



**GEORGE EGERTON-WARBURTON**  
**29 JUN — 10 NOV — 2019**





The American art critic Rhonda Lieberman has written that her own celebrity dreams are indications of the way in which 'contemporary experience is arranging our desires. Rather than a Dali montage sequence from a Hitchcock film', she explains, 'my unconscious is starting to look like a psychic dumpster for *Entertainment Tonight*'.<sup>1</sup>

If Lieberman has a point, and what we consume drives our desires, George Egerton-Warburton's installation at Heide suggests it also conditions our behaviour, and this idea is the nucleus around which much of the work in this exhibition forms. Recording the impact of consumption on society at large, Egerton-Warburton here considers the effects of a general population operating 'under the influence' of what it ingests—both physically and culturally.

The exhibition encompasses an assortment of paintings, found and constructed objects and images: a stack of miniature model beds; stills from a documentary about truffle hunting pigs with lumps of dried excrement as the ersatz fruits of their labour; several mid-sized, colourful paintings in a clash of styles; and a kinetic sculpture made from pieces of old farming equipment. The whole is a heterogeneous *mélange* of impressions, like a bargain bin—or 'psychic dumpster'.

Incorporating elements both obdurately stand-offish and seductive, Egerton-Warburton's approach is not easy to pin down. There are moments in which it is cagey, menacing or even repulsive, at others, playful and compelling. *Truffle Hunting* is an ongoing series that serves as a case in point and ready means of access into themes within the exhibition. The works take as their subject matter the systematic conditioning of pigs to locate truffles and are presented as a series of digital prints carefully set against silver Dibond backing panels in droll incongruity with the aforementioned pieces of excrement (masquerading as truffles) set into their frames.



Researchers have detected affinities between the odour forming chemicals found in truffles and the pheromones of boars. The same chemical and related steroids are produced by humans, which may add to the popular desirability of truffles and might even suggest they have a psychological impact on human beings.<sup>2</sup> It is this chemical coincidence that attracts the pigs to truffles, believing they are in search of a mate.

In an analogous fashion, Egerton-Warburton considers the effects of social and cultural conditioning on a society intoxicated by its own airs. In one work, a handler crouches low to retrieve his pigs' findings, flanking the animal and redoubling its stance. For the artist (like the pigs), our behaviour is consistent with our conditioning. Like the pigs, we too strive for small or futile gains.











This sense of striving recurs throughout the exhibition. Fenced-in along one edge of the gallery, a kinetic sculpture grinds slowly toward oblivion. It is slipshod in its construction, but the effect of the slowly revolving blades of former farming augers is absorbing and mesmeric. The mechanism's chief components are apparatuses 'in retrenchment', to use the artist's phrase—disused earth-drilling machines that look like oversized drill bits. Their endless churn is echoed by an audio component providing a soundtrack and adding aural texture to the exhibition: the 2011 pop anthem *We Found Love* by Rihanna and ft. Calvin Harris, here slowed to a metallic drawl and piped through horn speakers, of the kind used in public address systems across the globe and often found in institutional settings. Their effect is lithely comic in the context of the gallery.

At once optimistic and nostalgic, the originally up-tempo lyrics of the song speak of a couple finding one another 'in a hopeless place'. Altered almost entirely beyond recognition, the soundtrack adds a peculiar down-beat rhythm to the exhibition. Paired with the augers, it creates an atmosphere suggesting the dissociative or dysphoric effects of intoxication and adds to the vaguely menacing, slightly woozy feeling of creeping low-level anxiety uniting the whole. It is perhaps no coincidence that in English usage, 'hit' can refer both to a popular song and to the measure of an illegal or addictive substance. Both are seductive; both can deliver a dose of oblivion.

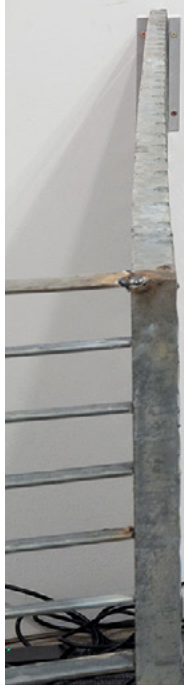
While the objects in the exhibition do not give too much away, in the context of Heide's bucolic surroundings an element of nostalgia seeps in: there are allusions to the aesthetics of agriculture throughout and Egerton-Warburton references Heide's garden beds as inspiration for two of the three paintings.

Alternately abstract, gestural and hard-edged, the jarring syntaxes of the paintings educe both impressionist and early conceptual pedigrees. Loose arrangements of expressive brushstrokes and colour built-up in successive layers create charged surfaces that in their movement reiterate that of the augers. The bold contrast of the third fluorescent abstract painting produces a rift or disconnectedness that divides the other two, and yet these dissonant elements somehow cohere in the context of the whole.

Like the song, the paintings hover somewhere between optimism and nostalgia. But there is a self-awareness to them that is always close at hand, exposed here and there by their subject matter, their titles and their use of exaggeratedly 'contemporary' colours—the intensely pigmented 'faux finish' of *Flashe* for instance, a matt vinyl paint initially developed as an innovative alternative to traditional materials.

Egerton-Warburton points to the cultural critic Mark Fisher as helpful in articulating his thinking here. Writing in the early 2000s, Fisher described something akin to the atmosphere Egerton-Warburton cultivates as a 'nostalgia for lost futures'—a *hauntology*, after theorist Jacques Derrida's concept in *Specters of Marx*, 1994.<sup>3</sup> Applying this idea specifically to music characterised by a particular stylised nostalgia, Fisher described it as a sense in which the past and present coexist in 'strange simultaneity'<sup>4</sup>—as an anachronism; an experience of time out of joint.<sup>5</sup> Work like this, for Fisher, inhabits a ghost-like existence that is neither living nor dead, neither here nor gone. It is a kind of fixedly dissociative state.







## GEORGE EGERTON-WARBURTON

George Egerton-Warburton's installation encompasses an assortment of found and constructed objects and images: a stack of miniature model beds; stills from a documentary about truffle-hunting pigs with lumps of dried excrement as the ersatz fruits of their labour; a series of colourful paintings in a clash of styles; and a kinetic sculpture made from pieces of old farming equipment. The whole is a heterogeneous mélange of impressions, like a bargain bin—or 'psychic dumpster'.

Egerton-Warburton is interested in the idea that what we consume drives our desires and conditions our behaviour. Here he considers the effects of consumption on a general population operating 'under the influence' of what it ingests—both physically and culturally. For the artist, our behaviour (like that of the pig!) is symptomatic of our conditioning. The motif of the sick-bed—resurfacing across several works—serves as a ready symbol for this syndrome.

While the objects themselves do not give too much away, in the context of Heide's bucolic surroundings, an element of nostalgia seeps in: there are references to the garden beds in the paintings and allusions to the aesthetics of agriculture throughout. Yet it is a nostalgia tinged with unsettling undertones. The slowed-down version of a well-known pop anthem that provides the soundtrack to the installation for example, adds a peculiar down-beat rhythm. Paired with the augurs' dull grind toward oblivion, it creates an atmosphere suggesting the dissociative or dysphonic effects of intoxication or over-consumption.

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Given Egerton-Warburton's proclivities for language and its slippages, it is not insignificant that terms like dissociation, dysphoria and anxiety delineate these conditions and also readily lend themselves to describing states of mental (ill) health. For Egerton-Warburton, our behaviour is symptomatic of our cultural conditioning. And the idea of symptom here is key. Advancing the metaphor of the public body, and in particular, one that has been pathologised, he looks to the motif of the sick-bed as a ready symbol for recognising that there is a 'sickness in the room'.<sup>6</sup>

The symbol acts as something of a meta-language—a shorthand for what it denotes and what it doesn't, and importantly, the deficit between the two. The units, in this exhibition stacked, but previously shown lining the walls, represent at once nineteenth-century infirmary furniture, illness and days of non-productivity. Egerton-Warburton explains they were devised as a strategy for working on days when he would otherwise have made nothing.<sup>7</sup> They are like notches marking off days of non-compliance, of opting-out, but paradoxically also, of not *not* making work. It is hard to avoid in describing these works the ill effects of our societally reinforced pressure to be ever-more productive, though the works themselves make no moral claims.

What is not said in this installation seems equally important. Like the comma sign that peppers the surface of one painting, or the X that strikes through another, the unit of the bed marks the irreducible remainder of what can neither be fully grasped nor articulated: works of art are haunted by all that eludes representation—in language, by that which is beyond words.

Egerton-Warburton's beds are conspicuously devoid of life. Ghost-like, and antiseptic white, they present a *mise-en-scène* without protagonists. Instead, they suggest the syndrome, or set of symptoms, but not the bodies they affect. Likewise, the artist's frequent invocation

regarding this work of the expression to be or to act 'under the influence', emphasises the *effects* that an outside force brings to bear on bodies rather than the affected bodies themselves. Each is haunted by the absent bodies they gesture toward but fall just short of representing. More broadly, this expression describes the artist's particular approach to practice, by which he has 'been attempting to live and learn among living bodies': to dwell in first person lived experience, rather than to explain it theoretically.<sup>8</sup> In our society, increasingly abstracted away from this kind of encounter under the sway of structures that alienate and separate us from a sense of agency, Egerton-Warburton's adroit reflections invite us to embody the works, to be, momentarily, those bodies that haunt them.







## NOTES

- 1 Rhonda Leiberman, 'Revenge of the Mouse Diva: Karen Kilimnik's Favorite Things', in *Artforum International*, vol. 32, no. 6, February 1994, p. 77.
- 2 Walter Sullivan, 'Truffles: Why Pigs Can Sniff Them Out', in *The New York Times*, March 24, 1982, accessed online at <https://www.nytimes.com/1982/03/24/garden/truffles-why-pigs-can-sniff-them-out.html>.
- 3 Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International*, Routledge, New York, 1994.
- 4 Joanne McNeil, 'Past and Present in "Strange Simultaneity": Mark Fisher Explains Hauntology at NYU', *Rhizome*, May 18, 2011, accessed online at: <http://rhizome.org/editorial/2011/may/18/hauntology/>.
- 5 William Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, cited in Mark Fisher, 'What Is Hauntology?', in *Film Quarterly*, vol. 66, no. 1, Fall 2012, p. 20.
- 6 George Egerton-Warburton, *Now-and-Then Industrial-Complex*, unpublished doctoral thesis, Monash University, Melbourne, 2019, n.p.
- 7 George Egerton-Warburton, *ibid.*
- 8 George Egerton-Warburton, *ibid.*

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