



MONIQUE BESTEN • CLAIRE HICKEY • STEPHANIE RUSHTON • JOANNE AYRE • PHOEBE CUMMINGS



WOMAN'S WORK

AirSpace Gallery

Friday 30th September - Saturday 5th November

The Potteries Museum and Art Gallery
until November 2017



WOMAN'S WORK

Making visible the hidden and unsung labour carried out by women in the home, the workplace and in public life

AirSpace Gallery 1 October to 5 November 2016

The Potteries Museum and Art Gallery until November 2017

Public Preview: 30 September 2016 6.00 to 9.00pm in both Galleries

Woman's Work is a partnership project between AirSpace Gallery and The Potteries Museum and Art Gallery. Woman's Work seeks to make visible the hidden and unsung labour carried out by women in the home, the workplace and public life, and in particular seeks to redress the imbalance in history and the arts, where work made by women has been undervalued, or simply not recognised.

Following on from some of the themes touched upon, but not fully explored in *The Artist and The City* Exhibition, 2015, *Woman's Work* is again curated by **Anna Francis** (AS) and **Jean Milton** (PMAG) and will be exhibited concurrently at AirSpace until November 5th and through to November 2017 at PMAG.

The year-long project involves a number of exhibitions, events and activities

- An **exhibition** of contemporary works and new commissions at AirSpace Gallery
- **Wonder Women** A complimentary exhibition by The Cultural Sisters and Letting in the Light, within the AirSpace Gallery Resource Room.
- **The Fabulous Ladies of Stoke**, - a year long, changing series of exhibits on the balcony at The Potteries Museum and Art Gallery.
- **A Woman's Tour of the Museum** - a new way to navigate the Potteries Museum and its collection, including some newly commissioned works and featuring a rehanging of the Art Gallery at the museum from January 2017, to give a gender

Wonder Women

September 30th to October 15th, 2016
Resource Room at AirSpace Gallery

Wonder Women is a creative wellbeing project initiated by The Cultural Sisters and Letting in the Light. The project provides regular arts, crafts and creative digital activities along with support, friendship and access to information that allows women to address, discuss and explore their wellbeing in a safe space.

The Wonder Women group have shared their skills and knowledge and working together have created an interactive tepee tent experience for the Lost Gardens event at Festival Park. For this exhibition, the tepee will be installed in the resource room at Airspace where you will be able to take refuge and type a 'note to self'.

Workshop

On 1st October at 2.30 The Cultural Sisters and Letting in the Light will run a workshop combining typed messages, collage, printing and photographic technology with Wonder Women from across the City to create Hannah Hoch-inspired portraiture artworks for display throughout their exhibition. Please see airspacegallery.org for booking details.

Woman's Work at the Potteries Museum and Art Gallery

Through to November, 2017
Potteries Museum and Art Gallery

The Fabulous Ladies of Stoke

A changing series of exhibits on the balcony at

balance of female artists, and to bring out some of the amazing works by women from within the museum's collection.

- The development of a **Mobile Woman's Potteries Museum** - a mobile structure housing documentation of all activity and exhibits from the Woman's Work project. This mobile exhibition and resource space will travel to various locations across the city, at the end of the project.
- An extra special **Community Night Walk** in the form of *A Woman's Walking Tour of Stoke* developed by Penny Vincent and Professor Karen Rodham, and planned to coincide with International Women's Day, March, 2017.

Full updated details on all the individual components of Woman's Work across both venues through until November 2017 can be found at the AirSpace Gallery website.

The Potteries Museum and Art Gallery across the full year which celebrates some of the important historic, activist women, who fought for Women's rights, justice and were leading lights in a variety of fields. From Millicent Sutherland to Gertie Gitana, they are all inspirational women with connections to the city.

Woman's Work Tour of the Museum

This exhibition trail around the Potteries Museum and Art Gallery highlights some of the amazing artworks and artefacts by and about women, and in particular 'women working' from the Museum's collection. This will change and evolve throughout the year, but significantly, will include a rehanging in January 2017 of the Art Gallery, to achieve a 50/50 balance of male to female artists.

The tour will include artworks from the collection, made by women, but also depicting women at work, aiming to draw out some of the amazing stories of how women have worked through history, in often undervalued contexts and the contribution made to the arts and industry by women. As an example, included in the trail is a chance to take a fresh look at Enid Seaney's *Homemaker* tableware and hear about this important ceramic designer, the first female to be trained in the Spode Factory Design Team, and whose iconic design was sold throughout the UK in Woolworths.

The tour will also include items from social history and a series of new commissions for the project. The contemporary works for the trail will change throughout the year, but will include:

- Documentation of Dutch artist **Monique Besten's**

The Artist Soup Kitchen

A Soft Armour with Monique Besten
1st October, 2016 12pm to 2pm
AirSpace Gallery

For the next in our series of critical engagement and discussion series, acclaimed artist Monique Besten will be presenting around her enduring walking-based project *A Soft Armour*. Various for the last 3 years, Monique has been travelling through Europe, alone, wearing a 3 piece walking suit, on foot, meeting people along her journey, collecting new stories and retelling them in various ways.

In this Soup Kitchen, using Monique's experiences as a base, we'll be broadening out the discussion to assess the roles for women in a traditionally male dominated sector, and in particular, exploring the forced compromises made by creative women in the making their work. Places are free but booking is essential - please email AirSpace Gallery for booking details.

practice and her *Walking Suit*. Her long distance walks are a counterpoint to the traditional Romantic figure of the lone male walker in the landscape. September 30th, 2016.

- Existing works by artist **Claire Hickey**, which explore changes to the female body through pregnancy as well as a new commission where the artist is using brick making processes, with the names of female makers and workers, celebrating hands on skills. January 2017.
- A new series of works by photographer **Stephanie Rushton**, whose commercial and fine art photography has, in the past, included a series of creatives at work. Stephanie completed a residency at AirSpace Gallery during the summer 2016 - where she explored the museum archives, drawing out a research project, resulting in a photographic series exploring the themes of the exhibition, and for January 2017, presents a new video work, presenting her findings.
- The final aspect of the tour involves a year long residency undertaken by ceramic artist **Jo Ayre**, who will exhibit a series of responsive artworks at the beginning of the residency, which considers the lives of women working in the Potteries. The residency will then explore how Potteries women navigated their lives through the challenges of work, family and personal identity, reflecting upon the social hierarchies and stereotypes, the gendered roles within the workplace, and accepted and subversive behaviours. The project culminates in an exhibit of findings and artworks at the end of the year, during the British Ceramics Biennial 2017.

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airspacegallery

AirSpace Gallery is a collaborative, artist led project in Stoke-on-Trent, providing professional development opportunities, studio and exhibiting space and support for artists and curators. Currently, particularly concerned with issues surrounding collaboration and partnership working and a relational relevance with its location and the socio-political landscape, AirSpace Gallery brings critical, high quality contemporary art to the region through a dynamic and evolving programme of exhibitions, residencies and public realm activities.

Visit AirSpace Gallery
4 Broad Street
City Centre
Stoke-on-Trent
ST1 4HL

Open during exhibitions
Thursday to Saturday
11.00am to 5.00pm
Tuesdays and Wednesdays by appointment
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+44(0)1782 26 12 21

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Woman's Work at AirSpace Gallery



Monique Besten

A Soft Armour, 2013 to present

"One of the first days I wore my three piece suit, I saw a flash of blue. I caught it on the inside of my suit. In white thread. I never saw a kingfisher before.

There is an oil stain on my right sleeve. A late dinner with friends. It has been there for 83 days now.

A woman laughed when she scanned the QR code on my back and saw the drawing of the beheaded man. I don't know why she laughed. He's always bothering me, scratching my leg.

Something Thoreau said about suits - beware of all enterprises that require new clothes, and not rather a new wearer of clothes.

Monique Besten is a nomadic artist who was born in the Netherlands and is at home where her feet are. Her practice spans walking, conversation, performance and installation.
www.moniquebesten.nl



Joanne Ayre

Jessie, Kate, 2016

Through presentation of a series of collections of objects and ephemera, Joanne Ayre exhibits the initial thoughts for her year-long *Woman's Work* Residency. The beginnings of an exploration; the first glimpses into the lives of three named women who worked in the Potteries.

Unpicking the visual elements that make their work identifiable and illustrating the first strands of their individual stories.



Claire Hickey

Various works 2014 - 2016

Claire is a visual artist who makes self-responsive sculptural objects, installations, and multiples. Her work focuses on making by hand using performative gesture to explore how malleable matter can be physically manipulated and shaped by her body and its experiences. She uses materials intuitively, using moulding and casting techniques to work in clay, wax, concrete and plaster. Somatic, familiar and functional, they reflect the tensions and flux of the female condition. Her current practice, and in exhibition here, uses brick stacks, embedded casts, and moulds to examine notions of pregnancy, labour, women's work, and the dichotomy of being both an artist and mother.
clairehickey.blogspot.com

Born in Stoke-on-Trent, Jo studied ceramics in Cardiff and at the Royal College of Art and is resident artist at the BCB studio at Spode Works. Her own practice has been invigorated and enlivened by establishing opportunities for others to make in clay and new ways of working are emerging through this immersive activity. Reflections upon traditions, collaboration, anonymity, collective endeavour and the pleasure of making have become a focus for playful, yet thoughtful exploration.

Phoebe Cummings

Nocturne, 2016

Phoebe Cummings creates detailed, temporary sculptures and environments from clay. The work is often built directly on site, and where possible, the same clay is reclaimed and reused at different locations.

Over the past ten years she has worked without a permanent studio space, often developing work through residencies, using the gallery space as a temporary workshop and increasingly producing components at home. *Nocturne* is a brief bouquet of flora that blooms at night; an ode to the work mothers do when their children sleep. Often these hours are intensely productive, a second day where an alternate role is performed. Unseen, the kitchen table may become office, studio or factory.



Stephanie Rushton

Looking at the Overlooked, 2016

Emanating from a residency at AirSpace looking at the condition and roles of working women in the Potteries, Stephanie presents a series of environmental portraits depicting contemporary creative female practitioners in Stoke on Trent in their studios and workshops, more often than not the abandoned factories and workshops of the former pottery firms. Alongside she presents a work in action reportage piece of newly made black and white images interspersed with selected imagery from the Potteries Museum photographic archive and projected in a continuous loop slideshow.

Stephanie studied photography at Blackpool and The Fylde College and was apprenticed to David Bailey for five years, and now works as a lecturer in Photography at University of Derby. Her recent work is concerned with exploring issues surrounding art, ecology and eco-psychology, eco-psychology being the study of the relationship between humanity and the earth through ecological and psychological principles.
www.stephanierushton.com/



Detail from Antediluvian Swag (clay, wire, steel) 2016
Photo - Sylvain Doleau

Cummings studied Three-Dimensional Crafts at the University of Brighton, before completing an MA in Ceramics & Glass at the Royal College of Art in 2005.

Cummings was selected as the winner of the British Ceramics Biennial Award in 2011 and recent exhibitions have included a commission to make work for *Swept Away* at the Museum of Arts & Design, New York in 2012 and a solo show at the University of Hawaii Art Gallery, Honolulu (2013).

A Woman's Work is Never Done

The piercing crash of wood blocks, a child's brightly coloured building blocks cascade across the floor, the echoing sound violently interrupting the ebb and flow within the room like a scream in the night. Those in the space encounter a demand upon their attention, unavoidably drawn to a peculiar figure pacing the floor on hands and knees, immaculately dressed, face obscured by her long black hair. As she crawls, vampire like, slowly collecting the blocks one by one, returning them from where they came - her Chanel bag - the tension of those willing to observe is mixed with unease of those who shy away.



I became a mother in 2014. Drop, Pick Up was a re-enactment of my situation as a working woman. A working woman that was now a parent. The repetitive action of picking up the wooden blocks, dropping them on the floor only to pick them up again was a reference to my new domestic chores; that of

continually tidying up after a baby in a never-ending cycle. It seemed to perfectly capture the proverb; a woman's work is never done.

Man may work from sun to sun,
But woman's work is never done.

The second more metaphorical comment that I was making in the performance was borne out of an increasing frustration with the art world. The sleek black fringe of the wig that hung down hiding my face like drawn curtains made me feel invisible, a familiar feeling that I continually experience as I attempt to break into an art scene that appears structured in a very particular way. That if you didn't go to the right art school, were aged 30+ or had not paid your way in, you were unlikely to get your work shown in any significant place. As the art scene moves on I often feel like an outsider with most of my time being taken up with domestic and caring duties, suffocated underneath a pile of menial jobs working for minimum wage and scant reward. Is it possible to keep these 'plates spinning' and maintain a work-life balance as a woman artist?

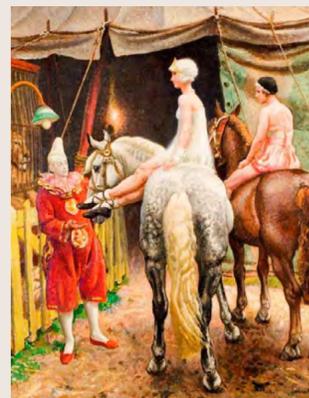
Over the past 30 years the mounting concern that women who successfully pursue a career do so at the expense of family life has been well documented. Women are putting off having a family until later in life or not having a family at all. I put off having my child until my late thirties, choosing to study and practice as an artist. Does having a family make you any less of an artist as a woman? Tracey Emin, it would appear, would think

so, provocatively saying recently "There are good artists that have children. Of course there are. They are called men."

There is this idealised notion that to be an artist you must be slaving away, obsessively working in your studio with no outside distractions otherwise you can't be considered a professional. Do women really believe that they have to live up to this outdated, possibly male driven, ideal to be a successful artist? I would argue that this perspective bears no relation to working artists who work outside of the studio; in their homes, working site-specifically or within the community.

In Airi Thisberg's book, *Art Workers, Material Conditions and Labour Struggles in Contemporary Art Practice*, 2015, the chapter 'In The Case of Nuns' makes the connection between nuns, care workers and artists and their relationship to wage-labour. There is an idea that these workers act out of 'devotion', which could explain why often people in these fields are not recognised as part of the social workforce at large, although they are contributing their services to society everyday, albeit for very low wages. This uncomfortable relationship that exists between money and your art is a constant paradox and has been strongly debated as to whether art is a profession or a vocation?

My mother always did say that I should have got a proper job.



Researching the Potteries Museum & Art Gallery's Fine Art collection online, I was drawn to the work of British painter, Laura Knight (1877-1970) who became the first woman to be created a Royal Academician. One painting in particular held a particular resonance for me. *The Rosinbacks*, 1932 (above), depicts two female circus performers sitting on horseback as they wait to enter a circus tent, reminding me, as a performance artist, of that familiar moment prior to entering a stage. Knight's paintings of circus performers and ballerinas, although popular in their day, are now quoted online as "rather corny" (www.artuk.org, 6/9/16). In the book *Women, Art & Society* by Whitney Chadwick, 2012, Whitney talks about how in the past, negative terms were used to

describe women's artistic work - feminine, precious, sentimental, amateur to mention just a few - all contribute to creating barriers to the work being seen as 'high-art'.

Further research into Knight's paintings showed that she extensively documented many working women at the time, such as families, gypsies, the auxiliary air force, factory workers, models and dancers. In contrast to some of these bygone women's roles, we have seen a visible rise of women working in professional positions in recent years. This is particularly apparent within the arts, as managers and curators within art galleries increases right up to director level in the case of Maria Balshaw, director of Manchester Art Gallery and the Whitworth. This is indeed progress, however it should be noted that a report by *Clare's Women in Leadership in the Creative and Cultural Sector* states that there are two and a half male leaders to every sole female, with women being outnumbered by men in the most senior roles. This substantial shift has certainly had a positive effect upon women artists. The increased number of solo exhibitions, such as Cornelia Parker reopening the Whitworth in 2015 or three of the four 2016 Turner Prize nominees being women are two notable examples. Maybe this will begin to disseminate down from those lofty heights to my level, the ground level, the level that continues to find it extremely difficult to find opportunities that are flexible enough to accommodate the individual and their everyday lives.

It has taken a very, very long time for a

woman's work to start to become recognised, however it has come a very long way in an incredibly short space of time. So, I'll keep spinning those plates and picking up those wooden blocks for now. I'll attempt to maintain the drive to keep working at it, for this in itself is work and though for some it is now being appreciated and demanding attention, as we know,

a woman's work is never done.

An AirSpace Gallery commissioned text, continuing a commitment to creative writing in the Arts.

Nicola Smith was born in London in 1975. Smith works predominantly in the medium of performance, and re-presents the documentation as art installations. Smith completed an MA in Fine Art at Liverpool John Moores University in 2010. She has performed and exhibited at Z-Arts, HOME, Ny Space, CFCOA, PAPER, Bluecoat, and Arncliffe. She has undertaken artist residencies in Finland, China and Berlin.

She is currently developing an artist residency programme. We Are Resident for families in partnership with Islington Mill in Salford, UK and the Artists' Association in Tampere, Finland.