

Stephanie Mann

Talbot Rice Residents





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Artist Intro

Stephanie Mann is fascinated by the exploration of objects – their inherent properties and latent possibilities. Mann's work conflates the act of thinking, working and play in bringing disparate elements together, re-balancing established hierarchies, and instigating new relationships between things.

Within her sculptural assemblages, digital prints, video works and texts, Mann combines intellectual curiosity and a trust in subconscious impulse to inform the objects that will become her subjects. She builds compositions of natural and artificial materials, pairing incongruous companions in dialogue – loud neon pieces sit with muted organic matter, roughly textured compounds meet soft and shiny forms, whilst Mann's own body, or body parts, often feature in the tableaux, as either an equal element or agent of disruption.

What objects are kept? Why, how and for whom? Mann is drawn to collections and archives, exploring the human desire to collect, and the potential futures of collections in an increasingly digital, non-material world. She asks what it means for the 'chosen' objects to be preserved in their original form. And how these established customs might be challenged or destabilised, by introducing elements that, by nature or design, are in a state of flux – unruly objects that defy the conventions of traditional conservative collecting.

Mann assumes the role of amateur alchemist, occupying the fertile space between scientific scrutiny and playful speculation. Her interests and research range widely, from geology and anatomy to philosophy, filtered through a ludic spirit, to create poetic scenarios and provocative encounters. Her work emits tactile energy, exciting an auto sensory meridian response, whilst equally promoting a cognitive rethinking of our relationship to the objects with which we cohabit the world.

Things, tunnels, traces, thoughts: a momentary gathering of words in response to new work by Stephanie Mann

By Tom Jeffreys

It was not until moving to Edinburgh that I first heard the word 'outwith'. It's a useful word – signifying something that takes (its) place beyond or outside of a particular boundary (conceptual, procedural, geographic, national...). Yet its use is not widespread: 'now chiefly Scotland, Northern England' says an online dictionary. If use of 'outwith' marks a linguistic community, then it is one whose words pour across a national border. Outwith this region, people do without.

I keep thinking of this word, 'outwith', while Stephanie Mann and I are talking.¹ She uses it herself from time to time, but there's more to it than that. I think it's because Mann's work seems inseparable from questions of inside and outside, and the always-permeable borders (skin, walls, words, complex bureaucratic decision-making) that seem to separate the two.

We meet twice at a cafe – first outside, later inside – to discuss the work she's making as part of the 2018-20 Talbot Rice Gallery Residents programme. Over the course of the two-year residency, Mann has immersed herself within the collections of the University of Edinburgh: not only the art and objects ('we have about 35 kilometres of historic material,' declares the website, which is certainly one way to measure it) but also the people and their stories, the systems and philosophies that form a kind of foundation. In response to this period of research, Mann will make four bodies of work: a group of texts, a series of prints, a film and four sculptural objects.

I write 'will', but it feels wrong. I'm used to writing in the perma-present of art criticism, but at the time of speaking and now of writing, the works are not yet available to see. This future tense will mean my text dates fast. Names for the works have not yet been decided either: the titles, Mann tells me rather beautifully via email, 'are still hidden, obscured, encrypted in the work and will reveal themselves when ready'. The name is not selected in advance or imposed through a discourse of knowledge; it emerges in time when the thing is ready.



Covid-19 has severely delayed Mann's ability to develop the work. For months, she has been unable to return to the university collections or access the required facilities. Things are on hold. This is therefore an unusual moment in the gestation of a project in which to try and write about it. Mann's work is sensitively attuned to the materiality of objects; something I would want my writing to reflect. But how to respond to an object when I cannot stand before it in the studio or gallery, give it time, return, ruminate, let it speak to me? Covid-19 has also prevented me from visiting the collections to situate my writing among dusty files, unlabelled boxes, and drawers full of stuff. For now, there are no objects to stare at or films to watch. Only conversations and ideas, essays and images. It's all words really. You'll have to excuse me if I get a little vague.

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I sit in the park reading a printed-out essay by Jane Bennett and little flies are drawn to the whiteness of the paper. They settle, walk, and – for a moment – become invisible on the dark curling lines of text. Bennett writes that things are 'more than mere objects'; that things too have 'powers of life, resistance, and even a kind of will'.²

I start to make some notes, a series of more or less related statements, and I shuffle them around until they fall into the following order:

A thing is more accurately a body. A body is more accurately a place. A place is a collection of things.

I'm thinking about collections of things and collections of words. To collect is to gather together, but also – etymologically – to read together.

Metaphysics, said Graham Harman, 'is an attempt to dig down a few feet further into the ground than people think you can. It is not to find the bedrock.'³

I remember that old line from Charles Babbage: 'The air itself is one vast library...'⁴

But all the libraries are shut and even the smallest particles can bring the world to a halt.

Meanwhile, a mole digs tunnels through the soil and all we know of it are the little piles of earth left in lines across the surface of the world.

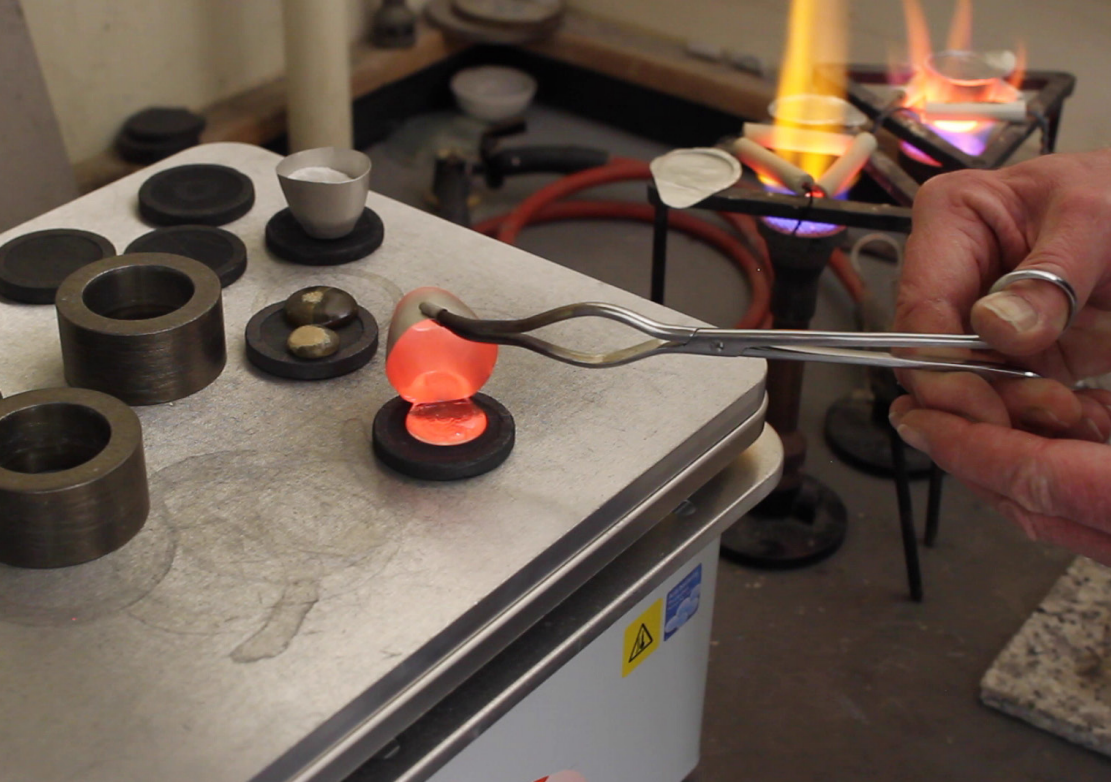
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Mann sends me photographs, tells me stories from the collections: a type of tar feeding upon the label that names it; rock quarantined in plastic; a 400-million year-old fossil, formed by the vast pressure of the sea, somehow damaged by a flood. I look through the images and I imagine that knowledge hides here somewhere – among packed shelves of green-bound periodicals or in drawers full of carefully catalogued secrets.

Each of Mann's four sculptures is a piece of rock – porous sandstone, aesthetically 'banal', no larger than a head. Inside each rock Mann will have hidden something. One will house some chipped-off corners of tiles and parts of wall, once components of Eduardo Paolozzi's mosaics for Tottenham Court Road station, installed underground in 1984. They were removed, not altogether cleanly, in 2015 and given a new home by Edinburgh University (Paolozzi studied at Edinburgh College of Art in 1943 and the university owns about 150 of his works). Another will become home to a plaster cast of a bust of an unknown man. The third will play host to a fossilised graptolite, an ancient filter-feeding organism, common across the world's oceans for much of the Paleozoic era. The fourth will contain a collection of geodes that once sat in the office of an academic – each holding within it a hidden land of shimmering mineral wonder. Thinking about geodes reminds me of Jane Bennett again: 'objects are coy,' she writes, 'always leaving hints of a secret other world... Objects play hide-and-seek.'⁵ A geode is a good choice.

In one sense, Mann's work is very simple. To take one object and put it inside another is a trivial, everyday act – we do it all the time when we breathe or eat. But everyday acts are often, in fact, very complicated: the first food of every human is amniotic fluid, so what a pregnant woman tastes, her baby tastes too (across multiple membranes, one thing enters another, enters another). The process by which Mann incorporates the tiles and plaster and fossils inside the sandstone pieces is also very complex, almost as complex as breathing or eating.

Each object will be subjected to a process of grinding using a machine owned by the university's School of Geosciences. The machine, a McCrone micronising mill, uses pellets of synthesised sapphire to grind things into a fine dust. The Paolozzi fragments, the plaster bust, the graptolite and the geodes will each be ground down into particles as small as one micron. By comparison, a human red blood cell is about seven microns in diameter⁶ and the SARS-CoV-2 virus particle somewhere between 0.06 microns and 0.14.⁷ In subjecting objects to this process, Mann asks what new possibilities might arise when something is disassembled into its component part(icle)s. Does a loss of visible form and apparent solidity result in a potential for transformation or



redistribution? At that scale, these particles could be taken up by plant roots or inhaled by humans. They are small

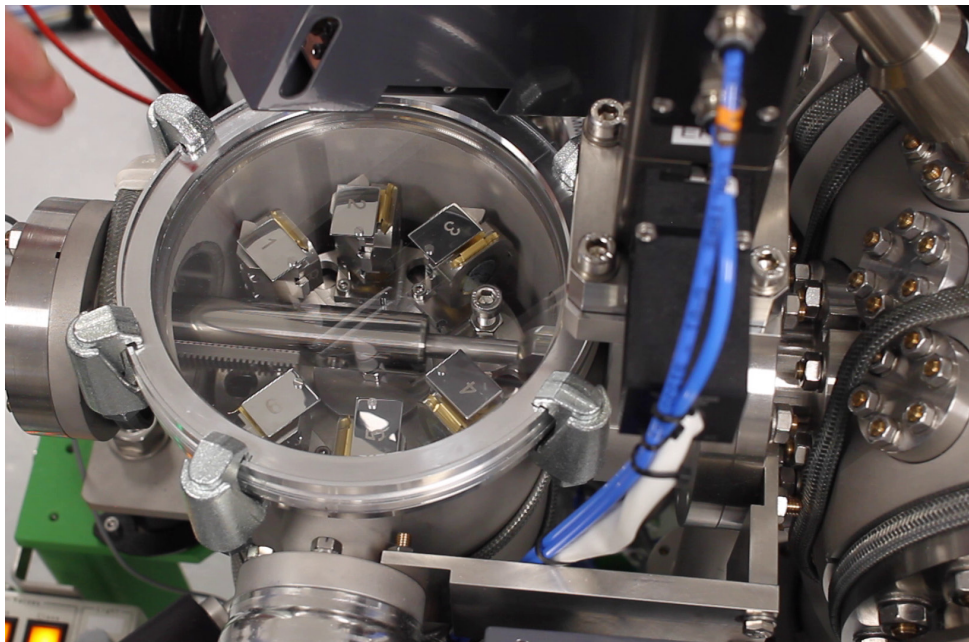
enough to pass through the body's barriers in the nose and throat and enter right into the lungs, potentially all the way to the alveoli.⁸

The elaborate nature of this process suggests that, despite its apparent simplicity, Mann's work is in fact endlessly complex. It complicates the very possibility of ends. For one thing, her choice of objects, guided by the teams within different departments in the university collections, has been very careful. Discussions have invariably touched upon what Ann Laura Stoler has described as 'the politics of storage'.⁹ This politics traverses the lifespan of objects: from how they came to be in a collection in the first place to the criteria upon which some things are considered worth saving for the future and others deemed disposable. University collections tend to value objects that can be used for teaching, but who decides the hierarchy and how?

Even the most lavishly resourced and carefully catalogued collections are full of dusty things – objects that serve no apparent purpose or whose histories exist only in memories. How did this even get here? Nobody remembers now. Once you're in, however, it's hard to get out. De-accessioning is a complicated, bureaucratic (and therefore also political) process: often objects must be cared for even if they no longer serve a purpose or in fact never did. There are systems in place that staff must follow. It begs the question sometimes: who has greater agency – the objects or the people supposedly in charge of them?

Geode, graptolite, bust and tiles: once ground up, the four resulting piles of dust will be absorbed into the porous cavities of the four sandstone rocks. The objects will have been inhaled like air, or perhaps imbibed like squash. 'A lot of porous sandstone contains tunnels, or channels, kind of like drinking straws,' said Mann in conversation with Talbot Rice Gallery curator James Clegg. If a thing can be ground to dust and absorbed inside another, we have to start to think about where a thing begins and ends, and how we could ever possibly know for sure.

Later in their conversation, James asks about the ethics of destroying objects and artworks. Mann pushes back: 'I'm seeing the process more as a recycling, than as destruction,' she says. 'The work is still there; it's just in a different form.' Later, she clarifies to me what she means: 'In saying this, I am detaching from human emotion or neutralising the language to focus more on the material process... Another word for recycling could be "rearranging".'



By insisting that 'the work is still there', Mann asks us to think hard about what we cherish, why we (as individuals, as institutions) collect objects, how we lavish precious resources upon their care and conservation, and why, in overstretched departments, 'care' occasionally means leaving things in cardboard boxes in basements vulnerable to flooding. What exactly is it that we are trying to conserve? Materials or culture; the thing or the tales we tell about the thing. Can

one exist without the other? And, if we cannot care for the objects we have, why are we always making more?

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Thinking about Mann's work, I can't stop thinking about digging and therefore about moles. Paolozzi's tiles were once installed underground, then dug out as Crossrail burrowed its way under London. The key materials of plaster – gypsum, lime, or cement – must be quarried from the earth. A geode is a formation inside sedimentary or volcanic rock. A graptolite is a fossil, which, etymologically, means something that has been dug up. In a way, Mann's works return all these things to the earth they came from: dust to dust, as the funeral service has it. Their titles too remain, in Mann's word, 'encrypted': buried under ground. Maybe that's why the mole keeps burrowing through my mind: in the language of zoology, a mole is a fossorial – an animal evolutionarily adapted to dig.

An archive or the collection of a museum or university is traditionally a dark place. This is often literally true: certain objects, documents or artworks require low light levels for their effective preservation. But it is a metaphorical truth too: a university collection is housed away from the glare of public scrutiny. Set aside for students and researchers, the collection calls for scholarship (or, in the case of the Talbot Rice Gallery residency programme, art) to shed light upon it. If the museum stores are therefore places of darkness and dust (underground, crypt-like places), the museum galleries by contrast are like cathedrals: light, airy and grandly gilded, full of sunshine (weather permitting) flooding in from, in the case of Talbot Rice Gallery, a trio of glass ceiling domes.

Mann's project navigates these two zones (the surface and the underground). She has dug tunnels through the collection, forged links between people and objects. These tunnels form a legacy, a series of traces that remain beyond the time of the residency itself. There is a suggestion that Mann's four sculptures will be purchased by the university collections. If this goes ahead then the geodes and the bust,

the broken tiles and the graptolite will have undergone a process of institutional re-evaluation. In a way, they will have been re-acquisitioned, stashed inside rocks to be smuggled back inside. From within the collection to 'outwith' and back again: across borders both porous and bureaucratically policed.



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In many ways, what Mann is doing is what happens out there in the world already, as it were, naturally.

Sandstone is formed through a two-part process of sedimentation and compaction caused by pressure and time. By turning objects into powder and placing them inside rock, Mann's act of transformation is not so different: technology increases the pressure, reduces the timescale by a few million years.

A graptolite is a type of colonial organism: a cluster of microorganisms growing together on or within a solid medium. Linnaeus, who named the genus *Graptolithus* in 1735, regarded them as 'pictures resembling fossils rather than true fossils'.¹⁰ The name means something like 'written

in rock'. Mann describes graptolites to me as 'apartment blocks' along a kind of shared 'spine'. Existing together as composite entities, these colonial organisms trouble tired-out distinctions between the individual and the community, between singular and plural. As filter feeders, they drink in the water around them, trapping and ingesting tiny particles of food. The process that the graptolite enacts is therefore not so different to that enacted by the work of art. The rock imbibes the graptolite like the graptolite once imbibed the world – through a straw.

For me, this realisation creates a dizzying, fractal-like effect. A graptolite (itself a conglomerate) filters particles, becomes over time part of the rock; the rock is extracted and relocated, becomes part of a university collection; it is then turned once more to powder, inserted into a porous rock, becomes part of an artwork, and is placed (potentially) back inside the collection. One thing within another to infinite regress.

The resulting vertigo is not only spatial but temporal. The object (and living things – plants, humans, zoonotic diseases – are each also assemblages of objects) exists in a state of flux, if that phrase ('state of flux') is not, after all, a contradiction in terms. Bennett describes 'materiality as a protean flow of matter-energy' and 'the thing as relatively composed form of that flow'.¹¹

An object then is a kind of momentary gathering: one body inside another. Within each gathering is another, and another. And somewhere inside it all waits the name – coy, still obscured, playing its own game of hide-and-seek.

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In lieu of a conclusion, an idea: if the university collection is a slice of the earth, then could we imagine the artist as a kind of mole, digging slowly, laboriously through the soil? The work of art is then not only the tunnels (created within the structure of the substrate) but also the molehills – all that material pushed up to the surface for us to peer at, the visible manifestations of hidden labour.

Does that make the curator an earthworm?

The gallery is a pristine lawn, so carefully tended. But all these molehills that are all of a sudden appearing... Somebody has called in the mole-catcher – oh god, is that me? A Romanian myth tells that a mole helped god create the world with a ball of thread. But god fell asleep and the mole let the thread unspool too far so he ran away and hid underground in shame.

The mole's solution was to squeeze the world, creating mountains and valleys to make the earth smaller so that it would fit underneath heaven.

There is soil all around us now.

And maybe the best thing is to keep digging.

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Notes

1. It is only just before completing a first draft that I notice the Twitter biography of Talbot Rice Gallery curator Stuart Fallon: simply 'OUTWITH' in capital letters.
2. Jane Bennett, 'The Force of Things', *Political Theory*, Vol. 32 No.3, June 2004
3. Graham Harman and Bruno Latour, *The Prince and the Wolf*, Zero Books, 2011
4. Charles Babbage, *The Ninth Bridgewater Treatise* (1837), chapter IX. *On the permanent Impression of our Words and Actions on the Globe we inhabit*
5. Jane Bennett, 'Systems and Things: A Response to Graham Harman and Timothy Morton' in *New Literary History*, 2012, 43
6. Mary Louise Turgeon, *Clinical Hematology: Theory and Procedures*, 1988 https://books.google.co.uk/books?id=cHAjsUgegpQC&lpg=PA100&dq=erythrocyte+size&pg=PA100&redir_esc=y#v=onepage&q=erythrocyte%20size&f=false
7. Marco Cascella, Michael Rajnik, Arturo Cuomo, Scott C. Dulebohn, Raffaella Di Napoli, 'Features, Evaluation, and Treatment of Coronavirus' <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK554776/>
8. John M. Cimballa, lecture notes 28th February 2014 https://www.me.psu.edu/cimballa/me405/Lectures/Slides_Particles.pdf
9. Ann Laura Stoler, 'On the Content in the Form' in *Refiguring the Archive* (ed. Caroline Hamilton), 2002
10. https://www.oldearth.org/curriculum/history/earth_history_c5_silurian_graptolites.htm
11. Jane Bennett, 'The Force of Things', *Political Theory*, Vol. 32 No.3, June 2004



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A conglomerate of voices rise up like hidden steam

By Stuart Fallon

The main protagonist arrives in the opening scene – an unremarkable egg balanced on a blackboard. Soothingly complimented by Mann's narration for her fine ergonomics and protective properties, she bears the reassuring red lion-stamp, confirming her calibre – this is a good egg.

Mann's voice meanders poetically over the imagery, exploring philosophical ideas that take us on a lyrical trip through the lives of objects. 'I've never watched an egg become – it just does, and is.' This acknowledgement of the egg's self-determination, its ability to grow, to choose, to be, outside of human perception, speaks directly to Mann's exploration of the autonomy of objects and the Heidegger-influenced theory of 'object oriented ontology', which problematizes the privileging of humans over objects, and posits that non-human entities have autonomous agency – 'The egg is quiet and never discusses her formation decisions.'

Suddenly, in the first of many disturbances, the egg is unceremoniously skittled out of shot by a self-propelled coconut. Swiftly restored to centre screen our egg is intact, attesting to its innate strength, in defiance of the external force of the errant nut. After the egg is left shaken by another

chance run-in, this time with a foreign object dropping in abruptly from above, we meet a red-skinned apple, minus a large bite. Whilst the fruit does not acknowledge the imperfection, or reveal the perpetrator of its wound, it carries with it a sense of fairy-tale peril, or biblical transgression. As the lesion is delicately caressed by a furtive branch with harmful red berries, the teasing stroke works to further unsettle rather than soothe.

Whilst the image of the bitten apple carries unavoidable associations with the innate human quest for knowledge, its contemporary connotation is entwined with the ubiquitous corporate symbol of modern digital technology, and, in turn, the disputed account of the logo's origin. Mann's apple evokes the pioneering computer scientist Alan Turing who played a fundamental role in the development of modern computing and artificial intelligence. His eponymous test examines the ability of a machine or robot to pass as a human, able to function and thrive beyond the bounds of human knowledge or instruction – the ultimate investigation into the autonomous agency of a non-human subject. A cyanide-laced apple, minus a single bite, was found next to Turing's body after his apparent suicide in 1954.

The apple is joined by our egg, tenderly rolling into view with clumsy comic timing, breaking the tension. The moment of gentle kinship is short-lived however, as a foreign pink liquid floods the scene – the toxic ingress heightening the portentous sense of an unstable environment.

Mann's own arm stretches into shot, cloaked glamorously in a silky blue sleeve, with fingernails painted bright red. The slick material seems to glide over your own skin, as Mann is cast as subtle conductor of proceedings, acting with disruptive intent. The screen flashes blue, moments of transition or breakdown, as the scene fills up with an arrangement of new objects – an ensemble of colour and texture, material and form – a kitsch party of potential playmates. Mann's hand reappears, carelessly disturbing the composition to a satisfying chorus of scratches and scrapes.

The work's denouement takes place underwater, the earlier flood having developed into a deluge. Into the abyss a

series of objects fall and settle, flotsam from some unseen unfolding crisis. The egg comes to rest dutifully among a chunk of packing foam, a partially moulded block of plasticine and a tangled knot of golden ribbon. This new family are quickly engulfed, united within an ethereal white smoke to the sound of a heavenly refrain. In a final twist, with Mann's whispered cryptic footnote, 'Hunt me down Maracas, I'm hiding inside your terrain' the white gas is choked by ominous purple fumes, consuming all in catastrophic rapture – confounding any hope of a resting peace and leaving the ultimate fate of our egg in the balance.





Biography

Stephanie Mann

(born 1990 in Dunfermline. Lives and works in Edinburgh)

Mann's work has been presented at the Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art, SWG3, Glasgow Sculpture Studios and Salon Gallery, Berlin. She is the recipient of the Andrew Grant Bequest Award, John Kinross Travel Scholarship and The John Watson Prize. She was artist in residence at Edinburgh Sculpture Workshop, Ten Chances in Minneapolis USA, Snehta in Athens, Greece and the Edinburgh Art Festival Tourist in residence. She obtained a degree in Sculpture (2011) and an MFA in Contemporary Art Practice (2013) at Edinburgh College of Art.

Talbot Rice Residents

Talbot Rice Residents provides time and support for early-career Scottish-based artists within the unique context of Talbot Rice Gallery, Edinburgh College of Art and the University of Edinburgh.

The programme provides a unique research and development opportunity to artists at a critical point in their career. Rigorous exploration, experimentation and risk-taking is encouraged within a culture of care and curiosity. Residents are provided with studio and office space, access to workshops, libraries and collections, as well as contact with the vast academic community within the University of Edinburgh and ongoing curatorial and technical support from the Talbot Rice team.

The Talbot Rice Residents programme is part of a UK-wide initiative funded by the Freelands Foundation to support and grow creative communities by fostering long term relationships and collaborations between artists and arts organisation. Talbot Rice Gallery became the Scottish recipient of the award in 2018 alongside G39, Cardiff, PS2 (Paragon Studios / Project Space), Belfast and Site Gallery, Sheffield.



This is an ongoing digital publication that will be added to over time. Published by Talbot Rice Gallery, the University of Edinburgh.

Proofreading by Miranda Blennerhassett.

All images courtesy of Stephanie Mann.

Thanks to Tom Jeffreys. All other texts written by Stuart Fallon.

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ISBN 978-1-9162753-2-4

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