

artists. Museum plinths are replaced with reclaimed metal sheets or wooden structures, while quilts are often authentically displayed flat as if on beds, instead of being hung like modernist paintings.

Previously unrecognised African-American women artists are foregrounded. Emmer Sewell's poignant *Scarecrow Assemblage*, c1990, is staged at the centre of the exhibition. This improvised life-size scarecrow is draped with fabrics displaying the distinctive colours of the Black Panther movement. This iconic work, designed to protect against would-be trespassers, stands like a flag on the roadside near Sewell's home in Alabama. This installation now sits against a large-scale photograph, representing her now dismantled 'yard show' (following her relocation to a care centre). These sculptural works of reclaimed everyday objects, such as mailboxes, shoes or refrigerators, are affectingly reassembled to offer new spiritual value and meaning. Mary T Smith poses in a dress that matches the stripy black-and-white objects in her yard, as she literally performs her artwork. Metal poster-like sheets and cardboard banners deliver urgent messages, such as 'we all want a job', which sits next to a line of disembodied heads.

The iconography of lynching is tragically and terrifyingly ubiquitous in many works. Lonnie Holley's *Him and Her Hold the Root* is placed at the entrance of the gallery space. It is made of two empty rocking chairs adjacent to each other, holding a large extended root across them. Like many artists in the show, Bessie Harvey creates sculptural figures whose identities came directly from the tree. The use of tree roots in southern black rural art can be traced back to African traditions where the root carries spiritual significance. Until recently her work had been understood as an expression of folk art, rather than receiving the recognition she deserves as a contemporary artist.

The show includes numerous quilts showcasing the work of female artists known as Gee's Bend quilters. The quilts are touchingly made up of (sometimes stained) reclaimed clothes, scraps and found fabrics, and in recent years have become collectable works of art. But like most of the work included in this exhibition, the artists who made them continue to live in relative poverty and deprivation. A number of art dealers and collectors have played important roles in bringing southern art to the world's attention but many have also been criticised for not ensuring that the artists are appropriately compensated by collectors.

Jazz, the blues and spiritual music are foundationally interlinked in this exhibition, as abstracted and improvised expressions emerging from the same tormented narratives of slavery. The sorrowful sound of John Coltrane's 'Alabama' powerfully resonates across the gallery. Coltrane composed this emotive track in response to Martin Luther King's 'Eulogy for the Martyred Children' after the 1963 Birmingham bombings which killed four children. King's spiritually uniting call, 'you do not walk alone', reflects the title of this exhibition, drawing on walking as an act of courage and militant protest.

The murder of Emmett Till, the 14-year-old boy lynched for offending a white woman in 1955, inspires several works in the show as well as protest songs assembled by musicologist Calvin Forbes in a playlist, which includes 'Strange Fruit' by Billie Holiday from 1939, 'Mississippi Goddam' by Nina Simone from 1964, 'The Times They Are a-Changin'' by Bob Dylan from

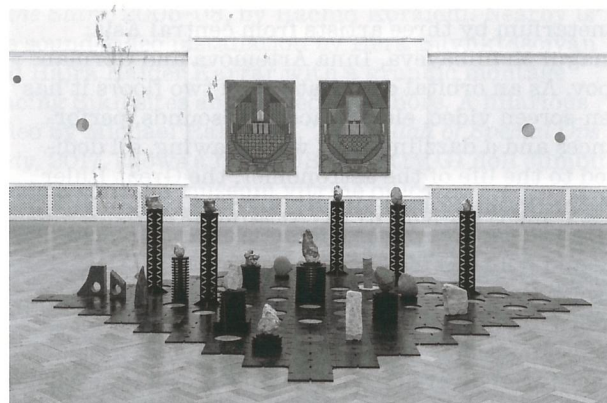
1964, 'I Wish I Knew How It Would Feel to Be Free' by Simone from 1967, 'The Revolution Will Not Be Televised' by Gil Scott-Heron from 1970 and 'Fight the Power' by Public Enemy from 1988.

A significant section of this exhibition is made up of documentary works recording the civil rights movement in Alabama, including Danny Lyon's photographs of Doris Derby as a young activist in 1963. Photographs by civil rights protesters disturbingly reveal how white journalist photographers were aligned to the police's point of view against black protesters.

The 1972 landmark interview with Angela Davis from prison is powerfully explicit. When asked if she supports violent revolution, she responds dismissively by reminding the interviewer of the violence experienced by African-Americans. She speaks about her childhood, and the terrifying public calls to attack African-Americans on state radio, or her horrific memories following the aftermath of the Birmingham bombing.

At the opening of this influential exhibition, Bonnie Greer reflected on how 'we are the people that our parents and grandparents dreamed of', and Goodwin spoke of his dream to see Southern African-American art incorporated into the canon of 20th-century American Modernism, alongside celebrated artists like Jasper Johns or Robert Rauschenberg, whose assemblages could have been influenced by those of the 'Deep South'.

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Yelena Popova, 'The Scholar Stones Project', installation view

## Yelena Popova: The Scholar Stones Project

**Holden Gallery, Manchester, 7 February to 27 March**

The title of Yelena Popova's solo exhibition at Holden Gallery, 'The Scholar Stones Project', doesn't directly refer to the main, and most conspicuous theme of the exhibition. This is a strength of the project. Instead of using the alarming, yet desensitising power of the term 'nuclear' to engineer engagement and command attention, the artist instead employs the contemplative tradition of 'scholar stones' as a framework by which to explore something with such acute significance. The term 'scholar stone' refers to an East Asian tradition of collecting curiously weathered rocks which are then used as a means to focus thought and stimulate reflection, used here by Popova to describe the stones that

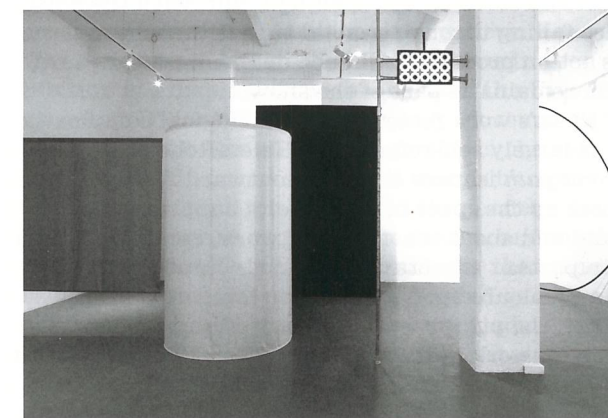
she has amassed during a series of walks around nuclear power stations in the UK, beginning at Sizewell in Suffolk. Nuclear power and ionizing radiation are scientifically measurable and culturally demarcated, while being simultaneously unfathomable in terms of their current influence and future effects. Consider how the potentially devastating question of Britain's nuclear deterrent is now frequently employed as a cheap means by which to bolster or undermine our political leaders. This contradiction is at the heart of Popova's project to commemorate, understand and draw attention not only to the UK's decommissioned nuclear power stations, but also their links to the production of plutonium-239 for unrealised Cold War weapons programmes. Furthermore, this association between energy and warfare connects with the artists' hometown of Ozyorsk, where the Russian nuclear weapons programme was founded.

The individual works here are all abstracted and quietly decorative. There are no images of smokestacks or mushroom clouds, instead there has been an extraction of samples; soils, stones and patterns that are then redeployed by Popova. As such, the exhibition as a whole comes across as more than a simple awareness-raising manoeuvre or moral judgement, and seems to be a genuine attempt to deal psychologically with the troubling reality of a post-nuclear world. Serene canvases that swirl with the earthen tones of ochre, umber, sienna and terracotta are part of the artists' post-petrochemical painting series, whereby only the most rudimentary ash and soil-based pigments are used, in these instances making use of potentially contaminated soil from the land surrounding nuclear power stations. In the accompanying publication the artist imagines that these works will carry the 'geological fingerprints' of the locations chosen, bringing to mind the way that pigments from the dawn of modern humanity are now analysed for clues about the cultures that produced them. There are further references to Neolithic art present throughout the exhibition, whether in watery spirals on the lower edges of tapestries or the kerf patterns of cylindrical MDF plinths, implying the deep time of stone and atomic decay.

The paintings that are hung in clusters, and the collected stones mounted on a laser-cut platform deriving its form from the graphite components of extant reactors, refer obliquely to Popova's sites of interest as well as materially enacting an ecological commitment in making use of low-impact and recycled materials. Conversely, the two newly commissioned tapestries offer a proposal for comprehending the radioactive material that will outlast us all, still entombed at sites around the UK and elsewhere. Relatively recently, the problem of how to communicate the danger of buried radioactive material became a popular talking point, and then the issue dipped out of public consciousness, left for somebody else to worry about on another day. This human tendency, to act on the assumption that some future version of ourselves will be able to cope with the trouble we cause now, is as much a theme of this exhibition as the specific issue of nuclear waste. The tapestries themselves, as well as the aforementioned Neolithic patterning, feature motifs derived from the gridded graphite cores of nuclear reactors, as does the central platform that holds and displays Popova's collected stones. The titles, *Keepsafe I* and *Keepsafe II*, are obviously a play on the term keepsake and are reminiscent of the imaginary 'futurespeak' found in speculative fiction, constituting

a semi-serious attempt to communicate a directive through time. The tapestries are also deliberately hung in the same place that Edward Burne-Jones's *Adoration of the Magi* was in the early 1900s, and this explicit allusion to spirituality as well as the history of art is at the crux of how the work in this exhibition functions. We are invited to approach past hubris and the menace of an unfathomable future with a contemplative attitude that takes into account the cultural power of symbol and ceremony.

**Lauren Velvick** is a writer and curator based in Lancashire.



'The Undersides of Practice', installation view

## The Undersides of Practice

**APT Gallery, London, 23 January to 16 February**

'The Undersides of Practice', curated by Catherine Ferguson and Della Gooden, takes as its starting point Hubert Damisch's *The Origin of Perspective*, 1987, a work examining the history, philosophy and practical application of this 15th-century revolution in pictorial representation. Damisch argues that linear perspective, far from being merely a technical device allowing the convincing two-dimensional representation of three-dimensional space, is in fact a highly effective method for controlling thought. One is reminded of Jean-Francois Lyotard's observation, made in *Artforum* in April 1982, that in the Quattrocento the invention of optical geometry was one of the most powerful ways ruling elites could 'instil a sense of identity in the new political communities - the City, the State, the Nation'. Perspective played a key role in constructing the hierarchical relations inherent in modern culture, and is not so much a translation of 'the real' as, again following Damisch, a model of thought.

The 'undersides of practice' of the title are the powerful influences upon the contributors' work, a partly hidden tangle of ideas, allusions and clues that the show aims to foreground, while also emphasising the presence of complex interactions between the pieces on display. The curators have encouraged, as they remark in their press release, 'connections to take place between static structures, performance-related activities and the perceptual experience of space, object and image'. Everything in the exhibition was made in the past two years.

An example of this intertextual temperament in action is the exchange between David Ryan's large, semi-geometrical abstract paintings and the small wall drawings included here. These transcribe elements