

Katharine Fry

Interview by Tess Charnley

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*Danielle Arnaud Gallery presents an interview with Katharine Fry, the first in a series of interviews with artists. Fry's exhibition **Please call me home** will open at the gallery in early 2021, subject to public health guidelines.*

Katharine Fry is a London-based artist working from performance into video. She recently completed practice-based PhD "House Arrest" at Goldsmiths. She exhibits nationally and internationally, including: Ann Arbor Film Festival, Michigan, USA (2019); "Visions in the Nunnery," London (2018); "Terror Has No Shape," Camden Arts Centre, London (2018), Alchemy Film Festival, Hawick, Scotland (2018), Oriel Davies Open, Newtown, Wales, (2018); and "The Modern Language Experiment," Folkestone Triennial, (2017). Recent prizes include: Hauser & Wirth First Prize and Soho House Mentoring Prize for Black Swan Open (2018) and First Prize for Creekside Open (2017).



Katharine Fry, *Home Suite - Monday*, private residence Sydenham, performance still, 2008

Your work straddles performance, video and, more recently, sculpture, frequently depicting your own body. How and why do you position yourself within the work? I'm thinking in particular of the different "characters" that appear, such as "innocent girl-child", "naïve gothic heroine" and "pristine housewife".

I have been performing in my work for twenty years. I began by making small-scale sculptural works and performing with them to act out family roles and dynamics, sometimes working with my brother. I documented these distinctly personal actions on video. While living in Venice, the

“naïve gothic heroine” emerged as a trope, inspired by the Gothic Palazzo Contarini degli Scrigni that I lived in which gave me license to play out my macabre romantic fantasies. Upon my return to the UK, I began making work in my grandparents’ house where the figure of the “girl-child,” or *femme-enfant*, took up residence in mid-century modern surroundings. Though it cannot be held as entirely distinct from personal experience, my current work is usually not explicitly autobiographical. I refer to the figure in my work in the third person, as she or her, staging her in a distinct world of roles and rules.

I connect my practice to the legacy, and ongoing battles, of feminist activism together with the politicisation of women in domestic confinement and under social restriction. Following a rich seam of different artists’ practices from the 1970s to present, my work critiques the normative roles projected onto women through parody or subversion. My figures allude to the historical role of women who, under the 1765 legal doctrine of coverture, were considered civilly dead upon marriage, during which their legal existence was suspended and consolidated into that of their husband. The Gothic condition of a buried or living-dead bride persisted for over two hundred years, only being abolished in the 1960s. This period of seismic change in terms of civil rights and social norms saw the restrictive role of ideal housewife dismantled. However, the return to such “values” remains a constant threat with conservative regimes seeking the constriction of women’s rights and the fixing of gender normative roles, now socially reflected in the emergence of the “tradwife.”

Working each time with a cast of performers, costumed to form a chorus of identical automaton housewives, I parodied this stifling role through exaggerated invocations of domestic rituals carried out at manic-depressive thresholds (that is a frenzy of domestic activities followed by a silent retreat into an inert but pristine shell), in 2006 theatre piece *Matin Après-midi* and 2008 site-specific performance series *Home Suite*, commissioned by London-based art collecting group The Collective for their seven private residences. The figure I adopt elsewhere deliberately stops short of this role. Rather than inhabit the shell of selfless mother or perfect wife, she remains girlish. Hers is a figure being pressed towards assuming a role that she refuses. Her girlish act is an act of resistance. She appears as a disruptive force, breaking the perpetuation of externally projected normative expectations of prescribed femininity.

The *femme-enfant* is a figure on a threshold. Her body is a site of connection with her surroundings while marking her as separate from them. It is on this in-between threshold that she seeks to establish, or surrender, her identity and sense of autonomy. Through this figure, who is both me and not me, I perform a working through, an attempt to reconcile or sit within the tension between self and other, to understand the possibilities for a body, for my body.



Katharine Fry, *Tablemouth*, 2016, diptych video installation web image

In your split screen video work *Tablemouth*, your body is conjoined to a table; its leg rooted in your mouth, or your mouth biting the table's edge. Your work often engages with ideas of boundary, particularly in relation to the threshold between the body and its surroundings. How do you explore ideas of porosity between the interior and the exterior, and the domestic space in relation to the female body in your work?

The sense of the body as a porous threshold is vital to my work. The figure remains caught in an ambivalent subjectivity where she persists as both a fragile subject needing to constantly affirm her precarious wholeness and as a subject constantly trying to surrender her fragile identity to the relief of inanimate wholeness. I call this ambivalent state *house arrest*. It is an ambivalence that cannot be resolved. Desire to escape her physical limits pours out of her mouth as liquids, gravel or pearls. She marks her need to confirm herself, to maintain the boundaries of her containing body, by blocking her mouth with furniture. She grapples with anxiety between her self and an other, between separation and connection. This other, which plays out in my works as objects and architecture, might contain, protect or engulf her. Her mouth is a threshold organ, marking the first intrusion of the world and the first extrusion through which she knows the world. It functions as a barrier and an opening with no distinct position, fluctuating at this intersection of separation and connection.

The work engages with numerous Freudian themes, and the “uncanny” in particular. Can you expand on how your interest in notions of the uncanny, and Freudian theory more generally, informs your work?

I have been reading Freudian psychoanalytic theory intermittently for the past twenty years and, while my work precedes these readings, it is a useful, though not exclusive, discourse through which my work might be framed. I described my earlier video works as an attempt to collapse narrative, to remain in a state of flux, to find a line of flight out of the middle. These works often featured doubles or multiples of the figure, mirroring each other. It is in relation to these works that I first read “Beyond the Pleasure Principle” and “The Uncanny.” I was struck by the death drive as a compulsion to return to a state of quiescence.

I returned to both essays as the core texts of my practice-based PhD *House Arrest*. I asked why the figure in my work keeps returning to the house. My answer: she is under house arrest. House arrest is the condition of every animate subject. It is the story of desire. The story begins with the constitution of the subject, formed through separation from an originary home, a fantasy state of wholeness that I align with Freud's assertion in “Beyond the Pleasure Principle” that all organic life “must aspire to an old, primordial state from which it once departed, and to which via all the circuitous byways of development it strives to return.”¹ Desire follows this separation. It appears in the gap that opens between the animate subject and her lost home. It is a desire for a lost home that must be re-sought and re-found. The subject, defined by and through loss, is a melancholic subject, unable to grieve her loss. Here, the loss is not for a lost object but for a lost state before there was a subject and object. The subject internalises loss, sensing herself as being less than whole. The subject's body is haunted, and it is in terms of this haunting that several aspects of the uncanny come into play.

¹ Sigmund Freud, “Beyond the Pleasure Principle (1920),” in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle and Other Writings*, trans. John Reddick (London: Penguin Books, 2003), 78.

Freud summarises the uncanny as “that class of the frightening which leads back to what is known of old and long familiar.”² It is “something repressed which *recurs*.”³ I connect this “known of old and long familiar” to the “old, primordial state” from which all organic life departed and to which it strives to return that he describes in “Beyond the Pleasure Principle.” What returns, what haunts the subject, is the lost wholeness before the animate, now rendered unfamiliar because it lies beyond the boundaries of the animate body. Going from Freud to Lacan, I suggest that the haunted subject of loss senses a discord between her constituting less-than-wholeness and the supposed wholeness of her external appearance as a distinct bounded body that is reflected back to her through mirrors and the gaze of others. She sees herself as separate, as perfect, as whole. But this image is illusory and easily shattered. She masks her less-than-wholeness by donning “the armour of an alienating identity that will mark her entire mental development with its rigid structure.”⁴ She is caught in the lure of the spatial identification her reflection offers and externally constitutes herself, her rigid armour of skin acting as a correcting surface to mask her inner insufficiency. But, watching herself from the outside, she appears as a performing skin, a double or near-likeness of herself. The subject sees herself as an automaton, a mechanical being performing an alienating identity whose terms are dictated by the social conditions that contain her.



Katharine Fry, *I would tell you everything but there's no room*, 2016, video still

Against this performing skin, desire presses for release. I consider the containing of desire within the surface boundary of the body as directly subsequent to originary trauma. I call this containing the first compression, that is, of desire into the body. I call it a compression as I imagine desire to

² Sigmund Freud, “The ‘Uncanny’ (1919),” in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud. Volume XVII (1917-1919) An Infantile Neurosis, The Uncanny and Other Works.*, trans. James Strachey (London: The Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psycho-analysis, 1978), 220.

³ Freud, 241.

⁴ Jacques Lacan, “The Mirror Stage as Formative of the I Function (1949),” in *Écrits*, trans. Bruce Fink (New York, N.Y.; London: W.W. Norton, 2007), 78.

be an interior force that exerts a pressure to escape from within its boundary. Her desire wants to escape the confines of her boundaried body, to eradicate her body, to dissolve into wholeness but, under house arrest, desire can only persist and, as a body, the figure can only remain separate.

Art historian Lynda Nead writes about the patriarchal motivation “to shore up the female body - to seal orifices and to prevent marginal matter from transgressing the boundary dividing the inside of the body and the outside, the self from the space of the other.” In your video work we frequently see your “characters” transgressing their bodily boundaries; in *After the transformation I was just the same*, you expel coloured liquid from your mouth in slow motion, your face covered in layers of purple, and in *I would tell you everything but there’s no room*, gravel pours out of your mouth onto a mirrored surface. How do theories of the abject, the feminine grotesque and the monstrous inform your work?

The subject’s secure differentiation depends on the fundamental opposition between I and Other, between Inside and Outside. The abject threatens the certainty of these distinctions. For Kristeva, the abject is “the violence of mourning for an "object" that has always already been lost.”⁵ The abject returns as the gap, the want, the loss by and through which the subject is constituted, through which being, meaning, language and desire are founded. The abject might frame my work in several ways.

In *I would tell you everything but there’s no room*, the figure is full to overflowing with something she cannot digest. This is an image in trauma, a mouth-gravel event that persists, that does not move in time but, rather, returns. Her trauma, like the gravel she emits, cannot be metabolised. The trauma that returns is the one that constitutes her. It is the loss of inanimate wholeness, the sense of emptiness that runs through her separate boundaried being.

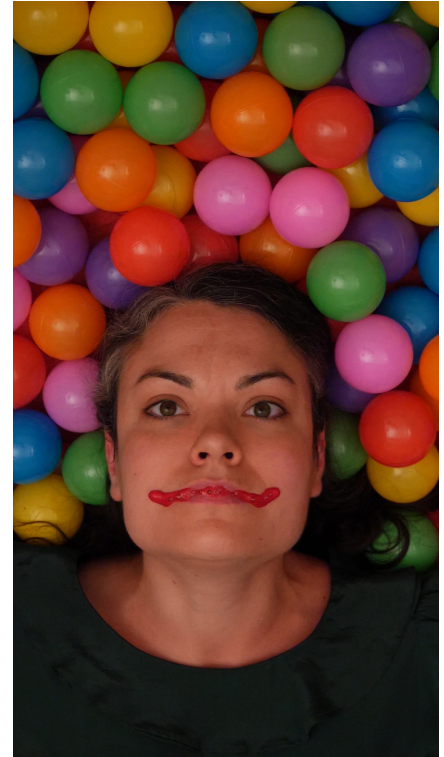
The doo-wop vocalisations that run over the scene allude to an earlier time, to a pre-verbal moment when her mouth was full of either hunger cries or satisfying nourishment, a fullness following an emptiness. In their repeating brevity, they also frame the protracted present of her gravel-mouth event. The sung lyrics act as a through-line to the returning event, trying to draw the figure into a developmental plot through a call for her to become separate by being “let go of,” to “put her feet down” and reach independence. The final spoken refrain of being “all grown up now” could be her claim to self-reliance, to taking responsibility for her own boundaries but it reads as a lie, a salve to a fragile self.

She keeps herself full to overflowing to try to mask her lack, to assert her own wholeness. Her emesis could also be a reaction to something foreign that she has taken in, that she must reject to establish her own boundaries, even if this rejection implies that she is empty. Her sense of emptiness collides with her over-spilling, a force inside her pressing for release, her desire for wholeness rupturing her fragile surface. She pours herself into a narcissistic system, affirming herself as whole, full, a complete boundaried being, denying the presence of an other or any need for that other. She is caught as a separate animate being constituted through loss, caught repeating false returns, caught repeating her failure to master an impossible return, caught in her inconsistent boundaries, caught as an illusory surface image pressing against another surface.

⁵ Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez, European Perspectives (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), 10.



Katharine Fry, *After the transformation I was just the same*, 2019,
video still



Katharine Fry, *I can sing a rainbow. Sing along with me*. 2018, video still

After the transformation I was just the same. captures messy desire pressing for release against the surface boundary of skin. It plays out in a typically feminine world of soft light, pastel pink and purple. In an intimate “to camera”, a girl presses a brightly coloured layer of purple, pink and green to her face. This could be a bedroom make-up tutorial, a new sheet mask treatment perhaps. But it’s not. The bright layers she adds do not make for a more flattering complexion. Instead, to a soundtrack of damp subterranean echoes, piece by piece, she presses on her new skin for a different purpose.

What hides underneath her skin, what she tries to cover under this thicker skin, is the messiness of her desire. The force of desire within her presses against the too-neat container of her skin. Her skin feels alien to her. It contains her and limits her but doesn’t correspond with her. Like the print of her dress, her skin is an alien surface that can’t quite contain her. Adding one skin on top of another might build some distance between her and the irrepressible force she hides. Or, like the blush-covering properties of foundation, this extra skin layer might mask her shame at her messy interior. It rushes out. A rupture. A gush. A purge. Again and again, her messy interior floods out. It washes over her skin barrier, pulling off pieces in its wake. Seemingly emptied out, she shakes off her second skin, like a newborn opening her eyes in the afterbirth. But she is still the same. Her same skin still holds her while the pressure of her desire builds once more.

Messy desire pressing for release ruptures the externally projected ideal of her frozen surface performance. In *I can sing a rainbow. Sing along with me*. the figure appears as an image onto which any role could be projected, her “rigid armour” set to meet any external demand, to “just smile” no matter what. She appears as an automaton, an externally constituted subject mechanically performing an unchosen script. She tries and fails to coincide with the external image

she has of herself and with external expectations placed on her. Her static illusion is ruptured by the spilling of her “blood,” her excess, the force of her desire leaking out, breaking the mirage of her surface control. The fragile illusion of her ideal self can be shattered at any time.

Sound is an integral part of your work; your video works often feature sounds of you humming or singing familiar songs, or sounds of breathing. Can you expand on the significance of music to your work?

I overlay my videos with sung a cappella fragments of popular songs from the 1930s to present. These sung fragments are at odds with the on-screen mouth which is usually blocked in some way so cannot be performing the singing. I read Samuel Beckett's *Company* and liked the play between a possible outside voice, an in-head voice or a subject's own absent voice calling out. Sometimes in my work, I'm happy for there to be a clear reference to a particular period or singer, such as Peggy Lee and Judy Garland. At other times, the lyrics are separated in small chunks from their source song, used in some cases to offer a potential narrative throughline, and in other cases to poke the work in the side. I use the songs to set the tone and direction of each work but devise the soundtrack as the final stage of my editing process. I draw up a long list of material and record usually twice as much as I include in each work. These recordings help me navigate my mood and how I might weave it into the work. I spend days listening to the fragments and building a score chaptered as emotional resonances and crescendos. I will often have multiple simultaneous versions I am testing, each with a distinct option for the work's climax. This process is often much more speculative than my image making and editing.



Katharine Fry, *Here is mine to hold*, 2020, bronze



Katharine Fry, *Past imperfect: we were touching*, 2020, bronze

You have recently started working sculpturally, in bronze and pewter, in works such as *Past imperfect: we were touching* and *Here is mine to hold*. How did this progression in your practice occur? Is there any connection between these works and the video works?

Whether as a single projection or across multiple screens, I stage my work as a one-to-one encounter between a viewer and a screen body, an intimate confrontation where the viewer is invited to perform a particular physical proximity. Despite this encounter of implied proximity, there is a disconnection. The medium of video creates a partition or impenetrable barrier between figure and viewer. The screen acts as an obstructing surface that serves to keep the other at a distance. The medium stages a separating skin that both protects and isolates figure and viewer. Neither can threaten or penetrate the boundary of the other, but neither can nourish the other. A gap persists between figure and viewer in which a desire to meet emerges in tandem with a fear of engulfment.

Much as I delight in the claustrophobic confinement of the framed and screened body and much as I enjoy my work's digital immateriality, I am absolutely drawn to fleshy, messy, visceral practices. I had not worked sculpturally in decades and found that the moment was right to explore the skin as touch and connection, and the absence of either, through material play. I now sit in my studio for hours on end caressing hands that are both mine and separate from me as I sand and shape them. They form another part of my ongoing forays into the tension between self and other, into the skin as a separating and connecting boundary.



Katharine Fry, *A deal with god*, 2020, video still

Your new video work *A deal with god* was directly inspired by your experience of COVID-19. How has the past year influenced your practice?

It is impossible to go through a life-or-death experience and not feel profoundly changed by it. Friends had suggested while I was in hospital that I was amassing some exceptional material to work from, whereas I insisted I had no interest in revisiting that experience. However, when I was able to start working again during my recovery, my unconscious suggested otherwise!

Both *A deal with god* and work-in-progress *Sing to me in the dark* deal with reanimation and carry a sense of optimism. However, these works are so personal and so charged with recent experience that I find the former almost unbearable to watch and the latter almost impossible to edit. Both return to the body as a boundary but here the rift between the internal and external is not one of identity formation but of control. After the virus penetrated my body, I had a profound sense of physical isolation and alienation. I felt the helplessness of a by-stander as an internal battle for mastery of my body was waged.

Ultimately, I returned from my journey to the beyond and I learnt the true strength of a resilient imagination. There were days when I questioned the importance of my identity, whether it mattered that I was 'Katharine' or 'artist' now I was one body in a room of many hanging onto oxygen feeds to survive. I built a world beyond the confines of my blue-screened cubicle and its crushing daily sameness. I imagined laying on the chest of a lover to mask the pains in my lungs and the uncomfortable contortions of my weakening body against the strange angles of a hospital bed. I listened to fairy tales recorded daily for me by friends, escaping into the fantasy imagery of childhood favourites while comforting, familiar voices drowned out the screaming that surrounded me.



Katharine Fry, *Her glass flower house*, 2021, R&D still

There was a period where I continued to deteriorate and was put on CPAP, mechanically assisted breathing that precedes ventilation. I was told on a daily basis that I might deteriorate further and not recover. I called on myself to perform the hardest imaginative feat of my life: conjuring a long and happy life, rich with experiences I had not yet had, against the impossible present of my illness. It is this psychic defence against a physical assailant that plays out in *Her glass flower house*, a new work set in a doll's house. Combining live-action and analogue animation, *Her glass flower house* is a fever dream spanning illness and recovery told through a female protagonist's relationship with her uncanny home and its enchanted furniture. In a voiceover narration, a protagonist describes arriving on her own, in advance of her family, to arrange their rented house. What happens inside the house does not reflect her homemaker vision. Instead, it becomes a metaphor for confinement and protection, an external expression of her physical and psychic struggle to survive illness. Her monologue aligns with her progress through the house but is at odds with the on-screen action. She does not reference illness. Rather, she describes her sense of identity loss and her attempts to find herself in the preparations she is making for her ideal family life. I am slowly gathering the ingredients and the necessary emotional stamina to fully engage with making this work.

I came out of hospital 10kg lighter with very damaged lungs and significant muscle deterioration. It felt vital to my sense of self to rebuild my strength and physical autonomy. I think that's what led me to experimenting with sculpture, particularly the demanding process of casting and finishing metalworks. The heightened conditions of separation and isolation, both in hospital and the world at large, together with the fear of contagion through physical contact and touch have directly driven my interest in making highly tactile sculptural works that demand intimate engagement. The hands emerged from my sense of a change in my connection to other people. I felt I had gone through something, gone somewhere, that made me feel separate from those who had not. My hands come from that threshold, staging that separation together with my desire to reach and to touch.



Katharine Fry, *Sing to me in the dark*, 2021,
production still

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