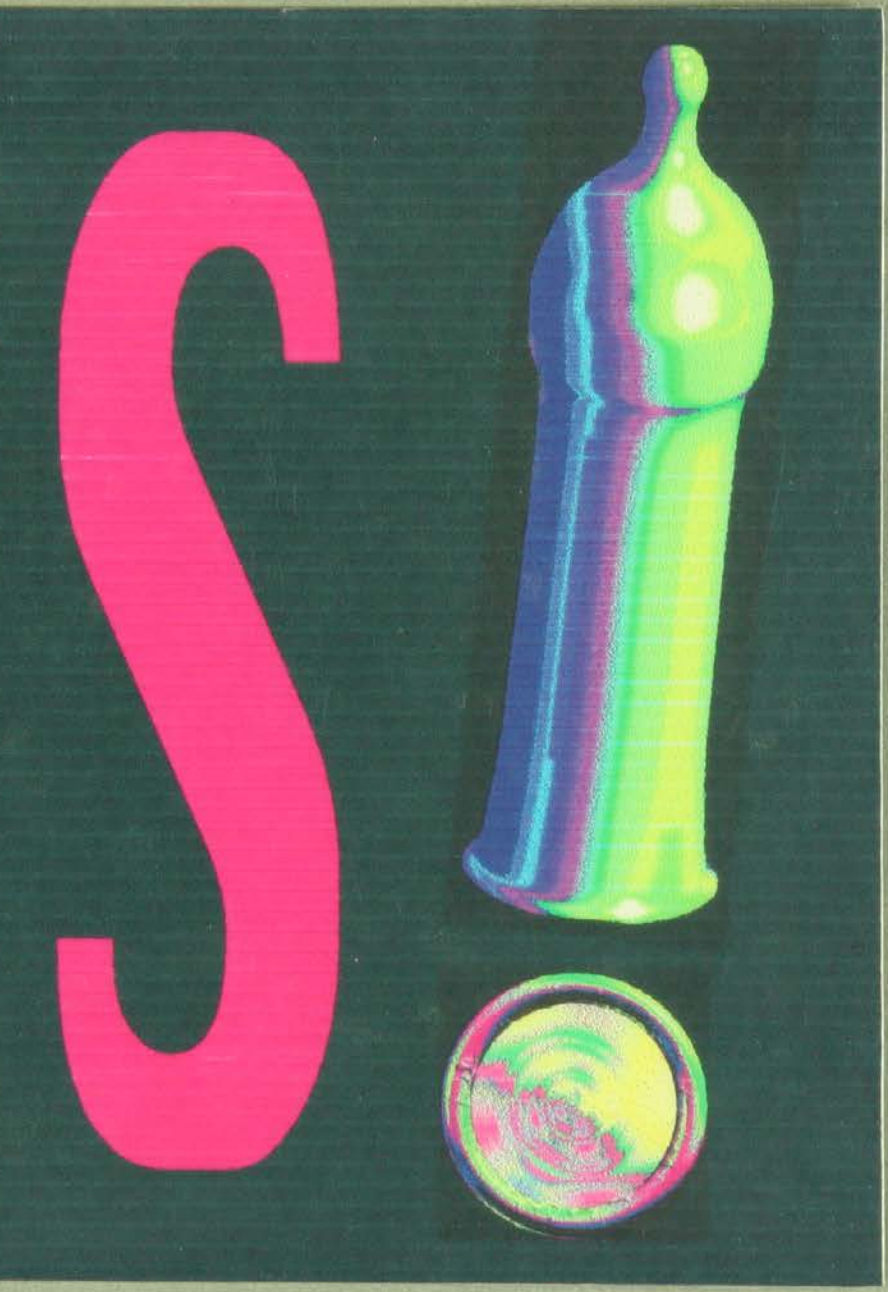

YES! Postcard.
Courtesy Lothian Health Services Archive, University of Edinburgh.



alternative
EDINBURGH
Edinburgh Lesbian, Gay & Bisexual Centre

1 60 Broughton Street 1

shops

West & Wilde Bookshop
25a Dundas Street
0131 556 0079
2

Drondale Gay Shop
60 Broughton Street
0131 556 1471
3

cafe bars

Blue Moon Cafe
36 Broughton Street
0131 557 0911
4

Cafe Kudos
22 Greenside Place
0131 556 4349
5

Eat Out Cafe
60 Broughton Street
0131 556 0152
6

Over the Rainbow
32 c Broughton Street
0131 557 8969
7

club bars

CC Blooms
23 Greenside Place
0131 556 9331
8

French Connection
Rose Street Lane North
0131 225 7651
9

Picardy's / LADS
2 Picardy Place
0131 556 5414
10

Route 66
66 Baxter Street
0131 556 5091
11

The Newtown Bar / Intense
26b Dublin Street
0131 538 7775
12 12

saunas

No. 18 Gay Sauna
18 Albert Place
0131 553 3222
13 13

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Information and advice

Bisexual Phoneline 0131 557 3620
A helpline available on Thuredays, 7.30pm - 9.00pm.

Lothian Gay & Lesbian Switchboard 0131 556 4049
Help, information, support and befriending. Evenings 7.30pm - 10.00pm.

Body Positive (Lothian) 0131 652 0754
Self-Help & Self-Care for those affected by/living with HIV/AIDS.

Milestone House 0131 441 6989
Purpose built hospice for positive people.

Gay Men's Health 0131 229 5995
Support services, training and HIV prevention activities.

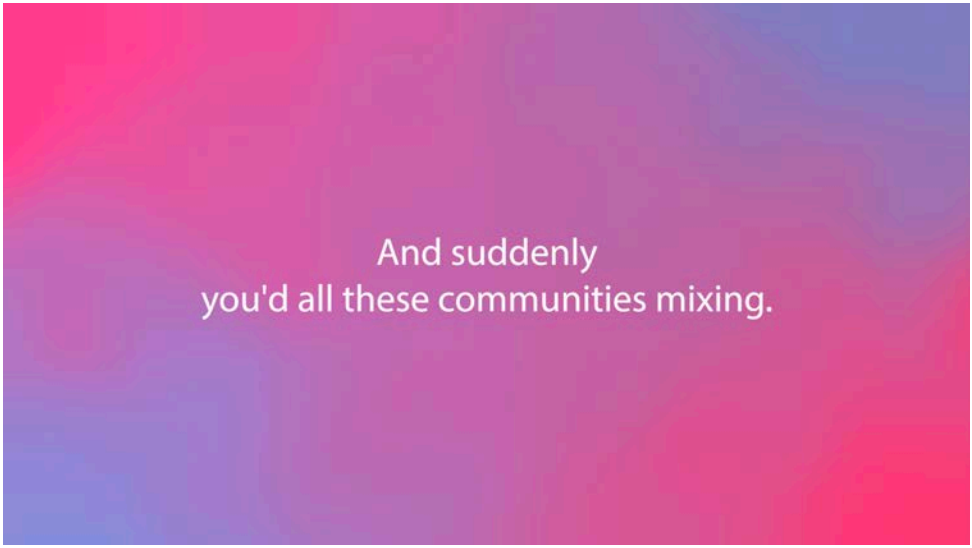
Scot - PEP 0131 555 4850
Self-Help Group for male and female prostitutes.

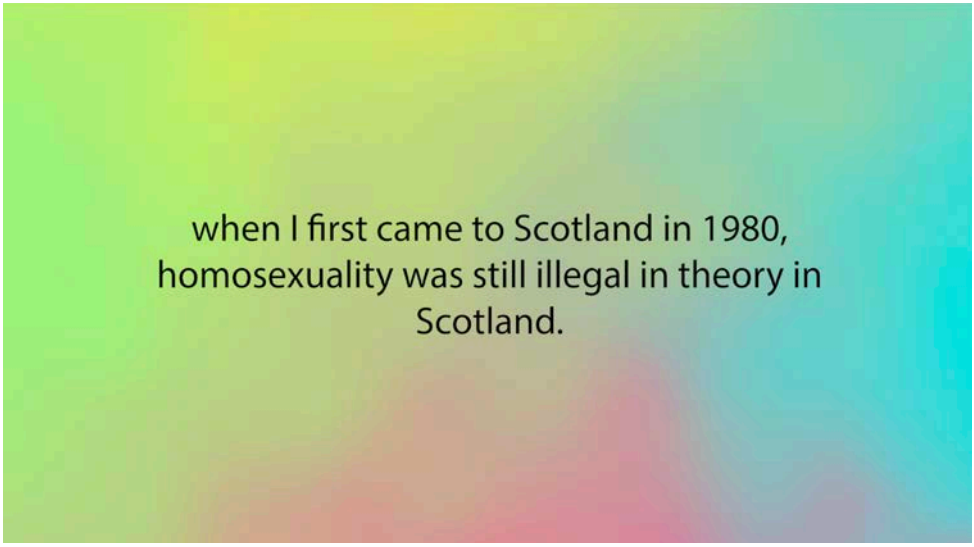
GUM Clinic 0131 536 2103
Diagnosis and treatment for sexually transmitted diseases.

SOLAS 0131 661 0982
A centre for support and information. For anybody living with HIV.

Harm Reduction Team 0131 229 5686
Free condoms. Advice, support and outreach work.
C Card available.

Stonewall Youth Project 0131 556 4040
A gay, lesbian and bisexual youth project for the under 26s.
Phoneline on Tuesdays, 7.30pm - 9.00pm.





Warp & weft: *remembering Edinburgh's HIV/AIDS histories*, 2022.
Digital video (stills).

Opposite:
Alternative Edinburgh leaflet, produced by The Gay Men's Service Providers Group, 1990s.
Courtesy Lothian Health Services Archive, University of Edinburgh.



Preciado Picnic, 2017.
Textile wall hanging (detail).

Preciado Picnic

Stuart Fallon, 2020

Eothen Stearn's *Preciado Picnic* is an ongoing series of fabric works that question traditional forms of homebuilding and community creation from a queer perspective. They blend the personal and the political, pointing towards an alternative way of being, and prompt a discussion around new models of kinship and domestic co-habitation.

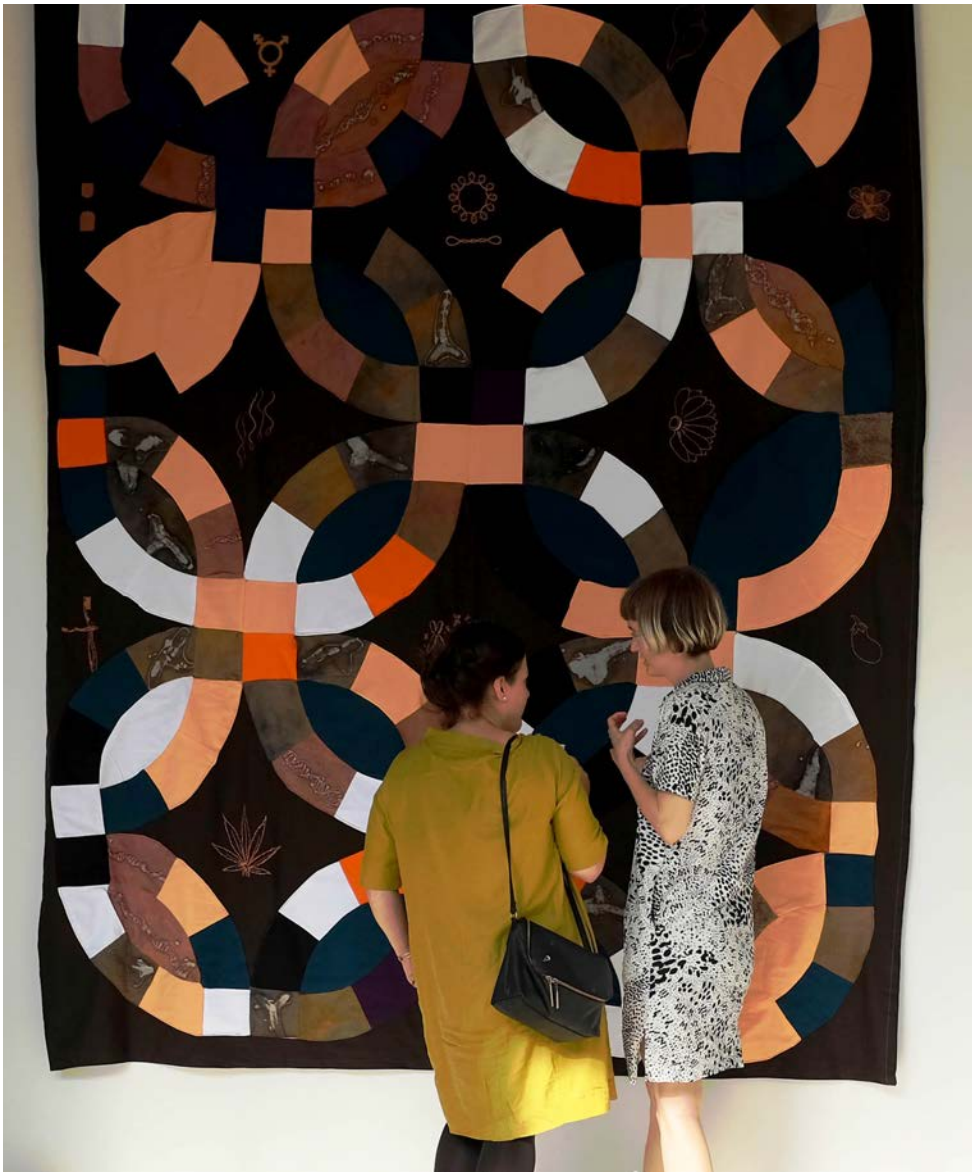
Stearn's series is inspired by the research and writing of philosopher and curator Paul B. Preciado, in particular his "body essay" *Testo Junkie*. In the text Preciado challenges prescribed gender norms and explores the role that pharmaceuticals play in the politics of identity and reproduction. Stearn sees her work as a fictional backdrop for an imagined meeting with Preciado – a convivial site where the ideas prompted by the text can be openly extrapolated and debated.

Using found off-cuts of material, embellished with intricately sewn icons, Stearn has designed a complex platform for this hypothetical meeting. Paths of bright and bodily colours weave in and out of one another, like vibrant DNA strands with undetermined coding that overlap and occasionally interlock into circular forms. These rings, resembling traditional wedding bands, are punctuated by a series of stitched symbols of female or queer identities; from X chromosomes and trans-positive icons, to the lesbian labrys, a battleaxe dated to ancient Minoan culture representing the strength and independence of women. Stearn has interspersed these motifs with her own emblems of shared living; a pair of toothbrushes, used teabags, foodstuffs and organic stains – all working to highlight the mundane universality of domestic cohabitation and the traces of

aligned personal cycles. All together they form a sort of labyrinthine board game, full of incomplete paths and multiple routes to take. The icons become playing pieces or hieroglyphic runes to collect and decipher along the way. Yet what is proposed is unfamiliar to any traditional game; the end points are manifold, and the overall rules are yet to be defined.

Whilst some of Stearn's paths form into bands, tokens of orthodox unity, others remain incomplete and wild, straying off the end of the fabric's edge. These wayward roads suggest alternative outcomes, refusals to adhere, offering different directions within the politics of partnership. They question whether equality in the form of marriage is really what is desired. Or should the goal be something different – something liberated from familiar heteronormative symbols and structures. Stearn rejects an essentialist view of a traditional domestic composition, which is reinforced both socially as the accepted norm and formally by the state, through rewarding conformity with specific tax-credits and incentives. Her work highlights this inequity whilst championing kithship, saluting the value of an alternate mode of domestic alliance, inherent within a queer or collective unit.

Preciado Picnic is an act of personal activism with Stearn literally sewing her colours to the mast. The results are proud, celebratory immortalisations of a movement that pay homage to a multitude of artists and activists over generations that have used quilting and fabric as catalysts for community building and to convey their potent messages of empowerment and memorial. In describing the finished works as "tapestries, wall-hangings and blankets", Stearn offers them as both storytelling devices and decorative items, as well as comforters – providers of warmth, safety and security. In a fitting act of domestic affirmation, the original work in the series currently hangs as curtains in Stearn's own living room. As an everyday feature in the private interior space they form a solicitous shield for the life inside, whilst their message is allowed to persist and resonate, firmly embedded within the fundamental fabric of home.



Preciado Picnic, 2017.
Textile wall hanging. Photos: Erika Roux.

Biography

Eothen Stearn (born 1987, UK), lives and works in Glasgow. She has an MA from The Piet Zwart Institute, Rotterdam and a BA from Goldsmiths University, London and attended the UK art educational protest The School of the Damned. She has performed at UK festivals RADIOPHRENIA, SUPERNORMAL, BUZZCUT Double Thrills and at Jupiter Artland.

She has also exhibited internationally at Maison Populaire, Montreuil, France in the exhibition, *La clinique du queer*. Recent residencies include: Triangle France - Astérides in Marseille, Creative LAB in Glasgow and Scottish Sculpture Workshop in Lumsden, Aberdeenshire.

In conjunction with her art practice, Eo plays in bands NIGHTSHIFT and 2Ply (Glasgow) and Difficult (based in the Netherlands). NIGHTSHIFT are signed with the Chicago record label, Trouble in Mind. Difficult have performed at multiple arts venues in Holland notably, Rotterdam Schouwburg and WORM, Rotterdam, TAC, Eindhoven and for Le Mini Guess Who Festival, Utrecht.

Talbot Rice Residents

Talbot Rice Residents is a two-year programme within the unique context of Talbot Rice Gallery, Edinburgh College of Art and the University of Edinburgh.

A part of the Freelands Artist Programme, Talbot Rice Residents provides time and support for emerging, or re-emerging artists based anywhere in Scotland. It is supported by Edinburgh College of Art, where the Residents have a studio and access to facilities. Residents also receive year-round curatorial and technical support from the Talbot Rice team, as well as access to workshops, libraries and collections, and contact with the vast academic community within the University of Edinburgh. In addition to an annual artist fee, Residents receive an individual budget for production and travel, and meet at key points in the programme for masterclasses and workshops delivered by invited guests. The programme also includes national and international research trips, new commissioned writing and culminates with exhibitions in Edinburgh and London.

Freelands Artist Programme

The Freelands Artist Programme is a landmark initiative to support emerging artists across the UK launched in 2018 by Freelands Foundation. The programme nurtures emerging artists' practices by fostering long-term relationships and collaborations with arts organisations and bolstering regional arts ecosystems.

In its first five-year phase, 80 artists have undertaken the programme across four partner organisations – g39, Cardiff, PS^2, Belfast, Site Gallery, Sheffield and Talbot Rice Gallery.

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