

# ELIZABETH LEACH GALLERY

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## ***In the Vacuum, Outside the Atmosphere***

### **Artist Statement**

**Claire Cowie, 2020**

*In the Vacuum, Outside the Atmosphere* refers to the space unknown to most of us, the place just outside our understanding. It is an “almost-void”, since there is no such thing as a *truly* empty space.

This work is about finding peace within discomfort, loss, and death - making work at a time of great anxiety. I've taken the image of a mariner's compass, and used it as a focus for inner contemplation. Often fragmented in this work, it is used as a representation of my attempts to navigate a meaningful life (and the crashes, bumps, and accidental discoveries along the way).

Contrasting the natural magnetism of the earth and the pull of the cosmos, this work explores the tension between groundedness and soul-searching.

I've been working on the series of small collages titled *Meditations* over the course of two years.

I began them at the beginning of a dear friend's illness, they progressed through her death, and they were finished in the midst of a global pandemic and a cultural reckoning with our society's severe racial and economic injustices. My concerns around care-taking, grief, and embracing the unknown moved from the personal to the universal.

A collection of awards titled *Memento Mori* are reminders of our mortality as a practice of appreciation. Made up of fragments from text messages, they bear the burdens of the everyday as well as the magic of opportunity.

The *Imperfect Vessels* are named such as they are leaky, tilted, more moon rock than vase. Their function is as yet unknown, though I imagine them holding socks or plants or loose change. They come with *Comfort Blankets*, made of repurposed clothing and hand-printed fabrics.

Two larger works on paper, *Elegies*, are poems of grief and happiness, strength and vulnerability.

This exhibition investigates the ways in which we make meaning and impose order in a chaotic world, and it celebrates finding beauty in unanticipated places.

## ***Navigate***

### **A Conversation with Claire Cowie's Exhibition *In the Vacuum, Outside the Atmosphere***

**Mita Mahato, 2020**

What is left when you are gone? A plural, pasted, hallowed hollow. Your skin composed of fragments of others' skins assembled to wrap a body that had been another's body. This skin—this body, too—will disperse. You remain and you are gone. I situate myself within your always-staying-going here and there again.

*I am scorched  
to realize  
once again*

I have questions for you: Where were you before you became entangled in these colors, shapes, and sirens? Were you as pink as you are now? As small and triangular? Were you in company or alone? What did you leave? What did you take? Did you *take joy*? Did you *take a nap*?

Something cuts across this shroud of your skin: A loud color and a sharp shape.

I have a package of straws that reminds me of you. A stack of magazines that reminds me of you. A text from a friend that reminds me of you. A peony in the yard that reminds me of you—or was it my head upon my shoulders? A swirl? A spill? A row of flags? *I had a dream about you*. In the dream, I find myself in your spiraling concentricism. I am at home, searching this leaking circling. Remind me before I overdo it, unravel it, cover it up and disguise it with answers: What is under here? What is over here? What is left when you are gone?

– Mita Mahato is an artist, writer, and the Associate Curator of Public and Youth Programs at the Henry Art Gallery.

## Enormous Things

A reflection on Claire Cowie's Exhibition *In the Vacuum, Outside the Atmosphere*  
David Strand, 2020

Open google drive, right arrow to scan images quickly. Pause on what stands out. Do it again. Then more slowly. Resist the urge to open a new tab. Fail. Forgive yourself. Give what rare bouts of undivided attention you can.

What if text messages accumulated like award ribbons  
Pinned up proudly or tucked beneath the bed in a shoebox for safekeeping  
Rather than archived in an endless scroll

How many would you keep? For how long?

These small reminders  
Ordinary, now exalted  
Words worth repeated viewings

*We're missing something (always)*

The body is a leaky vessel  
Too unwieldy to offer any neat explanations for its failures  
Don't deny it the negative space it deserves  
Better to offer a blanket and let the rest float away

In the space of the unknown  
you feel things you can't see  
and see things you can't feel

Remember to breathe when it's painful  
You're clenching again, holding on too tight  
Relax your jaw, soften your shoulders, open your chest

An emotional rootwad, hard knots coaxed loose  
Bundled and melted into glass, cut cleanly in half  
A vast expanse stretches overhead

Can understanding be found in presence rather than clarity?  
Rubbed and pressed on paper  
Sliced and rearranged  
Two things that come together to make a third, a fourth, a fifth, you get the idea

Sidestep dogma, the resurrection was always just a coping mechanism after all  
Dip into feeling, leave the door unlocked

You already have everything you need  
It's just a snake shedding its skin  
It's just dying  
We all gotta do it

Tune your frequencies accordingly  
She's back in the pulse

Nature repeats, why shouldn't we?

– David Strand is an artist, writer, curator, and Head of Exhibitions and Publications at the Frye Art Museum.