



**Tessa Jackson**  
NACHUM'S COAT

In his third exhibition for Danielle Arnaud gallery, Neville Gabie has decided to place his autobiographical work *Nachum* (2018) in the hall. Two framed photographs are presented on a shelf beside a coat hanging on a hook, accompanied by hat and gloves. The photograph on the left is of his grandfather's brother, after whom the artist is named. The photograph was taken in Riga in the 1920s and its purpose remains unclear. It may have been part of an attempt to gain documentation to leave the country and join the artist's grandfather in South Africa. This man, along with his parents, Gabie's great grandparents, were shot dead in Riga in 1941. It is the only remaining record of him.

'Had he lived he would have been 59 when I was born', reflects Gabie. 'So, in my 59th year I wanted to make a self-portrait (photograph on the right), which made a connection across that broken divide. Having the garments replicated, revealed that they were either borrowed or hand-me-downs as they are clearly too large. It suggests the family were not wealthy... He looks out anxiously into a future he did not know. I look back into the past and the unbreachable chasm between us.'

In this unique self-portrait Gabie faces away from the viewer. He often appears in his work, yet having followed the artist's career since the early 1990s, *Nachum* is one of his most personal pieces. A state of stillness or quietude fills the composition of familiar elements, with magnetic power and emotion. *Nachum* was a biblical prophet, is a boy's name and means comfort or comforter in Hebrew.

This installation and also the title of the exhibition introduces a selection of works that are more autobiographical and personal than is usual in terms of Neville Gabie's overall oeuvre. He is an artist who is well-known for his responses to public sites and contexts, as well as his commitment to collaborations with communities. Yet in 2018, his last show at the gallery, he began to present more private aspects of his artistic practice. Five years on, he has decided to share works from across almost thirty years of making, some rarely seen, others never seen. It seems the showing of *Nachum* last year<sup>1</sup> and the public response it received, had a liberating effect. It was one more step in 'owning' his past.

<sup>1</sup> *Nachum* was shown in *Me, Myself, I: Artists' Self-Portraits* at the RWA (Royal West of England Academy), Bristol, 2022, curated by Tessa Jackson

Neville Gabie's CV has always indicated that he was born in South Africa, even though his ongoing relationship with the country stayed opaque in the majority of his work. It has been a private affair, something Gabie has kept to himself. In fact, he visits regularly and the country has acted as 'a personal studio' over many years. It has informed his thinking and strengthened his belief in giving voice to communities and people, while he has not sought to exhibit or have a profile there. He was thirteen when he left and the presence of a close-knit Jewish family fell away. Since then, he has been cautious of speaking about his experiences and the sense of loss he feels for a place and culture that he remains inextricably connected to. It is a vital part of his biography.

During 1995/96 Gabie spent an extended period in South Africa, teaching as part of an exchange at the Natal Technikon, Durban. It gave him the opportunity to step back from a more formal sculptural practice and engage with the landscape and its communities, both past and present. The photographic triptych *Pomeroy to Maria Ratschitz Mission Station* was created at this time along with a series of temporary interventions and time-based works. These images, together with what they contain, were made on a 30km walked route from an Apartheid resettlement village, back to a former Mission settlement in Kwa-Zulu-Natal. In retracing the steps of those who had been forced to move in the 1960s, as part of the Apartheid Government's continued enforcement of the Group Areas Act (1950–1984), Gabie reflected on forced migration and the importance of belonging to a physical and cultural context. This period in his native South Africa was one of the most significant in terms of defining his future practice.

The landscapes of the Northern and Eastern Cape Provinces are also areas Gabie has been drawn back to over the years. A residency programme at MAP Richmond, initiated by Harrie Siertsema to support young black artists, in the context of the crisis faced by isolated rural communities with little economic activity, motivated a number of time-based works. In 2019 he made *Experiments in Black and White XXVIII – Small Acts* in Graaff Reinet, seen here as a two-screen projection and a small cube monitor. On one screen the artist paints the rocks around him, as well as himself, first black then white on a continuous loop. Simple in form, the work holds multiple complexities of trying to evaluate who one is, in a land with a history of racial displacement and the impossibility of assimilation. Its restlessness is febrile and hypnotic. The second screen, where Gabie sits on the ground spinning a bottle, with

its rhythmic sound of glass against stone, offers something more meditative. The small repetitive act marks time and expresses a sense of continuity. Both actions, in counterpoint, articulate the fundamental need to occupy a space and feel connected to a place.

His ongoing series of performance-based works *Experiments in Black and White*, begun in 2012, are made in both the landscape and the studio. Installed as videos, they involve Gabie undertaking a set of actions using a limited range of materials. Beyond the physicality of his activity, they allude to wider concerns and themes. *Experiments in Black and White XXX – part 2 (2020)* was made in response to meeting Mrs Begum who was in the late stages of motor neurone disease in which nerves in the spine and brain lose function. In *part 2* the artist proceeds to cut away a motley collection of wooden furniture heaped beneath him. As the pile diminishes, it becomes unstable and he is forced to shift his posture and weight to stay on top. For the viewer the action becomes mesmerising as we witness the near-possibility of collapse and the visualisation of precariousness and shrinking inwards. It also expresses the uncertainty of what can be done. Ironically the work only found its final form during the last weeks of lockdown, a time when all social interactions and movements had been drastically limited by Covid-19.

His most recent *Experiments in Black and White XXXV – Every day of my life until today V3 (2023)* was filmed and recorded in South Africa and the UK. The artist steps into nailed down shoes to paint around himself, on the floor and the wall in front. Moving quickly and repetitively he paints the landscape around him, two planes covered by flattened cardboard boxes. When installed the video of the action is accompanied by the cardboard box that held the tin of paint, although now it holds all the pieces of painted cardboard, folded away like rubbish awaiting collection. His focused activity contains the duality of the ability to stretch with the limitation to reach. His cardboard canvas highlights both worthlessness and disposability, while the continuing reference to black and white speaks of our need for certainty in a world that is anything but clear-cut. Neville Gabie continually seeks to find out who he is. Through the places he visits and the people he meets, he explores notions of place and what it means to belong. He seeks common experience, knowing he will remain an outsider.

**Tessa Jackson** OBE is an independent curator, writer and cultural advisor.

## **Mark Dunhill**

*A sharp darting nimbleness*

At the time of writing I am not aware of the works we will be looking at, listening to, or participating in, at Neville Gabie's solo exhibition at the Danielle Arnaud gallery. There could be video works, performance, sound, text, drawings, photographs, sculpture and, very likely, works that involve a combination of these media. What makes this solo exhibition all the more intriguing is that, to date at least, the gallery exhibition, as a site and format has not been Gabie's natural habitat.

Gabie spent the first 13 years of his life in South Africa before being sent to the UK to a boarding school (that I gather he hated). Moving from the freedom of an outdoor and relatively carefree existence to the restrictions of an English boarding school may well account for his restless and somewhat maverick approach to art making. He has cultivated an ability to operate outside the commercial gallery system remaining open to new challenges, contexts and audiences in different parts of the world, pushing at the boundaries of what an art practice can be.

A nomadic method of working requires a certain agility and appetite to improvise, embracing chance and risk. Photographs documenting Gabie's student works from 1988, show a Victorian fireplace set upright and brought back to life among the rubble of a derelict building site, complete with an open fire burning in the grate. Elsewhere a cast iron arched window frame balances precariously, but elegantly, against a grey sky on an old wheel barrow.

While sculptors in the late 70's had a similar impulse to work with discarded objects and materials, their works were usually made in the studio and re-contextualised in white cube gallery spaces. During the same period Gordon Matta-Clark's *Anarchitecture*, conflated the words architecture and anarchy to describe site specific sculptures that explored voids, gaps, and left-over spaces. He famously split an empty house in half in New Jersey, and in Paris made *Conical Intersect* by cutting a large cone shaped hole through two 17<sup>th</sup> century townhouses. These transgressive and politically charged works provided an important reference for Gabie, alongside works such as Joseph Beuys' performance, *I Like America and America Likes Me (Coyote)*, and Robert Smithson's radical site based works.

In a collection of short essays titled, *Six Memos for the Next Millennium*, Italo Calvino talks about lightness. He explains how throughout his writing career he has tried to remove weight from the structure of his narratives and from language itself.

*I soon realised that the gap between the realities of life that were supposed to be my raw materials and the sharp darting nimbleness that I wanted to animate my writing was becoming harder and harder to bridge. Perhaps I was only then becoming aware of the heaviness, the inertia, the opacity of the world - qualities that quickly adhere to writing if one doesn't find a way to give them the slip.*

A 'sharp darting nimbleness' is a characteristic that Gabie has cultivated throughout his career, travelling light, accepting invitations and commissions in unlikely places. Confronting new stimulus, questioning expectations and working within time constraints requires an ability to think on your feet and use all the resources available, be they social, material or environmental.

Gabie likes to collect and quantify things, measure them, count them, and rationalise them within a physical, economic or social structure. It is one of the many ways in which he deconstructs the way we look at and understand the world. Like an anthropologist he adopts a critical detachment in order to research and examine his subject, highlighting unexpected associations that have the potential to vibrate with new meaning. This has included generating data from a geophysical survey of a former football pitch; calculating the cubic volume of wood in a tree; producing books filled with images of make-shift goal posts he has photographed around the world, and embracing the logistics of transporting a two ton iceberg from Greenland and keeping it frozen with solar power for an exhibition in the gardens of a country estate.

In 2003, I travelled from Bristol with a group of Fine Art students to visit a tower block in Liverpool that was being vacated prior to its demolition. This was part of an extraordinarily ambitious, innovative and long term project titled *Up in the Air* conceived by Gabie and Leo Fitzmaurice. They, and the other artists and writers they invited to

participate, set themselves up in some of the empty flats and proceeded to engage with the complex social, political and material context they found themselves in. Having showed us several flats and artworks by other artists, Gabie opened the door to a flat that he had stripped back to its cast concrete core. All the additional materials and fixtures and fittings had been removed and stacked up neatly into a minimalist cube in the middle of the space, form and content neatly complimenting each other. The dark grey excavated concrete shell of the apartment was both grim and beautiful. A complex archeological work, it exposed the labour of the long forgotten building crew in its raw cave-like physicality.

In a recent video work Gabie is perched (in a black suit) on top of a stack of furniture with an electric jig saw in his hand. Cutting the furniture bit by bit, he lowers himself precariously towards the ground. Below the video monitor a sculpture sits on the floor crudely constructed from the waste material. In this Houdini-like performance we watch with some anxiety as the next section of a table leg is reduced requiring careful physical adjustment. The work cleverly refers to sculptures primary condition, gravity. While watching we are caught up in a myriad of narratives - and of course a drama, leading to the possibility of a nasty accident.

**Mark Dunhill** is an artist and educator. He was Dean of academic programmes at Central Saint Martins until 2017. After 20 years as a solo artist he has produced and exhibited artworks in collaboration with Tamiko O'Brien since 1998.

[www.dunhillandobrien.co.uk](http://www.dunhillandobrien.co.uk)

**Cover:** Neville Gabie  
*Nachum*

**NEVILLE GABIE**  
*Nachum's Coat*  
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**DANIELLE ARNAUD**  
123 Kennington Road  
London SE11 6SF  
Tel +44 (0) 20 7735 8292  
[www.daniellearnaud.com](http://www.daniellearnaud.com)