

## DOMOBAAL

Nicky Hirst  
Custodial Marks

"There is no poetry in politics", Nicky Hirst says from an internet swatch of her studio during an online visit. As a statement it chimes perfectly with the collective mood, on many levels, but given her recent journeys, it also encourages some wondering about what she might mean, exactly. Policy may not be an area where one might go actively looking for poetry, or expect to find it, but the wheels of governance turn under every kind of human story.

Appointed official election artist in 2019, Hirst visited constituencies and hustings across the country, as part of a personal data pilgrimage to inform a new public art commission recently installed at Portcullis House. In fact, she has at times worked directly with the observed rhetoric of the election machine, sorting it into an anagrammatic haiku that says possibly more than any think tank ever could about Britishness; its divisions and typification. The minute and telling details of our narratives are guided like a ribbon through the sharp teeth of the political animal via Hirst's hand.

GET BREXIT DONE

EXIGENT DEBTOR

BERET DETOXING

BEING EXTORTED

TENDER EXIT GOB

While wordplay and linguistic conventions are often embedded within her practice of many parts, everything she makes harbours a familiar but endlessly shape-shifting sense of the poetic. A custodian of readymade things and views, Hirst's economical and precise framing of pre-existing ideas and matter makes all manner of other readings possible. Collaged imagery, found-object sculptural configurations and the photographic recording of moments of urban happenstance give shape to everyday details that seem obvious once made visible, but are invariably overlooked.

Hirst appears curious about assumptions – how we ascribe value and status – as the title of this exhibition 'The Electorate' suggests. It is at once highly specific and phonemically elegant, but as a catch-all for every potential combination of those eligible to vote, is of little actual descriptive use. In contrast, there is no modal hierarchy to Hirst's object system. She holds only the lightest assertion over the articles in her employ and their former lives. Things are allowed to be what they are, what they have been, even as they become something else. The referential specificity implied by objecthood, colour or texture and aesthetic tropes

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is managed forensically in each case to enable the differential view: the scratch-card veneer of face value and what might lie underneath.

Her minimal treatment allows for close examination of the elements in play. In looking at objects and situations altered by use and time, questions arise that offer balloon thoughts out of immediate contextual territories: at what point in a chromatic fade does sunshine yellow become mustard? While painting is not a discipline Hirst works directly in, her compositional decision making and choice of motifs can appear grounded in the idea of looking at the world from a painterly point of view. Circles associatively link hefty ideas of time, civilisation and life cycles with more playful observations and treatments. Her incidental, if purposefully used, symbology witnessed in repeat suggests the possibility of a wider plan at work, as well as compulsive motivations.

Pre-exhibition source-material includes a series of (possibly 1960s) vinyl chair seats in colours of the era and with a municipal or institutional vibe. Each one bears an identically sized ring that must have come from the weight of the same, or at least similar, object. Sensible assessment suggests a paint tin. While the things themselves connect us with homes, cafes and waiting rooms – transitory places that for short periods house people in moments of reflection – the indentations in serial form appear like quotes from the lexicon of minimalist art history. But their ability to signpost us to intellectual visual territories is made intentionally unstable – only ever partially in view amongst the defiantly perfunctory associations worn by these works as items of use.

What expansive collective noun might apply to a group of marks or the physical ingredients of one or multiple works? Given the artist's predilection for borrowing and collecting, often on a temporary or temporal basis, perhaps a custody covers it? Things made, whether artworks or domestic props, are often dismantled – discharged from being 'in use' – if not sold into another context. The word also implies a morally engendered sense of being held for interrogation. But Hirst's chosen objects, signifiers and materials appear encouraged into an organisational format, as opposed to summoned and manipulated into a material dialogue that works against the 'will' of their essential purpose.

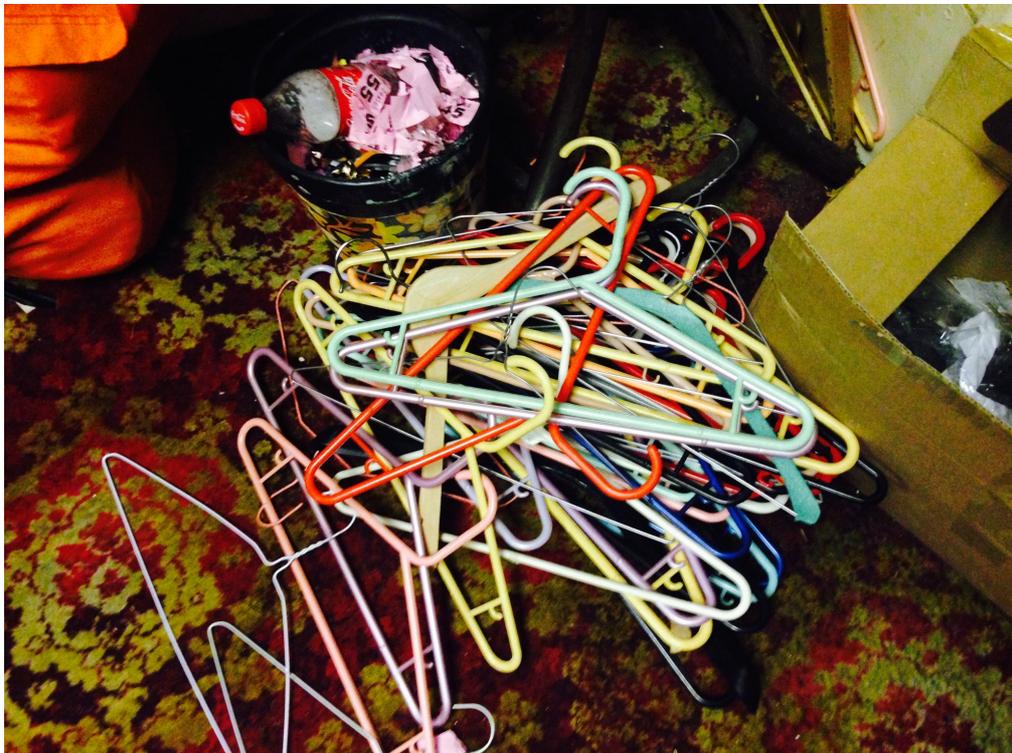
The idea of the collective is written into every body of work, either in the sense of many parts, serialisation, or interdependent dynamics. This is particularly true of Hirst's kinetic, hanging works. Alexander Calder may be the father of the mobile as 20<sup>th</sup> century art form, but Man Ray was first, she explains. His 1920 mobile 'Obstruction' forms the basis of a recent work also constructed from coat hangers. While hers embodies the odd anthropomorphic sensitivity of the original, Hirst's relationship with the surreal seems deeply rooted within the everyday encounter, as opposed to the furthest corners of a dream state.

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While the mobile works rely on precarious Jenga-like logistics for collective aerial existence, their literal and metaphorical physicality brings to mind well-worn but consistently returned to expressions, like "hang together" or "hang in there". Such colloquialisms and other forms of vernacular arrive in the room as a result of both mischievous formal decisions and the idea of each object as having been subject in the past to particular types of chatter. To engage one-on-one with a work, is to think about how we fit within the tweaked set of human parameters now offered, rather than how they might function as actual humanoid signifiers.

Simplicity and minimal intervention may be key, here, but these works function in the multifaceted way they do as a result of Hirst's sophisticated framing and connection with found items, built systematically over time. The seemingly easy handling of stuff, the fact so much of what she introduces already feels known to us, is consciously configured – to our benefit. And always with restraint. In discussion, Hirst talks about absence as a visual strategy, the job of the artist to leave essential room for all the things that need so be communicated but are so often left unsaid.

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