Monsters and Margins

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Abstract

Ralph Overill's research examines the relationship between figures of otherness and peripheral landscapes. Combining creative practice with theoretical and contextual study, Ralph explores the haunts of the 20th and 21st centuries, referencing popular cinematic and literary culture. From this he constructs a framework across psychogeographical and hauntological notions, including the work of J.G. Ballard, Robert Smithson, Iain Sinclair and Mark Fisher. His practice, with its roots in printmaking evolves to take ownership of spaces, embracing site-specific intervention, roadside walks, creative writing, installation and performative strategies, as Ralph searches for the essence of his own inner demons and his connection to the edge-lands of Essex in which he resides.

Keywords

Psychogeography

Hauntology

Printmaking

Walking

Creative writing

J.G. Ballard

Robert Smithson

Iain Sinclair

Mark Fisher

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Introduction

‘What trick of topography is this, that lets the sprawling monster hide behind corners to leap out at the traveller? It is too late to flee.’

(Miéville, 2000, p. 1)

This report tells my tale of monsters and margins, using a combination of artistic practice and theoretical study to examine the relationship between creatures of otherness and landscapes at the periphery. Throughout my life, I have gravitated towards places at the edge, excited by the clash of the wild and the ruined, attracted to the melancholy of the desolate and the degraded. These vagrant combinations spark my imagination – adventure, alienation, hostile territory – igniting dreams and nightmares of monsters. Why do I still stalk these spaces and what lurks there waiting for me to return? I search for the essence of these beasts and borderlands both personally, through self-reflection and childhood memories, and culturally, studying the evolution of what has haunted our book pages and cinema screens through the 20th and 21st centuries. The following pages document the development of creative practice and understanding I have built over the past five years studying on the Professional Doctorate in Fine Art programme, while adapting to and exploiting the unexpected changes and challenges along the way. From spinal injuries and university restructures, to national lockdowns and global pandemics, it has been a messy doctorate, but I have continued to push at the boundaries of my subject and my creative self, despite these unpredictable confines and instabilities. While distance travelled is no guarantee of success, I can take some confidence from the fact that my practice is a very different creature to what it was at the start of the programme, twisting and turning down unknown, risky paths that I feel I have been brave enough to tread.

The report’s structure is largely chronological, allowing me to narrate the evolution of the research. The first section, *Personal and creative context*, introduces me more fully to the reader, as a child (describing the circumstances of my upbringing) and as an artist (logging my creative education through undergraduate, postgraduate and aborted PhD studies). The second section, *Creative practice and theory*, charts the

key milestones of my Professional Doctorate study, communicating the decisions made in practice, while connecting the artwork to a wider context, constructing a conceptual framework unique to my concerns as an artist. This includes reference to, amongst others, Richard Kearney, Robert Rauschenberg, Robert Smithson, J.G. Ballard, Iain Sinclair, Francesca Woodman and Mark Fisher, as I build creative approaches that bridge between the disciplines of printmaking, walking, reflective writing, photography and performance. The third section, *Professional practice*, lists my undertakings and achievements as a professional artist and arts educator through the duration of the programme, including exhibitions, publications and presentations. This is followed by appendices of supplementary information and material useful to the reading of this report, including the full texts of two articles I have published as part of my research and documentation of my final viva exhibition in June 2022.

Through the presentation and narration of the last 5 years of research, I aim to contextualise, communicate, and ultimately, contribute my unique creative practice to the field of the fine arts. My original amalgamation of interests and working strategies that explore the intricacies of the symbiosis that exists between monsters and places at the edge, with an ability to expand or contract to address the singular or the societal, the personal or the political. Its willingness to adapt from strong foundations in printmaking, to embrace installation, guerrilla, and performative strategies, culminating in an ambitious and daring viva exhibition, quite unlike anything that has emerged from the dark forests of this research programme before.

I choose to end this introduction with the voice of Richard Kearney, whose text *Strangers, gods and monsters* (2003), has been a constant presence through this period of study, and I hope will prime you for the words and images to come:

‘Our very existence is narrative, for the task of every finite being is to make some sense of what surpasses its limits – that strange, transcendent otherness which haunts and obsesses us, from without and from within.’

(2003, p. 231)

Personal and Creative Context

How did I get here? A 35-year-old white-British male raised in the commuter belt suburb of Billericay, Essex. The county's landscape has been an important part of my life from its early stages: a childhood spent playing with spud guns in fields and traversing the dips and jumps of local woodland on my bike. This was augmented by regular nature walks, wildlife activity days and zoo visits with my father, cementing a curiosity for the stranger places and creatures of Southeast England into my psyche. Having worn myself out from my daily excursions, I would unwind by watching and re-watching my favourite sci-fi and horror films (collected on recordable VHS tapes) kindling my imagination and fascination with the possibilities of the unreal. An intelligent child, I was never one to fit in; bullied and restless at school, quiet and socially awkward, I found acceptance and expression through skateboarding culture, connecting to the risk, nomadic adventure and creativity it offered. This roaming freedom was counterbalanced by weekly karate lessons, ingraining me with a self-discipline, motivation and appreciation for the practice of movement and physicality.

25 years later, I continue to pursue these activities. Now more confident, academically strong, yet in financial struggle, I still feel very much on the edge. Living between the nostalgia of my childhood home and my wife's flat in the rawness of Grays, Thurrock, I repeatedly traverse the A13 corridor in my rusting Nissan Micra. Both my parents have consistently supported my creativity and autonomy, though as I have matured, I have witnessed them increasingly suffer from arthritis and other joint decomposition illnesses. As I write this, my mother has a rare form of glaucoma and a spur on her optic nerve, threatening to blind the limited sight she has left at any time. This fact propels me to make work at an unyielding rate – so that she might experience the development of my research – while also implanting an anxiety in me for the future of my own body and its ability to uphold my physical lifestyle. Quiet, curious and polite, I speak when spoken to, think rather than say, but my character masks a measured, yet ever-present, subversive streak.

Not particularly talented at painting or drawing, I was attracted to the art room by the kinder teachers and pupils it housed, alongside the shelter it offered from playground

bullies. When introduced to printmaking at college in 2006, the mixture of manual technique and mechanical process fitted my creative ambitions, and I went on to dedicate my undergraduate and postgraduate studies to the medium. Initially attracted to the mixture of chemistry and creativity offered by etching, my undergraduate degree culminated in a series of small aquatints exploring ghost-like creatures in dark, undefined space. This imagery was based on video-stills from sci-fi and horror films, which I painted by hand onto zinc plates, using the edges of metal letterpress type to stamp hard mechanical shapes that contrasted the more painterly human forms. I enjoyed exploiting the darkness created by the intaglio process and appreciated printmaking's ability to transform and destabilise images, as I sought to depict something between planes of existence. In this work, it was never the intention to create threat or horror, rather to convey the instability and flux of something spectral and undefined. Looking back on these prints now, I see skeletal, blanched figures, lost in darkness, each confined to their own rectangular cage of the plate mark, as isolated, alone and unable to integrate with the world beyond them.

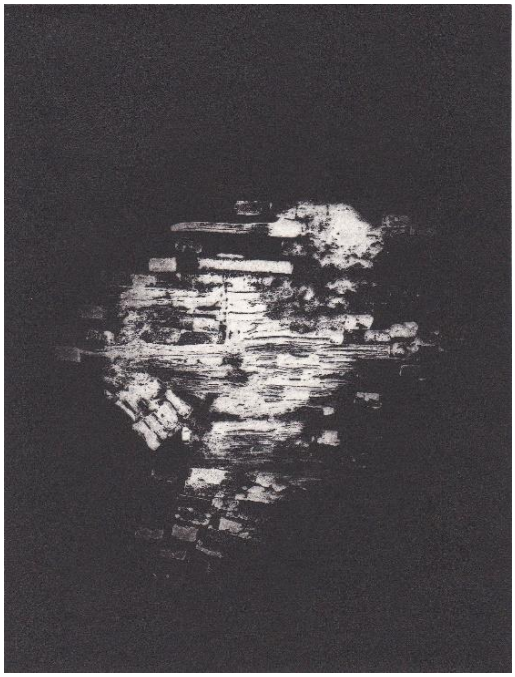

Figure 1: Ralph Overill, *Ghost of Hellboy*, 2009, etching, 16x12cm

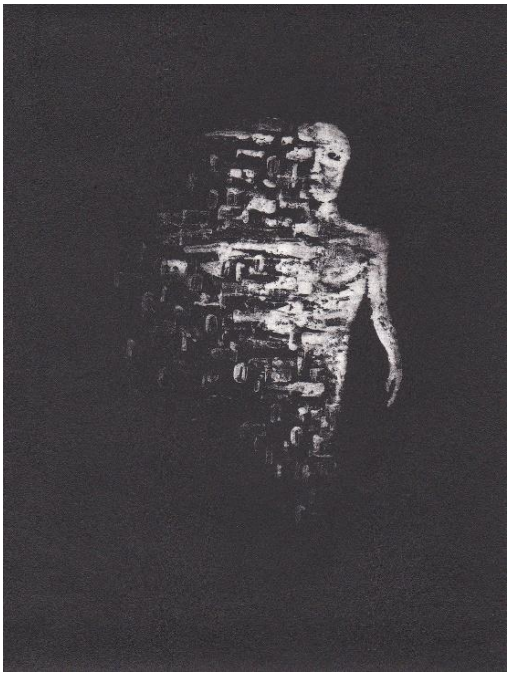

Figure 2: *Disintegration*, 2009, etching, 16x12cm

Further discouraged from pencil and paintbrush by my MA tutors, I began to experiment and embrace image transfer methods in my postgraduate study. The Camberwell print workshops were a fitting arena to hone my intaglio skills and learn

to appreciate the subtleties and serendipities of how an image could be transformed through oil and acid. I continued to demand a strong tactile experience in my practice, tearing, smudging and collaging forms so that their presence on the etching plates held a trace of manual process. My graduating piece, Landsite (2011), was more ambitious in scale, creating a delicate chrysalis from 16 etchings printed onto thin Chinese paper, featuring a variety of insectoid forms caught in imagined stages of metamorphosis. Frailty and vulnerability were evident in these half-creatures, alongside a sense of alienation and dislocation from an increasingly pressured and hectic contemporary world. This piece was awarded the Clifford Chance Purchase Prize and added to the law firm's printmaking collection.

Figure 3: Ralph Overill, *Land site*, 2011, 16 etchings, 210x100cm

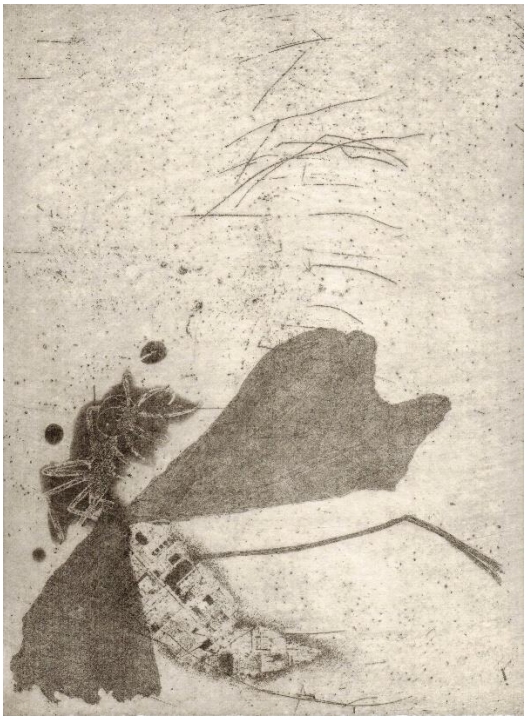

Figure 4: *Land site* (detail), 2011, etching, 29.5x23.5cm

I spent the next 4 years on print-studio internships and taking freelance editioning projects. I was involved in the creation of print editions for artists from Damien Hirst and Tracey Emin to Jamie Reid and Invader, learning to scavenge left-over scraps of metal and paper for my own work. I exhibited regularly in group shows, but failed to capitalise on the success of my MA degree show – my practice became increasingly safe and convenient until this lack of fulfilment spurred me to enrol on a research degree at Chelsea College of Arts. My struggle to succeed under the academic rigours of the PhD programme forced me to foster more risk and ambition in my

practice. I made a series of large woodblock prints imagining my former art colleges and exhibition venues in states of ruin and decay – seemingly denouncing the institutions and systems that had created me. Still struggling to register a research question and now disillusioned by academia and the artworld, I found myself attracted to the marginal landscapes of my home county; derelict and dilapidated spaces where pylons and road signs clashed with brambles and cow parsley. Etching and woodcut felt too slow and precious to capture these edge-lands that lined the roads and footpaths I wandered. Taking inspiration from Thomas Kilpper's monumental prints I began to work with fabric – cheap, large and easy to transport, I would no longer be tethered by the preciousness of printmaking paper.

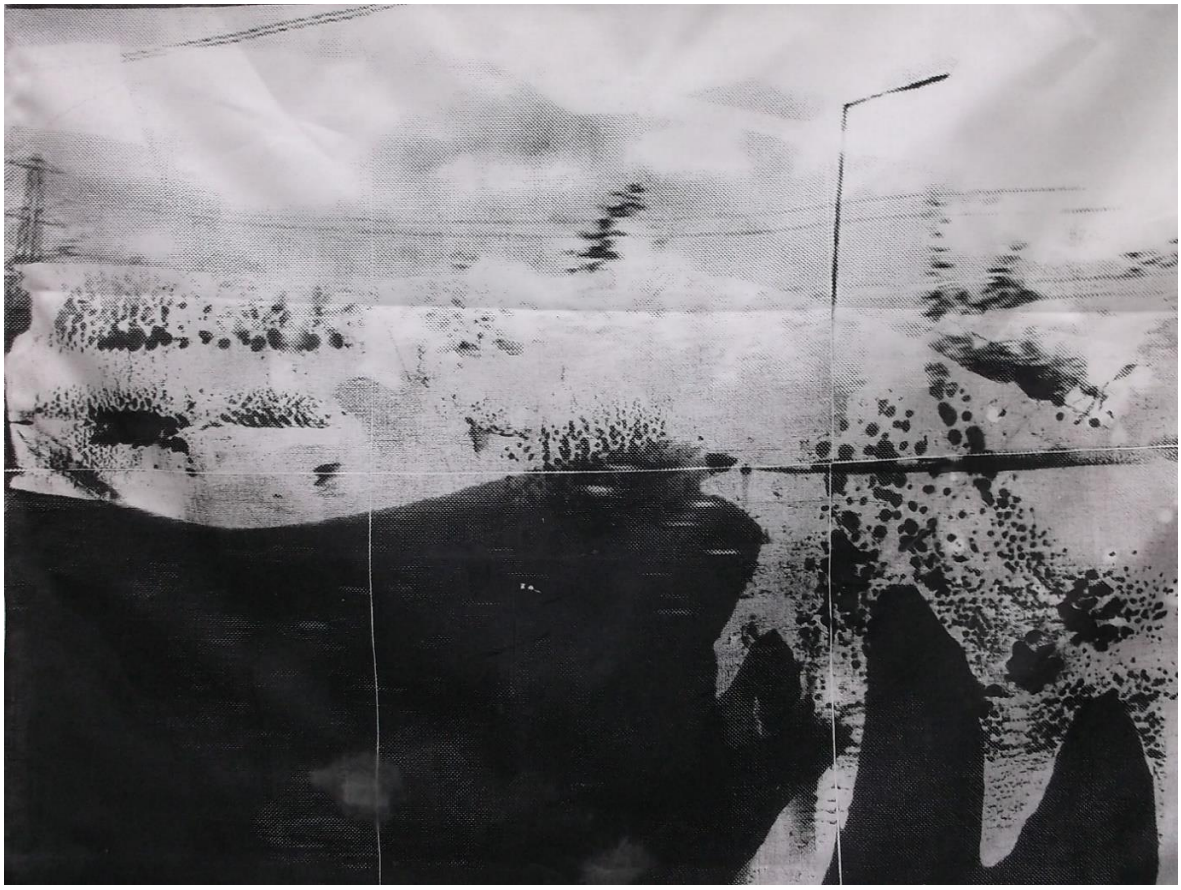

Figure 5: Ralph Overill, *Horizons of imperfection* (detail), 2016, screen-print, 37.5x50cm

Wanting to work faster and bigger, screen-printing became attractive to me. Speed, pressure and direction were inherent to this process, and I sought to exploit them through raw scrapes and swipes of an under-inked squeegee, letting the images stretch and tear into nothingness on the fabric beneath – much like the carriageway verges described by Paul Virilio – 'landscapes scoured by speed' (1991, p. 68).

There was something filmic about the A13, the rhythmic passing of lamp posts and telegraph poles, glimpsed from the car window seemed to segment the view in an analogous way to how a film is reeled off a projector – Marc Auge likened the parallel movement of roadside landscape to 'a series of snapshots piled hurriedly into [our] memory' (2009, p. 86). I decided photography was too static to capture these non-places and instead began filming my journeys, working with stills captured from the footage. This tension between motion and stasis present in my source imagery was enhanced in the resulting screen-prints, leading me to film theorist Raymond Bellour and his investigations into the instability of the moving image, and Laura Mulvey, who noted home audiences' ability to take control of the cinematic motor through their remote controls – the possessive spectator. This grew an appreciation of the fragmented, dislocated suspension of the still frame – between the fleeting moments of film and the lingering capture of photography – I linked this suspension to the silkscreen, suspended and latent, millimetres above the substrate, waiting for the image to be passed through it. This reading led to a practical experiment where I inserted my squeegee-scarred images back into the cinematic motor; one frame was screen-printed 24 times, each unique in the traces of motion in its printing. The resulting prints were scanned and inputted into video editing software, making each last 1/24th of a second. This second of footage was looped 60 times to create a minute-long film that hovered somewhere between motion and stasis [available at https://vimeo.com/224480984]. While the image remained largely fixed, the squeegee marks created a flickering animation – a running movement reminiscent of scratched and degrading filmstock passing through a projector. These results nurtured an interest in the materiality of film and the ruin of celluloid.[1]

[1] For a more comprehensive analysis of the connection between the moving image and screen-printing, referencing Andy Warhol's practice, please see my publication: Overill, R. (2018) 'Between the Screens: screen-printing moving images' in *Journal of Arts Writing by Students*, 4(1), Intellect Publishing Ltd, pp. 37-47.

Figure 6: Ralph Overill, *Passing through* (installation view), 2016, screen-print, 100x800cm

Taking inspiration from the imprecise, mechanical repetition of Andy Warhol's Death and Disaster canvases, his intriguing film works such as *Empire* (1964) and the ambitious scale of Robert Rauschenberg's *Barge* (1962-63), I went on to produce work for two solo exhibitions, covering gallery walls with filmic meters of speed-scraped fencing and foliage in my search for a project that would behave within the narrow limits of a PhD. Eventually, two years into the battle, my supervisory team advised me to find another way 'for the sake of human happiness!' I was too restless, too naughty, too …odd to research within this model. However, vaguely aware of a Stratford-based art doctorate, I defiantly decided the very same day that this would be my next point of call. An open evening and an interview later, my adventure was just beginning. I enrolled at University of East London with a recharged, energetic practice – stronger than it had ever been – but still feeling that something was missing: the PhD process had left scars, encouraging me to bury and ignore important feelings, interests and memories. While my work was more expansive and courageous than ever, I sensed restraint – something held back – I had more to give. What lay watching beyond the ivy-tangled fencing? Who lurked in the shadows of black halftoned screen ink? Who did I meet when I remembered the margins? What did I imagine when I walked at the edge?

Creative Practice and Theory

Carriageway creature features

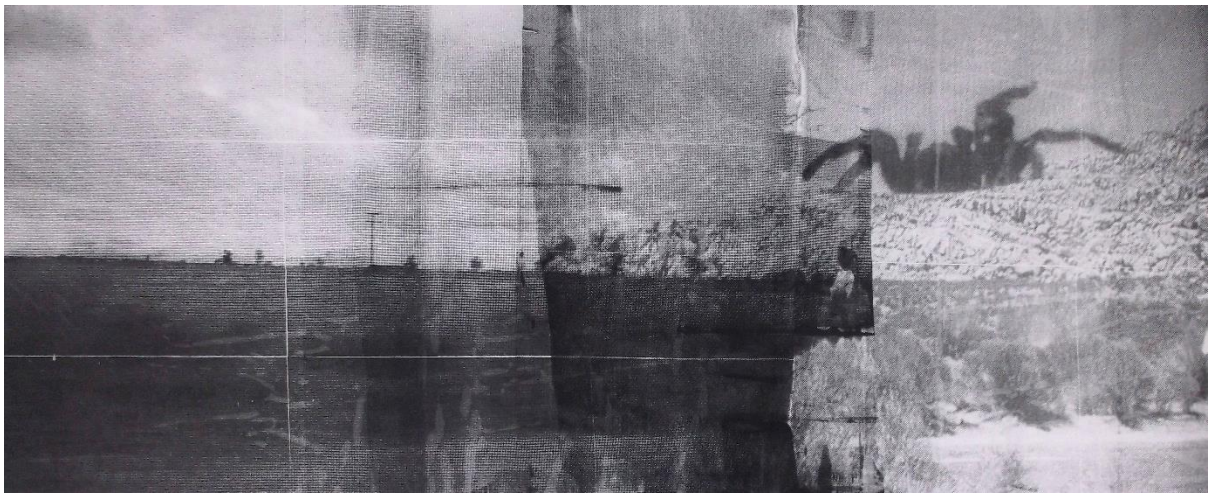

Figure 7: Ralph Overill, *Over the hill*, 2017, screen-print, 60x120cm

A barren nondescript horizon presided over by a giant tarantula, realised in a grainy filmic language of streaky frame edges and halftone dots. *Over the hill* (Fig.7) was the first work I made on the programme, selected for *Art in print* journal's *Prix de print* award, the piece was featured in an issue of the publication and subjected to a short essay by critic Nicolas Collins, who commented on the print's conversation with film as a medium of fantasy, noting that the Arabic word for 'movie' translates into English roughly as 'that which is not real' (2017, p. 42). Created by overlapping two screen-printed images – a frame of footage captured while driving along the A13 and a still from Jack Arnold's 1955 film *Tarantula* – the concept was born out of remnants of the filmic research undertaken during my discontinued PhD. I had been inspired by a scene from Chris Marker's *Sans soleil* (1983) where footage of passengers asleep on a Japanese commuter train was interspersed with clips from Asian horror, samurai and porn movies – an instance, as interpreted by Catherine Lupton, 'when the life and the shadow realm of the movies bleed into and influence one another' (2005, p. 168). This permeable membrane where the banality of the real and the unreality of cinema meet and merge was where I wanted to position my work – on

the brink. I imagined a traveller, driving home from the cinema (or a drive-in movie), their motion through the landscape, the images passing by the window, perhaps awakening images that flickered through the film – fragments passed into memory. This passing motion allows these present and remembered images to merge, so that perhaps Godzilla towered over the slip road to Tilbury, or King Kong could be glimpsed dissolving between the telegraph poles.

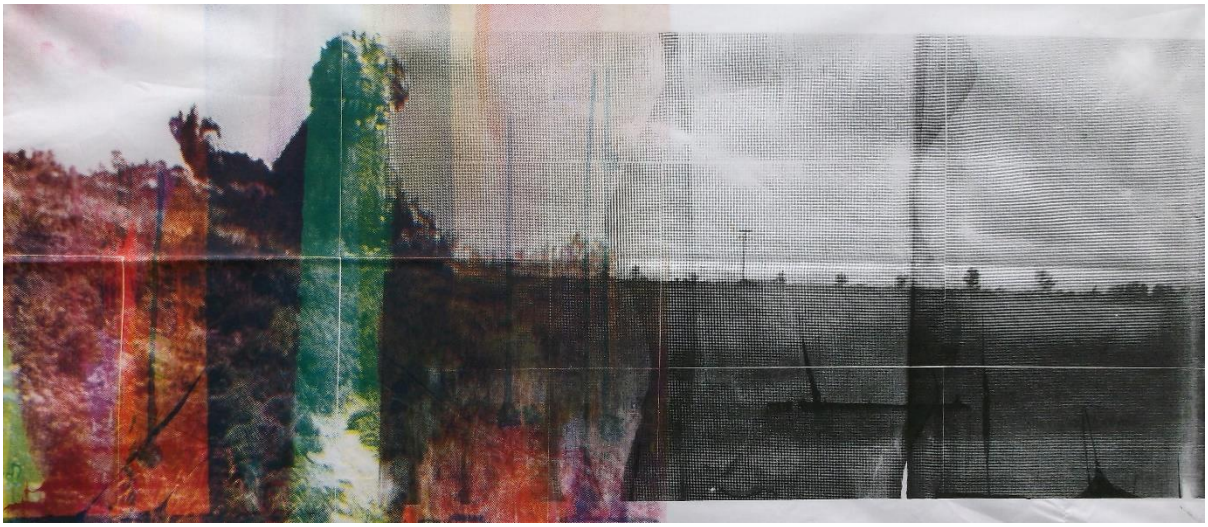

Figure 8: Ralph Overill, *Godzilla over the slip road to Tilbury*, 2018, screen-print, 60x120cm

The speed and rhythmic motion of the roadside landscape was important – Paul Virilio had prophesised this speed-driven shift in visual culture; ‘what had pushed the masses toward the cinema armchairs now forces them into the seats of their automobiles’ (1991, p. 64). ‘Speed treats vision like its basic element; with acceleration, to travel is like filming, not so much producing images as new mnemonic traces, unlikely, supernatural’ (1991, p. 60). Encouraged by these theoretical affirmations, I proceeded to develop a series in which 1950s B-movie monsters inhabited this same stretch of carriageway landscape in a host of playful ways. Indeed, I didn’t want these overbearing behemoths to appear scary, I was attracted to the initial appearance of *Godzilla* (Honda, 1954) by his ridiculous cartoon-like eyes and cheeky, sharp-toothed grin. Many of these monsters were obviously fashioned Ray Harryhausen-style out of plasticine (*It came from beneath the sea*, 1955) or just normal animals let loose on miniature landscape models (*The giant gila monster,* 1959), their re-presentation 60 years on from their making removed any sense of threat from these villains.

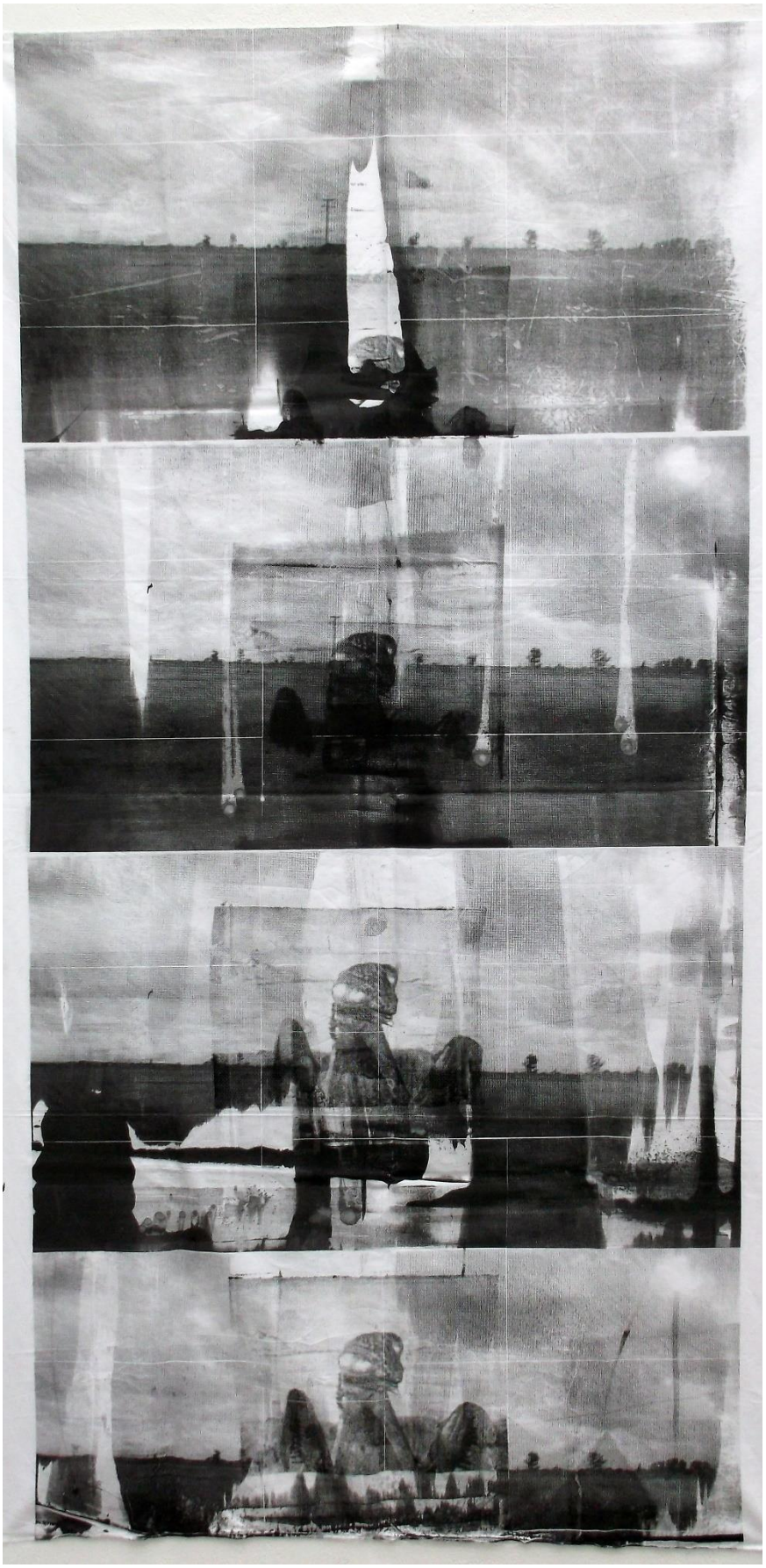

Figure 9: Ralph Overill, *Pop up*, 2018, screen-print, 80x200cm

Printing onto white polycotton fabric – for ease of portability, economy and to encourage surface imperfections – I experimented with repeating strips of landscape in which a creature was implanted in staggered positions, in an effort to depict a deliberately primitive form of animation, referencing the images' filmic origins. I also began to work with colour, initially limiting myself to the yellows, magentas and cyans of CMYK process printing. When layered imprecisely on top of each other, the shudders and vibrations of multi-coloured edges seemed to create the effect that the image was falling apart …or falling together – caught in an unstable state. My imprecise screen-printed approach took inspiration from the silkscreened canvases of Robert Rauschenberg and Andy Warhol. Rauschenberg's urgently overlapped and misregistered imagery seemed to float and drift across the surface of his work, caught in a semi-reality. When viewing these pieces at his Tate retrospective (2016 - 2017) I could trace and almost feel the energy in their making, sensing the speed and flexibility with which the medium allowed him to work. In her recent analysis of how 1960s artists employed this technique, Laura Roberts notes that 'screen-printing, with its delicate meshes and portable tabletop apparatus asserts the lightness of images' (2016, p. 243). But whilst Rauschenberg's environment was predominantly urban, exploring the clutter and bustle of cities framed by a menagerie of windows, television channels and magazine clippings, my practice sought out the barren horizons of the margins and the vast projections of cinema.

Figure 10: Robert Rauschenberg, *Scanning*, 1963, silkscreen and oil paint on canvas, 142x185cm

Obscured through the screens of both film and serigraphy, this body of work operated at a distance, much like the degrading repetitions of film stars and car crashes in Andy Warhol's canvases, my images were subject to what David Antin referred to as 'a series of regressions' (1966, p. 58). While Warhol was concerned with the superficiality and ephemerality of life and celebrity: 'Marilyn eludes us as she has slipped through the various screens that define her image' (Roberts 2016, p. 243), I wanted to destabilise my stills of the A13 and B-movie monsters to depict the collision of remembered images from a filmic past with moments of a bleak, undefinable present. The catalyst for the over-sized arachnid appearing in my work had been the resurfacing of a memory (while no doubt struggling to stay awake in a late-night TV showing of classic creature-features in my early teens) of a celluloid spider attempting to traverse some desert powerlines. Tracking down and appropriating stills from this film became a key methodology in my practice, alongside a sensitivity and receptiveness to cinematic memories. Victor Burgin acknowledges the ability of remembered film to diffuse into and infiltrate our past and current experiences: 'Our forgotten answers to distant questions may reverberate down history to shatter remembered films. But what concerns us most is what we make from the fragments' (2004, p. 72).

Figure 11: Andy Warhol, *Orange car crash (5 deaths 11 times in orange),* 1963, silkscreen on canvas, 210x220cm

While at this early stage of my research, my engagement with monsters and marginal landscapes was superficial – my experience of environment, memory and imagination filtered through material and theoretical screens – this series held the essence of my project at its core: the monster at the side of the road. The bleak wastelands that edged the A13, where sickly, overgrown vegetation scratched against rusting pylons and roaring freight lorries was a view that sparked my imagination, alongside that of other artists and writers. Iain Sinclair wrote a whole novel, *Dining on stones* (2004), on this most maligned and dystopian of carriageways; 'Europe's last great apocalyptic highway, rumbling trucks, discontinued firing ranges, spoilt docks, poisoned irrigation ditches, mounds of smoking landfill and predatory seagulls' (2004, p. 10).

I also connected with the duality between primordial and industrial in the work of Robert Smithson, noting the compositional similarities between his photo collage *King Kong meets the Gem of Egypt* (1972) (Fig.12), and my screen-print featuring the same gorilla deity (Fig.13). In his survey of Smithson's work on paper, Eugene Tsai notes this 'science fictional collision of the primordial past and technological present, and the expedition from urban centers and to a wilderness "periphery" where specimens (in this case, King Kong) are collected to bring back to the centre' (1991, p. 20).

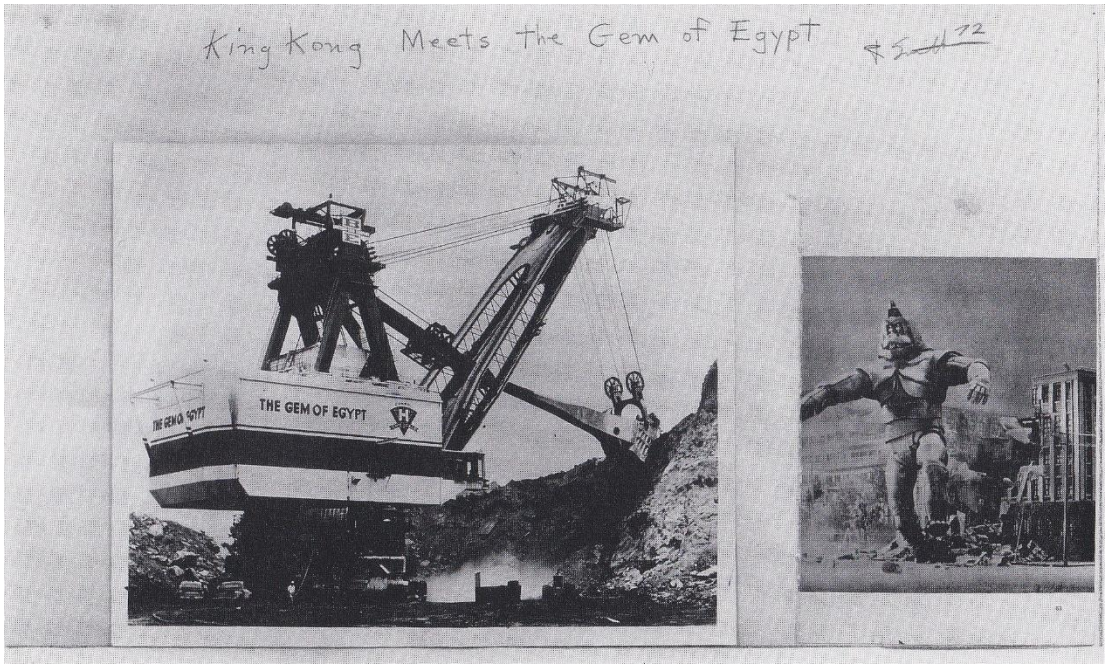

Figure 12: Robert Smithson, *King Kong meets the Gem of Egypt*, 1972, photo collage, 27x45cm

This sense of an expedition appealed to me, and I began to think of my rattling drives along stretches of the A13 as adventures through a zone of unlimited imaginational potential – a safari – ‘a car’s width from the hard shoulder, anything is possible’ (Sinclair, 2002, p. 261). Still, in the relative safety behind the windscreen of my Nissan Micra, my interaction with monsters, or their possibility, was somewhat removed, childlike, in the fact I could happily search the woodland behind my parents’ house as an 8-year-old, where the trees and bugs seemed to grow bigger, always safe in the knowledge that the greatest risk was posed by adders and horse flies …and if I did discover a truly over-sized beastie, the seemingly impenetrable sanctuary of my parents’ house was only a few minutes away. Stephen King, with his nostalgic narratives about the explorations of adolescent friendship groups, seemed to draw on the experiences of a similar film-fed childhood, hungry for monsters: ‘at thirteen I wanted monsters that ate whole cities, radioactive corpses that came out of the ocean and ate surfers […] Horror movies, science fiction movies, movies about teenage gangs on the prowl, movies about losers on motorcycles – this was the stuff that turned my dials up to ten’ (2000, pp. 39-40).

Figure 13: Ralph Overill, *King Kong Corringham*, 2018, screen-print, 60x120cm

The role of this ‘giant’ overbearing monster that featured through the B-movies of the 1950s and my early research has been theorised as an embodiment of the constant threat of incomprehensible destruction during the Cold War – a way for film makers, and society to make sense of the fear that their hometowns and countries could be obliterated in an instant, was to depict a behemoth creature laying waste to a landmark or settlement. Alexa Wright notes this ability of the monster to bring shape to what is unfathomable: ‘monsters absorb the horror of what is unknown and unregulated by giving form to the unspeakable and perhaps even the unthinkable monstrousness that cannot be contained within existing categories’ (2013, p. 21). In commercial Eastern culture, these *Kaiju* – ‘mysterious beasts’ such as Godzilla, are ‘a powerful metaphor of culture verses nature and for the terrors unleashed by a nuclear age’ (Foster, 2013, p. 147). While Western audiences are happily spoon-fed the dangers of climate change through meteorological disaster movies, the prospect of a dragon so vast that its footprint could shadow entire towns is an equally unmissable prospect.

I was compelled by the marriage of motorway verges with the possibility of a lurking monster. The creature-feature films I studied confirmed that these edge-lands, wildernesses and non-places were the perfect environments for imagination to run riot; from the vast desert that concealed a giant arachnid in *Tarantula* (1955), the arctic wasteland that defrosted *The Deadly mantis* (1957) and the network of scrubby riverbeds patrolled by *The giant gila monster* (1959), not forgetting the remote island laid to siege by *The killer shrews* (1959). Richard Kearney affirmed my developing understanding of where the wild things are:

> Their favourite haunts are those phantasmal boundaries where maps run out, ships slip moorings and navigators click their compasses shut. No man’s land. Land’s End. Out there, as the story goes, ‘where the wild things are’. These figures of Otherness occupy the frontier zone where reason falters and fantasies flourish. Strangers, gods and monsters represent experiences of extremity which bring us to the edge.
>
> (2003, p. 3)

Figure 14: Ralph Overill, *It came from beneath the A13*, 2018, screen-print, 60x120cm

At this time, I had begun reading J.G. Ballard, attracted to the iguana-infested London swamp he depicted in *The drowned world* (1962), and the adventures of its protagonist, Robert Kerans, as he battled to maintain his grip on reality and sense of place as the world sunk around him. In this regard, the inclusion of the A13 in this work is important, decided at a time when I was in constant travel between my wife's Thurrock flat and my parents' Billericay home, this carriageway was the main route between the two. It stands as a symbol of displacement or transition to me – somewhere between homes. This series aimed to impress some personality onto this blandest, most anonymous of landscapes by populating it with my childhood memories and imaginations – a way of taking ownership of a non-place, when I was constantly between places.

I exhibited this work in my first year Showcase exhibition, pinning the screen-printed fabric neatly and spaciously to the gallery walls, leaving the material enough flexibility to crease and flutter at the edges. Once hung, I knew my next work needed to be bigger – attempting to experiment quickly, I had become constrained by more manageably-sized screen frames – the prints had shrunk politely below my ambitions of a cinematic scale. The seminar leader praised the efforts to explore film, imagination and memory through fabric, encouraging me to allow the material more agency in future work. My personal reflection on the series showed the first hints of developing temporal concerns within my research practice:

> These hazy, halftoned horizons, presided over by a 1950s giant gila monster – glitching and hyper-coloured: part atomic accident, part genetically modified

experiment, part Blade-Runner-esque holographic advertising billboard. It is this combining, this sifting of images past with moments present that seems to reveal something that looks forward, beyond the temporal frontier, yet through the screens of memory, like a remembered future.

(Cited from research proposal, Ralph Overill, 2018, p. 27)

The *Carriageway creature-features* series had created a foundation on which to develop my research, having transplanted the filmic concerns and expressive screen-printed approach from the dead-ends of my PhD, merging them into my childhood fascination with adventure and the hunt for monsters. This medley of film, memory and imagination was tied together by the roadside – its motion and its unknowable verges – glimpsed through the distance of the windshield, apparently harbouring the potential futures of my doctorate: 'driving is a meditational device, summoning future memories: driving is prophecy' (Sinclair, 2002, p. 338).

Figure 15: Ralph Overill, *Giant gila monster billboard*, 2018, screen-print, 60x120cm

Tape worm

22 metres of fabric twist around the gallery walls. Two figures – outsiders – refugees from society, look back over their shoulders at the viewer, dissolving into the weave of the material. They explore the same section of graffitied river path again and again, repeating more softly or in sharp focus, in monochrome or degrading colour. Bars of magenta, yellow intersplice. Hard-edged forms assault the eye with teeth; demons and dragons lurk in the margins.

Figure 16: Ralph Overill, *Tape worm* (detail), 2019, screen-print. Photograph: Scott Freeland

My research was knocked off its trajectory in my second year by the diagnosis of an injury to my lower back. ‘LV4/5 disc bulge’ the consultant recited – the MRI scan translated the situation – a collapsed shock absorber in the core of my body, its deformed edges pushing towards my spinal cord. Inoperable, unhealable, but manageable: avoid sitting for long periods, walk every day, no high impact activity. I had skateboarded since I was thirteen years old, and while I adapted my weekly karate to smoother, more transition-focused training, the instinctive jerking motions and hip-to-concrete falls of skateboarding were suddenly forbidden. This sense of loss – an immediate distance from friends and practices of decades – seemed to represent an end to youth, risk and adventure. Initially, I sought comfort in my curiosity for horror films, in an effort to find a substitute for the danger that extreme sports offered. Anna Powell notes how horror is the most tactile of cinematic

mediums: ‘we feel and think the films directly on our nerve-endings, “inside” with emotions and ideas, and on the surface of our skin in goose-bumps’ (2005, p. 201).

I engrossed myself in a menagerie of frightening features: from chilling classics such as *The ring* (1998) and *The exorcist* (1973) to the video-nastiness of Tobe Hooper’s *The Texas chainsaw massacre* (1974). This greater breadth of filmic input led to an interest in cinematic devices such as montage and the subliminal cut, which helped me to develop my printed, material translation of film. Laura U. Marks wrote about the ‘tactile and contagious quality of cinema’, leading me to begin treating its images as something to ‘brush up against, like another body’ (2000, p. xii). Shifting from the overlapping frames of my earlier screen-prints, I now envisaged scenes colliding together or cut and spliced like on an old editing table.

Figure 17: Ralph Overill, *Tape worm* (detail), 2019, screen-print. Photograph: Scott Freeland

I began to reconnect with skateboarding through rewatching and capturing from my archive of recorded skating adventures – it must be stressed that my friends and I were not ‘normal’ skateboarders, growing up and learning in a time when skateparks were not on council agendas, we spent our time searching abandoned carparks and derelict industrial estates for obscure architecture and angled surfaces to express ourselves on – even in this counterculture, we didn’t fit in. For months I therapeutically reproduced these frames of adolescent memory through a variety of printmaking processes, appreciating the subtle ways in which each technique disintegrated the image. An article by Claire Humphries helped me to position the

role of mechanical reproduction in my research, referencing Walter Benjamin's notion of an aura of loss, haunting redundant reproductive media such as the daguerreotype …or screen-printing: 'by maintaining traces of the past in the present, outmoded media evoke Benjamin's more flexible conception of aura as a distance brought close' (2018, p. 159). The melancholy I felt at reviewing and reassembling these images from my past was enhanced by the fact that:

> The photograph or printed impression can never bring an audience into contact with the reality that produced it, and thus the work is always incomplete, pointing beyond itself to something that is missing. Reproductive media operate within the paradox that they perform the presence of an absence.
>
> (Humphries, 2018, p. 159)

Figure 18: Ralph Overill, *Tape worm* (detail), 2019, screen-print. Photograph: Scott Freeland

In my making strategies, I aimed to augment this incompleteness through my promotion of imperfection and transformation within the reproduction of the image. Particularly poignant was the shot of my friends, Chris and Martin, exploring a drainage ditch to the River Wick, looking over their shoulders at me as I followed with

the camera behind. When processed through overlayed silkscreens and mis-registered layers of colour, my two companions seemed to be dissolving, dissipating out of reach, watching as I slowly faded away from their adventure. This hazy frame of video footage evoked a time passed into film and remembered – Deleuze noted the temporal power of this speckle that I had applied to the image: ‘cinema doesn’t reproduce bodies, it produces them with grains that are the grains of time’ (2000, p. 372) – while Laura U. Marks affirmed my instincts to explore the surface of these images as a site where the past can partially return: ‘it is most valuable to think of the skin of the film not as a screen, but as a membrane that brings its audience into contact with the material forms of memory’ (2000, p. 243).

Figure 19: Andrés Muschietti, *IT: chapter one*, 2017, film still, Warner Bros

This developing nostalgia in my research seemed to build on the temporal concerns touched upon in my earlier *Carriageway creature-features* series. Svetlana Boym defines nostalgia as ‘a yearning for a different time – the time of our childhood, the slower rhythms of our dreams’ (2001, p. xv), guiding me towards the genre of the *coming-of-age* story …with added monster. Stephen King ruled this area of fiction with his novels, short stories and their inevitable film adaptations. I found myself engrossed by the narrative of *IT* (1986), with its relatable adolescent characters and their adventurous exploits against a malevolent shapeshifting entity that preyed on their fears and shortcomings – my understanding of the monster began to evolve into

something that changed in relation to its beholder. I was further intrigued by the story's narrative that forced this friendship group to return to their childhood home of Derry and reunite, in middle-age, to permanently defeat this monster of their youth. I connected King's tour-de-force examination of remembered childhood, with its fears and desires, to Boym's writing on restorative and reflective nostalgia: from the monster that re-staged and reconstructed events in the main characters' pasts to trap them in its web of terror, to the friends learning to look back at their childhood and enjoy those fading memories without letting them define their present lives.

> Restorative nostalgia manifests itself in total reconstructions of monuments of the past, while reflective nostalgia lingers on ruins, the patina of time and history, in the dreams of another place and another time
>
> (Boym, 2001, p. 41)

Figure 20: Andrés Muschietti, *IT: chapter two*, 2019, film still, Warner Bros

I link this notion of reflective nostalgia to the ruined, unstable screen-prints of my past skateboarding footage; a process of catharsis in which I slowly remove myself from my childhood pursuits, 'through longing and loss, the imperfect process of remembrance' (Boym, 2001, p. 41). While the marginal landscapes of Essex are present in this work in the neglected concrete hinterlands that my friends and I explored, the margins here also take on a form of the past, the remembered and the

lost. As the distance between my 4th and 5th vertebrae decreases, those times of risk and adventure fall further out of reach. I chose to represent this through the bars and columns that glitch between the repeating image of a skateboarding past, like sections of VHS tape re-recorded or overwritten, or crushed discs between vertebrae. Their bold colours and solid forms juxtapose the delicate remembered image, magnifying aspects of it into focus or threatening to bite at its edges. I connected these visual decisions in the work to Richard Kearney's writing on melancholy: 'melancholic imagination offers the possibility of putting human experience of loss and rupture into images, of grappling with the void so as to turn monsters into gods and aliens into angels' (2003, p. 176). These rifts between the frames seemingly revealed the instability of the monsters confined within them, caught on a knife-edge separating good and evil. Which side of the blade did they fall?

Figure 21: Ralph Overill, *Tape worm* (detail), 2019, screen-print. Photograph: Scott Freeland

Etymologically, the word monster can be traced to the Latin *monstrum* – meaning 'portent' / 'unnatural', but also *monere* – 'to warn' and *monstrare* – 'to show / demonstrate'. In the supernatural coming-of-age stories I studied, the presence of the monster seemed to help the damaged relationships between the main characters, the scenarios of fear and destruction forcing them to work together, set aside differences and grudges and realise how much they actually mean to each

other: e.g. *Super 8* (2011), *Turbo kid* (2015), *The monster* (2016) and *Stranger things* (2016).

In *Tape worm*, the monster is the threat of age and injury to my body, the warning that I cannot keep pursuing the activities I enjoyed in my youth indefinitely, but also a presence that shows a way forward – a future for me and my research practice. A way of appreciating and handling images from my past, harnessing the frustration and sadness – as Svetlana Boym advocates – without being consumed by it. Alexa Wright's writing helped me to contextualise the role of the monster in my psyche as I approach middle-age and begin to re-evaluate my priorities: 'monsters call for change, but they also reveal fear of changes to the existing order of things, and perhaps most fundamentally a fear of the possibility that we might not be who we think we are' (2013, p. 166).

Figure 22: Ralph Overill, *Tape worm* (composite photograph of installation), 2019, screen-print, 2200x70cm. Photograph: Scott Freeland

When it came to hanging this piece, the result was very different to what I had planned; while I had envisioned the giant length of fabric stretching horizontally around the gallery walls, it wasn't until I began working with the material in the exhibition space, that lighting supports and fire doors became useful objects to wrap and wind my creation around, allowing it to inhabit the room at a variety of heights and angles. This more instinctive hang gave the work a different character or presence within the space – a serpent or tentacle – whilst also mirroring the improvisational flowing lines a skateboarder might take. The biggest thing I had made, by far, *Tape worm's* scale gave it a visual impact greater than previous works and allowed the fabric more agency to fold, twist and crumple, adding more

theoretical connections to my research. Walter Benjamin's writing seemed to address my sectioned rippling, repeating screen-print as it slithered its remembered images around the AVA building: 'he who has begun to open the fan of memory never comes to the end of its segments; no image satisfies him, for he has seen that it can be unfolded, and only in its folds does the truth reside' (1986, p. 6). Indeed, it felt like this snake could never be long enough – I could go on printing and sewing sections onto its segmented body indefinitely and still never be satisfied by this presence of skateboarding absence. This idea that memory could be unfolded suggested valleys and edges – hiding places and haunts – where fears and desires of the past could lurk.

Figure 23: Ralph Overill, *Tape worm* (detail), 2019, screen-print. Photograph: Scott Freeland

The Showcase seminar leader seemed impressed yet frustrated by the work: 'I want it to be seen […] how can it occupy another space? […] it's a form of projection – how could you project it out there?' (2019, seminar notes). They likened the sprawling printed fabric to the language of protest banners, initially interpreting my dishevelled skating companions as refugees or asylum seekers: 'the migrant becomes the monster' (2019). While the piece had no political connotations for me, I welcomed this reading; I considered the idea of a migrant as an entity who moves between times and places – much like the ebbs and flows of memory, reacting to

life's events and surprises. From my removed investigation of the monster in my first year, a more personal research had developed, memory was now what haunted my dreams and images – past and present threatened to touch and overlap, creating melancholy margins that harboured potential futures – the distance had been brought close.

> He sees all those places again, intact, as they were then […] he sees them as they were, as they always will be in some part of his mind …and his heart breaks with love and horror.
>
> (King 1986, p. 1061)

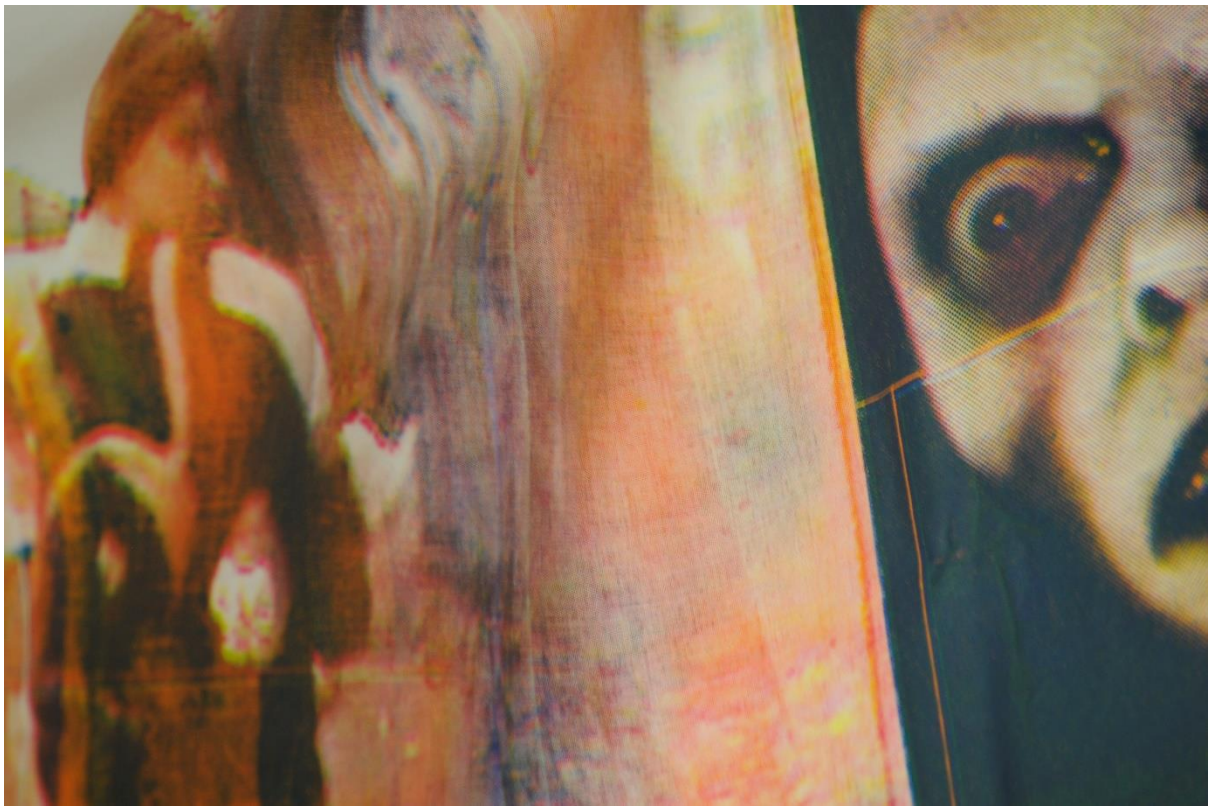

Figure 24: Ralph Overill, *Tape worm* (detail), 2019, screen-print. Photograph: Scott Freeland

Searching for the Green Man: a précis

In the early months of 2020, before Corona virus became an infamous addition to the cast of the 21st century, I had the opportunity to further explore my childhood memories and their connection to my research. In a successful application for a UEL Research Internship Grant, I devised a project, *Searching for the Green Man* [full details and images included in Appendix 5]. Where *Tape worm* had unearthed and examined the skateboarding adventures of my adolescence, I now found myself excavating deeper into my childhood, remembering Sunday car journeys with my father, where we twisted down the dark lanes and backroads between Billericay and Epping to attend weekly Quaker meetings. At the age of 7 or 8, these drives seemed to spark my imagination – much like my more recent shuttles along the A13 – no doubt aided by dad's enthusiastic commentary along the route, as he pointed out concealed churches and windmills …and a number of pubs, all similarly named 'The Green Man'.

Figure 25: Ralph Overill, *Dad driving*, 2020, screen-print, 150x90cm

In a new methodology for my practice, I decided to reconstruct one of these remembered journeys, enlisting the help and collaboration of my father (a seasoned academic, who displayed fascination in how I was attempting to research through art). While he drove the route, I filmed sporadically with my tattered video camera, capturing fragments of journey and conversation. This footage became the basis for work made in a residency at Edinburgh Printmakers, where I continued to explore the 'forgetting' of mechanical reproduction, transforming these images of a reconstructed childhood into paper stencil screen-prints (Fig.25).

Despite my time in Edinburgh being cruelly cut short by the pandemic, I gained much from the project: through my searching for the Green Man, I ventured into the misty realms of folk horror, beginning to recognise my deeper roots in the Essex landscape, and its connection to my practice. In my attempts to personify the mysterious pagan deity, remembered horror films resurfaced, and for the first time, Michael Myers (*Halloween*, 1978) appeared in my work – a hollow visage onto which my personal ideas of the Green Man could be impressed. Perhaps, most significantly, it initiated a research relationship with my father, in which the two of us would explore my memories and creative ideas together in a series of expeditions I affectionately named 'Dad-ventures'.

Eclipsing these positive developments, disillusionment rose in my heart as I sat in a deserted train carriage somewhere between Scotland and London on 21st March 2020, anxieties of university restructures overshadowed by viral uncertainty. Lugging a suitcase, heavy with printed fabric, over a derelict Tower Bridge at 9pm on a Saturday night marked the half-way point of my Doctorate – in one sense, this was where my 3rd year ended, in another, it was where it began…

Pandemic subversions

Dead eyes embedded within a ghostly mask, white against a harsh concrete surface, The Shape looks out from a landscape of stretching brake lights and speed-scarred tarmac.

Figure 26. Ralph Overill, *Halloween on the A13*, 2020, photograph documenting site-specific spray painting

The Covid-19 lockdowns of 2020-21 further challenged my research. It felt inhumane to subject a tactile kinaesthetic like myself to the virtual amnesia of Zoom and Microsoft Teams. Cramped with my wife and stepson in a two-bed flat, my modest income cut by the closure of print studios, galleries and karate. The damaged disc in my back ached and threatened further injury – I wasn't designed to stay still, sedentary – walking was the cure. I walked every day, exploring beyond the manicured lawns and polished SUVs of West Thurrock's commuter settlements, to the wasteland, the verges – the road and the river. A13, M25 and Thames became repeated routes and terminals. As I paced the margins, my volatile, lockdown-starved imagination would merge splinters of remembered films with half-glimpsed locations and future unseen destinations – Rebecca Solnit notes that 'while walking, the body and mind can work together, so that thinking becomes almost a physical,

rhythmic act' (2002, p. xv). I was aware that I was on someone's territory – Iain Sinclair had traversed the Thames Gateway in *Dining on stones* (2004) and circumnavigated the M25 in *London orbital* (2002). I appreciated how his prose blurred between fact, memory and imagination, how he acknowledged these sites as margins between reality and fiction: 'In parts of the map that are not overwritten, worked out, everything bleeds into everything, sea and sky, truth and legend; defences are down […] We confess, we lie, we make up stories' (2004, p. 171).

Figure 27. Ralph Overill, *Godzilla under the bridge*, 2020, photograph documenting site-specific spray painting

These neglected edge-lands held traces of other outlaws and outsiders: fly-tipping, fire pits and graffiti. The bold subversion of spray paint attracted me – I was frustrated, wanted to make a point, leave a mark – a knowledge of screen-printing and paper stencils, the pound shops were still open: card, scalpel, tape... Through a series of risky dawns and dusks, I adventured down footpaths, through fields, along the carriageway – the destination, a previously spotted concrete pillar or corrugated shipping container – exiled surfaces in bleak landscapes, primed for the presence of monsters. As I sprayed, my earlier prints and depictions were re-born in a new, primal reality and I felt potential in this new hinterland studio at the side of the road: 'it was somewhere to cook the future. A rogue laboratory in which to undertake high-risk experiments' (Sinclair, 2004, p. 56). My motivation for these stencilled

interventions was not to scare, provoke or create notoriety, but simply to see what happened.

While Banksy and his contemporaries covered well-populated, well-seen urban areas with their art – often displaying an obvious social or political message, I was fascinated by the alien, the desolate and the derelict – what happened when you actually put monsters in the margins? My practice was finally embodying the themes of risk and adventure that it investigated, and I began to relate more closely with the work of Robert Smithson, whose upbringing of frequent visits to the Natural History Museum, playtimes in quarries and construction sites, and childhood aspirations to become a zoologist mirrored my own (Smithson and Cummings, 1996). I admired his drive to push himself and his practice physically: ‘aesthetic experience could be an important experience only when it is risky and dangerous’ (Smithson in Tsai 1991, p. 96), and connected initially with his series of *Slideworks*, where he placed mirrors in the wastelands he ventured to. These reflective screens, embedded in vegetation, affirmed mine and Iain Sinclair’s notions of the edge-land as a site where reality and unreality could meet: ‘the boundaries between landscape, object and imagination waver, blur and momentarily dissolve’ (Bargellesi-Severi, 1997, p.177), as mirrored surfaces captured images and refracted them back into the environment – opening portals to other times and places. As my knowledge of Smithson’s practice developed, I realised that here was an artist who, like me, ‘found that [he] was dealing not so much with the centre of things but with the peripheries’ (Smithson and Cummings, 1996, p. 295).

Figure 28: Robert Smithson, *Mirror displacement (grassy slope),* 1968, photograph documenting site-specific intervention

Figure 29: Robert Smithson, *Mirror displacement on a compost heap*, 1968, photograph documenting site-specific intervention

With the pandemic, came the realisation that monsters are closer and better hidden than I realised. The more I read into monster theory, the more I understood that there was not one correct definition, only a prism of perspectives that changed with the times, mirroring the values and concerns of its creators and beholders. Jeffrey Cohen helped me to articulate this: 'the monstrous body is pure culture. A construct and a projection, the monster exists only to be read' (1996, p. 4). The serial killers I chose to adorn the carriageways and river paths with, for example, were straight out of 1980s slasher flicks: a time where, after the television coverage of the Vietnam War, came the realisation that the monster was within us – that outwardly normal people harboured the capacity to terrify and butcher – next-door neighbours became potential serial killers. I created a life-size Leatherface (*The Texas chainsaw massacre*, 1974) in the scrubland behind Billericay Football stadium (Fig.30) – 10 minutes-walk from my parents' house – reminding unfortunate dog walkers that 'the borderline between home and slaughterhouse (between work and leisure) has disappeared – the slaughterhouse has invaded the home, humanity has begun literally to "prey on itself like monsters of the deep"' (Wood, 2004, p. 130). Jeffery Weinstock argues that the late-twentieth century sees 'an important cultural shift that aligns monstrosity not with physical difference, but antithetical moral values' (2013, p. 276), hence the faceless mask of Michael Myers (*Halloween*, 1978) looks out from the A13 – a human silhouette camouflaging an interloper of insatiable malice. His eyes invisible, wearer unidentifiable, a dark boiler suit that blends in, becomes the

shadows; handyman of schools, hospitals, truck stops and suburban garages – multiplicity, invisibility – kitchen knife in hand. My inclusion of this spectre of suburbia affirms society's 'deeply seated contemporary anxiety that our monsters are no longer visible' (Weinstock, 2013, p. 289).

Figure 30: Ralph Overill, *Billericay chainsaw massacre*, 2020, photograph documenting site-specific spray painting

J.G. Ballard used these peripheral suburbs and commuter zones to ignite his imagination as he penned *Crash* (1973), *Concrete island* (1974) and *High-rise* (1975), believing in their ability to unleash the inner-psychotics of mid-career professionals. As I read, I witnessed Ballard's protagonists become increasingly alienated from their families, lovers and themselves; lost in a bizarre banality of overgrown traffic islands and desolate multi-storey carparks – this was a dislocated reality with which I empathised, dreamt of, and saw myself inhabiting. Connections emerged between the writers I studied as Sinclair interviewed Ballard, aligning their interests with the seemingly mundane: 'I think the suburbs are more interesting than people will let on. In the suburbs you find uncentred lives. The normal civic structures are not there. So that people have more freedom to explore their own imaginations, their own obsessions' (Ballard in Sinclair, 1999, p. 84). The word 'suburb' translating as 'the city below' or 'under the city' resonated with my reading of Stephen King, and a chapter named *Under the city* in *IT* (1986, p. 946), where the monster speaks in soliloquy, revealing its mind to the reader. Aligning with Ballard's writing, this affirmed the connection between suburbia and the sub-conscious in my research – the commuter-belt is where monsters are revealed. I watched *The hitcher* (1986) – a film release that fittingly coincided with the opening of the M25 – which I decided to commemorate by spraying a stencil of its title character onto a bridge support at Junction 30 of the orbital motorway (Fig.31).

Figure 31: Ralph Overill, *Hitcher on the London orbital*, 2020, photograph documenting site-specific spray painting

The temporal ambiguity I sensed while immersed in the roads, alongside the displacement of these 1980s American film villains inhabiting an Essex carriageway landscape 40 years in the future, was thrust to the forefront of my research. I found support to my concerns in Chris Petit's film *London orbital* (2002), made in collaboration with Iain Sinclair: 'what you find out on the M25 and any sort of motorway zone is that there is no past, no future' (Ballard in Petit, 2002, 56:25). John Ryder (*The hitcher)* doesn't need a mask – he has the road: no destination, no past, no future. Drifting between vehicles, mutilating the occupants; 'I want someone to stop me' Rutger Hauer smirks with a devilish twinkle in his eye – constant motion, perpetual butchery – anyone who rides the roads long enough becomes the villain, becomes a monster.

> Road is nightmare. Road is purgatory. Road is hell
>
> (Petit, 2002, 32:40)

Figure 32: Ralph Overill, *Hitcher on the London orbital*, 2021, paper lithograph on fabric, 18x26cm

By working in this hostile territory, my research began to link the artists and writers that attracted me. Smithson and Ballard believed in the edge as a site of liberation for practice and personality (where monsters are made), while Sinclair and Petit, compelled to experience the perimeter fence of their London city, found an outland devoid of time and morality: ‘West Thurrock is where bad things happen, limbs hacked off, chained women, bondage corsets, stinking fish […] Past, present and future: three windows on the third floor of the Ibis hotel. Revolve your head slowly: river, motorway, chalk quarry’ (Sinclair, 2004, p. 255). I noted the format of my documenting photographs – the monster always confronted the camera, looking out from the landscape – its landscape. Subconsciously, I had placed them as gatekeepers to these secret gardens, where time spirals and all horrors are possible, they stood as a warning to those who stumbled across them that these were the margins – this is where things get ugly.

Figure 33: Ralph Overill, *Pennywise under the M25*, 2020, photograph documenting site-specific spray painting

The rise of the Cybermen[2]

Lorries echo like detonations in the darkness, the night air is cut by a silver figure rising above the grim silt of the Thames; a 20ft high robot regards Kent from the Essex shore.

Figure 34: Ralph Overill, *Rise of the Cybermen*, 2020, documentation of site-specific projection. Photograph: Scott Freeland

[2] For an in-depth analysis of this section, please see article published in *Crossing Conceptual Boundaries* xii Overill, R. (2022) 'Pandemic Subversions: the rise of the Cybermen' [full text included in Appendix 3]

While satisfied with the escape that the *Pandemic subversions* offered from the deprivations of lockdown, how the corroded concrete surfaces imposed their texture on my spray-painted interventions, and how the weather and environment changed their setting and appearance – my work was part of the landscape – I felt that much was missing in the documentary photographs I took. I needed to find a way to capture the tacit bubbling of ideas and observations of my expeditions – the adventures to and from the sites seemed as important as the intervention. 'The passage through a landscape echoes or stimulates the passage through a series of thoughts. This creates an odd consonance between internal and external passage, one that suggests the mind is also a landscape of sorts and that walking is one way to traverse it' (Solnit, 2002, p. 5-6). Up to this point, my research had acknowledged the margins as catalysts for subconscious adventure and imagination, but my practice was yet to embrace this. Robert Smithson revealed a potential methodology in how he published his projects as articles consisting of documentary photographs and reflective writing: *The crystal land* (1966), *The monuments of Passaic* (1967) and *Incidents of mirror-travel in the Yucatan* (1969) appeared in the pages of *Artforum* and *Harper's Bazaar*. While recording his travels and interventions in the peripheries, these texts also acted as an outlet for the notions and science fictions that formed in his mind during the explorations.

Figure 35: Ralph Overill, *Ralph spray painting the Dartford Bridge*, 2020, photograph: Richard Overill

A combined diet of Smithson, Ballard and Sinclair gave me the confidence to embrace my writing, not just as a way of contextualising my research, but as integral to the practice itself, leading to the creation of *The QE II Bridge* [included in Appendix 3], a work which could take the form of an essay with images, or be presented as a slideshow with accompanying voiceover (as performed in WIPS #6, 25th February 2021). This documented a walk taken by me and my father along the Thames path to the foundations of the Dartford Crossing, resulting in the application of two Cybermen to one of the bridge's supporting pillars (Figs.35 and 37). While the photographs documented the dislocation, scale and challenge of the landscape, the writing captured a loose narrative that formed in my imagination during the event. I recalled scenes from a classic episode of *Doctor Who* (*The Invasion,* 1968) where an army of Cybermen were witnessed marching down the steps of St Paul's Cathedral in a take-over of central London (Fig.36). I imagined that these robots had been swept East from the city by the Thames tide, buried under layers of silt, to emerge 50 years later at the foundations of the A282.

Figure 36: Douglas Camfield, *The invasion*, 1968, film still, BBC

Here, the concerns in my work surrounding temporal displacement, and the revenant of the dated monster became focussed as I addressed Jacques Derrida's and Mark Fisher's notion of Hauntology. The ideas that 'we live in a time when the past is

present and the present is saturated with the past' (Fisher, 2013, p. 49), and 'the spectre is the future, it is always to come' (Derrida, 1994, p. 39) became integral to my research, from the anomalous 'road time' noted by Petit, Ballard and Sinclair, to my choice of monsters (Michael Myers, Leatherface, Godzilla), forever destined to return through another filmic sequel, prequel or reimagining: 'the monster always escapes […] no monster tastes death but once' (Cohen, 1996, p. 4). Mark Fisher notes that in contemporary digitised society 'loss itself is lost' (2014, p. 2), and as such, we will never lose our monsters. Having waded out into the Thames to a concrete island 60ft from the shore, the booming echoes of lorries overhead, creating robots from a future 50 years in the past, I sensed a hauntological disconnection from time and place: 'In clouds. Above water. Between Essex and Kent. The one section of London's orbital motorway that is not acknowledged as the M25, different rules, different space-time continuum' (Sinclair, 2004, p. 392). This piece was well received when presented to the seminar attendees, and the addition of reflective writing to my practice judged to be a success with much potential. However, I felt underwhelmed by the scale of my two *Doctor Who* villains, dwarfed by the Brutalist architecture of the bridge, and devised a plan to give them command of this portentous concrete landscape.

Figure 37: Ralph Overill, *Ralph documenting Cybermen*, 2020, photograph: Richard Overill

Collaborating with a photographer, I took a battery-powered projector to the site on a Christmas evening, and as our shivering fingers fumbled with the equipment, a ghostly cyber-behemoth illuminated the tide-flecked pillar, rising from the primordial Thames silt, affirming again Robert Smithson's significance to my research: 'Space Age and Stone Age attitudes overlap to form the Zero-Zone, wherein the spaceman meets the brontosaurus in a Jurassic swamp on Mars' (Smithson, 1963, quoted in Barikin, McAuliffe and Melville, 2018, p. 25). I had found Ground Zero – a collision between road and river, past and future, monster and maker. Derrida interrogates the instability of the present in *Specters of Marx* (1994) in terms of a joint, a 'double articulation' between 'what is no longer and what is not yet' (1994, p. 25). At this key moment in my research, my present was at the junction of M25 and Thames – a confluence of opposing streams of time, traffic and tide that embraced the spectral ghost of the Cyberman; to mouth or to source, clockwise or anti-clockwise – 'two directions of absence' (Derrida, 1994, p. 25). My projection appeared to emphasise Derrida's progression from ontology to hauntology – from *being* to *between*: 'simultaneously present yet absent, dead yet living, corporeal yet intangible, in time yet timeless' (Coverley, 2020, p. 205). In those fleeting moments, the site under the Dartford Crossing became an anchor in my mind, a dis-location that would haunt my practice. Somewhere I was destined to return.

I had become aware of the potential of projectors through visits to Mark Leckey's installation, *O' magic power of bleakness* (2019 – 2020), where the artist illuminated a replica motorway bridge support with reconstructed figures from his past (Fig. 39), and Marc Bradford's video *Dancing in the Street* in *Cerberus* (2019). Bradford had projected a performance of the *Martha and the Vandellas* song (1964) onto the back streets of South Los Angeles from a moving van, allowing the images and music to ripple across the passing warehouses and fencing – ghosts of the past and social change haunting an industrial American landscape. Projection was employed in both these instances as a way to superimpose one time and place onto another: 'it's like recalling the spirit of that place, and at the same time inserting another history on top of it' (Bradford in Somers, 2019) while Bradford's practice also demonstrated strategies for integrating a studio-based making of paintings and collages, with something more performative and site specific.

Figure 38: Ralph Overill, *Maker of the Cybermen*, 2020, documentation of site-specific projection. Photograph: Scott Freeland

The Brutalist stanchions of the QE II Bridge seemed perfect for my projection, and I found that Stephen Prince argued how Brutalism evokes 'lost progressive futures and alternative pathways society may have taken rather than its real-world failures' (2019, p. 139). Mark Fisher's adaptation of hauntology aspired to re-discover these lost futures as a way to escape the all-consuming, ultimately unsatisfying and imprisoning late-capitalist way of life, that has become the only imaginable way to govern society: 'it's easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism' (Fisher, 2009, p. 1). While my earlier *Pandemic subversions* displayed a disregard or discontent for the governing rules and systems, the rise of the Cybermen instigated an expression of anti-capitalist values in my work.

Figure 39: Mark Leckey, *O' magic power of bleakness*, 2019, photograph of installation and projection, Tate Britain

As I read Fisher's texts, I related to his experiences working in education; the damage of data-driven decisions to process learning and the obfuscation of continual restructures and convoluted management layers. The Cyberman – light-skinned and male, focussed on hostile takeovers and efficiency – became a monster that reflected everything I felt was wrong with contemporary society: emotionless, immovable mouth, dead eyes shedding a pre-implanted tear for the poor, shiny and smooth in appearance (new gloss over old, tired ideas) upgradable, replicable, disposable – the Cyberman is every politician, manager, CEO; reading empty promises from the script to placate the crowd, keep the power. Iain Sinclair seemed

to agree in his description of New Labour's Trade and Industry secretary, Stephen Byers: 'a panicked automaton, a top-of-the-range cryogenic model of the public servant' (2002, p. 64).

Figure 40: Ralph Overill, *Paper stencil prepared for spray painting*, 2021, cartridge paper, 60x42cm

By replicating Cybermen through West Thurrock, I was making a point, a stand against consecutive centrist governments, preaching to a converted middle-class who are desperate to keep hold of what they have – the comfortable stay comfortable (hungry for more), while the rich separate themselves in private roads, gated communities, tax havens, and the poor are shovelled into the country's dead-ends and blind spots: viral breeding grounds of neglect and hopelessness. The Cyberman became a spectre guaranteed to reappear – not only in the innumerable regenerations of Doctor Who, but in every business ontology adopted by educational institutions, every Microsoft Office 365 avatar.

Figure 41: Ralph Overill, *Reign of the Cybermen*, 2021, paper lithograph, 18x18cm

Lecturers pointed me towards Marxist manifestos, but this felt out-dated – with post-Fordism and the automation of low-end jobs, the working class no longer register, reliant on meagre benefit rations and complementary foodbanks. Ballard got it right in *Millennium people* (2003) imagining the middle-classes as the new proletariat, rebelling as they become aware of their servitude to the capitalist system. A group of architects, lecturers and health-care professionals burn their Volvos and fashion Molotov cocktails from Perrier bottles in an attempt to instigate revolution against their rising maintenance fees, plateauing pay-scales and lack of parking spaces. Anarchist groups, furnished with private schooling and BMWs, attack the cultural temples of middle-class worship: from staging protests at a luxury cat show in Olympia to setting fire to the National Film Theatre and bombing the Tate Modern. Carefully pitched between control and desperation, Ballard's middle-classes hold the power to influence change – an observation I connect to 21st century politics. They hold the voting power, they are the focus of countless ineffectual manifestos

launched by forgettable governments. Unfortunately, I don't believe they will follow the lead of Ballard's novel – the middle class are the new zombie hordes, sleepwalking through life – millennia of predatory hunter-gatherer instinct blunted by a myriad of TV boxsets and Ocado deliveries: 'no middle-class revolutionary can defend the barricades without a shower and a large cappuccino. You might as well fight them in yesterday's underwear' (Ballard, 2003, p. 224).

Figure 42: JR, *Kikito and the border patrol, Tecate, Mexico – USA*, 2017, photograph documenting site-specific wheat pasting

While reflecting on this body of work, I visited JR's exhibition *Chronicles* (2021), initially attracted by the prospect of a gallery presentation of high-risk, site-specific practice and a curiosity for the potential of wheat pasting. As I viewed the work, I felt I understood the ambitions of this artist; to disarm borders, to remove barriers, to bring down walls – to bring people together. I related to JR through the comparatively humble interventions of my Cybermen populating South Essex, bringing attention to, or creating conversation about the unjust, greedy systems I witnessed dominating society – that capitalism had become a monster. We were

both trying to change the world for the better through our art. I had become part of a strategy in which ‘the role of artworks is no longer to form imaginary and utopian realities, but to actually be ways of living and models of action within the existing real’ (Bourriaud, 2002, p. 13). Like Fisher, Nicholas Bourriaud believed creativity was a weapon which had the power to defeat ‘the deterritorialising violence of Integrated World Capitalism’ (2002, p. 101). Rather than artworks being another commodity to be financially valued, collected and traded, he notes a shift in practice to the ephemeral forms of performance, video and installation, where capitalist values can be questioned and subverted. Bourriaud’s notion of relational aesthetics celebrates the expanding relationships and exchanges between artists, viewers and spaces, in the face of the homogenisation and suppression of capitalism. From a situation of isolation, quarantine, lockdown – hopelessness – JR’s practice and Bourriaud’s theory reinjected some optimism into my psyche during the instability and bleakness of the pandemic: ‘Can art change the world today? Absolutely, because it can change our perceptions of this world’ (JR, 2021, n. page).

Figure 43: Ralph Overill, *Under the bridge*, 2021, wheat pasted paper on wall, 84x60cm

While I feel my spray-painted interventions will not (and do not hope to) alter the politics of this country, they have evolved my understanding of the monster: from the unrealisable threat of the behemoth, working through the melancholic aches of childhood memory, to the realisation that monster is mirror, ‘They are us, and we never know when we will act as monsters’ (Lake Crane, 1994, p. 8). In this respect, through my repeated lockdown adventures, memory and imagination amalgamated to reveal the Cyberman as a figure of greater importance; personification of my frustrations and disillusionment at society’s systems and values, and the hint of deeper personal instabilities and confinements yet to be explored. ‘I realised that the biggest walls are those that exist within ourselves. We are afraid to go to a certain place, we fear the other’ (JR, 2021, n. page). All the while my connection with the margins, through walking and making in the landscape has allowed me to appreciate these edges, with their blank canvases of Brutalist concrete, as sites of potential – where pasts and futures can merge or overlap – where anything, including change, is possible: ‘the tiniest event can tear a hole in the grey curtain of reaction which has marked the horizons of possibility under capitalist realism. From a situation in which nothing can happen, suddenly anything is possible again’ (Fisher, 2009, p. 81).

Figure 44: Ralph Overill, *Cyber-bridge, Wouldham Road*, 2021, photograph documenting site-specific spray paintings

Terminus: an A127 walk

Red timelines stretch across white walls, superimposed by suspended hubcaps – reflecting memories of aching knees and the acerbic smell of spray paint. My voice haunts the space, echoing determined footsteps along the carriageway. A chromium face grins back at me from a bridge support on the A127.

Figure 45: Ralph Overill, *4th year Showcase exhibition*, 2021. Photograph: Scott Freeland

This complex and ambitious work was an attempt to connect and develop my anomalous practice – the pandemic had left severed ends of large-scale printed fabric with filmic concerns, while germinating shoots of psychogeography, hauntology and subversion – a deformed, mutated bramble that entwined my research. In my mind, Iain Sinclair owned the M25 and the A13, but another carriageway had been mapping my life: through Romford work commutes, coastal skateboard road trips and Canvey karate lessons, the Southend Arterial Road had been part of my life for longer than I could remember. I decided to explore my connection to this route by marching a section of it – 10 miles from Gallows Corner

to the Dunton interchange – in which the industrial outskirts of Greater London gave way to the desolate fields and slaughterhouses of Essex: ‘proper countryside kicks in: the foot-and-mouth ribbons begin’ (Sinclair, 2002, p. 77). I walked on Sunday 21st March 2021, documenting the event through two analogue cameras (black and white, and expired colour film), digital photography and sound recording from my phone, and reflective writing, with the aim to better understand this margin and its significance to me: ‘every road is made up from discrete elements. It doesn’t fit together until you walk it’ (Sinclair, 2004, p. 153).

Figure 46: Ralph Overill, *A127 Westbound from Upminster bridge*, 2021, photograph from expired 35mm colour film, 15x10cm

Through my adventures and interventions around the edges of Essex, I was compiling a psychogeography of this often overlooked and maligned suburbia. From the expansive bleakness and expensive real estate of Jock Mcfadyen’s paintings, to the musical interpretations of the A13: ‘It makes me feel so cold inside / And that’s familiar territory / Oh barren hopeless highway / I love you’ (Wobble, 1990), these hinterlands were regarded in contradictions. Well-connected to, yet alienated from London, steeped with rich cultural history, superimposed by Land Rover murders and drug traffickers, a numbing and desolate landscape, loved by its proud

inhabitants: ‘a liminal place, neither rural nor urban, where a bucolic past vies for supremacy with a brash present, constantly torn between the sacred and the profane’ (Bragg, 2021, 13:00). This was the margin I understood myself in.

Figure 47: Ralph Overill, *St Clements church and Proctor & Gamble*, 2021, digital photograph

Through the 20th century, Ballard and Sinclair had initiated a shift in psychogeography, from the centre to the peripheries, something that my practice was now a part of, having witnessed the trendy dilapidation of Shoreditch and Peckham smoothed over by a gloss of capitalist gentrification (complete with flammable cladding) – the margins were on the move. From Bermondsey, to Beckton, to Barking, beyond the noose of the M25: the shredded plastic of the A13, the barbed-wire fences of Brentwood abattoirs. For me, the margins begin where the roads and rivers break free from the city, where the verges and paths become hostile (stiffer grass, sharper thorns) trodden only by the adventurous and the insane. I walk this space because it is still space – room to imagine, to remember, to dream, to change. Guy Debord adopted psychogeography as a political protest against the rise

of capitalism – walking to take the space of the city back from ‘an elaborate and spectacular array of commodities’ (Coverley, 2006, p. 102) and the ‘dictatorship of the automobile’ (Debord, 1970, p. 28). While starkly contrasting the urban environment, in my marching of the A127, I also positioned myself against a carriageway capitalism: the aspirational finance deals of countless polished BMWs and the unforgiving, uncompromising tide of motorist traffic. However, walking and writing was not enough – I had seen the potential in the blankness of Brutalist surfaces – I would adorn every bridge support between Romford and Basildon with an effigy of the ultimate hauntological icon: I would change this space.

Figure 48: Ralph Overill, *Terminator at Halfway House junction*, 2021, photograph documenting site-specific spray painting

The terminator (1984) is about a time-travelling cyborg assassin – an iconic role for actor Arnold Schwarzenegger, revenant of cinema since the 1970s – and despite its dense network of sequels and re-imaginings, the plot can always be condensed to an attempt to stop the future. Applying the 1980s Austrian-American robot to a 21st century Essex roadside created the out-of-time, out-of-place hauntological impact I

sought since my earlier cyberman projects, while also offering the possibility to explore road as timeline – a temporal map which could be traversed Eastbound or Westbound – with London as a distant primordial past and Southend as an unreachable future. My research of the A127 revealed that the first cases of the 2001 foot-and-mouth disease epidemic had been discovered at Cheale Meats in Warley – just half a mile off the carriageway. This, alongside *The terminator,* gave me milestones to loosely weave a story around – the hybrid of on-site scribbled sentences, post-walk recollections and sci-fi imaginations: 'the memory of the memory slips. We invent new memories, unaccountable to mundane documentation, are shaped. The dream anticipates the neurotic narrative' (Sinclair, 2002, p. 116).

Figure 49: Ralph Overill, *Terminus* (detail), 2021, screen-print on fabric and black and white analogue photographs

My reflective writing logged my expedition up the carriageway [see Appendix 4], imagining me as the time-travelling Terminator, sent back from a Billericay in the future (via my father's Hyundai time machine) to locate and prevent the foot-and-mouth outbreak at the Warley abattoir. The narrative documented the unexpected

sites and difficulties I discovered along the route, including a Brutalist cathedral at the M25 junction and increasing pain in my left knee as the miles ticked over. Ultimately, I ended up with a project which could be presented in a multitude of ways. For my 4th year Showcase exhibition, I experimented with linking my earlier printed work to this increasingly site-specific practice, using the images and words captured from the event to inspire several large screen-prints on fabric, fashioned in red and black threshold filters to emulate the cybernetic vision of the Terminator, as seen in the original 1984 film. These took the form of long, horizontal strips, featuring images of important milestones captured along the route, enforcing the idea of road as timeline in the work. The screen-prints were exhibited alongside a selection of the analogue photographs taken, spray paint stencils used, and a series of hubcaps I had foraged on similar roadside walks, onto which I mounted further photos and prints. I decided to record myself reading my reflective text, burned to CD and played on loop from a cheap boom box in the gallery, allowing me to experiment with a sonic presence alongside the visual works. Admittedly, there was a lot going on in the space, but after being deprived of any meaningful 3rd year exhibition, I had much to test out before my final year and viva examination.

Figure 50: Ralph Overill, *4th year Showcase exhibition*, 2021. Photograph: Scott Freeland

My aim was to create a richly layered experience for the viewer, that shifted between factual documentation of the walk (the photographs, hubcaps and stencils) and my science-fictional imaginings (the prints and voiceover), affirming Iain Sinclair and J.G. Ballard's assertions that the hinterlands are where the new is discovered: 'yes, I want to walk around the orbital motorway: in belief that this nowhere, this edge, is the place that will offer fresh narratives' (Sinclair, 2002, p. 16). '"Where else is there to go?" Ballard said. "The past is a biological swamp, the future is a sandy desert – and the present is a concrete playpen." […] The periphery, according to him is where the future reveals itself' (Sinclair, 2002, p. 267). In feedback, the seminar leader commended the printed work and large-scale fabric pieces, but felt the way I had employed hubcaps as framing devices and well-hung wall pieces appeared too clean or polite, and should instead fight against the sanitised gallery setting, road-grease and all. Using a CD player to distribute sound in the space divided opinion: some felt the quality and atmospheric effect was unsatisfactory, encouraging me to invest in top-of-the-range equipment for my installation attempts, while others appreciated the temporal object and cultural references of the boom box. Personally, it has been an objective of my Doctorate to make within my limited financial budget, being inventive with the technology I understand and can guarantee access to, to achieve personal yet effective results. The fact that the exhibited CD player was purchased for twenty pounds from an Argos in a Basildon retail park, strengthens the Essex ties and memories between myself and my work.

Figure 51: Ralph Overill, *Details of objects in Showcase 2021 installation*, 2021, spray paint on CD player and found hubcaps

The inclusion of *The terminator* was questioned and deemed unnecessary – a comment I dispute – as through my inclusion of sci-fi characters and narratives in more recent work, I have been able to understand science fiction as a way to view the present through the lens of an imagined future; a device that through an invented temporal distance, reveals the closest and most perceptive truths of our current times. The Cybermen stripped society's capitalism bare before me to subvert and attack, while *The terminator* has helped me to realise much more personal truths and concerns about my body and character. In a return of sorts to the spinal injury-induced *Tape worm* of my second year, an unforeseen theme of *Terminus* was an increasing awareness and anxiety of my parents' joint disorders (arthritis, Marfan's syndrome) and how my body is beginning to show signs of these as I enter middle-age. The roadside terrain was hostile, unwelcoming and I was reduced to a limp for the last miles of the walk as my left knee weakened, mirroring the dismembered Terminator in the final scenes of the 1984 film as it doggedly pursued its target. The T800 cyborg, with its endoskeleton of silver pistons and hydraulics emphasised the mechanical degradation of the body to me: 'eroded joints like charred hooves – bionic knees marching up the A127 – bone on bone, foot-and-mouth' (Overill, 2021. See Appendix 4). The narrative of *The terminator* films – robots, soldiers and assassins out of place and out of time, continually attempting to adjust, blend in – highlighted my own feelings of dislocation and alienation.

Figure 52: Ralph Overill, *Mother's chair*, 2021, black and white 35mm photograph, 31x20cm

Figure 53: Ralph Overill, *The piano at my parents' house*, 2021, screen-print on fabric 50x66cm

Michael Landy's *Welcome to Essex* exhibition (2021) helped me to understand my position in this self-contradicting county. On arrival, I found myself outsized and inadequate when confronted by *Essex man* – a 24ft tall cardboard bouncer, reproduction of the first newspaper illustration identifying this thick-necked breed of home-counties commuter (Fig.54). Due to my slim, slight stature, I have always held concerns about my size in comparison the broad chested alpha-males of Essex. This piece of Landy's struck a chord with these anxieties – no matter how many press-ups I did and chicken I ate, I would never amount to the proportions of an Essex wide-boy – I didn't fit the mould. Through re-presented newspaper clippings and cuts of television footage, Landy collaged together a landscape of aspirational social mobility, led by an outwardly materialistic and aesthetic lifestyle: former East-end fruit-sellers turned insurance brokers, dressed in new Mercedes and expensive suit (trophy wife hanging off broad shoulders) – wealth and its display were the only measure of success. Personally, I have always prioritised intrinsic values over this

lifestyle, putting me at odds with the society I grew up in – leading me to the counter-cultural activities of art and skateboarding. This disconnection and dislocation from my home county now reverberates in my work, as I imagine myself as the Terminator, walking miles of carriageway, graffitiing my presence along the route: ‘travelling the road becomes an end in itself, a way of observing society from outside its bounds’ (Martin, 1983, p. 3).

Figure 54: Ralph Overill, *Ralph with Essex man*, 2021, photograph: Richard Overill

However, despite positioning myself against the consumerist capitalism of Essex, my relationship to the county is more complex. Alongside the stiletto heels of promiscuous plastic Essex girls, Landy notes the seedy undercurrents of East London, migrating down-river (from the Krays to Cranham). When the Essex sun sets, a shadow of night-club drug-deals and landfill burials rules the roads and real-estate: ‘a sewer of potential bandits, rustlers, burger-munching trippers carrying the virus of the slums. It’s border country’ (Sinclair, 2002, p. 134). Through his inclusion of news footage of the ridiculous fly tipping in a Purfleet footpath, alongside his positioning of TVs in overfilled wheelie bins, Landy notes Essex’s role as the dustbin of London. It is this juxtaposition of gangland garbage and sun-tanned window-shopper that fuels my intrigue with the county; John Betjeman described Essex as ‘a large square with two sides water. It is a stronger contrast of beauty and ugliness than any southern English county’ (1958, p. 170). I witness this contrast as St Clements Church stands in the shadow of Proctor and Gamble’s bubbling, roaring factory (Fig.47) – a collaged landscape reminiscent of my earlier image-clashing screen-prints – and reflect it in my meticulously crafted lithographs and etchings, superglued to tarmac-scarred hubcaps; pretty meets gritty. The margins are where the gloss of suburbia gives way to the raw vagrancy of the carriageways and river paths, and Essex, with its ample transport links, docks and refuge sites, has plenty. While I’ll never fit in to Essex Man’s padded suit, or be able to afford his car, there’s risk and adventure to be had in the ghosts of a gangster culture, and the edges are only a short walk away.

Figure 55: Ralph Overill, *Detail of print on hubcap*, 2021, documentation of Showcase installation. Photograph: Scott Freeland

Through *Terminus: an A127 walk*, I was able to position and examine my practice and myself in relation to my homeland, defining more fully the Essex margins, and their role in my research. Through an expanding practice of walking, photography and reflective writing, alongside screen-printing and spray-painting, the role of the monster shifted again as I wrote of myself as the Terminator, injured and alienated in a hostile and temporally unstable frontier zone. The space between artist and monster lessens as I assimilate the notion of monster as mirror further in my research – as depicted in a telling selfie from the A127 walk (Fig.56). As my practice continues to inform my understanding of myself and my connection to the landscape, my attention is brought to the disconnection from society I display, as I seek the rough and raw of the Essex verges. ‘That’s the message of my fiction. We need to explore total alienation and find what lies beyond. The secret module that underpins who we are and our imaginative remaking of ourselves that we all embrace’ (Ballard in Sinclair, 2002, p. 269).

Figure 56: Ralph Overill, *Selfie with terminator*, 2021, digital photograph

The last Cyberman

A sliver figure floats in a vast vista of greys, lost between sea, sky and bridge. I feel the melancholy of the estuarine air through rough-cut eyeholes, time suspended in the breeze.

Figure 57: Ralph Overill, *Under the bridge*, 2021, digital photograph: Scott Freeland

On the morning of Thursday 4th November, I did something that had probably never been done during a Work in Progress Seminar before; while showing a video piece to the audience I left the room, changed, and upon the video's end, re-entered dressed as a cheaply deformed robot (boiler suit spray painted silver, polystyrene body armour), proceeding to give a five-minute lecture on lost futures as an introduction to my concept of *the last Cyberman.*

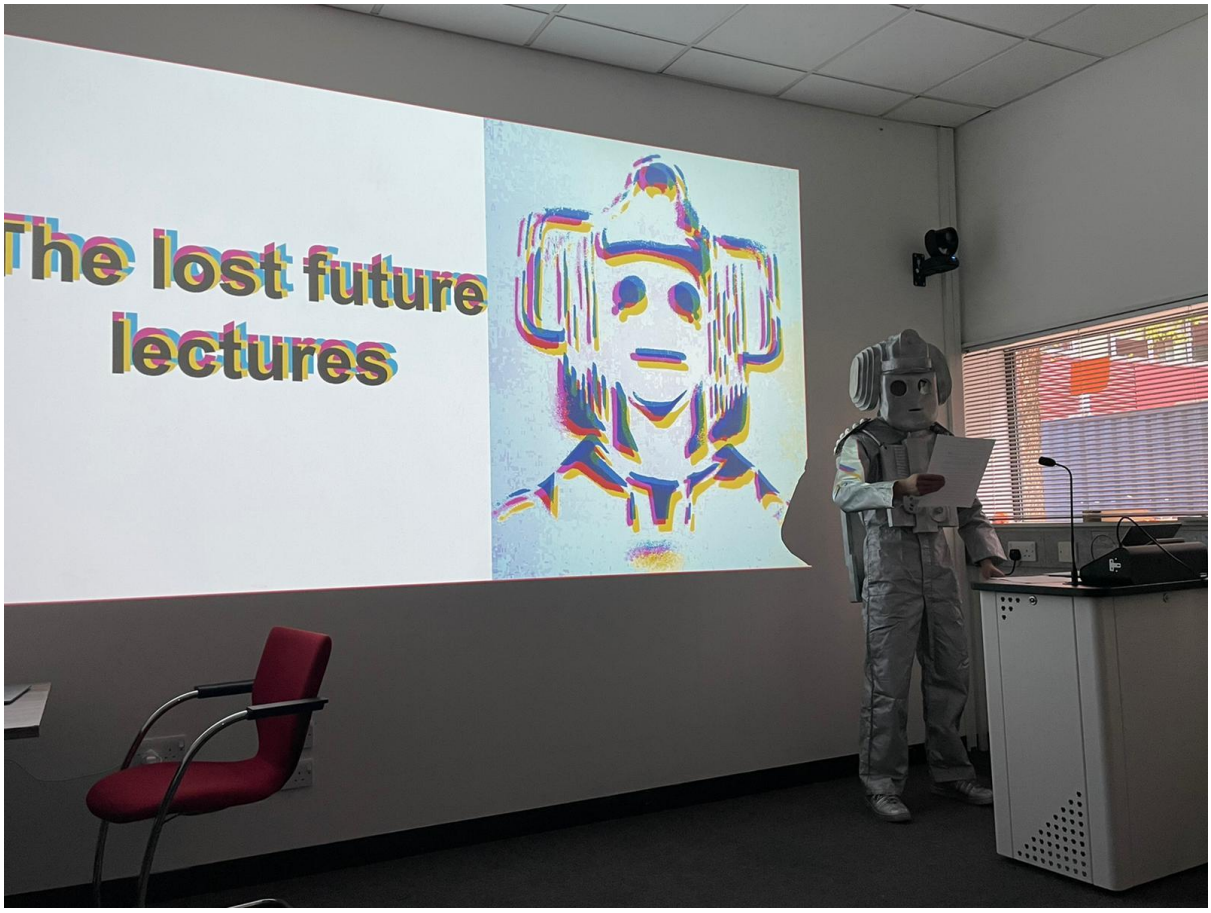

Figure 58: Ralph Overill, *The lost future lectures*, 2021, documentation of performance. Photograph: Dee Clayton

My first artistic performance, after noting the importance of selfies taken with my Terminator (Fig.56), Michael Myers (Fig.82) and Cyberman (Fig.38) works looming over my shoulder like some deranged shadow, it seemed the only place to go was within – the monster and myself. Although loosely modelled on *Doctor Who's* automaton nemeses, the last Cyberman signified deeper concerns than the insurmountable reign of late-capitalism; he was alone – the last of his kind – vulnerable and lost, dislocated in an unrealised future where his business ontology systems had collapsed, a world devoid of profit or demand. Physically, he was frail – more like the aging T-800 Terminator – joints seizing, circuits exposed, memory chip failing, power supply waning. The personal concerns of alienation and bodily degradation which so poignantly entered my *Terminus* work, found themselves at the forefront of my subsequent performances.

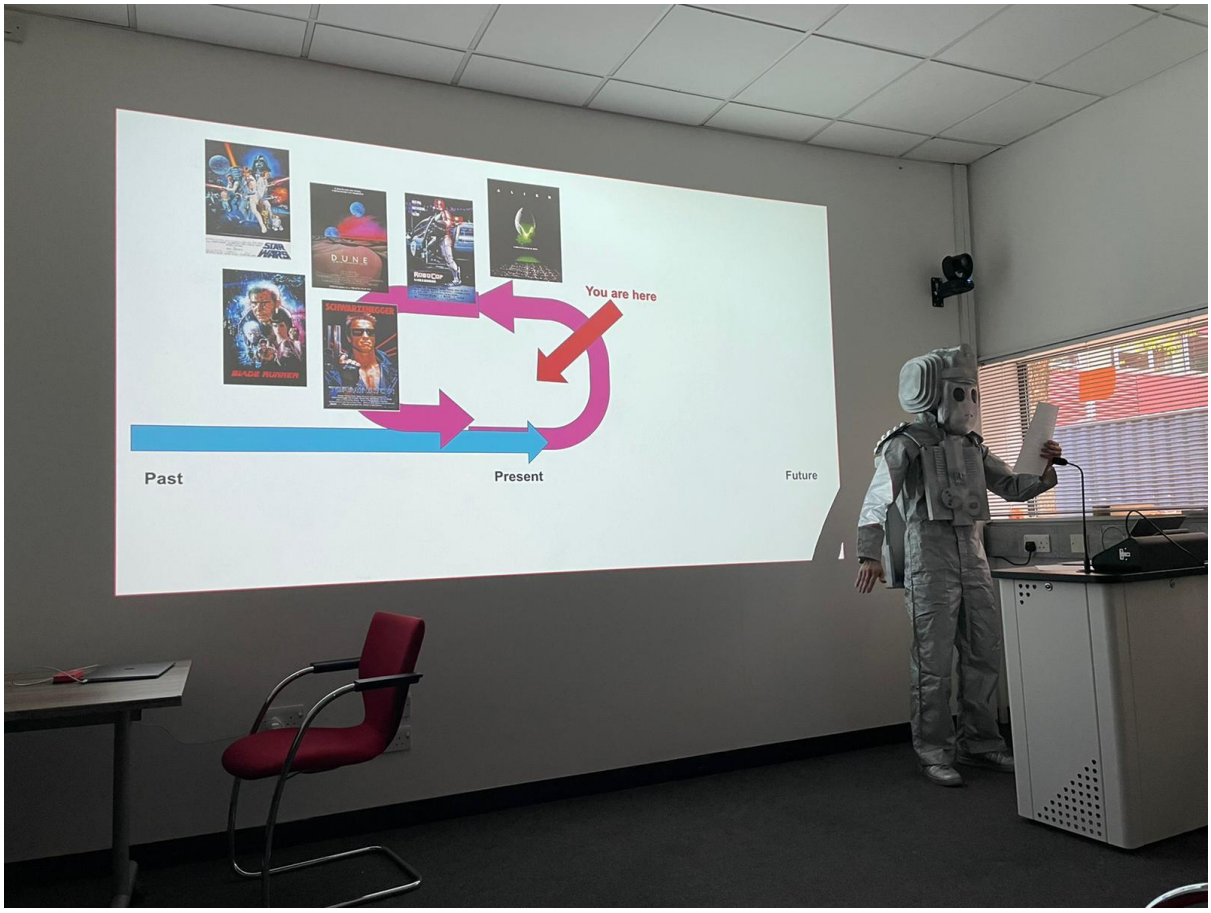

Figure 59: Ralph Overill, *The lost future lectures*, 2021, documentation of performance. Photograph Dee Clayton

As I stood before awakened and smiling academics in AVA G.48, I noted the greater ease with which I could express myself – slow my speech, project my voice – when adorning the over-sized mask and helmet. The vacuum-formed face plate improved my verbal delivery, the mesh I had duct-taped to the inside of the eye holes seemed to shield my vision from the blinding light of the seminar room projector. Perhaps by embodying this amalgamation of my fears and anxieties, I could better address them in my work, my vulnerabilities at the same time shielded and exposed.

'You cannot see me from where I look at myself'

– Francesca Woodman (Goodreads, 2022)

As I embarked on this more personal final leg of my research project, it became clear that I needed to add to my trio of creative influences. Ballard fashioned his imagery from cold, hard-edged surfaces – metallic – which critiqued and reflected society with an unforgiving matter-of-factness - a chromium world. Smithson's land art experiments left little room for sentiment, and Sinclair's boot-breaking pilgrimages were unmistakably masculine; the indestructible walker, the heroic scientist. While these three formed a *Boy's own* matrix that laid the conceptual framework to my research, I sought a softer, more fragile presence to converse with as I explored the intimacies of my character, my monsters.

Figure 60: Francesca Woodman, *House #4*, 1976, gelatin silver print, 25x20cm

Despite my DIY cyber-suit, I struggled to relate to Monster Chetwynd, her extensive team of collaborators and her perpetual remaking of herself, and while initially drawn into a BBC4 documentary on Brian Catlin, I couldn't commune with his unique level of weird. But while thumbing through *The artist's body* (2000, Warr and Jones eds.) during a narcoleptic evening session in the Docklands library I chanced across an

image; soft legs, a blurred torso, caught between a broken fireplace. A fleeting presence impressed upon a dying room, haunting my domestic sensibilities to my childhood home. *House #4* (1976) led me to Francesca Woodman. As I learned of the circumstances of this artist's life, I developed an association with her different to the other influences on my research. While I related to the urgency of Rauschenberg's and Warhol's making, connected to Marker's handling of images and memory, was inspired by the approaches of Smithson, JR, Bradford and Sinclair, I *empathised* with Francesca; a lady Icarus, darkroom angel, who flew so high so fast, lost her wings and fell. 'She internalised the problem, subjectivised it, rendered it as personal as possible' (Krauss 1999, p. 162). As I studied her photographs, I imagined meeting her, what she might say to me:

'Out of time, out of place – I look into my reflection and don't see myself. I am broken like this decaying house. I don't belong.'

Viewing this artist, blurred and suspended in vulnerable performance – 'she emerges from obscurity, crosses through the mirror and materialises for a moment in a world twisted with anxiety' (Sollers 1998, p. 10) – my own frailties were brought sharply into focus. The energy-sapping erosion of constant transit between the claustrophobic clutter of my wife's Thurrock flat and dusty dilapidation of my parents' Billericay house; the frustration at not being able to afford ownership of a space – get on the property ladder. The aching disillusionment as I have watched the accelerating marginalisation and degeneration of arts education through my seven years of doctoral study – will there be a living wage left for me at the end of it? Enough money for my wife and I to own a house, start a family? The anxiety that all my talent and passion as a printmaker will amount to redundancy, unemployment. The cyber-monster of late-capitalism casts a heavy shadow of instability over me. I'm a one-off – a failure in the eyes of my grammar school contemporaries and their financial successes. My brother-in-law earns more than me shift working at Proctor and Gamble. I don't fit into today's world and what it values – out of time, out of place. Out of body: a deep-rooted worry about my physique – too thin, too weak, too injured, too damaged, too old to keep doing it all – a dysmorphic disorder – I can't trust what I see in the mirror anymore. Alienated, outmoded, a rusting terminator on the scrap heap of the 21st century. A fragile motor on the verge of burning out. I am unsustainable.

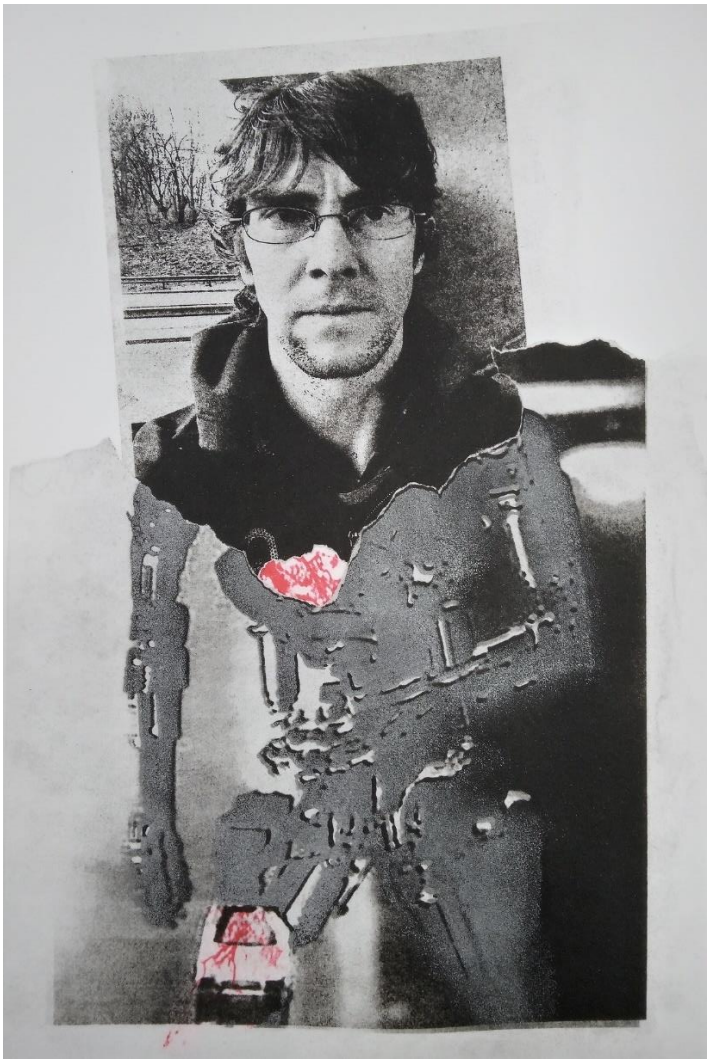

Figure 61: Ralph Overill, *Obsolete*, 2021, paper lithograph, 20x30cm

The Last Cyberman evolved to depict these vulnerabilities.[3] On an expedition to Rettendon to walk the site of the 1995 Essex Range Rover murders, I positioned myself on a log at the brink of a field; a lost astronaut, agricultural automaton 'exiled in the present' (Levi Strauss 1998, p. 20). As my father struggled to work the ancient Kodak Duaflex camera shutter with his numb fingers, I decided to shake violently in convulsions of anger and confusion, to the extent that the film emulsion couldn't situate me – displaced in time, space and body – something was inside, trying to get out. While I imagine I must have always cut a strange figure in my wanderings around the edges of Essex, placing this silver-suited oddity in these fields and green

[3] For a detailed analysis of the integration of the last Cyberman into my research, see Overill, R. (forthcoming) 'Exiled in the present: the last Cyberman walks in Rettendon', *Journal of arts writing by students*. 7(1). Full text in Appendix 2.

lanes raised the visuals to a new level of dislocation. The images and writing the walk generated became less about the steroid-deformed Essex terminators of the 90s drug and nightclub culture, and more focussed on my alienated experiences growing up in the county. On developing the photographs, the boundaries between figure and landscape had become blurred, undefined – I was part of a vibrating ocean that entwined monster and margin.

Figure 62: Ralph Overill, *The last Cyberman in Rettendon*, 2021, medium format black and white photograph: Richard Overill 20x20cm

My next project had to explore this symbiotic existence; the untamed fields of the A13 had become the hostile plains of my nightmares, where chainsaw wielding cannibals stalked. As I circumnavigated the Billericay suburbs, the dark behind every streetlight harboured Shatner-mask shadows, hollow eyes within every kitchen window. The Dartford Crossing not only connected Essex to Kent, but became a bridge to my innermost fears and frustrations – the stagnant river from where the Cybermen were exhumed. Further study of Francesca's oeuvre revealed a series inspired by Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, in particular the tale of Daphne and Apollo, as she wrapped bark around her limbs and positioned herself in waterside roots,

alluding to the mythological figure who was transformed into a tree. ‘Always wanting to disappear, Francesca Woodman melts into and loses herself in her surroundings’ (Chandès 1998, p. 7). But while Woodman merged herself with the classical ruins of ancient plants and crumbling stone, my monsters fed off the dilapidation of the margins: the hopelessness of Grays, ‘beyond resuscitation. A body bag lined with asbestos’ (Sinclair 2002, p. 479). And the dead-end of Chafford Hundred – middle-management housing perched on the edge of a chalk abyss, waiting to fall into the oblivion of memory, ‘a panorama of disenchantment. Amnesiaville’ (2002, p. 483).

Figure 63: Francesca Woodman, *Untitled MacDowell Colony, Peterborough, New Hampshire*, 1980, photograph, 20x25cm

In Ballard’s novels, I noted how the protagonist’s psyche became synonymous with the landscape that surrounded it in *The drowned world* (1962) and *Concrete island* (1974): ‘more and more, the island was becoming an exact model of his head. His movement across this forgotten terrain was a journey not merely through the island’s past but through his own’ (Ballard 1974, pp. 69-70). While Smithson often wrote in ways which compared the subconscious to geographical and geological forms:

> ‘one’s mind and the earth are in a constant state of erosion, mental rivers wear away abstract banks, brain waves undermine cliffs of thought, ideas

decompose into stones of unknowing, and conceptual crystallisations break apart into deposits of gritty reason.'

(Smithson in Bargellesi-Severi 1997, p. 40)

The peripheral landscape of West Thurrock reflected the bleakness, disillusion and alienation I felt. Therefore, on New Year's Eve 2021, my photographer, Scott, and I walked from St. Clements church, along the Thames path to the QE II Bridge, retracing the steps we had undertaken the previous Christmas. Instead of projecting Cybermen onto the landscape, in this iteration of the adventure, I performed the role of the returning robot, while Scott captured my presence along the river. As the wind pushed against my armour and aerated my mask, I felt exposed, vulnerable – yet true – in this desolate expanse of tide and torn cloud. I posed for distant static shots which aspired to emphasise my solitary, dislocated existence in a world I felt was crumbling around me, sat on the brink of the Thames, my automaton form caught between the stanchions of the bridge behind – my life – artist, research student, husband, part-time worker – was suspended in the margins. 'We move through space and time. Memory recedes. We become cosmonauts, we become lost' (Petit, 2002, 1:15:50).

Figure 64: Ralph Overill, *Between the stanchions*, 2021, digital photograph: Scott Freeland

A familiar echo of lorries boomed above; spray painting, projection, performance – this was the third time I was under the bridge – the narrative comes full-circle, loops around. And while here, in the shadow of the motorway circuit, I considered hauntology; it is like Sinclair's London orbital road – cultural debris, remnants of our hopes and fears spiralling and colliding around a clapped-out core – there will always be another pandemic, new variant, next climate crisis, housing shortage; just wait for it to come around again. Like the abandoned asylums that mark the perimeter of the M25, the margins bring us not only to the edge of landscape, but of psyche and memory – the brink of sanity – where monsters are made. Hauntology is the promise of monsters; both individually, and as a society, we are forever destined to be haunted by the recycled ghosts of our anxieties, insecurities and failings, 'they are always *there*, specters, even if they do not exist, even if they are no longer, even if they are not yet' (Derrida, 1994, p. 176).

Figure 65: Ralph Overill, *Haunting the bridge*, 2021, digital photograph: Scott Freeland

With this in mind, I attempted to make myself a spectral presence at this crossing of times and places, highlighting the alienation and instability that late-capitalism had inflicted on me. Through long-exposure photographs and carefully timed movements

I encouraged the cyber-suit to fuse with the Brutalist concrete, dying vegetation and neon graffiti around it. ‘Wormholes in the fabric of time. Mythic projections invade an unoptioned landscape, the gloom over Gravesend. The bridge is more metaphor than reality, lorries disappear into the clouds’ (Sinclair, 2002, pp. 453-454). I shook my head so hard that it became one with the bridge. *The last Cyberman* had evolved into an entity that inhabited the space between not only Thurrock and Dartford, but the planes of existence itself. Like Ballard’s *The atrocity exhibition* (1970), internal and external landscapes merged; ‘both dead and accelerating, a wind-blown desert strewn with the wreckage of modernity that is at the same time a place of unbearable speed and intensity’ (Kunzru, 2014). Francesca’s work often contested the static image of photography with a blur of movement – rifts that highlighted the instability of the subject, while allowing us ‘to see time in all its elusiveness’ (Chandès, 1998, p. 7). With Scott’s DSLR camera, we were able to push this further; the digital equipment allowed longer exposure times and instantly viewable results, allowing me to craft performances of motion out of trial and error. Upon reviewing the photographs, Scott advised that much could be altered and enhanced through editing software, but I preferred to keep the instinctive, primal urgency and honesty of the event present in the raw shots; their capture of the imperfection of the instant – ‘one must be receptive, receptive to the image at the moment it appears’ (Bachelard, 1994, p. xv).

Figure 66: Ralph Overill, *Bridge head*, 2021, three digital photographs: Scott Freeland

While the edge-lands of Essex had proven a fitting haunt for my lonely automaton, I was yet to address another margin that I had gravitated towards in my search for a sense of belonging: the art school. As someone who had always struggled or

refused to fit in, arts education had become an ever-growing part of my life, from undergraduate, postgraduate and doctorate study, to employment and further career aspirations. In the final days before winter shutdown, toiling away diligently in the AVA workshops, I noticed the building becoming increasingly deserted. I learnt of a super-spreader at a staff Christmas party that had allowed Omicron to burn through the department like wildfire. Keen to exploit this, I found a large, empty studio space and one evening, smuggled my Cyber-suit, skateboard, video camera and set of crutches past the security guards. I continued to draw on the practice of Francesca, her spontaneous, DIY approach using simple props and opportunistic spaces, creating scenarios in which something could happen.

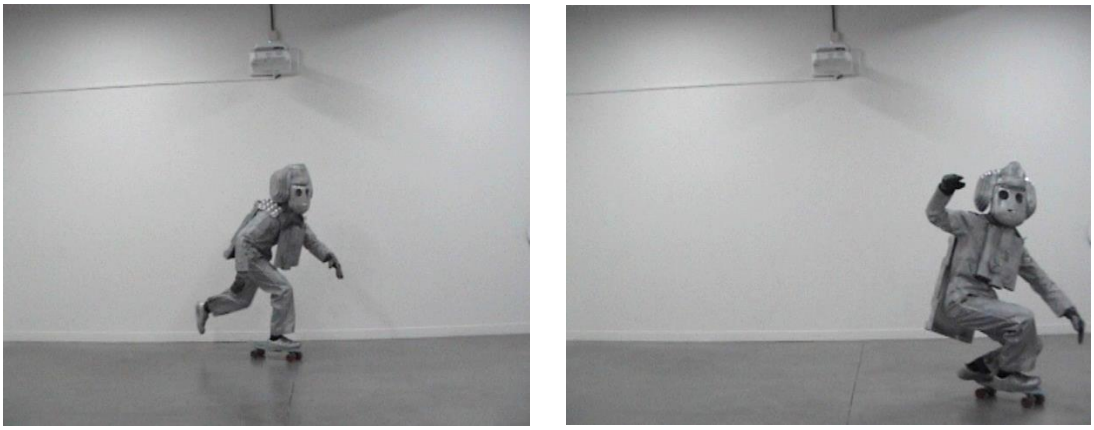

Figure 67: Ralph Overill, *Cyber-skate*, 2021, video stills

6pm, 22nd December, almost completely alone in the AVA building, I proceeded to film myself skateboarding around the studio while dressed as a Cyberman. Where earlier performances had evoked the dislocation and disillusion I felt in this capitalist-realist world, skateboarding had become connected to the weaknesses and degradation of my body (initially explored in *Tape worm*). I first captured myself freely flowing around the space in my regular clothes, before attempting to skate across the smooth concrete floors in my cyber-costume – balance and vision made more difficult by the over-sized helmet and face mask. While slightly more tentative, this was still relatively comfortable for me, so I attached my two crutches (from a teenage skateboard-induced ankle injury) to my forearms and attempted to propel myself along with these acting as supports / oars. This gave me the awkward struggle of motion I was searching for, alongside some crashes, as I aimed to depict my anxieties for the future of my limbs and joints as I continue to enjoy the motion

and physicality of karate, football and skateboarding. The combination of crutches and skateboard, alongside creating an absurd visual oddity, became symbolic of the contradictions in my character: the fear of injury, the refusal to give up. I left the university that evening (bruised hip, small cut on forehead) satisfied that I had captured a care-free skating past, a tentative, delicately rolling present and a struggling, disabled collision-course of a future, alongside acknowledging my exploitative relationship to the art school and the creative refuge it offers me.

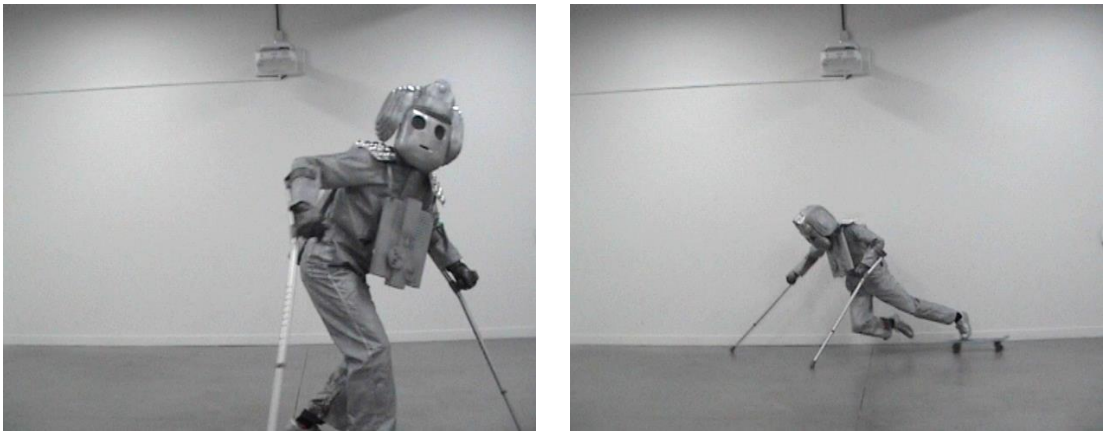

Figure 68: Ralph Overill, *Cyber-skate (crutches)*, 2021, video stills

Through *The last Cyberman* performances, I was able to explore a more idiosyncratic monster, to not only make work that depicted or alluded to my own fears and vulnerabilities – that I don't fit in, that I'm wearing out – but to embody and perform these as a way to better understand the anxieties connected to my self, my past and my potential futures. This resulted in a merger of margin and monster, as I sensed these landscapes that sucked and clawed me in, echoing the feelings and images of my inner psyche. If the monster mirrored me, and I was mirrored by the margins, in a Ballardian psychogeographical twist, could margins *be* the monsters?

> Beyond the silver span of the motor bridge lay basins of cracked mud the size of ballrooms - models of a state of mind, a curvilinear labyrinth.
>
> (Ballard, 1970, p. 93)

Figure 69: Ralph Overill, *Cyber-bridge*, 2021, digital photograph: Scott Freeland

The last monster

Something …undefined materialises into view. Fragile limbs dissolve into cluttered rooms, worn joints merge with dark, dusty corners. Memories dance between the shadows.

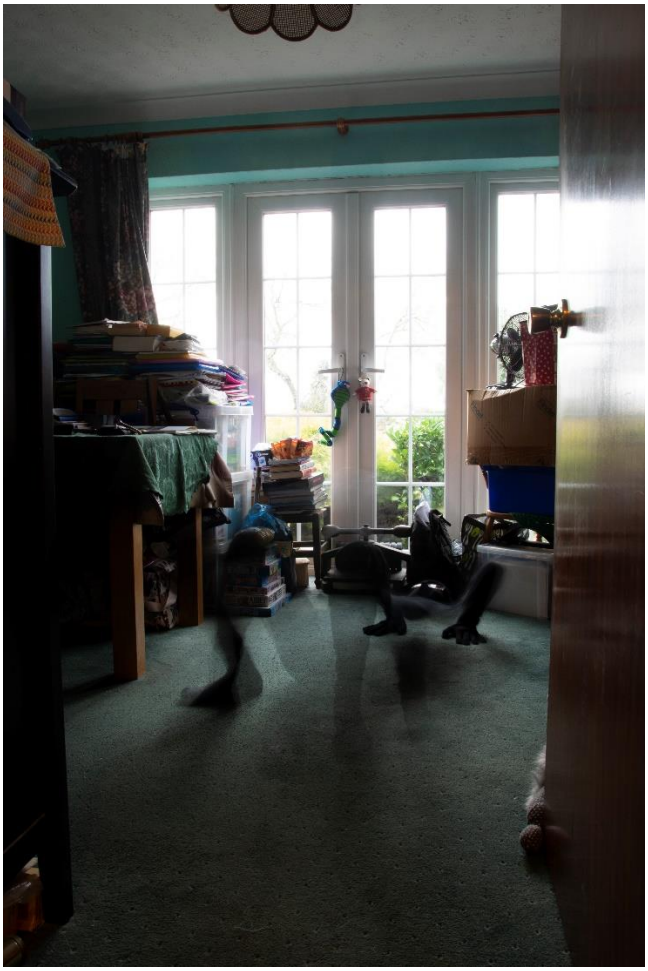

Figure 70: Ralph Overill, *House spider (dining room)*, 2021, digital photograph: Scott Freeland

During the late stages of my research, academics raised concerns about the impersonal nature of the monsters I appropriated from cinema and encouraged me to depict *my* monster. Initially, I felt uneasy about the direction – particularly as my research does not address the area of psychoanalysis. I could argue that while studying these creatures and villains of popular culture, I not only projected my thoughts onto them, but they in turn impressed their presences onto me, amalgamating into a fragmented, kaleidoscopic reflection of myself.

Figure 71: Ralph Overill, *The mirror cracks*, 2021, paper lithograph, 42x30cm

I had my doubts; when the monster finally emerged from the shadows in horror films, I was always underwhelmed – Like Robert Smithson's *Island of broken glass* (1969-70), destined only to exist in mind and words, never in mud and sand. To depict this monster would surely lessen its power, put a full-stop to the research that has sustained me for the last half-decade. What remains of me once this monster is resolved? But deeper anxieties took over – a PhD-embedded fear of doctoral failure (stiff professors in mahogany Chelsea corridors) – I was not content with my splintered cinematic reflection, this was an apparition, a refraction, a misdirection. I always strived for the essence, the lineage of things in my research. *The last Cyberman* had partially personalised my relationship to the monster, but the malformed automaton was a suit of armour, used for traversing the margins and the corridors of the art school. Domestic tensions had been raised by the inclusion of images of my mother's chair and my father's piano in my earlier *Terminus* work. The adventure had to come full circle, mirroring my childhood playtimes and lockdown wanderings, whether out on the road, river, woodland or wasteland, at the end of an expedition, the explorer must return home. As I revisited *The poetics of space* (1994) Bachelard confirmed my parents' home as the heart of my memories: 'our

daydreams carry us back to it. And the poet well knows that the house holds childhood motionless in its arms' (1994, p. 8).

My research had taught me that we are our own monsters – but what resided within me? The clues lay in the practice, a common thread, constant presence through the programme, from the first print, first slide presented; silently watching from the corners, patrolling the edges, still yet fast-moving, awkward, uncomfortable, slender, sinuous, alien. From the legs that crawled across my hands as a child to Stephen King's final image of the monstrous *IT*, I am a spider, and I always was.

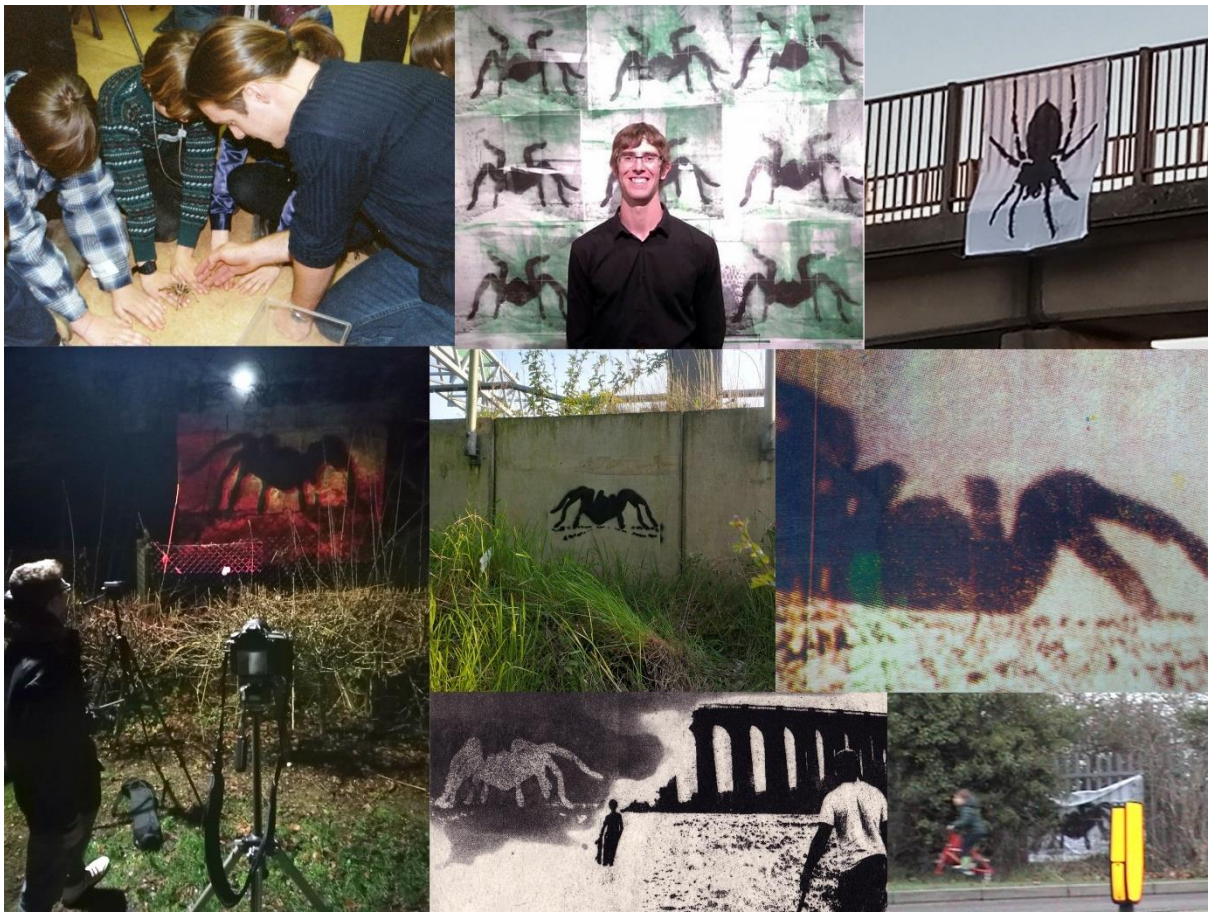

Figure 72: composite of doctorate spider practice, clockwise from top left: childhood photograph (1997), LOOP exhibition (2017), A13 banner (2021), Screen-print detail (2018), Fabric intervention (2019), Etching (2019), Projection experiment (2019), Spray painting (2020)

House spider

Building on the long exposures of *the last Cyberman* at the QE II Bridge, I aimed to use my spidery physique and movements – flexibility and speed learnt through decades of karate training – to create an undefinable half-form of many limbs and

joints that haunted and semi-materialised in the edges and angles of my childhood home. The interior light allowed for longer exposures – up to 8 seconds in which to hold and transition between a variety of poses. Scott and I learnt quickly that to get the balance of solid, blurred and transparent forms I sought, correct choreography was critical: ‘it is a matter of participating more intimately in the movement of the image’ (Bachelard, 1994, p. xxxix). Again, I could take inspiration from Francesca Woodman’s *Space*^{2} series (1975-78), appreciating the shadowy, spectral forms and paying attention to the way she used the angles of the interior to frame her body. Wearing the black, elasticated base-layers I used for football matches, I experimented with confining myself within lit doorways and stairwells alongside crawling across carpets and furniture. Every surface was steeped in memory – my 35 years of life lived in these spaces, their dust and clutter reflecting this time with honesty, alongside referencing the over-sized arachnids that undoubtedly hid within their crevices.

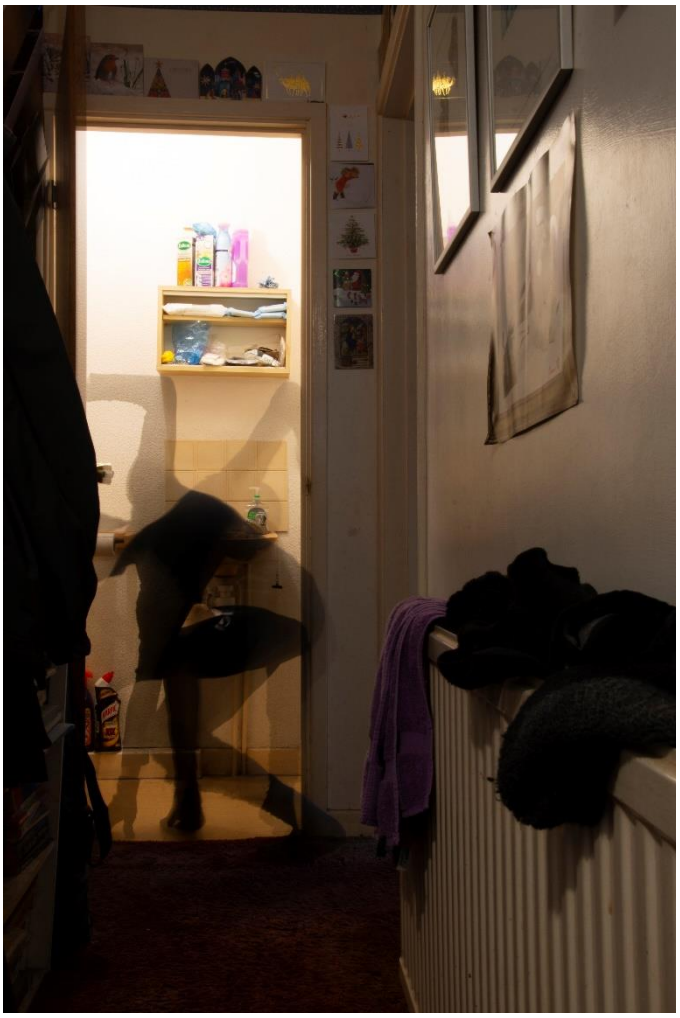

Figure 73: Ralph Overill, *House spider (toilet)*, 2021, digital photograph: Scott Freeland

The project pushed Scott's equipment to its limits – we shot over 150 photographs in the session, with about 5 meeting my demands. The images stood in vast contrast to Monster Chetwyn's absurd, overblown performances. They displayed a subtlety and restraint closer to the *Land site* etchings of my MA studies (Figs. 3 and 4); I had presented myself as a fragile, primordial creature, not belonging anywhere yet feeding off the past, flickering between realities and memories in this domestic space: 'something unreal seeps into the reality of the recollections that are on the borderline between our own personal history and an indefinite pre-history, in the exact place where, after us, the childhood home comes to life in us' (Bachelard, 1994, p. 58).

Figure 74: Ralph Overill, *House spider (stair climb)*, 2021, digital photograph: Scott Freeland

Reflecting on this body of work helped me articulate what the monster is to me. Alexa Wright has written that the monster gives form to what I can't comprehend – that web of memories, melancholies, fears, frustrations and frailties that orbit around me in my own hauntology – my *Atrocity exhibition* (1970). While I witness these semi-materialise as a wraith-like shade through the motion of my performance, this final year has shown me that the monster can also function as a dispersal, a

transfusion of all that haunts me, into the landscape that surrounds me; the desolate roadsides, estuaries and bridge foundations of suburbia. As in Ballard's fiction, the monster exists as a margin between the protagonist's psyche and the hostile environment they inhabit. Therefore, in *House spider*, the importance is perhaps not the dark mass of limbs and joints, but the areas that dissolve into the remembered childhood behind. This backdrop of precariously stacked CDs, books and VHS tapes becomes folds and cabinets in a repository of memories: 'in its countless alveoli space contains compressed time' (Bachelard, 1994, p. 8). Each archives decades of my presence, so that this body of work captures what lies between the anxious body of my adult self and the site of a childhood that I cannot relinquish. Without this place, I fear I would have no past, no timeline, just a lost Cyberman, a foreign body passing through the on-demand boredom of the 21st century.

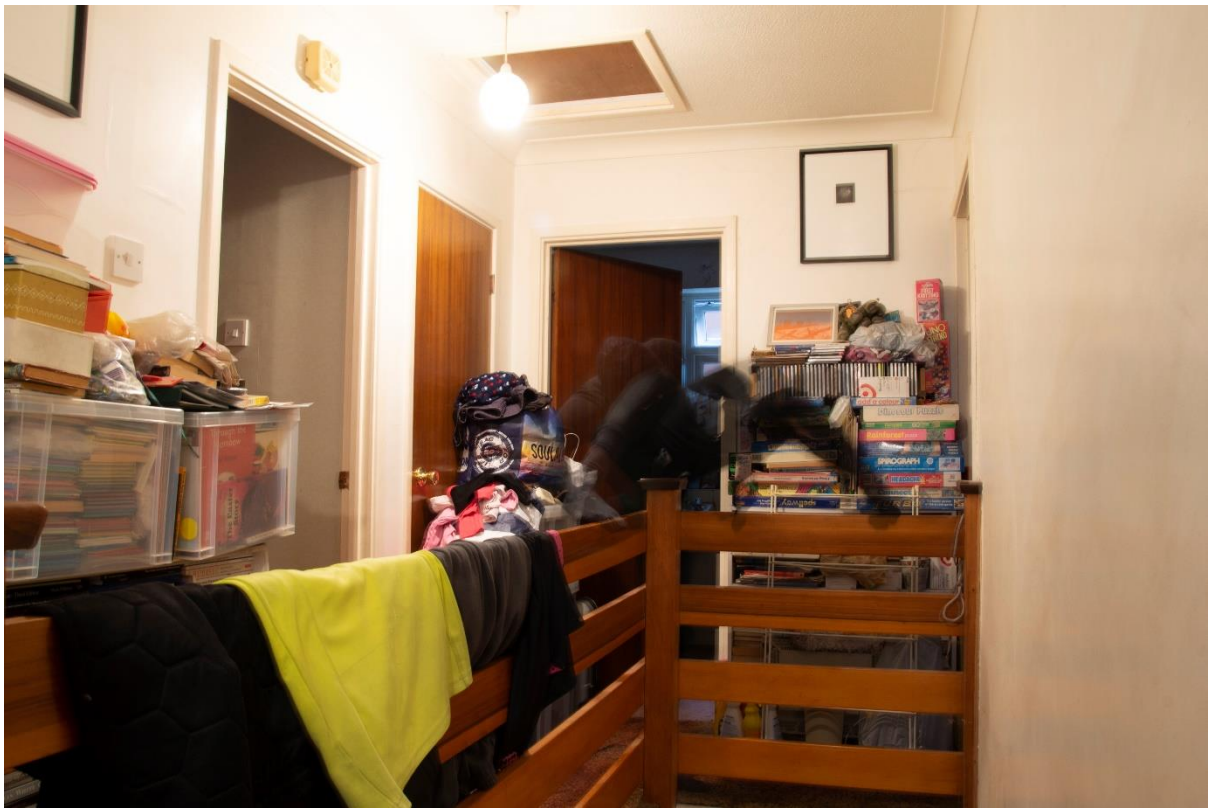

Figure 75: Ralph Overill, *House spider (banister)*, 2021, digital photograph: Scott Freeland

JR found his monsters in the walls, fences and borders that divide and deprive societies. For Sinclair, the M25 became a monster, a tarmac slipknot choking the history from his London home. This project has made it clear that my monsters form in a margin between the desolate voids of West Thurrock that I venture out to

(seeking escape from the stifling matrix of capitalism), and the remembered interior to which I am compelled to return. Tensioned strands that bridge gaps between internal and external landscapes and realities; the fragile web, where the spider which haunts my practice resides. Academics occasionally expressed concern at the instability inherent to my life, but the research has shown it is something that I feed off, alongside something that drains me – a delicate balance must be struck – though a certain solitary fleetingness will always be part of me. ‘It is better to live in a state of impermanence than in one of finality’ (Bachelard, 1994, p. 61).

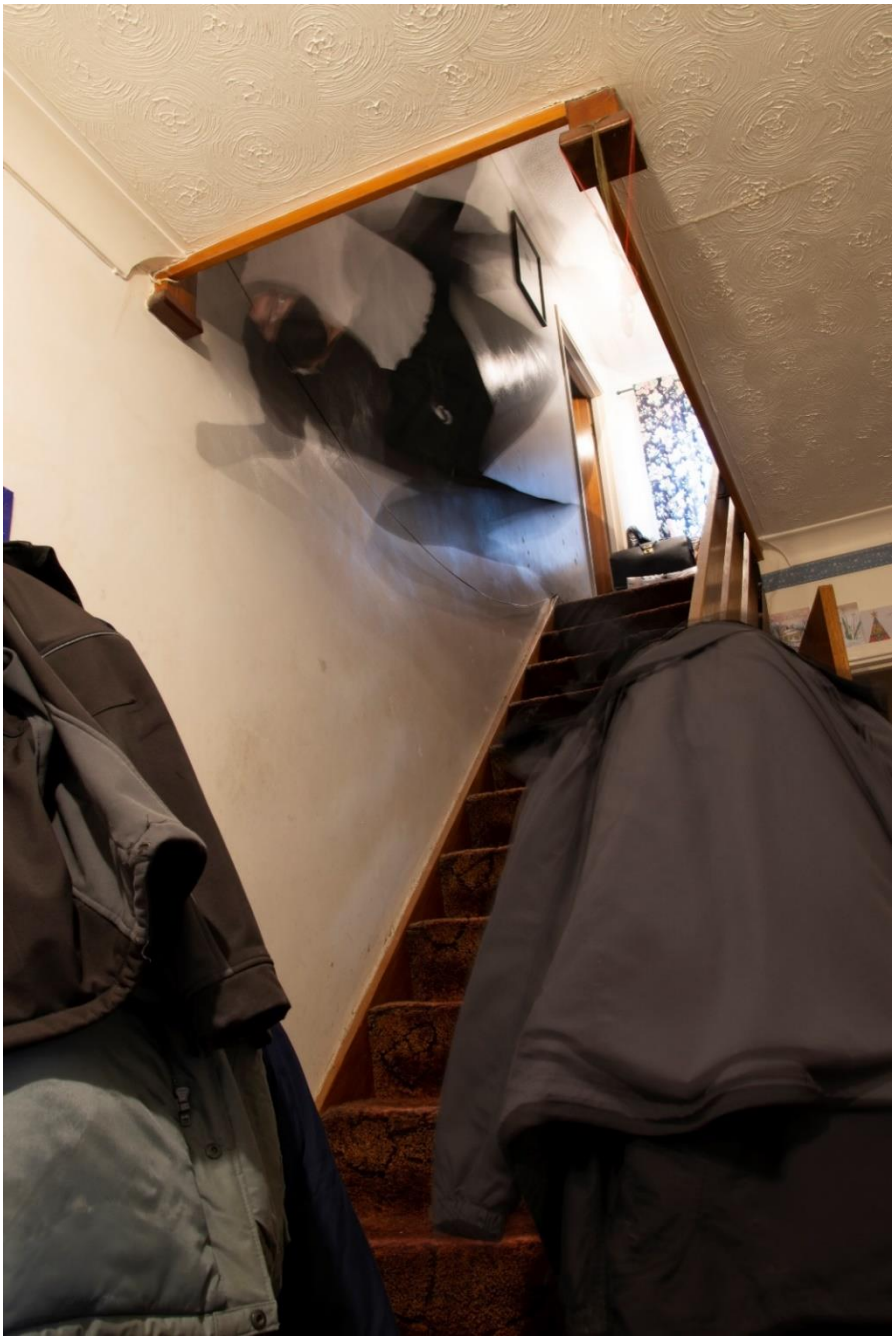

Figure 76: Ralph Overill, *House spider (stair hang)*, 2021, digital photograph: Scott Freeland

Reorientation

Having circulated through the monsters of my research and the margins in which they reside (from a giant roadside tarantula to a ghostly domestic spider), it seemed important to consider the new destinations reached by my practice; its repositioning of processes and working strategies, and where it now sits in an artistic context.

While Robert Rauschenberg, Andy Warhol, Chris Marker and Robert Smithson will continue to influence my methodologies and aesthetic decisions, the development of the photographic and performative in my work led to a connection with Francesca Woodman, and now paves the way for an, arguably, more feminine scaffold of practitioners who address the issues of body, identity, and their tensions within society.

Figure 77: photograph of Louise Bourgeois wearing her latex sculpture *Avensa*, 1975

The continual appearances of the spider in my practice aligns me with Louise Bourgeois, whose cage-like installations similarly allude to a preoccupation with interior and exterior space. Upon viewing her 2022 Hayward Gallery retrospective, *The woven child*, I felt the scenarios she constructed sat on a knife-edge between dream and nightmare, sometimes welcoming, sometimes repulsive. The twisting

spidery sculptures towered or concealed as either gods or monsters. These dualities coupled with an intimate connection with fabric (nurtured by her parents' tapestry restoration business) situate this artist's concerns near to my own. Most poignantly, an image of Bourgeois wearing one of her latex sculptures as a costume (Fig.77) caused her to resemble, in my mind, a giant egg sac; in the same way that I eventually became the spider of my domestic sensibilities, perhaps Louise's practice led her to the centre of a nursery web – to embody an archaic spider-mother. This considered, Bourgeois' aesthetic and concepts seemed to feed off the Freudian and the abject, two psychoanalytical notions that my work sought distance from, instead finding connections in the visual language and characters of cinema.

Cindy Sherman's strategies around costume, performance and photography have become something I now relate to. Visiting a National Portrait Gallery exhibition of her work in 2019, I was drawn to her early series of untitled film stills – like Francesca Woodman's work, these images relied on makeshift props and opportunistic shoots, often with a friend or relative taking the photo of the posing Sherman, (something I can relate to having had to teach my father how to operate the shutters on my collection of charity shop cameras). A narrative ambiguity, anchored by an unmistakably cinematic style made these images accessible to me – my favourite, *Untitled film still #48*, (1979) feeling undeniably Hitchcockian: *North by Northwest* (1959)? *Vertigo* (1958)? *The birds* (1963)? I feel my own aesthetic choices draw heavily on the filmic and a youth mediated by science fiction and horror features: isolating a melancholy robot in a dystopian estuarine landscape, or silhouetting a chainsaw-wielding beserker against a burning sky (Fig.83). Sherman's practice displayed the photographic motivations that attracted me to the medium – every walk, every shopping trip was working towards a new outcome: location spotting adventures and thrift-shop discoveries that became the next settings and costumes, things that were now key components of my compositions. As the last Cyberman became a tool to examine the alienation I felt as an intrinsically motivated creative in an increasingly neo-liberal society governed by extrinsic values, Sherman's series of characters and the scenes she constructed similarly researched her feelings around femininity, and particularly its presentation in cinema: 'I was wrestling with some sort of turmoil of my own about understanding women. The

characters weren't dummies; they weren't just airhead actresses. They were women struggling with something but I didn't know what.' (Sherman, 2003, p. 9).

Figure 78: Cindy Sherman, *Untitled film still #48*, 1979, gelatin silver print, 24x18.9cm

Later work in the artist's oeuvre saw her removing herself from the frame, instead employing props of dolls, prosthetics, and jewellery to instigate narratives. This is something that I began to experiment with as my stories around the Last Cyberman developed; compelled, whilst exploring J.G. Ballard's hometown of Shepperton, to photograph my discarded cyber-helmet at the base of a decapitated statue, evoking a fallen capitalist kingdom and echoing Percy Bysshe Shelley's poem, *Ozymandias* (1818) [see *Viva chronicles*, Appendix 1]. Ultimately, Sherman's interrogation of the female identity is based largely in the attitudes and values of the 20th century, and I was compelled to seek an artist of my generation; someone whose practice traversed the in-between voids bridging the material and virtual worlds of the second millennium.

I connected with Cao Fei's work initially through the poignant image of an astronaut wandering an empty beach (*Nova 01*, 2019). The melancholic disconnection created through combination of costume and setting mirrored my own recent practical experiments documenting a Cyberman stranded on the Thames path (Figs. 57 and 64) and worked with the principal of temporal dislocation – pasts and futures clashing together. Fei's practice displayed a flexibility and adaptability synonymous with 21st century life, merging traditional mediums of film, photography, performance and installation with blogging and video gaming. Her work seemed to explore the effect of digital media on society and the alienation of a – her – millennial Chinese generation.

Figure 79: Cao Fei, *Nova 01*, inkjet print 150x105cm

In *Haze and fog* (2013) the artist filmed around her local neighbourhood in Beijing, depicting a near-future 'air-pocalypse' where pollution and global warming have zombified the population. Taking the form of a 47-minute-long video, this piece indicated a shared interest in the cinematic between Fei and me, alongside motivations to create imagined futures which addressed environmental and political concerns. I related to Cao electing to use her hometown as the setting for this, reminiscing on my own exploitation of the Essex suburbs and Thurrock edge-lands as a source of inspiration.

I found an affinity for the artist's 2004 series, *Cosplayers*, in which she sought to analyse the role-playing strategies employed by Asian teenagers as they attempted to connect with contemporary society. Through a series of staged photographs and video, Cao Fei placed these adolescents, heavily costumed in cloaks, metallic armour and threatening weapons, against the bleak urban and industrial landscapes at the peripheries of Guangzhou, China. Here, costume is highlighted as a way of searching for identity within a world overrun with cartoon characters and popular culture references, as my solitary Cyberman drew upon an upbringing surrounded by classic *Doctor Who* episodes, the cosplayers find connections (or disconnections) with each other and the world around them through becoming the heroes and villains of popular anime and manga franchises.

Figure 80: Cao Fei, *Hello! Kitty*, 2005, c-print, 120x90cm

For both these players and me, costume functions as escape from the dreary reality offered by global capitalist systems, simultaneously a way to stand out from, and a way to disappear from the joyless responsibilities burdening life in the 21st century. Fei starkly underlines the alienation faced by these youth generations, juxtaposing the cosplayers' battlefield confrontations and rooftop adventures with shots of them

in their domestic households. Still in costume, they now appear bored, powerless, and dislocated as they attend mealtimes, carry out chores, or pass time on their mobile phones – all under the gaze of unimpressed parents. ‘It’s a new kind of role reversal, which reflects the younger generation’s discontent with their actual roles in real life. The fact they choose these fictional characters indicates their disillusionment and the gap between the generations’ (Fei, 2013).

In July 2022, I attended the London Film and Comic Convention at the Olympia Exhibition Centre, as *the last Cyberman*. Alongside functioning as a much-needed day out for my wife and stepson, this allowed me to experience the culture and camaraderie of cosplayers first-hand. Receiving many requests for photographs and friendly attacks from sonic screwdriver-wielding Tom Baker look-alikes, I was astounded by the huge numbers of costumed adults and children drawn to this event, all eager to convene, play and share their fictional character of choice for the day. This demonstrated the importance and perceptiveness of Cao Fei’s work to me; a practice with meaning and relevance stretching beyond her Chinese heritage, addressing issues that affect global cultures and increasingly virtual futures. Hers is a practice displaying creative fearlessness, ambition, and adaptability that I hope to continue to follow and take inspiration from as my work develops post-doctorate.

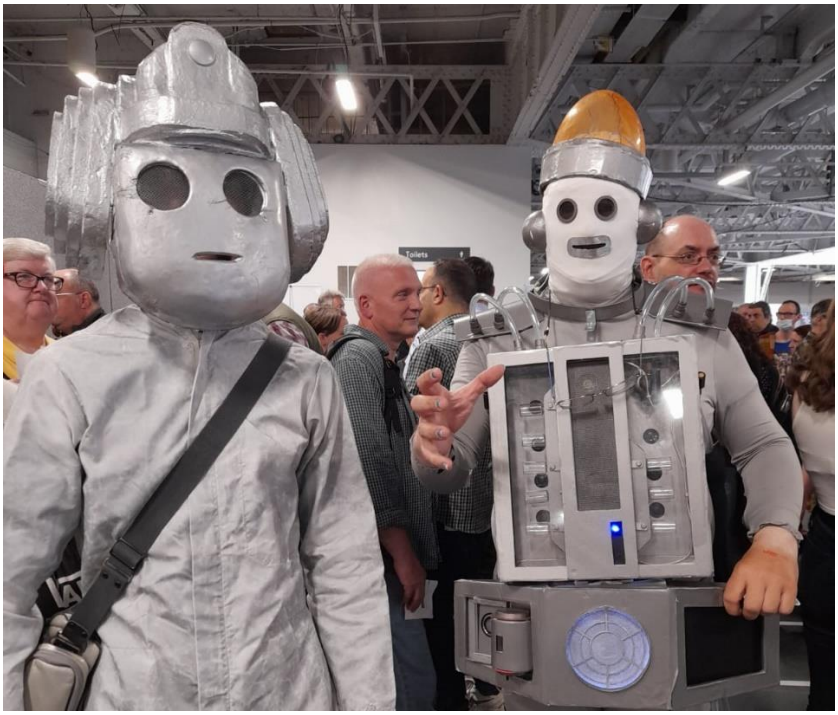

Figure 81: The last Cyberman with a Mondasian Cyberman at Comic Con, 2022. Photograph: Maddison Overill

Conclusion: Monsters and Margins

Through my adventures and artworks, coupled with Sinclair's roadside walks, Ballard's literary investigations of the suburbs, and Smithson's practical experiments in the peripheries, I have come to understand and appreciate the margins as sites of imagination and escape – from time, society and self. By removing myself to the edges of the Essex landscape that has been constant throughout my life, I am able to see that as much as I project onto this contradictory county, it in turn reflects back onto me: Both raw and refined, thoughtful yet instinctive, polite yet subversive – I am as much a part of Essex as it is a part of me – neither of us fit in, neither will be comfortable – always pushing at the edges, searching for something that is torn deep inside. My practice and research in the margins has highlighted an alienation and displacement that I feed off creatively – there is a nervous energy that comes with not belonging anywhere. For me, the margins are places of possibility – somewhere (or nowhere) where something can happen. By being in the margins I created the space to examine myself, and when I did, I found monsters.

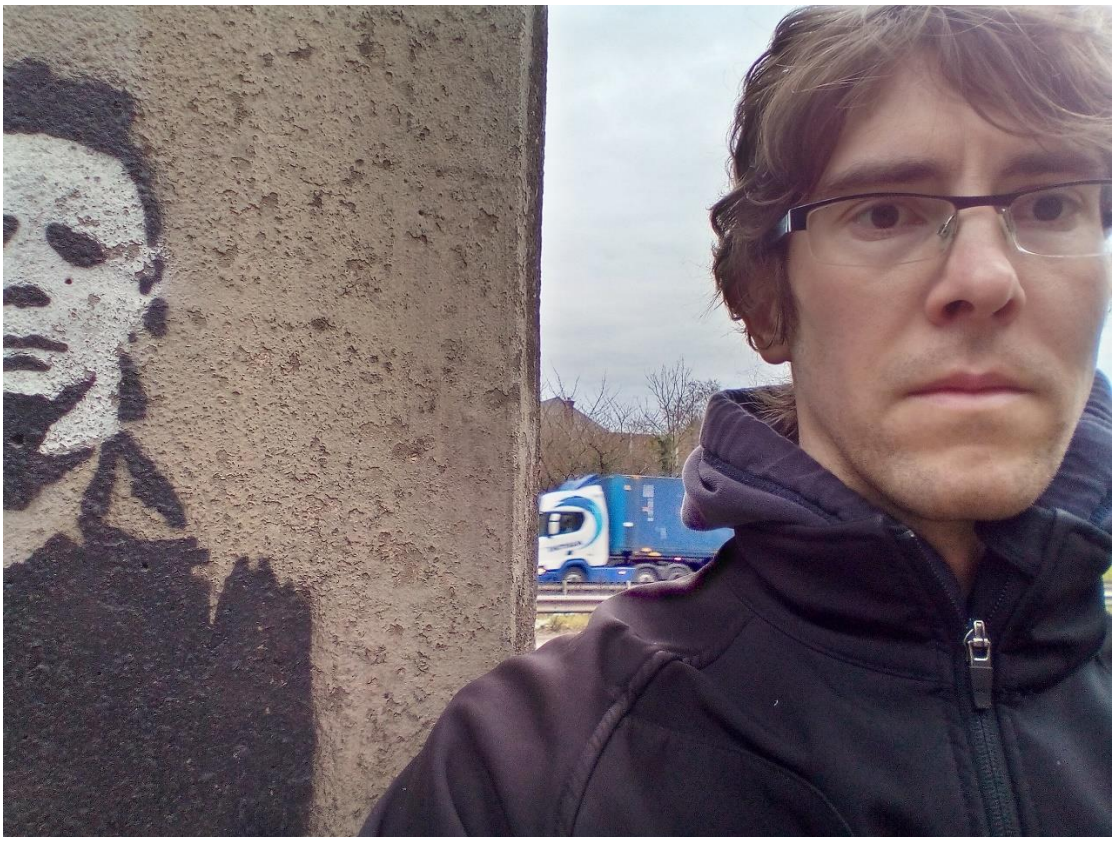

Figure 82: Ralph Overill, *Ralph with A13 Mike*, 2021, digital photograph

While the sci-fi film allows us to review ourselves through the lens of an imagined future, the horror film permits us to circumscribe ourselves through a language of monsters. From the Cold War shadows of giant tarantulas and lizards, to the suburban anxiety of masked serial killers, and the capitalist menace of robot automatons. Whether we find our monsters through the unreal of cinema, in the fears and desires of our childhood memories, or in the hostile peripheries of the city limits, the monster is a construction, projection and reflection of ourselves – contemporary society and its concerns. Monster is mirror.

‘The centre has to draw outlines to give itself definition. The city has need of the barbarians to know what it is. The self needs the other to establish a sense of integral identity’ (Warner, 1994, p. 74).

Jordan Peele’s *Us* (2019) sees a suburban middle-class black family confronted by their alters – a parallel version of themselves grown from subterranean imprisonment and depravation. Ultimately the mask of Michael Myers is discarded, and we confront ourselves – the part of ourselves we dare nor see. Our lost fears and decisions, futures that supposedly didn’t happen, exhumed dreams that should have stayed buried.

The development of my practice has seen the distance between myself and the monster lessen; from the car window glimpses and childhood memories separated by windshield and adolescent decades, to confronting the landscape and the fears it harbours for me. My selfies with Michael Myers, the Cyberman and the Terminator depict the monster as my reflection – revealed in the camera’s lens – lurking over my shoulder, but in my final year the reflection has merged with its creator, the distance is absorbed and I realise that as I adorn my Cyberman costume, I am my last monster.

‘There is no inside except as a folding of the outside: the mirror cracks, I am an other, and I always was’ (Fisher, 2016, pp. 11-12).

It is important to note the evolution of monsters through this period of practice, no doubt influenced by the films and texts I have studied. From the hulking mass of Godzilla, devastating the landscape, to a cyber-wraith blurring between its boundaries; from a giant tarantula to a spidery spectre. The trajectory of my research

affirms Weinstock's assertion that our monsters are becoming increasingly less visible (2013), and also demonstrates that ghosts and monsters are not separate entities – one can slip into the other.

My employment of the villains and haunts of cinema to visualise the monstrous has served as a useful research tool in my understanding of its evolution through our culture, and an avenue of accessibility for the viewer, who is invited to bring their own memories and feelings of these iconic characters to the work. Mark Fisher and Jacques Derrida helped me to understand these returning spectres, as I came to equate hauntology to Ballard's *Atrocity exhibition* – the orbiting of traumatic fragments around society and self – a circular motorway, with no exit roads. A giant roundabout, enclosed by the stifling suppression of capitalist realism, which promises to keep our revenants close to us. We are caught in a time loop, encircled by the monsters of our past, yet – as I hope I have demonstrated – new monsters await us in the form of lost futures; the dreams and possibilities we can't quite reach, beyond the homogenised guidelines of society – to escape to the margins, to search beyond the verges, is to almost touch them. This considered, when we confront our monsters, I feel they hold both an essence of the past and of something to come; they are our remembered futures.

The last monster, however, remains largely unseen, concealed within the shell of my deformed Cyberman costume, gestured through the shadows in my childhood home – an arachnoid curiosity that I feel is given more power when left to the imagination – in the monster movies I watch, the 'reveal' is always an anti-climax. This project has clarified my understanding of my own otherness – the monsters I face – and through the practice, ways of bringing balance to myself have been revealed; as with late-capitalism and physical degradation, part of learning to live with our monsters is learning to fight against them, and as Fisher, Bourriaud, and JR have demonstrated, creative practice is crucial to this challenge.

My research has shown that, not only are the margins where the monsters lurk (as Kearney reminds us), but these peripheral zones create monsters (Ballard's suburbia, *The hitcher's* John Ryder), and we construct monsters to define our margins – abominations such as *The Texas chainsaw massacre's* Leatherface help us understand our edges, mark out our perimeters, test the limits of society. There

have also been instances in the latter stages of my practice where beast and borderland have merged, suggesting that behind the effigies we project, the landscapes that surround and influence us may be the real monsters – as suggested in much of Ballard's writing[4], and more recently, in Ben Wheatley's film *In the earth* (2021). All of the above suggests a symbiotic relationship – without one there cannot be the other. Margins make monsters and monsters make margins, our monsters may even be our margins; I am certain there will always be monsters *and* margins.

Figure 83: Ralph Overill, *A13 cyber chainsaw massacre,* 2022, digital photograph: Scott Freeland

[4] In *The drowned world* (1962), *The drought* (1965), *The crystal world* (1966), *Crash* (1973), *Concrete island* (1974) and *High-rise* (1975), it is arguable that the oppressive landscape surrounding the protagonists orchestrates the physical and mental disintegration they experience, alongside their increasingly violent and irrational behaviour.

Professional Practice

Solo exhibitions

November 2020: *Memory lanes*, Appleby Gallery (Frances Bardsley Academy), Romford. Screen-prints and video from 1st and 3rd year Doctorate work.

November 2018: *Cosmic play*, Triangle Space, Chelsea College of Arts, London. Variety of past and present work chosen by curator and PhD student, Emma Gradin.

Joint exhibitions

March – April 2022: *Withheld*, Peckham Safehouse, London. One screen-print on fabric and opening night performance.

November 2021: *Woolwich contemporary print fair*, London. One framed etching.

November 2021: *LOOP*, Espacio Gallery, London. Two life-size Cyberman screen-prints on fabric, video projection.

October 2020: *Between walls*, Peckham Safehouse, London. Spray painted found surfaces hung in garden.

September 2020: *LOOP*, Espacio Gallery, London. Large, densely coloured screen-print on fabric.

August 2020: *The resilient self*, Espacio Gallery, London. Screen-print on fabric.

December 2019: *Lights in the dark*, 54 the Gallery, London. 3 screen-prints on fabric.

November 2019: *Research space*, Way Out East Gallery, UEL, London. A selection of suspended CMYK photocopy transfer prints on fabric.

November 2019: *Woolwich contemporary print fair*, London. One framed etching.

July-August 2019: *Members summer exhibition*, London Print Studio. One framed CMYK photocopy transfer print.

December 2018: *Present arts*, Parndon Mill Gallery, Harlow. Selection of framed etchings.

October 2018: *Plus one*, Slaughterhaus Print Studio, London. One screen-print on fabric.

September 2018: *LOOP*, Bankside Gallery, London. 2m x 3m screen-print on fabric.

July-August 2018: *Royal Academy summer exhibition*, London. One framed etching.

September-October 2017: *Works from the RA summer exhibition*, Zillah Bell Gallery, Thirsk, Yorkshire. One framed etching.

September 2017: *LOOP*, Bankside Gallery, London. Two large-scale screen-prints on fabric.

September 2017: *Illusions*, Menier Gallery, London. One screen-print on fabric with stretcher.

July-August 2017: *Royal Academy summer exhibition*, London. One framed etching.

Residences:

March 2020: UEL Graduate School Research Internship Grant, Edinburgh Printmakers. To pursue research project '*Searching for the Green Man*' (included in Appendix 5).

Publications:

2022 forthcoming: Overill, R. 'Exiled in the present: the last Cyberman walks in Rettendon', *Journal of Arts Writing by Students,* 7(1), Intellect Publishing Ltd. Article examining the introduction and development of *the last Cyberman* in my practice.

2022: Overill, R. 'Pandemic subversions: the rise of the Cybermen', *Crossing Conceptual Boundaries*, (XII), School of Social Sciences, UEL, pp. 88-107. Article examining the effect of the COVID-19 pandemic on my research practice.

June 2021: Published in '*The Thing About Artists'*, Brennan, L. and Burch, M. pp. 182-187. Book about Essex-based artists. Interview and images of work.

August 2020: promoted to Senior Editor / Deputy Principal Editor, Journal of Arts Writing by Students, Intellect. Editorial duties for publication of volume 6.

March 2019: Joined editorial board for Journal of Arts Writing by Students, Intellect. Editorial duties for publication of volume 5.

August 2018: Peer reviewer for article submitted to Journal of Arts Writing by Students Vol.4 Issue 2.

March 2018: Overill, R. 'Between the screens: screen-printing moving images', *Journal of Arts Writing by Students*, 4(1), Intellect Publishing Ltd, pp. 37-47. Article examining my practice in relation to the screen-prints and films of Andy Warhol.

October 2017: Prix de Print no. 25, Art in Print Journal, 7(3), pp. 42-43. Short essay written by Nicolas Collins on screen-print '*Over the Hill'*.

Papers / Presentations

September 2021: Creative Folkestone Triennial, Postgraduate Research Conference: 'The Matter of Circulation'. Presented paper '*Straying from the Path'* – summary of A127 Terminus work with slideshow/voiceover performance.

March 2021: Wow Speaker presenter, University of Bedfordshire. Online presentation of recent research and practice.

February 2021: Virtually Impossible, Cultural Manoeuvres, UEL. Online presentation of '*pandemic subversions'* research and practice

January 2021: Genre/Nostalgia conference, University of Hertfordshire. Online presentation '*Beasts in the borderlands: a practice-based reaction to fearsome coming-of-age films.*'

July 2020: Research is Open, UEL Graduate School conference. Online presentation of '*Pandemic Subversions'* paper.

May 2020: Presentation of practice to MA Printmaking and Book Arts students, Camberwell College of Arts, online.

February 2020: Speaking from the Margins, UEL ADI PGR Networking Committee conference, USS campus, London. Presentation of recent research '*Projecting on the margins.*'

October 2019: Presentation of practice to Art and Design Students, Havering College of Further Education.

May 2019: Presentation of practice to MA Printmaking and Book Arts students, Camberwell College of Arts, London.

February 2019: Authenticity, UEL ADI PGR Networking committee seminar, Docklands campus, London. Presentation of recent research '*Cary Grant chased by tarantula: cinema's poor images.*'

November 2018: Presentation of practice and career development to Level 2 Art and Design students, Havering College of Further Education.

Collections

Clifford Chance printmaking collection: *Landsite*, 16 etchings with relief print on Chinese paper.

Workshops

October 2018: William Morris block printing workshop, year 6 pupils, South Green Junior School, Billericay

Teaching

January 2015 – present: printmaking technician, Havering College of Further Education. Facilitating print workshop based teaching and learning.

June 2020: Attained Level 3 Award in Education and Training, Barking and Dagenham Adult College, in collaboration with UEL Graduate School.

April 2012 – October 2020: Experimental etching: photocopy transfer, day course, London Print Studio, running approximately 3 times per year. Course tutor and creator.

Evaluation of professional practice

Throughout the doctorate programme, I have exhibited my practice regularly and consistently at a variety of venues and with a range of different approaches. From the glazed work battery farms of the Royal Academy Summer Exhibition to the test sites of Safehouse Peckham and Chelsea College of Art's Triangle Space, I have learnt to tailor and carefully select what I submit to the appropriate venue. While I occasionally sell my prints at more market-orientated shows, I value – and favour – the chance to experiment, test new ideas and take aesthetic risks when hanging my work. This philosophy of research through exhibition is reflected in the development of my practice over the doctorate, as my work has become increasingly ambitious and installation focussed – a from the selection screen-prints hung loosely around the light well space in my first-year showcase, to the hanging hubcaps, wall-covering fabric and sound loops of the fourth year. This, coupled with my stencilled spray paint and fleeting projections that adorn the Essex margins, baffling motorists and dog walkers, has given my practice a breadth and depth of potential options – an energy that I can carry into future work.

My involvement in academic publishing has also developed through the doctorate, publishing an article in The Journal of Arts Writing by Students in 2017, peer reviewing for this publication through my second year and taking voluntary roles as associate editor, senior editor and deputy principal editor in the following years. This opportunity to gain experience in the academic publishing process has been valuable in my maturing as a doctoral candidate, though I remain sceptical and uninspired by the narrow regulations and unwritten rules of academic journals – having several submissions refused due to not fitting with a journal's theme or approach. It is for this reason that I have chosen to give my time to JAWS, believing in their aim to act as a supportive bridge for creative MA and doctoral students who want to publish their research. I value the opportunity to positively input into their writing, learning about their interests and practices in the process.

Finding it difficult to identify outlets for my research writing, I began to explore self-publishing options towards the end of my fourth year, seeing potential for my more site-specific practice and psychogeographical writings to be documented in the form of books, perhaps under a series title of ‘Monsters and Margins’. This remains an attainable ambition for me post-doctorate and would offer another route of exposure to my research as it continues to develop. I plan to test this strategy with a short publication to mark my viva, a collection of short stories chronicling the adventures leading up to June’s exhibition – complete with risographed cover (another opportunity to augment my printmaking skills) [included in Appendix 1].

I have regularly shared and communicated my work in a variety of conferences and symposiums throughout the programme, supporting and contributing each year to internal UEL PGR events, alongside presenting in external national and international conferences such as the University of Hertfordshire’s ‘Genre/Nostalgia.’ I have also accepted invitations to give presentations of practice to creative students at institutions including Camberwell College of Arts and the University of Bedfordshire, enjoying the opportunity to share my research and network with a variety of art schools. The Covid-19 pandemic forced me to develop my virtual presentation skills, and I am now proficient with the awkwardness of online conferencing. However, I retain a strong preference for the in-person format, valuing the opportunity to test myself in front of a physical audience, to meet and entertain them. This reflects the growing performative strands in my practice – something nurtured in my Work in Progress presentations – another area of my work where there is potential for development in the future.

Finally, I have continued to teach throughout my doctoral studies. My employment as a printmaking technician at Havering College allows me to pass on my knowledge and printmaking skillset to teenagers from a wide variety of backgrounds – many facing hardships such as financial deprivation, unstable home-lives and physical and mental disabilities. Until its closure in 2020, I also taught day courses at London Print Studio, sharing etching and photocopy transfer techniques with adult learners and professional artists. I have recently been approached by West Dean College with the

opportunity to design and deliver a paper lithography course for them, starting in July 2022. During the frustration of lockdown, I channelled my energy into achieving a Level 3 in Education and Training qualification through a partnership between the UEL Graduate School and Barking Adult College. This will no doubt have improved my teaching delivery and employability prospects, but the experience confirmed that an academic teaching / lecturing role is not for me – at least not until the system heals itself from the business ontology wounds of data obsession and tick-box learning inflicted by countless successive Departments of Education. Instead, I shall endeavour to continue inspiring and empowering young creatives through facilitating a welcoming and inclusive print workshop, with the plan to work in a similar role in Higher Education, when the opportunity arises.

Summary

From my initial conversation with Eric Great-Rex at a UEL open event, following two years of struggle and disillusion on a practice-based PhD, I have felt that I understood the purpose of the Professional Doctorate in Fine Art programme within the rigid framework of academia. It argues that every artistic practice is unique, an irreplicable confluence of processes and products, memories and making, concerns and concepts. A creative practice is, in its entirety, an original contribution to knowledge. The challenge for each artist on the programme is to communicate theirs as comprehensively as possible, both through the report and, more importantly, through the presentation of the artwork itself; to push the themes and ideas as far as they will go, to interrogate the tacit and exhume the concealed.

Reflecting on the last five years, I hope I have demonstrated this, I feel I know myself now, not only as an artist, but a person. I understand my connection to the edge-lands of Essex, and accept the deep-rooted instabilities of my character; I will always find myself in the in-between, my practice will be defined by margins, a territory delineated by monsters. My artwork has developed from an exclusively printmaking approach, to encompass site-specific interventions such as spray-painting and projection bombing, to capture the previously invisible through reflective writing, to appreciate walking, not only as a method of thinking but a creative act in itself, to investigate photography, as a documentative and image-making strategy, and to employ performance, as a tool to explore and externalise my innermost thoughts and concerns. The practice has evolved to grant me greater ownership of those peripheral landscapes that fascinate me, while allowing me to embody the monsters that patrol my memories and anxieties.

Augmenting this deep toolbox of creative methods is a greatly developed contextual and theoretical knowledge of the research area. My MA studies were based almost solely on making, with very little theoretical input. This is something I have focussed on improving (a process that began during my PhD study) and while I'll admit there is still much that completely baffles me, I have constructed a hauntological–psychogeographical framework enmeshing Ballard, Smithson, Sinclair and Fisher, that I hope positions my work in a wider field of practice and contemporary

relevance. Despite many of my artistic and literary touchstones being based in the 1960s and 70s, I feel the poignancy and relevance of their ideas resonating today. We are arguably living in the future that Ballard foresaw: ‘a vast, endless suburb of boredom, interrupted by acts of totally unpredictable violence’ (Ballard in Self, 2009).

Alongside the development and contextualisation of my artistic practice, the programme has offered me a supportive cohort of equally dedicated and engaged creative practitioners and academics, in which an enjoyable and challenging convergence of ideas, knowledge, and experience breeds. Through being immersed in this, my professional practice has greatly benefitted, and I am grateful for the variety of opportunities over the last half-decade of study. There are still aspects of my career that I have to unlock or fit into place, but I am in no doubt that the Professional Doctorate has carried me closer towards where I want to be.

While I have answers for many of the questions I held when I started the programme, these are not finite, the curiosity is not exhausted. In my creative practice, there are more adventures to be had, risks to be taken, particularly in the area of performance, which materialised in the late phases of my research, leaving me a potential creative route to explore into the future. The Doctorate has given me strategies for sustaining and furthering my practice, independent of an institutional framework, and I will likely be found pacing the Thames path or the verge of an obscure Essex A-road – a monster in the margins of the years to come.

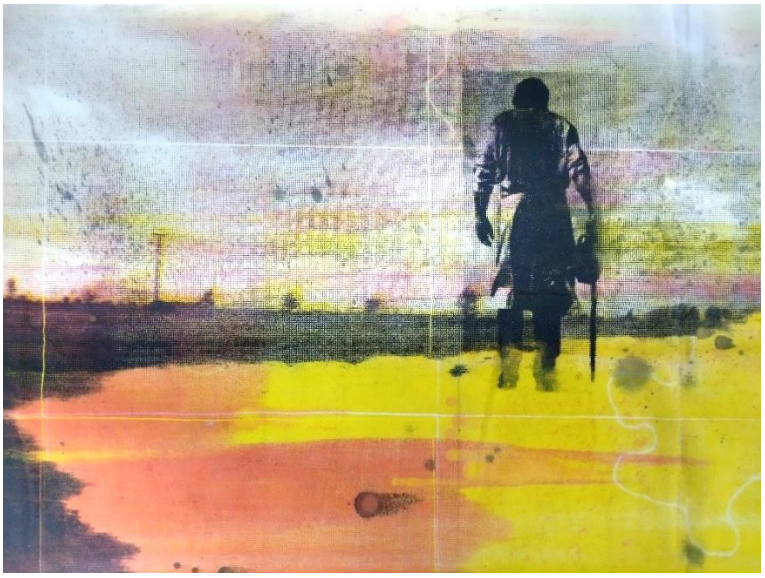

Figure 84: Ralph Overill, *Road walker*, 2020, screen-print on fabric, 50x80cm

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Appendices

Appendix 1: Viva exhibition documentation

a) Addendum
b) *The world of the last Cyberman* installation photographs and video links
c) *The last Cyberman: viva chronicles* page scans

Appendix 2: ‘The last Cyberman walks in Rettendon’. Full text of article published in *The Journal of Arts Writing by Students*. 7(1) (forthcoming).

Appendix 3: ‘Pandemic subversions: the rise of the Cybermen’. Full text of article published in *Crossing Conceptual Boundaries.* (XII) University of East London, 2022, pp. 88-107

Appendix 4: Terminus: an A127 Walk: Creative writing and link to video piece. June 2021.

Appendix 5: ‘Searching for the green man’. Research Internship Report of residency at Edinburgh Printmakers submitted to the UEL Graduate School, May 2020

Appendix 1: Viva exhibition documentation June 2022

a) Addendum handed to the examination panel before viewing the exhibition on the morning of Tuesday 28th June 2022

Ralph Overill

Viva Exhibition Addendum

This is not the exhibition I envisaged 8 months ago: highlights of the last 5 years of research – a safety net, or lap of honour? While I still feel my practice throughout the programme has been of a consistently high enough standard to enable this approach, I was advised against it, encouraged to take one more risk, one last doctorate adventure: a viva showcase comprising entirely of work made in the final months of the programme. Supervisors assured me that this would demonstrate not only my 'exit velocity', but a more general shift in the Professional Doctorate; away from the stasis of the retrospective and re-presentation, into the dynamisms of the present and possible futures – where is the researcher right now? Where are they going? With the benefit of hindsight, I'm glad I took their advice.

I considered a viva under the M25 but was deterred by the logistics of transporting examiners and visitors to a site only accessible by a 2-mile hike along the estuary. The lack of reception in these dead zones made Microsoft Teams an impossibility (I would have hated that anyway). Perhaps most importantly, an examination in the margins wouldn't be representative of my practice as a whole – the relationship between the gallery and the periphery needed to be resolved.

Review of my work and development over the Doctorate revealed a language of dichotomies: interior and exterior, conscious and sub-conscious, motion and stasis, past and future. My choice of the spaces aims to exploit these contrasts: the quiet intimacy of an enclosed corridor, the dark expanse of a wasteland studio, and the language of dockyards, Essex hauliers and 18-wheelers gestured by a corroded shipping container, dumped at the periphery of the campus.

The corridor:

A transition zone. The viewer enters a different space, a blue luminescence of Sci-Fi. The dim light hopes to make the eye look more closely – a reminder of mum's degrading vision and the limited time it has left. The spider is my mother's part of me, my interior, sensitive, vulnerable. It is my monstrous feminine: Barbara Creed's archaic mother (1993), the haunt of Louise Bourgeois. While my mother's influence has remained tacit throughout this process, it has been a stabilising necessity. The last Cyberman more closely reflects my father, who accompanied me on many of my doctorate expeditions. The analogue photographs (some shot by him) document our defiant adventures and making of memories along the Thames Path and through Rettendon murder sites. I chose to hang a quieter, more contemplative collection of work here, highlighting one of the facets of my character; the intimate, delicate acts of etching and darkroom photography, the creation of images with the hands. My love and investment in the quiet darkness of intaglio printing, images crafted by the materiality of light …before the lights go out.

The wasteland:

I wanted to demonstrate the extent of the development of my research practice – to change and take ownership of a space. I considered the gritty realism of Mike Nelson's installations, and Cao Fei's visions of a near-future world.

It's *Mad Max* meets *The matrix*. A gallery governed by the language of the road – an alien scale of signage, traffic cones and pylons. Through my research in the margins, I came to believe that the carriageway verges and river paths could act as portals of escape from the suffocating capitalist ontologies; sites where our lost futures could be glimpsed. Hence, I have created one such path-not-taken: the world of the last Cyberman.

A once-monster presides over the space – mainframe, data-server – the shut-down hydra of capitalism. Severed from the systems it managed, now a defunct monolith of hard drives, security cameras and power cables. Decapitated cyber-heads litter the floors, spouting an incomprehensible melody: the swansong of the network.

I wanted the last Cyberman to haunt this landscape, he stitches the disjointed dystopia together through stuttering projections and disembodied voices – a spectre of the margins – blurring, Ballard-esque, in and out of the edgelands. I attempt to gesture loose narratives: surfaces defaced by anarchistic graffiti, the fallen statue of a cyber-leader, a tarpaulin shelter housing a scrap-heap control panel – a detonator? Time machine? Escape to the past or the future? The exploits of a lost astronaut trying to find purpose in a dying world. A slide projector casts the adventure in its ancient light. I love how the carousel is broken – images can't move forward, we cannot reach the future – the orbit has ceased: gridlock on the M25. Road Closed Ahead.

A number of viewers in their 40s and 50s responded: '*this is what should have happened in the 1970s'* – is that when capitalism should have fallen? Or should it have died in 2008 with the banks, that governments elected to bail out? A preserved culture of mega-salary bonuses stings the eyes of those queuing at foodbanks between work shifts. There is something timely about the desolation I've created: shadows of disillusionment over the cost-of-living crisis, echoes of Putin's power-maniacal onslaught of Ukraine. We are a society teetering on the edge of madness – possibilities to dress up as robots or swing chainsaws around in fields – our monsters have never been closer to us than they are right now.

A landfill of broken skateboards crowned by a TV: a Cyberman skating around the university art studios on crutches – there are elements here that are ridiculous, but to escape the omnipresent, omnipotent late-capitalism constricting our society, perhaps the future has to be absurd. My bodily and societal anxieties all mashed together in one disorientating space, when you're in this room, you are very much walking around inside my head. A psychogeographical topography of my monsters and margins.

'A tainted landscape […] *My fate, never to be content with the present, to walk perpetually through that elegant wilderness.'*

- Laura Oldfield Ford, *Savage Messiah*, 2011

The container:

I wanted this rusting hulk, dumped in the docklands, to echo the grunting Eddie Stobart lorries of the A13 and the towers of stacked metal adorning Tilbury docks. When, a few weeks ago, the university management decided to paint it black, homogenise it with the rest of the campus buildings, I was dismayed, and devised a JR-inspired plan to disrupt its newly refined surface – return some individuality to its corrugated walls.

Inside lies the tomb of the Cybermen: 28 petrified robots stand in procession, while the sole survivor addresses his fossilised crowd. I chose not to perform live in the showcase or my viva, largely because I struggle with the pressure and anxiety of the 'event' (the exhibition opening or the exam). In all honesty, I didn't have enough energy left to face it. Instead, my performances exist in spectral traces of projections and recordings – part of the ambiguous narrative of virtualisation: is the last Cyberman still here? Is he still *alive*? He recounts his adventures through the Essex oddities of Grays and Rettendon with a mixture of cynical humour and urgent desperation, while the use of the university's green screen facilities give the visuals a B-movie-bad aesthetic.

I feel melancholic when I spend time in this space, surrounded by an army of lifeless automatons. My imagined future (like most Sci-Fi) reveals my disillusionment with the present. Our conglomeration under umbrella corporations and governments peddling anodyne policies. We are enforced more and more to be the same, to join an unsustainable workforce operating at a perpetually increasing intensity, until we burn out, flatten into the walls, become a monotone effigy of ourselves – a shadow on the bedsheet: '*a city of pinch-faced drones plugged into iPods*' (Mark Fisher, *Savage Messiah*, 2011).

The viva chronicles

A unique window into my thoughts and adventures leading up to the viva, blending the melancholy of Mark Fisher, the scathing critique of Iain Sinclair, and the unstable anarchy of Laura Oldfield Ford. If there is a future direction for my practice in the sprawling wreckage of this exhibition, it is here: publications that can collect my

expeditions, writings, photographs, and prints into some sort of order, and expose them to a wider audience. I didn't want the stories behind each of the items collected for this show to remain tacit – it wasn't conceived in one great visit to a scrapyard in a rented van. Months and miles of walking, carrying, thinking, struggling, worrying – all recorded here.

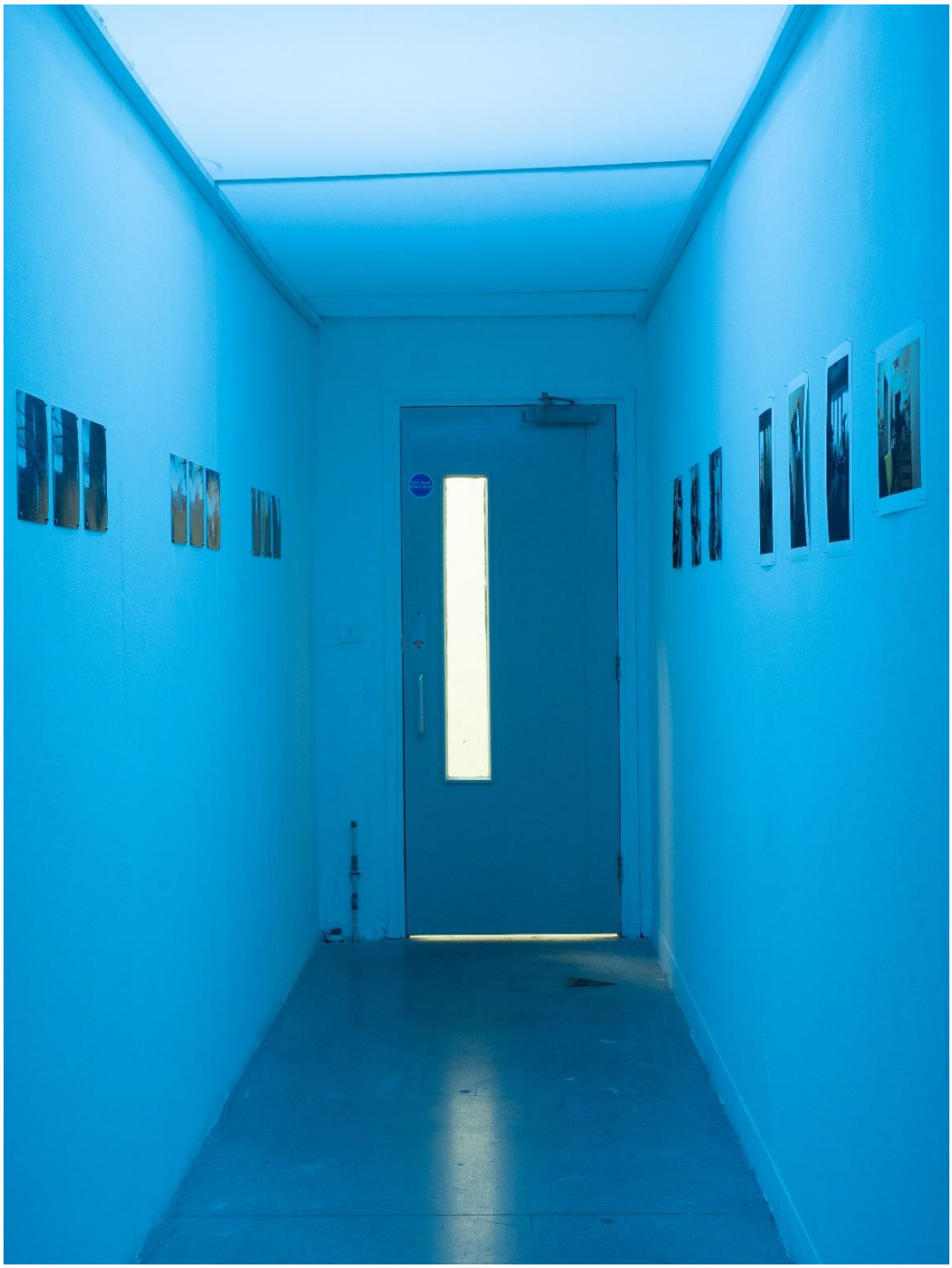
I naturally approach the viva with some trepidation, but this anxiety is magnified by the fact that, in my time on the Doctorate, I have never seen a final exhibition anything like this. Some practices seemed to package themselves up in neat little boxes, ready for assessment, but mine has sprawled, ballooned, mutated in monstrous fashion. It has reached the margins and returned a different thing. The consequences of this are for you to decide, but I hope you enjoy the show.

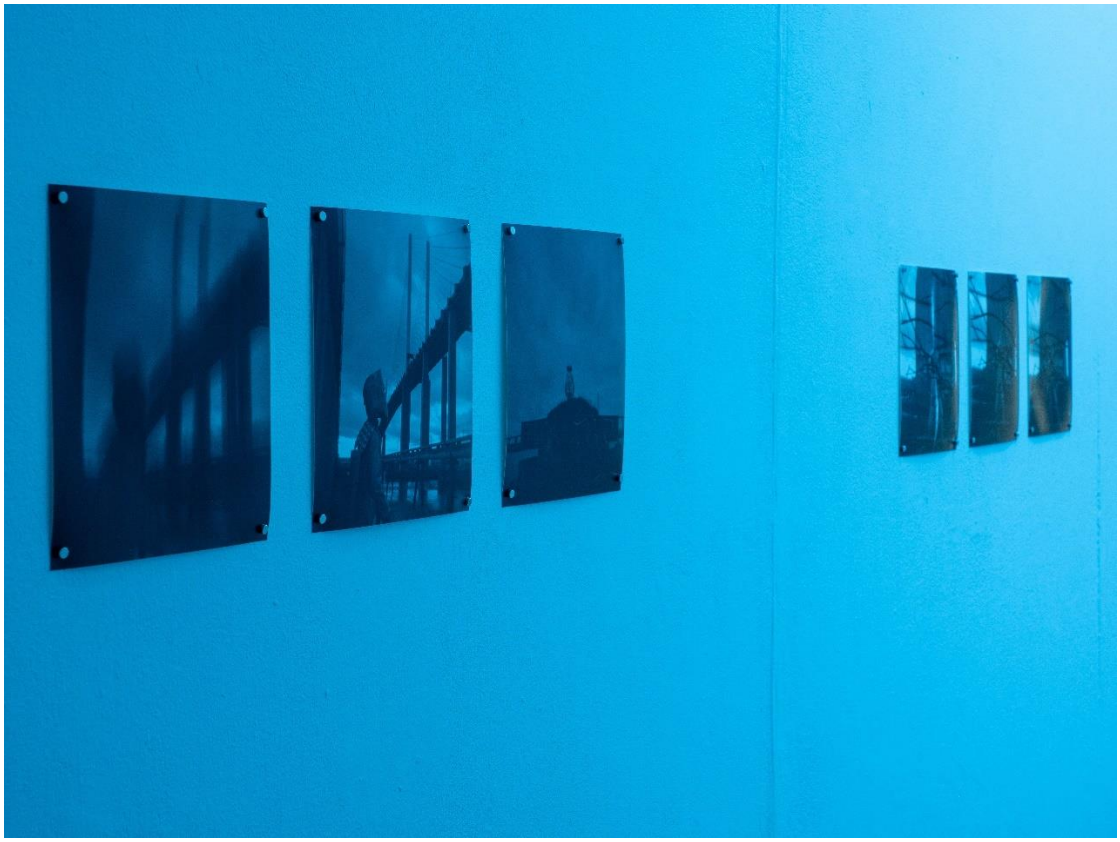
Ralph Overill

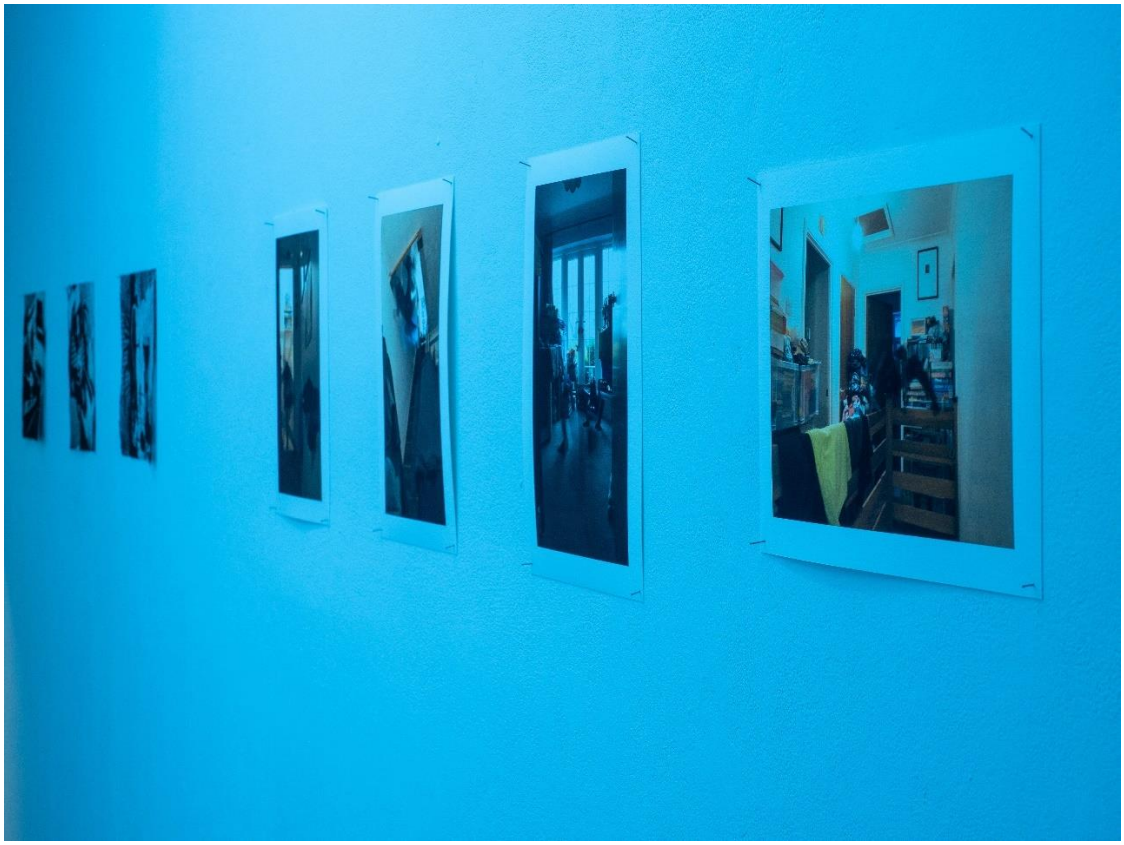
28th June 2022

b) *The world of the last Cyberman* installation photographs. Documentation of the three installation spaces: AVA 1st floor corridor gallery, AVA 1st floor photography studio and the container space. Exhibition dates: 23rd – 26th June 2022. All photographs taken by Andrew Moller. Scans of photographs and prints by Ralph Overill.

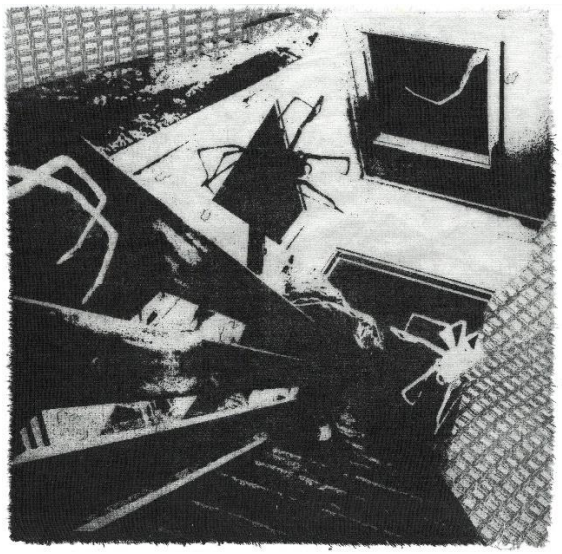
Corridor gallery:

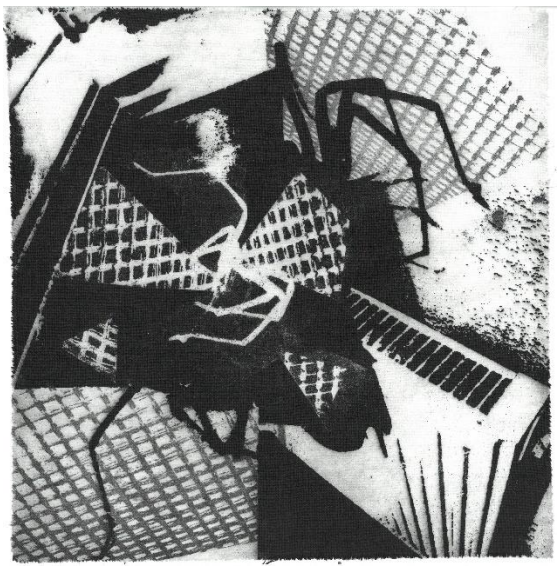


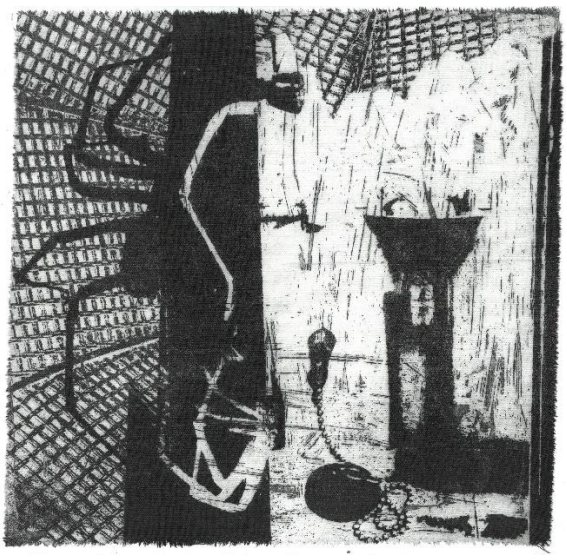




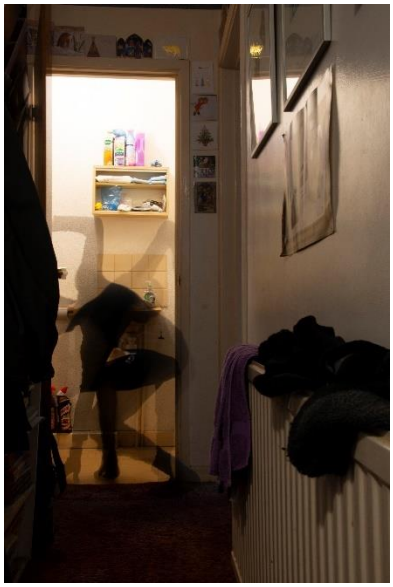
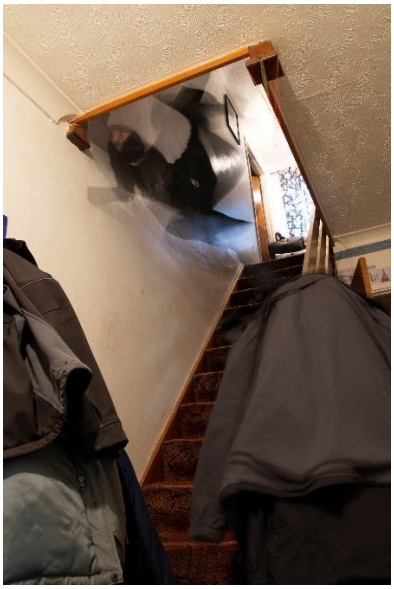
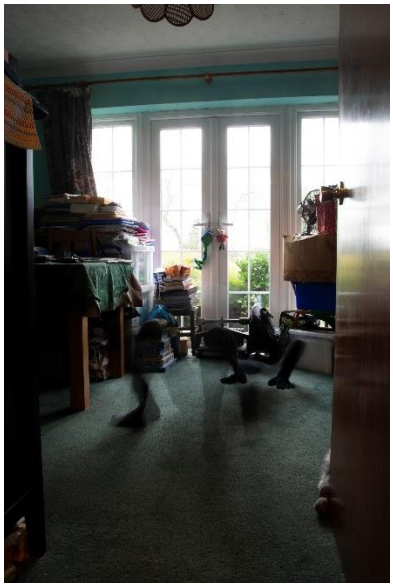
12 medium format photographs printed on Ilford multigrade RC Deluxe satin paper, each 20x20cm

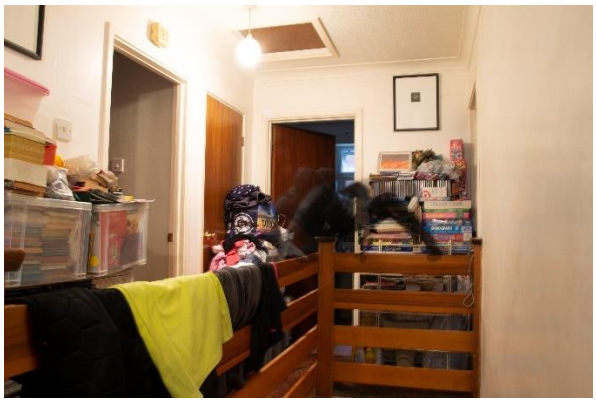






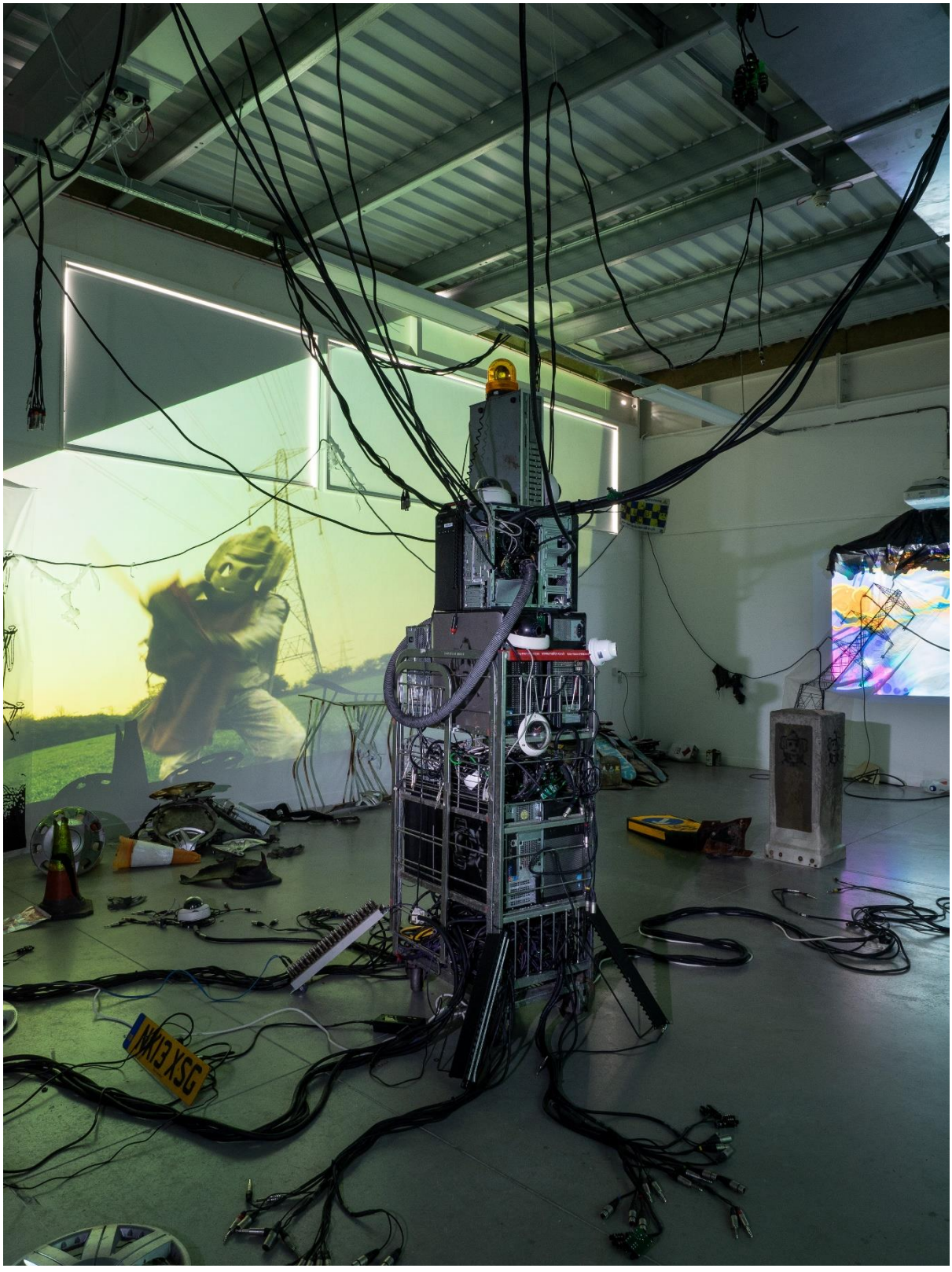
3 etchings printed on white polycotton fabric, each 28.5x28.5cm



5 inkjet prints on Somerset enhanced 255gsm velvet paper, each 35x25cm

Photography studio:



The world of the last Cyberman: Found discarded items including road signs, traffic cones, wires, computer casing, crash barrier, CCTV cameras, licence plates and hub caps. Stencilled spray painting, screen-print on fabric, vacuum-formed plastic, 2 floor-standing projectors, each playing one video on loop, one ceiling-mounted projector playing 2 videos on loop. 3 CD players, each playing a 3-track audio CD on repeat.

The mainframe, installation shot.


Queues likely
NK13 XSG


No smoking

The bridge: installation shot, large format LaserJet print on paper, 500x350cm, formed of 7 vertical rolls, each 75x350cm

Fallen kingdom: installation shot, screen-printed fabric

Monument to childhood memory: installation shot, collected used skateboard decks, CRT monitor with built-in DVD player, DVD playing on repeat, traffic cone.

Cyber-shack: CRT monitor with built-in DVD player, DVD playing on repeat, headphones, rotary slide projector, selection of 5 slides, tarpaulin, wheat-pasted screen-prints, discarded control panels, monitors and rice sack, spray-painted stencils, DVD cases and J.G. Ballard books selected from the artist's collection, framed childhood photograph.

The A13 cyber-chainsaw massacre: installation shots, projection loop, screen-print on fabric, discarded fuel cannisters, traffic cones, hub caps, road sign with stencilled spray paint, and crash barrier.


ROAD
AHEAD
CLOSE

Container space:

The tomb of the Cybermen: [exterior] 30 wheat-pasted screen-prints on newsprint, 2 discarded road signs with stencilled spray paint.

The tomb of the Cybermen: [interior] 28 screen-prints on fabric, ceiling mounted projector and speakers, video and audio loop.

Links to video documentation of exhibition content

Promo film: a 2-minute prelude to the viva exhibition and *The world of the last Cyberman* installations, introducing the themes of my research and my artistic strategies. Played on loop (in a playlist that also included Paul Greenleaf's promo film) in the AVA building atrium throughout the duration of the exhibition and viva examination. Edited with the support of David Chapman, filmed by Scott Freeland and Bethen Blackabee.

https://youtu.be/uK9qCHCl-CI [accessed 20 September 2022]

The World of the Last Cyberman: video documentation of the viva exhibition installation. Filmed by Ralph Overill with assistance from Michael Pinsky. Edited by Ralph Overill.

https://youtu.be/2-M8R0tlm9A [accessed 20 September 2022]

Playlist of the four installation projection videos: as projected on loop in the photography studio as part of *The world of the last* Cyberman installation. Edited by Ralph Overill.

https://youtu.be/DRMKVJtlbIA [accessed 20 September 2022]

Exiled in the present: Video of the projection loop shown in the container space as part of *The tomb of the Cybermen* installation. Filmed by Scott Freeland. Edited by Ralph Overill.

https://youtu.be/hvejrC2GC7M [accessed 20 September 2022]

c) *The last Cyberman: viva chronicles*: page scans of a zine made to accompany the exhibition. 24 black and white LaserJet pages with screen-printed front and back covers. Printed in an edition of 100. One copy given to each of the examination panel on the morning of Tuesday 28th June 2022.

A collection of personal responses to selected adventures, expeditions and forages between November 2021 and May 2022 in preparation for my doctoral viva and exhibition on 28th June 2022.

Printed in an edition of 100

Grays: exiled in the present

Is this how I got here?

Have I always been here?

From the lights of the Woolwich time tunnel I travelled east along the river until I reached the monolith stanchions of the bridge, my memory flecked by the magenta geometries of the C2C line.

I walked through the plumpness of suburbia – the dead-end of Chafford Hundred – middle-management housing perched on the edge of a chalk abyss, waiting to fall into the oblivion of memory, amnesiaville.

My wires crackle and spark in the morning dew like the powerlines above Lakeside shopping centre.

It was as though a meteorite of chalk and pollen had plummeted into West Thurrock, leaving a crater of whiting and buddleia. A cancelled landscape.

In the future, everything ends. The waters will boil like the bubbling sewage outlet by the Proctor and Gamble chemical factory. The earth will be death-white with ash like the chalk-trodden innards of the gorge.

Grays – it foretells the end – oversized plastic cattle farting along a field of tarmac. These humans immerse themselves in ultra-fast fibre broadband, next-day deliveries, 5G connectivity; buy now, pay later – the on-demand boredom of the 21st century – everything is instant.

Except the end of their world: it is happening so slowly, they can deny it is happening.

Did I witness it?

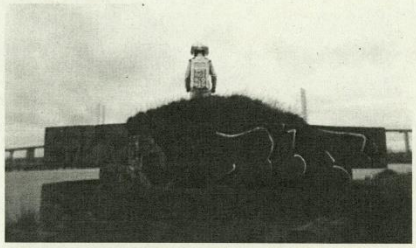
Was I once human?

Subsumed into the Wi-Fi, automation, automaton – I can't be sure.

My circuits are scrambled, my joints seize, my exoskeleton corrodes in the caustic air of Grays.

I can't remember how many times I've walked around Chafford Hundred – a lost astronaut orbiting a satellite town. Bruised sky collapses into black thorns; yellow and purple futures fall before dead wood and pitted metal. Rooftops fade to January grey. Tarmac glistens with the first bite of frost.

Why am I still here?



Rettendon 29th November 2021

Through the back roads - the B roads; those tributaries of the carriageways, capillaries of the Home Counties, harbouring fly-tipped treasures, slaughterhouses haunted by sick livestock and money-laundering golf clubs employing coke-head chefs.

Where we were going was blank space on the map – without the infamy of the triple Range Rover murders, Rettendon wouldn't exist.

Our walk doesn't register, the old green lanes – hedgerows arch between ploughed fields – glimpses of pylon horizons through gaps in the foliage. South Essex is a landscape of greys: road-grey, river-grey, sky-grey, a deadlight filter over a sodden margin. But here, on the frontiers of the A130, sharp browns and greens infiltrate the palette; mud glistens with full bodied tyre tracks, leaves backlit by mid-morning sun.

A far stretch from the neon reflections in flooded Basildon asphalt, rippling with the aggressive rhythms of night life. Clubs jostle and vibrate like the terraces at Upton Park. Nocturnal creatures dance, fight and forage through the carparks in designer jeans.

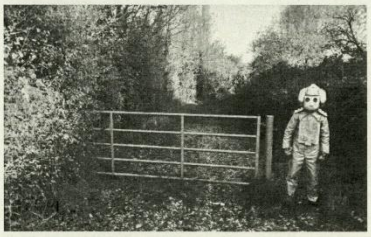
Deformed, mutated muscles, fed on lager and steroids, stalking a piss-soaked Southend seafront; Pat Tate was the Essex terminator, snuffing rival powder-peddlers; chromium knuckles, red eyes wired to the max.

As I sit on a log that marks the corner of a field, an anomaly infiltrates my system – a glitch in the databanks – an image fragment clogs my CPU. I shake, convulse, circuits spasm and spark. Memories of a boy who couldn't leave his hometown:

Every weekend I return, stalk the margins of Billericay – I see figures, ghosts of my past, people who knew me as a child – I read their faces, accusing glances. There's _____, he's grown up, must be in his 30s …looks 17 – is he eating enough? What's he doing now? Why is he still here?

We reached the gate – gate to the underworld – it didn't matter which side we stood, we were already there, rural ghosts of an Essex mafia-class. Cold galvanized steel, Bridleway, decapitated traffic cone, Whitehouse Farm 200 yards away - all in the shadow of the A130.

A large property on the hill watches over us, no doubt housing a Hanningfield drugs baron. I picture the film, obligatory British villain – Tom Wilkinson, Ray Winstone, or if you're lucky, Jack Nicholson, presiding over a nightclub empire of doorman deals and estuary shootouts: Basildon to Barking, Southend to Gravesend (via the Dartford Crossing), 3am skirmishes up the A13 – white powder blurs the vision - streetlights become a river of souls. Rettendon was the afterlife, if you were summoned here you were already dead.



Junction to the right: the Rectory Road sign extraction
5th March 2022

Target locked: a felled road sign straddling the grassed verge and the tarmac at the junction of Rectory Road and Dunton Road. I'd monitored its position for 3 weeks on my Saturday morning drives back to my parents' house.

I pulled over in a pitted church carpark half a mile up the carriageway. The road was twisting and narrow, no footpath, deceptively busy: a rat-run between Basildon and Billericay. No where, no opportunity to stop, shovel it into the tailgate of the red Micra. A rhythmic passing of suburban SUVs cut the air: KIA Sportage, Ford KUGA – black / white, headlights glaring at the puddles. 28 hours of steady drizzle had softened the fields and filled the potholed carpark I surveyed from.

A single plank bridge over a trickle of the River Crouch revealed a route: keep to the blind side of the hedgerows, hidden from the unforgiving traffic. I hugged the inside edge of the fields, sharp shrubs attacking my coat and jeans. Their roots gave me a foot-wide margin of firm ground to balance on, the ploughed earth beyond clung to my boots, sucked me down to join the furrows of drowned crops.

As a farmhouse drew close, I decided I was trespassing, hopped the Crouch, dodged the cars, continued down hill over the front gardens of the oversized houses dotted along the other side, now exposed, in full view of the road.

A peloton fizzed passed: 'walk on the mud, why don't he walk on the road?' Wiggins grunted, while Armstrong chuckled behind.

Their ridiculous Lycra was the only registering colour in a topography of soaked agriculture and the Ford testing site at Dunton: clay – green – grey.

A road runner bounced into view: black tracksuit, no high vis, back to the traffic, 4x4 zebras stampeding around him. Was he speaking to me? No – hands-free headset – phone call to discuss the morning's shopping list. Fuck – how do these people live into their 30s?

Superdry armour, impervious to Saturday drivers, knees bowed, cartilage knackered by tarmac impacts, ears plugged into the network. An endless haze of sales, line managers, call centres, punctuated by a kamikaze jog through Little Burstead. A sprint-finish to the oblivion of the 21st century.

The fallen sign comes into view, I feel like Jason hunting the golden fleece as its yellow-orange metal illuminates in the rainwater. There are no monsters here to fight, only oversized engines and unseen farmers stroking their shotguns. No plasticine hydras or stop-motion skeleton warriors, only 2-wheeled suicide bombers in blue spandex.

I carry my prize, retrace my steps, another piece of the viva exhibition jigsaw pressed between my wet gloves. The absurd hoarding of road-waste. The ambition to fill a gallery with the shipwrecks of a bitumen sea; mark the death of Amazon Prime, Netflix, Nectar points with a reflective plastic headstone: approaching junction to the right.

The obsolete computer towers of Bricktown

12th March 2022

The familiar figure of Bass cuts a unique silhouette into the morning sun as he guards his bike outside the Billericay Oxfam. Khaki-green coat sprouting baggy combat trousers, tucked into thick socks at the ankle. At the other end, a wiry beard bristled out from a hoodie, sunken eyes topped with a striped beanie. Bass was the original odd fellow, patrolling the lanes between Ramsden and Althorne on his vintage wheels, fuelled on cannabis and aniseed balls. He claimed to live on a narrow boat, moored near Maldon, but in reality, nobody knew where Bass came from, or where he was going. Just a shade, furiously pedalling Essex into submission, haunting the passenger-side wing mirrors of suburbia.

Every Saturday he would ring me from his Nokia nine-button phone (held together with electrical tape):

'Are you about today bruv? Just wondered what you were up to.'

I'd spotted the open wheelie bin from the footbridge that crossed the railway tracks near Gooseberry Green roundabout. From my elevated position, I could see it was stacked with old desktop PCs. Bulky and heavy, I could only carry one of these, but Bass, with his custom-welded shop bike – enlarged front basket frame to facilitate his morning paper round – could ferry two or three at a time.

He seemed keen to help – anything to add purpose to his morning cycle. The office compound housing the defunct computer towers was well-known to us both; memories of fakie-inward heelflips, switch no-comply impossibles and a primo slide on the waxed metal panel of a bus shelter.

This landscape carpeted in red stone housed decades of skateboarding achievements, now reduced to unopenable video files on a corrupt hard drive, encased within my dusty Windows XP computer. We had affectionately named it Bricktown.

Walking down Radford Way, parallel to the trainline, the commuter-belt descended into industrial estate. Kitchen showrooms and gyms sandwiched between carparks of abrasive concrete; Jewsons wood yard, World of Spice.

Gutted computer casing – fan, DVD drive, circuit boards – husks of Bill Gates, the chrysalis from which Office 365 and Microsoft Teams emerged. A shedded skin at the feet of constant availability, remote working, Outlook calendars. While my email avatar would be reading 'offline', Bass was off the grid, beyond the network – even cookies couldn't locate him – according to Google, Bass didn't exist. I try to avoid the ripe smoke pluming from his elongated cigarette. A yellow and black sign reads 'NO FLY-TIPPING' on the bin shed gate.

Two towers on the bike, one in my arms, we walked the back roads to my parents' house. Single file, mindful of the traffic as the path narrows over the railway bridge on Mountnessing Road. Overused engines drag their plump chassis over the incline, wary of these two nomadic figures and their hoard of redundant technology.

A mile to go, we recount old memories, discuss skateboard trips that our backs and knees are too damaged to undertake. Houses squeeze together, front gardens become driveways.

Bass wheels his bike through the narrow alley to the back garden, the old plastic Wendy house comes into view, half-full with traffic cones and hubcaps. We deposit the prizes and then he is gone, pushing off the kerb in the direction of the fields, swerving around a reversing neighbour as his feet find the pedals. Existence between Essex and Elysium: Bass's contribution to the viva exhibition.

Fourth time to the bridge

26th March 2022

The stretching Devonshire Road: scattered pebbles and gems of windscreen glass shimmer on the tarmac before me.

Wouldham Road: a line of Cybermen march out to greet me as the C2C line rumbles beneath – memories of pandemic subversions – an empty petrol cannister catches my eye, to collect on the return journey.

The river: tide out; ripples of hissing silt hide arthritic crustaceans and deceased seagulls – complete with shopping trolley headstones. The cemetery of the estuary, corroding industry on wooden stilts. The spring sun cooks the rotting seaweed to my left as I travel west towards the bridge.

The river path: where over-sized ants dismantle butterflies on the paint-stained concrete. I walk past the taggers: plumes of colour and cannabis, a boombox plays Run DMC. The spray paint is so thick, it peels from the sea wall in technicoloured shards, a shed skin amongst the rusting aerosol cans. We exchange knowing glances, silent conversations. We are creatures of the margins.

Rugby balls impaled on barricades of bramble. The tank farm and the wader birds sing in harmony while bikes with fat tyres ambush unsuspecting dog walkers and fishermen.

The Dartford Crossing: A Kraken risen from the Thames, turned to stone by the eyes of a billion headlights – the M25 – a motorway Medusa. Part road, part serpent, an asphaltum anaconda constricting the city, bleeding it out into the home counties.

Under the bridge is a mythical place, a Charybdis between Essex and Kent, where the lost futures of the 20th Century can be found.

Where do we go when the dark draws close, when the hum of civilisation fades away, when connections sever and communications cease? There is this place; a universe of echoes between mud and concrete where tyre pressures and diesel fumes haunt the air.

Vibrations through time and space, oscillations between presence and absence, memories reverberate in the moments, as 18-wheelers shake the stanchions. The sound of continental drift on amphetamines, the gears of global capitalism slipping.

In my mind, Marx is buried here – deep under the Thames, entwined in Derridean riddles. But the dead don't stay dead. The bearded ghost resurfaced in the guise of an army of Cybermen to remind us of the failings of contemporary society – the gaping inequalities and illusory freedom of capitalism:

You can have everything you want, as long as you have enough money to pay for it – so work harder, work longer – sell yourself to the system. More will make you happy – but you will never be happy, because you will always want more.

We are all still slaves, incarcerated in a motorway of revolving pasts; lanes of crawling traffic. A forgotten present, continually overwritten like tyre tracks in the rain. Unreachable futures in the mist beyond the verge; the M25 under an April dawn.

I make my return, a scavenged rice sack filled with rusty aerosols in one hand, discarded plastic jerry cans tied to either side of my backpack. They beat against me like drums as I walk. Civilisation trickles back into West Thurrock, glimmers of optimism cut through the dark anxiety of the viva.

The mountain of broken skateboards
15th May 2022

Through the mossy gate and fossilised garden path of 22 School Road; 2 discarded DVD players sit at the base of the pebble-dashed council house (potential viva sculptures). Into the wilderness back garden of Chris's house.

After decades of skateboarding together, I increasingly valued any time grabbed with this fleeting, auburn-bearded hobbit. As our bodies had aged and broken, and life's pressures and responsibilities had burdened us, our meetings had become less frequent, each one a mythical voyage into some undiscovered past.

Grey hoody, tinted brown with allotment dirt and sweat, above once-white pyjama bottoms, decorated with thin vertical stripes and a triangular rip exposing his left shin. A 29-year-old face weathered to 40 by stints of van-life; harsh nights on a sofa jammed in the back of a Citroen Berlingo.

Chris invited me through the smoking area (faux folk art statues of owls and cockerels gathered around a creaky bench and leaning apple tree). Past the old pond where occasional bubbles emerged from the black water – possible mosquito larvae or rat-tailed maggots.

He lifted a shredded blue tarpaulin to reveal a stack of muddy bread crates, each full of splintered plywood; fragments of colour, designs abraded by repeated collisions with concrete and metal. The old boards. Bass, Chris and myself had collected them here, an archive of purposeless pursuits and anarchistic adventures. Ideas put into motion by ripped jeans and broken wrists.

There were more than I remembered – good news for my plan to build a mountain of shattered memories out of these wooden tombstones in my viva exhibition. I'd come on foot, greatly underestimating the haul, and Chris offered to drive me the half mile back to my parents' house in his dad's ancient Vauxhall Zafira.

We exited the garden and Chris searched for the Zafira keys in his camper van, parked out front: Renault T-1000 – remnant terminator of the carriageways – beige with a maroon speed stripe and rusting wheel arches. Like Bass, no one really knew where Chris lived: rumours of some flood land purchased in the shadow of the bridge (Kent side). Thames-infused dreams of a business cultivating elephant grass and living in a poly tunnel.

His parents' descent into depression and dementia had pushed him away from Billericay, the under-inflated tyres of his mobile homes temporarily distanced him from his demons. When the gravitational pull of Essex sucked him back, I tried to be there to help him face the shadows.

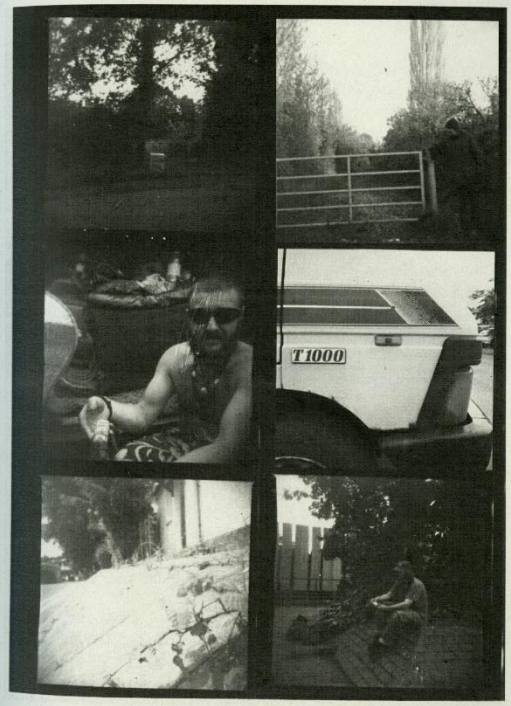
Clambering through the back of the camper, Chris located the keys in a pile of unwashed clothes, knocking into a compressed gas cylinder as he returned. *It's a miracle he hasn't blown himself sky-high*, I thought: a Dartford detonation, caused by a discarded home-grown cigarette, or an emergency stop at a roundabout.

The Zafira juddered into life, its deep green paint so old it appeared to be growing mildew. We pulled away in what felt like 3rd gear and chugged towards my parents' house.

As Chris recounted gospel-inspired visions and philosophies over the Vauxhall's struggling engine, I considered the viva and my ridiculous ambition for a pyre of fractured skateboard decks: childhood pasts re-emerging in a lost future. Perhaps to escape the sprawling monotony of late-capitalism, the future has to be absurd.

Chris had certainly adopted this mantra, I almost felt sorry for the parking wardens and dog walkers who stumbled upon his motor-maison – if the odour of cardon monoxide and rotting vegetables didn't repel them, the nomad's cheerful ramblings about repenting sins and the possibilities of home-made CBD products certainly would. Like Bass and myself, Chris had carved a unique niche between the seams of society in which to survive.

I respect him for this, and with the bread crates of boards safely loaned in my studio (Chris expected them returned after the show) we exchanged thanks and goodbyes: spidery fingers met dirt-encrusted knuckles – the hip-hop handshake of the odd fellows – a slap and a bang.



Shepperton
15th April 2022

It's hard to keep up with Dad as he marches between the Good Friday footfall at West Ham station, his 72-year-old knees out-pacing the bank holiday blancmanges and buggies.

We cram onto the 10am Jubilee line. Runners grind against the tracks at North Greenwich. Adverts assault my eyes: 'drive sales with data-powered automation', while a hen party drink Smirnoff and cranberry from little cans.

As the Shepperton train pulls into Platform 5, a tide of people fall out into Waterloo station. A mass-exodus from the commuter-belt; escape from suburbia. Middle-class migrants motivated by the prospect of a glass of wine by a different window. Work clothes banished to the dry cleaners, weekend warriors with wheeled suitcases.

Departure slightly delayed by a line block at Clapham – one of the hen party bedded down too early? Passed out on the track. As the train carries us deep into the suburbs of Surrey, Dad flexes my academic muscles with mock viva questions: 'what research questions do you feel you have answered?' …'Why am I still here?'

The tracks stopped - Shepperton was the terminus - end of the timeline.

Exiting the station, we travelled North, away from the centre. 36 Old Charlton Road: whitewash, new driveway and windows, yellow front door – paint giving way to the decades – fading into scorched wood, an empire of the sun; Ballard revealed.

In the author's style, we circumnavigated the periphery of this suburbia: over the M3, traffic stretching from Shepperton to Elysium, unreachable horizon lines in both directions. Nutty Lane – characters' minds giving way to their surroundings. New Road – an author who dared to dream the future. Now, nothing new is created, we can only re-visit where the new was discovered; a 3-bed semi with a duff yellow door.

We traverse a half-mile stretch of featureless fields and fencing, a reservoir to our right. It concludes in a security gate and a Netflix sign: 'Shepperton Studios', affirming Ballard's theory that the edge is where fictions are found. From the Day of the Daleks to the Marvel Universe, the world's imagination was contained within these teal warehouses. The security guards laugh at my cyber-costume as I pose for Dad's photo: 'you can't come in 'til they buy Dr Who'.

A footpath draws us into a landscape reminiscent of the Mardyke valley – a margin rainforest complete with parakeets; green darts chattering in the canopies, the River Ash winds between the foliage. Brimstones and Speckled Woods flutter amongst the ruined statues and Latin-inscribed stone: 'sic nos non nobis' – 'thus we labour but not for ourselves'. Futures lost in the self-service of capitalism.

Long Acres garden centre: 'for all your pets needs' (missing apostrophe). As the afternoon grew hot we stopped at The Bell Inn for pints of Neck Oil and Timothy Taylor. Flat-bottomed cumulus clouds overview the beer garden as planes rise from Heathrow in the distance.

We make the 3:38 back to Waterloo – it fills up fast, the stops are frequent, 20 mile-an-hour coasts between platforms. The trendy's pile in at Kingston, fresh from punting in the Thames, complete with accessory dogs and burgundy chinos.

Through the Jubilee crush and back to the platform at West Ham, where Eastern Europeans jabber incomprehensively into cell phones. As East London gives way to Thurrock, the C2C line carries us back to Essex – from one perimeter of the commuter-belt to another – a pizza-slice journey in to and out of London, and back again.

Shepperton was all of the non-town we had expected. A temporal void governed by the mystics of suburbia. Ballard's books gather no dust, his knackered front door will always creak at the threshold of the present. The futures offered to us by this author are the last imagined by a society falling into temporal stagnation. They are now: the catastrophe is in full swing… or has already happened.

The banks of the River Ash will burst, erupting tropical fauna and exotic birds (parakeets) into commuterville. Suburbia submerged by the primordial; the re-wilding of Surrey. A headless figure of lichen-riddled stone sinks into the ivy strewn earth before the hollow gaze of a decapitated cyber-helmet.

'Look on my works, ye Mighty, and despair!'

The fallen kingdom of capitalism.

It is at these junctions of non-place and non-time: Shepperton, Billericay, Grays, Rettendon, where late capitalism's homogeneity is neutralised by the seemingly mundane vistas of the periphery. Where, perhaps, new futures wait to be discovered.

Road ahead closed: lost futures
22nd May 2022

When people ask me what my research is about and I start talking about 'lost futures', their eyes glaze over with confusion or scepticism. Lost futures are simply the things which haven't happened yet, but maybe could have, should have; the things that won't get a chance to happen unless we break free from the late-capitalist hold that constricts us.

Fisher, Derrida, Debord, Oldfield-Ford, Bourriaud, Ballard and Sinclair all agree that the homogenisation of societies under capitalism's business ontology damage and dissolve the conditions in which new things can happen. But this potential they pine for is not my future – I didn't exist in 1970, I never witnessed the BBC Radiophonic Workshop or public service broadcasts.

My story began in 1986, arriving in Harlow hospital as a vampiric Margaret Thatcher opened the M25 with a pair of oversized scissors and a grim brown coat. The M25 – my no longer and my not yet, my orbital motorway hauntology.

A Sunday morning drive with dad; over the bridge, riding the belly of the beast round to Junction 10 and the A3 – artwork to deliver for a Chichester exhibition. On the return leg, the M25 was eerily deserted: a zombie apocalypse of Surrey's middle-classes? Until a sudden snake of tail lights: 'Road Ahead Closed'. An accident at Epsom had ceased the flow back to the Dartford tunnel. Spine and hamstrings aching, the escape route was a U-turn at Leatherhead and a sprint around Staines, Watford, Waltham Abbey, my shuddering Micra rewinding Iain Sinclair's anti-clockwise trudge around this perimeter and its pasts, back to the A12 and the ibuprofen relief of Essex.

Time travels faster clock-wise on the orbital – my accelerator pushed the clock hands forwards, strained the gears: concrete carriageway sections drummed my tyres like a heartbeat on MDMA, the fencing and foliage blurred the passenger-side window into a Gerhard Richter painting. I could almost see the future:

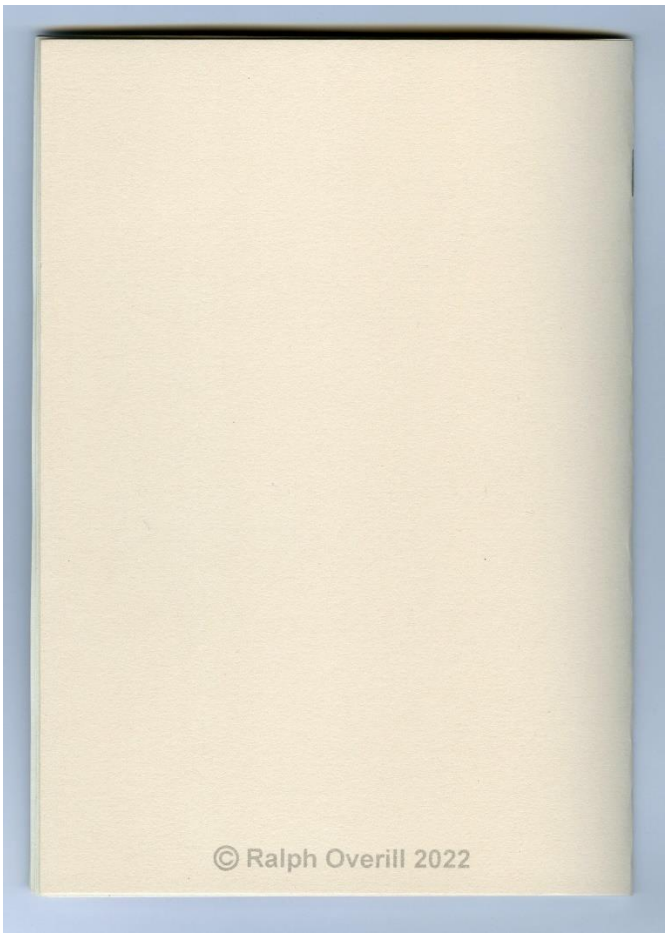
Stone turrets against a perfect sky. Wildflower gardens and bubbling water stretch to green carpet fields dotted with plump sheep. A castle from a forgotten century where arts and crafts are still held in high regard, where teaching and learning is natural and free, where creativity is currency. The undiscovered country of Singleton. West Dean College welcomed my presence, requested my exhibition. The 2-hour voyage to a past era; artists petrified into stone battlements, a fossilised diamond in a sea of rapid-prototyped plastic.

As this future was lost in the distance of Junction 10, another drew closer: the viva exhibition. Choking wires of capitalism stripped bare and powerless, strewn across a land littered with hollow computer casing and graffitied road signs. Warning lights and CRT monitors gasp their last while the sound of corporations being cannibalised grinds from cheap speakers. The bridge presides over the wastelands of Essex while the last cyberman flickers beneath.

As anxiety and emotions swell, this future will become reality – for 4 days in June – be found for an instant before dissipating into the motion blur of the M25. While the road ahead may be closed, diversions are always possible. The future doesn't have to be the same.

Carriageway Sundown

Hot magenta sphere in a mango haze.
Streetlights burn like aching vertebrae,
While brake lights throb and tyres graze.
Contrails scratch a darkening sky:
Cyan-white to cobalt-grey to ultramarine.
Traffic magnetised towards an ember horizon line,
A petrol-infused fireball over the A13.



Appendix 2:

Exiled in the present: the last Cyberman walks in Rettendon

Abstract:

The author introduces, presents and considers a recent experiment that saw him walk to the location of the 1995 Essex Range Rover murders while dressed as a character he has created, ‘the last Cyberman’. The article tracks the lineage of this imagined persona through a concise review of the author’s journey through fine art research study, before displaying the photographs and reflective text resulting from the walk. Upon analysing these, connections are made to the work of Francesca Woodman, Michael Landy and J.G. Ballard, as it becomes evident that this recent performative development in the author’s practice reveals previously tacit truths about his relationship to his home county and the displacement he feels in 21st century life.

Keywords:

Psychogeography, Essex, Cyberman, Francesca Woodman, J.G. Ballard, Michael Landy.

Introduction: the final year

As I write this article, the date of my viva exam only a few months away, it seems necessary to reflect on my extended period of doctoral research. Two years enrolled on a practice-based PhD at Chelsea College of Arts highlighted an uncompromising sprawl to my creativity as I refused to work within the strict confines of academia, leading me to abandon the research degree in favour of the more organic Professional Doctorate in Fine Art programme at University of East London. Now in my fifth and final year of that qualification, I feel ready to review the adventure, glance at the meandering road as it disappears in the rear-view mirror, and measure the miles travelled.

The aim of this article is to present a recent practical experiment, where I dressed up as a robot – something akin to a Cyberman from the BBC's Doctor Who series – and made an expedition to the small Essex village of Rettendon, accompanied by my father, with the goal of finding the site of the infamous Essex Range Rover triple murders of December 1995. Documented through a psycho-geographical approach combining reflective writing and photography, the odd amalgamation of science fiction, rural Essex landscape, and drug-dealing criminal underworld, reveals my torn relationship to this contradicted home county, allowing me to position my doctoral studies not only academically, but geographically and personally.

How did I get here?

My Final Report – the written element of my thesis – opens with this question. It has been a messy doctorate; seven years spread over two institutions, three supervisory teams (courtesy of university restructures) and one global pandemic, have guaranteed that I am a very different artist from the polite and timid printmaker who tip-toed around Chelsea's studios in 2015[5]. My research title, 'Monsters and margins', expresses an interest in the figures of otherness that haunt our nightmares and cinema screens, and their connection to the wildernesses and wastelands in which we imagine them – landscapes at the periphery. The first years of my research used my printmaking skills to create scenarios where the giant tarantulas and lizards of films watched in my youth populated those edge-lands of Essex that caught my imagination, (from the drainage ditches of the River Wick to the verges of the A13). I collaged photographs and film stills onto metres of fabric, encouraged to work larger and more ambitiously by my supervisors, giving the resulting work a commanding presence when exhibited – from image to installation. Frustration at the COVID-19 lockdowns led to a series of 'pandemic subversions' in my practice[6], as I was forced out of the studio and into the landscapes that featured in my prints from the previous years. I reconnected with the skateboard-fuelled risk and adventure of my childhood, exploring the edges of suburbia that have always intrigued me. Bouncing off work by Robert Smithson, and the writing of Iain Sinclair and J.G. Ballard, I became a volatile

[5] For more detail on my early PhD research, see Overill, R. (2018) 'Between the screens: screen-printing moving images', *Journal of Arts Writing by Students*, 4(1), pp. 37-47.
[6] For a detailed documentation on these developments in my research see Overill, R. (f2022), 'Pandemic subversions: the rise of the Cybermen', *Crossing Conceptual Boundaries,* XII, University of East London, pp 88-107.

psycho-geographer; walking and writing in their margins while marking my territory with spray paintings and projection bombings of monsters, to vent my disillusionment at society's late-capitalist values. I read a lot by Mark Fisher during the pandemic, coming to my own understandings about hauntology and the orbiting hopes, fears and failings of our culture. This shift from depicting my concerns in images to realising them in site-specific interventions was an important one, unearthing much more personal concerns than the grabbed frames of sci-fi and horror films that adorned my earlier research. The academics seemed energised by this frenetic artist, able and keen to mutate his practice and approach to whatever the world threw at him: printmaking, installation, fleeting non-gallery actions, walks, photography and reflective writing – a jack-of-all-trades perhaps, but one with a unifying goal, focus – what did the monster mean to me? Why did I seek solace in the geographic margins of Essex?

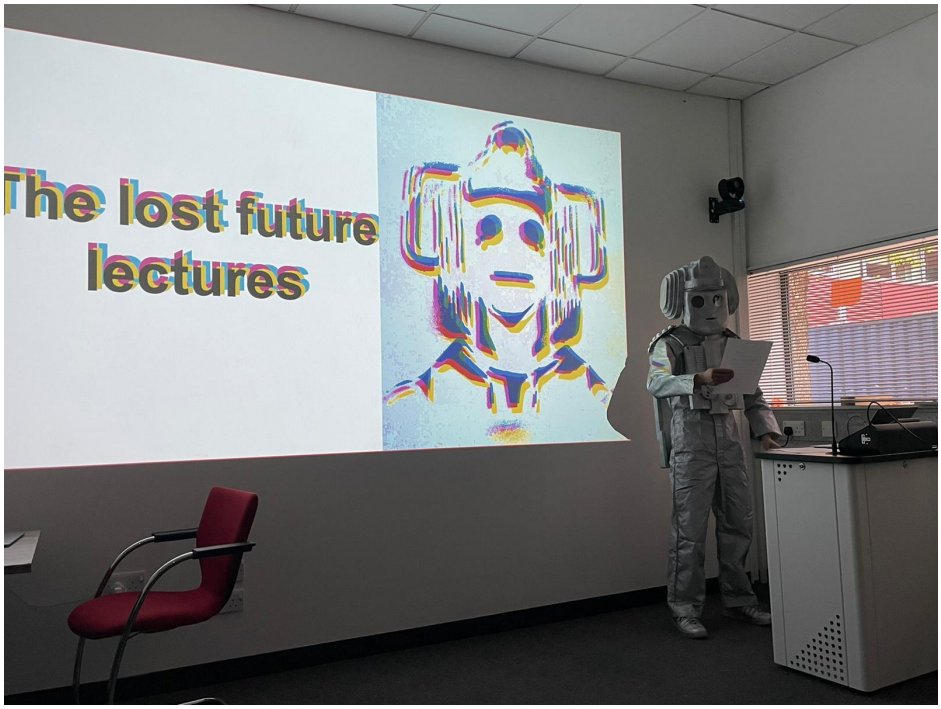


Figure 1: Photograph documenting the introduction of the last Cyberman, 2021. © Ralph Overill.

The last Cyberman

On 4th November 2021, I did something – presumably – never done in a research degree seminar before: while showing a film about one of my roadside expeditions (a

10-mile hike along the A127) I left the room, only to re-enter at the film's end dressed in a boiler suit spray-painted silver and embellished with similarly metallic armour fashioned from polystyrene and those little foil trays used to hold garlic doughballs in. Completing the costume was a full-face helmet – also made from household remnants – attempting to resemble that of a 1960s-era Cyberman. Proceeding to give a brief lecture on lost futures (Figure 1), this half absurd, half academic event marked the introduction of 'the last Cyberman' to my research practice.

The Cybermen had become a key anchor point in my research, following a walk along the Thames path to the Dartford Crossing which resulted in effigies of these automatons being spray painted and projected onto the bridge's foundations. As documented in my recent publication in Crossing Conceptual Boundaries, these relentless replicant robots came to represent my disillusionment at late-capitalist society and its values; from the continually growing abyss of the rich-poor divide, to the convoluted management structures and business ontologies that, in my mind, damaged public services such as education and healthcare. As these personal concerns, envisaging an unsustainable world warped by monetary greed and devoid of philanthropy, were unearthed in my research, I began to create a fictional narrative – a lost future – where this civilisation of Cybermen disintegrated, and capitalism collapsed. I imagined a post-apocalyptic world which resembled the bleak river paths and roadsides that had become my adventures. Through the development of my research, I had noted the distance between the monster and myself continually shrinking – the gap between artist and his reflection disappearing until the only place to go was within, as Mark Fisher notes, 'there is no inside except as a folding of the outside: the mirror cracks, I am an other, and I always was' (2016, pp. 11-12). For my research to be complete, come full circle, I had to embody the monsters that afflicted me, and so, the last Cyberman was born.

A single surviving automaton, visibly damaged and disorientated by this new world lacking profit margins and Office 365, the last Cyberman would wander to the peripheries of his home county, Essex, in search of purpose – a truth, perhaps – to his existence. Through experiencing these marginal landscapes and recording them through reflective writing and photography, he would attempt to reconnect his severed memory circuits and heal his corroded emotion sensors in an effort to rediscover a connection to the world.

Rettendon

The following section documents the last Cyberman's first adventure; to a small village whose only point of note is being host to a triple murder of Essex drug dealers in the winter of 1995 – the subject of a multitude of books and films[7]. Having grown up surrounded by the folklore of this grisly event, I was curious to experience the location and see what imaginations it offered my practice. As has become customary to my research expeditions, my father accompanies me, driving us to and from the site and joining me on the walk; a second body that muddies the narrative and can take photographs that record my character in situ.

[The voice of the last Cyberman]

A late November morning, bright and bitter – 4 degrees – frost and sun fizzing like sherbet lemons in the air. Dad scrapes the ice off the Hyundai, my cyber-suit blends into its silver paintwork. Through the back roads: Norsey Road, Runwell Road, East Hanningfield Road – the B roads – those tributaries of the carriageways, capillaries of the Home Counties, harbouring fly-tipped treasures, slaughterhouses haunted by sick livestock and money-laundering golf clubs employing coke-head chefs.

We run parallel to the A130 – carotid artery to the A13 – it joins low Essex to high Essex; Corringham to Colchester, tank farms and storage warehouses to country manors and antique centres. Our destination was blank space on the map – without the infamy of the triple Range Rover murders, Rettendon wouldn't exist. This inaugural journey of the last Cyberman somehow echoed the conclusion of my Doctorate; five years part-time extended to seven by a false start in Pimlico. PhD memories of meetings with rigid supervisors ensconced in unfindable mahogany corridors. West gave way to East, Soho sunk into the Docklands. Chelsea College of Arts was the A130, at a tangent to the University of East London's Thames estuary and the A13.

Leaving the car in Old Bell Lane, we begin to track the old Workhouse Lane. In full cyber-suit, I carry a museum of analogue cameras: my favourite, a Kodak Duaflex ii, is a redundant machine designed to take 620 roll film (now long extinct), I keep it alive by cropping medium format spools, reducing the diameter with scissors and

[7] See Windsor, Terry (2000), *Essex boys*, DVD, UK, Pathé. and Gilbey, Julian (2007), *Rise of the footsoldier*, DVD, UK, Optimum Releasing. Etc.

sanding the plastic edges until paper thin. Dad's digital camera belongs in a museum too – every shot uses up an AA battery (he keeps 4 in a sandwich bag in his pocket.)

Where we walk doesn't register, a different plane of existence – the criminal underworld defies cartography. Tractor prints echo the ghosts of impounded 4x4s, ice in the mud like shards of windscreen glass. The old green lanes – hedgerows arch between ploughed fields – glimpses of pylon horizons through gaps in the foliage. South Essex is a landscape of greys: road – grey, river – grey, sky – grey, a deadlight filter over a sodden margin. But here, on the frontiers of the A130, sharp browns and greens infiltrate the palette; mud glistens with full bodied tyre tracks, leaves backlit by mid-morning sun. There are no people, all the crime lords have been murdered or arrested, golden years retirement with no hope of return. Only expanses of fields, agricultural burial grounds.

Figure 2: Ralph Overill, *Looking out*, 2021. Digital photograph, photographer: Richard Overill © Ralph Overill.

Time stood still here – were these ridges of frozen earth the imprints of that ill-fated 4x4, 27 years ago, or were the tracks regularly replenished, continually etched by the wheels of the next victims? Imagination and memory slides through the gears, revs

back to the neon reflections in flooded Basildon asphalt, rippling with the aggressive rhythms of night life. Clubs jostle and vibrate like the terraces at Upton Park. Nocturnal creatures dance, fight and forage through the Festival Leisure carparks in designer jeans. Deformed, mutated muscles, fed on lager and steroids, stalking a piss-soaked Southend seafront; Pat Tate was the Essex terminator, snuffing rival powder-peddlers; chromium knuckles, red eyes wired to the max. Lost in my early twenties, I'd find myself in Talk of the South, Dick De Vignes or Bakers Bar on a Saturday night. Out of time, out of place, these Southend proving grounds offered me nothing but the sense that something could happen – when there are shots at the bar, anything is possible.

Figure 3: Ralph Overill, *Looking in*, 2021. Digital photograph, photographer: Richard Overill © Ralph Overill.

I pose on a log that marks the corner of a field. As Dad battles with the camera shutter an anomaly infiltrates my system – a glitch in the databanks – an image fragment clogs my CPU. I shake, convulse, circuits spasm and spark. Memories of a boy who couldn't leave his hometown:

[Ralph speaks from within the cyber-suit]

Every weekend I return, stalk the margins of Billericay – I see figures, ghosts of my past, people who knew me as a child – I read their faces, accusing glances. There's

_____, he's grown up, must be in his 30s …looks 17 – is he eating enough? What's he doing now? Why is he still here?

[the voice of the last Cyberman returns]

A narcoleptic evening session in the university library, yellowing pages spread on a formica table. An image reproduction: soft legs, a blurred torso, caught between a broken fireplace. A fleeting presence impressed upon a dying room. Francesca Woodman, 'House #4', 1976. It touches me, this artist, her photography, her performance – the domestic image displaced in the fields of Rettendon. A darkroom angel, lady Icarus, who flew so high so fast, lost her wings and fell. Are we the same? A lost Cyberman pursuing his images in opportunistic spaces with resuscitated cameras. My shaking, coupled with Dad's shivering fingers, blurs the shot, merges me with the frosty furrows – a cyber-ghost of the rural Badlands – I empathise with Francesca.

Figure 4: Ralph Overill, *Breaking out*, 2021. Medium format photograph, photographer: Richard Overill © Ralph Overill.

We reached the gate – gate to the underworld – it didn't matter which side we stood, we were already there, rural ghosts of an Essex mafia-class. Cold galvanized steel, Bridleway, decapitated traffic cone, Whitehouse Farm 200 yards away - all in the shadow of the A130. We soak it up, exercise the camera shutters. A large property on the hill watches over us, no doubt housing a Hanningfield drugs baron. I picture the film, obligatory British villain – Tom Wilkinson, Ray Winstone, or if you're lucky, Jack Nicholson, presiding over a nightclub empire of doorman deals and estuary shootouts: Basildon to Barking, Southend to Gravesend (via the Dartford Crossing) 3am skirmishes up the A13 – white powder blurs the vision - streetlights become a river of souls.

Figure 5: Ralph Overill, *The gate*, 2021. Digital photograph, photographer: Richard Overill © Ralph Overill.

Pat Tate, Tony Tucker and Craig Rolfe had accepted their fate; too many double deals, vicious assaults – collateral damage had reached critical mass. They knew they only had to sit and wait for the shotguns to find them. Rettendon was the afterlife, if you were summoned here, you were already dead.

Film and AA batteries exhausted, we make our return. Through Downham, Runwell, Norsey Wood – heater on full blast defrosting the fingers. Dad drives slow and steady, creating a queue of white Land Rovers in the rear-view mirror; the ghosts of the Rettendon murders catch up to us, jostle impatiently to overtake, pass us into the future with disapproving glances.

Reflections: exiled in the present

Dressed in my ridiculous silver costume, while navigating rural bridleways and footpaths, this experience gave me an overwhelming sense of not belonging, disconnected, not supposed to be there. As I feel is evident in the photographs, the last Cyberman was a foreign body in this agricultural Essex village, his dated robotic form – which emulated a past future of 1960s BBC Sci-Fi programming[8] - was from a different timeline (lost or forgotten) to the sunlit countryside. In this space I was out of time and out of place. In an unpredictable development, my reflective writing of the event diverted to consider Francesca Woodman – an artist whom I had stumbled across a few weeks earlier in a search for practitioners to position my developing performances against. Her presence is most welcome – firstly to balance an account which I am all too aware is unhealthily masculine – the macho adventuring of Smithson, Ballard, Sinclair, my father and myself (not to mention the Essex-boy crime culture) benefits from the vulnerable, feminine images in her photography – but also because her practice sought to depict an artist who wasn't quite at peace with her difference. The ghostly blurs and shades caught by her camera convey someone who was restless in herself, an adolescent still searching for acceptance. Writers studying her work came to similar conclusions: Philippe Sollers noted how she 'emerges from obscurity, crosses through the mirror and materialises for a moment in a world twisted with anxiety' (1998, p. 10). Rosalind Krauss was also affected by her fleeting frailty, 'just out of sight, she is the field of experience, tiny, fragile, slid just beneath the skin' (1999, p. 172), and David Levi Strauss suggested 'perhaps Francesca Woodman was herself out of time, exiled in the present' (1998, p. 20). While I was inspired by Smithson, related to Ballard, connected to Sinclair, my research linked to Woodman in a different way: I *empathised* with Francesca.

[8] 'The invasion' (1968) *Dr Who,* Season 6, episodes 1-8. BBC One Television. 2 November.

Upon researching deeper into her oeuvre and learning about the circumstances of her tragically short life, my own anxieties and vulnerabilities were brought sharply into focus. The displacement I felt growing up, unable to live up to the outwardly materialistic and aesthetic lifestyle of Essex man or meet the approval of Essex girls. As referred to in my Rettendon adventure, when I found myself in the bars and nightclubs of Southend, in reality, I was completely lost. These concerns were echoed when I visited Michael Landy's exhibition 'Welcome to Essex' at Colchester's Firstsite gallery. Upon my entry to the show, I was confronted by a thick-necked cardboard bouncer – Landy's 24 ft tall reproduction of 'Essex Man'. This summarised my bodily anxieties as a slim male growing up in a county where chest and bicep size were seemingly a measure of success – no matter how many press-ups I did or chicken I ate I would never amount to the proportions expected of an Essex wide-boy – I just didn't fit the mould.

Figure 6: Photograph documenting Ralph Overill outsized by Michael Landy's 'Essex Man', 2021. © Ralph Overill.

Being a skinny, skint artist in this land of commission boasting salesmen and fake-tanned trophy wives was an alienating experience, and likely the reason I gravitated to the fiction of J.G. Ballard relating to his narratives of distant protagonists, slowly losing grip on a disintegrating reality. The author, whose writing of executive housing estates, airport carparks and overgrown traffic islands re-situated psycho-geography from the city centres to the suburbs, was fascinated by the dislocation of the developing 20th century: 'that's the message of my fiction. We need to explore total alienation and find what lies beyond. The secret module that underpins who we are and our imaginative remaking of ourselves that we all embrace.' (Sinclair, 2002, p. 269). Now in the 21st century, I feel the author's writing is more relevant than ever. As I type this, it is the anniversary of Sarah Everard's murder and Vladimir Putin is waging war on the Ukraine, all while across the UK, television remotes scroll through bingeable boxsets and little lorries bustle about the roads delivering people's shopping. To me, we are living in the future that Ballard foresaw: 'a vast, endless suburb of boredom, interrupted by acts of totally unpredictable violence' (Ballard in Self, 2009).

Conclusion: why am I still here?

Academics posed this question at the start of my final year, regarding the unsettled, in-between state of my life and commitments. Also, it is a question I often ask myself; while watching *Match of the day* with my father on a Saturday night, having driven back to my parents' house earlier that day, or when at work, contemplating my seven years of part-time employment as printmaking technician at a further education college in Romford. I have since adopted it as a mantra for the last Cyberman – why must I and my invented cyber-character remain lost, in constant instability? Where does it end?

The walk in Rettendon encouraged me to examine Essex and my relationship to it: Francesca Woodman's delicate photography highlighted my own vulnerabilities, and Michael Landy's exhibition helped me connect these to the county, while J.G. Ballard's narratives revealed how the alienation I feel could be an awkward energy that my creativity feeds upon and embraces. Through this performative development of my practice, I place (or displace) myself in the landscapes most constant to my

life, with a commitment that I have not before considered. In her analysis of walking, Rebecca Solnit writes: ‘when you give yourself to places, they give you yourself back; the more one comes to know them, the more one seeds them with the invisible crop of memories and associations that will be waiting for you when you come back, while new places offer up new thoughts and possibilities’ (2002, p. 13). In this regard, I must engender a certain amount of trust to the sites which I choose to explore while dressed as a deformed automaton; that they and their inhabitants will to an extent accept me without too much hostility, but also that they will gift me something in return for my fleeting presence through them.

On that crisp November morning, Rettendon revealed the visuals of peaceful rural scenery often associated with home counties countryside, however, this was starkly contrasted by the memories and imaginations that surfaced in my reaction to the landscape, the cultural histories and folklore – the triple Range Rover murders – connected to it. Just as my doctoral studies migrated from Chelsea to the Docklands, my writing returned to the A13: Southend – Basildon – Barking, amphetamine-fuelled joyrides and the brutality of a criminal underworld which culminated in a dirt-track road and a metal gate. Like Landy’s Colchester gallery takeover, eyelash extensions and leopard print handbags jostle with overspilling wheelie bins and catastrophic fly-tipping. Alongside facilitating the aspirational wealth of London’s East End, Essex was also its rubbish tip. A county that houses both historic churches and soap-belching chemical plants – in Grays the two make the most juxtaposing of neighbours – the defining trait of my homeland is its schizophrenia. The ‘Bard of Barking’ himself, Billy Bragg, has described Essex as ‘a liminal place, neither rural or urban, where a bucolic past vies for supremacy with a brash present, constantly torn between the sacred and the profane’ (*Odes to Essex,* 2021), while John Betjeman depicts the region as ‘a stronger contrast of beauty and ugliness than any southern English county’ (1958, p. 170).

Figure 7: Ralph Overill, *The last Cyberman at St. Clements Church / Proctor and Gamble*, 2021. Digital photograph, photographer: Scott Freeland © Ralph Overill.

It is now clear to me that Essex and I share a ruptured nature, an irreconcilable tear deep within both of us that defines and drives our existence. I am – as you the reader may have judged – half academic, half lunatic: an oddity as much quiet, patient, generous and inquisitive as volatile, frustrated, uncompromising and disillusioned. Only someone with such juxtaposing facets of character would feel at home in a place that is both postcard landscape and rotting landfill, cricket greens and chemical plants, listed churches and Land Rover burials – the gateway to both Heaven and Hell. Essex's mix of beautiful countryside, industrial wasteland, retail aspiration and criminal underworld, intrigues my restless creativity – fuels the explorer and researcher in me.

The last Cyberman is a lens (and suit of armour) to experience and reflect this place of many places through. As the adventures accumulate, I hope to build up a unique and personal understanding of my home county, something that may be able to be shared more comprehensively in the future. With the date of my final exhibition only 12 weeks away from when I am writing this, I have set myself the ambitious task of

visualising the post-apocalyptic, post-capitalist world that the last Cyberman inhabits and to manifest it in the gallery space. Whether furiously foraging for discarded road signs and broken computer towers, or attempting to screen-print 2.5 meter-high effigies of pylons onto bedsheets, this final doctoral challenge will no doubt push me further and harder than I thought I was prepared to go for a research qualification – but this has been a recurring story over the last seven years – each new project more demanding, immersing than the last, farther from the mind-numbing multitude of price comparison websites and virtual calendar invites, increasing my disconnection from the on-demand boredom of 21st century reality. Maybe I really am exiled in the present.

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Appendix 3:

Pandemic Subversions: the rise of the Cybermen

Abstract

This article reflects on recent developments in the author's fine art research project, *Monsters and Margins*. The imposing of lockdown restrictions in 2020 initiated a shift in practice, resulting in the spray painting and projection of Doctor Who villains onto the Brutalist architecture of the Queen Elizabeth II Bridge. The author will demonstrate the influence of literature and philosophy on his artistic practice, drawing upon the work of Robert Smithson, J.G. Ballard, Iain Sinclair and, most pertinently, Mark Fisher, as he narrates the evolution of his understanding of hauntology and psycho-geography through progressing experiments. This leads to the unearthing of an anti-capitalist political stance in the work, enflamed by the pandemic's highlighting of poor governance and society's unsustainable consumerism and inequalities.

Introduction: monsters and margins

'Monsters and margins' is the title of my research project, registered on the Professional Doctorate in Fine Art programme at UEL. Through it I aim to examine the role and construction of monsters – the figures of otherness that reflect our cultural and personal concerns, and their connection to wildernesses and wastelands – landscapes at the periphery of, or between, places. Aiming to argue a symbiotic relationship between monsters and margins, the latter stages of my research have fostered a political, anti-capitalist stance – a development that this article aims to track and discuss. As my methodology is led by the making of artwork, my writing style consists of a hybrid between academic and artistic approaches, using a mixture of theoretical writings and personal reflection to analyse and develop my creative practice. This article charts the adaptation and evolution of my research through the restrictions and opportunities posed by the COVID-19 pandemic lockdowns of 2020 and 2021. I will introduce and present recent work made, reflecting on how it has

advanced my understanding of both the monsters (Cybermen in particular) and the marginal landscapes that feature in my projects.

The first section, *Pandemic subversions*, outlines the circumstances, problems and solutions through which this body of research germinated. I chart early forms that this series of work took and how they evolved, introducing the main artistic and theoretical influences surrounding the project: Iain Sinclair, J.G. Ballard and Robert Smithson. The second section, *The QE II Bridge*, presents a key artwork in my research – an essay of photographs and self-reflective writing – that documents a walk to the foundations of the Dartford Crossing, resulting in the application of two spray-painted Cybermen to one of the bridge supports. The third section, *Robots from a future passed*, analyses this piece through the lenses of psycho-geography and hauntology, introducing the writing of Mark Fisher to examine the temporal disruption evident in the work, while connecting the positions of Sinclair, Ballard and Smithson in its creation. The fourth section, *The rise of the Cybermen*, documents the practice-based developments that followed, including large-scale site-specific projections, that allow emerging political concerns in the work to be addressed through Mark Fisher's hauntological notion of *Capitalist realism* and the underlying political agendas of psycho-geographical practice. I conclude the article by summarising how this body of work has furthered my understanding of both monsters and margins; through a balance of creative practice, theoretical and literary study, an environment is created where the researcher's understanding and ability in each of these areas can benefit. I track how such an environment, alongside pandemic restrictions, unearthed deep political frustrations in my own character and beliefs that now form a part of my artistic practice and research.

I hope that this article, in addition to logging the developments in my research over an extended period of restrictions and hardship, is also testament to the resilience of creative practice and its ability to adapt and grow in unstable and challenging conditions; that out of bleakness, deprivation and anxiety, hope and change is always possible.

Pandemic subversions

March 2020: It felt inhumane to subject a tactile kinaesthetic like myself to the virtual amnesia of Zoom and Microsoft Teams. Cramped with my wife and stepson in a two-bed flat, my modest income cut by the closure of studios, galleries and karate. I was used to the explorative expanse of print workshops, filled with old-fashioned equipment and materials – the smell of ink, the weight of the press wheel. I feared not only for my mental health, but physically my body was suffering – I wasn't designed to stay still, sedentary – a damaged disc in my lower back ached and threatened further injury; walking was the cure. I walked for the permitted hour every day, exploring beyond the manicured lawns and polished SUVs of West Thurrock's commuter settlements, to the wasteland, the verges (stiffer grass, burnt out joyrides), to the road and the river. This felt like an opportunity to reconnect with the margins of Essex – a sense of place was important to my research, but artists can often get comfortable in a studio routine – if anything, lockdown kicked me out of a habit, back into the landscape.

A13, M25 and Thames became repeated routes and destinations. As I found myself in increasingly hostile territory (roaring lorries, unforgiving tides), I developed an affinity for the art and writing of Robert Smithson[9]. Here was an artist who went out to the edge-lands and made things happen (a coiling jetty, an avalanche of glue) pushing himself physically and mentally with each piece: 'aesthetic experience could be an important experience only when it is risky and dangerous' (Smithson in Tsai, 1991, p. 96). Through these roaming journeys, I found a fresh appreciation and curiosity for the roadsides and river paths I discovered. Bleak and neglected landscapes, that although almost always deserted, held traces of passing outlaws and outsiders: fly-tipping, fire-pits, graffiti. The bold subversion of spray paint attracted me – I was frustrated, wanted to make a point, leave a mark – a potential new practice revealed itself: a knowledge of screen-printing and paper stencils, connections to skateboarding culture, everyone was hiding indoors, wearing masks was normal, available and affordable materials: card, scalpel, tape…

[9] Robert Smithson was an American artist who was influential in the 1960s -70s Land Art movement. He was attracted to making interventions in landscapes on the industrial fringes of towns and cities and held a fascination for the way these were affected by time and entropy. See 'Spiral Jetty' 1970 and 'Glue Pour' 1969 for further information on the artworks mentioned briefly above.

Through a series of risky dawns and dusks, I adventured down footpaths, through fields, along the carriageway – the destination, a previously spotted concrete pillar or corrugated shipping container – vagrant surfaces primed for the presence of monsters. As I sprayed through hand-cut stencils, my earlier research of prints and depictions was re-born in a new, primal reality and I felt potential in this hinterland studio: ‘it was somewhere to cook the future. A rogue laboratory in which to undertake high-risk experiments’ (Sinclair, 2004, p. 56). Early pandemic subversions included Michael Myers (*Halloween*, Carpenter, 1978) looking out from a bridge support of the A13, Pennywise (*IT*, King, 1986) adorning the pillars supporting a section of the M25 and Leatherface (*The Texas chainsaw massacre*, Hooper, 1974) patrolling the scrubland behind Billericay football stadium. While these received encouragement and praise from my supervisory team and fellow research students, I was left underwhelmed by the modestly sized Jpegs documenting these interventions, nervously and hurriedly shot with the camera built into my phone. I wanted to communicate the creative fulfilment that these explorations of the margins offered me in a time of worry and deprivation – there was something special about these sites and the journeys between them, and a deeply embedded sense of frustration in the defacing of neglected surfaces with cheap spray paint – concerns my developing research had to unearth. Much was still missing from the records of my adventures – the tacit bubbling of memories with every step: childhood play in the woods and fields behind my parents’ house, glimpses of the late-night films I was not supposed to watch (recorded on VHS), skateboarding expeditions to deserted drainage ditches and abandoned warehouses. My volatile, lockdown-starved imagination would mould and merge these splinters of my past into new ideas, narratives and potential future projects, while anticipation (and fear of getting caught) ballooned as destinations approached. It became clear that the walk itself was crucial to the practice. Rebecca Solnit notes that ‘the rhythm of walking generates a kind of rhythm of thinking, and the passage through a landscape echoes or stimulates the passage through a series of thoughts. This creates an odd consonance between internal and external passage, one that suggests that the mind is a landscape of sorts and that walking is one way to traverse it’ (2001, pp. 5-6). My active lifestyle of weekly karate and football matches – all currently suspended – craved something tactile and kinetic to spark my brain, which was sorely languishing in an endless haze of video meetings and virtual seminars.

I became aware that I was walking on someone else's territory: Iain Sinclair traversed the Thames gateway in his 2004 novel *Dining on stones* and circumnavigated the M25 in *London orbital* (2002). I appreciated how his prose blurred between fact, memory and imagination, how he acknowledged these sites as margins between reality and fiction: 'In parts of the map that are not overwritten, worked out, everything bleeds into everything, sea and sky, truth and legend; defences are down […] We confess, we lie, we make up stories' (Sinclair, 2004, p. 171). Another author whom I had begun reading during my doctorate was J.G. Ballard – I had witnessed his characters become increasingly alienated, lost in the bizarre banality of overgrown traffic islands, multi-storey carparks and suburban real estate hugging the perimeter fencing of Heathrow airport – people in flight from reality. 'I think the suburbs are more interesting than people will let on. In the suburbs you find uncentred lives. The normal civic structures are not there. So that people have more freedom to explore their own imaginations, their own obsessions' (Ballard in Sinclair, 1999, p. 84). Ballard, like Sinclair, saw the peripheries as places where imagination could fuse with reality – sites where monsters were made. Deeper study into Robert Smithson's oeuvre revealed a potential methodology for recording my adventures – three pieces stood out: *The crystal land* (1966), *The monuments of Passaic* (1967) and *Incidents of mirror-travel in the Yucatan* (1969). documenting the artist's expeditions and interventions through essays of reflective writing, often with accompanying images. I experimented with adopting this format in my next exploration.

The QE II Bridge

Through the influence of Smithson, Ballard and Sinclair, the following piece was created, documenting and reflecting on a six-mile walk taken along the Thames path to the foundations of the Dartford Crossing, accompanied by my father, on Sunday 8th November 2020.

Figure 1: Ralph Overill (2020) *The meeting point at Wouldham Road.* Photograph

I had arranged to meet with Dad at the end of Wouldham Road at 2pm on a dull Sunday afternoon, where we would follow the Thames path West until we reached the bridge that spanned the river between Essex and Kent. We had explored the path up to Proctor and Gamble on a previous adventure, but everything that came after was unexplored territory. In my blue *Radical Essex* bag I carried a bottle of water, my Ilford Sportsman camera and some cereal bars, an A3 portfolio in my other hand containing a paper stencil of a 1960s Cyberman. As a child, I had been raised on televised science fiction, and while I don't recall ever being scared by these lumbering automatons, they had stuck in my memory and intrigued my aesthetic sensibilities as an artist, and so, the image had been traced, the card incised, (offcuts scattered over a cluttered living room floor) ready for an opportunity to deploy.

Figure 2: Doctor Who (1967) *The invasion*. Film still

I did not know if I would use the stencil – I had a curious fascination with the towering suspension bridge – and as we walked, my mind drifted West up the river and back in time, towards Blackfriars Bridge, as I remembered scenes of St Pauls Cathedral and central London being overtaken by the silver-suited robots – fragments of forgotten Dr Who episodes: William Hartnell, Patrick Troughton.

Figure 3: Ralph Overill (2020) *Approaching the bridge*. Photograph

As the bridge loomed from misty distance into the foreground, I imagined residues of these metallic monsters, forced into the Thames by swipes of a sonic screwdriver, expunged by the current, half-buried in silt, now collecting, reforming at the foundations under the A282; memories of a lost celluloid future clinging to reality – the space between Thurrock and Dartford.

Figure 4: Ralph Overill (2020) *Under the bridge*. Photograph

We were under the bridge. The pillars, more like walls, reached up vertiginously. Lorries traversing sections of reinforced concrete echoed like colliding asteroids in the space above.

Figure 5: Richard Overill (2020) *The gap*. Photograph

The first support was about 60 feet away; a span of wet mud edged by a verge of angular rocks on either side. I felt the urge to get across, reach this island and populate it with Dr Who villains. Dad seemed happy to wait – his knees would not let him follow. I clambered down onto the rocks, some wobbled and see-sawed as I tested them with my feet.

Figure 6: Ralph Overill (2020) *Wrong shoes*. Photograph

Wrong shoes. White leather K Swiss, half a size too big, donated by the father-in-law (only 2 miles down the path in Purfleet). I clutched the portfolio in one hand, rigging tape and spray paint in coat pockets. Bag relegated to watching with the old man. Had to travel light. I reached the mud, one foot sunk and slipped laterally, Thames diarrhoea lapping my laces. Maybe I should come back another time with boots, what if I lose a shoe, get stuck, break an ankle in the rocks?

Figure 7: Ralph Overill (2020) *Previous hesitations*. Photographs

I remembered previous similar hesitations; slipping on the pebbled verge to the A13 bridge (feral children watching 20 feet below) or being spotted by a fisherman while preparing to spray red octopus tentacles over Grays riverbank. Each time I had to push myself further – increasing danger, risk, but the rewards were great and the regrets, so far, had been none.

Figure 8: Ralph Overill (2020) *The rocks*. Photograph

The tide was out, Dad was watching eagerly, now or never. I slopped across, finding seaweed footholds, the silt was unforgiving, coating my tennis shoes, making them slippery for the rocks to come. Sharp, irregular, unpredictable. I crabbed and spidered up the leg-eating bank (decades of karate balance called upon). I reached the foundations of the QE II bridge.

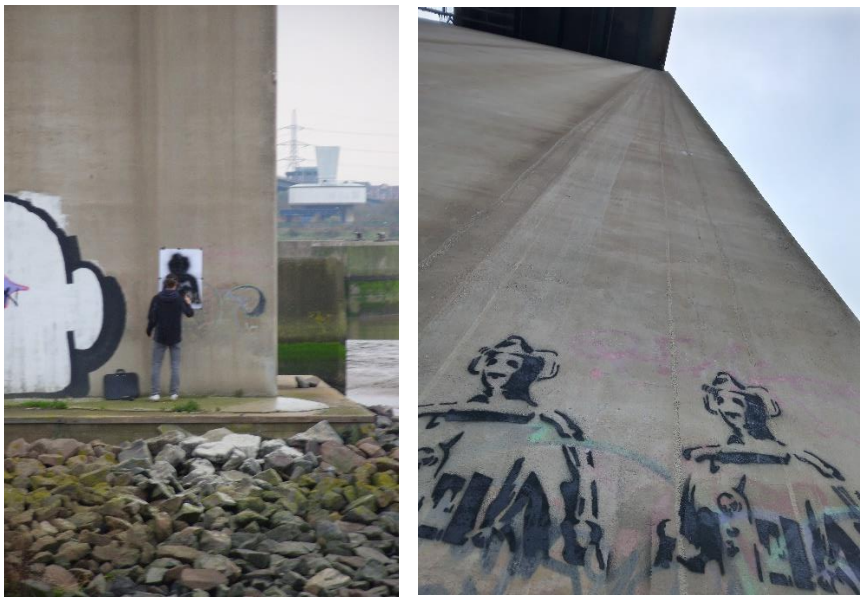

Figure 9: Richard and Ralph Overill (2020) *Rise of the cybermen*. Photographs

The concrete was rough, sandy; flecked with decades of silt and tide wash, but the tape stuck, the spray paint adhered. The Cybermen rose out of the Thames; one, two …spray can ran empty. I looked back to Thurrock and Dad observing, along with a teenage couple who had decided to watch this afternoon entertainment.

Figure 10: Richard Overill (2020) *Between*. Photograph

I realised I was truly between: an outland, a non-place, floating in the margin, I was under the skin of the dividing line. The sound of the unreachable traffic stretched down to me, distorted, alien. Tide coming in – how long had I been out here? Dr Who playing tricks again; time and space out of joint – Cyberman fossils found in 2020 under the M25. Make it back to the Essex shore.

Figure 11: Ralph Overill (2020) *Thames Cybermen*. Photograph

Walking home, the reflections came, the adventures were becoming increasingly risky, the stakes (like suspended concrete) rising higher. I felt like a Ballardian character – on a collision course with incident like the protagonist in *Crash*. I had fallen between the carriageways into an under-land reminiscent of *Concrete Island*. I had traversed an estuarine world, in the process of being subsumed by a primordial ooze, a *Drowned World*. Smithson would have been proud of how I conquered the rocks, dodged the tide, to apply my art. I imagined Sinclair treading alongside Dad and I, narrating another pedestrian adventure. The fictions drained away as I returned to locked-down suburbia – a landscape of quarantine and isolation: empty streets, lit curtains concealing jabbering television screens. The pandemic had highlighted a world as alienating as any of Ballard's novels – perhaps this was the point. From now on, maybe I was destined to practice in the peripheries: the margins were manifest.

Robots from a future passed

The format of *The QE II Bridge* allowed me to articulate the experience of the adventure more fully, enabling me to analyse the previously tacit connections growing between mind and landscape in my practice. While I had decided to bring the Cyberman stencil with me on the walk, the site of its application and the fictional

history around this intervention emerged during the event, as the Thames path encouraged a theme of temporal disruption to enter my writing. I recalled an episode of *Doctor Who* (*The invasion*, Camfield, 1967) first broadcast over 50 years ago, leading to my forming of a narrative where futuristic robots from the past were emerging from the river Thames to influence the present. The bleak, estuarine landscape of West Thurrock seemed to add to this dyschronia, as I experienced a loss of temporal awareness while under the bridge, to the point where the incoming tide threatened my return to shore. This confluence of past, present and future timelines, and my realisation of how the environment was affecting my thoughts and behaviour, led me to the research areas of hauntology and psycho-geography. The pandemic and ensuing government restrictions had threatened to limit my right to explore and create, propelling me into the spaces that fascinated me the most. At the same time, society's adoption of an increasingly virtualised existence of Wi-Fi-led interaction and entertainment had damaged my temporal perception and routines, leaving me to watch and re-watch my collection of horror and Sci-Fi movies at low-points through the days. These superficial, screen-bound creatures kept coming back to me – though a deeper monster, stirring at the inequalities I witnessed through lockdown, my disillusionment at seeing people fight over soap and toilet rolls on emptying shelves – still lay beneath, waiting for my research to address it.

Mark Fisher adopted hauntology (after Derrida) to describe the post-modernism of contemporary culture and its inability to escape the forms and models of previous eras: 'we live in a time when the past is present and the present is saturated with the past' (Fisher, 2013, p. 49). Initially, this notion struck a chord with my cinematic interests and the remembered Sci-Fi and horror films of my childhood. Movie monsters like Michael Myers, the Cybermen and Godzilla had persistently haunted my maturing art practice – the argument that these characters had become revenants of popular culture, destined to be continually resurrected or re-imagined through perpetual film releases, helped me understand my fascination with them. Additionally, the theory's interrogation of temporal and spatial dislocation appeared immediately useful to describe the peripheral zones I explored, and mirrored the instability and displacement I was feeling in the midst of a national lockdown. While Fisher's appropriation of hauntology helped me to contextualise my revival of dated *Doctor Who* villains, it was Ballard who instigated a paradigm shift in

psychogeographic concerns, as his writing began to explore the effect of suburban and hinterland areas on his fictional characters, the discipline slowly refocussed from the urban centres of London and Paris to the peripheries and Iain Sinclair's monumental trek around the M25.

Within my work the areas of hauntology and psychogeography are deeply entwined, as the disorientating effect of the Thames path and Dartford Crossing heavily contributes to the temporal instability of my experience. Iain Sinclair echoes this dislocation in his own reflections on the A282: 'In clouds. Above water. Between Essex and Kent. The one section of London's orbital motorway that is not acknowledged as the M25, different rules, different space-time continuum' (2004, p. 392). 'To drift through low cloud, through the harp strings of the suspension bridge, is to become a quotation; to see yourself from outside' (Sinclair, 2002, p. 46). Ballard's thoughts on the landscape of the road affirmed this temporal displacement: 'what you find out on the M25 and any sort of motorway zone is that there is no past, no future' (Ballard in Petit, 2002, 56:25). Smithson's tour of Passaic, New Jersey, revealed similar disjunctions between past and present as he noted derelict diggers on a construction site: 'extinct machines – mechanical dinosaurs stripped of their skin. On the edge of this prehistoric Machine Age were pre- and post-World War II suburban houses' (1967, p. 54). These artist and writers' fascination with peripheral zones and science fiction culture connects to my merging of silver-suited robots from a passed future, with the Brutalist architecture of the QE II Bridge and the desolate edge-lands of Essex. Smithson's practice seemed to pre-empt my concerns, fashioning the places that we both connected with, into a temporal void: 'sepulchral monuments, alien deserts, science fiction landscapes – served Smithson as he sought to picture the evacuation of time' (Barikin, 2018, p. 18).

The Dartford Crossing seemed a perfect location to facilitate my resurrection of BBC time travel narratives – as I started to read more widely around the subject, Stephen Prince informed me that hauntology is quintessentially British (2019) – by spray-painting onto the raw concrete stanchions, I was creating and adding to layers and surfaces that bridged between places (Essex and Kent) and timelines (past, present and forgotten futures) on this site. Criminologist Theo Kindynis explores the connection between hauntology and graffiti in a recent text (2019) noting the

physical, sedimentary layering of painted tags on frequently sprayed surfaces; as parts of layers are rubbed, peeled or cleaned away, remnants of past images and writing beneath return to re-exist with the present. As Mark Fisher notes, 'place is stained by time' (2012, p. 19). When I returned to review my Cybermen a few weeks later, they had been covered by a larger, more colourful and ambitious work of graffiti. My pair of *Doctor Who* villains were buried again – invisible, but present – much like a ghost that haunts a place, always with the potential to return. While I had partially contextualised and positioned this piece and my practice, there were still spaces to explore, times to travel – I had created a future that didn't happen – a sequel to *The invasion* of 1967 – a lost future? In my practice, the real monster hadn't awakened – the invasion hadn't happened yet – but it soon would…

The rise of the Cybermen

Upon reviewing the images of my spray-painted cybermen, I was left wanting a greater scale to the work – the stretching concrete surfaces of the QE II Bridge held much potential, like huge blank canvases. In the autumn before lockdown, I had visited two exhibitions: Mark Leckey's *O' magic power of bleakness* (September 2019 – January 2021, Tate Britain), where the artist illuminated a replica motorway bridge with reconstructed figures and events from his past, and Mark Bradford's *Cerberus* (October – December 2019, Hauser & Wirth), featuring a video documenting the projection of *Dancing in the streets* (Martha and the Vandellas, 1964) onto the back alleys of South Los Angeles from a moving van. Witnessing Leckey's 1990's track-suited teenage memories haunting the Tate galleries and viewing Bradford's experiment ripple across fencing and warehouses – ghosts of the past and social change haunting an industrial American landscape – I came to see projection as a way to develop the spectral traces and temporal layering of hauntology emerging in my practice: 'it's like recalling the spirit of that place, and at the same time inserting another history on top of it' (Bradford in Somers, 2019). With a battery-powered projector and enlisting the help of a professional photographer, Scott, I returned to the QE II Bridge on the evening of 27th December 2020, determined to see the ghosts of the Cybermen rise again.

Figure 12: Ralph Overill (2020) *Ghosts of the Cybermen*, Photographs: Scott Freeland

As our shivering fingers fumbled with the equipment, a spectral cyber-behemoth illuminated the tide-flecked pillar, rising 20 feet high from the primordial Thames silt. I had exhumed a monster, not only from the river, but from deep inside me, harbouring my reflections on a sick, quarantined world. With his mirrors placed in the Yucatan rainforests and his islands made from broken glass, projection seemed as much a part of Robert Smithson's practice as my own, and as I regarded my creation, fragments of his writing entered my mind: 'Space Age and Stone Age attitudes overlap to form the Zero-Zone, wherein the spaceman meets the brontosaurus in a Jurassic swamp on Mars' (Smithson, 1963, quoted in Barikin, McAuliffe and Melville, 2018, p. 25). I had found Ground Zero – a collision between road and river, past and future, monster and maker.

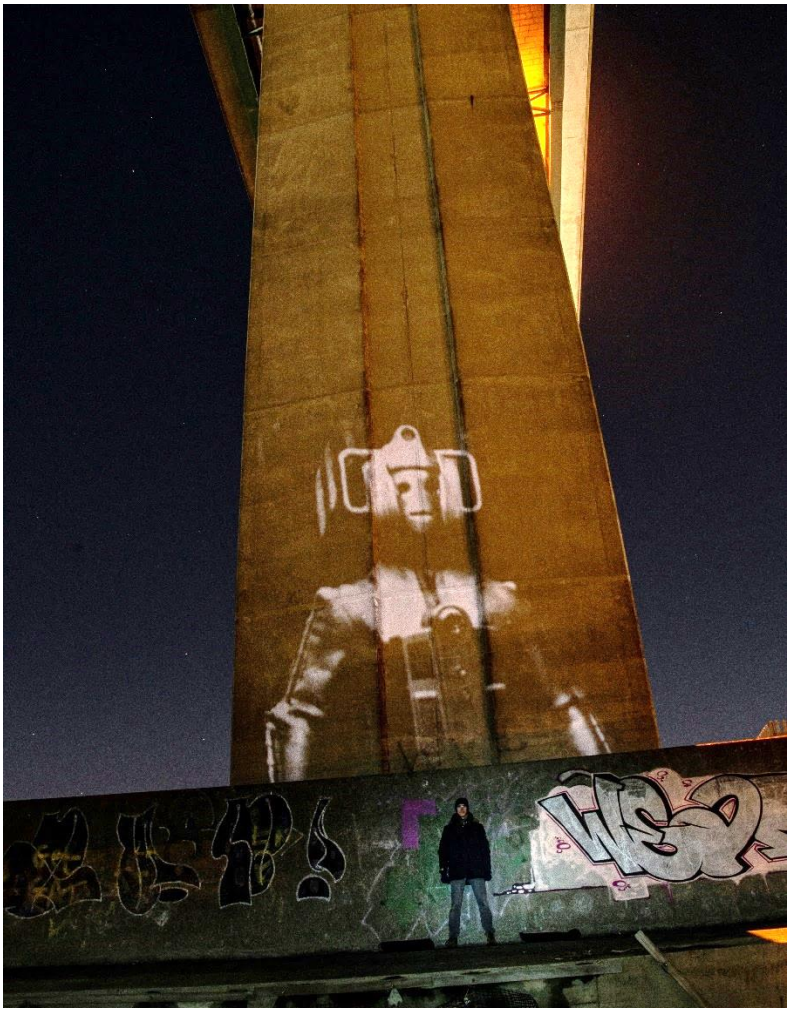

Figure 13: Ralph Overill (2020) *Ralph with Cyberman*, photograph: Scott Freeland

The Brutalist bridge supports seemed a perfect backdrop to my projection, and further research found that Stephen Prince argues how Brutalism evokes 'lost progressive futures and alternative pathways society may have taken rather than its real-world failures' (2019, p. 139). Compelled to read deeper into Mark Fisher's work, I understood that his hauntology aspired to re-discover these lost futures as a way to escape the all-consuming, ultimately unsatisfying and imprisoning late-capitalist way of life. His book *Capitalist realism*, 2009, notes that late-capitalist values have become so deeply embedded in our mindsets and lifestyles, that they have become the only imaginable way to govern society: 'it's easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism' (Fisher, 2009, p. 1). The Cyberman – predominantly light-skinned and male, focussed on hostile takeovers and efficiency – became a monster that reflected everything I felt was wrong with contemporary society: the emotionless,

immovable mouth, dead eyes shedding a pre-implanted tear for the poor, shiny and smooth in appearance (new gloss over old, tired ideas) upgradable, replicable, disposable – the Cyberman is every politician, manager, CEO; reading empty promises from the script to placate the crowd, keep the power. Iain Sinclair seemed to agree in his description of New Labour's Trade and Industry secretary, Stephen Byers: 'a panicked automaton, a top-of-the-range cryogenic model of the public servant' (2002, p. 64). I finally had an avatar through which to depict my frustrations and disillusionment at the rampant business ontology and inequality in our society. My fleeting projections onto the supports of a road opened by Margaret Thatcher in 1986 represented the continual haunting of damaging, power-hungry governments, and their suppressing and burying of alternative, now lost, futures – 'the spectre of a world which could be free' (Fisher, 2018, p. 753). The Cyberman had become a vessel which projected my frustrations and anxieties of contemporary society – pandemic included – onto the structures and surfaces that strain under its continually growing pressures: repeated episodes and cycles of under-funded health, transport and education systems, under the umbrella of an ever-growing abyss between the most privileged and most vulnerable in society. Hauntology, for me, became like Sinclair's London orbital road – cultural debris and remnants of our concerns spiralling and colliding around a clapped-out core – there will always be another pandemic, new variant, the next climate crisis, housing shortage; just wait for it to come around again. Like the abandoned asylums that mark the perimeter of the M25, the margins bring us not only to the edge of landscape, but of psyche and memory – the brink of sanity – where monsters are made. Hauntology is the promise of monsters; both individually, and as a society, we are forever destined to be haunted by the recycled ghosts of our anxieties, insecurities and failings, 'the spectre is the future – it is always to come' (Derrida, 1994, p. 39).

Reflection on this work returned me to psychogeography and the importance of walking – there is no road access to the foundations of the Dartford Crossing, Scott and I had walked for miles along the Thames river path, with only torches and the residual light from surrounding factories for guidance. Guy Debord had employed psycho-geographic tactics to protest against the rising consumerism and commodification in 1950s Paris: 'walking is seen as contrary to the spirit of the modern city with its promotion of swift circulation and the street-level gaze that

walking requires allows one to challenge the official representation of the city by cutting across established routes and exploring those marginal and forgotten areas' (Coverley, 2006, p. 12). From protest marches to investigative wanderings, walking could be viewed as political act: 'a bodily demonstration of political or cultural conviction and one of the most universally available forms of public expression' (Solnit, 2001, p. 217). Sinclair's written records of his roaming through his home city (see *The last London*, 2017) would often criticise the capital's ineffectual governance, scathing both Thatcherite, New Labour and preceding systems. Though I found it easy to agree with these complaints, my practice was at odds with this focus and politicising of the city – I was a psychogeographer of Ballard's edge-lands – and while Debord's aspirations for the Situationist International had largely petered out, my Smithson-inspired practice of spray-painting and projecting was doing more than just experiencing and recording the landscape. These peripheries and their Brutalist surfaces offered blank canvases of raw concrete – space to project ideas onto (space that would be populated, monitored and policed in the city) – by embellishing the margins of Thurrock with Cybermen, I was both depicting and bringing attention to the crippling matrix of capitalist realism, while also demonstrating that things don't have to stay the same – in the margins, lost futures can still be found, there are still potentials and possibilities: space can be changed. 'The tiniest event can tear a hole in the grey curtain of reaction which has marked the horizons of possibility under capitalist realism. From a situation in which nothing can happen, suddenly anything is possible again' (Fisher, 2009, p. 81).

Figure 14: Ralph Overill (2021) *Cyber bridge*, photograph.

Conclusions:

Changing space

The pandemic became a catalyst for change in my research, compelling me out of the studio and into the peripheries, where I was forced to confront and question the deeper monsters driving my practice. By conquering the QE II Bridge with a giant Cyberman, I was able to understand its Brutalist surfaces and connect both site and robot to Mark Fisher's writing. Through the development of my research, I came to understand hauntology as the stuttering of a monstrous late-capitalist system, and psychogeography as a way of connecting with and reclaiming the spaces it threatens to engulf. Being present in landscapes at our peripheries enables and encourages us to think more freely, allowing memories and imaginations to emerge and be projected onto these desolate, bleak non-places. The Dartford Crossing became a bridge not only between Essex and Kent, but to the edges of my psyche and my forgotten hopes and fears – the lost futures of hauntology. Thinking of mine and Scott's stumbling walk through the raw winter darkness of the Thames path, it was only through being lost, displaced in this undefinable hinterland that the greater potentials of what I was doing revealed themselves. As Ballard reflected on his own literary investigations of the perimeter: 'That's the message of my fiction. We need to explore total alienation and find what lies beyond. The secret module that underpins who we are and our imaginative remaking of ourselves that we all embrace' (Ballard in Sinclair, 2002, p. 269). I now think of the margins as sites of potential: somewhere (or nowhere) where something can happen. I continue to walk this space because it is still space: room to remember, to dream, to change.

The last Cyberman

Exhuming the fragments of these *Doctor Who* villains, buried deep in the VHS recesses of my childhood, allowed a new breed of monster to enter my research: quintessentially hauntological in their originating from a British future-passed and their metaphorical connections to late-capitalist politics, the Cybermen have revealed and expressed my frustrations with profit-driven greed and consumerism – from my inability to integrate with the virtual learning platforms induced through the COVID-19 lockdowns, to my questioning of the business ontology adopted by educational

institutions and my dismay at the growing financial inequalities in our society. They have become the avatar that allows me to foster political considerations in my work, developing my understanding of hauntology and psychogeography, and the connections between the two. As I enter the final year of my research degree, I plan to embark on a project that pushes these themes further, imagining an unrealised future where late-capitalism and the reign of the Cybermen has collapsed, leaving only the voids of the margins, inhabited by vagrants and outsiders, defiant of capitalist culture. In a development of my relationship to the monster, I will embody the sole surviving Cyberman (complete with home-made cyber-suit) who must traverse these spaces of imagination and alienation, in an attempt to realise a purpose for his existence. Busy constructing my armour from bottle-tops and silver spray-paint, I am unsure what this imagined future holds, though with another trip planned down the Thames river path, the Cyberman may rise from the QE II Bridge one last time.

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Appendix 4:

Terminus: an A127 walk

Sunday 21st March 2021:

Miles merge into decades. Time and distance in a contraflow across dual carriageways. The silver Hyundai reaches top gear.

February 2001:

Gallows Corner, where the A127's segmented body is raised into the sky. Dad peeps the horn as he drives past. What was I doing here? Temporal amnesia. I turn my back on the flyover and walk towards the sea.

Ardleigh Green Road: the primary colours of retail give way to the green-grey of the carriageway. My bag clinks with spray cans. Cameras heavy around my neck – a noose as I walk from the gallows.

Wingletye Lane: a car limps passed with a flat tyre, hazards flashing. Heat in my left knee – friction under the patella. The landscape seems marooned in a Sunday morning stasis, open to possibility. Friday night's film (9pm Freeview Channel 31) *The terminator*, James Cameron (1984). Arnold Schwarzenegger – the ultimate revenant: *Conan the barbarian* (1982) to *Terminator: dark fate* (2019) – 'I'll be back.' Degradation through the sequels; aging Austrian flesh over chromium skeleton (apply 3-in-1 oil to shoulders before press-ups).

Cranham: squirrels dart amongst the fly-tipping and shredded plastic. The traffic is close – I feel each vehicle as it hurries past.

Traffic cones and hubcaps smashed into oblivion: the M25 junction. The roundabout houses a cathedral of Brutalist pillars – what is worshipped here? – past or future? I spray a terminator (T800 model) on the support closest to the carriageway. 3 stencils – silver, black, then red; time-travelling cyborg assassin – preprogramed mission: change 1984, save 2027 – it grins at the road, presiding over the tarmac timeline.

I fight through some bushes to empty my stinging bladder (always worse in the morning). Concrete obelisk, rusted engine, discarded cassette player, abandoned calculator: a technological dystopia, from the past or the future. The T800 haunts here too.

I cross over at Upminster, push on into the wind, against the traffic, against the temporal tide gravitating towards London. Memories of countless 5pm journeys: gridlocked traffic inching up the Southend Arterial Road – the city didn't let its workers leave without resistance – the attritional drag of the commuter belt. Southend was a timeless place – the capital had drained it dry – a desert by the sea.

Memory bubbles up: hulking piles appear on the horizon, mounds of stiff hides and flanks. Grotesque funeral pyres solemnly smoking. I remember my mission: my spray-painted T800 reflecting back at me. I was the terminator. Sent back from a Billericay, twenty years in the future, to identify the abattoir, isolate the infection. Prevent foot and mouth disease. Dad's time machine was old (clutch recently replaced) we had overshot Warley, arriving in a Romford carpark. Through my disorientation I was retracing the route – approaching Little Warley Hall Lane.

I left the thundering carriageway, now dense with morning traffic: single track road, muddied edge. Past St. Peter's church (wonky gravestones flecked with lichen). Farmyard machinery: corroded hydraulics and pistons – poised to manoeuvre livestock cadavers. 4th or 5th left: Cheale Meats (no sign) wide entrance: metal edges, set back from the road.

PRIVATE PROPERTY Trespassers will be prosecuted

24 HOUR CCTV IN OPERATION

Teal warehouses 100ft away, protected by a multitude of barriers and security cameras. Unreachable. I jump a ditch, press against a fence, shoot my cameras. What happens to tomorrow if you photograph yesterday? Can we really stop the future? Alter the past, change something to come. Like tearing a cell of film and watching it travel towards the reels of the projector. If I spray my stencil at Halfway House, what happens at Rayleigh Weir? Temporal ripples rolling up the road – if I cross over and walk back to the M25 does Southend disappear?

Back on the A127. Hot twinges from my knee again (inflamed cartilage) right hip aching due to compensation. Musculo-skeletal deterioration – got to make it to the extraction point at Dunton Road. Chevrons and asphalt stretch to journey's end… world's end… Southend.

The piano in the front room at my parents' house: brown carpet, cobwebs on wallpaper, stacks of CDs. My father's fingers (loose skin, skeletal) my Mother's chair (extra cushions, full-time hot water bottle). Marfan's Syndrome, Arthritis – eroded joints like charred hooves – bionic knees marching up the A127 – bone on bone, Foot and Mouth. If you photograph yesterday it can come back to haunt tomorrow – watch the paper fog, edges crease, image fade: time's debt is always paid.

The bridge at Halfway House commands the horizon. I duck under it – use the shade to change the film in my Ilford Sportsman camera. Time hovers, windmills – a vortex in the centre of the A128 roundabout. The terminator raises his triple-layered head once more (stencils tearing, ink dripping).

Trees give way to expanses of fields and broken fencing. My left knee and foot are unbalanced – I fall onto them with every step (ligaments burning like cauterised horse legs). Dunton half a mile away – reduce speed, switch on hazard lights.

My voice: soundwaves lapping between junctions – distorted by traffic, degraded by time – memories of futures which haven't happened yet.

Reach the slip road, climb the steps.

Disintegrating into temporal noise, overwritten by a lost apocalypse.

Spot the Hyundai, open passenger door (wet stencil on back seat).

The terminator holds its grin as it is crushed by a lorry under the Dunton interchange (red light fades from hollow eyes). Mum's glaucoma: vision withdrawing into fog – a haze of exhaust fumes over the A127.

Arthritic joints seize into vanishing points.

Dad's fingers on the steering wheel.

The piano at my parent's house.

I'll be back.

Video slideshow with audio available to watch online at:

https://vimeo.com/639148186/e4b6c72ccf

Appendix 5:

Research Internship Report

Edinburgh Printmakers, 16th–21st March 2020

Searching for the Green Man

The Green Man public house sign, Toot Hill, Essex [video still]

Introduction

With generous funding from the UEL Graduate School I was enabled to undertake a placement at Edinburgh Printmakers, a printmaking studio with world-class equipment and facilities serving a professional and diverse artistic community. The project I had devised, 'Searching for the Green Man', forms part of my larger doctoral research project, 'Monsters and Margins', which I am developing in my continuing study on the Professional Doctorate in Fine Art Programme (2017-2022). The concerns in this mini project grew organically from my practice-based research and bridge across the subjects of folk-horror, rural landscape, the mechanically reproduced image and childhood memory. Alongside having access to the time and

facilities to produce a number of ambitious practical experiments and outcomes, I hoped to collaborate, share good practice and my research with the skilled technical staff and artistic community that orbit the studio. In my employment as a printmaking technician, having the opportunity to work alongside master printers and experience how such a studio is run and managed is invaluable to updating my industry skills and enhancing my employability for the future.

The rural, remembered

The catalyst for this project was the recent resurfacing of my childhood memories of weekend car journeys with my father. Having relocated from Epping to Billericay after my birth, my parents, who were Quaker attenders, continued to travel to their original Quaker Meeting House in Epping every Sunday to attend services. This journey across Essex was embraced by my father, who having been raised on a farm, sought the rural views of woodland, villages and fields from the country back roads, through which he devised his route. Even when my mother's arthritis became too severe for her to join us, dad would still take me on this weekly pilgrimage, enthusiastically pointing out the pubs, windmills and churches to me as we passed. Once I was old enough – maybe 7 or 8 (1993/4) we began to stop at these points of interest: Greensted church or The Green Man public house at Toot Hill, to explore the history – the folk – that surrounded them. Though I remember nothing of the Quaker meetings, these weekly adventures into the rural margins of my childhood have stuck in my memory. I vividly recall my first imaginings of the green man – too young to understand him as a mythical figure of the forest and a remnant of the ancient Pagan beliefs that preceded Christianity in this country – I visualised a towering leafy behemoth hulking between golden fields, very similar to the Jolly Green Giant printed on the labels of sweetcorn cans. Needless to say, this mysterious figure captivated my imagination and now, 25 years later, is forming an important part of my research.

My first imaginings of the green man

Prior to travelling to Edinburgh, I arranged with my father to spend one weekend afternoon (22nd February 2020) roughly retracing the journey we used to take. Where we would stop and what I would record on my video camera would be unrehearsed allowing a degree of spontaneity to proceedings. Dad's route took us from Billericay, through Mountnessing, Stondon Massey and Chipping Ongar, stopping to rediscover Greensted church before heading on to Toot Hill and a pit stop at The Green Man pub. On the way back we stopped in St. Giles church, Mountnessing in search of a secluded green man carving and finally detoured through the village of Herongate to view a second Green Man pub. I filmed sporadically, imagining I was making some sort of documentary, as if my camera was a crude mechanical memory device – Chris Marker's *Sunless* (1983) has undoubtedly had an influence on my work. My rough plan was to use stills from this footage as my starting point, letting the mechanical reproduction of printmaking processes reduce, distort and forget the images; Walter Benjamin speaks of an aura of loss around images reproduced in old-fashioned or out-dated media, 'the superseded technology continues to bring traces of the past into the present' (Humphries, 2018). This is something I planned to exploit by using primitive screen-printing techniques to add a remembered melancholy and haunting aesthetic to the outcomes.

Dad driving [video still]

detail of paper stencil screen-print

Between terror and melancholy

Mixing with this reverie was a constant input of horror films – something which I have always had a curiosity for and watch regularly. My odd adventures to the rural seemed to organically merge with examples of the folk-horror genre. The morbid medieval carving that decorates Greensted church recalled the uneasy, ominous atmosphere of Edward Woodward's exploits in *The Wickerman* (Hardy, 1973), while being engulfed by overhanging trees as the road corkscrews down into darkness just outside of Toot Hill – a stretch my dad refers to as 'the dingley dell' after Charles Dickens' *Pickwick Papers* (1836) – is reminiscent of the foreboding forest that hides a bloodthirsty primordial deity in *The Ritual* (Bruckner, 2017). This growing brood of films play on our primitive fear of the rural and what lurks beyond the known paths and streetlights. They explore themes of isolation in the landscape, the skewed morals and beliefs of those who reside there and the exhuming or summoning of something ancient, primordial and dangerous (Paciorek, 2018). My research into folk-horror has learnt that it is intangible, hard to categorise or contain: 'like the mist, Folk Horror is atmospheric and sinuous. It can creep from and into different territories yet leave no universal defining mark of its exact form' (Paciorek, 2018, p. 12). This understanding allowed me to create a shifting, malleable idea of the green man from fragments of my childhood memories: the jolly green giant of the sweetcorn can, the weathered pub sign at Toot Hill and the eerie stone face carved into the central pillar inside St. Giles church, fixing its hollow eyes on all who enter. Ultimately, I had to find my own green man – what did I fear when darkness fell over the woods and lanes I grew up exploring? What visage did my horror-film-scarred

imagination summon as I glanced between the passing trees as I rushed home to safety?

Eagle lectern, Greensted Church [video still]

The ‘dingley dell’ just outside Toot Hill, Essex [video still]

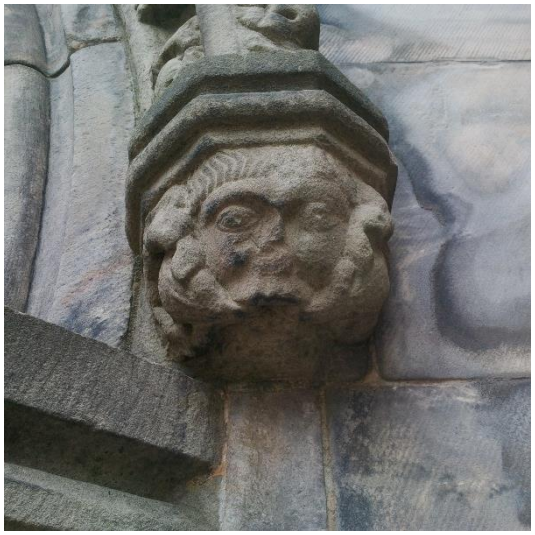
The studio

Edinburgh Printmakers welcomed me on Tuesday 17th March with the news that they had decided to close the studio at 6pm on Friday 20th March (due to the current COVID-19 pandemic). Whilst this cut my studio time in half, it focussed my creative energy into making the most of the time I had. The print studio was almost empty every day I was there as the country began to shut down and self-isolate – I had lots of space and the ability to work fast and fluidly through the screen-printing process. Prior to the visit, I had also arranged to refresh my skills in stone lithography – my weakest printing process – but knew that this would now not be possible. In those 3 and-a-half days I spent a total of 36 hours at the screen-printing table, completing the 3 practical experiments / outcomes I had planned to do over the two weeks. Leaving the studio Friday evening, the experience felt like a success – I only knew that I had missed the opportunity to share good practice and network with fellow artists and technicians as the studio had been unnaturally quiet and the staff were running a skeleton crew, this was not down to poor organisation, communication or design of the project but just unfortunate coincidence.

The screen-print area at Edinburgh Printmakers

Edinburgh

By Wednesday 18th March all the sites of interest I had planned to visit, including Rosslyn Chapel where there are at least 40 green man carvings, had unfortunately closed to the public. Before my train home on Saturday 21st March, I had half a day to walk around the Old Town of the city – now eerily deserted to the point that I began to imagine myself starring in a sequel to Danny Boyle's *28 days later* (2002) – and take in the historic architecture of the cathedrals, churches and castle. On a few of these I spotted potential green men, carved innocuously into the nooks and crannies of side doors and corner stones. One – a bulbous face with foliage sprouting from each side of his mouth, was within reach, allowing me to take a rubbing of him (a process I had used to capture the green man at Mountnessing's St. Giles Church in Outcome 3). Pleased with the result – something I will use for a future piece of work – I scrambled around the building's exterior searching for an identifying mark. A strange coincidence confronted me: 'St. Giles Cathedral, Edinburgh'.



Green man carving, St. Giles Cathedral, Edinburgh

Possible green man, St. Cuthbert Church, Edinburgh

Practical experiments / research outcomes

1. Billboards

Using stills from my video footage, I made 3 paper-stencil screen-prints, each 150cm wide by 90cm high, printed on polycotton fabric. The idea for the series came to me after watching *Three billboards outside Ebbing, Missouri* (McDonagh, 2017). Witnessing the degrading mental state of this film's characters in relation to a stretch of highway bearing a triptych of large signs, I began to think of the mind as a road or passage onto which memories take the form of screens and images at its verges that are passed, glimpsed or crashed into. The large scale and strong colour of the works gives them, I hope, a physical presence – images with hard edges and substance that can counter the fluid motion of memory with some viscosity, stickiness. I chose to employ the relatively primitive paper-stencil process at such a large scale with the aim to introduce a 'material forgetting' to the image; after printing out each video still at necessary size, tracing paper was laid on top and I proceeded to map out the essential shapes and tones of the image in pencil, taking time to consider the overlaps of my chosen colour palette (cyan onto magenta makes purple, cyan onto yellow makes green etc.). By creating 2 overlaying stencils for an image I could create 3 colours. These shapes were transposed onto newsprint and then cut out using a scalpel (where the paper is removed ink will be let through), before being

placed under a fine mesh screen and ink forced through onto my fabric beneath. At every stage some information from the original was lost or distorted, leaving visuals that evoke old memories, warped and simplified by the process of remembering. In *Sunless* (Marker, 1983) the artist uses a video synthesiser to filter some of the footage, this quickly redundant technology allows an 'audio-visual memory to haunt the film's surfaces and images' (Chamarette, 2012, p.100) something I hope my bold, brightly coloured, overlaying stencils can relate to.

Billboard 2: *The Dingley Dell*, state proof [screen-print]

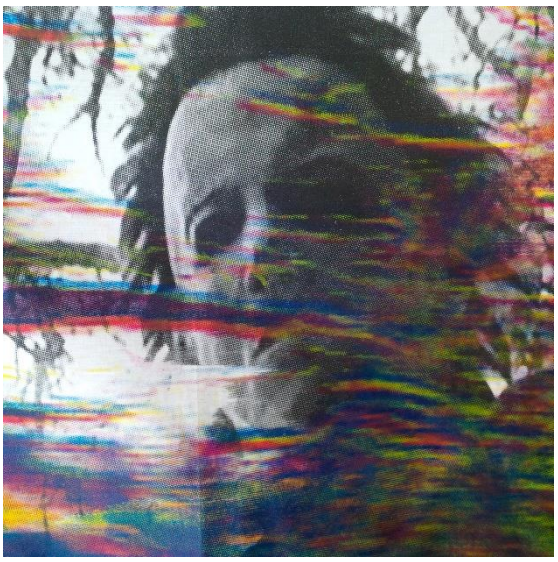
Example of paper stencil used for screen-prints

2. Green Man Passing

Tracing back my childhood fears led me to the pale-masked, boiler-suited Shape, aka Michael Myers, of John Carpenter's *Halloween* (1978). Remembering that I used to sneak downstairs late at night to watch or tape trashy horror films in my early teens, the first I 'owned' on my parents' recordable VHS and remember viewing was *Halloween 6: the curse of Michael Myers* (Chappelle, 1995). A scene from this film had lodged itself in my memory and I proceeded to track down a still. The aim of this piece was to evoke the childhood imagination and fear in the construction of my personal green man – what haunted my mind's eye as I stared out of dad's smelly 1976 Volkswagen Golf as we rattled past the fringes of Epping forest on darkening Sunday afternoons? I reverted to a photo-stencil process to put this image onto a silk

screen – giving the work an immediacy and coarseness reminiscent of Andy Warhol's *Death and disaster* canvases. Indeed, like in much of Warhol's prints, I employed a lateral repeating of the screen onto 5 meters of canvas creating a stuttering rhythm of images, each slightly different to the previous as the ink being repeatedly forced through the mesh dried or ran out. Working in this way leaves a trace of motion in each print from the stencil – tears and streaks evoking glimpses from a moving vehicle. I overlaid this print with an image taken from the car window as my father and I approached Greensted church. The motion-blurred branches and leaves created a rural screen through which the dead eyes of Michael peered. I repeatedly printed this passing shot over my green man – first in yellow, then magenta, then cyan – allowing the merger and mis-registration of the colours and details to obscure my primal fear beneath. This piece has echoes of the uncanny within it – the eyeless masked face, the repeating return of childhood fears and the screening of past memories – Julia Kristeva writes that 'uncanniness occurs when the boundaries between imagination and reality are erased […] a crumbling of conscious defences, resulting from the conflicts the self experiences with an other' (1991, p. 188). In this work, the green man is one such other – sewn together from fragments of remembered horror films and woodland glimpses – I believe the mysticism of the rural landscape itself also plays its part in the creation of these fears; 'a strange land of borders and otherness ceaselessly constructed and deconstructed' (1991, p. 191).

Green Man Passing, work in progress



Green Man Passing, screen-print [detail]

3. Searching for the Green Man

Before leaving for Edinburgh, I got permission from St. Giles church, Mountnessing, to take a rubbing of the green man carved into an interior pillar in the centre of the building. As with most green men – the stone mason's tended to hide them from plain sight – this was hard to reach and I stretched, standing on one of the pews to apply a sheet of paper and crayon to its lumpy form. With my hands high above my head, I could not see what I was doing and had to rely on touch – my fingers groped clumsily around the stone face, one hand attempting to press the thin paper into the nooks and crannies of the relief, the other fumbling a crayon over the scrunched paper. First, I dropped the crayon, then it broke in half – I took 4 attempts blindly taking the rubbing – and when I regarded these, this struggle, this *searching* could be seen in the work. These tatty A4 pages had the ability to communicate my project – my searching for the green man.

Green man carving, St. Giles Church, Mountnessing

Rubbing 2 of 4 taken from carving

The small edition I screen-printed on my last day at Edinburgh Printmakers comprised of this series of rubbings, digitally amalgamated in Photoshop to create a whole, yet oddly vacant face. On 24 x 24cm Somerset satin 300g paper in variable edition of 12, this work much more closely resembles the work of a printmaking practitioner (I had originally planned to make this work as a stone lithograph, eager to see if the image's re-connection to stone could bring something through the process). However, despite its polite scale and fumbling execution, this print seems to encapsulate a quieter, more reflective side to memory; Walter Benjamin writes 'he who has once begun to open the fan of

memory never comes to the end of its segments; no image satisfies him, for he has seen that it can be unfolded, and only in its folds does the truth reside' (1986, p. 6). I feel that there is some truth grasped in the folding paper I crumpled into that stone face on a cold Sunday morning, something found by my clumsy, scribbling crayon. The green man is many things, much like the folk horror that surrounds it; from remembered journeys to movie monsters, sweetcorn mascots and old pub signs – but when it is grasped, felt, seemingly captured, it still slips from our touch, it still only half-appears. Glimpsed not seen, it only gives away as much as it wants to. Searching for the green man is resigning oneself to never really finding the green man, but the adventure can lead to many memories and imaginings – happy, melancholic, horrific – and ultimately much engaging and progressive work.

Acknowledgements

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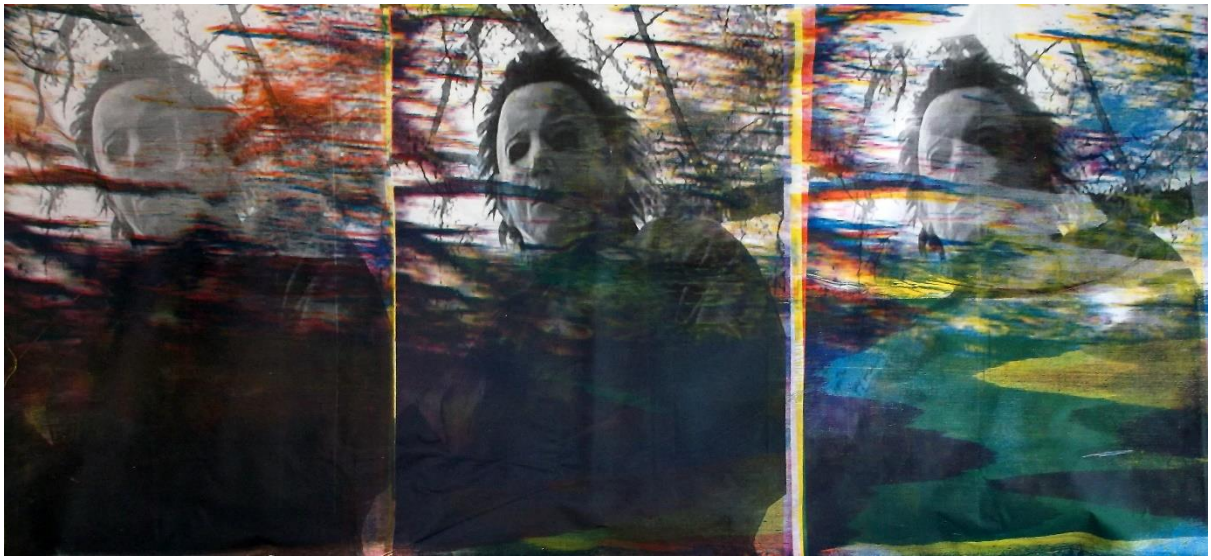
Appendix of research outcomes

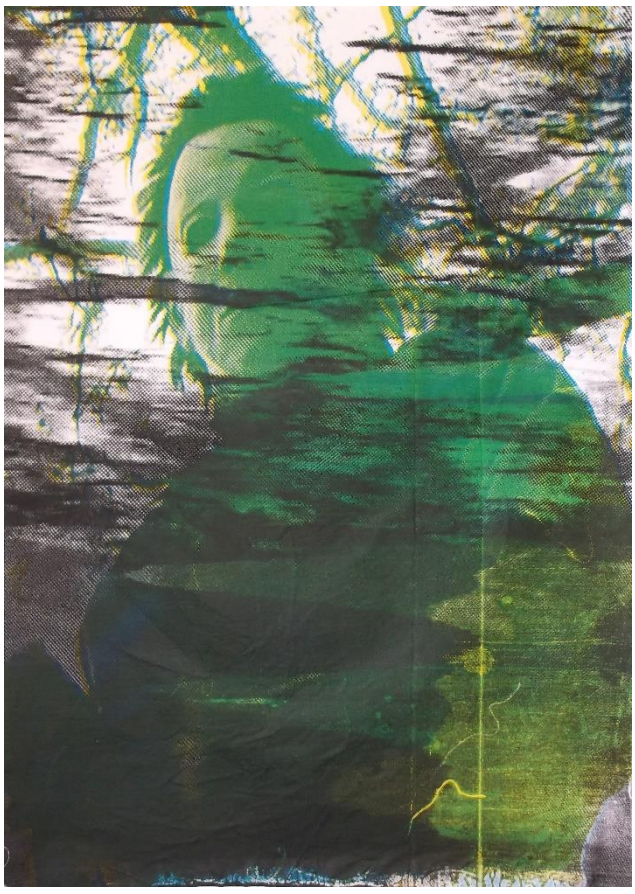
Billboard 1: *Dad Driving* (2020) screen-print on polycotton, 90cm x 150cm

Billboard 2: *The Dingley Dell* (2020) screen-print on polycotton, 90cm x 150cm

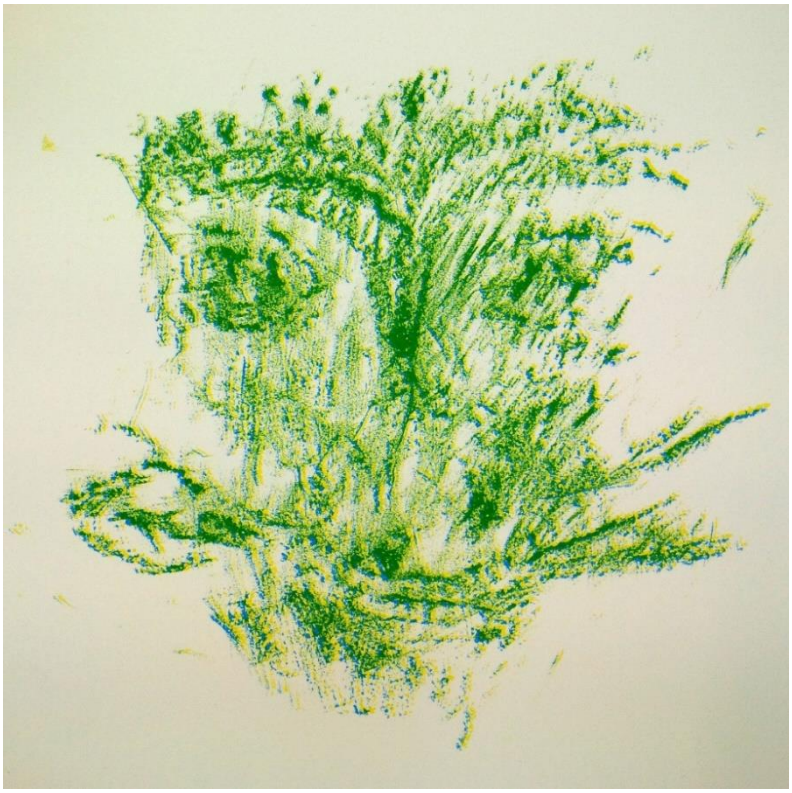
Billboard 3: *Greensted Remembered* (2020) screen-print on polycotton, 90cm x 150cm



Green Man Passing (2020) [detail] screen-print on polycotton, 110cm x 500cm



Green Mike (2020) screen-print on polycotton, 70cm x 100cm



Searching for the Green Man (2020) screen-print on Somerset Satin paper, 24cm x 24cm, edition of 12

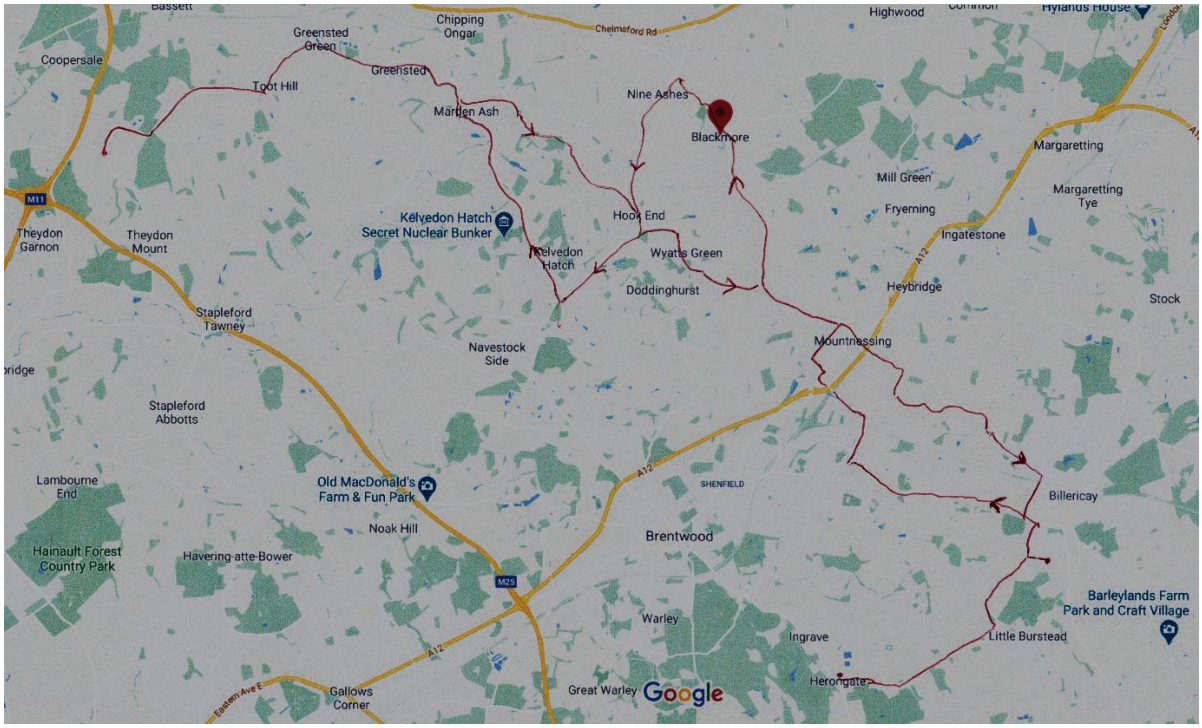
Rubbing 1: St. Giles Church, Mountnessing

Rubbing 2: St. Giles Church, Mountnessing

Rubbing 3: St. Giles Church, Mountnessing

Rubbing 4: St. Giles Church, Mountnessing

Searching for the green man (2020) time-based: 8min 36sec. Available at https://vimeo.com/405002035



Map of journey taken on Saturday 22nd February 2020