

THE WORKINGS

GRACE CLIFFORD



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Testing Ground at **Yorkshire Artspace** is a residency programme providing intensive periods of creative experimentation for artists working in Sheffield. It aims to reveal the processes of making and thinking involved in creating artworks, offering a rare glimpse under the hood at the mechanics of artistic production.

The Workings is an accompanying publication series that continues this effort, documenting and sharing each residency through photography, writing and notebook extracts.

This chapter looks at artist **Grace Clifford**, who used her residency in May/June 2024 to explore the rituals of blue collar trade. It features a commissioned text by **Beth Hughes**, written after a studio visit and conversation with the artist during her residency.

Grace Clifford (b.2000) works mainly in sculpture and installation, using materials and found objects she feels instinctively drawn to. She thinks churches and factories are the same thing. Her practice “chews up and spits out” environments, ideas, feelings and experiences she encounters.

www.artspace.org.uk
www.grace-clifford.com







ARTIST'S NOTES

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WORDS BY **BETH HUGHES**

What first hits you as you enter the gallery are the industrial smells: petrol, oil, grease. As part of Yorkshire Artspace's residency programme, *Testing Ground*, Clifford has transformed the gallery into a large-scale sculptural installation of seemingly disparate objects carefully positioned in dialogue with each other. Through conversation which oscillates from the art in front of us, the artist and I begin to find commonalities between our fathers' professions as my olfactory memory unearths what my younger self assumed was my father's chosen cologne, Swarfega.

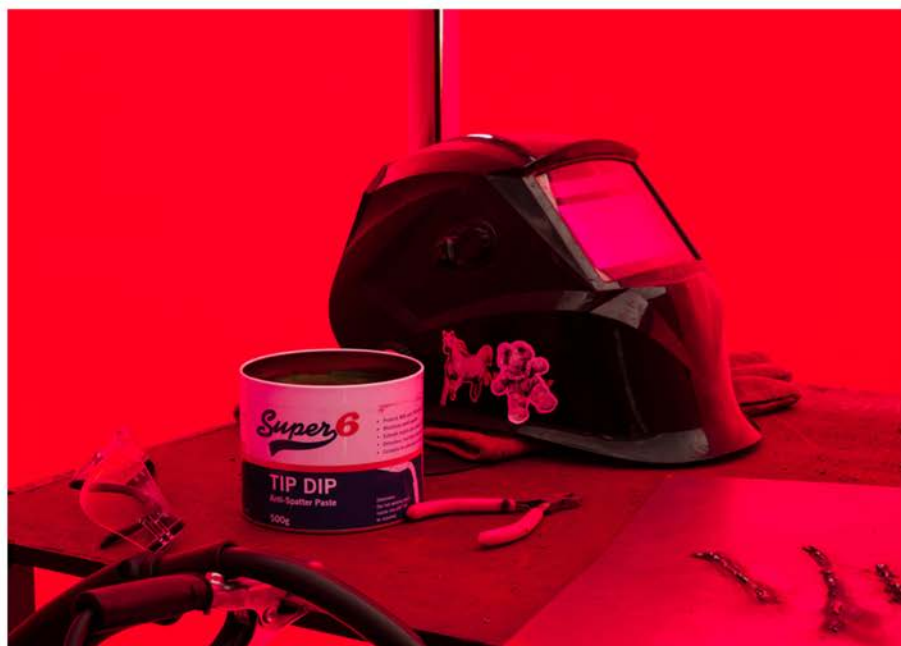
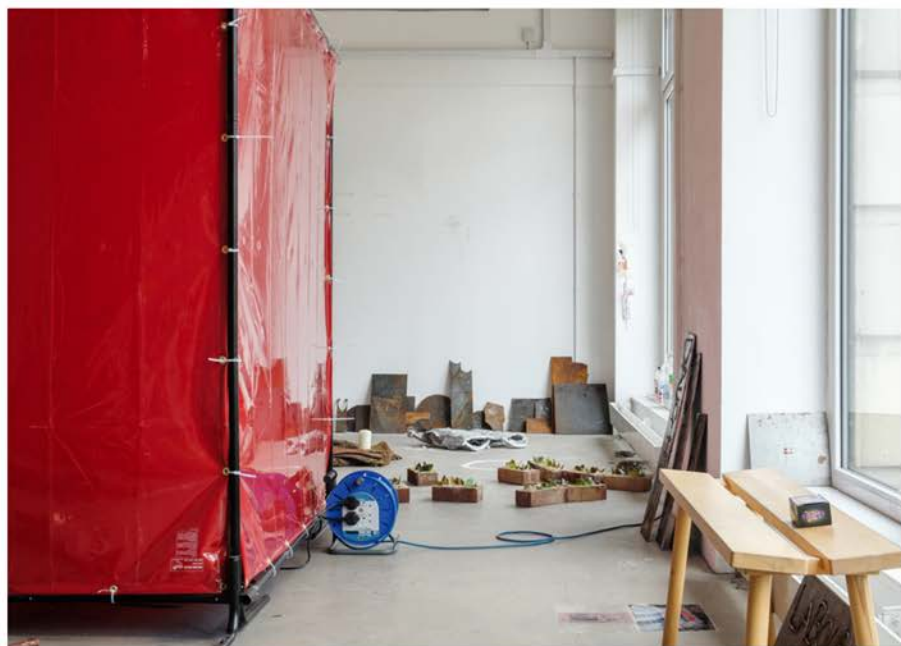
Clifford outlines her working method which begins by intuitively collecting objects, it is a meticulous selection process, she then waits for their potential to be revealed through cognitive introspection, and finally the task of arrangement and re-arrangement. The objects call to each other, sparking memory, reflection and stimulating conversation; the installation acts as social lubricant.

I am drawn to a squat bar stool which, at a distance, seems to be a found object. As its metallic surface slowly reveals itself, it is clear there is a laborious process that lies beneath. Cast from thirteen separate

pieces, the artist describes the immense effort it took to take the stool apart to prepare it for the casting process. She then painstakingly hammered a textile pattern into the seat, the tools for which lie nearby as the making process is no hidden secret. Created during a period of furlough, the artist declares dissatisfaction with the piece. Although acknowledging the benefits of the learning journey and it not being without its aesthetic value, she feels a palpable lack of resolution at the end of the work. As we sink further into the installation, it becomes clear as to why.

The presence of employment in Clifford's work is multi-dimensional, encompassing both physical and intellectual labour. In the centre of the gallery is a red, rubber welding curtain creating a room within a room; its deep, lurid red pigment is an abrasive presence and reflects the intensity required for the welding process. Clifford trained as a welder, a skill that requires a high degree of precision and is certainly a physically demanding process, where the best welding is designed not to be seen. Clifford raises the profile of this hidden craft by emblazoning a series of steel plaques with short phrases which meld together notions of labour and religious practice. One in particular stands out to me, it says simply: *'churches and factories.'*

In our view of the past, the eye can confuse church and factory; their joint associations with a moral life, both ritualistic, both at the heart of a community, both a





form of servitude. Clifford reflects on her father's occupation as he worked nights and slept days, which necessitated her daily vow of silence and the threatened consequences if she transgressed and made a noise. Her labour is hidden behind his.

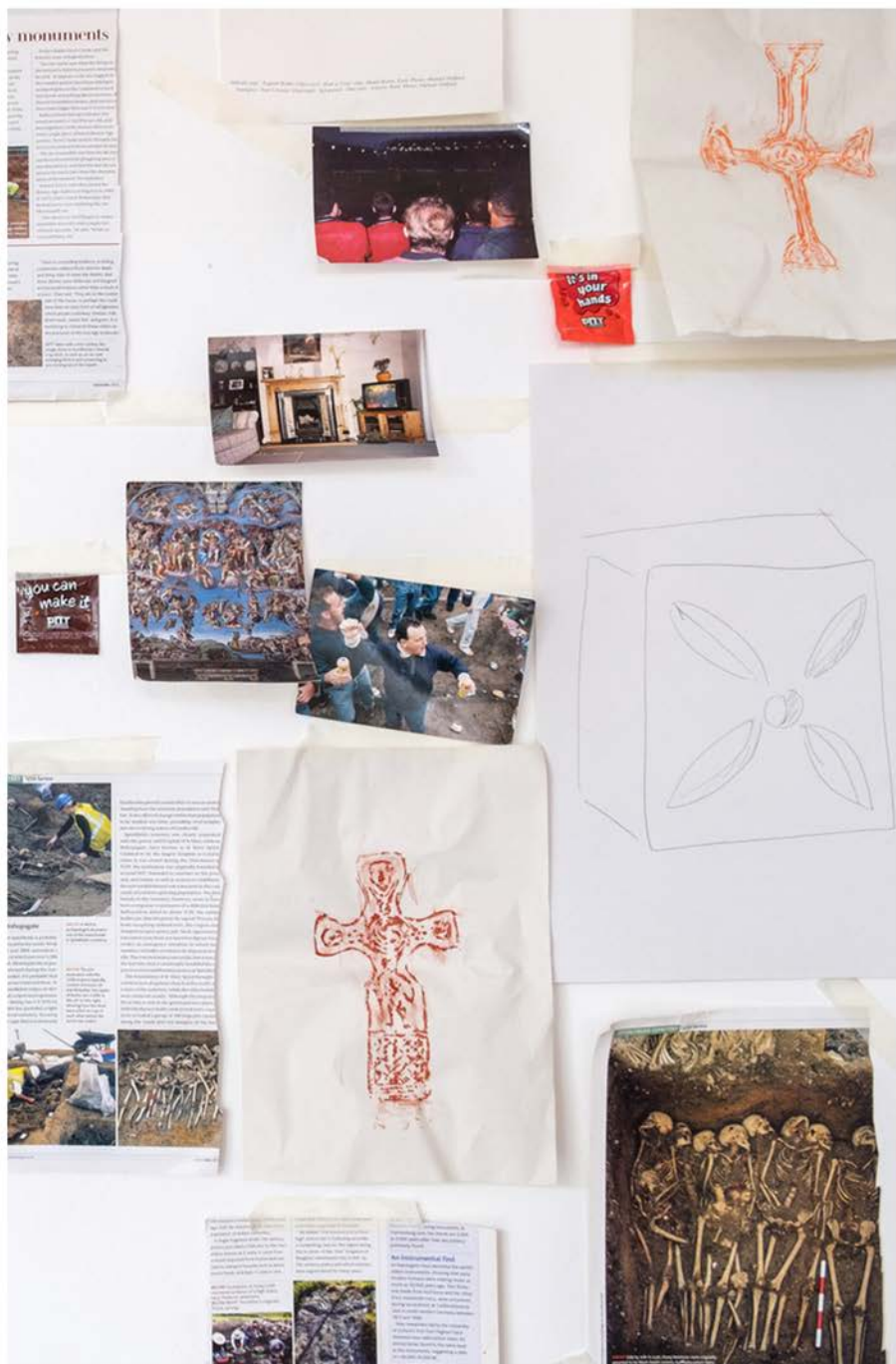
While the presence of manual labour is palpable, what is most striking in this installation is the sophisticated intellectual labour. Clifford guides me to a pink and green cannabis packet collected some time ago and now lying on the floor by an open book. She describes the pull this packet had for her, the source of which was initially unknown to the artist. She placed it alongside books documenting industry in the Midlands which were collected by her Grandfather, whose father (Clifford's great grandfather) was a miner based in Stoke. He used to travel to the Black Country by bike in search of work as the rest of his family took refuge in a squatted pub. In laying the objects side by side, the artist noted compositional similarities between them - the billowing smoke, the chimney shapes - which magnetised these objects. She describes how she once felt her family history was not pertinent to her but, through these material revelations, these intergenerational connections were unearthed.

This example of cultural transference reaffirms the application of memetic theory, that our genetic information is transferred in our genes and cultural information is passed on through our memes. When Professor Richard Dawkins coined the term 'meme' in

his seminal 1976 book, *The Selfish Gene*, five years before the widely recognised birth of the internet, he described 'the meme' in wider terms than our current usage extending it to any cultural idea or behaviour that is imitated and replicated. Memetic theory is yet to be fully operationalised but I would suggest that our social class is transferred in what Dawkins would deem a longitudinal meme - those that develop into customs and traditions and maybe more akin to how genetic information passes from generation to generation. In her material explorations, Clifford is revealing the subconscious memetic behaviours passed on through her family, which in this instance is an inherent value in manufacturing and the making process.

This weed packet is no longer disposable detritus, as objects are only mass-produced at the point of production. When they become part of someone's life, they gain status and are transfigured. Sitting on the windowsill is a plastic vase with the italicised words '*In Loving Memory*' printed in gold. The label tells us it was bought from B&M Bargains for three pounds, although you'd only know that if the branding was familiar to you. Liberated from the shop shelf, this object has potency, it is emblematic of a wider and yet unknown circumstance. All we do know is that this is the funereal object of those with limited funds. How death is done in any culture is steeped in symbolism; deaths are deeply personal moments within the structures of our culture pertaining to a wider universal experience and another example of memetic behaviour.









Guided by the artist's references to organised religion, it is clear she enacts a quasi-religious methodology. Sensing the cultural significance of an object, she waits patiently for it to be transfigured, its meaning to be released, at which point the artist lets go of any control and ownership is reversed; the artist becomes in servitude to the object. The intense labour enacted to construct these assemblages negates the ghost of a mass-produced process as Clifford exposes elasticity in the object, in its commonly overlooked potential to spark connection. It would seem the source of disappointment in the bar stool stems from its deficiency in this area, at the end of such a laborious process, it failed to ignite.

Clifford goes beyond our usual understanding of 'working-class' as being just a label, in her work it becomes a verb, it is active, she does working-class in her practice. I am reminded of Professor Maria Fusco's exploration of working-class as method, how social background permeates all aspects of creative practice and creates a standalone methodology which, in Clifford's work, we read through the visual. This reflects the artist's pride in her class background which she describes as a coping mechanism, but which I would suggest is her methodology.

In paying homage to our industrial heritage, a history of making and manufacturing, which is integral to shaping British identity (and none more so than in Sheffield, where this residency took place), our

understanding of current social constructs is questioned. Reflecting on the intergenerational nature of class and decline in the industrial workforce, we ask who and where are the new working-class communities?

We end our conversation with a conscious shift as the artist realises we have spoken at length but she hasn't mentioned her greatest love: horses. 'If I had a horse my life wouldn't be what it is now, I wouldn't make art,' she says. Our back and forth about the shape of working-class life crystallises in her view of horses; these hard-working, beautiful creatures are the pinnacle of labour.

BETH HUGHES (b.1985) is an independent curator, researcher and leader of the Working Class British Art Network. She is interested in the representation of contemporary British working-class artists in publicly-funded art collections. From 2015 to 2022, she was Curator at the Arts Council Collection, London.







Grace

When you have a
Can of pepsi. ~~But~~

Could you make Sure
you drink it all
please.



CREDITS

ARTIST IN RESIDENCE

GRACE CLIFFORD

RESIDENCY FACILITATORS

TYLER MELLINS

RACHAEL DODD

WRITER

BETH HUGHES

PHOTOGRAPHER

JAMES CLARKSON

PUBLICATION EDITOR

TYLER MELLINS

SPECIAL THANKS

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