

A photograph of a man sitting on a sandy beach, seen from behind, looking out at the ocean under a blue sky with light clouds. The man is shirtless and has short dark hair. The beach is wide and sandy, with gentle waves lapping at the shore. In the distance, a dark structure, possibly a lighthouse or marker, is visible on the horizon.

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BLACKBIRDS LOOK  
AT A MAN**

**Fiona MacDonald  
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## INTRODUCTION

Taking its title from the poem 'Thirteen Blackbirds Look at a Man' by RS Thomas, Thirteen Blackbirds Look at a Man features four artists concerned with how modern urban existence has separated us from the natural world: socially, spiritually and culturally. What was once seen as magical is now understood in rational ways. The artists look at the gaps in our collective knowledge and personal experience and present imagined symbolic encounters with a dark humour, willing us to believe in what they tell us.

Eluding the day-to-day, the works explore the realm of fiction and folklore and linger there, rather than backing into explanation or analysis. The story gradually unfolds through snippets of narrative, revealing ideas of visual mysticism or occult import. The characters depicted by individual works may have originally been sourced from real life, biblical stories, Greek myths or German fairytales, but their storytelling has been turned sideways in the making.

The works accumulate ideas and sensibilities about the world, with some alluding to a quasi-religious or spiritual dimension. The effortful and personalised act of crafting - be it in carving, moving image, painting, modelling or embroidery - connect to the tradition of objects and images across continents: in high religion and low vernacular, of the talisman, the fetish object, the relic and the lucky charm.

**Fiona MacDonald** draws on the cultural rules of fairy tale and the imagination. The traditional hierarchy between human, animal and plant dissolves, to explore ideas around uncertainty, hybridity and interdependence. She is interested in the material, corporeal and relational aspects of visual art practice, working primarily in response to place and to interaction with the nonhuman. Her approaches include painting, sculpture, video and photography, sometimes combined in assemblages or loose groups that echo the disparate scale and materiality of the natural world. The resulting works produce moments of temporal and affective slippage between the prosaic and the fabulous.

**Cathie Pilkington's** sculptural practice combines the interrelated and antagonistic worlds of fine art and craft. For this exhibition Pilkington is showing a collection of sculptural tableaux and other objects built into a wooden structure that acts like, and refers to, a domestic shelving system or room divider. The deliberate confusion of made and found objects is exacerbated by their presentation, which explores a space somewhere between storage and display.

**Annie Whiles** works with art as a suspect activity. She is involved in a relationship with a representational language that aims to form a tension between what we might know intuitively and how we might conduct ourselves as contemporary artists and audiences. She works closely with pictorial devices, to allow for a humorous exchange between the quotidian and the miraculous, between soviet realism and surrealism. She is interested in who magic belongs to, as a kind of cultural lost property.

**Sean Ashton's** short story 'The Second Room' is a tale about a sect of men who upheld a strange existential tradition. Derived from Bishop Berkeley's maxim 'to be is to be perceived', Ashton's account of their ocular obsessions provides a fictional backdrop to the ritualistic concerns of Fiona, Cathie and Annie's works.

Sean is a liar based in London. Recent lies include 'Mr Heggarty Goes Down', for Collapse Vol. VIII, a story about an academic who uses his body to test out his philosophy of radical contingency; and 'The Portrait of Cary Grant', a satire on a collector of celebrity artworks, commissioned by the Jerwood Foundation to accompany the painting show Suspicion, both 2014. In 2007 he published a book of lies, 'Sunsets and Dogshits' (Alma Books), a collection of reviews of apocryphal artworks, books, sporting events and other cultural phenomena. He also lies regularly for Art Review, a magazine devoted to showcasing the visual lies of contemporary artists.

## THE SECOND ROOM

Am I cold, am I hot? Am I close, am I far? Am I up, am I down? Is this the first floor or the second? The third or the fourth? The tenth or the twelfth? The nineteenth or the twentieth? Is this the same room as yesterday? The same one as last week? Are the contents of the room the same as before? The same as they have always been? The same as they were on that first day?

Thirty years have passed since then. There were six of us, as I recall: three novices and our guide, plus two beholders. Obviously, the two beholders were already in the room. As we entered, our guide, or 'relief' beholder, as he is properly called, walked over to the first, or 'lead' beholder, as he is officially known, and stood next to him, facing the pedestal at the centre of the room. This, he announced, was called 'coming alongside'. And in fact he had initiated this manoeuvre with a question: 'Permission to come alongside?' Once the relief beholder had come alongside the lead beholder, he asked him whether he was ready to stand down. The lead beholder said that he was. The relief beholder then began staring at the object on the pedestal. The lead beholder, who was himself still staring at the object, then asked the second 'auxiliary' beholder — stationed at two o'clock to the lead beholder — to verify that the relief beholder was staring at the object. The auxiliary beholder confirmed that he was. The lead beholder now stood down. The relief beholder was thus promoted to the rank of auxiliary beholder, while the auxiliary beholder became the lead beholder.

The off-duty beholder was now free to begin our instruction. What we had just witnessed, he said, was a ritual that had taken place every day for the last two hundred years. He reminded us of the cardinal rules: we were not to approach the object; we were not to speak about the object; we were not to focus on a specific part of the object, but to regard it in its entirety. This last feat, he warned us, would be trickier than we imagined. The object comprises many different parts, many different materials, and it is only natural that beholders should come to favour certain features over others during their long careers. Resisting this temptation was, he assured us, the most difficult aspect of the job. It would simply not do to focus only on its metal or wooden elements, to fixate on the stone slab at its base at the expense of its upper parts; our gaze should travel all over the object, circulating continuously from top to bottom. He would be able to tell if we weren't doing it right simply by looking at our faces.

Then we were left to it, working in threesomes, doing two-minute shifts in order to get the hang of the changeover. The official beholders, meanwhile, just carried on as normal. We were told to ignore them — to behave as though we were the official beholders.

One of the novices asked why it was necessary to conduct training here, in the presence of the actual object. Why not use a stand-in, a substitute object? The answer to this was simple, said the instructor: so that when we began our observations proper we would not be cowed by the aura of an object that had been continuously perceived since its creation. He reiterated that *at no point in its existence had the object on the pedestal gone unobserved*. It was a staggering achievement. A simple achievement, perhaps, but a staggering one all the same, and entirely dependent on the optical tenacity of a select band of men. The question was, were we ready to take our places alongside these men?

In his opinion we were not. Were we aware that we had blinked on several occasions during our two-minute vigils? And that blinking was allowed only with the verbal approval of the other beholder? That before blinking, the blinker had to warn his partner, and also indicate when he had finished blinking, so that the other beholder knew it was safe for *him* to blink, if he needed to? We practiced blinking for over an hour that afternoon, till there was a knock at the door and another group of novices came in. There were fifty in total that day, and fifty more, every day, for a month.

There is little to say of my subsequent apprenticeship: all I had to do was master the procedure described above. My vigils were increased by five minutes per day until I had performed six months of four-hour shifts. After a further six months' probation I was pronounced fit for duty.

The room containing the object is slung deep underground and reached by means of a lift. The descent takes five minutes. On emerging from the lift, it is only possible to turn left, into a vestibule with a single door at the end. Here we must knock and wait for admittance. It may surprise you to learn that, in addition to the object, there are several other things in the room. You would think it harder to concentrate with all this other stuff, but the opposite is the case: the wheelbarrow, the snowshoe, the bottle rack, the armchair, the typewriter, the aquarium and the banjo tend to sharpen your focus. There is also a miniature hot-air balloon hanging from the ceiling, a pile of sand in the corner and a grandfather clock by the door, marking every second of your shift. On the face of it, none of these objects has anything to do with the one

on the pedestal. But apparently it is necessary to have a number of objects that have *not* been perceived for the entirety of their existence, in order to remind us of the uniqueness of the one that has. Of course, the fundamental difference between these items and the central enigma is that the materials used to make the object were watched over by teams of beholders even as they were shaped and assembled into their current form. Thus, the object has been continuously perceived, not just in its final state, but at every stage of its production.

When it was first installed, it was deemed necessary to have beholders on all sides of the object, so that no part of it was left unobserved. During the first decade, when it was watched over from every angle by upwards of twenty men, the changeovers had been somewhat convoluted affairs, with beholders coming and going every few minutes. It is easy to laugh, now, at the methods of those early pioneers, but we must try to view them within the mindset of that period. The thinking behind their 'panoptic' approach was straightforward: it is all very well to observe an object from one angle, to perceive, say, the rotundity of an orange from a single viewpoint; but how do we know for sure that its rotundity continues on the unobserved side, unless we station a man there to affirm that it is so?

Panoptic observation required that beholders be stationed, not just around the object, but beneath it, that is to say, *within* the pedestal itself, looking directly up at the base of the object through a glass lid. For the same argument applies to the base of the object as applied to the farthest hemisphere of our notional orange: How could those parts of the object that were touching the pedestal be said to categorically exist if they were hidden from actual view? It is true that their existence could be deduced from the fact that, in order for the object to continue to sit on the pedestal there must be some part of it that is in contact with it, and is therefore physically extant, but logical deduction is not the same thing as empirical observation. No, better to send a man in there to check that when the base of the object is touching the pedestal, it doesn't just dissolve into it.

As I say, it is easy to laugh at these methods but we must place them in the context of the prevailing doctrines. Panoptic observation was the subject of much debate during the first years of the object's existence. Its champions declared that only the combined perceptions of every beholder constituted continuous, unbroken perception of the object, and thus a perpetual verification of its existence. Their opponents countered that because these perceptions could not be objectively compared with one another, it was sufficient to perceive the object from just a

couple of viewpoints: the knowledge that the object would appear differently when regarded from another angle was considered equivalent to the actual experience of doing so. But that was not the main reason for abandoning the panoptic vigils. The main reason was that the multiple beholders tended to distract one another from the job at hand. The man stationed inside the pedestal was particularly problematic. Although the pedestal had opaque sides, you could see the reflection of the occupant through the transparent lid as he shifted around its interior. The sound of his movements, the expletives he uttered as he tried to get comfortable, the disturbances caused by his entry and exit (through a trap door directly beneath the pedestal) were a constant menace to the concentration of the other beholders, who (it is reputed) would hurl insults at the *in camera* observer as he smarted and cursed on his milking stool. It mattered not that certain beholders excelled in and even enjoyed this role, for the sheer knowledge of the occupant's presence was enough to induce laughter from his less disciplined colleagues.

The initiators of panoptic observation had overlooked another thing. In addition to the man in the pedestal, they should have suspended another from a harness directly above the object in order to observe its topmost surface, which was not quite visible, even to the tallest beholder. In fact, it was on this technicality that the panopticians were eventually defeated: in neglecting to install an aerial beholder at the outset, they had left an aspect of the object unobserved for more than seventeen years. Installing one now would simply underline the oversight. From this point onwards, the reduction of the beholders to a lead beholder and an auxiliary beholder, was a *fait accompli*.

Deciding who to let go must have been hard. There was no voluntary redundancy in those days, no pension plan, no compensation for those considered surplus to requirements. Men were weeded out unceremoniously, through a process of rigorous examination, leaving a skeleton crew of elite staff. Nevertheless, I sometimes wish we could go back to that era. It must have been quite something to be a beholder during this period of transition. Imagine: where, before, there had been fifteen or twenty beholders, now there were just two. The pressure on those men must have been immense. The tension of those first vigils must have been close to unbearable. Yes, it would have been quite something, to stand with those men. There are some engravings in one of the mess halls of these early 'biopopticians', as they became known. You can tell them from the panopticians by the shape of their beards. The panopticians have big bushy beards that come down to their chests, and the biopopticians have manicured spades jutting from their chins — a bit like mine.

I hope you will forgive the length of this preamble — I am a long time coming to the point. And I do so with a heavy heart. For last week there was a serious incident.

Despite the strictness of our regime, the atmosphere in the workplace is quite relaxed. Despite the seriousness of our corporate endeavor, a certain amount of individualism is encouraged by the management. Every beholder has his own way of doing things, his own technique — his preferred method of coming alongside, for example. You'd be surprised at the range of approaches that can be adopted, even within the aforementioned strictures, the number of different ways there are of staring at something for a long time, and of getting oneself into the right position to do it. It must be admitted that the stances of some colleagues can be off-putting. Most keep their theatricalities within reasonable bounds, but occasionally it is necessary to have a quiet word with those beholders who seem not to be beholding at all, really, but rather impersonating or parodying a beholder.

It would seem that there is a small minority for whom the vocation of beholding is not enough. It would seem that, for the younger generation in particular, this high office is insufficient reward. And so, to make it through their shifts, they have devised all manner of covert entertainment. I don't know whether I fully clarified this earlier, but we may only communicate with each other when coming alongside or when blinking. In addition to blinking, any bodily function that may *cause* one to blink must also be flagged up verbally, in advance. Apart from that, speech is forbidden. To get round this, some beholders have developed a crude language. I will not labour the details; suffice to say, the tap of a foot here, a cough there, will be answered in kind by the other man, and a sort of dialogue established between the two. Add to this the gambling, the sweepstakes, the bets placed on the first man to blink during a given shift, the jokes tapped out in morse code when fate throws together two beholders proficient in that tongue, and you can see that our workforce is not without its subversive elements.

But this incident was different. It happened a week ago. It is far and away the gravest offence I have seen during my tenure. No, I must keep an open mind: it is either the gravest offence or the beginning of a new epoch. I have heard it said that there is a heretic behind every great leap forward. So it may be in this case.

The culprit was well known to me. I must have stood with him a hundred times and never had cause to reproach his conduct. The incident began innocuously enough. I was the lead beholder, and he was the auxiliary. We'd been together two and a half hours when suddenly he broke wind. There was no advance warning — the



discharge was not foreshadowed verbally, in accordance with protocol. Fortunately I was not distracted by the fanfare. However, worse was to come. As everyone knows, it's impossible to sneeze without blinking. Try it — and watch your eyeballs spill onto your cheeks. Anyway, my partner sneezed four times consecutively. Again, there was no advance warning. But again, I was on my guard: as I heard the first sneeze approach, I leaned forward and had at the object like never before.

I should like to add, in passing, that the action I took at that moment was probably the highlight of my career to date. I should like to place that on record. After all, beholders have been decorated for far less. Nevertheless, I was concerned. What was he going to do next? Here's what: ten minutes later I heard a rustle of paper and sensed, on the periphery of my vision, the kind of movement that could only denote the unwrapping of a sweet. Now, he must have known that even if these oral suppositories had been medicinal — their ingredients vetted, their ingestion approved and ratified with the necessary paperwork — I would still have had to report him. For the ruling on this matter is clear: medication must be administered by a functionary, a man stationed in the corner of the room who, as well as acting as nurse, must take the invalid's place if he is unable to complete his shift. My colleague had made no such arrangements. There was no standby.

While he sucked on his mint, I thought of all the previous shifts we had shared. As I say, we had racked up considerable plinth time together and I had never once found him wanting, in a disciplinary sense. In fact, he had come to my own rescue once or twice, and I had always thought him the hardier fellow. Naturally, I assumed his leisure hours were dogged by the usual thoughts that bedevil men of our calling: that, like me, he had expended infinitely more vision on this thing at the centre of the room than he had on his own wife; that, like me, he was more intimate with its contours than those of his own face. Naturally, I assumed that what he saw in the mirror every morning was, in comparison with the object, completely alien to him. This disparity, this expenditure of so much vision on one thing at the expense of others, takes its toll. I have heard some beholders express outright contempt for the object. I have heard them mutter expletives, even as they rise from their chairs in the mess hall and prepare to come alongside. There was one occasion, years ago, when someone burned an effigy of the object, in a ritual round the back of the sanitation blocks on the edge of the compound. Its charred remnants were discovered by the chaplain, amid wine bottles and beer cans. The perpetrators were never found.

My colleague had never shown any signs of insurgency. I go so far as to call it placid, his demeanour, as he turned to me and spoke:

'You must be proud,' he said.

At this point my only concern was for the object. I focused my gaze intently, ignoring the distraction on my left.

'You must be proud,' he repeated.

Again, I ignored him.

'Yes,' he added. 'Anyone would be. Anyone would be proud to have served so long in the second room. After all, it is not everyone who puts in thirty years. It is not every man who shows such devotion. But never to be promoted, to be so consistently overlooked for advancement — that is too bad.'

Never to be promoted? What was he talking about? I had risen as far as it was possible to rise. What was this bluff impeachment of my professional record?

'Oh, I admit, the second room is impressive,' he continued. 'Technically, to have served in the second room is no less an achievement than serving in the *first*. But to have begun so high up, to have begun in the second room and never to have advanced to the first — that is a blow, I should think, to a man of your experience?'

He left a long silence here, and I told myself that I would not fill it. I told myself that I did not want to know about this 'first' room. But when he added further that at least I'd had the privilege of invigilating in the second room, rather than the third or fourth, or the ninth or tenth, or the sixteenth room, I couldn't help it:

'The sixteenth?'

'Yes. I was there yesterday, as it happens.' He paused theatrically, tearing himself another mint. 'At least, I think it was the sixteenth. It could have been the seventeenth or the eighteenth — or perhaps it was the fifteenth?'

Who would have thought, when I woke up that morning, that later on that day I would have to put into practice some of the emergency measures learned during my training? The correct protocol, in this situation, was to limit the damage, maintain the status quo till the end of my shift, when I could inform the relief beholder of the problem and report the matter — even if it meant playing along with the malefactor. I decided it was best to take the initiative, so I began by asking him how many of these other rooms there were.

'Difficult to say,' he replied. 'As many as it takes, I suppose.'

'As many as it takes — for what?'

This question was avoided. He would answer it in due course, but for now he was silent, sucking loudly on his mint, smacking his lips and moving the saliva around his mouth in a way that disgusted me.

'You were saying. The sixteenth room. You were there yesterday?'

'I was.'

'And what did you find?'

'The same.'

'The same?'

'The same but different.'

My colleague — if I may I still call him that — now approached the pedestal at the centre of the room. The seriousness of this action cannot be overstated. A low brass railing marks a circular exclusion zone ten feet from the base; watching him trespass it was like watching a member of the congregation stroll casually into the chancel halfway through a sermon. Fortunately, he did not touch the object, merely gesturing towards it as he spoke.

'The difference between this and the others is substantial enough to corroborate my theory,' he began. 'If we extrapolate on this difference, then perhaps three or four hundred are enough.'

'Three or four hundred what?'

'Objects. *Rooms*.'

He turned again to the pedestal, examining the object more closely: 'It is just discernible. Perhaps you would not mark it. Perhaps, even if you had been in the first room, you would not see the difference between that one and this one. It takes a trip to one of the higher rooms to get your eye in. The sixteenth or the seventeenth. The fortieth or fiftieth. And even then, it is not easy. Even then, you must return to the first room in order to verify the difference. And of course you have no say in which room you are assigned to.'

'But there is only one room,' I said.

I regretted this immediately — there was still an hour to go till the relief beholder came alongside and it would not do to excite him. But my words had the opposite effect. It is strange: whenever I recall the incident now, it's the weary calmness, the almost sympathetic tone of my colleague that first comes to mind. I am sure he has told his story many times, but he told it as though I were the last man to hear it — as though the truth, having circulated so widely, had no-one else to surprise but me.

'This object is a replica,' he stated baldly, gesturing again at the pedestal. 'This room and all it contains is a facsimile of the original room. The real object — the object that has been continuously perceived by men since its creation — is in another room. I call it the first room; others may know it by a different name. And this, if I am not mistaken, is the second room.'

'How can you tell?'

'There is a tiny scratch on the grandfather clock by the door, that I gouged out with my penknife when I was last here. It is just under the sill beneath the face. You will see it at the end of your shift when you leave.' He had his back to me as he told me all this, his eyes moving over the room, mentally comparing it with the others he claimed to have visited. 'It is amazing it never occurred to you,' he continued, as he stepped away from the pedestal. 'It is extraordinary that you never thought to look into the history behind the object.' His voice was lower now, as he retreated, walking backwards over the rail and rejoining me at the edge of the room. 'I am not talking about the official history. I am talking about the other history. The *actual* history. The history one learns of in the mess halls. The history one learns of in the bars and cafes surrounding the compound. The history hinted at by the provost in his more drunken moments, the history intimated by the chaplain at his most faithless. But above all, by the lift operator.'

'The lift operator?'

'Yes. Would you like to hear it?'

I don't know what was stranger: this sudden mention of the lift operator or his giving me the option of hearing the rest of his story. I really think he was willing to abort the mutiny there and then, continue as normal till his shift was over. He had already resumed his position and refocused his gaze on the object, and he continued his account without looking at me. I shall abridge the remainder, culling the salient points from my report, which, needless to say, I began immediately afterwards.



The object's official history is well known. I described it earlier: after two decades or so, panoptical observation gave way to dual or 'bioptical' observation. The panopticians, it will be recalled, had neglected to install an aerial beholder, leaving an aspect of the object unperceived for more than seventeen years. I should have added that the dispute didn't end there: undeterred by this setback, the panopticians initiated a second project, this time with an object perceived from every possible angle. Identical in every way, this artefact had been fashioned according to the same criteria as the original, with every stage of its production observed. It too had its own collection of ancillary objects, its own banjo, its own aquarium, its own grandfather clock and so forth.

'The canonical literature would have us believe that the story ends there,' said my colleague, after he had recapitulated these facts. 'That this rival project fell quickly by the wayside and everyone was united again under a common cause.'

'It continued?'

'It continues to this day. It continues as we speak, above and below. It continues here, in this very room, now.'

This was the second revelation: that the two projects had coexisted all along, unfolding in tandem. I did not see how that was possible, in a technical sense, but he insisted it was so.

'Let us return to the historical flashpoint,' he said. 'We can well imagine the chagrin of the biopticians as their rivals refused to give up. Who was to say that, as time passed, posterity would not come to favour the other project, the one instigated by the panopticians? So they put it about that the panopticians, in their zeal to address the spatial problem of observing the object from every angle, had overlooked certain temporal issues pertaining to its physical constitution. They argued that the panopticism of the panopticians was not panoptical enough, as it did not take into account what they called the object's *material ancestry*.

'They were referring, not just to the various stages of the object's manufacture, all of which had been diligently observed, but to the history of its constituent materials. Anyone could accept the claim that at no point since its creation had the object on the pedestal gone unobserved by men — that was beyond doubt. It had also been continuously observed *during* its creation. But where did one draw the line between the materials used to create the object and the object itself? At what point did it become an autonomous entity? The object

had several parts, each comprising different aggregates of materials. In order to claim that at no point in its existence had it gone unperceived, it would surely be necessary to have witnessed, not just the extraction and modification of those materials and their unification into a single artefact, but their entire evolution, their complete geological past, right down to their astrophysical origin. Put plainly, the panopticians would have needed to observe the evolution of the universe.'

When I objected that the history of these constituent materials was in no way consonant with the *identity* of the object, my colleague replied that I was missing the point: it was the fact that you couldn't isolate a precise moment when those materials became the object — it was this that obliged you to trace its identity all the way back to the beginning of time.

'Tell me,' he said, after he had given me a chance to absorb all this. 'Do these revelations not chime with your own experience? Do they not accord with the doubt we all feel in our first days as a beholder? The ineffable uncertainty that we quickly repress in our zeal to prove ourselves?'

He was referring, here, to the complex physical character of the object. Though not permitted to say what the object is, I can tell you that it comprises at least five species of wood (teak, oak, balsa, pine and ebony), six metals (steel, brass and zinc are the only ones I can identify), some cloth (hessian or linen) and something ceramic. There is a bit of rock in there too — basalt, I think — and a thin piece of corrugated asbestos projecting towards the viewer at eye level, extending beyond the footprint of the pedestal. There are also wires poking out of it at odd angles, bits of wool hanging off it, and a tarnished dessert spoon leant casually against the central core, that may or may not be classified as part of the object. That is as much as I am willing to say.

It was this compendium of materials that preoccupied my colleague. Where, he asked, does one begin with it all? Who observed the iron ore as it lay trapped underground? Who bore witness to the seeds that grew into the saplings that eventually became the trees from which the wood was harvested? And what of the trees that engendered those seeds? And the seeds of those trees — did these, too, have to be ontologically verified? Once you accepted that the boundary between the finished object and its evolution was a porous one, you fell into an abyss of infinite regression. That was his claim.

I protested that both projects were susceptible to the argument of infinite regression. The panopticians had failed to observe the evolution of the universe — but so had the biopticians.

‘That is true,’ said my colleague. ‘But they were pragmatists, and their solution to the infinite regression was to impose the following rule: until the object’s constituent materials came within man’s perceptual remit, they were deemed to be inexistent. When the ore was placed in the blast furnace, its ferrous content was a matter of mere speculation, but as soon as it was poured into the mould — the beholders standing over the cooling ingot — it was said to exist indubitably. The same was true of all the other materials. Beholders observed the extraction and modification of those materials insofar as it was perceptually feasible. Any process that could be witnessed was witnessed. Thus, the boundary between the object’s constituent materials and the object itself was situated at the limits of observable phenomena.’

‘And the panopticians? How did they respond to this?’

‘In a word: counter-intuitively. They conceded that it was impossible to circumvent the infinite regress without establishing an arbitrary boundary between the finished object and the history of its constituent materials. Confronted with that fact, they did the precise opposite of what everyone expected them to do.’

‘They gave up? They abandoned their project?’

My colleague tore himself another mint. ‘Oh no,’ he said, sucking loudly, ‘they *redoubled* their efforts. Once the boundary between the object and its material history had been acknowledged as irremediably porous, they were free to turn their backs on the past — the ancestral past of the universe — and focus on the future. This they did with no little humility, adopting the same pragmatism as their antagonists, but adding a new, social twist. When they regrouped, they reconsolidated their panopticism around another question: Why, they asked themselves, should the object be the optical privilege of a chosen few, an elect? Didn’t the project’s original premise, that things cannot be proven to exist independently of our perception of them, that they must be watched over, or at least, one of them must, in symbolic recompense for all the things that go unobserved — didn’t this hold for all men? If the object was to be perceived at all, then it should be perceived by everyone — such was their utopian directive.’

It was this, claimed my colleague, that had led to the proliferation of rooms

described at the outset. For a single object was no longer sufficient. New beholders now enlisted daily, and several objects were needed to accommodate them. Extra rooms were built on a near continuous basis, each with its own facsimile of the original.

‘And everyone believed they were observing something that had been observed since its creation?’

‘They were — just not the same thing as others were observing. But that didn’t matter. For the panopticians, the deception was an honourable one. It was the optical commitment of the beholder that was important, his conviction that the object existed only insofar as he perceived it; the object itself was of relatively minor importance.’

I asked how all this worked politically — how the panopticians had persuaded their rivals to accommodate their demands.

‘That is a good question,’ said my colleague. ‘In fact, it was the biopticians who made the first move. They allowed their rivals as many rooms as they wanted, on two conditions. The first was that they be used not just for the panopticians’ “experiments”, as they pejoratively called them, but as training rooms for their own apprentice beholders. The panopticians willingly consented to this, for they naturally regarded these apprentices as members of their newly formed brotherhood. Since then, the two factions have coexisted in a state of ironic harmony: the panopticians regard the original object simply as the first of many, while the biopticians regard the replicas as examinations of a beholder’s fitness to stand in the first room. Thus, each faction regards itself as subsuming the other. In many ways, it is a perfect arrangement.’

‘So the beholders are promoted and demoted from one room to another without ever knowing?’

‘I should’ve thought that were obvious, given your own ignorance on the matter.’

‘And the second condition?’

‘With respect, that is more obvious still. Their second condition was that the history of all this should never be written.’

In retrospect, this was the very pinnacle of his grand claim: that the integration of the two projects had remained secret, a matter of rumour among the more attentive beholders, and a matter of delicious irony to initiates like himself, but never a matter of accepted fact. I was more interested in the location of these other rooms. The compound, though vast, has only a handful of buildings: a gatehouse at the entrance for security, a scattering of mess halls and dormitories at the centre, a sick bay, sanitation blocks, and a few steel barns for storing tools. Toward the northern perimeter is a nine-hole golf course with a derelict clubhouse; to the south, living quarters for janitors, a crumbling mansion where the management once resided, and where the chaplain's office can still be found.

According to my colleague, the other rooms were stacked up vertically, on top of each other. The first room was deep underground, at the bottom of the lift shaft, the second just above it, and so on till you reached the surface. The room assigned to each beholder depended on his ability. The best beholders presided in the lowest rooms, the worst in the highest.

'The next time you descend, watch the lift operator closely,' he said, 'and listen to the sounds coming from the shaft. As you know, there are only three buttons: up, down and stop. As he descends, the operator must count each floor, and bring the lift to a halt manually, at the correct one.'

'The one his passenger has been assigned to.'

'Exactly. A difficult task. And he is able to accomplish it only by means of rods placed in the shaft, which catch the base of the lift as it passes. Only by counting the clicks can he bring his passenger to the right floor.'

'But surely, if a beholder is promoted and taken to a room much lower than the one he normally stands in, it would take longer to get there and he would notice?'

'The lift operator can increase or decrease his speed to compensate for the change in distance, by means of a pedal under his right foot. Watch him closely and you will see that he never moves from his position in the corner, his boot never rises from the floor. But in some ways, that is academic.'

'How so?'

'Well, it is hardly ever the case that a beholder who normally presides in the fortieth room finds himself suddenly promoted, say, to the second or third room, or vice-versa. In the main, beholders move no more than a handful of rooms in either

direction. Indeed, the destiny of most is decided at the outset. It would not surprise me to learn that you, for example, were singled out as second-room material right at the beginning of your career.'

'That is preposterous,' I said. 'I believe nothing of what you have told me.'

'That too is academic. Your belief is not required, only your participation.'

'And it seems some are allowed to participate more than others.'

'Meaning?'

'Yourself, for example?'

My colleague nodded. 'It is true that I have been permitted more leeway than most. More licence to roam than my ability warrants, truth be told.'

'You admit it then. The question is: licenced by whom?'

He wouldn't be drawn on the matter, so I decided to ask him about the object instead, about the differences between the various incarnations he had claimed to see in the other rooms. Again, he was guarded — I got the feeling he had revealed as much as he cared to reveal, that he was playing for time, waiting for the relief beholder to arrive — but as the lift sounded in the shaft outside, he began to talk much faster than before, as though he had mistimed his party-piece and now had to rush the dénouement.

'I will tell you this,' he said, as the lift approached. 'The differences get more pronounced as one ascends. It is possible that the object most distant from the first room — the one nearest the surface — bears no resemblance at all to the original. Last week the lift brought me a hundred clicks higher than ever before.'

'And what did you see?'

'The object was similar. Similar in form, but less distinct.'

'What do you mean?'

'I mean that it was less *present*.'

'I do not see how that is possible. Either a thing is there or it is not there.'

'No. There are degrees. Increments. The first room contains the object in all its finitude, but its integrity diminishes with each subsequent room. It is like a melting block of ice, with every moment of its melting rendered as a separate physical form. If the first room contains the original, it is possible the last contains nothing more than a stain, a stain on an otherwise empty plinth.'

'I pity the poor beholder who has to look upon that spectacle,' I said. 'What are you going to do about it?'

My colleague was perplexed. 'Do? I have already done what I came here to do. I have already accomplished that.'

I took this to mean that his sole aim had been to disclose the reality of our vocation, then leave me to act on my instincts, as I saw fit, but I was wrong. It was only now, in the final few seconds of my shift, as the relief beholder approached the door, that he revealed his true purpose.

'One last question,' I asked, 'before I go.'

'Very well.'

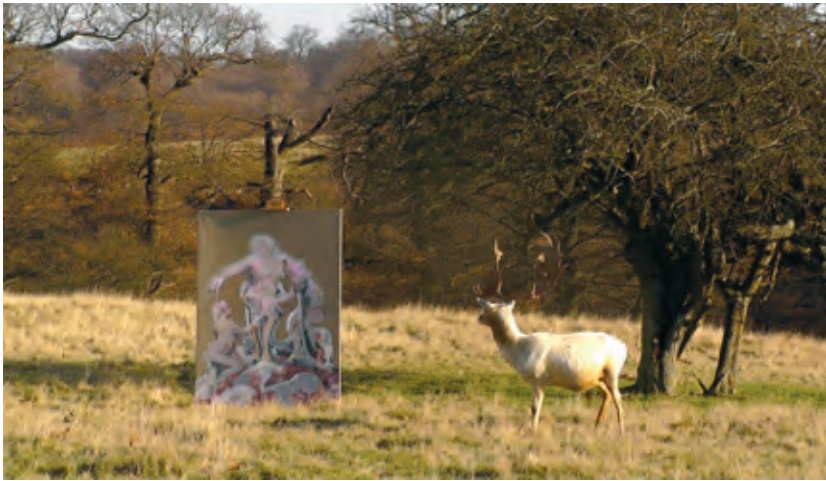
'How do you know that I've never been in the first room?'

He leaned in close, reducing his voice to a whisper: 'Because your fitness to stand there had not been assessed,' he said. 'I was assigned to carry out that task. And now I have completed it.'

These were my colleague's last words. He was silent now, squinting intently at the object, having resumed the position he had held for the first hour of my shift. It was the textbook stance of the men in the old engravings, the bearded pioneers of bygone times: neck extended, nose in the air, hands tucked behind his back, like the figurehead of a ship. When the door opened and the relief beholder came alongside, everything was as it should be.

A week has passed since then. A changed man I am not, but there is something else at stake now when I clock on, there is fresh curiosity as I descend in the lift. This morning I counted the clicks. I shall count them again tomorrow. I shall go on counting them. I shall keep a record. And then I shall decide what is to be done.

Is this the first room or the second? Is it the third or the fourth? Is it the tenth or the twelfth, the nineteenth or the twentieth? Am I up am I down? Am I cold am I hot? Am I close am I far?































































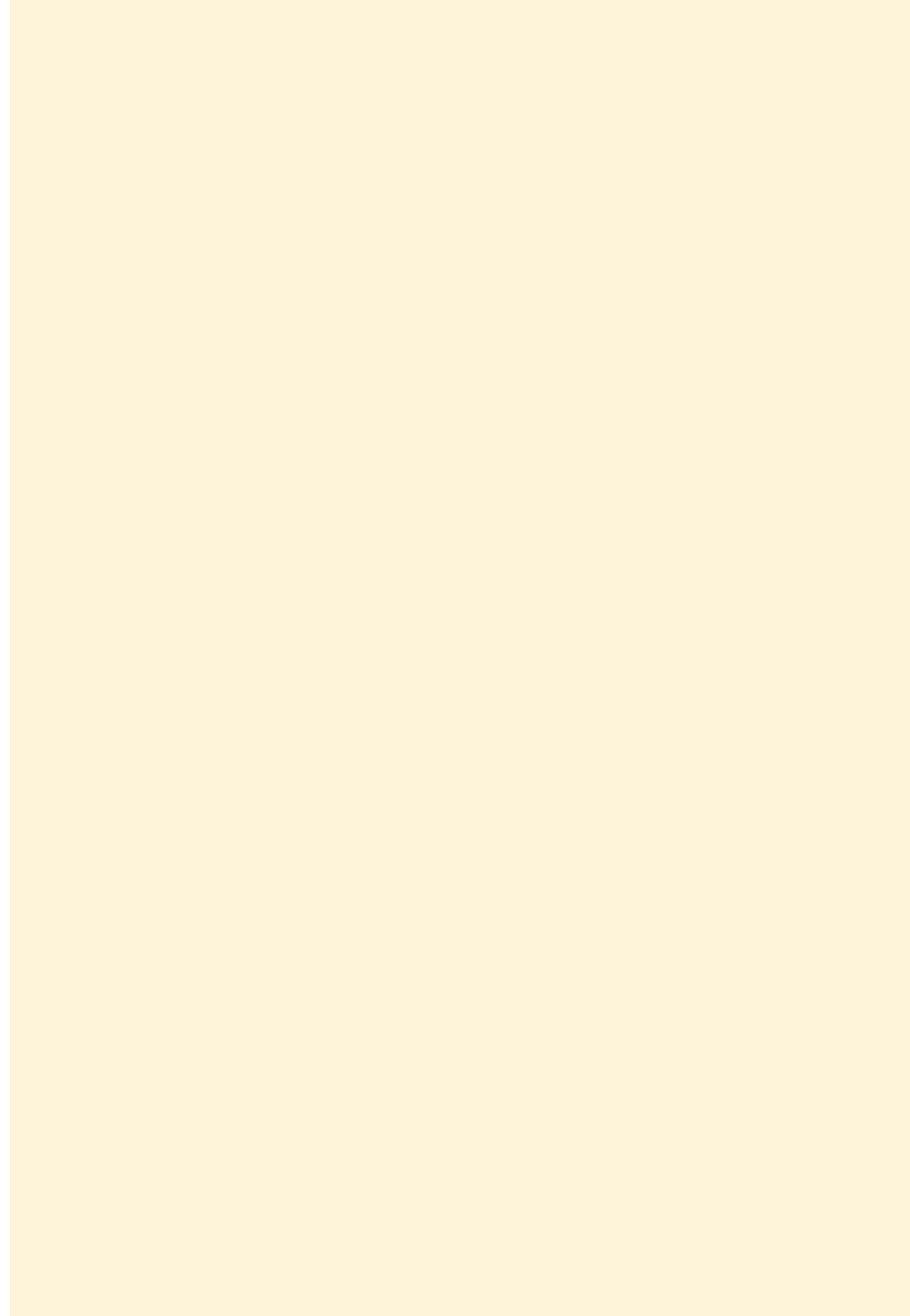














## LIST OF WORKS

COVER: **????**

- 1&2** Fiona **macdonald**, Actaeon's Second Look (stills), 2015, HD video in an edition of three, 5 minutes 27 seconds
- 3 Fiona MacDonald, Diana with Nymphs, 2013, oil and acrylic on linen, 155 x 110cm. **Fiona name of photographer here please**
- 4 & 5** Annie Whiles, One of the Gapers (detail), 2015, wood and paint, 183 x 61 x 26cm
- 6 Annie Whiles, One of the Gapers, 2015, wood and paint, 183 x 61 x 26cm
- 7 Thirteen Blackbirds Look at a Man, installation at Chapter, Cardiff (detail), 2015
- 8&9** Annie Whiles, Bird in Commercial Way (detail), hair, paint, embroidery silks and fabric, bird 24 x 10 x 18cm; branch 163 x 42cm. **Annie name of photographer here for studio shot please**
- 10** Fiona MacDonald, Lullingstone Tree #8 (v leg one), watercolour and acrylic on brown paper (one of a series of six), 65 x 50cm. **Fiona name of photographer here please**
- 11** Fiona MacDonald, Lullingstone Tree #3 (cut here), 2013, watercolour and acrylic on brown paper (one of a series of six), 65 x 50cm. **Fiona name of photographer here please**
- 12 Fiona MacDonald, Lullingstone Tree #1-6, series of six watercolour and acrylic on brown paper, 2013, each 65 x 50cm
- 13 Fiona MacDonald, Forage, 2015, three HD video loops on box monitors and Bloody Ethel, 2014, berries / juice on cream paper, 310 x 100cm
- 14 Fiona MacDonald, Forage, 2015, three HD video **loops on box monitors**
- 15 Fiona MacDonald, Bloody Ethel (detail), 2014, berries / juice on cream paper, 310 x 100cm
- 16 Cathie Pilkington, Harmonium (detail), 2015, mixed media installation
- 17-19 **Cathie Pilkington, titles TBC**
- 20&21 Cathie Pilkington, Harmonium (detail), 2015, mixed media installation
- 22 Cathie Pilkington, Harmonium (detail), 2015, mixed media installation and Curio, 2003, oil paint on jesmonite, ceramics, dresser, 140 x 110 x 85cm
- 21 Annie Whiles, Blackheath Donkey (detail), 2011, glass, wood, hair and paint

- 22 Annie Whiles, Blackheath Donkey, 2011, glass, wood, hair and paint, 145 x 140 x 60cm
- 23&24 Cathie Pilkington, Curio, 2003, oil paint on jesmonite, ceramics, dresser, 140 x 110 x 85cm
- 26 Fiona MacDonald, O Quam Tu Pulchrum Es, 2012, mixed media
- 27 Annie Whiles, Hover Boys, 2005, satin, felt, canvas and silk thread, 48 x 48cm. **Photo: Name required from Annie**
- 28 Annie Whiles, June in July, 2004, felt, canvas, silk, velvet and silk threads, 120 x 82cm. **Annie name of photographer here please**
- 29 Annie Whiles, May, canvas, felt, velvet and silk threads, 2007, 30 x 18cm. **Annie name of photographer here please**
- 30 Annie Whiles, installation of embroideries at Chapter, Cardiff, 2015. Left to right: Hover Boys, 2005; Bad Chair Day, 2003; John of Lunchtime **{date?}**; **LEG one, date?**; Dog and Ball, 2008; Don, 2005; May, 2007; The Moment Ago, 2007, canvas, felt, velvet, silk and silk threads, and Cathie Pilkington, Lamb, **date?, materials?**
- 31 Cathie **Pilkington, Lamb, date?, materials?**
- 32 **Cathie Pilkington, Tital, materials, dates???**
- 33-36 Fiona MacDonald, In a Shoreham Churchyard (stills), 2015, HD video
- 37-39 Cathie Pilkington, Welsh Dresser **Numbers???**
- 40&41 Fiona MacDonald, Wild Word, installation at Chapter, Cardiff, 2015

**In a Shoreham Churchyard**

**2015**

**HD video 3m30secs**

**Sale price £2100 (ed of 3)**

**Title of work:**

**£10,000**

# THIRTEEN BLACKBIRDS LOOK AT A MAN

Fiona MacDonald  
Cathie Pilkington  
Annie Whiles  
Sean Ashton

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