# Large Print Transcript of UNTITLED Review (video)

# By Jennifer Brough, Flo Jensen, Charley Skinner, Emma Astra, Ell Hammond, and No Jobs in the Arts.

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# Untitled Review: an exhibition about bodily slippages and inhabiting otherness across identities and illness.

QUAD and No Jobs in the Arts’ latest art exhibition, UNTITLED, showcases dreamlike ideas from four early-career creatives in the Midlands. But blink and you’ll miss it! Oddly, this exhibition is only on for a day…

Words by Jennifer Brough following a visit to the exhibition.

## Flo Jensen.

Before entering the main gallery to encounter Flo Jensen’s ‘It’s Rude to Stare’, we are met with an array of bald caps and fanciful wigs sitting on mannequin heads. They await inspection on their neat white shelves like rows of eggs. We must choose one. I side-eye my partner, already knowing we’ll gravitate towards the colourful lace fronts. I pick up a coiffed head of cascading copper waves and she opts for a Farrah Fawcett number. We gently preen each other’s new look – there are no mirrors but our eyes – and cross the threshold.

Then we see him.

An enormous suited figure sits cross-legged beneath an even bigger bell jar. It is not just the size of this elongated Monopoly man that is alarming. It’s that he has no face.

A group of bald-capped young people bubble in, laughing and taking selfies. We tread an uncertain circumference around the glass and a mechanical whirring begins. The man judders into life, metal joints chafing against his pressed suit. Rising up to full height, top hat nudging the bell jar’s curved peak, the man surveys us. The kids’ laughs peter out as one whispers, “Nah man, that’s low-key creepy.”

A metallic clang resounds as he taps on the glass with his cane. One, two, three… He stops at six. The number of people in the gallery. One kid turns to his friends, “Is that it? I’ve seen scarier episodes of Goosebumps.”

The screeching shudder of metal against glass causes us all to jump. The suited man lurches towards the bald caps, like a hen pecking at seeds. The group scatters, but his attention is locked. Over and over he swings, until the bald group runs out. Then he stops. Just like that. We leave too, sharing a nervous laugh and removing our wigs, thankful for the glass separating him from us.

## Charley Skinner.

Heading to the left side of the gallery, we encounter photographic work by Charley Skinner. I smirk at the title, ‘But you don’t look ill’, and mentally note to text my sick friends. A white-walled room is cast in the shadow of swaying tree branches.

“Komorebi,” I say.

We watch the patterns dance on our skin and sit before the photographs. Like their frames, the chairs are made of wizened wood with comfy leaf-shaped cushions. I close my eyes to enjoy the wind easing through absent trees.

Relaxed again, I consider the black and white photographs. The unfocused slim tree limbs are frozen, but the blurring suggests they were once quivering. Perhaps I’ve spent too much time in doctors’ offices, but the effect echoes an ultrasound reading. A fragment of a forest captured for static examination. The misted objects in motion invite us to project readings onto the piece: veins interlocking, a cave’s interior, or a portal to a hidden wood?

Skinner’s use of nature to portray the brain fog that accompanies many invisible illnesses is sharply observed. As symptoms are in a state of continual flux, a singular moment is not representative of someone’s wider condition. These dark branches could be signs of a storm heralding a flare or the slow shutter of an eyelid blinking away fatigue. I linger on this piece, reluctant to leave.

## Emma Astra.

We double back to the right side of the gallery, passing through eerie medical curtains. Emma Astra’s ‘Trial by TikTok’ installation contains a hospital bed, medical equipment, a blank TV screen, laptops and phones scattered over nearby tables. Everything is white and the medical items are contained in plastic film. I wrinkle my nose at the smell of disinfectant. Did I mention how much time I’ve spent in hospitals?

The TV blinks on, a welcome distraction, to play a vlog of headlines, starting with a story of the government funding a major art exhibition to create opportunities for disabled people. I bark out a single, “Ha.” The laptop screens flash through various disabled creatives. The telephones shriek a cacophony as the TV cuts to a red-ribboned headline informing us that each of the artists is being sanctioned for benefit fraud. The laptops flash penalty letters. We see a re-enactment of the artists unable to get to trial due to inaccessible transport, expenses, and inadequate care. The final headline blares: Government unveils groundbreaking scheme to reduce benefit costs. The scene cuts to a plane and the artists’ faces stare out bleakly. Destination: Rwanda. On the runway, a crowd of protestors block the flight path. Uniforms are crawling. Before long, blurs of batons and high vis crack down onto placards and then body parts. Wheelchairs are overturned. The screens fade to black.

We sit silently.

My former laugh is now hollow, as I reflect that Astra’s wry critique of the government’s refugee scheme demonstrates how little of a stretch it would be to apply, already unlawful practices, to more vulnerable groups in the name of budgeting.

I think about how Skinner and Astra’s pieces both employ a disability justice lens to different ends. Astra’s bureaucratic dystopia highlights the intersections of injustices between marginalised identities. Skinner’s piece, a slow-burner, winks to the chronically ill.

## Ell Hammond.

We almost miss the last artwork as we head out; a community information board, featuring a display of safety notices, a local map, and typed sailing times. Luckily, an invigilator is on hand to explain. She talks us into joining the back of a group destined for the River Derwent, apparently to catch the off-site commission before the last sailing time — obviously, we’re curious. Who wouldn’t be?

After a short-ish walk, we head down a gangway to the riverside and see a glittered sign introducing Ell Hammond’s ‘A Fluid Utopia’. We put on life vests and board our transport — an inflatable ferry splashed with patterns. The sound of water sluicing against a shoreline is a welcome balm. I look down at the water, curious about the destination and what version of utopia waits. The boat is unsteady as we climb aboard. Once seated, a multitudinous voice intones, “I am the Goddess of Fluidity”, and we set sail.

The boat drifts towards a cell-like structure studded with windows. The walls look malleable yet sturdy, like a glass marshmallow. I graze my fingertips against them — smooth and ancient. Bubbles float under the refracting crystal as water flows through the walls’ inner chambers. The raft docks and we help each other alight.

Televisions are embedded in the structure, with buttons encrusted in coral. We recline on smooth benches and tune in. The sound of water rushing, but beneath it something else… a low rhythmic whispering. The screen is bright with colours, universes unfolding within painted hands. Skin on skin, the limbs of multiple bodies entangled, washed in the chorus.

We move trance-like from room to room, where more videos wait in enclaves. Multiple bodies across the spectrum dance and sweat, go to the shops, wait for a train; the ordinary imbued with small explosions of joy. We soon realise each storyline is interconnected. In the final room, two performers pass silver orbs back and forth. We watch from the circle of seats as they throw orbs in the river, which glide out of sight.

Inner softness pads our walk to the dock, which dissipates as we see our return boat is a rickety pile of planks bound by wire. We jostle on, sardined among others, as a cut glass accent drones, “This is the God of Norm. Fill in this form. Now.”

Each question only has two options, the first: male or female. I crumple the form into a ball and drop it into the river. Norm clips, “Keep your arms inside the boat.”

We ignore the voice to chat about Jansen and Hammond’s works being a natural pairing, both leaning into magical realism to insist gender identity expands beyond an enforced binary. Yet even in these whimsical worlds, the Man and God of Norm preside over what is and is not desirable or acceptable using heightened caricatures.

## Summary.

While each piece in UNTITLED provides an opening into an ‘othered’ position, or bodily slippage, it simultaneously enforces a closing — the reprieve terminated by the worlds’ internal parameters and laws. The works are a reminder to keep creating and preserving spaces of otherwise, beyond binary thinking and the state’s cruelty. To imagine what future worlds could be and how we can work collectively in solidarity and resistance.

## Additional Information.

You can find UNTITLED on Tuesday 2nd January 2024 at QUAD, Market Place, Cathedral Quarter, Derby, DE1 3AS.

About the writer. Jennifer Brough (she/they) is a slow writer and workshop facilitator based in Nottingham. She writes poetry, short stories, creative non-fiction, and reviews that explore the body, pain, gender, horror, art, and literature. You can read more work by Jennifer online at www.jenniferlbrough.com.

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