

## Holding History: Helen Cammock and the Power of Place

Ahead of her London exhibition at Kate MacGarry, the artist reflects on attuning to each venue, shaping performances through attentive listening

BY JULIET JACQUES AND HELEN CAMMOCK IN INTERVIEWS | 27 AUG 25



*Opening this month at Kate MacGarry in London, Helen Cammock's solo exhibition, 'Pelicans Dive at Half Light', inspires conversations about colonial violence, past and present, in interdisciplinary works that encompass film, print, ceramic and text. Ahead of the premiere of her film commission for the National Portrait Gallery, Persistence [2025], I spoke to Cammock about the ways in which violence continues to be perpetrated through race, faith, class and gender, the differences between film and performance, and the relationship between east London's industrial spaces and colonial exploitation.*

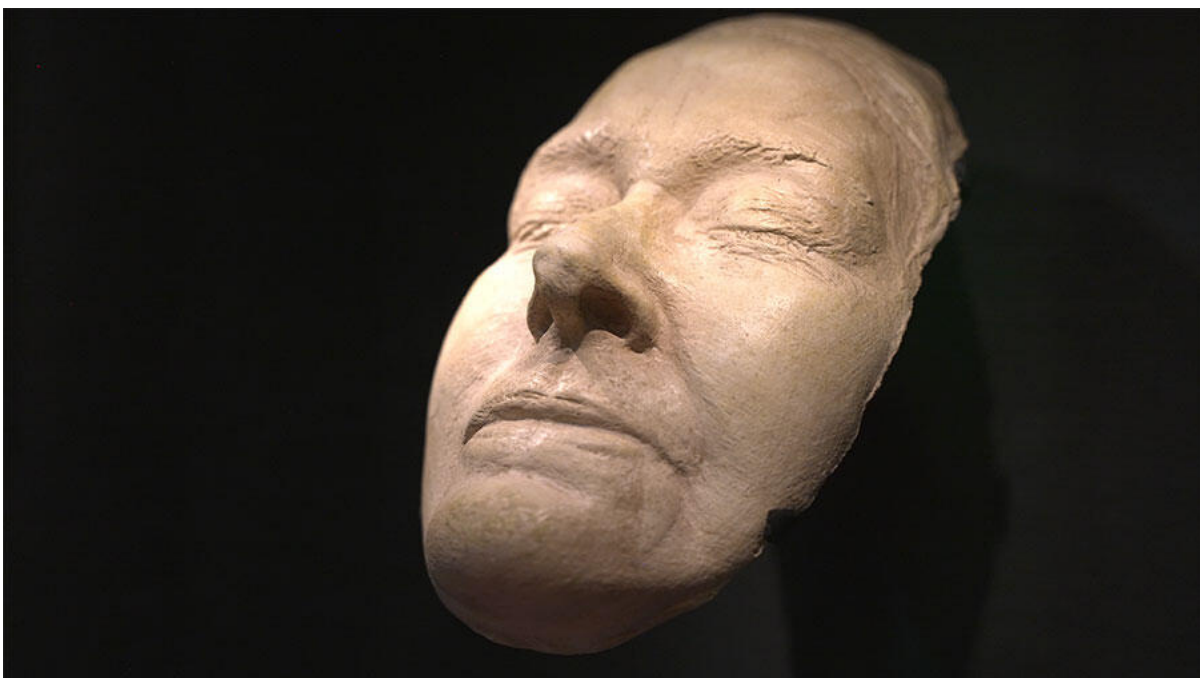


Helen Cammock, *Persistence*, 2025, film still. Courtesy: the artist and Kate MacGarry, London

**Juliet Jacques** What was the impetus for your film *The Lay Shaft Drive Is Down* [2023] – which is featured in ‘Pelicans Dive at Half Light’?

**Helen Cammock** It grew out of a performance of the same name commissioned by The Line, London in 2023 for ‘Tributaries’ – a site-specific exhibition in which artists explored their relationships with bodies of water at The House Mill on the River Lea. I’m often uncomfortable with photographic or filmic documentation of my live performances – they’re about the moment, the tension, eye contact (or lack of it), bodily proximity. They’re different every time because of who I’m performing to. It’s incredibly hard to capture that intensity and interconnectedness, so I decided to make a film of the performance without an audience, instead. The context didn’t change, nor did the content.

During the performance, the audience and I were not allowed to move through the space as I’d hoped, because the building [an 18th-century former gin distillery, developed on the site of a medieval tidal flour mill] is vulnerable. However, I had a little more freedom for the film because I was working with an incredibly small team. I identified spaces that I thought were interesting and would resonate with what was being said or sung. The building is a container of histories and experience, and of sound and movement, but I was also interested in its materiality and the passage of human bodies through it – a kind of ghosting. I wanted to listen to the site and to the body, responding to all these elements, sensorially and formally.



Helen Cammock, *Persistence*, 2025, film still. Courtesy: the artist and Kate MacGarry, London

**JJ** There are so many subjects raised in the film – including child labour, mechanization and dehumanization – but I was especially interested in the discussion of gin.

**HC** Before visiting, I didn't realize The House Mill used to produce gin. I needed to ask myself how that fitted into the colonial framework, because inevitably it did. Gin was popular with European women in India, was served with lime to imperial soldiers and the British navy to stave off scurvy: it dulled the senses, prevented resistance and the organization of workers, and I guess it was a way to try and control poorer sections of the population.

Industrialization brought a lack of connection to and care for the human body, rendering it merely a tool to enable systems of production – whether for gin, coal, grain or cotton. There was little opportunity for idleness or rest within this framework. There are connecting threads between this work and my film *They Call It Idlewild* [2020], which explores the relationship between labour and doing 'nothing' in an active way. Some people have greater access to the opportunity for idleness, some waste it and others must fight to have it – but it offers a space to be creative, to be present and can be used as a tool for resistance.



Helen Cammock, *Thought (Diptych)* from *They Call It Idlewild*, 2020, screenprint on paper. Courtesy: the artist and Kate MacGarry, London

**JJ** Your work tends to be interdisciplinary, with different forms unified by theme. What else is included in the exhibition?

**HC** There are ceramics that represent ideas about danger, escape and fleeing in different ways – but also a kind of ‘being with the feelings of fear’ and the ‘predator psyche’. These include a cheetah, a gorilla, a bison and an okapi head, recast from moulds that my father made in the 1960s, which I found in his garage after he died. There is also a new text work, *Buckets of Lead* [2025], made from laser-cut steel letters, which evokes the lies created to justify violence. For me, this piece speaks directly to the genocide of the Palestinian people [as defined by the UN], the internationally unaddressed famine in Sudan, the sustained exploitation of and extraction from the Democratic Republic of Congo by certain large multinationals – the list goes on.

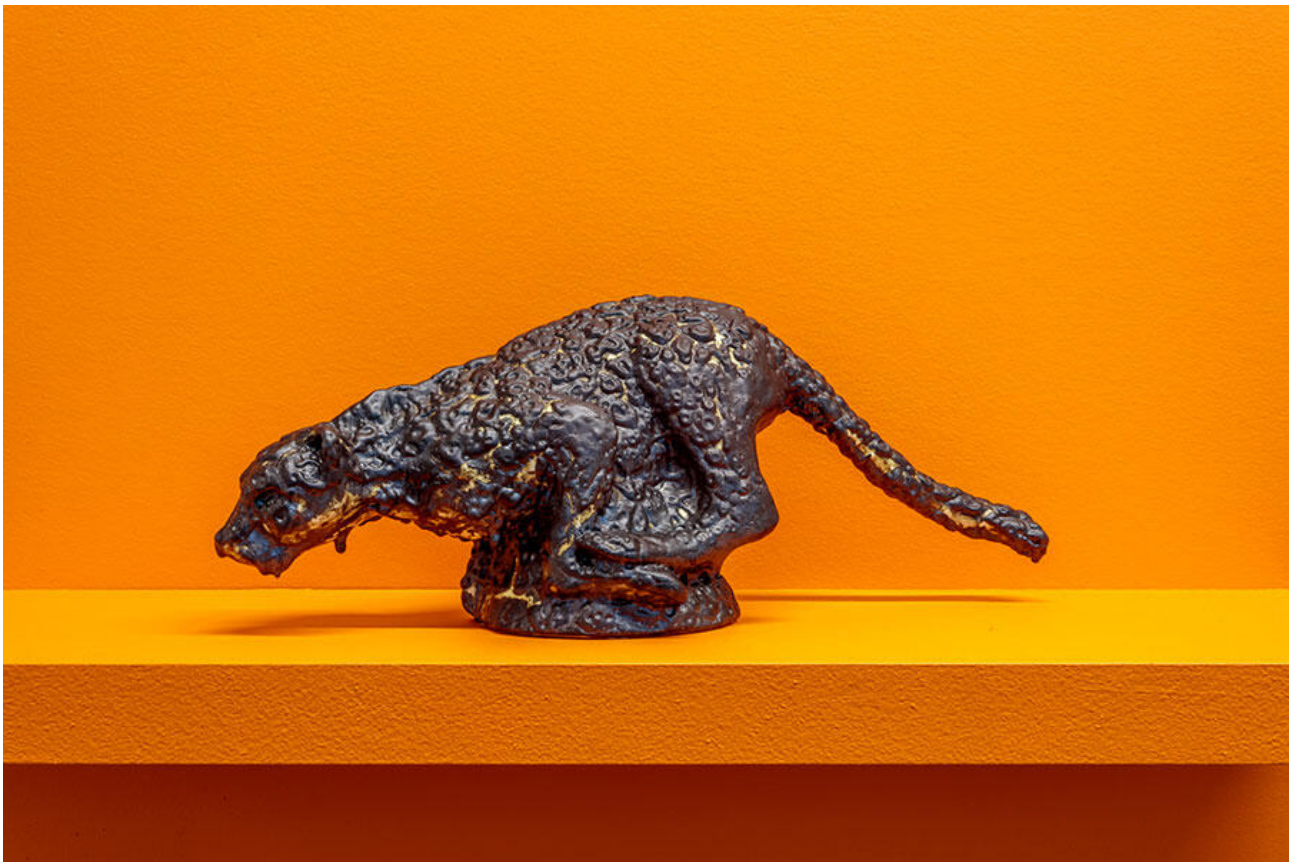


Helen Cammock, *They Call It Idlewild*, 2020. Courtesy: the artist and Kate MacGarry, London

There is also a text work on jute, *If I Run My Palm Along the Twine* [2024], which responds to Dundee jute worker Mary Brooksbank's poem 'Courage'. I came across it in a handwritten notebook in her archive, likely from the 1940s or '50s. She's best known for 'The Jute Mill Song' [c.1920], part of which is engraved into the Scottish Parliament building. In 1933, Brooksbank was thrown out of the Communist Party for criticizing Josef Stalin, and later became a Scottish nationalist and fought for women's rights.



Also in the show is a plywood specimen cabinet housing a series of prints, called 'Pelicans Dive at Half Light' [2025], that I made on a trip to Jamaica to see where my father grew up after his family left Cuba. These are about being in touch with some sadness, but also an evolving exploration of the diasporic body, my diasporic body. I also made some automatic drawings to the sound of the sea, done at a point on the coast where you can see Cuba, and to the sound of the wind in Christiana, close to where my father lived. I drew one to Keith Jarrett's *Köln Concert Part I* [1975], which moves me very deeply, just in the way the sea does.



Helen Cammock & George Cammock, *Cheetah (prototype test)*, 2021, porcelain, 19 × 49 × 12 cm.  
Courtesy: the artist and Kate MacGarry, London

**JJ** Tell me about your commission at the National Portrait Gallery.

**HC** *Persistence* is a film about absence, invisibility and attempts to extinguish or suppress acknowledgement. It's a two-screen work – shot in the National Portrait Gallery's corridors, galleries, collection and archives – that considers the institution's founding focus on 'sitters of note', provoking conversations about mythmaking and enforced invisibility. Amongst other works, I examine a series of 19th-century photographic portraits of working-class fishing communities in Newhaven and St Andrews; a painted portrait of Ada Lovelace, one of the first

scientists in a European context to imagine the idea of complex computation; and death masks memorializing cultural and political figures from the UK. There are also portraits of the Pankhurst family [who were significant in the British women's suffrage movement], and a conversation about what happens when social and political beliefs sever familial ties.



Helen Cammock, *There's a Hole in the Sky Part I*, 2016, film still. Courtesy: the artist and Kate MacGarry, London

The film goes on to unravel the threads of the portraits which are not present, exploring worth and value and the ways in which social frameworks replicate and sustain presence, absence, inequality and violence across histories. It uses 'The March of the Women' [1911] – a suffragette hymn composed by Ethel Smyth, whose bust sits as a sentry to the gallery where the Pankhurst portraits are displayed – to link the past and the present, combining it with footage from recent protests: the trans rights march after the UK Supreme Court ruling of April 2025, as well as Black Lives Matter, pro-Palestine and civil-rights marches from different geographies and historical moments.

I haven't made a film that feels intimate in this way since *They Call It Idlewild*, where it's just *me* speaking to *you*. Both a challenge and a provocation, *Persistence* is, most importantly, intended to feel conversational. It's about class, race and gender, looking at people whose inventions and innovations went unacknowledged. It considers achievement, bearing witness,

recognition and the role of institutions in containing and perpetuating belief systems and myths – and it explores the capacity for that to be disrupted.

*This article first appeared in frieze issue 253 with the headline 'Song of Myself'*

*Helen Cammock's Pelicans Dive at Half Light will be on view at Kate MacGarry, London, until 25 October*

This article was published in the September 2025 edition of *Frieze*

27 Old Nichol Street, London, E2 7HR  
+44 (0)20 7613 0515 mail@katemacgarry.com