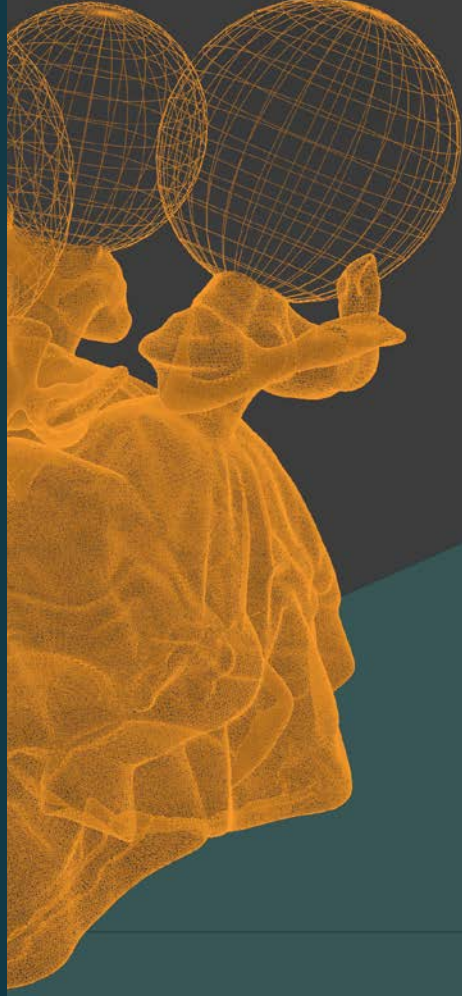
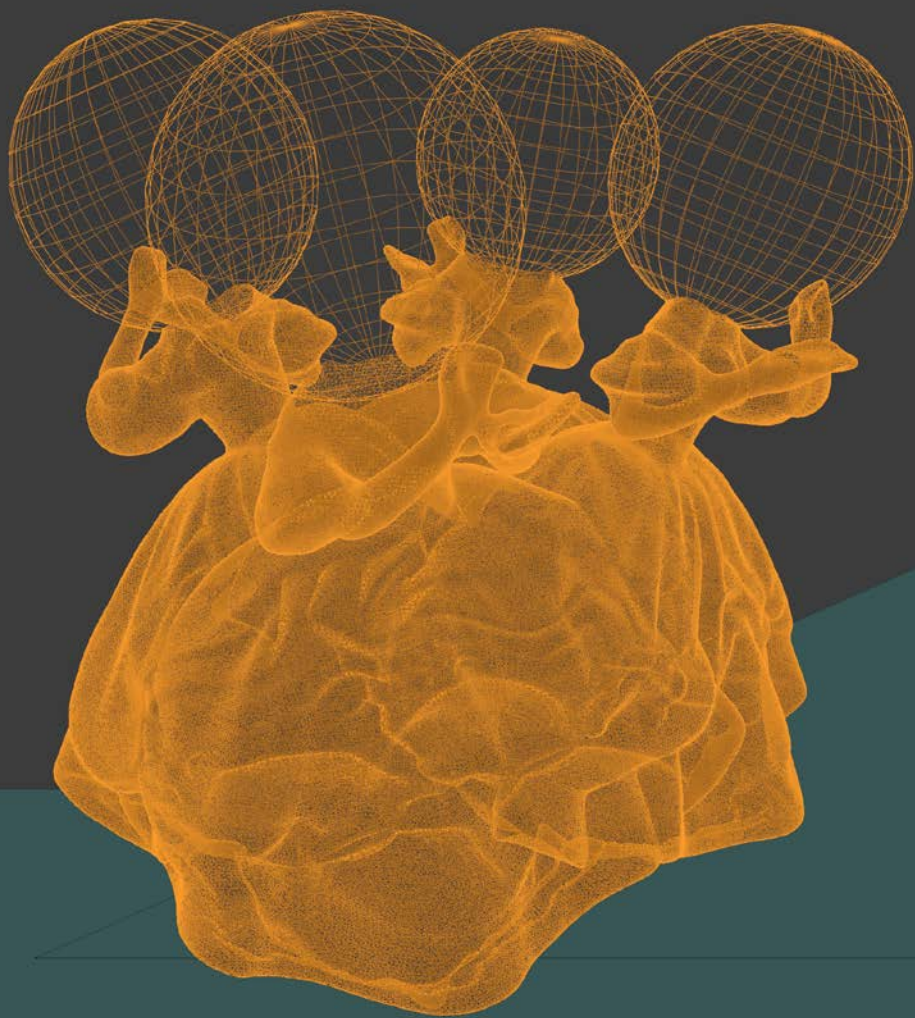


Matt Smith

CFPR Editions / Like People in History
Foreword by Meredith Martin

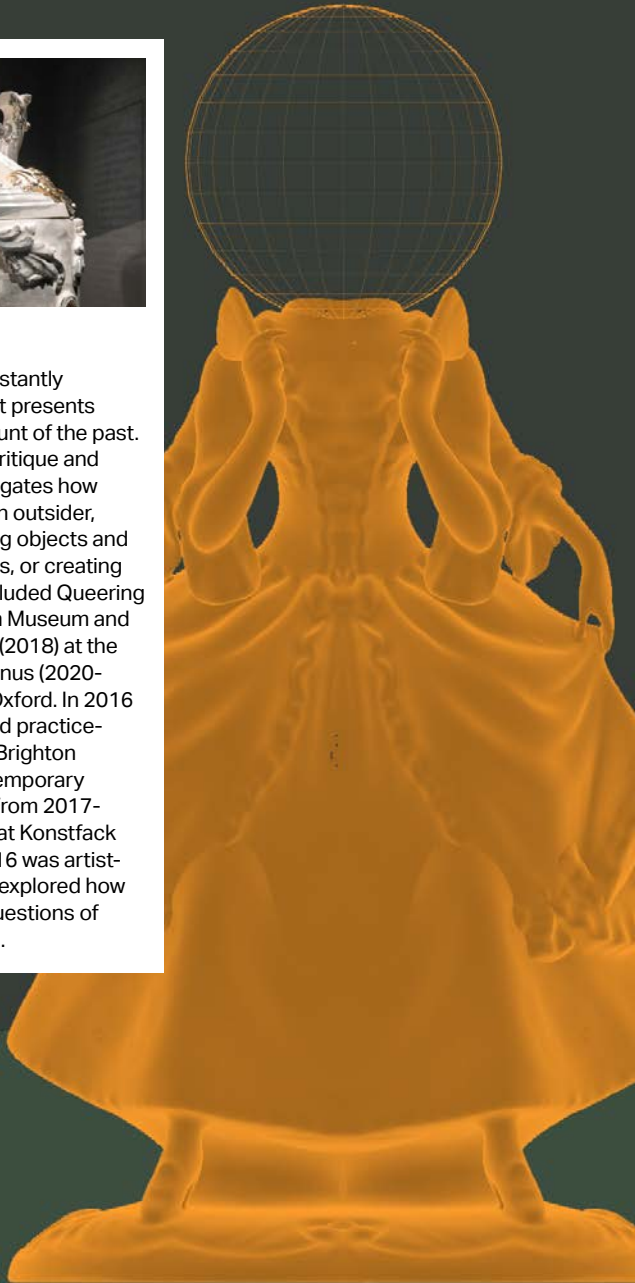






Matt Smith

Matt explores how history is a constantly selected and refined narrative, that presents itself as a fixed and accurate account of the past. Using techniques of institutional critique and artist intervention, his work investigates how museums can be reframed from an outsider, often LGBTQ, perspective by taking objects and repurposing them in new situations, or creating 'lost objects'. Solo shows have included *Queering the Museum* (2010) at Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery, *Flux: Parian Unpacked* (2018) at the Fitzwilliam Museum and *Losing Venus* (2020-2022) at the Pitt Rivers Museum, Oxford. In 2016 Matt was awarded an AHRC funded practice-based PhD from the University of Brighton exploring the intersection of contemporary art practice and queer identities. From 2017-2022 Matt was Professor of Craft at Konstfack University in Stockholm and in 2016 was artist-in-residence at the V&A where he explored how historic figurines could address questions of representation within the museum.



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'What a miserable luxury is that of porcelain! A cat, a brush with the sleeve, may destroy in a moment more than the produce of twenty acres'.

Louis-Sébastien Mercier wrote these words in his 1771 novel *L'an 2440* (The Year 2440), translated into English in 1772. A milestone of early science fiction and the first futuristic utopia, *L'an 2440* was an instant bestseller and went through numerous reprintings in Europe and the United States, though it was banned in Catholic France and Spain. The plot centers on a Parisian gentleman who, after conversing with an English traveller, falls asleep and awakens six hundred and seventy years later to find that the world has been 'perfected' according to Enlightenment ideals: slavery been abolished (but patriarchy is still rampant), and 'Europe is no longer the enemy of the other three parts of the globe...its vessels go in search of examples of simplicity and refined manners, and not of contemptible riches'. Wandering through an altered Paris, the narrator enters an airy salon and marvels at the absence of 'brittle, tasteless trinkets' as well as any 'varnishing, porcelain, *magots* (Asian or Asian-inspired porcelain figurines), and sad gilding'. In Mercier's novel, porcelain signifies both an entrenched privilege and an imagined precarity: a shape-shifting relic of the past that also indulges fantasies of its future destruction.

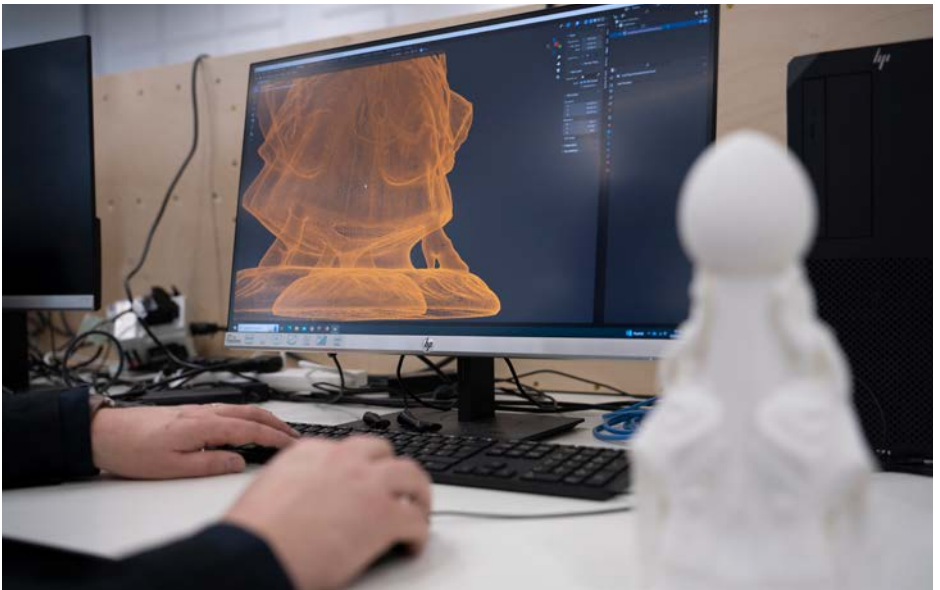
Porcelain's ability to collapse time and space was a hallmark of its eighteenth-century identity. Although it had been produced in China for centuries, Europeans had only begun to divine its technological secrets, giving porcelain a cutting-edge, mystical quality that can be difficult for viewers to access today. Some trace of that enchantment, however, resides in Matt Smith's latest body of work, which also channels porcelain's darker side—creating an effect that I would describe as 'rococo cyberpunk'. By playing with 2-D and 3-D technologies in a way that recalls the porcelain experiments of the past, Matt has created a dystopian dessert service of deformed chevaliers and shepherdesses, some of whom mutate, duplicate, and crystallize before our eyes or sprout globes in place of heads. On some level, these ceramic cyborgs resemble the disfigured 'wasters' of early modern kiln trials gone wrong, while on another they evoke the accreted bodies of shipwrecked porcelain found after centuries of being buried at the bottom of the sea. Either way, their stretched,

Opposite: Digital print.
Opposite inset: Photograph by
Mark Stedman.

fractured, and twinned forms conjure the fourth dimension of time and prompt a reflection on the many uncanny ways past and present are linked.

I like to think these futuristic figurines could have graced the Parisian dining tables of *L'an 2440* had its protagonist liked porcelain better. They embody an eighteenth-century fascination with the permeable boundary between animate and inanimate form – an idea expressed in fairy tales and so-called 'it narratives' of the time, in which luxury goods like sofas and teapots come to life and tell their stories, as well as in the period obsession with Ovid's Pygmalion, the lonely artist who falls in love with Galatea, his fantasy female creation, and (with the help of Venus) magics her into being. Like porcelain, these cultural phenomena were tied to the rise of global capitalism, consumer culture, and their radical reordering of socio-economic and psychic life, a process whereby commodities began not just to represent but to speak for or even replace the self. Much of eighteenth-century European art and philosophy is profoundly concerned with the question of who or what counts as human, a question also linked to a new market economy that redefined the relationship of person to property, and to the expansion of colonialism and the slave trade, which violently reduced humans to the status of things.

Below: Digital modelling.
Photograph by Simon Regan



Matt's media manipulations bring these ideas to the fore and suggest how they were always already embodied in eighteenth-century porcelain figurines that, unlike other official or 'high' art forms, make visible a wide range of identities, sexualities, and desires, even as they sometimes delimit or lampoon these desires through objectification and caricature. His female cyborgs in particular – both latter-day Galateas and proto-Barbies – seem to push against and shatter their restrictive casings and the normative gender roles to which they are assigned. Or, perhaps more terrifyingly, they unveil their status as mere robots or dolls, figures of male fantasy whose soft flesh is really just cold, brittle ceramic. Either way, they reveal undertones of repression and resistance beneath their deceptively pliant surfaces while also suggesting new possibilities for embodiment.

Given his embrace of Rousseauian ideals of femininity, it's unlikely that *L'an 2440*'s narrator would have approved of these avenging avatars, but he would have championed the overt associations Matt's figures make between porcelain and colonial exploitation as symbolized by the head-as-globe. Not only was porcelain the first truly global commodity, a major catalyst of imperial ambition, but it was also used to serve 'contemptible' goods like coffee and sugar, whose appearance on the tables of the 'civilized' European elite was made possible by brutal practices of colonialism and enslavement. Mercier's narrator may be able to imagine a world in which such evils have been erased, but Matt's cyborgs carry the weight of history on their shoulders, reminding us of the need to look back on its dark mirror and acknowledge how it bears on the present.

Unlike Mercier, Matt sees potential in history's 'tasteless trinkets'. It may be because of their low-stakes kitsch factor that we can connect more intimately with these porcelain bodies, to feel a closeness with the past and to see, for better or worse, some part of ourselves. In earlier projects, Matt manipulated and rearranged ceramic figurines in museum collections as a way of confronting blind spots in institutional practice – of giving voice to historical realities and desires, like queerness, that museums typically suppress. Here, the manipulations have changed but the goal is consistent and no less ambitious: to mobilize the material remnants of the past as a way to dream of a different future.

Meredith Martin

Meredith is Professor of Art History at New York University and the Institute of Fine Arts and specializes in eighteenth-century French art.

— Diminutive, marginal
and ridiculous as they
may seem today,
figurines are also
powerful signifiers —



Like People in History

I joined the Centre for Print Research at the University of the West of England for a three month artist residency in the Spring of 2023. I wanted to explore the manipulation of porcelain figurines through scanning, digital manipulation and 3D printing. As a ceramicist, I have worked with found figurines in my studio practice, but there are limits to what you can do with fired clay and I was keen to see what the languages of digital processes might bring to this investigation.

Porcelain figurines are made in moulds. Usually they are made from many moulds whose casts are assembled before firing in the final form of the figurine. To make new moulds from a complex figurine is often impossible without destroying the original figure. I was interested in how digital scanning and printing could enable distortion and reproduction without affecting the original objects.

Diminutive, marginal and ridiculous as they may seem today, figurines are also powerful signifiers. First developed in the early eighteenth century at Meissen, porcelain figurines were produced for dessert tables to replace a centuries-old tradition of sugar sculptures. These figurines of 'the labouring poor, the artisans and professionals of the Saxon state'¹ were more than ornamental. 'In a society where people were acutely conscious of their social position and where the hierarchy was rigid in comparison to Britain, these depictions personified the subject peoples of the state and reinforced social distinctions.' Figurines of 'misfits, laborers, and peasants...[provided] a social and cultural counterpoint to the atmosphere of wealth and refinement in which these objects were displayed.'² All this before we start digging into the colonial horrors associated with the sugar they replaced.

1. Sarah Richards qtd in Adrienne L Childs, "Sugar Boxes and Blackamoors: Ornamental Blackness in Early Meissen Porcelain," *The Cultural Aesthetics of Eighteenth-Century Porcelain*, eds. Alden Cavanaugh and Michael E Yonan (Abingdon: Routledge, 2016) 173-4.

2. *ibid*, 174.



“Figurines of ‘misfits, laborers, and peasants... [provided] a social and cultural counterpoint to the atmosphere of wealth and refinement in which these objects were displayed.”

Above: Digitally manipulated, 3D printed PLA figure.
Photograph by Simon Regan.



“Studio ceramics is a lonely place for figurines. The decorative, historical and industrial fight against the ideals of the minimal, contemporary and individual.”

It is quite the turnaround that three hundred years later, we find relatively cheap porcelain figurines of eighteenth century upper class men and women made for the mass market. These low value depictions of high-worth individuals, rather than their rarified predecessors are what interest me: how they raise issues of good and bad taste and shine a light of questions of class.

Studio ceramics is a lonely place for figurines. The decorative, historical and industrial fight against the ideals of the minimal, contemporary and individual. Figurines are camp and I think I love them for that, since camp 'always has an underlying seriousness... You're expressing what's basically serious to you in terms of fun and artifice and elegance.'³

Any representation of people will link into identity politics. The mannerisms and poses of men in the eighteenth century veer vastly from contemporary ideals of (hetero)masculinity, sharing much with notions of camp, and its associations with 'theatricality, aestheticism, artificiality, exaggeration, incongruity, humour, parody and twisted irony.'⁴ From camp to queer is a very short step, and through contemporary eyes, it is hard to read these male/female rococo pairings heteronormatively, opening them up for queer readings and interventions. The desire to reread collections is a key driver in my interest in rococo figurines and as Danielle Thom argues in *The Return of Rococo in Contemporary Culture* the rococo provides 'a firmly tongue-in-cheek aesthetic that offers us a way to navigate our desire for pleasure in a painful world.'⁵

3. Christopher Isherwood qtd in "Isherwoodian CAMP," *Camp: Notes on Fashion* (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2019) 1/115.

4. Fabio Cleto, "The Spectacles of Camp," *Camp: Notes on Fashion*, 1/13.

5. Danielle Thom, *The Return of Rococo in Contemporary Culture*, Art Review, 08 November 2022.

In *Notes on Camp*, Susan Sontag deftly links camp taste with the early eighteenth-century aristocratic taste for artifice, with mass dandyism and with contemporary queer culture. That porcelain figurines tie so closely with all these links to homosexuality and still found favour in the homes of middle England is not only surprising, but a masterful sleight of hand. Metaphorically using the mirrors that were so ubiquitous in rococo interiors, I hoped to hold them up to show how ubiquitous queerness was (hiding in plain sight) within the family home.

The residency was therefore an opportunity to explore how queer (verb) could be brought to queer (adjective) objects.





Opposite: Matt in Centre for Print Research.
Top left: Removing PLA figure from 3D printer.
Top right: Digitally manipulated, 3D printed PLA figure
Left: Digitally manipulated, 3D printed PLA figure.
Photographs by Simon Regan.

I came to the residency with a knowledge gap around 3D printing, digital design and manipulation. Therefore, a major part of the residency involved upskilling in the use of both hardware and software.

The process started with scanning figurines. Some of these were relatively expensive historic examples and others low value figures from the 1970s and 80s. The shine from glazed porcelain causes distortions in the scanning process, so matting spray was required to dull the surface before scanning. The scans were then digitally stitched together to form a final digital mesh. These digital meshes were then manipulated, combined, stretched or mirrored using 3D animation software and printed. The printing was done using PLA, a plastic polymer which is heated until soft and then built up in layers to create the desired form. Scale was constrained by the limits of the printers, and following printing, the pieces required laborious cutting and finishing by hand.

The digital manipulation of the figurines drew on existing works I had made by hand in the studio, but also allowed for distortions that would be very difficult to replicate using traditional ceramic techniques. At each stage of movement from 3D to screen and back to 3D, distortion crept in and the inherent visual languages of the technologies each left their mark, thus echoing the translation from drawing to figurine to etching that occurred in the eighteenth century: drawings by Boucher were adapted into porcelain figurines and these figurines were then drawn to produce etchings and engravings.

“The digital manipulation of the figurines drew on existing works I had made by hand in the studio, but also allowed for distortions that would be very difficult to replicate using traditional ceramic techniques.”

Right: Digitally manipulated,
3D printed PLA figure.
Below: Plywood laser cut figures.
Photographs by Simon Regan.



Right: Scanning historic figurine.
Below: Removing plates from kiln.
Opposite: Porcelain plates with decals.
Photographs by Simon Regan.



There is no absolute reading of any of the final 3D prints. However, doubling and mirroring raise questions of intimacy and sexuality; spherical heads nod towards global sugar production and/or queer silencing, while stretching creates links between then and now, nodding to queer temporalities.

During the residency I was keen to experiment with as much of the equipment as possible. This included creating an oversized garniture set. Digital outlines were created from online photographs of museum objects ranging from Meissen pugs through Chinese vases, bowls and – naturally – figurines. These were all increased in size and laser cut.

Playing with the online digital 2D images of 3D objects in museum collections resulted in new 3D works which have the appearance of 2D objects. They have a graphic quality which brings a new aesthetic to their highly ornamental outlines, their plywood structure creating rococo garnitures for the modern flatpack world.



One of the most visually beautiful things that happened while working with the digital manipulation of the figurines was the imagery created in the software. Usually a catalyst, or by-product in the process of 3D printing, these images had an alluring visual language, possibly more so than the actual 3D prints. These digital mesh drawings were perfect; there were no printing flaws and they were constantly changeable. Their meshes of vertices, edges and faces glowing an orange gold.

These images formed the basis of a series of plates. 3D porcelain plates acting as carriers of 2D digital images of distorted 3D porcelain figurines. Using the digital decal printer in the studio allowed for the rapid production of decal images enabling experimentation and trial in the process.

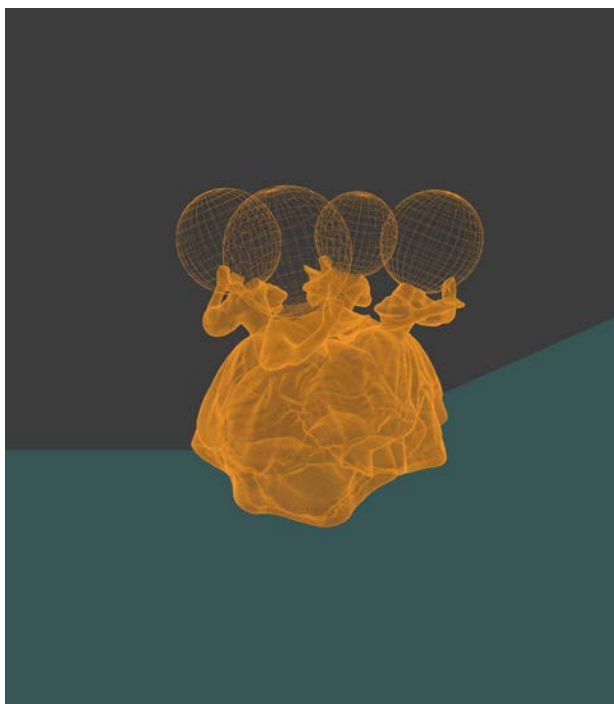
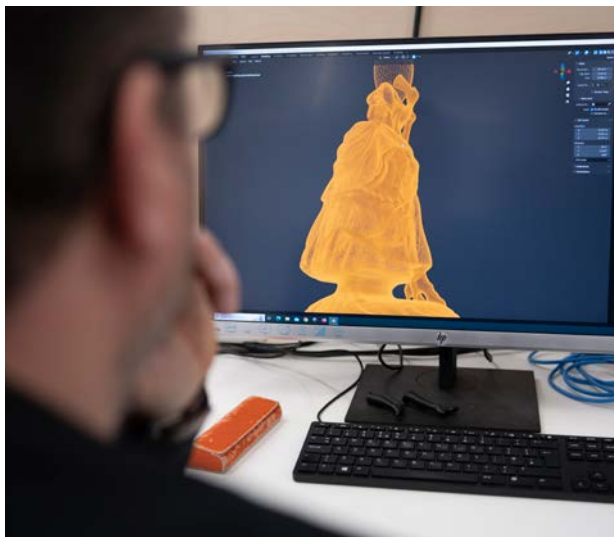
The digital images also formed the basis of the edition of prints being produced at CFPR. Through a decimation of detail, the rococo figurines triangulate into abstract figures reminiscent of works by mid twentieth-century artists. This interests me: how a visual language from 50 years ago is recreated by reducing difference and individuality and what this might speak to in terms of mid-century homogenisation. Taking digital meshes and placing them in landscapes, the prints are screen-printed to lay the background colours and then relief printed to – literally – press the figures onto the image plane.

In hindsight, that a project exploring the representation of eighteenth-century identities in porcelain figurines should move so frequently between binaries is to be expected, since neither the 'critical history of camp [which] is the story of dichotomies'⁶ nor the rococo which 'hovers between the serious and the playful, the deep and the shallow, the domestic and the foreign...'⁷ ever settle in one final position, but rather rely on the vibration of opposites to exist. Sliding between the 3D, the digital and the 2D, these objects – to me – are always in transition, never finished, forever in process.

I would like to thank Carinna Parraman, David Huson, Laura Clarke Oaten, Mike White, Sonny Lee Lightfoot, Xavier Aure and the whole team at CFPR for their help and advice during the residency. Thanks also go to my fellow artists in residence, whose openness and generosity has added immensely to the experience. It has been a fascinating education to see the breadth of contemporary printmaking and its potential applications.

6. Cleto, "The Spectacles of Camp," 1/15.

7. Vanessa Alayrac-Fielding "From the curious to the 'artificial': the meaning of oriental porcelain in 17th and 18th-century English interiors," *Miranda* Vol 7 Ceramics/Submorphemics (2012).



Above: Digital modelling.
Photograph by Simon Regan.
Right: Digital print

Like People in History / 2023

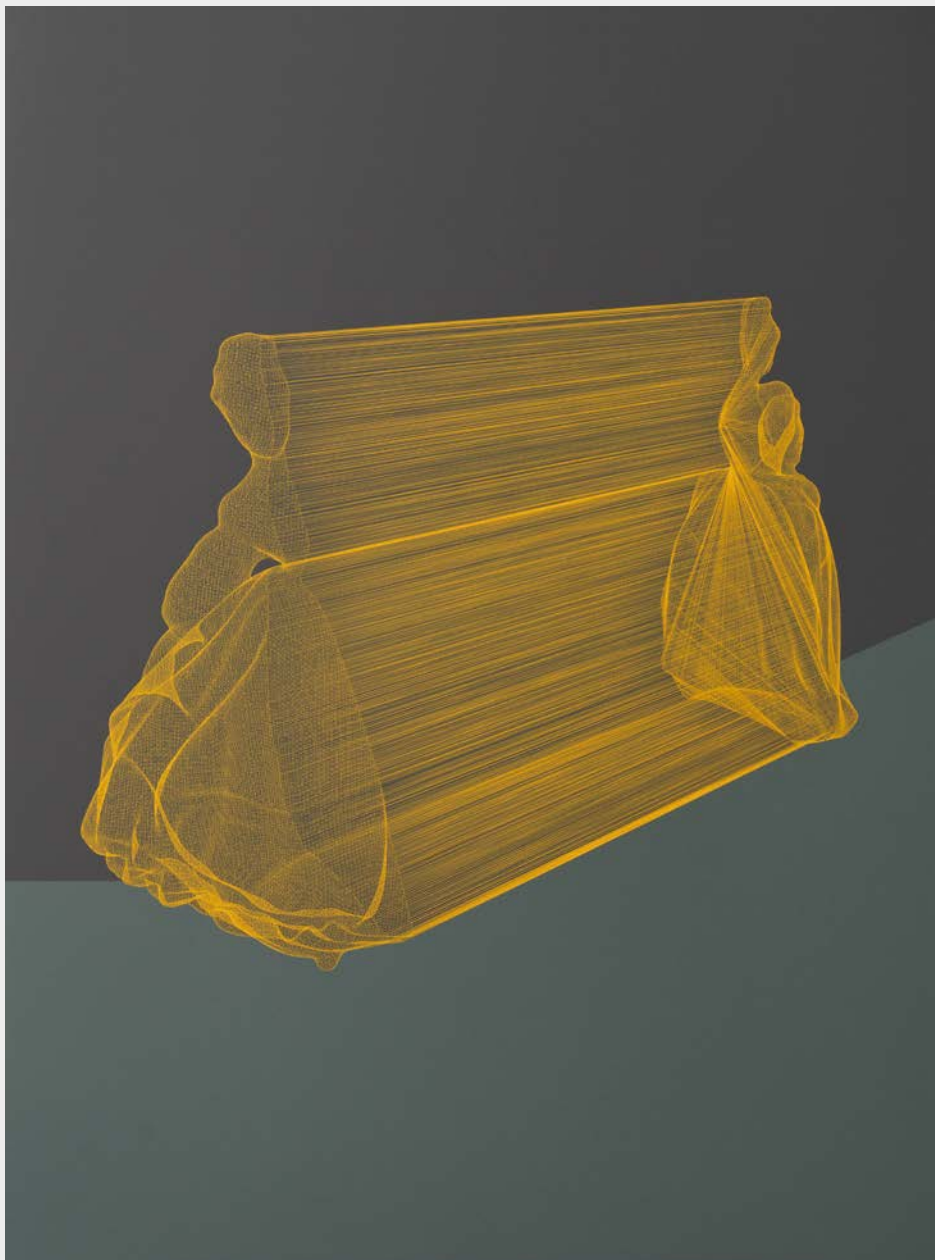
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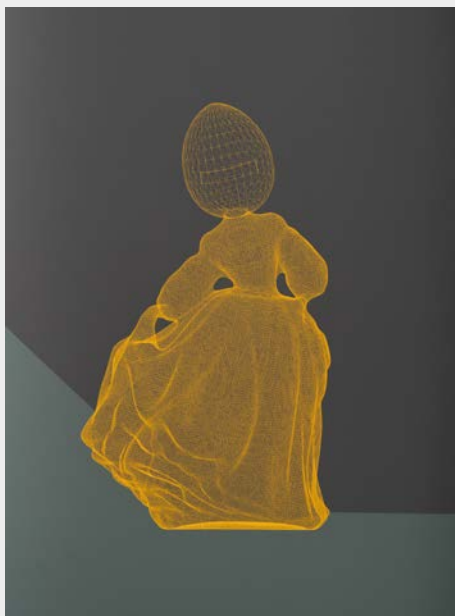
Dimensions: 50cm x 70cm

Material: Somerset Satin Digital Paper

Printmaking processes: Digital Print with screen printed spot varnish







Graphic Design

J Graphic & Digital Design
j-graphicdesign.co.uk

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