

**'SEVEN SISTERS' solo exhibition by Crow Dillon-Parkin
Stryx, Minerva Works, Birmingham
17-19 November 2023**



Left to right: 'Frida Kahlo in Temple Fortune – diptych: Millstone Grit (The Broken Column) and The Red Flag (Tree of Hope Stand Firm)' 2017 (Acrylic paint and drawing ink on paper, collage and gold ink on wooden frames, 34 x 24 cm each); 'Women Artists Are The Best Artists' 2019 (Printed cotton vest, UK women's size 14); 'Post-Fusion Document: Part I Codeine Diaries' 2023 (Black and white collages printed on A4 silver inkjet paper, plastic laminate, set of 15, each 30x 21.5cm each)

After my first spinal fusion operation I made small versions of Frida Kahlo's 'The Broken Column' and 'Tree of Hope Stand Firm', using more of a comic-book line art approach that I then coloured in with paint, with myself in place of Kahlo. I had been working on some very large-scale drawings before the operation, but I had to stay off ladders while I recuperated.

In the spring of 2018, I had a discussion with fellow Euroart Studios artist Donna Riddington about some great exhibitions by women artists we had seen. I half-jokingly said 'that's because women artists are the best artists' and then I said that I should get a tattoo of it as a reminder. Long story short, I did. I designed it myself and it was inked onto the inside of my right wrist by Barbara Nobody in April 2018. This tattoo is my Barbara Kruger tribute, so it was an amazing coincidence that my tattooist was also called Barbara. It became a limited-edition enamel badge in early 2019 (I still have about a hundred left so let me know if you want to buy one).

The Mary Kelly-inspired 'Post-Fusion Document' was really easy to physically put together because it had been in my mind since about 2017, and I had loads of source material available. The 'Post Partum Document' series that this piece is based on was made of resin somehow printed on slates, presented in Perspex cases but I had neither the budget nor the technical capabilities, so I went with inkjet prints and laminator pouches. I felt like a Poundland Mary Kelly, but I was very happy because the finished article looked how it had in my mind, and even I was impressed with how it looked 'out in the world'. Another piece that is very hard to photograph because of its reflective components and also the size of it.



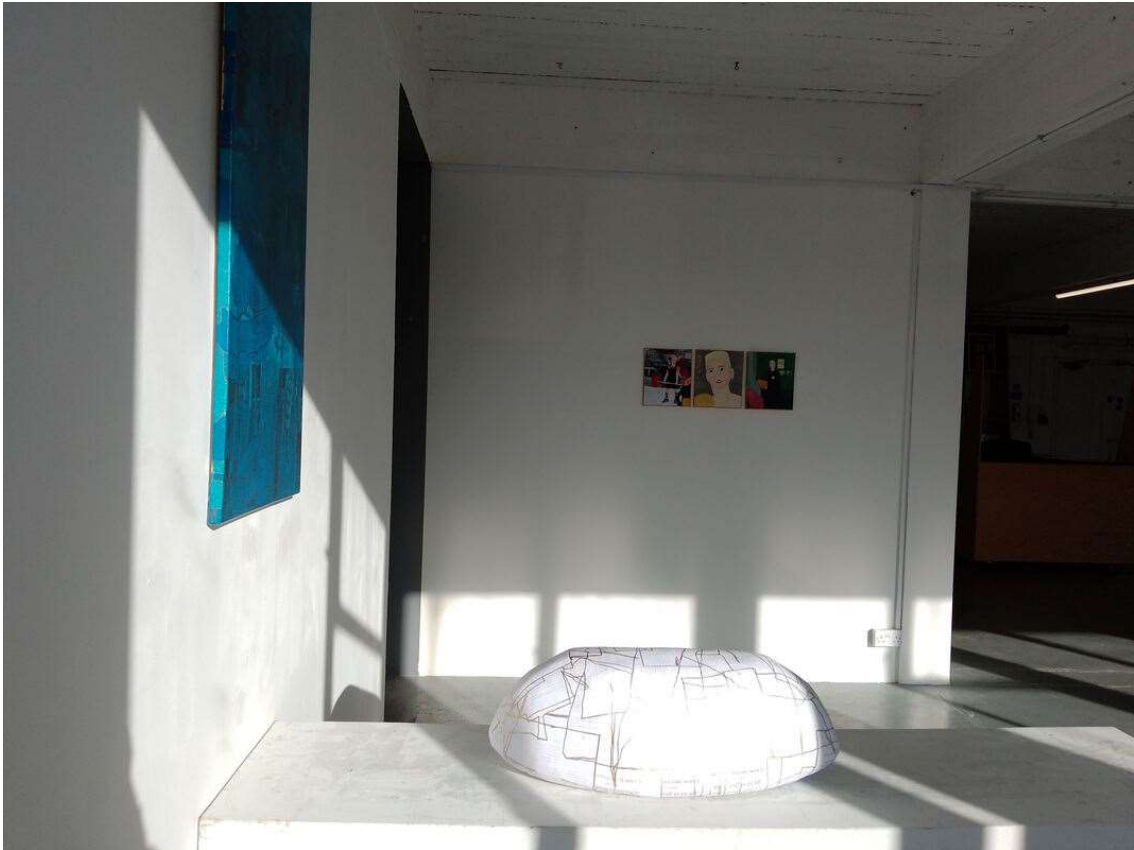
Left to right: 'Carcass' 2017-2023 (collaged index cards, assorted personal and medical paperwork, and gold ink, 30 x 20 x 20cm); 'Mutability' 2017 (collage, tissue and gold ink on canvas, 160 x 60cm); 'Millstone Grit (The Broken Column)' 2018 (acrylic paint and marker pen on Fabriano paper, 250 x 150cm); 'Red Flag (Tree of Hope Stand Firm)' 2018 (acrylic paint and marker pen on Fabriano paper, 250 x 150cm)

'Carcass' is a still ongoing work made of all the paperwork that I had accumulated up to that point in my life - an inaccessible archive of data I had collected about myself and projects I had worked on. Everything is in there, everything is safe, but you can only read the top layer. It will be finished when it gets to 163cm long (my height). In 'Mutability' I use layers of medical imagery and my own medical scans and X-rays to process my experience of having emergency lumbar fusion surgery in December 2015. The tissue acts as a skin over the top and the gold lines stitch everything back together in a kind of kintsugi style. These two pieces are massively influenced by the work of Helen Chadwick, my multidisciplinary heroine.

I made this large-scale version of Frida Kahlo's 'The Broken Column' when I could no longer draw accurately at small scale, due to nerve compression in my neck. The landscape behind me is based on the Yorkshire Tea packaging's idealised version of my home county. Millstone grit is the local stone. The break in the column is where my own spine was broken.

This second Frida Kahlo tribute shows me face down on the operating table having my spine bolted back together. The landscape is another version of Yorkshire, with flat-topped slag heaps instead of Frida's Mexican mountains and coal beneath the earth. I am wearing mill workers

clothing and wooden dancing clogs. My red flag is partly a symbol of my misdiagnosed cauda equina syndrome, and partly a nod to my Communist paternal grandfather (killed in a mining accident). My other hand holds my 'grabber', an invaluable tool during my recovery from surgery.



Top left to right: 'Mutability' 2017; 'Carcass' 2017-2023; 'Girl Lifting' 2023, 'Girl With A Baby' 2023, 'Girl Tweeting' 2019, (Acrylic paint and metallic paste on canvas, 30 x 25 cm each)
I first learned about Gwen John from a Sunday Times or Observer article in the 1970s, I haven't been able to track it down, but I think it was in the mid to late 1970s. I was intrigued because she looked like me (in a photo of her in her late teens) and her painting was almost otherworldly. I saw a couple of paintings at the Tate Gallery on a school trip in the late 1970s and I couldn't

believe how powerful such small works could be. Then there was an exhibition at the Barbican in 1985 – Gwen John: An Interior Life – that was absolutely breath-taking, I didn't want to leave. How did she do so much with so little? These self-portraits from different phases of my life are a homage to her quiet yet direct style.



'Post-Fusion Document: Part I Codeine Diaries' 2023; Performance set-up for 'Repetition is the Mother of Skill: Repetition is the Skill of Mothers' 2018-2023 and 'I Used To Be A Superhero' 2023 (various props including mask, dancing clogs, bottle and glasses, pink peppercorns, kitchen timer, chopsticks, welding goggles and gloves, Brasso, polishing cloths, and a Wonderwoman vest)

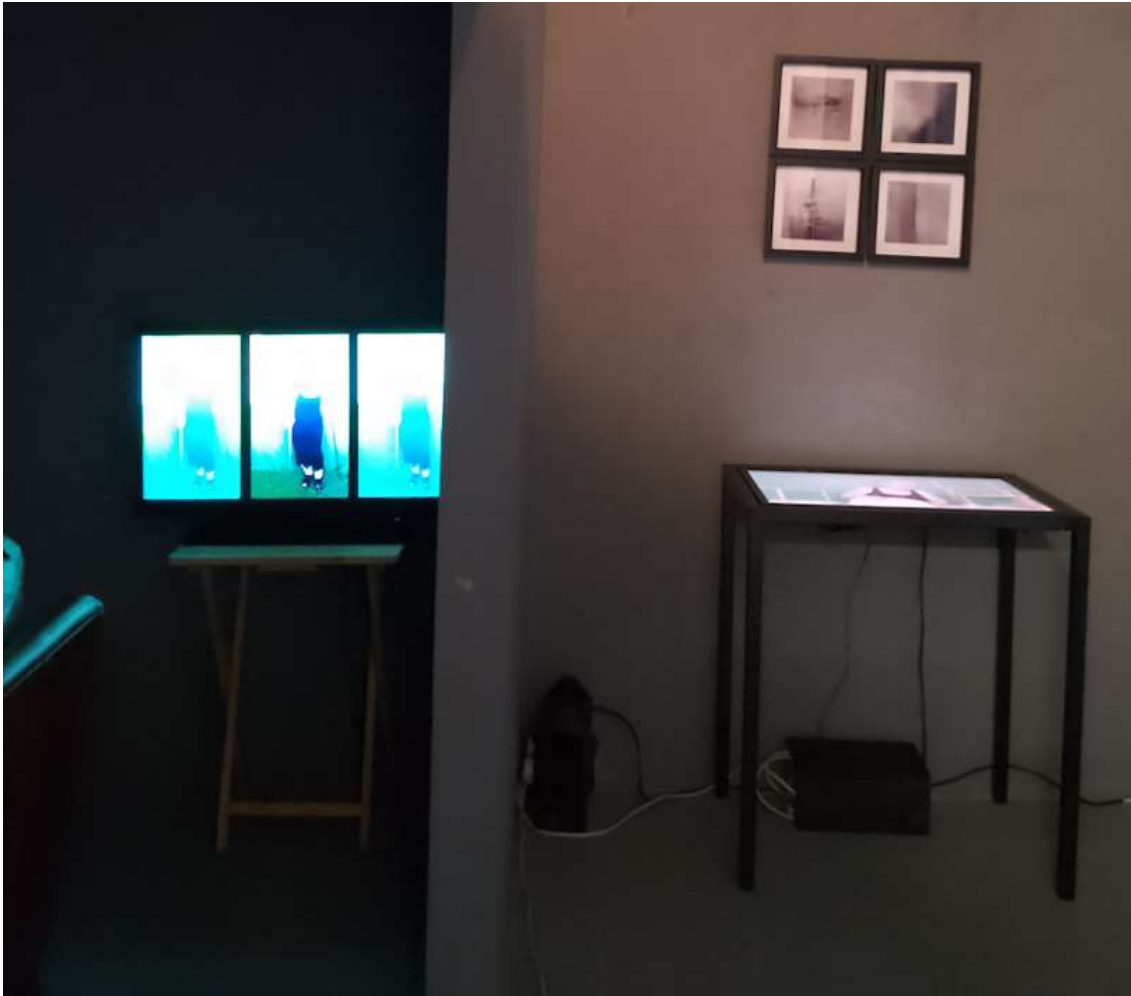
The performance area was set up so that I could do live versions of 'Repetition...' and 'I Used To Be A Superhero', which had both originally been studio performances to camera. I hadn't done a live version of 'Superhero' because I hadn't got a satisfactory ending for it, and I think a live performance does really need a conclusion, unless you can physically close a curtain to signify the end. The ending came to me over the course of installing the show, so by Saturday 18 November I was prepared for it. I like my loops, but this piece is about me having to draw a line under a major part of my pre-disability life, so it HAD to stop.



'My Neck, My Back' is a set of photographs of my operation incisions and the resulting scars. The first one (lumbar spine) was taken in December 2015, while the external stick-on stitches were still in place over the actual subcutaneous stitches. The second (cervical spine) was taken in December 2018 moments before I had the surgical staples removed (there were also internal stitches but those haven't left much trace). The third and fourth photos were taken in November 2023 to show the healing at its most complete. I used black and white to get some distance

from the aspects of gore that can so easily distract from the formal qualities of this sort of image. And to hark back to not just Jo Spence's body of work, but to my own photographic and phototherapy-based works in the 1980s and 1990s. However, these images were captured on smartphone cameras and then digitally processed to look like black and white film images and printed on glossy finish inkjet paper, because I don't have a film camera and access to a darkroom.

I will award a gold star (or a 'Women Artists Are The Best Artists' enamel pin badge) to anyone who understands the reference in the title and its significance. Email me!



Left to right: "I'm not a trained dancer" 2018 (MP4 format video file, music by Peter Mann for angrycandy, duration 4 mins 52 secs), top: 'My Neck, My Back' 2015-2023; bottom: 'Carcassing' 2019 (MP4 file, music by The Double Doctor, duration 19 mins)

A sister artist who I didn't discover till about 2013 is Joan Jonas, a pioneer of performance and video art, who has been going her own way since the 1960s. I saw an interview with her in which she was talking about doing dance performances even though she wasn't a trained dancer, and that's where this title came from. The dance was the last piece of work I made before my neck fusion surgery in December 2018. I'm using the grabber and walking stick I used after my first fusion surgery as props for a half-dance, half-exercise routine performance. I wanted a record of my whole body moving, in case the surgery didn't go to plan and I ended up paralysed. The Maleficent headdress was a present from my children. I'm also wearing my dancing clogs (as

seen in 'Millstone Grit'), and my last pair of rollerderby referee socks.

'Carcassing' shows the process of building the 'Carcass', and some of the emotions that come out while I'm doing the work. Most of the time I don't get upset by the evidence of the life that I enjoyed and can no longer have, but sometimes what I have had to give up hits me like a hammer in the heart. I made this video just after the untimely death of a very sweet friend who had been part of my old life and was just about coming back into my new life. So it's a double dose of mourning, for me and for her.

In a weird way this piece is a blend of all of the artists I've been referencing during this project.



Left to right: 'Repetition is the Mother of Skill: Repetition is the Skill of Mothers' 2018 (MP4 file, music by The Double Doctor, duration 20 mins); "I'm not a trained dancer" 2018

This is the original 'Repetition...' studio video from November 2018, and during the 'Seven Sisters' exhibition I repeated the live version that I did for Desperate Artwives at their takeover of Leyden Gallery in December 2018. That was my last live performance before my neck surgery, and I was really struggling to perform the task with my increasingly uncooperative hands. Stryx Gallery was very cold in November 2023, so my hands were almost as uncooperative as in the original performance.

After seeing the Joan Jonas solo show at Tate Modern in 2018, my daughter and I went to eat at the nearby Wagamama where we watched a woman picking pink peppercorns out of her drink with chopsticks. On the tube home we saw a young woman with her eyebrows drawn on very badly, travelling with a friend who was too drunk or too shy to mention it. These two experiences morphed into a performance to camera that I originally called 'Eyebrow mask Wagamama lunch lady'. The video loops because I didn't have an ending for it at first. The live performance has a very definite ending, that some people find just as frustrating as no ending...