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### Abstract

This essay will explore demolition, dereliction, queerness and dispossession in relation to Glasgow in particular. I have written in the past about the dereliction of New York City in the 1970s and about demolition and the various kinds of queer art projects that focused on demolition sites in NYC at that time, but for this examination of flux and urban decay and renewal in relation to Glasgow, I will focus on queer art and architecture in works focused on Glasgow. In *Shuggie Bain*, the queer child moves around the city with his alcoholic mother in the 1970s, shifting from one ruinous housing development to another and the social rejection he experiences plays out against a backdrop of slag heaps and clay pits. Like the detritus of industrial collapse, queer life unfolds in the ruins and eschews improvement and development for demolition and destruction. Earlier in the century, another queer artist, Joan Eardley, painted complex portraits of street kids she met near her studio in Townhead. Slated for demolition, Townhead offers a dramatic backdrop for childhood. What are the connections, I will ask, between representations of (queer) children in the works of Douglas Stuart and Joan Eardley, and their depictions of Glasgow itself as a site of change, collapse, and urban pessimism?

Post-war approaches to urban planning in Europe and in some North American cities, like New York City, were characterised by waves of demolition and rebuilding. As capital investment moved out of turbulent markets and found solid ground in housing, banks and urban planners alike began to plant the seeds of what we now call gentrification. Gentrification in New York City in the 1970s, in Paris in the 1950s, and in Berlin in the 1990s began always with demolition and collapse and then moved on to massive rebuilding projects. At the same time, some artists of the time folded demolition and collapse into their aesthetic practices and offered trenchant commentaries on urban life, speculative

capital, and materiality. While the artists I consider in relation to the practices of demolition and collapse are not all queer, queerness is part of the unfolding story of cities, anarchitecture, bodies, money, ruination and destitution.

Rather than just outlining a narrative about modern architecture, urban blight and poverty, and then slotting queer people and geographies into that, I decided to investigate the odd history of artists who made art using the vocabulary of demolition and collapse. This has led me to Gordon Matta-Clark, Beverly Buchanan and Alvin Baltrop, among others, but it has also raised questions about desire, bodies in space, queer imaginaries of the urban, and so on.

## DEMOLITION

Architecture, buildings, and structures that are built up and torn down bear within them the erotic geometries of multiple desires. Think of the prestige documentary by Godfrey Reggio, *Koyaanisqatsi* (1982), made right in the middle of post-war gentrification and accompanied by a grand soundtrack scored by Philip Glass. The film, through a dramatic combination of landscape shots and orchestral ebbs and flows, offers a narrative of a world 'out of balance' (the meaning of the Hopi word that gives the film its title). A third of the way into the film, once we have been forced to bear witness to the massive changes wreaked on earth by human presence, by farming, by technologies of transportation and communication, the camera turns to the modern city of skyscrapers, traffic, city lights, glass, street grids, congestion, pollution, neon billboards, mass production, fast food, video games, malls, grocery stores. Suddenly, the visual track shifts gears and begins to imagine the undoing of urban development in the form of demolition. The buildings that rose into the sky in earlier clips and which reflected moonlight and sunlight are now replaced by the spectacle, repeated across a number of different contexts, of demolition. Specifically, this section of the film focuses upon the collapse of the Pruitt-Igoe buildings, housing projects from the 1950s in St Louis, Missouri which stood empty awaiting demolition just twenty years later. The footage in *Koyaanisqatsi* stands as a kind of money shot in the middle of high-end ruin porn – what goes up, the film implies, must come down and when it does, the end is explosive.

The Pruitt-Igoe demolition images represent the aesthetic and perhaps erotic fascination exerted by images of collapse and directed at the spectacle

of large structures coming apart. What draws us to these visual dramas? The slow-motion collapse of the Pruitt-Igoe buildings in the film is followed by other tall buildings falling out of the sky and flattening the landscape. The film marks these spectacles of demolition as part of its visual depiction of a ‘world out of balance,’ and they quickly rise (or sink) to the status of ‘ruin porn’ with their obsessive orientation to order and the grid at first, and then their inevitable decline and demolition later. Following the rhythms of a porn film – identifying a need, building up excitement (erection), and then culminating in an explosive money shot followed by deflation and detumescence – these images from *Koyaanisqatsi* are less high-minded eco-responsible film-making and more high-minded building porn. But the emphasis on porn reminds us that *architecture has a sexuality*. Usually, architecture expresses a hetero-masculine obsession with building and making, erecting and dominating, but occasionally we catch a glimpse of queer architectures and anarchitectures that revel in horizontality, collapse, new definitions of landscape and ruins. These images can easily be used, as they are in *Koyaanisqatsi* and in the literature on Pruitt-Igoe, as signalling the end of the grand schemes of modernism designed to improve human life, but they are also images of the abandonment of poor people, the movement away from public funding, and the ruins themselves are monuments to past and potentially future dreams of living outside of the grid, the carceral state, the governmental order of things.

I want to examine these cycles of collapse and construction and argue not for better design, more construction, better architecture, more housing, but for collapse itself or the aesthetics and politics of unbuilding, dismantling and taking things down. In the 1960s and 1970s in US and European cities, architects, urban planners, politicians and builders began to tear down an earlier generation of buildings that were supposed to replace tenements with socially responsible structures. The Pruitt-Igoe structures in St Louis, like the Queen Elizabeth square towers in the Gorbals in Glasgow, failed to live up to the promise of their early years. Under the influence of Le Corbusier, urban architecture imagined rational design solutions to social problems and built high-rise structures that promised to elevate inhabitants out of the slums and house them in airy, light structures hovering above the city. Even radical thinkers, like Buckminster Fuller and poet and Black activist June Jordan, believed that building upwards was the answer – they crafted a plan for Harlem in 1972

titled 'Skyrise for Harlem' that imagined tall buildings in the city as 'trees of life'.<sup>1</sup> However, in the absence of actual solutions to unemployment issues, post-industrial decline, racial segregation and the rise of real estate capital, these high-rise buildings became prisons, vertical slums and sites of abandonment.

There is no question that projects like the Gorbals and Pruitt-Igoe featured ergonomic and aesthetically innovative designs and did in fact pull generations of poor people out of tenement blocks and placed them in tall, airy buildings with balconies and views. But their slow and perhaps inevitable collapse, due to lack of funding and the abandonment of the projects by the city councils, represented much about boom/bust economies, the end of the social projects that followed the Second World War and the policing of poor people that turned such units into prisons and islands of poverty.

#### COLLAPSE

In 1972 Pruitt-Igoe was demolished, and in 1993 the Gorbals met a similar fate. In New York City, in the same period, the Hudson River piers were left to rot and decline as the shipping industry went elsewhere, low-rent apartment buildings in the South Bronx burned as landlords set fire to them, and buildings in East Tremont were brought down to make way for expressways engineered by Robert Moses. Global cities, in other words, were, in the 1970s, demolition sites and the failure of earlier urban dreams littered the landscape and created disorderly spaces of collapse.

Within these spaces of collapse, inventive artists, many of them queer, imagined experimental architectures and anarchitectures as oppositional forces to modernist structures of control. As urban planners began to fill in the spaces created by demolition, others, such as architect Gordon Matta-Clark and photographer Alvin Baltrop, and sculptor Beverly Buchanan, stepped into zones of urban collapse and deployed a counter-intuitive vocabulary of cutting, dismantling, demolition, unbuilding, collapse and dereliction to oppose the logic of rebuilding.

The term 'collapse' derives from Latin and contains *col*, meaning 'together', and *labi*, meaning slip. This etymology offers us a glimpse of the potential aesthetic folds hidden in the term. Collapse can refer to a system plagued by multiple failures, a mental break, a physical depletion, a structure giving way,

a fall. But it specifically means *many things* falling together, and a fall created by a loss of support. An aesthetics of collapse might name a series of gestures that orient towards falling, that skew away from making, building, improving and that embrace the beauty of gradual and inevitable decay. Under the aesthetic heading of ‘collapse’ we can gather together the hollowed-out and split structures created by self-described anarchist Gordon Matta-Clark as well as Rachel Whitehead’s infamous sculpture ‘House’ (1993), a plaster cast of the inside of a house in East London slated for demolition that required the actual house to be dismantled around it. While Matta-Clark’s cuts and incisions commented on the beginnings of New York City’s post-war wave of gentrification and real estate capital, Whitehead, twenty years later, offered a temporary monument to the removal of low-income housing as preparation for gentrification and a grim commentary on the domestic prisons that family homes can be for women.

Demolition has been a subject of cinema since its earlier inception. In 1896, the Lumière Brothers, pioneers of early cinema, made a short film of a group of men demolishing a wall. When *Démolition d’un mur* was shown, the projector accidentally began to rewind the film and play it backwards halfway through. The audience was shocked and delighted, and the brothers incorporated the ‘accident’ into future screenings. And so, rather than just witnessing the demolition of a wall, overseen by August Lumière, the audience watched time roll backwards and the wall collapsed and then, miraculously, moved upwards, against gravity, against the laws of time itself and reinstalled itself.<sup>2</sup>

This fantasy of a world in total flux, that can move backwards and forwards in time, that can ameliorate collapse with seamless and perfect structural restoration, is one that only cinema can provide. And while the Lumière film was a short and somewhat inconsequential moment in their impressive contributions to modern cinema, it actually precedes and predicts entire visual genres that bring worlds, cities, empires, families, structures, and relationships down, only to switch temporal dimensions by the end of the film putting everything back together again. Indeed, mainstream cinema has become the reversal of ruination, a fantasy of repair, a monstrously optimistic erasure of the fault lines of collapse. As Robert Smithson puts it, ‘the cinema offers an illusive or temporary escape from physical dissolution’. But, he adds, this seeming control of eternity is false and “the superstars” are fading.<sup>3</sup> *Koyaanisqatsi* and other ruin

porn entertains these fantasies of repair and of overcoming entropy on behalf of imagining a world structured around the logic of building. But, outside of conventional film, worlds, time, material forms actually do fall down. What art forms investigate collapse? Within an an/architectural archive, we will find many tips and clues *on how to unmake a world*.

Some of the most resonant images of Gordon Matta-Clark's gorgeous piece 'Days' End', a series of cuts he used to sculpt one of the West Side warehouses into a marvel of air and light and water, were taken by queer Black photographer Alvin Baltrop. After a stint in the Navy, Baltrop came back to New York City and, like so many restless queers in the 1970s and 1980s, made his way to the West Side Piers. The piers, lined with massive, empty warehouses, evacuated by the late 1970s during a post-industrial turn in the economy, became the cruising grounds for countless gay men, offered a home to the houseless, and became the terrain for multiple informal economies and social practices. Baltrop made photographic portraits of some of the men he met but, mostly, he took pictures of the piers themselves. Like Matta-Clark, he paid homage to the non-monumental quality of the collapsing piers but, unlike Matta-Clark, he did not try to eliminate gay sex from the piers. Instead, he offered a scaled-down version that did not privilege the human over non-human materiality, and that revelled in the messy sculptural, chance-based architecture of collapse. In some images, we see a building that sags and leans and appears ready to fall into the water. In others, his camera lingers on bodies that are themselves off-balance, leaning into a failing structure or even severed by their intersection with a wall. The human body is rarely centered in these shots and might even appear alongside trash on the floor as more discarded waste. Surfaces often slant in Baltrop's work, and larger girders and crumbling walls sometimes partially block our vision.

Baltrop's photographs of strange half-fallen shapes of steel, corrugated iron and wood, of architectures in the process of collapse, are full of drama and peril and serve as much more than backdrops for gay male sex. Instead, the tiny spectacle of the two men having sex only reinforces the idea that we have shifted away from the phallic architecture that rises gloriously and triumphantly out of the wreckage, and we are in the presence of an anti-patriarchal scene of detumescence. While the art world now thrills to images such as Jeff Koons's phallic and pneumatic inflatables,<sup>4</sup> and while the last few decades of real

estate investment have literally been all about inflation and erection,<sup>5</sup> Baltrop captured deflated, impotent architectures that fold down into spaces that are uninhabitable for humans. This withdrawal from the human, from real estate, from the market, from value, is the an/architectural non-value of the scene: Baltrop captures the disintegration of property, the dereliction of architecture, the anarchitectural process of ruination.

If we move to Glasgow from New York, we can find a similar relationship between ruination and queer bodies in a widely acclaimed novel about queer childhood, *Shuggie Bain* by Douglas Stuart.<sup>6</sup> In *Shuggie Bain*, the queer child moves around the city with his alcoholic mother in the 1970s, shifting from one ruinous housing development to another and the social rejection he experiences plays out against a backdrop of slag heaps and clay pits. Those backdrops are meaningful, they are not just local detail; they offer insights into the queer childhoods of the 1970s and situate them against and alongside the detritus of post-industrial collapse and shifting gender mores. Here, queer life unfolds in the ruins and eschews improvement and development for demolition and destruction.

In one memorable scene, Shuggie and his brother Leek wander around near an abandoned mine. As they struggle to traverse slag heaps, they talk about Shuggie being bullied at school and Leek tries to teach Shuggie to alter his effeminate ways in favour of a more masculine relationship to language ('wee boys shouldn't talk like old women', p. 152), movement ('try not to be so swishy', p. 152), and attitude ('it's time you tried to blend in more', p. 151). Stuart writes:

They strutted like two cowboys across the flat upturned earth. On the face of the mine sat the main colliery building. As big as Glasgow Cathedral, the abandoned building sat like a lonely giant on the moon. Large broken windows were set in simple arches, too high for a view but high enough to catch all the day's light for the cavernous inside. The windows that remained intact were blacked out with coal dust. At the far end of the building a large smokestack towered into the sky, and on wet days you could barely see the top for the soaking clouds. Pipes and rods lay scattered on the ground, the hurried tearing of hacksaws visible in the ends, looters taking what they could strip before the mine was officially dismantled for scrap. (p. 152)



This scene of the derelict mine is not just colour commentary but all at once a symbol of the post-industrial era, a monolith of the collapsed masculinity that joins Leek, Shuggie and their father through unemployment, alienation and shifting definitions of virility, and an erotic landscape. Like the piers, like the collapsing monuments of modern architecture, this abandoned building becomes a site for scavenging, cruising, dreaming and fantasy.

The abandoned building limns the area where Shuggie lives with his mother, Agnes Bain. Agnes both depends on her 'wee poofter' son and constantly abandons him to the violence of a Glaswegian working-class housing development in the early 1980s (p. 272). She is his life and his burden to bear and he is her 'no future' and the only feature of her life that offers an exit from the brutal relations to men, drink and family.<sup>7</sup> Indeed, Agnes Bain is not destroyed by alcohol simply but by the men in her life. Her husband for example, a man Agnes loved passionately, leaves his wife and children not by simply walking away but by promising them a better life in a better part of town and then moving them to a distant public housing project, far from family, friends and neighbours. He leaves her there because: 'She had loved him, and he had needed to break her completely to leave her for good. Agnes Bain was too rare a thing to let someone else love. It wouldn't do to leave pieces of her for another man to collect and repair later' (p. 110). In this sentence, it is the wife herself who becomes the scene of demolition and collapse. She must not simply be left in pieces but absolutely smashed and obliterated by the masculinity that seeks sole ownership and operates through decimation and abandonment. The son, Shuggie, is the person who must collect the pieces of his mother and, rather than trying to offer her something in the way of repair, he accepts her as broken and fragmented. While dealing with bullying and sexual pressure, Shuggie adores his mother, even in her broken state, and like the ruined landscape that envelopes them, this brokenness is part of their bond and the impossibility of repair joins his sexuality to hers. The queer child represents the end of the line for brutal patriarchal enforcement and signals to the mother that there are lives lived otherwise, beyond the heterosexual matrix and outside of the geometries of violence, humiliation and abandonment that enclose families. These lives are lived in the ruins, through scavenging and in the shadows of the dream of relentless improvement.

## QUEER LANDSCAPES

What is a queer landscape? Queer art history has run so resolutely through the figure – think Tom of Finland – that it becomes almost impossible to imagine spaces, geographies and, yes, landscapes, as queer. I want to give two examples of queer landscapes that build upon the aesthetics of collapse that I have already outlined. Both artists are thinking about cityscapes and landscapes together, both are searching for other languages for the mapping of desire onto space, social relations, turmoil, race, and collapse.

This idea, that collapse might reveal a different order of things, lies behind the work we have already looked at, situated in a New York City that was literally falling down. And it underwrites the preoccupation with abandoned buildings with ‘pipes and rods’ scattered across their floors. In my last section, I used the phrase ‘a ruins in reverse’, a famous phrase taken from Robert Smithson’s essay on the minor monuments of Passaic, New Jersey. In the essay, Smithson described the flat and concrete landscape he traversed as a ‘zero panorama’ and a ‘ruins in reverse’, and as ‘full of holes’ or ‘monumental vacancies’. Smithson lamented the rise of the new, the world-building that goes by the name of suburban development, and searched in vain for an opening in the signifying chain of Passaic in which the centre of Passaic ‘loomed like a dull adjective’. These ruins in reverse, he explained, are not romantic ruins that have fallen into disuse but future ruins, buildings that rise into ruination, suburban landscapes with no past and ‘just what passes for a future’. In this sense, he offers, they are ‘utopia minus a bottom.’<sup>8</sup> No pun intended. But on the way to investigating these bottomless utopian structures, he finds another point of access to the fundament – an industrial fountain created from six large pipes that took water from the river and gushed it into a crater. Smithson writes: ‘The great pipe was in some enigmatic way connected with the infernal fountain. It was as though the pipe was secretly sodomizing some hidden technological orifice, and causing a monstrous sexual organ (the fountain) to have an orgasm.’ He concludes: ‘A psychoanalyst might say that the landscape displayed “homosexual tendencies,” but I will not draw such a crass anthropomorphic conclusion. I will merely say, “It was there.”’<sup>9</sup>

Smithson may have pulled back from the crass anthropomorphic conclusion that the landscape gave evidence of homosexual tendencies, but we should

draw close in order to find in this 'crass' image of the sodomitical pipe and the gushing, orgasmic surplus of its concrete fountain, a clue to the queer tendencies that lie coiled in landscapes of collapse. Reversing the order of things here, Smithson connects heterosexual ways of life to suburban staleness and orderly erections and counters this with the structures of waste issuing forth from a great pipe, going nowhere but flooding the landscape nonetheless with its infertile excess. While some may cringe at the subtle homophobia of such a passage, instead I think we should read within it a clear directive about the erotic vibrations of the landscape itself. Like the falling down buildings that also seemed completely distinct from sexuality and sexual community until we perused the photographs of Alvin Baltrop, so a landscape is organised like a language. Indeed, this connection between grammar and space informs Matta-Clark's experiments with cuts, sculptural removals and material transformation: 'What I do to buildings', wrote Matta-Clark shortly before his death in 1978, 'is what some do with language and others with groups of people: i.e. I organize them in order to explain and defend the need for change.'<sup>10</sup>

Earlier in the century, another queer Scottish artist, Joan Eardley, also looked for an alternative and queer language of desire and found it in landscape. Early in her career, she painted complex portraits of street kids she met near her studio in Townhead. But, while the depictions of the street kids are fairly standard, the glimpses in the background of these paintings, of a city in a process of collapse, offer yet another gloss on landscape, collapse, disorder and desire.

Eardley wrote of Townhead and her small studio there: 'I like the friendliness of the back streets. Life is at its most uninhibited here. Dilapidation is often more interesting to a painter as is anything that has been used and lived with.'<sup>11</sup> Dilapidation is the actual subject of these paintings rather than the children – her figures can be cartoonish and more geometric than detailed. As a female painter, of course, her painting of children was understood as part of some mysterious feminine disposition towards maternity. However, Eardley, a butch lesbian, should not be identified with such motivations. Her topic, in many ways, was Townhead. Her eye was drawn to the mysterious languages of graffiti and posters on the walls of the neighbourhood and very often these hieroglyphic messages peek out from behind the small figures. In an interview, Eardley explained that she saw the children she painted as 'all the bits of red and bits of colour' and rather than describing them as individuals, she said

‘they are Glasgow’.<sup>12</sup> The children, in other words, were part of a landscape she sought to capture, a mode of being, a way of life, an organisation of space, time, buildings, activities, relations and non-human forms. Almost as if the children were a distraction from the actual theme of her painting, Eardley turned, for the last part of her career, to seascapes in Catterline and these are the works for which she is best known. But now, absent the human body altogether, the paintings become harder to place within a queer genealogy of art.

As we have seen however, the city, architecture, collapsing buildings and landscapes under construction are all informed by a queer language of demolition, collapse and ruination. In Baltrop’s images, the piers’ dilapidated state mirrors and provides a context for the marginal communities that live, dream and connect in the falling-down space. And even for straight male artists, like Matta-Clark and Smithson, the post-industrial landscape offers a chance to think about a signifying system that spreads across the city, speaks the language of improvement and development in one place and is countered by queer languages of collapse and cuts, dereliction and desire in others.

Once she made her move to painting the landscapes of Catterline, Eardley relied upon locals to let her know of storms rolling along the coast. It was the turmoil she wanted to paint, the turbulence, the violent storms that obliterated the coastline. While Eardley was recognised for her work in her day, she has not been well understood as a queer artist precisely because the discourse of LGBT identity demands a figure, preferably recognisably queer, and oriented towards notions of individuation and individualism. The landscape, the queer landscape, tells a different story. It proposes a web of strange and indeterminate relations between desire and nature, between built environment and constructed identities and between collapse and an avowedly political desire to unmake the world.

## CONCLUSION

Contemporary queer artwork by boychild, Cameron Rowland, Yves Laris Cohen, Kiyon Williams and Cassils uses the aesthetic vocabulary established by this earlier generation in order to offer queer and trans aesthetics, often rooted in Black histories of art, that favour abstraction and collapse rather than figuration and world-making. Such projects side-step the pitfalls of identity politics and offer powerful critiques of markets, profit and investment property.

While boychild, a non-binary dancer, turns to Butoh for choreographies of collapse, Kiyon Williams, a Black non-binary artist, rescues bricks from demolition sites and builds sculptures out of the discards. Cameron Rowland, like Matta-Clark, turns his critical lens onto the art market itself and explores the terrain of depreciation. Many of the artists in this history, including the auto-destructive art groups from Europe in the 1960s, refused to create work oriented towards an art market and proposed an anti-market and anti-real estate politics of dispossession. Contemporary queer and trans artists extend this tradition and trans\* body artists, such as Yves Laris Cohen and Cassils, make and unmake their own bodies within performance practices that revel in the anarchic potential of collapse.

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## Notes

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- 1 For information on this project and a critique of it see Sharifa Rhodes-Pitt, 'How a Harlem Skyrise Got Hijacked—and Forgotten', *The Nation* (26 July–2 August 2021).
- 2 Deac Russell, 'Demolition d'un mur: The Social Construction of Technology and Early Cinema Projection Systems', *Early Popular Visual Culture*, 12.3 (2014): 304–41.
- 3 Robert Smithson, 'A Tour of The Monuments of Passaic, New Jersey', *Artforum*, 6.4 (December 1967): 48–51 (p. 51).
- 4 See Jeff Koons, Balloon Sculptures: [www.jeffkoons.com/artwork/inflatables](http://www.jeffkoons.com/artwork/inflatables) [accessed 10 May 2024].
- 5 The global phenomenon of 'Ghost Towers' illustrates this preoccupation with building and erection without a parallel interest in housing and shelter. An article in the *New Yorker* called housing built on the outskirts of Tehran for workings 'Ghost Towers,' and the term comes up again in a *Los Angeles Times* article on high-price towers built but never occupied in Los Angeles. The ghost towers of LA became the site of daring and colourful graffiti which drew attention to the abandoned buildings and took them back for a different purpose. See Robin Wright, 'Ghost Towers: The View from Iran's Housing Crisis' in *New Yorker*, 14 October 2019, and Carolina A. Miranda, 'L.A. Joins Ranks of Cities with Ghost Towers' in *Los Angeles Times*, 10 February 2024.
- 6 Douglas Stuart, *Shuggie Bain* (New York: Grove Atlantic, 2020).
- 7 See Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and The Death Drive* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004).

- 8 Smithson, p. 50.
- 9 Ibid., p. 49.
- 10 Gordon Matta-Clark as quoted by Jillian Steinhauer, 'How Gordon Matta-Clark Saw The City' in *The New Republic*, 5 February 2018.
- 11 This quote appears on [www.joaneardley.com/biography](http://www.joaneardley.com/biography) [accessed 26 April 2024].
- 12 Hamish MacPherson, 'Remembering Joan Eardley, who battled personal tragedy to produce her art', in *The National*, 16 May 2021.

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