

HESTERCOMBE GALLERY
Contemporary art in reclaimed spaces



Materiality: Provisional States

Sarah Bennett, Megan Calver, Philippa Lawrence

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‘But nothing is “common” in the sense of base or unworthy if it is rightly used’ Gertrude Jekyll, *Colour in the Flower Garden*, London, Country Life Ltd. and George Newnes Ltd, 1908.

Gertrude Jekyll’s *Colour in the Flower Garden* was published the very same year as *Country Life* magazine featured Sir Edwin Lutyens and Gertrude Jekyll’s newly finished Edwardian garden at Hestercombe in glorious black and white. Within those printed monochrome pages, which sit in our archives, lay a world of colourful references. I am constantly amazed at how such black and white images, as well as monochrome paintings and prints can exude and appropriate colour.

In 1791 John Collinson described Coplestone Warre Bampfylde’s Hestercombe as ‘most admirably improved by art, and exquisitely embellished by taste’, and again this very reference was made to the Portman’s garden commission in the 1908 *Country Life* pages. Two things have informed Hestercombe’s history: art, in all its creative forms, and the desire through labour to make it happen.

It is these links and connections to the past that inspire artists to respond to the contemporary, and in this case also help an organisation to ponder its future direction. This exhibition, unlike many, began life as a proposal to give three artists unlimited access to Hestercombe’s landscapes, buildings and archives to ‘see what happens’. No exhibition was promised, just the agreement of sharing thoughts, ideas and art through five sessions with an invited list of participants.

Disclosures and Dialogues, as these sessions became known, took shape, under the coordination of curator Kate Best, and delivered fascinating insights into Hestercombe and future possibilities. Sessions were titled *Island Gracing; Not Quite This or That; Being Here and Being There: Pulling Threads; Tripping [over things]; Observations*. Participants were offered tea at the top of a tower, invited to throw a stone into an off limits pond, led to visit inaccessible landscapes or drop a flower down the tower stairwell, to simply let go.

For me these sessions led to two things: firstly commissioning and curating this exhibition; and secondly further understanding how artists can contribute, not only by showing work (as important as that is), but also by engaging with different types of people: from staff in a rapidly changing organisation, volunteers who want to be part of a journey, children who happen on something, to those people that, knowingly or not, walk into a gallery space and encounter something unusual.

I would therefore like to thank artists Sarah Bennett, Megan Calver, Philippa Lawrence and curator Kate Best for their commitment to Hestercombe – as an artistic work in progress; as well as all those within and outside the organisation that contributed to the dialogue sessions and exhibition.

Tim Martin
Gallery Director



'Materiality: Provisional States' by Cherry Smyth

The management of material is abundantly evident on the Hestercombe estate. The huge restoration project in the 1990s shifted 17 tonnes of silt to retrieve Pear Pond and High Pond and reclaim a lost mill, as well as felling thousands of trees to restore the 18th century views. This, and the painstaking revival of the Lutyens-Jekyll formal garden, have been thanks to the devotion and vision of Somerset County Council and Founder and Chief Executive, Philip White MBE. Devotion requires repetition, patience, insight, perseverance and humility. It also demands selflessness, deletes ego, navigating the dichotomy of permanence and transience, as well as a deep acceptance of the unacceptable: the truth, in this case, that the house and grounds may always be in a state of provisionality, striving towards the fantasy of the finished. One of the great charms of Hestercombe House, however, is its very transient character. It often appears half stripped or half restored and one is never quite sure which direction the process is heading. This liminal quality makes Hestercombe an ideal place to inspire and exhibit art.

In 'Materiality: Provisional States', ideas of devotion link the three artists, Sarah Bennett, Philippa Lawrence and Megan Calver. Over three years, they have interacted closely with Hestercombe, responding to the materiality of the site in unique, compelling and complementary ways. With site-specific work, we seek an unseen relationship to the surroundings, a perception that peoples the atmosphere anew and revitalises a curiosity about the multiple histories of place. This is astutely delivered by Bennett, Lawrence and Calver.

Allan Kaprow once wrote that 'art-like art holds that art is separate from life and everything else, while lifelike art holds that art is connected to life and everything else.' (1) Interconnectedness is key to the approach taken by each of these artists.

Sarah Bennett provides a depth of historical resonance in a roundly satisfying way in 'service is no inheritance', 2018. A congregation of 15 footstools meet in an empty room, their tapestry covers inverted to reveal loose ends, curdled grey stuffing and phantom floral patterns. Bennett highlights the fixtures and furnishings of ease, the leisure of the aristocracy who could put their feet up, while those whose work rarely won a legacy, toiled around them. There's a satirical note of upstairs-downstairs in the recto-verso exchange which keeps the servants' eponymous saying, sewn into one footstool, almost illegible in its inverted state, like a whisper the upper classes had to pretend they couldn't hear.

In *Cultivar*, 2018, Bennett uses silverpoint – a Renaissance process of drawing with silver wire on primed paper – to make microscopic drawings of seeds, sourced almost exclusively from Gertrude Jekyll's garden. Again, Bennett investigates the how and what of perception: what looks in extreme close-up like a sea mollusc is an Elymus seed, or what appears as a tailed cone, a Clematis. We have gourds, pods, purses, shells, what looks like a courgette with a Mohican, a pimpled pouch, a lychee, a hirsute hot water bottle, made quietly private by being viewed individually through a slide viewer. While the flowers in the garden below can be viewed by anyone, Bennett makes the act of viewing the seed drawings distinctly intimate. As Muriel Rukeyser wrote:

'Nourish beginnings....
Not all things are blest, but the
Seed of all things are blest.
The blessing is the seed.'
(2)



One seed drawing Bennett nicknames 'Mouse's Nose' – the hairy cone of *Berkheya purpurea*, a little time bomb that bursts out as a purple daisy in midsummer, its leaves retaining the long, soft hairs visible on the seed. It's clear that the meticulous devotion of drawing parallels the gardeners' hours of tending and nursing, but there is also a hint of covetousness, the desire to own the potential signified by the seed. This leads me to research the origin of the plant's name and how seeds were imported from all over the Empire, wittingly and not. The *Berkheya purpurea* is native to South Africa and was named Sehlohlo in Sesotho, the language of the Southern Bantu, but was renamed by a German botanist in honour of a Dutch botanist, Jan le Franq van Berkhey. The Zulu called it Inkinobho or 'button', yet 'Zulu Warrior' became its common English name. The journey of the mere name of each seed is one that would take as long to describe as Bennett took to draw it, often tracing the colonialization of plants and languages that accompanied the imperialist control of people. Bennett's work encourages this act of slowing down, leaning in and unlocking knowledge.

In the series *Pear Pond I* and *II* and *Untitled*, 2018, Bennett works from a drawing of a pond in the landscape garden. In *Untitled*, she paints a silver nitrate sketch of the pond's outline onto an oval piece of glass. Is it glass becoming mirror or mirror becoming glass? Like a semi-tarnished mirror, the piece hovers between states of being seen, seeing and unseen, cleverly alluding to the vanished pond resurrected during the restoration. There is great skill in the use of materials here, as the stark, exquisite image also signals the potential loss of maritime islands and archipelagos due to climate catastrophe. Global warming is key to *Island Gracing*, 2018, a short video that shows glossy cherries bobbing on branches of the wrong trees – camellia, beech, bay and hazel. The images jar, hint at genetic modification, and make us question whether the breeze and birdsong are also modified or faked too. *Island Gracing*, inspired by an Elizabethan water garden rediscovered on the estate, uses seductive softness to pack a hard punch. What was brought here to grace the UK island was often rooted in mimicking the flora of colonised landscapes and creating artificial views that boasted of conquest.

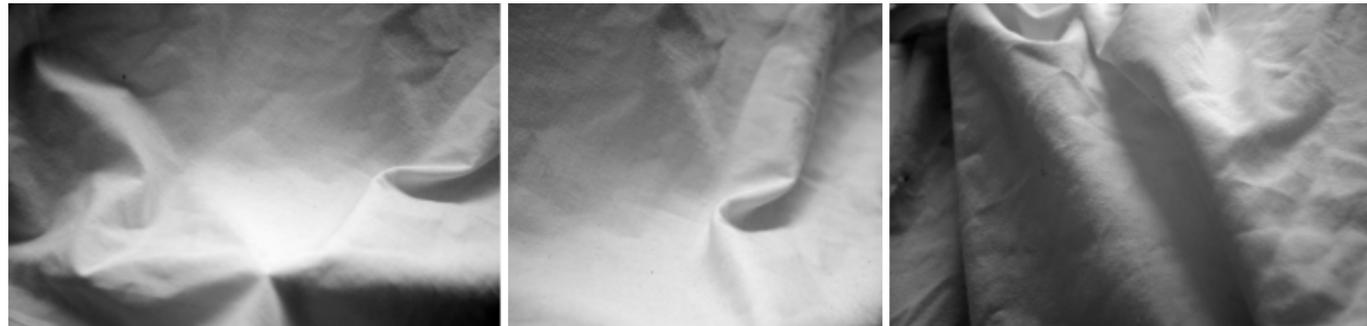


The hidden labour in aesthetics also drives Philippa Lawrence's work. The black and white close ups of creased white fabric in the series *The Topography of Cloth*, 2017, works brilliantly to suggest the hours of washing, ironing, folding and unfolding linens that the female staff would have undertaken. The cloth slips associatively from bedsheet to canvas, the photograph from paper to painting, evoking the sumptuous artworks (of mostly male subjects) that once adorned the walls. Why must linen be ironed? And why must women do the ironing? What is the obsession with the pristine, the tabula rasa, the virgin? Lawrence gives the creases time to inhabit their own landscape, reflecting the Blackdown Hills beyond the window, without being seen as flawed.

Core to Lawrence's practice is her interest in and relationship to threatened materials and processes and cultural heritage. In *Stasis*, 2018, Lawrence honours the felled trees in the Hestercombe grounds, detailed in a beautifully hand-drawn tree stump survey she found in the Hestercombe archives, also on display here. Talking through the project at a local sawmill, the artist managed to locate a massive oak tree stump that had lain in the recess of an enormous barn. Lawrence's practice has led her to engage with crafts that are in danger of falling into obsolescence and so she decided to learn the craft of French polishing as a way to connect both to the former oak tree and to a skill

that is no longer commonplace. She spent days slowly sanding and layering the polish across the cut face of the tree stump. 'It's like a world that you can get lost in,' she explains. 'I wanted to spend time in this continent.' Here the smooth, reflective polished surface offsets the rugged and idiosyncratic clump of roots that are left unpolished in a beautiful disposition on nature and nurture, the 'raw' and the 'cooked'. Just as Bennett makes us see the role of furniture in the history of Hestercombe and the history of class, Lawrence points to the traditional craft of French polishing in preserving and beautifying wood, and creates an astounding transitional object between indoor furniture and outdoor trees, between tree and sculpture, between labour and the self.

Physical labour is foregrounded in *Stasis* through the bodily meditation of touch. Walter Benjamin once said that we don't touch to be touched back, but to give something that has already been given so much. Lawrence's demanding manual work is a tribute to the tree's beauty and strength, to its role in having purified the air and brings to mind how Ben Nicholson described spirituality in art, 'Painting and religious experience are the same thing. It is a question of the perpetual motion of a right idea.' (3) It's clear that the bond between human and tree is an intense one, akin to devotion. 'If the tree is a stitch between heaven and earth,' Lawrence suggests, 'then the stump is a knot.'





Megan Calver's work is also closely tied to questions of ecology and change. *For Spill: real colour (part two)*, 2018, Calver spent up to six hours building up each empty hearth in the house with damp anthracite coals, using the dry-stone walling method. Hestercombe once had thirty-two grates, and the second highest hearth tax in the country, which points not only to the immense privilege but to the vast labour required to keep the fires lit and the grates clean. The coals are banked in obsessive, tight layers, allowing no oxygen to move a flame, evoking the end of fossil fuel. Coal may be unrecognisable to the next generation and here glints with decorative menace as if to communicate something of their long life, their lost worth. Once again, the artist pays tribute to women's daily domestic labour, almost in a kind of penance, on her knees, hands filthy with soot, slowly picking and placing each coal, to mark the cultural significance of coal at the centre of many

generations' lives. While Lawrence's work practised skills that are in danger of being lost – French polishing and enamelling, Calver invents a new skill: bringing the stone walls of the landscape inside. The coal-studded hearths now act as barriers against fire, (they could not burn), a fitting and wry reminder of the years 1953-2006 when the Somerset Fire Brigade used the house as their headquarters. Calver also engages with this strange legacy of a former tenant by illuminating the lightbox 'Emergency 999 call in progress' for the first time since 2006 and by inserting her own simulacra into what was the fire brigade's control room. Calver's new lightboxes read 'Devoré Data' and 'Reckless Velvet'. Devoré velvet is the process of burning pattern into velvet much like the flocked and embossed wallpaper used in the house. This aptly highlights the antinomy of destruction as part of a cycle of new creation.

Lawrence follows her desire to give the missing trees of Hestercombe a reconstituted form in *Trace*, 2018, a stunning piece that further explores materiality and endangered skills. Lawrence visited only one of three enamelling factories left in the UK, (where there were once ninety-nine fifty years ago), developing the project over a six-week period, discussing fabrication and observing and learning the processes. She then worked with the enamellers to enamel the profiles of the tree stumps selected from a roll call of over 20 species, including English Elm, False Cypress, Cedar, London Plane, Holly, Birch and Cherry Laurel. The flat, irregular enamel disks are laid across the floor, catching the passing light and evoking the

traces we find of ourselves outside ourselves: something planted, something designed, something made. Lawrence deliberately chose colours from an industrial palette, from navy and dark turquoise to putty pink, and each horizontal portrait exudes its own distinct personality and a playful resilience. Some outlines are smooth and billowing, as expressive as the clouds that once watered the ghosted trees; others are smaller cartoonish blobs; while more look like aerial views of islands rivened with inlets. This Pop Art sculpture suggests the lost trees, a transposed mapping of a landscape once allowed to run wild and then cultivated into composed views of arboreally framed vistas.



Our emergencies are now increasingly caused by reckless data: its intrusion of privacy, its algorithmic control and its havoc on systems that govern us. Yuval Noah Harari suggests that dataism is becoming the new global religion: 'Dataism expects electronic algorithms to eventually decipher and outperform biochemical algorithms.....' (4) He goes on to argue that freedom of information doesn't give more freedom to humans, but to information, 'privileging the right of information to circulate freely over the right of humans to own data and restrict its movement.' (5) Calver's succinct work illuminates a bright warning in a darkened room.

Calver brings a quiet mania to her series, *Spill: real colour (part one)*, 2018. Here she takes flowers from Hestercombe's formal gardens at different times of the year and explores them in a deeply forensic way. She holds them above a flame to see how fire and flower interact. Inspired by Gertrude Jekyll's renunciation of the word 'flame' being used to describe a scarlet colour, Calver investigates what colours lie beneath what petals show. As if foreseeing the effects of long-term drought and sun exposure on plants, Calver subjects each flower to heat dissection and colour scans the results. Under heat, the orange of the poppy shrinks from its edges while the waxy white water lily petals resist the flame, with only its stem blackening. On one flower, the flame seems to have drawn a thin graphite line around each petal, as if making a drawing of itself on itself: a kind of flame tattoo. It seems that there is always a desire

to take something apart to see how it upholds our devotion. I'm reminded of Fanny Howe's poem about how beauty has the habit of finding ways to torture itself: 'There are some gems tear at their colours all night.' (6)

We have already produced hybrid plants to withstand hotter summers and Calver brings a mischievous wit to her own flora experiments. In a digital upgrading of the book-pressed flower, each scorched flower is flattened and scanned. Calver is interested in how the scanner auto-reads the colours, lending another interpretation to the eye. An astronaut returning to earth claimed he could see more colours in space than on earth which led the poet and artist Etel Adnan to assert that 'the object of our search is these colours.' (7)

The final results are stunningly toned, floral portraits that conceal how they were conceived, outlining the malleability of nature and its unknowability, beyond our categorising eye. There's the eerie sense of an anti-memorial in this series that displays the doughty resistance of the flowers' refusal to be used.

Three artists, three years, three conversations among each other and with the landscape and the house that have created intricate and important layers of overlap and interconnection that remake history, challenge the rules of aesthetics and reflect the dangers the ecosystem needs to overcome to survive on this planet.

(1) Allan Kaprow, quoted in *Art & Activism in the Age of Globalisation* (Rotterdam: Nai Publishers, 2011), p.41

(2) Muriel Rukeyser, 'Tenth Elegy: Elegy in Joy', from *Elegies* (New York: New Directions, 1949)

(3) Ben Nicholson, *Circle* (London: Faber, 1937)

(4) Yuval Noah Harari, *Homo Deus* (London: Vintage, 2017), p.428

(5) *Ibid.* p.446

(6) Fanny Howe, *The Lyrics* (Minneapolis: Graywolf, 2007)

(7) Etel Adnan, *Journey to Mount Tamalpais* (New York, The Post Apollo Press, 1986)



Megan Calver

Megan Calver generates site-responsive artworks, investigating locations and their inhabitants in a spirit of imaginative discovery. A recurrent theme is her speculative relation to the other-than-human lives and things with which she co-exists. She makes and uses objects, sculptural interventions and live actions in a process of teamwork with people, places and things. For the past decade she has focused her enquiries throughout the South West of England where collaborations have grown and taken hold. In 2018 she was commissioned with Gabrielle Hoad to make an 8-channel sound installation, *Turn (the) leaves*, for Art on the East Devon Way at Thelma Hulbert Gallery, Honiton.

Projects include *The Buffer Zone* an experimental collaboration at Dawlish Warren National Nature Reserve supported by a Professional Development Bursary from The Artist Information Company (2016); *Loiter like a leaf* commissioned by Somerset Art Works in partnership with National Garden Scheme (2013); *In winter look patiently around the edges of pools*, an enquiry about memory loss with Social Scientists at Bournemouth University leading to publication in the journal *Creative Approaches to Research* Volume 5, Issue 2 (2012).

Calver is an active member of Preston Street Union, an Exeter-based affiliation of artists who initiate new work and learning through social and collaborative processes.

www.megancalver.com



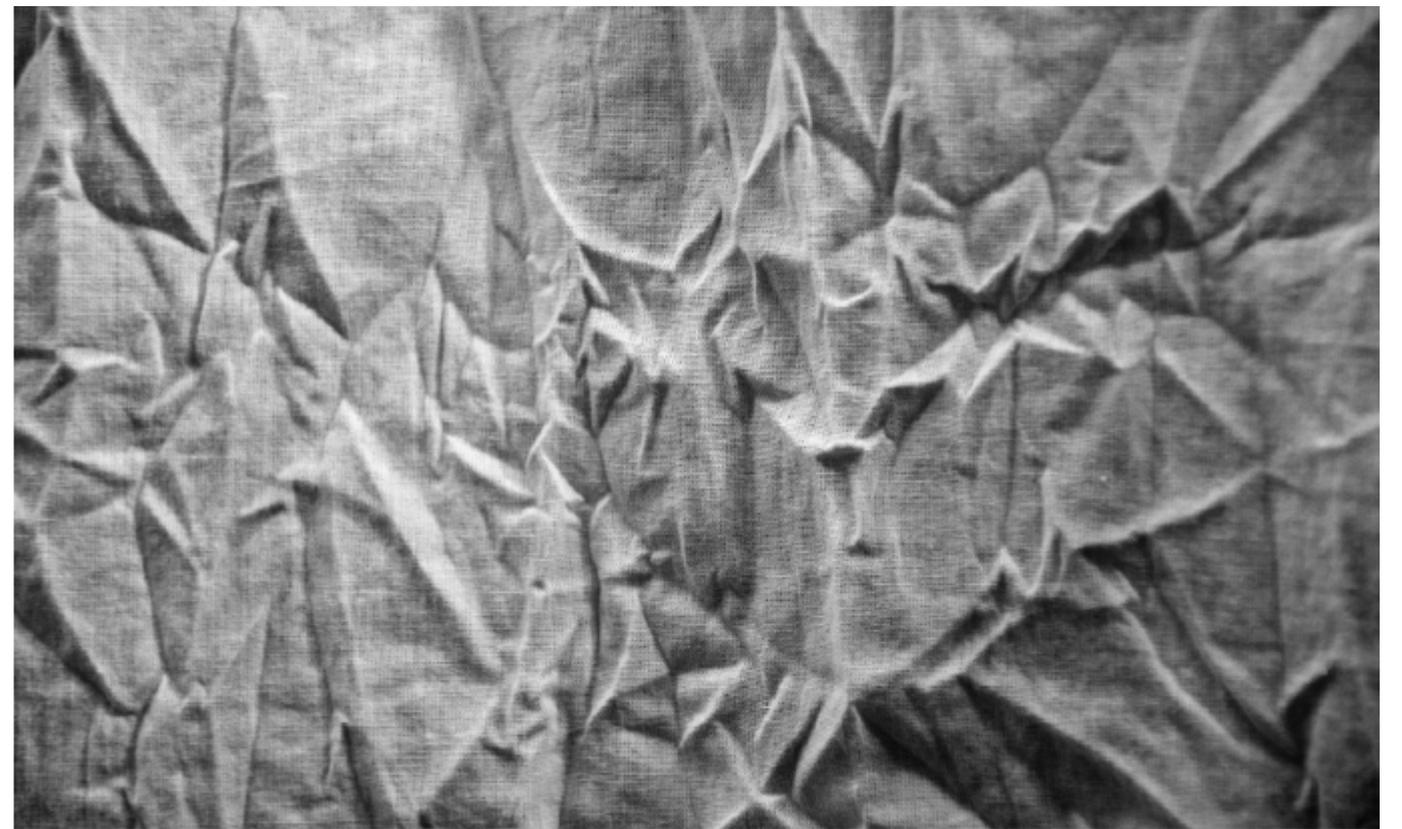
Philippa Lawrence

Philippa Lawrence is based at Spike Island, Bristol and is a Principal Lecturer at Cardiff School of Art & Design, Cardiff Metropolitan University. Her practice is diverse, grounded in the process of reading and understanding site, embracing land and environmental art, the use of textiles in a fine art context, and the relationship between art, craft and design. Her concepts and material choices are research and context-led. She is involved in on-going research looking at our cultural heritage, engaging with the last practitioners of traditional craft skills.

Lawrence has exhibited widely both in the UK and internationally, including America, Japan, Czech Republic, Canada, Iceland and Australia. Projects have been commissioned for galleries, organisations and sites including: UNESCO World Heritage Sites of Singapore Botanic Gardens; Salts Mill, Saltaire; Morton Arboretum, Lisle, Illinois; The National Botanic Garden of Wales; the nature reserve island of Videy, Iceland; municipal parks and the National Trust properties Waddesdon Manor, Aylesbury and Croft Castle, Leominster. Recent exhibitions include: *Nature's Alchemy*, bo-lee, London, 2017; *Angles of Incidence*, with Randy Chan, Singapore Botanic Garden and Inner Temple, London through AiRx and the British Council, 2014 *Cloth & Memory {2}*, Salts Mill, Saltaire, 2013.

In a rapidly changing world, she asks us to consider human engagement with the earth and its resources and to understand and appreciate the shifting value, production and status of materials, art and artifacts.

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Materiality: Provisional States, new work by Sarah Bennett, Megan Calver and Philippa Lawrence at Hestercombe Gallery 10.11.18 – 24.02.19

Curated by Tim Martin

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Images

- Cover: Megan Calver *Spill: real colour (part one) (detail)*, 2018
- Page 3 Site of Elizabethan Water Garden, Hestercombe
- Page 5 Sarah Bennett *Cultivar (installation view)*, 2018
Sarah Bennett *Cultivar (poppy solar ice)*, 2018
Sarah Bennett *'service is no inheritance' (detail)*, 2018
- Page 6 Sarah Bennett *Island Gracing (video still)*, 2018
- Page 7 Sarah Bennett *Cultivar (detail)*, 2018
- Page 8 Philippa Lawrence *Topography of Cloth (detail)*, 2018
- Page 9 Philippa Lawrence *Stasis*, 2018
- Page 10 Philippa Lawrence *Trace*, 2018
- Page 11 Megan Calver *Spill: real colour (part two)*, 2018
- Page 13 Megan Calver *Spill: real colour (part one)*, 2018
- Page 14 Sarah Bennett *Seolfur (detail)*, 2018
- Page 15 Sarah Bennett *'service is no inheritance'*, 2018
- Page 16 Megan Calver *Spill: real colour (part two)(detail)*, 2018
- Page 17 Megan Calver *Spill: control*, 2018
- Page 18 Philippa Lawrence *Bonsai, Bound VI*, 2018
- Page 19 Philippa Lawrence *Topography of Cloth*, 2017
Philippa Lawrence *Shift (detail)*, 2018
Philippa Lawrence *Shift (detail)*, 2018



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