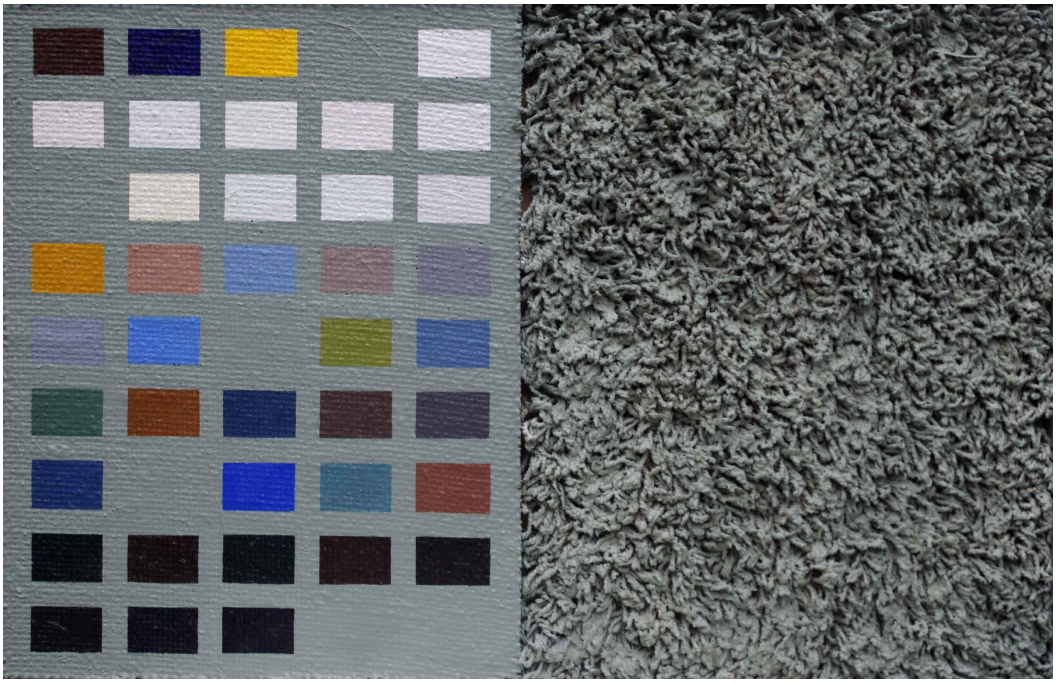
Everything Stops for the Baby

216 NE 3rd Street ‘Bodiford House’, Apartment 4, Gainesville, Florida 32601

by Chloe Lane, Peter Gouge

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Peter Gouge and Chloe Lane spent six years living in Gainesville, Florida. Their son Errol was born there at the end of 2018. Gouge's project, which this text describes, has two parts. Initially it consisted of five painted pieces of carpet shaped to cover squeaky floorboards in the family's living room. The carpets were functional – warning anyone present to avoid stepping in the noisy spaces when Errol was sleeping. The second part consists of the documents and materials – photography, drawing, painting, and programmed electronics – that communicate the function and presence of the carpets without removing them from their context. This second part was originally presented as part of Gouge's final exhibition for his MFA in Painting at the University of Florida.

23 August 2020

C,

I'm trying to remember how we got started with these things (objects, paintings?). It wasn't art when it started, more of a solution to a problem. E was such a light sleeper in those first few months after he was born that we were forced to tiptoe around our Gainesville apartment – any squeaking floorboard would wake him. Initially I remember just outlining the spots we shouldn't walk on with tape, but soon it became clear we needed something more. The

outlines were too easy to miss. We'd accidentally stumble into them, visitors wouldn't know the purpose of the markings or often they wouldn't notice them at all.

When we met in 2011 I was already painting on carpet. You told me you thought it was 'dumb' – correctly as it turns out. Carpet is tough to work on, and I stopped using it for most of the time we were living in Florida. Returning to it was natural though, like being reunited with an old friend. Placing the painted carpets in the living room worked in a way I hadn't expected. The implied value of painting spurred avoidance – we have an institutional instinct, *don't touch*.

Ultimately, the carpets were going to be functional for only a short period of time. Thinking about having to get rid of them still hurts – they were so bound up in our experience of that space, so tied to E's first year. Should we have found a way to bring them back to New Zealand, considered relegating them to the wall in a kind of retirement?

Love,
P

P,

When I look back through my journal entries from those early months, I find only pages of nonsense: *I'm being haunted by hind milk … At thirty-six I'm finally starting to get the point of scented candles … Remember this comforting burning smell coming from the heating unit … The different ways P and I cut slices of cheese from the block … Gristly mandarins.* I was delirious. We were a lot less prepared for E's arrival than we thought. Why did we assume everything would go smoothly?

I thought, and some days still think, E might hear as well as a bat – our little fruit bat. Back then the sound of the fridge being opened could wake him. Or the rustling of a packet of crackers. The quiet clonk of a knife being placed in the kitchen sink. And then there were the creaky wooden floorboards in the living room and our bedroom. I could never remember which ones to avoid, so when E did eventually sleep, often I would remain standing in the kitchen,

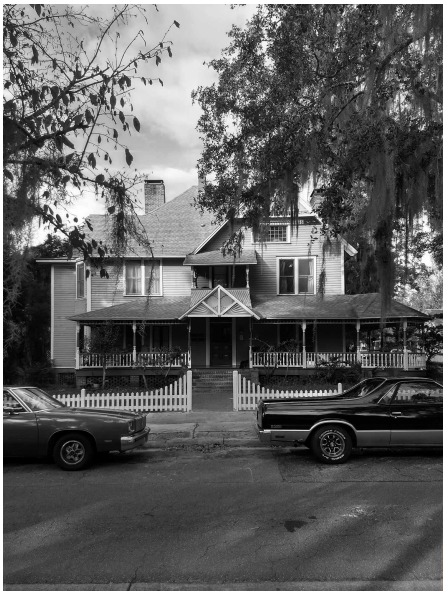
banished to the heavy and silent kitchen tiles, leaning all of my weight against the counter while I ate my snack as quietly as possible.

It was a relief to be able to walk to the couch without stepping on the wrong floorboard, without waking E up. That's what the carpets gave me: a small relief. In those early months, with days still short, dark and wintery, but also unbelievably long, the best we came to hope for were those moments of relief.

Love,
C



Gouge-Lane Family, 2019. Photo: Thomas Sanders.



213 NE 3rd Street, Apt #4, Gainesville, FL 32601, USA, 2020. Image courtesy of Peter Gouge.

28 August 2020

C,

Relief is a good way of putting it. It's funny, the usual places we could expect relief to come from – family, close friends – were difficult to access due to the distance we'd put between ourselves and many of our loved ones. These objects became surrogates for those kinds of helping hands.

In the first year of my MFA in 2017, visiting artist Ernesto Oroza suggested that I read a recently translated book by a Russian Productivist theorist, Boris Arvatov. I can't recall why – I was probably blathering on about 'construction' – but he was on to something. It took me a while, but that book became increasingly important to me as a way of thinking about what I'm making. Arvatov talks about the artist abandoning traditional art making like painting and sculpture and instead entering the factory to produce functional things. Basically, in the Soviet Union's shift from an agrarian culture to an industrialised society he's trying to propose what a socialist object might look like vs. a capitalist one. Specifically, Arvatov talks about the difference between a 'dead' commodity – things that are static, like heavy armchairs, drapery – and proposed objects that might have more life to them, taking what he calls an 'active role in the organization of everyday life'. The phrase I like here is 'object as comrade'.

I suppose we could have bought objects that fulfilled the same objective of quieting the space – furniture, rugs, etcetera. But, and it's hard to articulate, I think there's something different about unthinkingly moving around a piece of furniture and how we interacted with the carpets. We had other things in the space, like the rugs we bought in Oaxaca, and I couldn't help noticing we treated them differently. Am I making sense here?

Love,
P

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29 August 2020

P,

I love our rugs. We bought them near the beginning of six weeks of travel, so they journeyed with us through the south and east of Mexico – on all those buses mostly – till we flew into Miami, and then Gainesville. This year they made the long trip to New Zealand. Maybe they deserve the title 'comrade' because they were with us from the beginning and through all of this: two apartments, two Master's degrees, collectively seven years of teaching, one book, some good paintings, many failed paintings, a seismic shift in

your art practice, learning to cook a decent carnitas, E's arrival, becoming parents. Nearly six years of life in Florida.

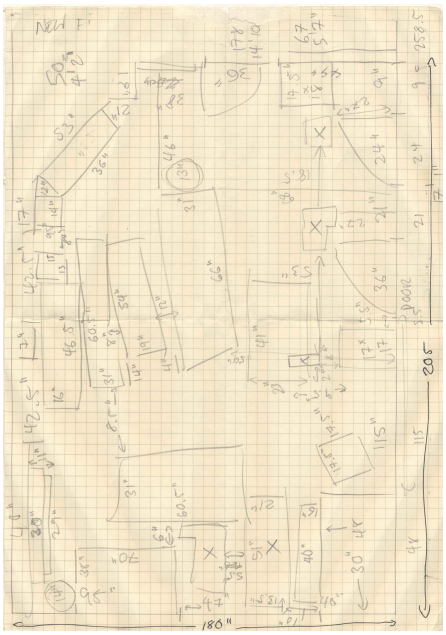
What do the rugs do though? They brighten the room. Especially the room I spent a lot of time with E – the living room of apartment number two, which was north facing and often gloomy. They remind us of that trip to Mexico, a kind of honeymoon. They are nice to stand on. Yet a rug is still a rug is still a rug. And although I can happily picture the elderly man from Oaxaca who sold them to us in that low-ceilinged corner store not far from the place we were staying, buying something is not the same as making something.

The carpet paintings? We talked about how they worked, how even after E was sleeping more soundly they served as a kind of memento of those rare moments of relief when he was still tiny. And though we weren't supposed to walk on them, I did. A few times. The paint had hardened the synthetic weave into a kind of loofah for the foot. But because you made them they were also more than just another object in the house. For me, anyway. Maybe we should have made room for them in our luggage.

Love,
C



Living Room: February 2019, 2020. Image courtesy of Peter Gouge.



Room Plan: Rough Sketch, 2019. Image courtesy of Peter Gouge.



Plan for Carpet #1, *Varvara* Version 3, 2020. Image courtesy of Peter Gouge.

31 August 2020

C,

When I'm painting I often get to a point where I have to just stop. Something isn't right. I can't see what it is, but it's there. Some value needs to be shifted, some colour introduced. There isn't exactly a logical process to work it out – instead, I was taught to listen to the painting. I told my students this, and most of the time I just got a look. I don't blame them – it's not as if a painting can literally speak to you. But I have heard enough of the same thing from other painters to know that I'm not that strange for thinking it.

Many years ago I read a small book on Gordon Walters' *en abyme* paintings – paintings that in essence contain themselves. These paintings became obvious models for what the carpets needed to do. Not only did the doubling of the composition reinforce the importance of the shape and edges of the carpets in their function as borders, but working with a 'given' problem to solve – removing some of the freedom of expression – gave the carpet paintings a much clearer voice to tell me what they needed.

But it wasn't only the composition and colour that needed to be listened to with the carpets. The surface had its own voice too. Originally when I first started painting carpet I remember talking to you about them fighting back, rejecting a lot of painting processes I'd usually go towards. These carpets are airbrushed – the only way to get around all their little nooks and crannies. Airbrushing usually tends to be seen as a way of distancing the maker from the object – there are no obvious brushstrokes or marks that painters tend to use as signatures. Though whenever I've tried to brush colour onto carpet it has been a failure. It was like I was pushing myself onto them, rather than letting them become what they wanted to be. You're right though – there is in a sense, a way in which these carpets are self-portraits. Paintings always contain a trace of subjectivity from their authors – these paintings, containing themselves, might even be painting themselves.

I'm getting pretty esoteric here.

Love,
P

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3 September 2020

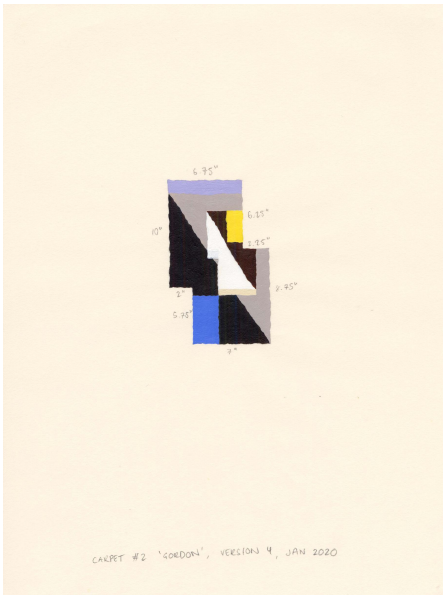
P,

I think I understand. Like how do you know which avocado is the best? You don't want to be one of those dicks who goes around squeezing them all, bruising them for the next person. So you take a leap of faith, trust your gut – maybe that knobbly, deep-green one at the back will be okay?

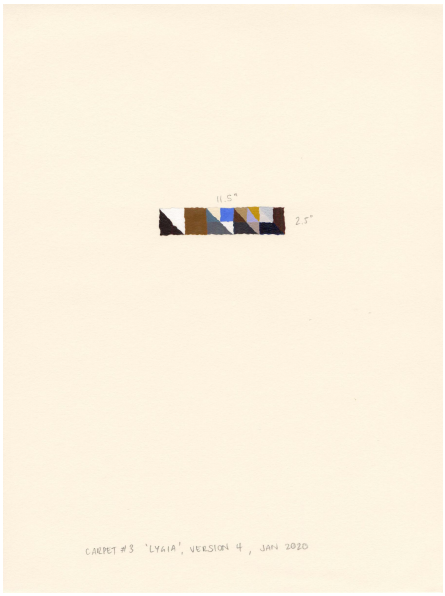
Of course parenting is like this too. On one level there are the easy fixes. Like when the St. Bernard moved into the downstairs apartment and started barking at all hours with a deep, rough bark that vibrated throughout the entire house. The solution: turn up the volume on E's white noise machine, crank up the floor fan. On another level there are the problems that require more wily action, like when we started putting grated cheese in E's dinners. The cheese worked as an adhesive, helping the food to stick together in clumps so E could better keep the beans, tofu, and vegetables on his tiny fork and maintain eating autonomy. There is another level too: simple resignation. For example, that E's ongoing insistence on burrowing through the trash and recycling is a phase that will eventually pass.

I read something once about listening to avocados, how that was one way to know if they were ripe and good. It sounds like madness. It can't be true – I must have made it up. Or was it watermelons? Either way, the listening thing – there's something there. Though I don't think you always need to be listening with your ears.

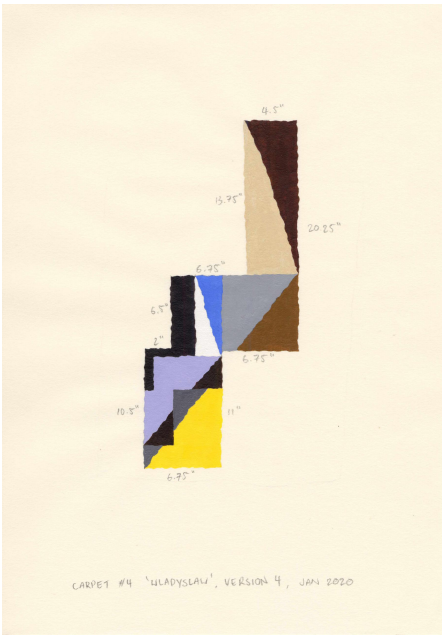
Love,
C



Plan for Carpet #2, *Gordon* Version 4, 2020. Image courtesy of Peter Gouge.



Plan for Carpet #3, *Lygia* Version 4, 2020. Image courtesy of Peter Gouge.



Plan for Carpet #4, *Wladyslaw* Version 4, 2020. Image courtesy of Peter Gouge.

4 September 2020

C,

As this project developed I noticed other parents discussing these small concessions or workarounds. For example, trying to sell the plastic measuring spoons as more fun to play with than the glass measuring cup or cast-iron pan. E isn't reasonable, or able to be reasoned with. Maybe reason still isn't the way to deal with him, and that's why the carpets worked?

I found that a lot of things I researched earlier in my MFA kept dovetailing with what was happening with the carpets. I think of concrete art out of Brazil, and the idea of the Non-Object developing out of an interaction with the art of psychiatric patients. Here, too, is the idea that maybe the work of art isn't contained by the object, that an experience of it can be more than just looking at it. The object needs a person to interact with it – it requires a more intimate engagement. Ferreira Gullar describes the Non-Object as a 'quasi-corpus', a kind of body that actively reacts to your handling of it. The carpets were a bit like this – we experienced them in more than just a visual way.

Though they didn't need to be handled – they worked with the inverse of that idea. As if they themselves were a body – a subject – that must be avoided, allowed to exist undisturbed.

Does this maybe explain why I had so much trouble letting them go?

Love,
P

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7 September 2020

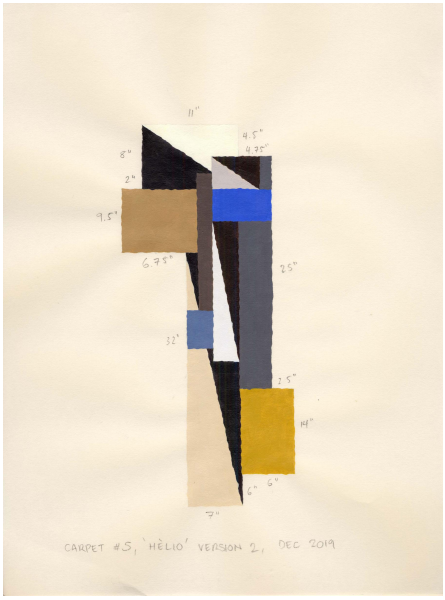
P,

There are floorboards in our new home, a 1990s brick townhouse in Ōtautahi, that creak worse than those in our Gainesville apartment in the northeast corner of Bodiford House, which was built in the 1890s. Thankfully E is a pretty good sleeper now. Though new issues have arisen. Just last week he figured out how to unlatch the front gate, which means our courtyard is no longer a place he can play without one of us watching his every move. And what about his obsession with the microwave, which due to our kitchen's size is stored on his level? The child-proof latch you bought doesn't work. This morning I turned around to find the following spinning on the microwave tray: a silicone spatula, a pair of BBQ tongs, the letters J, F, and C from his alphabet magnets. He'd set the cook time for ten and a half minutes.

Do you remember how we packed up our belongings before we left Gainesville? We started with E's things, all of his clothes, eating paraphernalia, everything we knew we would need for two weeks of quarantine and then to start our new life in New Zealand. After that: your paints, a few paintings, the rugs from Oaxaca, a crate of records, a handful of books, our clothes, a few special kitchen implements (the heavy cast iron pans). We had our suitcases and cardboard boxes lined up in the living room. It was a kind of triage. Those days were an awful sleepless blur. The carpets were there, still in their allocated places on the living room floor. They bore witness to this too.

It's hard to think of them now, how easily we binned them. But in the moment we were determinedly facing forward. The carpets were a look back we couldn't afford. They were a special part of our life for the time that they were a part of our life. And as much as it would have been nice to see them hanging on the wall of our home in Ōtautahi, we don't need them here. We have the photos. And now we need other things.

Love,
C



Plan for Carpet #5, *Hélio* Version 2, 2020. Image courtesy of Peter Gouge.



Living Room: February 2020, 2020. Image courtesy of Peter Gouge.

9 September 2020

C,

Yeah, there are new problems to solve here.

Now that this project is getting a New Zealand audience at Melanie Roger Gallery, the challenge is to communicate how the carpets functioned in our apartment to people who couldn't be there. When I was preparing this work to be shown as the final exhibition of my MFA, it was often suggested that I reconstruct the room. I didn't think that would work – it's a cheap illusion. I also think it's important to recognise our home as a private space. Even back in

Gainesville I was hesitant to let people come and see what I was working on. I didn't want to spectacularise our life.

Displaying documentation then, has become a way to reveal what I was making without people actually experiencing the paintings as they functioned for us. What information you might lack from one source you can get from another: you can see the colours in the palette, but not the texture, you can see the texture in the carpet swatch but not the shape, you can see the shape in the plans, but not the scale, you can see the scale in the wall drawing, but not what else is in the space, you can see what else is in the space in the photographs, but not the colour. All of this partial information allows us that privacy – of never showing everything. To me, they now act like a collection of architectural plans. Looking at a single elevation gives a viewer only one perspective, while looking at a series of plans together allows them to see more fully what the building will be like, even when they can't experience it first hand.

We'd still be missing something though, without a representation of the original problem the paintings were made to solve. I ended up recording as many of the noises from the floorboards as I could while you two were out one day. Then I made an electronic piece that is triggered by the viewer's movement in the exhibition, playing random squeaks, cracks and creaks. The aural shock from this piece creates a sense of place that can't be expressed through the presentation of visual information – of being there in the space, accidentally creating that noise. And hopefully not waking the baby.

Love,
P

This project is being shown at Melanie Roger Gallery from 23 September - 10 October 2020.

Biographies



Peter Gouge is an artist currently based in Ōtautahi. He has a MFA in Painting from the University of Florida. He is represented by Melanie Roger Gallery, Auckland and Carey Young, Wellington.



Chloe Lane is the 2022 recipient of the Todd New Writer's Bursary and a 2021 Grimshaw Sargeson Fellow. Her second novel, *Arms & Legs*, is out now in Aotearoa (Te Herenga Waka University Press), and will be released in North America (House of Anansi Press) and the UK and Europe (Gallic Books) in 2023. She lives in Gainesville, Florida.

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