

## Through the Looking Glass: An Architectural Rhetoric of Collecting and Placement

Dr. Sally Mackereth

**Figure 1:** Thinking through making: A glimpse of my temporary studio where I gathered and rearranged objects on tables and in specimen trays – Sally Mackereth (2023)

In 2025 I completed a practice-based PhD as part of the architectural research programme at RMIT. This essay and exhibit for the 2026 biennale reframes a part of this academic study through a lens of works entwined with words. This reflection on my creative preoccupations identifies “magicking” as the core of my practice that operates at the intersection of magic and architecture. This is an uncomfortable pairing of words and worlds, where the solid, rational, grounded, trustworthy is interwoven with the ethereal, intangible, illusory, mystical.

**Figure 2:** Interior of apothecary collector, Levinus Vincent's gallery in Amsterdam with extensive natural history displays, Illustration to Levinus Vincent's *Wondertooneel der Nature* (Amsterdam: Halma, 1706). c.1706 Engraving

Presented as a contemporary cabinet of curiosities, the exhibit's format takes inspiration from seventeenth century apothecary collections, the Pitt Rivers (an ethnographical museum in Oxford), as well as flea markets which captivate me.

“I'm checking on what's in the world. What's left. What's discarded. What's no longer cherished. What had to be sacrificed. What someone thought might interest someone else. (...) But there may be something valuable there. Not valuable, exactly. But something *I* would want. Want to rescue. Something that speaks to me. To my longings.”<sup>1</sup>

This study has also revealed parallels between my creative practice and my impulses for collecting and arranging. My working method as an architect is rooted in the notion of new readings derived from a juxtaposition of found objects (both physical and metaphysical) gathered from sites and reconfigured with oddments from my collection of ‘finds’. Architectural magicking is at work within the details where inanimate walls, roofs, windows become animated through a process of temporal and spatial distortion woven into the projects.

The exhibit is centred around three case study projects, that each embrace aspects of their historic literary connections to become abstractly referenced into the architecture:

a decommissioned lighthouse at Winterton-on-sea in Norfolk on the East coast of England, that is specifically mentioned by Daniel Defoe in Robinson Crusoe, regarded as the first English novel and published in 1719; **Figure 3:** The Lighthouse at Winterton-on-Sea – The Modern House (2018)

a derelict stables in central London originally constructed around the same date as Lewis Carroll's 1872 novel Through the Looking Glass; **Figure 4:** View within the secret garden with concrete oval lily pads set into the old cobbles and black rolled steel lining to the arcade openings - Henry Bourne (2019)

an abandoned farmhouse in a volcano crater on a Sicilian island with steps down to a beach with a stretch of sea which featured in 8<sup>th</sup> century BC in Homer's ancient tale of The Odyssey. **Figure 5:** View of plot with The Farmhouse under construction with the live volcanic island of Stromboli smouldering on the horizon - Sally Mackereth (2019)

The study explores my singular approach to the domestication of these three very different building types with a particularly non-domestic former use. This typically involves retaining a sense of present danger in a site. For example, when refurbishing an 18<sup>th</sup> century lighthouse that was to have 21<sup>st</sup> century home comforts, a deck was built up in the new domed roof extension at the top of the tower with a bed floating higher than the birds of prey hovering over the dunes. From this lofty position with its panoramic views of the Norfolk coast one can also look up at a wind vane mounted inside at the apex of the dome with a compass dial and a needle that jerks and spins in stormy weather – a reminder of the dangers faced by centuries of mariners lost here at sea as described by Defoe in Robinson Crusoe.

**Figure 6:** View up to the bed deck under the metal dome for sleeping at the top of the tower – The Modern House (2018)

**Figure 7:** Collaged panoramic view of the coast looking over the dunes to the sea from the new lantern with its diagonal steel posts for structural bracing against strong wind forces – Neil Marriot for Rakes Progress magazine (2020)

Employing a 'thinking through making' process, each project is examined by assembling a series of so-called 'sketch-boxes' and several curious devices and books that have been tampered with, reconfigured then filmed. The boxes comprise a selection of hand drawings, collage, photographs, prose, mnemonic objects and fragments of curios gathered from my collections. This methodological use of 'sketch-boxes' as analytical tools of observation provides an opportunity for poetic reflection on the work. These devices reveal what the Surrealists termed 'the marvellous' alive

in the architectural design process as well as the experience of these reimagined sites and buildings. The exhibition visitor is enticed to enter this kaleidoscope of artistic practice in architecture, making connections between details in the built projects alongside the curated arrangements of artefacts and specimens on display. The works and the workings behind them are explored from the perspective of an architectural rhetoric derived from a bricolage of fragments of the past, present and future plucked from each site and reconfigured for a new contextual dialogue, a presence of place that can be understood without words.

**Figure 8:** Specimen trays from the Pitt Rivers display cabinet were each filled with a selection of inspirational objects which I had been collecting over a long period of time. These objects informed and inspired my architectural thinking – Sally Mackereth (2023)

My creative process is analogous with my habitual collecting, where observations of a site are intuitively selected and put together in an assemblage of metaphorical specimens in a tray that are grouped and arranged then regrouped, paired up and juxtaposed for heightened effect. These catalogues of oddities comprised of seemingly mundane, discarded, and unrelated physical objects and traces of past lives lived are carefully gathered together and recomposed, bestowing the components with new status. These blended animations become an anecdote retold, a play reperformed, a place reimagined, imbuing the new buildings with dramatic narrative tension and a latent temporality.

**Figure 9:** Collection of items impulsively gathered from the land around The Farmhouse the first time I encountered the abandoned building – Sally Mackereth (2018)

**Figure 10:** Ode to the moon and a volcano depicted in tiles at The Farmhouse, with the excerpt from Homer's book The Odyssey where Odysseus sets sail from the Aeolian Islands with a sack of winds given to him as a gift from Aeolus – Sally Mackereth (2020)

**Figure 11:** Tile inset rug being laid on the South terrace at The Farmhouse – Studio Mackereth (2021)

This study identifies moments in the architecture where it is possible to cross the threshold between 'rational and logical decision-making' and 'magicking'. This physical exhibition of objects made, gathered and arranged as a *tableau vivant* interwoven with fragments of reflective text allows the visitor step through the looking glass into a world of architectural enchantment.

**Figure 12:** Night Cherries, Day Cherries - Sally Mackereth, (2021)

“First, there’s a room you can see through the glass – that’s just the same as our drawing room, only the things go the other way. I can see all of it when I get up on the chair. All but the bit behind the fireplace. Oh! I do wish I could see that bit!”<sup>2</sup>

I use the term ‘magicking’ in the context of my work as a process in my creative practice that seeks to move, transform, or create elements of buildings by (or as if by) magic. This approach taps into invisible perceived forces I identify within a site which I then highlight and amplify, weaving them into the experience to transform the once familiar into a subtly different encounter, resulting in architectural details that suggest an altered perception of time and place. Some magic involves sleight of hand and deception; in my projects there are many examples of details that seek to conjure a sense of illusion, the uncanny and the performative.

**Figure 13:** Jet trails in the sky framed by the oculus at The Stables – Sally Mackereth (2019)

**Figure 14:** Wooden steps from the bedroom appear to float at The Stables - Sally Mackereth (2019)

For example, a number of projects have secret doors concealed in walls –at South Stables, the main bedroom is accessed from the living room via a large, pivoting panel of brickwork adroitly concealed within the coursing of the new made-to-look-old wall. The only clue to the location of the opening is the metallic gleam from a recessed handle formed in steel to the exact size of an imperial brick that was inserted in place of a clay brick in the wall. Insert the fingers inside the flanged face of the metal brick, and with a gentle push, the wall gives way, gliding forwards with an open sesame action to reveal a panelled bed chamber within. This heavily engineered door is a performative kinetic element which with an eccentric gesture conceals then at once reveals a hidden threshold to another realm.

**Figure 15:** With a gentle push the brick wall swings open to reveal another room beyond - Stephan Julliard (2020)

**Figure 16:** Recessed handle in the shape of a single brick - Sally Mackereth (2019)

“This house is like a complex mechanical box. Push this door, gently. There are spaces here, silences, one thing becoming another, one person becoming another. Doors to slip through, slip away.”<sup>3</sup>

Another tool adopted in the design process consciously traces and manifests natural energies and backstories into the layered experience and details of a building and a site. This can be seen in The Farmhouse where the Aeolian wind is drawn through the house via small circular ‘wind-eyes’ carved from local lava stone. This new intervention is partly in reference to the Sicilian myth of Polyphemus, the savage one-eyed man-eating giant and also a way to bring cooling currents of air

through the building whilst recalling the Siren's song from Homer's tale of The Odyssey. Depending on the speed and frequency of the wind these new penetrations in the original stone walls can produce an eerie and ethereal sound, transforming the house quite literally into an Aeolian wind harp. This strangely animistic whine created entirely by nature pulses through and lingers like an energy field around the house as if the Sirens are whispering their incantations through these small apertures. The sound can be moderated by adjusting a large, motorised glass arch that was introduced on the south-facing façade. Designed with a central pivot the arch glides silently ajar to the desired point at the touch of a button. This highly engineered kinetic wall element needed to be delivered to this remote inaccessible location by helicopter. Once installed it acts like a giant air valve where the flow of the Aeolian wind through the house can be regulated.

**Figure 17:** External bung. Painted timber disc, rope handle and perforated aluminium collar to allow ventilation without dust blowing inside - Sally Mackereth, 2022

**Figure 18:** Inside the window reveals were formed as a concave recess. Cork bungs with rope handles were made to block the passage of air and shut out the light for sleeping - Sally Mackereth, 2022

**Figure 19:** Film still from the site of the helicopter delivery, Sicilian-style, of the motorised arch – Sally Mackereth (2021)

**Figure 20:** View towards the sea along the south terrace with traditional striped tende da sole designed to clip onto the structure to provide shade – Sally Mackereth (2022)

This project is an example of my approach to domestication of an otherwise undomesticated building on a natural site of innate wildness and tension that I wanted to retain. It also consciously revels in the juxtaposition of the use of modern technology to amplify the ancient words of Homer's epic poem, The Odyssey.

**Figure 21:** Collage study of The Farmhouse in paper, card and acrylic with strings indicating the route of the wind and passage of sound through the building - Sally Mackereth, 2019

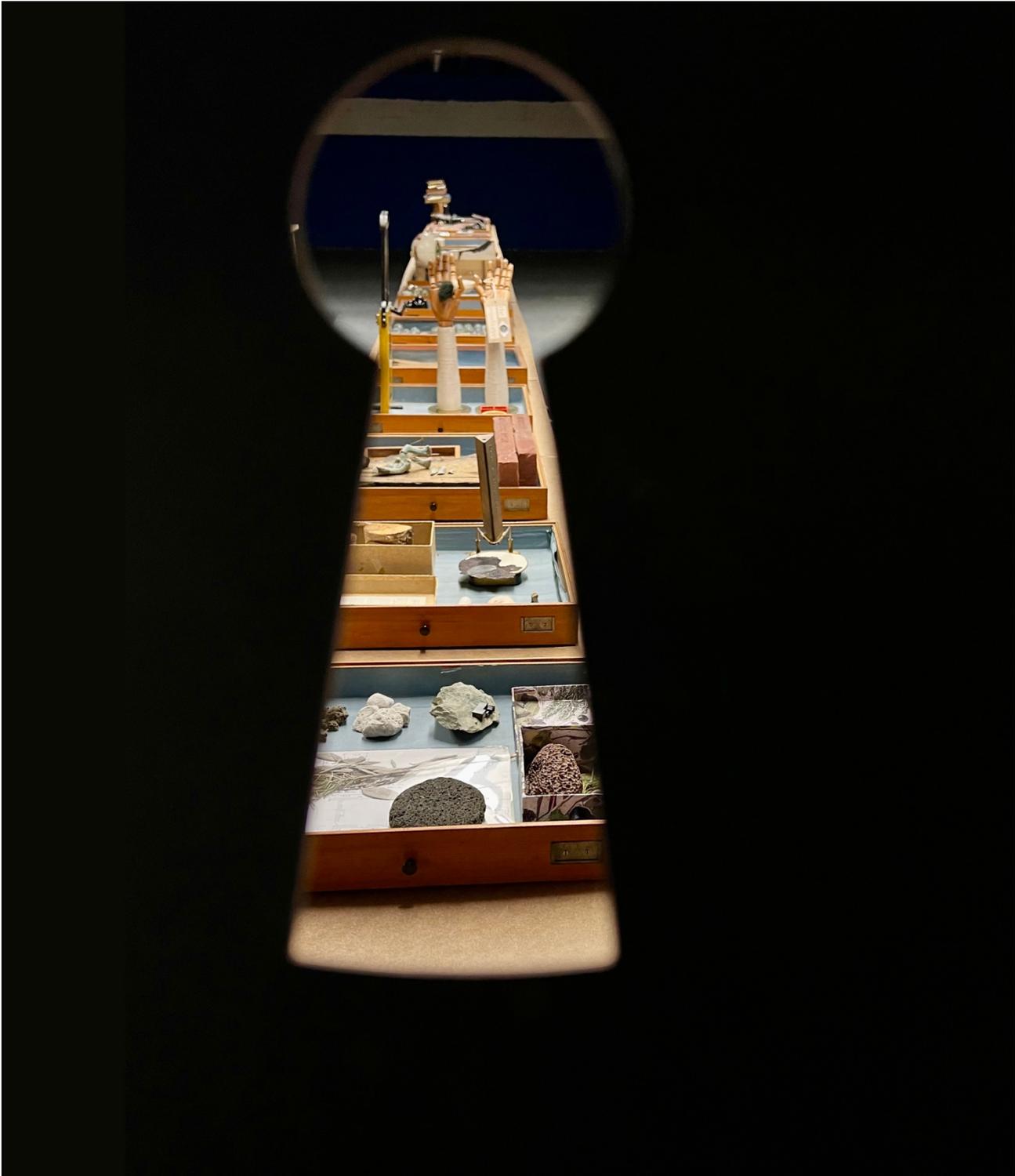
This approach is further demonstrated in The Lighthouse project where the design interventions positively tap into the inherent dangers of this ancient and treacherous site whereby the domestication of such a building, like taming a wild beast, should not involve its subjugation. In fact, to sanitise any apparent negative energies and eradicate all sense of danger in its architectural repurposing to create a seaside retreat and a place of safety, would be to lose the unique qualities of the site and the building's inherent ability to spark the imagination. The architectural magicking lies in the reappraisal of the site's assets, to animate their presence and absence manifesting in a new

version of the lighthouse building that carefully draws out the past lives and curious narratives embedded in its metre thick walls, creating a place to sleep soundly and dream vividly.

**Figure 22:** Details of the suspended curved walls drawn around the bed to separate the second floor sleeping area from the staircase – Simon Upton (2013)

The exhibit offers up insights into the grain of my creative practice such as spatial and temporal distortion, performative intervention and a Surrealist approach to collecting wherein Siren's voices, ancient shipwrecks and volcanic eruptions become amplified and brought to life through the architectural details. By adopting a highly curated sense of time and place that manifests through unlikely materials and details, projects are deliberately laced with a sense of uncertainty. The design summons up an enchanted world where reality is augmented, and the familiar is simultaneously uncanny. This approach to architectural practice is clearly esoteric, diverging from the mainstream of contemporary culture consumed by imaginary environments trapped in the digital world. Instead, architecture is envisioned as experientially transformative with physical sensorial experience placed at its centre.

**Figure 23:** A sea fret surrounds the new domed lantern at The Lighthouse – Sally Mackereth (2024)  
“The most beautiful experience we can have is the mysterious. It is the fundamental emotion which stands at the cradle of true art and true science. Whoever does not know it can no longer wonder, no longer marvel, is as good as dead, and his eyes are dimmed.” (Einstein 1931, 193-194)<sup>4</sup>



**Figure 1.** Thinking through making: A glimpse of my temporary studio where I gathered and rearranged objects on tables and in specimen trays, pp.187 figure 275

Image: Sally Mackereth, 2023.



**Figure 2.** Interior of Levinus Vincent's gallery at Amsterdam with natural history displays, showing specimens in jars at left and mounted insects at right, figures looking at the objects displayed on long tables at centre; illustration to Levinus Vincent's *Wondertooneel der Nature* (Amsterdam: Halma, 1706). c.1706 Engraving Image, pp.188 figure 276  
Image: © The Trustees of the British Museum.



**Figure 3.** The Lighthouse at Winterton-on-Sea, pp.58 figure 93  
Image: Sally Mackereth, 2018.



**Figure 4.** View within the secret garden with concrete oval lily pads set into the old cobbles and black rolled steel lining to the arcade openings, pp.42 figure 61

Image: Henry Bourne, 2019



**Figure 5.** View of plot with The Farmhouse under construction with the live volcanic island of Stromboli smouldering on the horizon, pp. 87 figure. 135

Image: Sally Mackereth, 2019



**Figure 6.** View up to the bed deck under the metal dome for sleeping at the top of the tower

Image: The Modern House, 2018



**Figure 7.** Collaged panoramic view of the coast looking over the dunes to the sea from the new lantern with its diagonal steel posts for structural bracing against strong wind forces

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**KEY**

**a. *Obsidia***

**b. *Pinus Hartwegii***

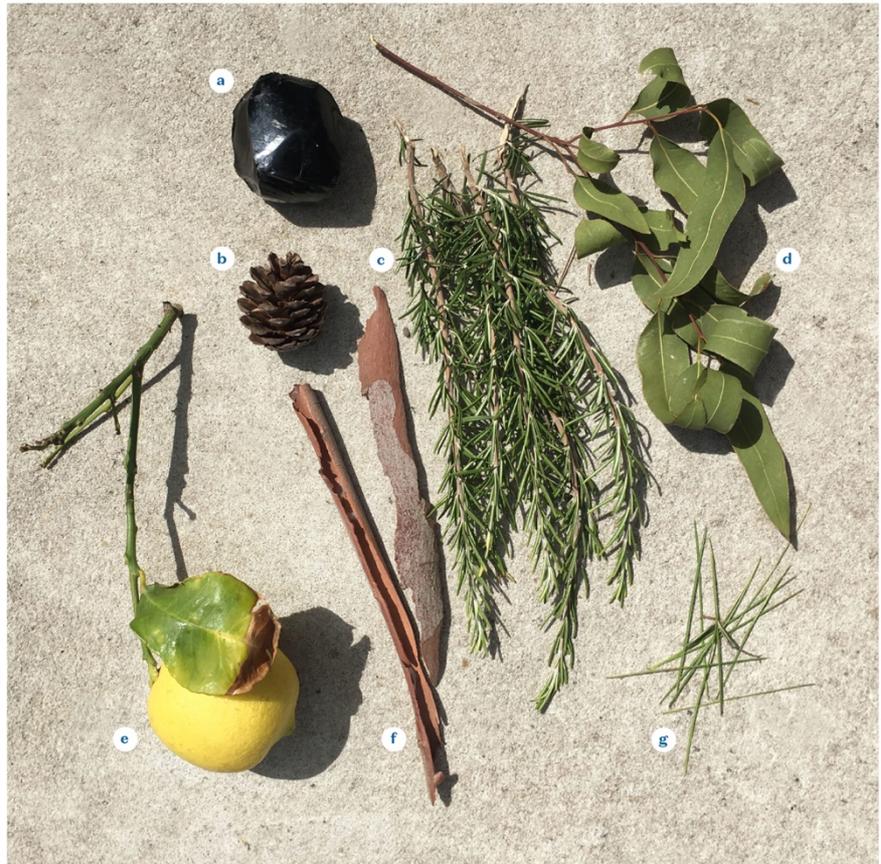
**c. *Salvia Rosmarinus***

**d. *Olea Europaea***

**e. *Citrus Femminello***

**f. *Eucalyptus Glubus***

**g. *Pinus Pinea***



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Image: Sally Mackereth, 2019



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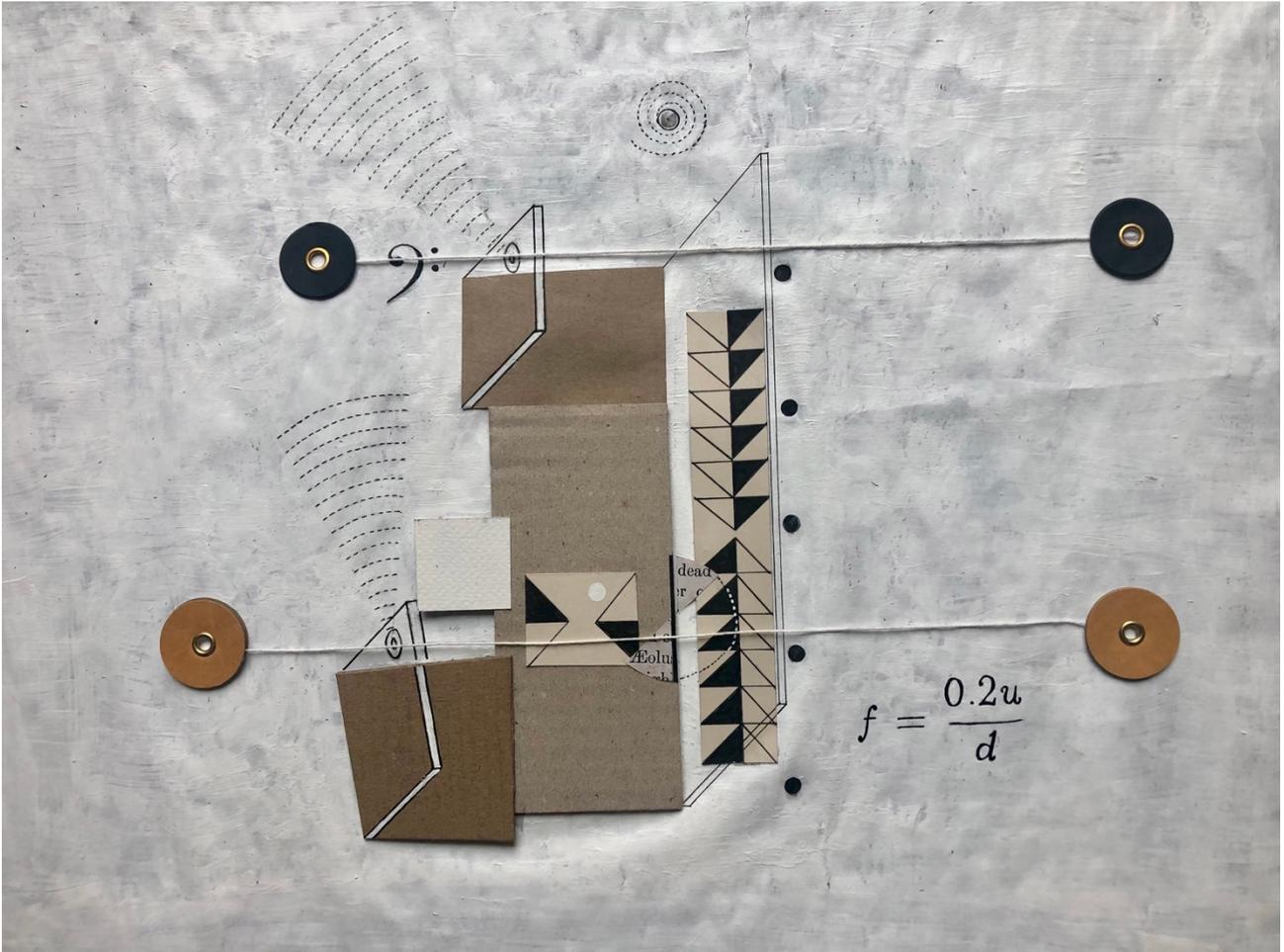


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## Bibliography

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## Bio

With award-winning projects completed around the world, Sally Mackereth's practice transcends the traditional realms of architecture extending into exhibition design, theatre sets, jewellery, furniture design and collaborations with a perfumer. The materiality and scale of designs by Studio Mackereth reveal a fascination for highlighting the patina of life, allowing a building to reveal its traces of occupation, choosing to treasure its wear rather than eradicate it. Mackereth has recently completed a PhD, which reflects on the creative motivations behind her practice uncovering preoccupations with spatial and temporal distortion, performative intervention and a surrealist influence of collecting.

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## Notes

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1. Susan Sontag, *The Volcano Lover: A romance*. (Penguin, 2009), 2.
2. Lewis Carroll "In *Through the Looking Glass, And What Alice Found There*" (Macmillan & Co, 1872), 94.
3. Edmund De Waal, *Letters to Carmondo*, (Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2021).
4. Albert Einstein, "The World As I See It." (*Forum and Century*, 1931) Vol 84.