

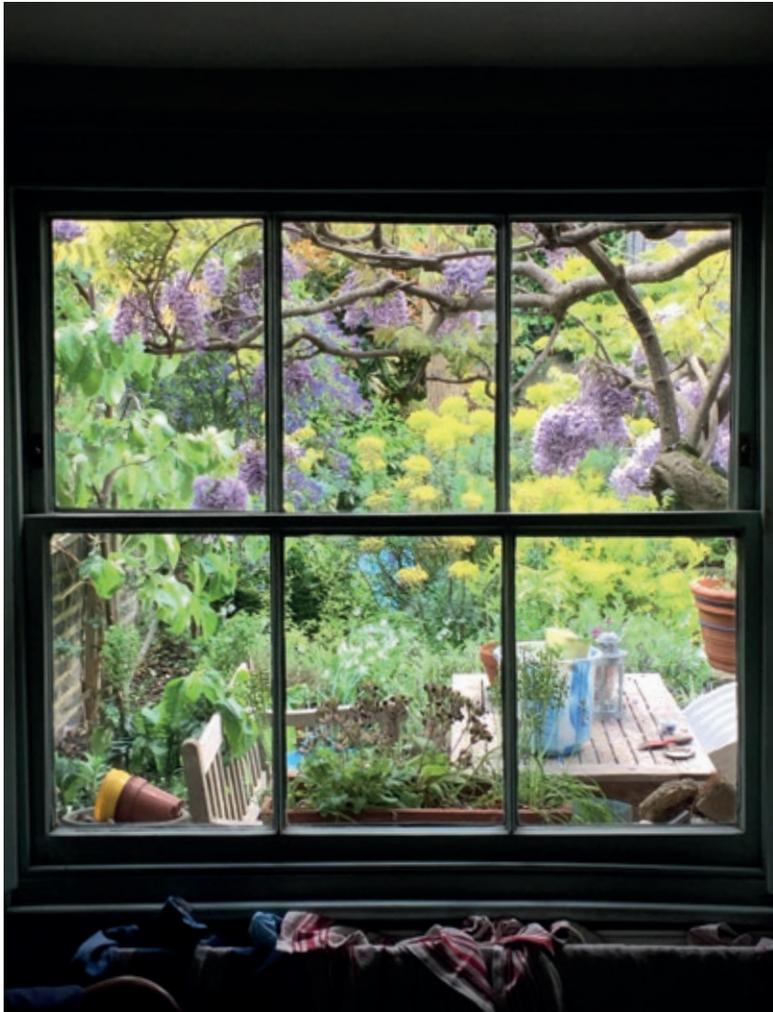
Dialogues
Alison Britton

Dialogues

This catalogue was published by Monique Deul Consultancy on the occasion of *Dialogues*, a solo exhibition of work by Alison Britton, presented by Taste Contemporary at Rue Abraham Constantin 6, 1206 Geneva, Switzerland

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Foreword

I first contacted Alison Britton in 2014 when I was beginning my journey with Taste Contemporary. I wanted to share with her my hopes and dreams for Taste and to invite her to become part of the Taste Contemporary family. I was already aware of her stature; a pivotal figure in postmodern ceramics, her work challenged the notion of this material, not only through her making, but through her insightful writing. As a teacher at the Royal College of Art she was also a mentor to many young artists. Needless to say, I was overjoyed when she agreed to send me work for our first artgenève exhibition in 2015.

I was a little apprehensive about our first meeting. As a woman emerging in the 1970's, determined and ambitious, she earned the respect and admiration of her contemporaries because of the expertise, rigour and dedication she brought to her making, writing and teaching. As a leading and revered figure in British Studio Ceramics, I have seen her described as 'formidable'. I, therefore, assumed there would be no obvious path to Alison's affection during our first meeting over lunch in her London home in 2016. Alison may have been critical and challenging, but in a way that was encouraging and stimulating. I am reminded of Tanya Harrod's description [page 7] of her pieces. "There are ways of holding these pots – handles, yes,

but also semi-secret indentations that make a pot easy to pick up." I guess Alison is a bit like her pots; challenging but ultimately welcoming, wonderfully exuberant, strong, humorous and quirky. I include this photo [left] I made of Alison's beautiful garden, a becalming and everlasting memory of the lovely day I met this incredible woman who became a kind and generous friend.

I'm honoured that Taste Contemporary is presenting a solo exhibition of Alison Britton's work here in our Geneva gallery. Many of the pieces in this exhibition were created earlier this year during the UK lockdown. They are a testament to her depth of character. Thoughtful and uplifting, they offer us some much-needed respite and reassuring inspiration.

Monique Deul, Founder & Director,
Taste Contemporary





Alison Britton: Mythical Method

Alison Britton's work reaches back to my first stumbling thoughts about ceramics. In the 1980s, when I first encountered her work, I saw what appeared to be a remarkable amalgam of sculpture and painting. My understanding of what art might be was restricted. Our text books were limited. Our ideas about what was radical had been kept narrow and exclusive.

George Kubler's remarkable primer *The Shape of Time* finally put me on the right road. Kubler argued for the collapse of categories. He saw that there was an 'urgent requirement to devise better ways of considering everything that humanity has made'.

We might assume that today, in 2020, debate about categories in the visual arts would be a thing of the past. After all, painting and sculpture are now just two genres among many in an art world which celebrates every kind of diversity. Ceramics and textiles are currently enthusiastically embraced as are other areas once defined as 'craft' or 'applied art' or 'design'. Only last year the Hepworth in Wakefield, Yorkshire staged a magnificent retrospective of the pots of Magdalena Odundo, set among a catholic selection of paintings, sculptures, textiles and

Tanya Harrod

ethnographic objects – an array of many categories of 'things' chosen by Odundo.

To love ceramics is both easy and difficult. As with all art forms, to respond at a deep level requires a specialist understanding. On the one hand, ceramics appear reassuring familiar, related, however distantly, to objects of everyday use. But I was missing something when I first saw Britton's work and decided that it encompassed both painting and sculpture. I was overlooking qualities that are peculiar to ceramics. Over time I read books and essays that helped me understand the unique qualities of ceramics, particularly the vessel form, with its ancient, pre-industrial and vernacular histories. Some of these discoveries are set out here.

The nineteenth century architect and theorist Gottfried Semper has interesting things to say about ceramics in his majestic *Der Stil in den technischen und tektonischen Künsten* or *Style in the Technical or Tectonic Arts* (1860-63). He observed that the introduction of the wheel 'had the negative effect of impoverishing and devaluing pottery'. He suggested it was only the Greeks who revived a fallen art

by softening the wheel's industrially productive capacity. We may disagree about the Greeks – Attic red and black ceramics were seen as cold by early studio potters like Michael Cardew who sought to escape what he called the Greek Vase Horizon.

But Semper offers a novel and exciting way of looking at ceramics which he saw, along with textiles, as a technology from which all other art forms derived. Semper made a radical claim – that the laws of proportion, symmetry, and eurythmy (harmonious rhythm) were explored first in ceramics, that ceramics taught us architecture. Semper's fascinating analysis of the origins of art and architecture helps us understand that pottery is not a minor art.

Meanwhile in his little essay 'Der Henkel' [The Handle] of 1911 Georg Simmel writes beguilingly about vessels. In particular he notes that a vessel is a special kind of object. Unlike a painting or a statue, it fulfils a purpose, if only symbolically. The vessel is drawn into practical life by its humble handle which has the function of mediating 'between the work of art and the world'. Simmel goes further, discussing the handle's counterpart, the vessel's spout. He observes that 'With the

handle the world approaches the vessel; with the spout the vessel reaches out into the world'. Why did Simmel write about these apparently everyday matters? He wanted to make a larger point, about how the individual reaches out and interacts with society.

Martin Heidegger's 1949 lecture *Das Ding [The Thing]* is difficult to follow but significantly Heidegger dwells on a vessel as something to investigate, putting a ceramic pitcher at the centre of an argument about modern life. In a world in which time is speeded up and geographic remoteness is diminished, Heidegger urges us to attend to what is near us. He reflects that 'Near to us are what we usually call things'. Faced with scientific advances we barely comprehend, Heidegger turns, perhaps surprisingly, to a jug. This quotidian object becomes exemplary for Heidegger. His reasons are simple: implicit in a jug is a gift, the gift of pouring out.

Semper, Simmel and Heidegger all recognise that something marvellous occurs when we interact with a vessel – holding a handle, pouring, making a gift, appreciating its eurythmy. They were all writing under the cosh of industrialisation

in a fast-changing world where certainty was in short supply. All, in different ways, were looking back to look forward, seeking out the stillness of the pre-industrial world.

Studying Britton's work for this exhibition in the quiet of her studio it struck me yet again that she has never used a potter's wheel. She hand-builds her work using rolled out slabs of clay, working in a slow and meditative fashion. Her pots are radical but link to pre-industrial ways of fashioning clay objects – remembering that ceramics industrialised early, arguably around 1500 BC if we choose to see the wheel as an industrial tool.

Britton attends to the qualities of vessels, the qualities that so struck Semper, Simmel and Heidegger. She plays with proportion, symmetry, and eurythmy. Although her vessels are not intended as functional containers, she pays great attention to handles. Playful spouts abound. There are ways of holding these pots – handles, yes, but also semi-secret indentations that make a pot easy to pick up. The long history of vessels is inscribed in the mysterious archaic appearance of this new work.

Chorus [page 11] with its two handles that also do duty as spouts and its pale patches of blue pigment looks as if it might have been disinterred in Knossos by Arthur Evans – or perhaps more accurately it looks like a modernist's response to the idea of a civilisation that was largely a product of Evans's imagination. Many of Britton's pots suggest half-remembered rituals.

Her platter *Arena [page 17]* recalls the series of moulded dishes made by Picasso at Vallauris as a utopian reparation after the Second World War. *Arena* is both a platter but also appears to map a space of ritual activity, evoking Evans's fantasy of Ariadne's dancing floor described by Homer – 'a dancing floor like the one Daedalus made at Knossos'.



It is not entirely fanciful to see Britton's inspiration coming from Mediterranean culture. Britton spends time in Italy, near Lucca. But she is sensitive to all kinds of artistic engagement with the ancient world, from Cy Twombly's tributes to the Trojan War to the Piero della Francesca colours she saw Elizabeth Fritsch using when she was student at the Royal College of Art.

Flotsam [page 25] comes from elsewhere. It is intended to hang on a wall as are several of Britton's more dish-like objects in this exhibition. *Flotsam* is the most ferociously painted, recalling abstract expressionist brushwork mixed in with sgraffito and snake-like applied clay coils. It is a three-dimensional object that takes us back to the well springs of painting abstractly – with artists reflecting on the very earliest mark making, on the orchestration of colour as end in itself, on the possibilities of automatic writing.

'Yet we all know – or are supposed to know – that results are all that count in art' was the mantra of art critic Clement Greenberg. We do not need to ask Britton about how works like *Flotsam*, *Arena* and *Chorus* are made. But – and back to this question of seamlessness within the visual arts – it helps to understand

the particular aesthetic interest of ceramic, invariably bridging the gap between art and life, hinting at use but often by-passing it. In fact Britton herself put it best when she wondered aloud in a statement made in 1981, almost at the beginning of her career: 'I may be clinging to the residue of use as a justification. Or I may have an irresistible (and fairly abstract) preoccupation with something very deep-rooted.'

Powerful forms hint at use. Abstract marks reflect on the history of non-representational art. What look like brush marks and pools of paint are applied in surprising sequences particular to ceramic. The build-up is gradual, tempered by all the risks of firing. The results, however, look utterly spontaneous.

These new ceramics by Alison Britton were mostly made in the strange circumstances of the Covid 19 pandemic. When lockdown was finally imposed in the United Kingdom on March 23 many of us felt very alone and frightened. Alison Britton, however, went into her studio and made some of the most thoughtful ceramics of her long and distinguished career. To create art in such difficult times is admirable and moving in itself. To produce such profound work in a world of alarming new vocabularies and unfamiliar rules seems just short of miraculous.



Chorus, 2020

Hand built high-fired earthenware,
poured and painted with slips and glazes
43H x 45W x 21D cm



Upstart, 2017

Hand built high-fired earthenware,
poured and painted with slips and glazes
40H x 49W x 29D cm



Sniper, 2020

Hand built high-fired earthenware,
poured and painted with slips and glazes
42H x 27W x 24D cm



Arena, 2020

Hand built high-fired earthenware,
poured and painted with slips and glazes
8H x 50W x 35D cm



Crater, 2018

Hand built high-fired earthenware,
poured and painted with slips and glazes
52H x 34W x 16D cm



Swamp, 2020

Hand built high-fired earthenware,
poured and painted with slips and glazes
54H x 37W x 21D cm



Rogue, 2018

Hand built high-fired earthenware,
poured and painted with slips and glazes
43H x 37W x 27D cm



Flotsam, 2017

Hand built high-fired earthenware,
poured and painted with slips and glazes
54H x 34.5W x 10.5D cm



Ripple, 2019

Hand built high-fired earthenware,
poured and painted with slips and glazes
13.5H x 40W x 39D cm





‘Throughout her career, Britton has remained committed to the ceramic container, exploring both its formal possibilities and its capacity to hold and communicate thoughts and ideas. Her pots are marked by ambiguity and contradiction, sitting between the sculptural and the everyday, the civilised and the wild, the real and the imagined. A work may seem to be both the representation of a pot as well as an actual one – a pot observed through the artist’s eye, informed by the experience of modern painting.’

Alun Graves, Senior Curator,
Victoria and Albert Museum, London

Alison Britton OBE

Britain b. 1948

Education

- 1970–1973 Royal College of Art,
London, MA Ceramics (RCA)
- 1967–1970 Central School of
Art and Design, London,
Dip AD (Ceramics)
- 1966–1967 Leeds College of Art,
Pre-Diploma year

Academic Posts

- 2005–2015 Research Coordinator
for Ceramics and Glass
- 1998 Royal College of Art,
London, Senior Tutor,
Ceramics and Glass
- 1984–2018 Royal College of Art,
London, part time Tutor;
Ceramics and Glass

Selected Collections

- Art Institute of Chicago, USA
- Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge, UK
- National Museum of Wales, Cardiff,
Wales
- Museum of Decorative Arts and
Design, Oslo, Norway
- The British Museum, UK
- Aberdeen Museum and Art Gallery, UK
- Los Angeles County Museum of Art, USA
- UCW Collection, Aberystwyth, UK
- National Museum of Modern Art,
Kyoto, Japan

- Art Gallery of Western Australia,
Perth, Australia
- Museum of Contemporary Ceramic
Art, Shigaraki, Japan
- Australian National Gallery,
Canberra, Australia
- National Museum, Stockholm, Sweden
- Boymans van Beuningen Museum,
Rotterdam, The Netherlands
- The Powerhouse Museum, Sydney,
Australia
- British Council Collection, UK
- Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam,
The Netherlands
- Contemporary Art Society, London, UK
- Ulster Museum, Belfast,
Northern Ireland
- Crafts Council Collection, London, UK
- Victoria & Albert Museum, London, UK
- Royal Museum of Scotland,
Edinburgh, Scotland
- Hove Museum & Art Gallery, UK
- York City Art Gallery, UK
- Wurttembergisches Landesmuseum,
Stuttgart, Germany
- Kunst und Gewerbe Museum,
Hamburg, Germany
- Badisches Landesmuseum,
Karlsruhe, Germany

Princessehoff Museum, Leeuwarden, The Netherlands	2005	<i>Alison Britton New Work and the Ed Wolf Collection of Alison Britton Pots</i> , Barrett Marsden Gallery, London, UK
Kruithaus Museum, Den Bosch, The Netherlands		
Nordenfjeldske Kunstindustrimuseum, Trondheim, Norway	2003	<i>Alison Britton New Ceramics</i> , Barrett Marsden Gallery, London, UK
Svenska Handelbanken, Stockholm, Sweden	2001	<i>Alison Britton; Oeuvres Récentes</i> , Galerie DM Sarver, Paris, France
Art Gallery of Nova Scotia, Canada		
National Gallery of Victoria, Australia	1996	<i>Alison Britton</i> , Craft Victoria, Melbourne, Australia and touring to museums in Canberra, Brisbane and Perth
Musée des Arts Décoratifs, Paris, France		
Musée de Sevres, Paris, France	1995	<i>Form and Fiction, Alison Britton New Work</i> , Marianne Heller Galerie, Sandhausen, Germany
Selected Solo Exhibitions		
2018 <i>Making it Up</i> , Marsden Woo Gallery, London, UK	1990	<i>Alison Britton – A Retrospective</i> , Two year tour by Aberystwyth Arts Centre, touring to Newport Museum, Aberdeen Museum, Carlisle Museum, Stoke on Trent, Cardiff Museum, York Museum and Boijmans van Beuningen Museum, Holland
2017 <i>Alison Britton: Fieldwork</i> , Galleri Format, Oslo, Norway		
2016 <i>Alison Britton: Content and Form</i> , [retrospective exhibition of 65 works made over 40 years] Victoria and Albert Museum, London, UK		<i>Alison Britton</i> , Contemporary Applied Arts, London, UK
2012 <i>Life and Still Life, new pots by Alison Britton shown with curated artefacts</i> , University for the Creative Arts, Farnham, UK	1988	<i>Ceramics by Alison Britton</i> , Crafts Council of New South Wales, Sydney, Australia
<i>Standing and Running</i> , Marsden Woo Gallery, London, UK	1987	<i>Alison Britton, New Ceramics</i> , Contemporary Applied Arts, London, UK
2007 <i>Containing</i> , Barrett Marsden Gallery, London, UK	1985	<i>Ceramics: Alison Britton</i> , Miharudo Gallery, Tokyo, Japan
	1979	<i>The Work of Alison Britton</i> , Crafts Council, London, UK

Selected Two-Person & Group Exhibitions

2019	<i>An Idea Needing to be Made</i> , Contemporary Ceramics, International group of 12 artists, curated by Glenn Barkley and Lesley Harding, Heide Museum of Modern Art, Bulleen, Victoria, Australia	2015	<i>Many a Slip</i> , Alison Britton curated exhibition of interpretations of the cup by over 50 international artists for Marsden Woo Gallery, London, UK
2018	Two Person Exhibition [with Misha Stroj], Stereo Exchange Gallery, Copenhagen, Denmark	2014	<i>Cut and Run</i> [with Jim Partridge], Marsden Woo Gallery, London, UK
	<i>Contenu/Contained</i> , 7 ceramics and glass artists [curated by Monique Deul], Musée Ariana, Geneva, Switzerland		<i>The Ceramic Object</i> , Gallerie Format, Oslo, Norway
2017–2018	<i>Things of Beauty Growing: British Studio Pottery</i> , Yale Center for British Art, Newhaven Connecticut, USA and Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge, UK	2013	Cheongju Crafts Biennale, South Korea
	<i>The Social Life of Things</i> , Corvi-Mora Gallery London, UK	2012	<i>Libertés, Affinités</i> , Galerie 19 Rue Paul Fort, Paris, France
	<i>English Touch</i> Hélène Aziza, Rue Paul Fort, Paris, France	2009	<i>Unforeseen Events</i> [with Marit Tingleff], Marsden Woo Gallery, London, UK
	<i>Woman's Hour Craft Prize exhibition</i> , V&A Museum, London, UK and touring	2008	<i>Ten Years Innit!</i> , Barrett Marsden Gallery, London, UK
2016	<i>Kneaded Knowledge, The Language of Ceramics</i> , Kunsthau Graz, Austria and National Gallery in Prague, Czech Republic	2007	<i>END</i> , Danish Museum of Art and Design, Copenhagen and Bomuldsfabriken Kunsthall, Arendal, Norway
	<i>Vase: Function Reviewed</i> , National Craft Gallery, Kilkenny, Ireland		<i>Containing</i> , Barrett Marsden Gallery, London, UK, ceramic works with curated collection of chairs from modernist designers and contemporary designer Martino Gamper
	Les Plaisirs de l'Assiette, 19 Rue Paul Fort, Paris, France	2005	<i>Transformations, the Language of Craft</i> , National Gallery of Australia, Canberra
		2003	<i>British Ceramics: Five Artists</i> , Frank Lloyd Gallery, LA International, USA

- 2005 Review of Barrett Marsden solo exhibition 2005, Shane Enright, *Crafts Magazine*, Issue 197
- 2003 Review of Barrett Marden solo exhibition 2003, Oliver Watson, *Ceramic Review* Issue 202
- 2000 Sources of Inspiration, Edward Lucie Smith, *Crafts Magazine*, Issue 167
- 2000 *Complexity and Ambiguity, The Ceramics of Alison Britton*, Linda Sandino, Barrett Marsden Gallery
- 1998 Thinking Aloud, Edmund de Waal, *Ceramic Review*, Issue Sept/Oct 1998
- 1996 *Das Andere Gefass*, Saariandisches Kunsterhaus, Saarbrucken, Germany
- 1995 Profile by Gabi Dewaid, *Ceramic Art and Perception* (Australia), No. 19
- 1993 *The Raw and the Cooked*, exhibition catalogue, Museum of Modern Art, Oxford, UK
- 1991 *The Abstract Vessel*, John Houston, Bellew Publishing
- 1990 *Alison Britton, Ceramics in Studio*, Tanya Harrod, Bellew Publishing
- 1990 *British Studio Pottery*, The V&A Museum, Oliver Watson, Phaidon Christie's Ltd.
- 1988 *Contemporary British Crafts*, National Museum of Modern Art, Kyoto, Japan
Alison Britton, Wendy Dubin, *American Ceramics*, 7/1
- 1986 *The New Ceramics, Trends and Traditions*, Peter Dormer, Thames & Hudson
- 1985 *British Ceramics*, exhibition catalogue, Kruithaus Museum, Den Bosch, The Netherlands
Fast Forward: New Directions in British Ceramics, exhibition catalogue, ICA, London, UK
- 1983 *British Ceramics*, exhibition catalogue, British Council
Fifty Five Pots, exhibition catalogue, Orchard Gallery, Londonderry, Northern Ireland
- 1982 *The Maker's Eye*, exhibition catalogue, Crafts Council, London, UK
- 1979 *The Work of Alison Britton*, exhibition catalogue, Crafts Council, London, UK
- Selected Writing | Book**
- 2013 *Seeing Things, Collected Writing on Art, Craft and Design*. London, Occasional Papers
- Selected Writing | Journal, Catalogue Essays & Book Chapters**
- 2020 Contributed an essay to the book *Claire Debril, La Terre Dévoilée*, Snoeck Editions, dual French/English text
- 2019 'A View from Afar', essay in Prue Venables' catalogue, *Living Treasures*, Masters of Australian Craft series
'Slip-sliding narrative and evolving form in Philip Eglin's new works.' Catalogue essay for *Ajar*, Philip Eglin solo exhibition presented by Taste Contemporary at artgenève
- 2018 'The Maker's Eye' statement, CC catalogue 1981, republished in *Craft*, Ed. Tanya Harrod, *Documents of Contemporary Art* series, Whitechapel Gallery
- 2017 'Circling', preface in exhibition catalogue, *Things of Beauty Growing, British Studio Pottery*, Yale Center for British Art, Yale Publishing
- 2016 Review of Betty Woodman, ICA exhibition *Theatre of the Domestic, The Burlington Magazine*, May issue
'Homework', essay on Garry Fabian Miller in exhibition catalogue, *Making Thinking Living*, Crafts Study Centre
'Curiosity and Speculation', chapter in *Karen Bennicke: Spatial Destabilization*, Strandberg Publishing, Denmark
- 2016 Round table discussion on the role of ceramics in contemporary art, *Frieze Magazine*, May issue
- 2014 'The Relation of Craft', *Collect Magazine*, Collect art fair, Saatchi Gallery, London, UK
- 2013 Exhibition essay, Martin Smith, 'Static Field', Marsden Woo Gallery, London, UK
'Seeing Things: Collected Writing on Art, Craft and Design', Occasional Papers
'Overthrowing Tradition' first published in electronic journal, *Interpreting Ceramics*, 2002, revised and republished in *Interpreting Ceramics*, selected essays, Bath, Wunderkammer
- 2011 'Introducing: Nao Matsunaga', Exhibition essay, Marsden Woo Gallery, London, UK
- 2010 'Laying the Table: synthesis, continuity, and the everyday', catalogue essay, RJ Lloyd Collection of Devonshire Slipware, Burton Art Gallery and Museum, Bideford, UK
- 2009 'The Fiction of Form', Statement of Practice article, *Journal of Modern Craft*, Vol 2.1, March

Acknowledgements

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Photography

All images by Philip Sayer excepting: page 03, 04, 07 and 09 images by Alison Britton; page 02 image by Monique Deul; page 19 image by Jack Cole and page 28 image by Toby Granville, taken on day two of the UK lockdown, March 24th, 2020.



