Abigail Reynolds: Walking A Cappella

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‘Abigail Reynolds: Walking A Cappella’, Newlyn Art Gallery and The Exchange, Newlyn and Penzance, Cornwall, UK, 9 December 2025 – 2 May 2026

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In an essay commissioned for the book published to coincide with Abigail Reynolds’s current exhibitions at Newlyn Art Gallery and The Exchange, writer Joanna Kavenna recounts a conversation with the artist. Reynolds had been researching the theme of tidal currents, specifically in the waters around west Cornwall near where she lives and works. She was working on a piece called *Gyre*, a sculptural installation involving the ambitious attempt to vitrify sand from local beaches. Amongst the evocative terms appearing on a mariner’s chart, one stays with the artist as a favourite. A portion of sea close to the Scilly Isles is marked as ‘Experimental Area’. Here, qualities of the coastal geography give rise to effects that cannot be mapped effectively for sailors. Seizing on the idea, Kavenna draws a parallel with philosopher William

James's proposition of an 'unclassified residuum', a field of irregular phenomena that resists incorporation into settled systems of knowledge.[1]

It is not hard to imagine why an artist might enjoy these lines of thought. They provide a way of picturing the work as, in James's words, 'a great field for new discoveries'.[2] But some questions follow. What is it, exactly, that is being proposed here as the unclassified residuum? Is it the practice as a whole? Or is the 'experimental area' something distributed, found in each individual work? Furthermore – or perhaps this is the same question – is the experimental area being affirmed and enjoyed from the relative safety of the shore, or witnessed with feelings of anxiety by a mariner lost and at the mercy of the currents?

Stepping into the main space at the Newlyn Gallery, it is tempting to propose that the exhibition does more than align itself in vague terms with the idea. The unclassified residuum is there in the concrete form of a space at the centre of the room around which half-a-dozen works are arranged and across which the striations of multiple tensions can be felt. What gives rise to the apparent tension? It is not simply that the space at the centre is empty; it is the diversity of the works. 'Walking A Cappella' brings together sculpture, participative aesthetics, digital film installation, print and collage. The book (of the same name) is also a site in which various visual and written materials pertaining to the artist's work over a period of two decades or more are presented as a parallel expression of the same themes.

Tensions, it could be said, involve attraction and repulsion. As the seafaring and philosophical metaphors come to bear, the more critical question will be how the artist uses the appeal of images, of material, to orientate the viewer, and what becomes of the many disorientations also promised in an experimental practice. If there is indeterminacy, either in the hang of the show or in the different works included, or in both, what would it mean for that quality to be encountered as a condition without guarantee of resolution?

Thinking of the works arranged around the central area in terms of their materials and processes, some different threads become apparent. One involves glass and other pieces of sheet material combined with the use of steel frames designed to stand freely. The larger piece in this format is *When Words are Forgotten* (2018) and was made following the artist's journey in search of lost libraries along the old Silk Road between China and Italy. The tilted frame, with a grid of horizontals and verticals, supports variously sized, coloured and textured pieces of glass, acrylic and other found materials. As the frame implies archive shelving, so the glass and other materials supported become surrogates for the books that have been dispersed or destroyed following many historical upheavals. The work might also be thought to resemble the kind of structures used in the glazing industry for the transportation of large panes. Though prosaic, the association is significant. It marks this work out as an anomaly, the only work in the exhibition

[1] See Joanna Kavenna, 'Turning on the Widening Gyre', in Abigail Reynolds, *Walking A Cappella*, Anomie Publishing, London, and Newlyn Art Gallery & The Exchange, 2026, pp 67–80, p 71

[2] Ibid

Abigail Reynolds, *When Words are Forgotten*, 2018, steel, tinted and textured glass, found material, 275 x 360 x 96 cm, courtesy of the artist and Newlyn Art Gallery, photo by Abigail Reynolds

highlighting the sculptural potentials of modern, prefabricated materials in their rough, industrial state. And that, in turn, complicates the question of where Reynolds's historical allegiances lie.

When Words are Forgotten falls notably into relations with two other pieces installed nearby: *Rock Pool* (2024) and *Tol* (2016), the latter also a work in steel and glass, but with added elements of images printed on its surfaces showing the Bronze Age stone formation referenced in the title. Mên-an-Tol here becomes a co-ordinate linking the lives of three women associated with the west of Cornwall: Daphne du Maurier, Virginia Woolf and Barbara Hepworth.

A conflict on the level of historical allegiances gives this group of works a certain conceptual weightiness. *Tol*, with its explicit appropriation of elements from Hepworth's print *Itea* (1971) implies a particular early twentieth-century modernism as a foundation for Reynolds's work. The more industrial aesthetic of *When Words are Forgotten* references a different branch of late modernist practice, thus placing it on the other side of an argument that has divided artists in the past. It may not be clear the extent to which these aspects of Reynolds's practice and the installation are intended to signal a dismissal of some long-established parsings of conventional art history. But that lack of clarity itself seems to intensify the way this group of works operates. And this, perhaps strategic, complexity is felt not least in relation to another piece in close proximity, which promises something more playful as counterpoint.

Abigail Reynolds, *Tol*, 2024, powder-coated steel, printed, tinted and textured glass, 189 x 154 x 84 cm, courtesy of the artist and Newlyn Art Gallery, photo by Abigail Reynolds

Fire Underground (2015) is one of the larger photographic works included in the exhibition. It is comprised of two found images printed on different papers and hung in strategic relations to one another so that elements of their respective compositions come to correspond. In one, a plume of black smoke rises from an industrial vent; in the other, a line of striking workers flanked by police officers makes its way slowly down a London street. The alignment of forms gives rise to a visual pun, and to a kind of perceptual game. Two conflicting ways of seeing – a normative reading of the photographic compositions and a reading against the compositional autonomy of each – are bound as if into one duration of looking. Several passages in the publication describe Reynolds's interest in how strategic privations to the senses can give rise to new ways of sensing.[3] Something of that order might be happening here, although if there is a feeling of disturbance in the viewing experience, it is quickly stabilised by the elegance of the corresponding forms and their apparent communication beyond their respective frames.

Across the floor, on the opposite wall, *Year of the Flood* (2012) is another work in which two found images are assembled in careful relations. Here, the method is more evasive. The legibility of the larger image is compromised, first by the superimposition of the other and then by the

[3] See, for instance, references to the sculptural work entitled *Anthronauts: Trilobite*, 2023, in Reynolds, op cit, p 64

Abigail Reynolds, *Year of the Flood*, 2012, collaged book pages, coloured glass, 51 x 62 cm, courtesy of the artist and Newlyn Art Gallery, photo by Abigail Reynolds

introduction of coloured glass, which makes the details of the motifs more difficult to discern. The picture shows two women, one standing, the other reclining, in the setting of a 1970s music festival. The smaller image superimposed on top is cropped more tightly. It documents a river in spate and the damage inflicted on built structures along its length. A compositional alignment similar to that of *Fire Underground* emerges here too. The swing of a garment worn by one figure comes to echo the arch of the bridge in the other picture, the orientation of the reclining figure reinforcing a vortical movement implied by the architecture and the swollen river. But the visual pun lacks the force that would be necessary to overcode the whole. Potential narratives begin to emerge concerning counter-cultures, the way they might target conventional social orders, and so on. Those familiar with Margaret Atwood's *The Year of the Flood*, published a few years before Reynolds's work was made, might also be provoked to speculate along those lines.[4] But all these thoughts arrive late. A more primary obfuscation has already taken hold. Elements of compositional wit are not enough to repair the disruption already done to representational coherence. The viewer is left with an image, the significations of which feel partially withheld. *Year of the Flood* is the more difficult work, and perhaps the more compelling. As it falls into suggestive opposition with *Fire Underground*, its relative refusal of consolation registers more surely the deeper tension at the heart of Reynolds's practice.

[4] See Margaret Atwood, *The Year of the Flood*, Bloomsbury, London, 2009

The Universal Now is another series of works using photographic collage. It makes evident the artist's long-term interest in found images and techniques of image-assemblage. In this case, the pictures are sourced in British guidebooks (the artist collects such volumes). Each work in the series is comprised of two images found in different source books. The images show the same scene from subtly different vantage points. The scenes are of monuments: a well-known feature of coastal geography, a piece of historic architecture, a memorial or public sculpture. The two images are superimposed. Cuts and folds are then used to expose the picture behind through the one in front. As the two are brought into close alignment, their compositional similarities are made evident, as are the differences produced by evolving photographic and printing technologies.

These works have at their origin an idea that must surely occur to tourists who point their camera at a famous monument, that the exact place they are standing must have been occupied by other photo-snappers in the past. The fascination might be merely that two or more identical photographs will thus exist in the world. Alternatively, it is that the deviating correspondence between two photographic documents points to a frightening irreversibility of time and to a bewildering quality of newness superseding all that remains apparently unchanging in the scene. Commonly, the misalignments in the collages of *The Universal Now* are subtle. The encounter with the work is sustained by feelings of pleasure and frustration bound together. On the one hand, to look is to will the images back into an alignment that seems to have been promised; on the other, it is to face the brute recalcitrance of materials, because even as the eye shuttles back and forth trying to bridge a gap between incommensurable times, a dull sense of immanent threat is inaugurated in the compulsion to look. Here, again, the work provokes competition within the faculties of vision, which, through consequent depletion, come to differ from themselves.

Abigail Reynolds, *National Gallery 1950 | 1912*, 2010, from *The Universal Now* series, cut and folded book page, 30 x 23 cm, collection of the artist, photo by Abigail Reynolds

But *The Universal Now* has another component. The placement of the cuts and window flaps seems to rely less on the philosophical import of a speculation on time and more on a light style of dialogue between the artist and image, if not a fanciful enjoyment of design for its own sake. The interventions operate to distract, reassuring the viewer that, here, enjoyment is primary. Not coincidentally, in a short documentary film provided by the gallery as an introduction to the artist, Reynolds remarks that to make a work in this series has become, for her, something akin to a gift she gives to herself at times of the year when the harder graft of studio practice is winding down.

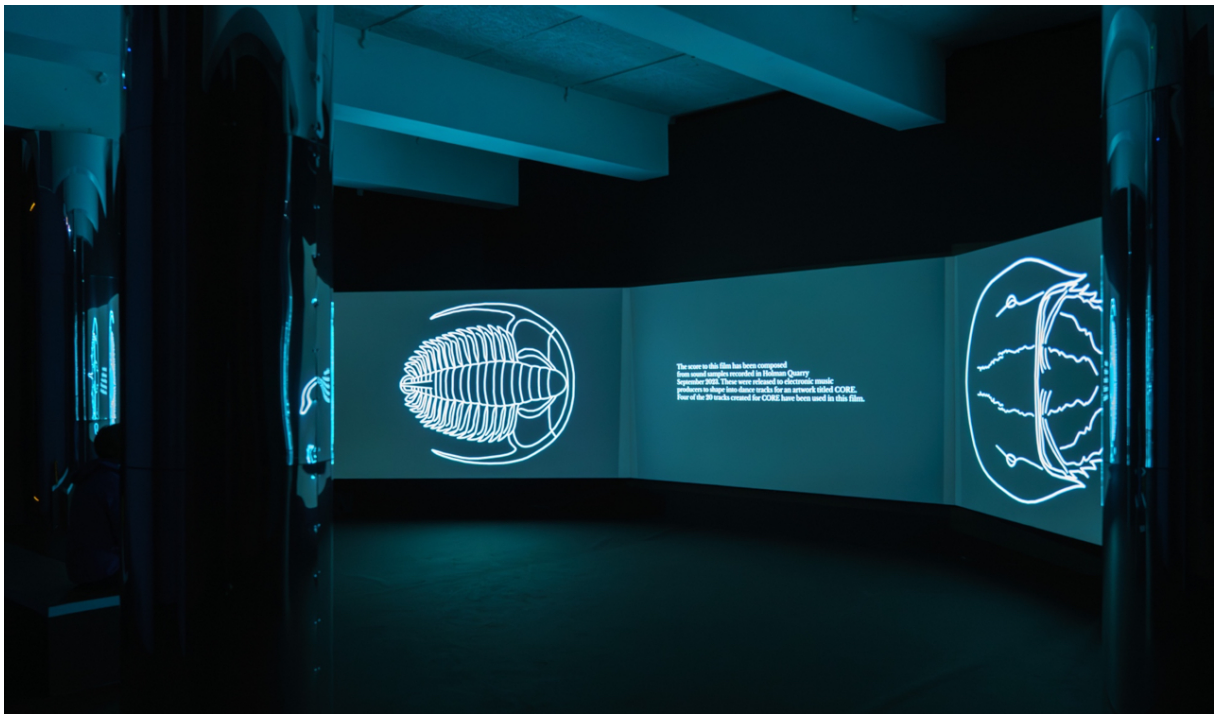
A Book of Holes (2025), a three-screen digital film installation presented at The Exchange, extends many of the strategies developed elsewhere in the exhibition into time-based form. Drawing together different qualities of film and video footage on a wide range of topics – trilobite fossils, ancient Cornish mining tunnels, documentary sequences showing horseshoe crabs used in medical science, contemporary drilling technologies, electronic dance music events and so on – the work proceeds by establishing formal and thematic correspondences across these disparate materials. Reflective columns installed in proximity to the screens act as strategic sources of distraction. A voice-over by the artist introduces an essayistic narrative accompanied by subtitles incorporating typing errors and their corrections in the real time of recording. The soundtrack includes dance music tracks which succeed one another, and are mixed, and that sometimes give way to more open sections of sound.

Reynolds describes *A Book of Holes* as tracing 'an array of extractive connections', remarking also that the work is 'an inquiry into how many connections can be kept spinning in the mind'.[5] Elsewhere she says of *A Book of Holes* that '[o]ne of the many questions in the work is whether streams of ideas can be connected through [the beats of a dance music sound track]'.[6] In this last remark especially, it may not be entirely clear what 'connection' means. If the ideas are in 'streams' they are surely connected. Different streams may, of course, give rise to connection on that level, but in any case the sense seems to be of a disparity of ideas requiring that their unruliness is quelled so that they can follow meaningfully one to the other. More saliently, the question might be asked why connection is being construed as the problem to be solved. The discourse here falls into a common error. While practices of assemblage are understood well as possessing generative power, and while it is understood that a diversity in the material elements available to be assembled adds to that power, at the same time a generalising of the idea of relations between elements results in their diversity being reduced to sameness.

The dance music soundtrack in *A Book of Holes* may have the effect of rationalising otherwise disorientating jumps between very different forms of image. But there is already a logic at play in this work, underlying the question of which pieces of footage can be assembled. It is a logic of equation, of formal and thematic correspondence. And so it might be asked: at what point does

5 Reynolds, op cit, p 121

6 Reynolds, op cit, p 61



Abigail Reynolds, *A Book of Holes*, 2025, three-screen film, mirrored columns, 13 mins, 10.2 x 2.3 m projection size, courtesy of the artist and The Exchange, Penzance, photo by Nick Cooney

the affirmation of identity across the divide between images become a way of avoiding thoughtful discrimination? If, for an artist, there is something gained by beginning with the heterogeneity of all that might be connected, why is it not also necessary to attend to the heterogeneity of connection? Again, there is evidence in the film installation of sensitivity to this issue. A diversity of connective functions (and disconnective functions, which may amount to the same thing) is certainly present. It is felt, for instance, in the misalignment between voice-over and subtitle, the visual interference produced by flashes of reflected light from the mirror columns, the unacknowledged ethical dilemmas of using animals in medicine, the abrupt shifts of scale and temporality – all constitute a fracturing that resists being absorbed into an over-arching connective flow. But the trouble fomented here on the immaterial level of the relations is rarely allowed to persist. The question raised, as if by the work itself, is why the 'flow' of continuity in a film installation, or in any assemblage of diverse elements, should be modelled on stability and plenitude rather than, for instance, disequilibrium?

Across its two venues, 'Walking A Cappella' presents a practice deeply invested in relations: between images, materials, histories and viewers. The exhibition demonstrates considerable formal intelligence and a sustained attentiveness to how meaning can be generated through proximity, alignment and resonance. At its best, Reynolds's work reveals how fragile such processes are, how easily coherence falters, and how much labour is required to sustain it. The fragility is not incidental; it is one of the exhibition's most telling features. Moments of rupture are introduced, but often they are resolved. Visual puns, connective logics and the affect of wonder function as stabilising devices, restoring continuity at the very point where the potentialities of threat are most profound. The result is an exhibition that offers reassurance

where more troubling questions might otherwise persist. This is not a failure of ambition, nor a lack of awareness. On the contrary, the work repeatedly gestures towards a recognition that meaning is neither guaranteed nor given in advance. That the recognition appears to have been encountered through practice itself is another indication of the sophistication of Reynolds's work. In those instances where consolation is withheld – most notably in works that resist easy alignment or refuse to redeem fracture – the exhibition reveals a different potential: one in which the viewer is not protected from disorientation, but is asked to remain with it, and with the consequences. To confront meaninglessness more directly would not require the abandonment of care, pleasure or craft. It would require allowing certain connections to fail – for the apparent failure to be the nature of the connection – and certain uncertainties to remain unassuaged. Such a move would undoubtedly risk undermining the broad spirit of optimism projected by the artist. But it would also open the work to a different kind of seriousness – one that acknowledges not only how meaning is made, but what it costs to make it, and what remains when the guarantees of meaningfulness fall away.

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