

script of *Hiroshima Mon Amour*, 1959. Skelton's opening shot is a dark hotel bedroom scene, an oft-used Akerman trope, the only light being the room's window. One cannot identify the restless figure under the bedclothes, but the minimal subtitles intimate the artist's trepidation about the day's visit to the power plant. The footage alternates between architecture and flora, the pine trees grown from contaminated seeds and the abundance of black wormwood (*Chornobyl* in Ukrainian), nature reactivating itself in the aftermath of nuclear accident. A few strains of evocative film music (Giovanni Fusco's score for *Hiroshima Mon Amour*) quickly vanish to return more emphatically later in conjunction with the infamous dialogue from Alain Resnais' film in which a French actress's claims to remember Hiroshima are negated by her Japanese architect lover. In Resnais' film, two places, Nantes and Hiroshima, coalesce. In Skelton's video, two radiological events are brought into relation; her filmic layering opens up what academic Michael Rothberg refers to as multidirectional memory, in which collective memories emerge in dialogue with one another, current crises and past traumas being linked in such a way that acknowledges their difference while creating a wider narrative of implication across times and locations.

That said, the exhibitionary logic of showing the four videos in 'Ukraine Suite' on small wall-mounted monitors obviated against immersion in this wider narrative. *Conversations With Liquidators*, which featured individual interviews with four male liquidators, did not hold one's attention, given the long pauses and gaps between the liquidators' recounting and the off-screen female translator's faltering hesitancy. While her struggle to translate what on a narrative level are often rather banal details could be said to signal transmitted trauma, subtitles might have aided viewer absorption and accessibility.

*Liquidators* held its own more compellingly. Its voice-over narration, read and written by translator Bernard Hoepffner, invoked a fictional character, Velimir Adnavryen, who self-nominates as a scribe to represent the community of liquidators. Sometimes obscure, his WG Sebald-like ruminations illuminated the mundanity of some of the documentary footage. At moments, Skelton homes in on the liquidators' faces until they fill the screen. Lit in a dewy golden light, these stunningly moving portraits resuscitated the ghostly witnesses who, as Hoepffner's voice-over character recounts, the authorities failed to inscribe into history. Skelton counters this historical omission and lets the connections between then, there and now begin to emerge in synchronic and diachronic dialogue.

**Maria Walsh** is author of *Therapeutic Aesthetics: Performative Encounters in Moving Image Artworks*, 2022.



David Kefford, 'In Search of a Higher Shelf', installation view, Quip & Curiosity, Cambridge

## David Kefford: In Search of a Higher Shelf

Quip & Curiosity, Cambridge,  
22 October to 15 January

Existing until recently as a lighting shop, Quip & Curiosity is a new contemporary art space in Cambridge, the name a holdover from its previous commercial existence. Located a brief stroll from the railway station and art school, its inaugural show, 'In Search of a Higher Shelf', consists of new sculptural works by David Kefford curated by Kristian Day. Many of these artworks have been produced during a summer residency at the space before its public opening and, appropriately, evince the transition from lighting shop to gallery in a manner that is best described as 'site sensitive' rather than 'site specific'. Each sculpture is made from accumulations of discarded materials, some of which were found in and around the space, and others which were discovered on lockdown wanderings and after.

While this procedure suggests that these works betoken assemblage strategies, the resultant sculptures bear closer affinities with biomorphic forms than agglomerated objects *per se*. All the works in the main space are phenomenologically human-scaled and, further enhancing their creaturely status, are elements suggestive of fleshiness. A tongue-like pink balloon pokes limply from an orifice that we might perceive as a 'mouth'; 'glans' reveal themselves from a grey-skinned erection cobwebbed by cardboard packaging; other forms suggest testes, legs and other body parts – all these are part of Kefford's process of 'queering up' the materials he uses. Yet, as the scare quotes confess, anatomical identification is uncertain and not to be

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undertaken in a literalising manner. Also underscoring the indeterminacy is the fact that these forms hybridise internal and external biology. Inverting Gilles Deleuze's formula, these are organs without bodies, not yet formed and therefore also deeply fragile; they lack the protective armouring of flesh.

Kefford's work interacts with aspects of the diverse philosophies placed under the umbrellas of 'new materialism' and 'object-orientated ontology'. At times, these philosophies impute a quasi-agency to matter that refuses the hierarchy between subject and object. But Kefford's engagement here is playful, as the 'shelf/self' pun in the exhibition title suggests. And the living, biomorphic forms extend new materialism's remit by envisaging a fully fledged animism. At stake, then, is not just a matter of working with the *objet trouvé* - the found object so important to Surrealist thought - but also, one might propose, with the *subject trouvé*.

Because these beings are precarious - self-forming, but not yet fully formed - they depend upon an array of supports to define their position in the exhibition space and to maintain their verticality. Some of these supports are readily construable as modifications of the typical methods of presenting sculptural work. For example, *Body Balance (Disobedient)*, 2021, utilises a tall metal cage redolent of the humble plinth; *Tether Weight*, 2022, hangs from a steel girder in a manner that might remind the viewer of Joseph Beuys's gargantuan *Lightning with Stag in its Glare*, 1958-85. Other forms of support are perhaps more ad hoc: a battered wooden trellis is all that forestalls *Error Type*, 2021, from toppling over, while *Self-Entanglement*, 2022, rests on a plank leaning against the wall. Although these various supports manifestly dovetail with customary modes of exhibition display, they should not be perceived as only belonging to the genre of artworks reflexively engaging those modes. On the contrary, because Kefford's sculptures possess animistic qualities and evoke corporeal fragility, it is better to perceive them less as supports than as *crutches*. Look again at *Tether Weight*: describing it as 'hanging from a steel girder' does not encapsulate its physicality in the correct register. It actually reaches and grasps the girder above in a desperate bid to stand upright; the direction of energy in the first instance goes from ground to ceiling and not vice versa, as the thought of it hanging might suggest.

It is in this way that new materialism conjoins with ecological issues in a way that is utterly distinct from the likes of Timothy Morton or Olafur Eliasson. Made from society's discarded paraphernalia, these beings seem to speculate that if the world is rapidly transforming into an inhospitable collective rubbish tip then new or evolving lifeforms will not only adapt by mimicking waste but also by bodily incorporating detritus. Undoubtedly, this might ring a mordant knell and perhaps contributes to the sheer powerlessness that some of us may feel in the face of environmental cataclysm. But part of the exhibition's fascination is its light touch, which tempers tragedy with comedy. As tragic and fragile each being is, the crutches Kefford supplies them with bespeaks their determination to stand. That determination produces humorous sculptural consequences, but there is a lingering optimism there as well alongside a politics of care.

**Matthew Bowman** is an art critic lecturing at the University of Suffolk and Bath Spa University.



Yuri Ancarani, *Il Capo*, 2010, video

## Yuri Ancarani: Works

Kunstverein Hannover 5 November to 8 January

The transition from gallery to cinema is an obligatory rite of passage for many contemporary artists (eg Matthew Barney, Steve McQueen, Sam Taylor-Johnson, Julian Schnabel), but does the appeal of incomparably bigger budgets, and potential access to audiences from a broader demographic, compensate for the conditions of entry: the pressure to adopt conventional narrative forms and the loss of an installation's specific setting? And are these exchanges necessarily tantamount to an expedient choice between depth and reach? I have yet to see the Italian filmmaker Yuri Ancarani's *Atlantide*, currently on cinematic general release - a 'semi-documentary' account of the lives of younger inhabitants of one of the more peripheral Venetian islands, and his first film produced for this form of distribution - but the films he has made to be shown in galleries bode well for his ability to avoid yielding to compromise in the crossover. His art already hints at the potential of more expansive scales, and contains the seeds of narrative elaboration which would facilitate it.

These questions are hard to avoid when the release of *Atlantide* coincides with the first mid-career survey of Ancarani's art at Kunstverein Hannover, where the film is included in a supplementary cinema programme, running in parallel with the show. Art-filmmaking currently leans heavily towards the medium's documentary function. Ancarani, although an artist with the instincts of a documentarian, characteristically pushes documentary forms beyond a pitch of spectacle at which they become no longer recognisable as merely objective. *The Challenge*, 2016, (at 70-minutes, his second-longest production to date) transforms an empirical premise into results closer to surrealism, without resorting to the add-ons of theatre, fiction or other more overt forms of artifice. It is a study of the predilection of wealthy Qataris for the sport of falconry. We follow convoys of chauffeured gold SUVs into the desert, where their owners go to watch their birds compete. These ritualised practices - conflating medievalism with the sharp edge of contemporary capitalism - subvert the film's documentary style, from which Ancarani nonetheless never deviates.

*Wedding*, a film also shot in Qatar in the same year, but at a wedding ceremony, converts a domestic-sized flatscreen into a fabulous window onto the same culture's excesses, and how they operate as a barrier, evacuating unwanted, inconvenient matter, most notably women. Despite the subject, we see only males in their flowing white robes and headdresses, circulating portentously inside a vast hanger in which all exposed surfaces are bordered with gold or gilt.

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