

Bea Underwood

2022 Portfolio

Artist Statement

My practice broadly centres around the act of combining conflicting elements. I attempt to evoke opposing sensations in viewers with installations that often combine domestic aspects with imagery of discomfort or the abject. This frequently includes the pairing of fabric with more industrial/ stark construction in wood and plaster.

Recently my work has focused on metabolizing and memorialising my personal experience of bereavement. Part of this area of interest is the idea that when a significant person in our lives dies, we feel that the whole world should stop and mourn with us. We must then accept the reality that this death is significant to only a few and the world keeps turning, unmoved. We are overwhelmed the enormity of the loss and yet the loss is dwarfed by global and historical context in which it exists. This idea has led to a revisiting of my longstanding interest in the use of religious iconographic imagery and architecture as a means to elevate the personal to the sacred.

I am influenced by my childhood attendance of a Catholic school, wherein I came to learn the visual language of the religion while remaining outside the belief system. Within my work I have drawn on the Catholic preoccupation with gold, vessels, arches, etc, and have paired these elements with some of the humbler motifs of the old Anglican Parish churches: bare plaster walls, simple wooden pews, threadbare hassocks. The central image in this project, though, is the triptych. While the triptych is strongly associated with Christianity in altarpieces, triptychs or holy trifectas are found in the majority of religions. While I draw upon my own experiences of Christian artistry, the works I create are not overtly tied to the religion and, in fact, attempt to sit at the intersection of diverse religious iconographies.

With a triptych shrine or altar as the overarching theme of this project, I have created a related series of relic-like objects. If the value of relic is conferred by its religious or historical significance, then my 'relics' are reflective of an effort to imbue my personal memory and experience with this same significance. These 'relics' have explored ideas of the fragility and transience of the body and thus of human life, the idea of the body as a vessel, and the circle as a symbol of the cycle of life. Some are depictions of specific intrusive memories.

These lines of enquiry in my work will culminate in a single installation entitled *Finisterre*; a large wall-mounted triptych of open-faced arched boxes that contains sewn and sculpted sheets of white calico. *Finisterre* combines the domestic with the industrial, the humble with the grandiose, and personal memory with the wider language of the sacred.



Untitled I

26 x 26 x 7 cm

Cardboard, cotton, polyester filling, polymer clay



Untitled 1 depicts a head sunken into a pillow with fabric either emerging in a vomit-like stream from the mouth or stuffed into the mouth – it is both at once. The clay face is reminiscent of a death mask while the wider composition perhaps has connotations of a gargoyle. The effect is claustrophobic and unsettling, connecting to ideas of illness and consumption by an overwhelming force.



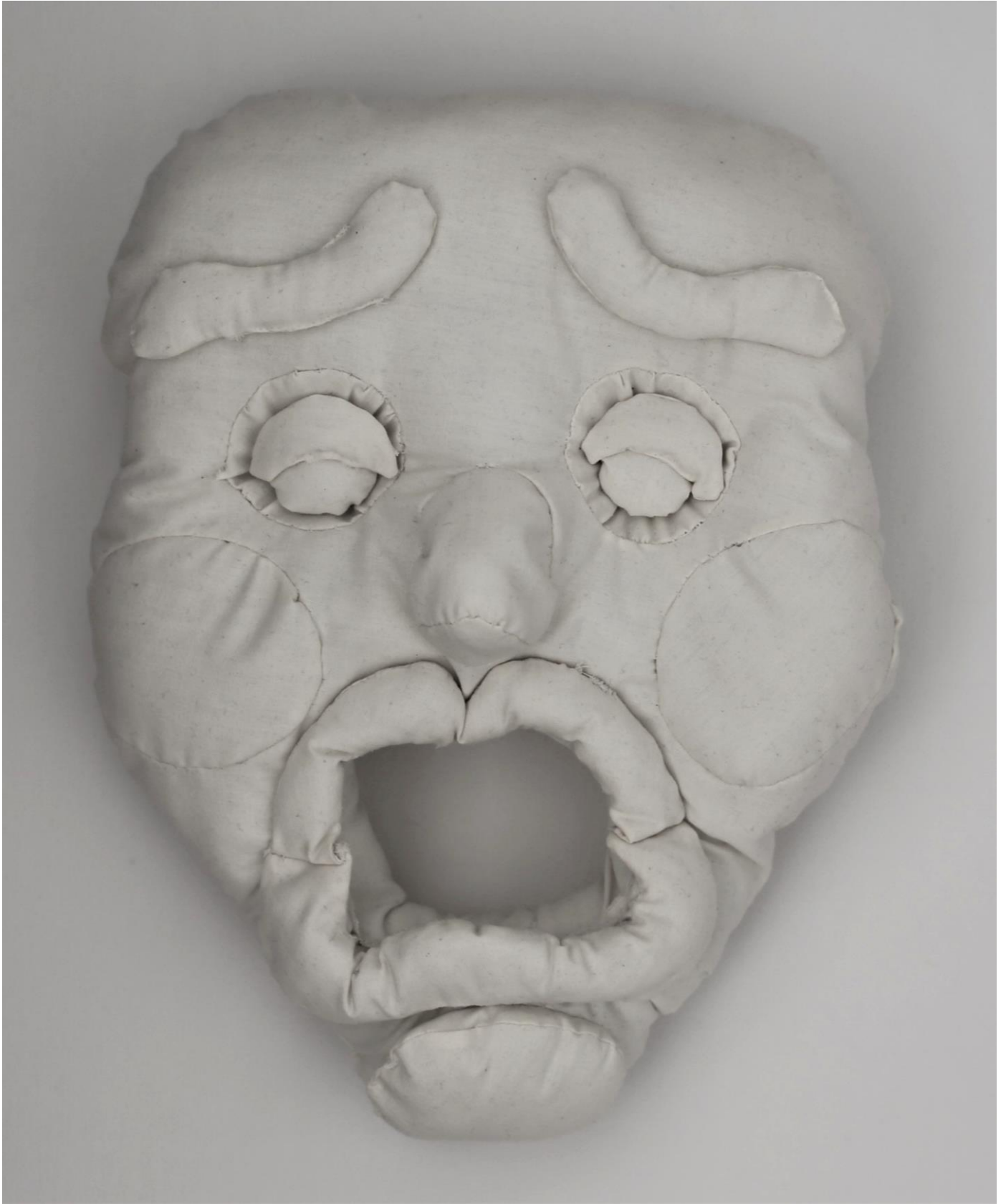
Untitled II

81 (Circ.) x 15 cm

Clay, rayon, polyester filling, metallic finish



Untitled II draws upon ideas explored in *Untitled I* but uses gold finish and silky fabric to reflect a sense of preciousness and opulence. The result is further removed from a real flesh form and therefore less visceral and unsettling but with stronger connotations to religious iconography.



Untitled III

27 x 21 x 6 cm

Cotton, polyester filling



This piece combines the image of the grotesque, gargoyle-like face (as seen in *Untitled I* and *Untitled II*) with a pillow form. The pairing of these elements aims to create a discomfiting yet tactile and possibly familiar kind of object. This head does not have the appearance suffocated/ choked like the previous two but the soft and malleable form of the face may evoke some of the same feelings of claustrophobia.





Relic I

15 x 13 x 12 cm

Clay, cotton

This piece reflects the concept of the body as a vessel and fabric symbolising a life force – in this case flowing like a liquid but suspended in a moment in time.



Relic II

5.5 x 31.5 (Circ.) cm

Clay, cotton, polyester filling, polymer clay

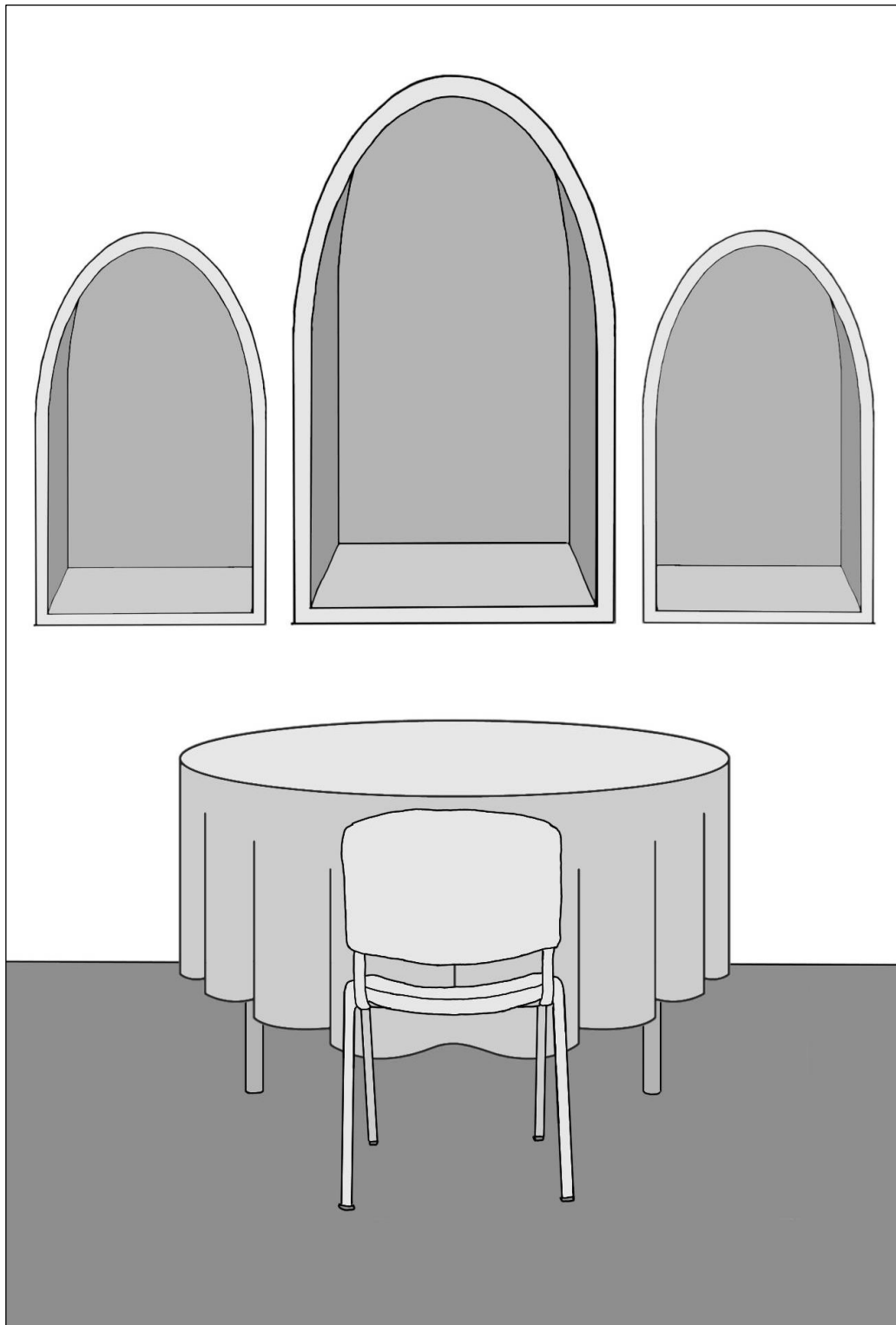
I continued the exploration of the vessel and focused on circular forms and their ubiquitous use in religious iconography as a sacred shape. The cushion is both domestic in its fabric and ceremonial in its position for a plinth for the 'precious' gold form on top – which acts as both head and halo.



Transubstantiate
18 x 10 cm
Clay, metallic finish

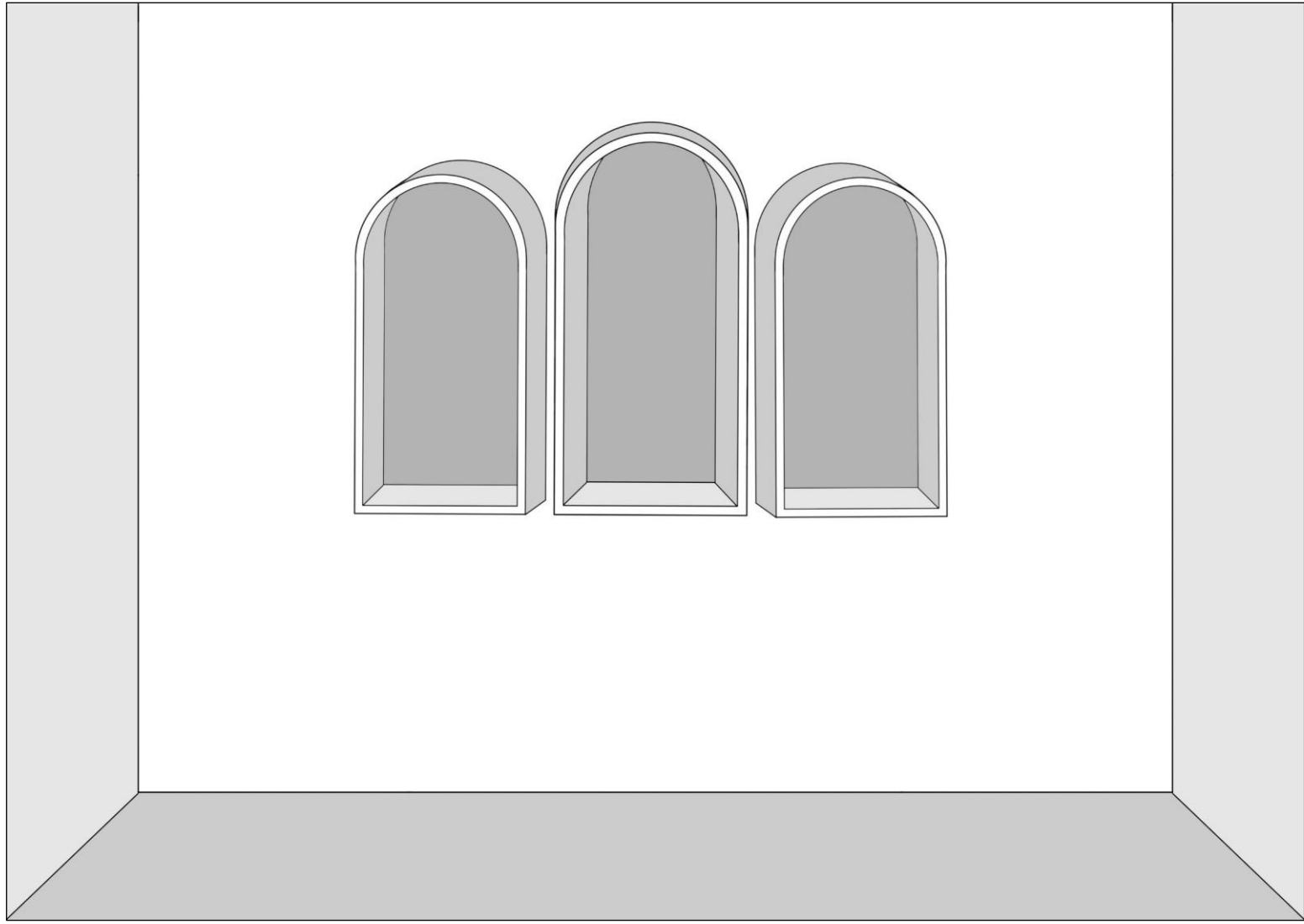


Transubstantiate draws on a more primitive form of iconography, continuing the image of a grotesque mouth, frozen open, with the addition of the open empty stomach. It has the sense of a petrified preserved form. The title *Transubstantiate* references both the Eucharist – a ritual of transformation via consumption – and a wider sense of the irreversible change in a moment of death; the body is the same in substance but it is transformed.



Untitled digital sketch

This sketch explores ideas for a larger installation that relates to the themes of this project: a triptych of alcoves that resemble an altarpiece with the 'altar' below, which in this case would be a domestic kitchen table and chair.



Untitled digital sketch

This idea developed into a triptych of wall-mounted arched boxes that could then be the vessel for 'relics' or fabric forms.



Untitled sketch

21 x 15 cm

Pencil on paper

I developed further the previously explored ideas of creating a bed-like form within the composition of an altarpiece or saint's alcove: combining vulnerability and humility with this sacred format.



Bed/Room Maquette

15.5 x 24.5 x 6 cm

Modroc, plaster, leather, cotton, polyester filling, polymer clay



Bed/Room Maquette combines the ideas of personal relics with the triptych format. The fabric forms reference both domestic pillows and sheets with hassock-like pillows. The gold clay pieces encompass both the use of the circle as a sacred symbol and also serve as a kind of head resting on the pillow.



Bed/Room

48.5 x 61 x 11.5 cm

Modroc, plaster, cotton, polyester filling, polymer clay, metallic finish, clay





Bed/Room is a reflection on my father's time in hospital before his death. It explores the liminal space of the hospital room and the pervasive images that occur within my memories of this time. It draws upon the visual language that my practice has focused on recently – triptych, opulence paired with the humble/ stark, and the domestic paired with the raw/ industrial.