

SECOND CHANCE

My Life in Things



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Unforgotten

A nurse gave me Ian's pyjamas, together with his slippers, his sage-coloured jumper, mobile telephone and a few toiletries in a plastic bag. *Personal effects*. The pyjamas were what he was wearing when he died.

Earlier, she had warned me against staying in the ward while he was being extubated. *Extubated*: a cold, technical term for the process of switching off life support. I had signed the consent form.

Though Ian looked like himself, there was nothing of him left but the shell, the husk. *He'll turn yellow*, she said. *You'll never forget it*. I still thank her for that kindness. I imagine his skin the colour of beeswax, and I walk away. But before that, I put my hand on his familiar hand; a hand large and capable, where specific explanatory gestures lived, where touch of me once coiled. I kissed his brow, which was warm and living, though in effect no longer occupied. I looked at him with quiet, urgent attention, as if to impress on my mind the last signs of his being-in-life. I turned back at the doorway to see again that magnificent nose, the profile on a Roman coin.

There's a private waiting room (is it called a bereavement suite?) where I sat with two of his three children. The third, Ian's second-born son, who arrived late and then ate a curry in the hospital canteen, decided to stay on in the ward, as a show of grit or a kind of penance.

The pyjamas have remained with me. Striped blue seersucker, they are faded and crinkly, faintly yellowed around the neck. They now exist in place of the corpse I never saw. To touch them means to feel again their ridged, nubbly texture and be transported to an earlier time when fabric skimmed flesh. They smell ferny because they have been washed: the stench of hospital and death on them was unbearable. Laundering has removed them from the once-living flesh of my long dead husband.

Why have I kept them? Because they were so close to Ian's dying body, for sure, and to his living one too. Because discarding them would

have been—or seemed to be—heartless, as though it were Ian’s very skin, now flayed, that I would be throwing away. But also, because looking at these pyjamas reminds me of their loose drape on his sinewy, athletic body. Seeing the pyjamas, I also see him. I cannot touch them without having both presence and absence at my fingertips. It is as though some lurking remnant of voodoo grabbed me. To throw these pyjamas away would be to discard the man and the recollection of his horrible death. As though holding the memory in my head—like a reference book, closed but ready for consultation—were not enough.

There is something rigid in this kind of thinking. Rigid with fear; moved by the dread of a loss that has, in effect, already taken place, the mourner’s pre-emptive rigor mortis. To lose the memory would be to lose Ian again. To have to grieve all over again. To lose the material object, I am trying to say, might mean to see the memory transformed, perhaps beyond recognition. The fear of this—for there is fear attached to the possibility of freedom—is that such a transformation might signify a failure of loyalty, of love.

Fearing transformation is perhaps what Freud means when he writes in *Mourning and Melancholia* (1917, 2001) of melancholia not as a state that skirts close to the edges of mourning, but as its opposite: a condition of being stuck in a kind of self-absorption that hinders the work of grief, of mourning, *Trauerarbeit*. Mourning is, for Freud, a labour that a bereaved person must undertake, a process that begins with the removal of the love object (which, in death, it occurs to me, must always be sudden, however slow the process of *dying*). It is always a caesura, its distance from life and the living immeasurable. And we each suffer the anticipation of our own death as something at once unique and generic, personal and impersonal.

In *The Undying* (2019), having undergone aggressive cancer treatment, Anne Boyer writes beautifully of this dialectic. Death, she says,

is both universal and not. It is distributed in disproportion, arrives by drone strikes and guns and husbands’ hands, is carried on the tiny backs of hospital-bred microbes, circulated in the storms raised by the new capitalist weather, arrives through a whisper of radiation instructing the mutation of a cell. It both cares who we are, and it doesn’t.

But although life and death are binary, our affect is not; our attachment to the living person whom we love is not amputated when they die. On the contrary, cathexis—the Freudian term for the concentration of mental or emotional energy on a particular person, idea or object—is not easily abandoned; not even, Freud tells us, when a substitute love object is already beckoning. As part of a process of disinvestment from a love object that has disappeared (by death, abandonment, or betrayal), the task of mourning is one in which you keep rehearsing that loss through repeated acts of reality-testing. It is carried out ‘bit by bit and at great expense of time and cathectic energy.’ Finally, the truth sinks in: the object of your love is well and truly gone.

Is this what is meant by closure? In the Freudian account of mourning, ideally—if the person lost is a chosen love object rather than someone structurally irreplaceable, such as a parent, child, or sibling—you gradually become free to re-attach to a new object. I am not sure what you are supposed to do when a sibling or a child dies; I think in important ways, many people never recover from such a loss. But with lovers, being able to attach to a new object is what is clumsily called *moving on*. Things are not always that clear-cut, but in theory at least, the beloved is dead or as good as, and then we learn through our suffering—through our mourning—that we ourselves are fully alive. In leaving me, P’s parting shot in an email of dispatch entailed an expression of regret for not having given himself more time to mourn his wife.

And yet, pace Freud, bits of your lost love remain attached to you, like flesh to bone; fragments that are so meshed and integrated with your being that you would not want to shed them. P would occasionally call me by his late wife’s name, or I would sometimes call him Ian, each of us, though apparently in love with the other, still somewhere clinging to the lost partner. ‘When I’m drunk,’ writes poet Don Paterson, ‘the ghosts of all my old lovers file through me one by one; I realize I had never stopped loving them, only buried them alive in me.’ I do not need to be drunk to access that vivisepture. I have never had much patience with the notion of closure: I believe the dead—and also the lost undead—continue to reside in me, perhaps more at rest, or simply tucked away somewhere deeper, snoozing.

The pyjamas I have kept, I now think, are less a reminder of Ian than a token of memory itself. They reveal to me how tenuous my belief in my

capacity to hold onto inner objects without such outer props is. 'Even now, when I try to remember,' writes the listless, unnamed narrator of W. G. Sebald's *Austerlitz*,

the darkness does not lift but becomes yet heavier as I think how little we can hold in mind, how everything is constantly lapsing into oblivion with every extinguished life, how the world is, as it were, draining itself, in that the history of countless places and objects which themselves have no power of memory is never heard, never described or passed on.

To rail against such bleakness, to be heard or passed on, it seems, the extinguished life has to be described, recorded, written, rewritten. It must enter into, and operate within, a signifying network, which is also a web of innumerable transformations. Thoughts and associations must be allowed to ebb and flow, to shift and change form if they are not to risk settling and finding their home on a site of amnesia.

In being associated first with Ian's living body, then with his corpse, later finding themselves in a drawer, then being unpacked and spread out for a photograph, Ian's pyjamas have turned from possession to still life. I find myself considering that move from material ownership to an art form, a genre that is verbally characterised by its immobility. And I wonder now if my attachment to the art of still life—to the stilling of life in objects selected for that purpose—might not always be a way of thinking about stasis, but also about its opposite: change.

Still(ed) Life

Still life painting—especially that by the Dutch artists of the seventeenth century—seems to be about the quiddity of objects. There appears to be something staunch and immovable in those exquisite panoplies of natural and wrought things. In his beautiful poem 'Realism' (1995), Czeslaw Milosz says that 'we are not so badly off, if we can/Admire Dutch painting. For that means/We shrug off what we have been told/For a hundred, two hundred years.' The things captured in the paintings enable us to brush away hearsay and see the things for what they are: 'this here:/A jar, a tin plate, a half-peeled lemon,/Walnuts, a loaf of bread, last—and so strongly/It is hard not to believe in their lastingness.'

This here: the thingness of the thing, as it exists in the present moment. Pieter Claesz' lemon, or Manet's, or Maira Kalman's, or the one you

have in a bowl with three others, standing cool on a kitchen windowsill. You will believe in the lastingness of things, but look closer and you will see the worm in the fruit, the tear in the silk, the blossom about to turn, the drop of water soon to evaporate. Transformation—which is also putrefaction, death—is everywhere in these paeans to the riches of the table. The sufficiency of things, and their transience, both. In this sense, the objects of still life are like the objects of memory: apparently stable, they are in fact nothing if not mutable.

Being separated from the world—traditionally, set apart on a table—the objects of still life speak to us of the mundane, of the reassurance of ordinariness, of the continuity of lived experience. Historically, representations of the routines of daily living and the discourse of the unexceptional were known under the banner of *rhopography*, from the Greek *rhopos*, meaning trivial objects or trifles. Such a discourse was pitted against that dealing with exceptional acts of unique, fearless individuals (*megalography*) as represented in sculptures of classical antiquity and the Renaissance, or the genre of history painting. Epics. Battles.

However, there are artists who labour specifically to erase the historical distinction between the unique gesture of heroic actions and the commonality of everyday things. They show us that to focus on the specific can be a way of addressing that which is shared, common to many. To examine closely the ways in which individuals express their self-experience through the objects with which they engage—through the still life that stands for them—becomes a form of engagement with metonymic portraiture. You capture the person and her life through the objects she touches or uses, the things that, in that transfer back and forth between the visual and the tactile, come to describe her.

Numerous photographers working in different idioms have conjured unique experiences by training their attention to the small, constituent parts of a subject's personal idiom. What he wears. The implements or tools she uses. The things they put down on a table. In such works, the clothes and belongings of an individual present themselves to the viewer as proxies, standing in for that particular human presence. And if they communicate something of the dilated time of non-events—of nothing-in-particular happening—they are also often crisscrossed by traces of something-having-already-happened. An event that already was. Sometimes, a violent event; sometimes, death itself.

My photograph of Ian's pyjamas, crumpled on a white sheet laid flat on the floor—its ironed folds visible in the soft light, its allusion to a winding sheet manifest—becomes a still life that participates in a particular, if discreet, tradition of contemporary still lifes: things of the dead. Each of these still lifes stands on the site of a loss, representing its own contiguity with a once-living body.

These Are Works that Move Me

a) In 2006, Swiss photographer Peter Püntener made photographs of clothes, shoes and other personal belongings at the Krajina Identification Project. Established in 1996, the remit of this project was to assemble and process the remains of those killed in the Balkans War. In a former industrial building on the edge of the Bosnian town of Sanski Most, human remains were gathered and arranged on trestle tables: skeletons, many of them missing bones, positioned as though in silent anticipation of an anatomy lesson. A single bullet has blasted through each skull. At the foot of each trestle table, dusty, torn and broken possessions and clothing found with the exhumed remains are gathered. Post-mortem examinations, ante-mortem data and DNA reports are collated and the results coordinated by local identification authorities in an attempt to return newly identified remains to families. This is the raw material of Püntener's work.

The items of clothing lie spread on white fabric body bags set against a speckled ground. The nature of Püntener's scant intervention in setting up the scene of the event of photography is tactile: Püntener picks up the dead person's belongings and rearranges them in a particular way, turning forensic document into work, mere things into a rudimentary still life, megalography in rhopography. The identical formatting of the individual images grants the pieces together the sense of a unified series, a listing linked by simple compositional and structural criteria. No information about the fact-findings or the deceased person is legibly included in the photographs; any relevant text is blurred. Püntener explains that this is because these cases might come to be used at the International War Crimes Tribunal in the Hague: 'the hand-written words you can still find on the white body bags represent a common religious farewell greeting to honor the deceased person.'

Clearly, though adhering to some of the protocols of conceptual art—the serial form, a coherent set of criteria, an apparently affectless approach—Püntener's work can only be considered art insofar as it is also already activism, intrinsically political. Its title amounts to an accusation: *Totenklage* translates as 'the lawsuits of the dead,' claims or actions filed against unnamed perpetrators in the name of dead victims. It is as though each photograph were also an accusation, a speech act. Like Kiki Streitberger's images of the belongings of Syrian refugees, Püntener's view is aerial. And like Streitberger's, the photographic prints invite viewing vertically in the conventional manner of pictures on walls, images in an art gallery or museum, enlisting complex sensory, personal and cultural associations.

In the grim pastiche of a still life—inert items spread out on a tablecloth—Püntener has arranged and composed the torn and stained remainders of clothes and belongings in such a way as to establish a meaningful corporeal syntax. Shirts are positioned above trousers, skirts above shoes, at once idealising and parodying the contents of the body bags. These compositions attest to the tactile relationship between the possessions of the dead and the photographer, his delicately corporeal intervention as he lays the clothes meticulously. We see in their arrangement Püntener's care, and we are quietly invited to imagine what it might be like to engage so intimately, so physically, with the belongings of ones who, whilst wearing or carrying these items, died so violently.

b) Seventy years after the dropping of the atomic bomb on Hiroshima, Japanese photographer Ishiuchi Miyako travelled repeatedly to that city to photograph objects that survived the bombing and are now housed in the Hiroshima Peace Memorial Museum. There are 219 photographs in the series ひろしま *hiroshima* (2007–2014) and they are either framed in white and unmatted, or unframed, thus to be hung on walls.

These images belong to a recognisable genre of Hiroshima photography, where, over the years, attention has moved from people to objects and then back again. But in several ways, Ishiuchi's photographs diverge from that genre. She uses no situating text—no captions or narratives associated with the display of such artefacts—allowing only the name of the owner of the thing, when known, to be included in her titles. The souvenirs of atrocity include a fragment of denture; a comb;

a broken watch; an embroidered cloth handbag; torn shirts; flimsy dresses; seared socks; a suitcase handle; shoes; buttoned gloves. In some of the close-ups, she isolates fragments such as tears, hems, borders, buttons, selvedge. Silk, organza and linen are stained, scorched, frayed, shredded.

Mostly, the garments and objects selected were once owned and used by women. It is not only materially, but also semantically that Ishiuchi focuses on the experience of the women of Hiroshima. ひろしま *hiroshima*, her title for the corpus, contains both Japanese rōmaji characters and hiragana characters. Hiragana, a syllabary that is one component of the Japanese writing system, is derived from the cursive script of Chinese calligraphy, and was historically used by women, who were not granted access to the same levels of education as men. Famously, in the eleventh-century *Tale of Genji* and other early courtly novels by women writers, hiragana was employed extensively or exclusively.

As in *Mother's*, the earlier series that Ishiuchi Miyako made using her dead mother's belongings, the items in ひろしま *hiroshima* reveal traces of intimate ownership. The photographer comes up close to these objects (I find riveting the shots showing her at work: no tripod, just her body bending over the things in a way that seems informal, personal, intimate). And she brings us up close with her: each image addresses the viewer directly, privately. Frequently, the items are cropped by the frame, almost filling our field of vision. The monstrosity of the bombing is implicit not only as a scarring of surface, but also as an omission: that which is left unsaid, outside the frame.

Each item issues an invitation to empathy through sensory engagement. In touching the frame or being cropped by it, each piece exists as pure foreground, implicating the photographer's body, and that of the viewer as well. Ishiuchi's sensuous absorption in the relationship between transparency and opacity draws the viewer's close attention to the material item in the present tense, leaving its relationship to a moment of horror in the past implicit. And it comes as no surprise, seeing the epidermal effect of these friable clothes, that for over a decade, Ishiuchi also worked on a series of close-ups of scars (1991–2003).

The scrutiny that the viewer is invited to lavish on the work is honed by the lighting of each photograph. We can see the seams, the weave, the translucent surfaces, fine as skin. More dramatically than Püntener's

images, because more explicitly 'beautiful,' Ishiuchi's photographs engage with the question of the aestheticisation of horror that has vexed so many twentieth-century critics of images of extreme suffering. Rather than turning her back on such aestheticisation, Ishiuchi presents it as an abrasive ethical challenge to the viewer.

Although the photographs of Ishiuchi, like those of Püntener, are linked to a specific historical circumstance, in their simplicity and the direct ways in which they attest to a collectively experienced catastrophe, they also suggest the universality of suffering. In her film *Things Left Behind* (2013), Linda Hoaglund observes that these photographs prompt us to imagine ourselves in the fashionable, beautiful clothes and shoes that Ishiuchi photographed. We then become subjects implicated in these works, and by extension, unwittingly imperilled by catastrophe. We become, to borrow a phrase from French philosopher Michel Serres, subjects born of objects.

Ishiuchi—who has stated that for her, photographs function in both form and content as traces of time—photographed her selected objects backlit on a lightbox. As the series progressed, she began to arrange them on tracing paper placed on the floor of the museum, relying mostly on ambient lighting. This change suggests a desire to remove the objects from associations of art and artfulness, offering them as objects of a more intimate and direct address. Amanda Maddox, Associate Curator of the Department of Photographs at the J Paul Getty Museum in California, where Ishiuchi's exhibition *Postwar Shadows* ran in 2015–2016, describes how the photographer squatted and knelt beside the items of clothing 'to inspect the tears and holes caused by irradiation, as well as the intricate, handmade qualities visible in the stitching, patchwork, and mending.' There is, in Ishiuchi's low-tech method, a bodily identification with these fragile, ruined items; a tender and personal approximation as she touches them, arranges them, frames them.

In these delicate yet lapidary objects, the atomic explosion has dramatised *in extremis* the separation of a time before from an ever-after. It seems to me that, in materially embodying that moment of catastrophic and consequential arrest, these objects take on the historical condition of photography itself, the way in which, in a single click or flash, photography brings about an abrupt cessation of the ongoingness of time. In that historical condition of photography,

the past is momentarily illuminated, flashes up, and then is at once extinguished and memorialised. The present tense of the photograph is a static arrangement of fragments, of parts. 'Here and formerly,' is art theorist Thierry de Duve's fabulously succinct formulation for such a temporality.

c) While Püntener and Ishiuchi's bodies of work attest to collective catastrophes, British artist Peter Watkins explores an experience of personal catastrophe: the suicide of his mother when Watkins was nine years old. Ute Watkins walked into the North Sea from a beach at Zandvoort in the Netherlands. Watkins has suggested that the form that her suicide took represents how existentially torn she felt between Germany, where she was born, and Wales, where the family lived; the drowning might have resulted from a confused idea of 'trying to make her way home, to swim across the North Sea back to Wales.' She had been diagnosed with schizophrenia in her late teens and had experienced a relapse shortly after Peter's birth. Her suicide occurred, in the words of her son, as the 'culmination of several months' struggle' with a new recurrence of her illness.

she moved between her native Germany and Wales, between different houses and hotel rooms and two psychiatric wards, as the family tried desperately to take control of her deterioration. She no longer went by her Christian name, 'Ute,' but by 'Suzanne,'—her middle name. She was restless and manic, and seemingly heartbroken.

The Unforgetting (2011–2014) is not only a pained gathering of physical fragments from Ute Watkins' life, it is also, as the title suggests, a meditation on the precariousness and paradoxical workings of memory. It is an elaboration on the unforgetting that is the guilty premise of Peter Watkins' very existence, the burden of his having been born.

The title of this body of work is drawn from French writer and film maker Chris Marker's cult film *Sans Soleil* (1983) in which the narrator says: 'I will have spent my life trying to understand the function of remembering, which is not the opposite of forgetting, but rather its lining. We do not remember. We rewrite memory much as history is rewritten.' In appropriating and stretching Marker's idea, Watkins accommodates two propositions—remembering and forgetting—and their distinct negations.

The Unforgetting signals a purpose: to reverse the forward momentum of forgetfulness as it careens toward complete obliteration: oblivion. Is remembering the same as un-forgetting? The latter implies the removal of a block, an impediment, an obstacle. And an obstacle may well be, as psychoanalyst Adam Phillips has suggested, that which unpacks a desire, reveals it. With this title, Watkins suggests not something completed, but an ongoing process, undoing and dismantling the things that stand in the way of the child's development; things that impede the expression of *this* child's desire for his mother, whose self-willed death has both accused and excluded him, frozen him in his tracks, in the time of his childhood.

Peter Watkins' memories are filtered through evocative objects that situate his mother existentially, bureaucratically and experientially. He uses both found photographs and ones that he has artfully composed and made. We see Ute as a young girl, then as a beautiful young woman, presumably not too long before she died at the age of thirty-four. The objects depicted include an audio cassette tape and a Panasonic cassette player: his mother was a linguist and used to teach herself languages by recording her own voice. But the tape in the photograph was, Watkins tells Pauline Rowe,

actually a mix tape that she had made, and left in my grandmother's car, and as the radio never worked, this became my soundtrack to the project. Another tape I have is of me, at two years old, singing nursery rhymes with my mother, the only recording I have of her voice.

A list itemising his mother's possessions found at the time of her death, reads as a poignant portrait. It includes

- an orange pocket torch
- three identity cards
- a set of house keys
- bank withdraw slips
- Hospital Personal Patient's Card
- a pack of Wrigley's Doublemint chewing gum (four sticks remaining)
- two grey-and-orange Lufthansa pens

Ordinary and resistant to poeticising, these listed objects, considered in the light of the son's desire to hold onto the memory of his mother, suggest that there is no guaranteed continuity between a material prompt and a reliable memory. Remembering and forgetting are each lined with the other: they wrap around each other, get folded and creased, furl together like a Möbius strip. Together, the four terms remembering/unremembering/forgetting/unforgetting build a fragile and changeable mnemonic structure.

With formal severity, Watkins trains his attention onto a few objects, removed from their everyday contexts in the manner of the most abstract of still lifes. Captured in black and white, the images of Ute/Suzanne's possessions have a pared down and emotionally restrained quality. Wood features in many of these images as a warm, tactile material that also, for Watkins, stands for his mother's German identity. A small selection of impossibly floating books describes Ute as a reader. Then: a satchel; furniture covered in sheets; an obituary notice; small formal glimpses of suburban houses; indoor plants; an accordion and a baptismal dress, an item linked to a Christian ritual that eerily prefigures Ute's death by drowning. The black and white photograph of the baptismal dress is embedded in yellow Perspex, like an insect caught in amber. To some, this touch of colour might suggest sunshine or life itself, but to me, this yellow is the colour of jaundice and extubation, the colour of panic.

In these formal, subdued works, the freeze action of photographic capture both memorialises and stands for the sudden ending of Ute Watkins' life. Her son has created a spellbinding photographic installation that yokes intense emotion to its wilful inhibition. Stylised groupings of objects are interrupted by elusive, equally still portraits. Among the portraits, there is but a single one of the artist as a young man. Dated 2011, it shows him stripped to the waist, seated on a hard wooden chair, his fists clenched. Turned away from us, he allows us to see his back, which bears the large circular scars of cupping, a Chinese treatment for depression. The reticence of this image is, in part, a matter of point of view. Watkins positions himself at a distance, leaving the viewer at arm's length, refusing to submit to the temptation of close contact. This self-portrait with scars communicates a sense of profound isolation and vulnerability, a traumatic silencing. The tension between a desire to withhold (the face wilfully withdrawn from view) and the

wish to communicate (almost turning around) resonates outwards from this individual image to touch the entire body of work.

* * *

In all of the works that I have addressed here (Püntener, Ishiuchi, Watkins), the material objects in the image occupy a locus of radical loss. Each body of work—that corporeal metaphor for an aggregate of works is so apt here—addresses, in other words, the material expression of a violent loss of life. Each invites the viewer’s attention to oscillate between the evocation of a particular deceased subject or subjects (Watkins’ mother; named victims of the bombing of Hiroshima; Bosnia’s missing, unnamed dead) and the impossibility of those subjects being fully or even adequately represented. In different ways, then, these works suggest the tension between an essential remembering and an inevitable forgetting. And that relation is configured, I think, as a relation between the visual and the tactile.

Writing about Peter Watkins, Benedetta Casagrande pays particular attention to the tactile. ‘In dealing with things that have been left behind by our dead,’ she writes,

it is not so much the visual but the *tactile* which provides a posterior connection to whom we have lost—our hands discovering the surfaces which have been touched before; the gesture repeated in a ritualistic manner stretching through generations; an imaginary contact between our body and the body which we can no longer touch.

It is *the body which we can no longer touch* that remains, insistent as a ghost in the works of Püntener, Ishiuchi and Watkins. And indeed, thinking back to an earlier chapter, this is also applicable to the work of Carol Hudson, Rosalie Rosenberg and Tina Ruisinger.

I become especially interested in this aspect—the question of touch—at the time of writing, when, under the rules of social distancing, all bodies are bodies that I cannot touch.

With our lives shaped and altered by the Covid-19 pandemic, I find that such works—works about the evacuation of the body—have a particular resonance, a special poignancy.

For months on end, I am the only human in a large house.

I remember reading somewhere how lanugo, that fine body hair that human fetuses develop in utero, enhances comforting sensations of

being wrapped by amniotic fluid, serving as earliest precursors to the pleasure and security of being held, or later, embraced. I touch Monty, of course, and animal touch in some ways is everything: I note the place where the softness of his ear brushes against my thigh, or where his chin is cupped by my yielding flesh. My consciousness is attuned to the sinews beneath his fur. I find endearing and frankly laudable his need to be in the same room as me, and *quite* near, but not as close as I would sometimes wish. Monty cannot hug me, his touch has purpose for him, but is not purposeful in relation to me.

In being unseen and untouched by other humans, I feel a little disjointed, alienated, expelled from myself. 'When, in a room by ourselves,' writes Gabriel Josipovici, 'we reach outwards our hand in a mirror and meet only the coldness of the glass, we do not call that touching.' I can make myself come, but I cannot embrace myself: the limitations of touch test the limits of my self-containment, my autonomy. During lockdown, we are all caught in webs of meaning woven around the concept of contagion, whose etymology links *touching* with *together*, and whose cure is a kind of banishment.

I am drawn, then, to these works not only for the ways they track a relationship between a body and its absence, but also for the ways in which they talk to me of the present time.

Our moments of remembering and forgetting, of erasure and excavation.

Our oblivion and our unforgetting.

We handle the possessions of those who have died, and in that tactility and materiality, we nakedly feel our losses.

In folding away again Ian's pyjamas, I am aware of how I have grown accustomed to a world in which he is no longer present.

