

“Sorry ... Ummm”: Mystery, Mark Fisher,  
and Laughter

A Conversation with Campbell Patterson

by Jasmine Gallagher

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Image documenting Patterson's studio during Gasworks residency, 8th December 2022 ,1:58am. Image courtesy of Campbell Patterson.



Campbell Patterson, *Interview*, 2022, digital video, 9 min 56 sec. Made during Patterson's Gasworks residency. Image courtesy of Campbell Patterson.



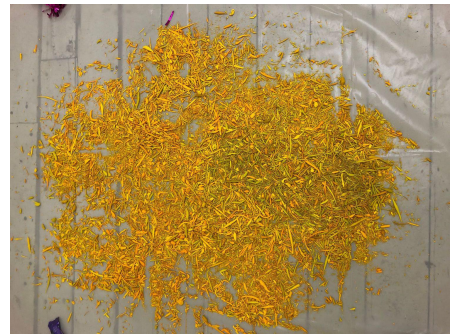
Moments from November 2021 written onto a piece of masking tape stuck to the floor. Still from Campbell Patterson, *nowhere 2*, 2022, digital video, 41 min 24 sec. Made during Patterson's Headlands residency, 2022. Courtesy of the artist.



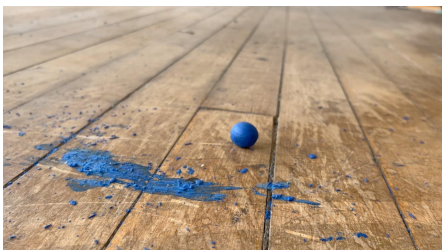
Campbell Patterson, *torso*, 2022, acrylic, wood glue, rags. Courtesy of Campbell Patterson.



Artist lies on the floor covered by a blue airplane blanket, tries to sleep, rolls over to turn on the automatic lights whenever they turn off. Still from Campbell Patterson, *sleep*, 2022, digital video, 43 min 11 sec, made during Patterson's Gasworks residency, 2022. Courtesy of the artist.



Work in progress during Patterson's Gasworks residency, 2022. Image courtesy of Campbell Patterson.



Artist rubs blue paint and wood glue on his foot to create a blue ball. Still from Campbell Patterson, *blue foot*, 2022, digital video, 12 min 43 sec, made during Patterson's Headlands residency, 2022. Courtesy of Campbell Patterson.

*Poet and researcher Jasmine Gallagher and visual artist Campbell Patterson met for the first time when they became flatmates as Gallagher was beginning her PhD and Patterson carried out the 2017 Frances Hodgkins Fellowship, both at the University of Otago in Ōtepoti Dunedin, Aotearoa New Zealand. Two years later, Patterson won the Fulbright-Wallace Arts Trust Award, which funds a ten-week residency at Headlands Center for the Arts in Sausalito, California and in May 2020, Patterson was awarded a three-month residency at Gasworks in London. By this stage in the unfolding global pandemic all plans for international travel and work were—at best—tentative, but Patterson was finally able to complete these periods of work in 2022. The two shared a conversation with HUM that traverses the full spectrum of life that happened amongst these milestones and the potential of nocturnal, absurd, and unseen processes for physical and emotional healing.*

JASMINE GALLAGHER     I read something the other day about how a joke that needs to be explained often loses its humorous effect. I think this aspect of a joke, the following laughter, and the healing potential of laughter all relate to how you have described your practice to me in the past, because it is not so outcome-focused or explainable in an instrumental sense, but dwells more in a space of indeterminacy, ambivalence, and the open-ended process of making itself. In contrast, I read about your residencies online where there are explanations and videos about your work and intentions for your time there.<sup>[01]</sup> Do you feel like the residency websites give a good overview of the projects now that you have completed them?

CAMPBELL PATTERSON     I had a read of what is on the websites and, no, I don't think that they really sum up my residencies that well. Most of what is on the Gasworks and Headlands websites is more relevant to where I was at in 2020, when I was supposed to do both residencies.<sup>[02]</sup> A lot about the way that I work doesn't really fit into the box of how residencies work; I don't even really think of them as projects, more specific periods of life and work. On the Gasworks page there is a promotional video of me talking about my work. During the residency I made my own

edit of the interview they shot for that video. My edit is mostly just “umm” and “sorry” and shows a very real struggle to articulate anything into words. I felt like it spoke more to my way of working and was a more genuine representation of my project than what is on the website, which makes less sense to me when I try to watch it. I shared my edit as a work displayed during my open studio at Gasworks and the staff had a good laugh. They were even considering my request to replace the promotional video on their website with my edit. I struggle with this kind of direct talking on the best of days but that day was particularly bad. Luckily, failed attempts and struggle are things I am interested in so after a few days feeling despair over the interview I had a bit of a breakthrough moment with it.

JG                      Your edit of that video sounds great, and as though it certainly has some humour in it, which I often see in your work. I suppose the difference between the two videos highlights the way that artists are often required to publicise their practice in this neoliberal era, in order to gain funding and residencies, court dealers, or appeal directly to the consumer via social media and personal branding. Neoliberalism is a systemic pressure that artists and institutions all have to navigate, whether in public or privatised funding environments. As a system for distributing resources, it sets up a contest wherein artists and institutions are pressured to perform ideas and identities that are culturally desirable while advancing their own, more specific, ideas and practices. Within this context it feels like art is regularly instrumentalised, often in the name of promoting marginalised identities by working towards some kind of social justice, which has in turn become intertwined with securing funding and making money. However, in Gasworks’ video I do think you can still be seen to reject this notion of instrumentalisation when you say that you find your work “almost needs to be secret, like a secret shame. My work thrives in that space and it is that space that I wish to explore.”<sup>[03]</sup> This reminds me of a quote about the role of the artist that is widely attributed to the poet Stéphane Mallarmé: “Everything that is sacred and that wishes to remain so must envelope itself in mystery.”

I hope I'm not reading into it too much, but I feel like my recent experience of having a baby and what I learned about the medicalisation of birthing reflects these ideas about the nature of art and the role of the artist—especially the associated idea that the process of creation is something that is best unobserved by those who are strangers or foreign to it. Birthing evolved from being considered a private or sacred kind of thing, in familiar environments like the home, with familiar people like partners and midwives that the woman knows and invites to support the process, to one that is observed, monitored, and examined instrumentally by doctors in hospitals. This has taken the power to birth more naturally away from women, and changed the meaning and experience of birth in the process. With this in mind, I was wondering if you could describe your visit to the hospital in Portsmouth while on the Gasworks residency, including how it made you feel and what gave you the idea to visit.

CP                      Wow, congratulations Jasmine! I didn't know you were a mum now. That's amazing!

I was born in Portsmouth but left before I turned one. It's always been on my mind to visit this place and to use it to make some kind of work about my identity but I felt no major sense of belonging or anything hugely revelatory when I visited. I took two trips to Portsmouth, the weather was quite bad both times. The first time, I got off the train at the harbour, which was a really long way away from the hospital. The walk took up most of the day and when I got there I just wandered around taking photos of everything, feeling a bit stressed that I had no real good reason to be there. The second time I got the train to the right station. I bought a huge tomato from a nearby shop and crushed it between my head and the wall of one of the hospital bathrooms. Somebody walked in while I was cleaning up and a security guard soon followed but, luckily, by then I had cleaned up properly. I walked around the entire hospital a few times, ran up and down the stairwell for about an hour, and then sat on a grapefruit in another bathroom. As for how it made me feel, I guess I was at a loss for what to do, how to interact with a very human but also dehumanised building. The idea that I came from there felt big in my mind but completely meaningless in

reality. It felt perverse to be there. Honestly, it felt like a kind of lonely place.

I like that quote from Mallarmé. I find that whenever I do a residency my sleeping pattern takes a dramatic turn towards nocturnal. At Headlands I was still living in New Zealand time, going to sleep almost every day after the sun had come up and waking up halfway through the afternoon, and it was similar, though less dramatic, at Gasworks. I made a series of paintings years ago and called them all *jetlag*, which I don't think I fully understood at the time. I think that when I am in an intense period of making I like to be in a similar kind of headspace. Sometimes I didn't get anything done in a day until I thought all the other residents were asleep. I became particularly obsessed with the stairs at the Headlands studio building and would run up and down them many times during my late studio nights. I took so many photos of them when it was time to leave, in an attack of sentimentality. I just don't think you can properly appreciate something like a stairwell when other people are up and walking around.

JG                      Thank you! Yes, it's been an amazing experience, especially doing a natural home birth with supportive midwives. I learned so much through that process and felt I was able to make the experience an empowering one. But it also made me aware that I was lucky to be able to access that learning and support, as it is not the experience of many women, with traumatic and unnecessary medical interventions still extremely common in the hospital system. I suppose hospitals do tend to have that clinical and institutional kind of feeling, as the presence of security personnel highlights even more.

This aspect of policing bodies and space might allow us to segue into your Headlands residency—whether that residency still allowed you to look into aspects of housing insecurity, as the statement on the website outlines. Did thinking about this while overseas allow you a bit more freedom to explore this notion?

Also, you mentioned going to death metal gigs while at Gasworks and I wondered if you found this was more generative than the

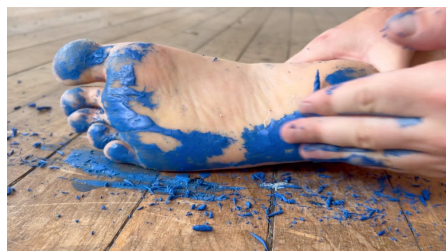
hospital visits? Although it is hard to predict how our life experiences or research might filter into creative work, I imagine the gigs might've felt much more appropriate or welcoming, while also suiting your nocturnal habits; being out and amongst the London nightlife.

CP                      I wrote my proposal for Headlands almost three years before I actually got there. I wrote about housing insecurity in my application because I was working on a commission at the time which asked me to respond to the concept of home, but even then, the idea wasn't really that central to the work I made, just a starting point. Making work about one specific thing just isn't how I work or think and I have chosen to communicate through art because art can communicate in a way that is not that direct or literal. The work needs to go somewhere else than my intent, it needs to live its own life away from my feelings or words. But in saying that, I think the decision to make art is always an exploration of housing insecurity on some level, especially in a residency situation, where you have a temporary home and friends and then you pack it up and go somewhere else. I find this aspect of artist residencies really difficult. I think a lot of the work I made on both residencies was essentially about anxiety or sitting still and having tons of energy. I found a process that would take as long as possible and take up as little space and got lost in it.

It was really refreshing to make art in a place where nobody knew anything about me. New Zealand can feel very small sometimes and I find that can be quite suffocating for art making. One of my favourite things was the presentations we all had to give about our practice—it felt liberating and very validating to have it seen through new eyes. My body is often in my work and I draw heavily from my life, but I intend that to be a body anonymous to the audience, the work is not supposed to be about me, the person, but me the object.

Death metal gigs were more welcoming than the hospital, but that was not a surprise. Metal can feel like such a culture of abundance, where everybody is getting plenty of what they want—it seems like

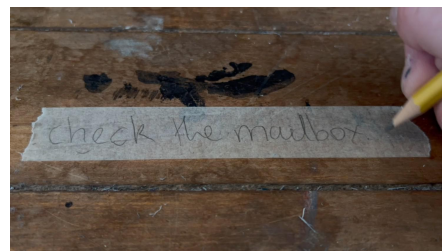
a very happy place. I went to those gigs to experience a feeling of being totally surrounded, like being lost inside a pillow, and that was exactly what it was like.



Artist rubs blue paint and wood glue on his foot to create a blue ball. Still from Campbell Patterson, *blue foot*, 2022, digital video, 12 min 43 sec, made during Patterson's Headlands residency, 2022. Courtesy of Campbell Patterson.



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Research image taken inside Portsmouth Hospital during Patterson's Gasworks residency, 2022. Image courtesy of Campbell Patterson.



The staircase at Patterson's Headlands residency, 2022. Image courtesy of Campbell Patterson.

JG I see. Did you find that some of the anxiety you mention comes from the temporary nature of the residency experience, compounded with the housing crisis here in New Zealand and the global cost-of-living crisis? Your process of using a lot of time in a small amount of space sounds pertinent. What materials were you working with at the time and how were you using them? Also, did you document the grapefruit and tomato scenes at the hospital? And is exercise a part of your practice (like climbing the stairs)?

CP                      Well, when I did start working at Headlands, I started using materials that I could find around the place: a soiled blue microfibre rag (which I spent a while cleaning), wood glue from the workshop, tiny amounts of acrylic paint from one of the painters working there, and, of course, my phone. I made a video in each studio documenting the daily attempts to fit into these jeans my dad gave me, which are too small. I'm mostly completely nude in the video and I'm super self-conscious about it; I may never exhibit it. I never managed to fit into them comfortably. The jeans sat in the middle of the studio for most of both residencies, I would put them on then take them off and put them down, the video cuts to me picking them up the next day and the studio evolves in the background.

I also revisited a process that I had played with many years ago, of rubbing wood glue and paint between my hands until it hardened into a putty-like consistency which could then be used like a sort of paint. I think the desire to explore this came from the experience of breaking my right arm at the start of 2022 and the rehab processes involved in the healing. About a week before I left New Zealand, in July, I fell on that same arm and fractured my shoulder so was still in quite a bit of pain when I arrived at Headlands. It felt good to push against the resistance of the drying glue. I became interested in the parallel between physical healing and emotional healing, and wanted to explore that space.

In the paintings that I was finishing before leaving New Zealand, I was consciously trying to slow down the painting process. I thought that once overseas I would emerge from this place and increase the pace of the process but actually I ended up slowing it down even more, to the point where I started to think about it as being something my body was dissolved in. I continued to explore this process at Gasworks, but more as a process than as a means for composition. Less interested in the material being fixed in a certain way than letting it fall to the floor to be swept into the work. More and more, I felt like my project was an exploration of both sitting still and rapidly moving, not articulating but trying.

Also, while at Gasworks I made the decision to title my works *torso* if there was no other title for them. *Torso* instead of *untitled*

because, if nothing else, the works are of that part of the body, where anxiety and restlessness dwell.

I didn't document the actions at the hospital. I think of them as research, ways to interact with a building. I was interested in the futility of that interaction; that I felt very small and insignificant in relation. Exercise is a huge part of my creative process and just daily life. It helps to be moving, helps to process things and ideas, and sometimes it's just really hard to sit in front of a laptop for any length of time without wanting to get up and run away!



Artist lies on the floor covered by a blue airplane blanket, tries to sleep, rolls over to turn on the automatic lights whenever they turn off. Still from Campbell Patterson, *sleep*, 2022, digital video, 43 min 11 sec, made during Patterson's Gasworks residency, 2022. Courtesy of the artist.



Campbell Patterson, *torso*, 2022, acrylic, wood glue, rags. Courtesy of Campbell Patterson.



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Work in progress during Patterson's Gasworks residency, 2022. Image courtesy of Campbell Patterson.



Floor residue swept up before leaving Patterson's Headlands residency, 2022. Image courtesy of Campbell Patterson.

JG                      That's cool. I've been thinking a lot about that link between emotional and physical healing myself lately. In my doctoral research I was looking at that idea, specifically with regard to the natural environment. But the field of ecocriticism that I was specialising in can feel so heavy, righteous, and serious. This is part of the reason I wanted to talk to you about your practice, because, like I said at the start, I've always seen an element of humour in your work. I've noticed ecocriticism is finally moving towards affects like hope, joy, and laughter more than the likes of fear, guilt, anger, and grief, but it is a slow process. Maybe that is because, as Mark Fisher discusses in *Exiting the Vampire Castle*, in the arts and academia more generally there has been a focus on social justice, marginalised identities, trauma and victimhood that feels kind of oppressive at times, despite often good intentions.<sup>[04]</sup> So perhaps the idea you touch on with regards to the torso and anxiety could be extended to laughter, too?

Do you feel like humour is something that continues to be relevant to your practice—especially during the residencies and while doing absurd or futile acts like those with the grapefruit and tomato at the hospital as research, or with the videos you made with your father's jeans—maybe as a way of dealing with anxiety and uncertainty perhaps? Maybe it's because they're focused on things not fitting, like the parts of the interview footage that you felt best articulated your practice.

CP                      Yes! The concept of fitting/not fitting felt central to my explorations overseas. Also, you are right, the torso can definitely be extended to laughter! But I don't think about laughter when I make my work. I don't really think about humour at all but I do like to explore the absurd and the ridiculous because there is a real freedom there, and you can hide a lot. It's also liberating to move away from the rational! I am definitely interested in that too, though there needs to be a balance. I think it would be a disservice to that part of the work to consciously explore humour in any kind of laboured way. Maybe I'm too close to the work to even know what people are going to find funny. It does make me happy that people can see humour in the work. Laughter is a good response, it is a

nice thing but it can quickly be devalued in this context. I think an art gallery is a space where people really want to laugh.

## Footnotes

01. Details of the residencies at [Headlands](#) and [Gasworks](#) are linked here.

02. Instead, Patterson completed the Headlands residency from 19 July – 31 August 2022, and the residency at Gasworks from 3 October – 19 December 2022. Awarded by the New Zealand Friends of Gasworks, Patterson's residency at Gasworks was part of an annual residency programme co-organised by the Jan Warburton Charitable Trust and Stephanie Post in collaboration with Creative New Zealand and Elam School of Fine Arts.

03. Campbell Patterson in: Gasworks, "Artist in Residence: Campbell Patterson (New Zealand)," Vimeo, <https://vimeo.com/776247548>

04. Mark Fisher, "Exiting the Vampire Castle," Open Democracy, 24 November 2013, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/opendemocracyuk/exiting-vampire-castle/>

## Biographies



Campbell Patterson (b.1983) creates works in an interchangeable array of mediums that evoke the mundane, repetitive, but frequently sublime aspects of everyday living and suburban experience. In his video work, Patterson often transforms his body into an absurd domestic tool, such as in the ongoing series *Lifting my mother for as long as I can* (2006–). Particularly through the use of repetition, Patterson invokes the conceptual tradition of the mid-twentieth century through figures like Stanley Broun and On Kawara—transplanted into the contexts of domestic Aotearoa environments.

Patterson graduated with a Bachelor of Fine Arts from Elam School of Fine Arts, the University of Auckland, in 2006. His work has been included in *Contact Us*, Cement Fondu, Sydney (2020); *Performance Portraits*, Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki (2016); *Art as a verb*, Artspace, Sydney (2015) and the 6th Asia Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art, Queensland Art Gallery | Gallery of Modern Art, Brisbane (2010).



Jasmine Gallagher is a stay-at-home mum from Ōtautahi Christchurch. Her debut poetry collection, *Dirge Bucolic*, centres around the nervous breakdown and recovery of a female protagonist and was published by Compound Press in 2022.

