

'Remember, practise. We'll be back.' Suddenly, the projector cuts out and floodlights turn on – they're blindingly bright. At the same time, cheery lift music plays through the speakers – a palliative, just as ineffectual as a throwaway apology. But while the work highlights a wilful lack of empathy, it doesn't address how racial discrimination and border control coincide, as recently demonstrated by the Windrush scandal.

Harrison-Mann & Redgroves' return the space to its previous function as a public toilet. A sign outside, footed with a fictional company name, 'ptaa', invites park-goers in. In the foyer, a strong smell of bleach rises from the original laminate floor. Like many public services outsourced to private firms, the ptaa facilities aren't in full working order: the cubicles don't have doors, the tiling is half finished and the toilets are unplumbed. But there is one working bathroom down the corridor. As you approach the door, a light below the handle flashes red and it bolts shut. As you step back, the light turns green and the lock opens again. This goes on as you try to avoid activating the motion sensor. Like *HEFT* and the other exhibits, the work integrates interactive game design within its form, only revealing or granting access to certain features if visitors can solve a puzzle of sorts. After a while, you are forced to ask yourself, 'what's wrong with me?', highlighting the way it is possible to internalise discrimination. Inexplicably, the door eventually opens to an ordinary toilet, except for a set of instructions for discarding toilet paper: 'To make sure that other people, like yourself, will be given access to the same facilities, validate our system ... your DNA does it all.' The gamified public convenience seemingly uses interactivity as a cover for monetising racial profiling. Despite attempts to resist gamification-from-above, the exhibition leaves visitors in no doubt that there is no recess that it cannot worm its way into. ■

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## A Woman's Place

**Knole House** Sevenoaks 17 May to 4 November

Is the English country home a battlefield? Knole House, the fortress-like ancestral seat in Kent of the noble Sackville-West family, has witnessed countless battles since the 1400s, when the building's massive construction began. In 1884 an angry mob stormed the locked gates of Knole to protest the closure of the vast house and deer park to the public. Knole was eventually reopened to visitors – who still flock to this popular National Trust property, these days squabbling over limited-number visitor-parking spaces.

As documented in 'A Woman's Place', a six-person exhibition of newly commissioned artworks, generations of Knole-based females have waged a quiet but desperate battle since at least the early 1600s, when resident Lady Anne Clifford penned her mournful diary. As chronicled in artist Melanie Wilson's evocative audiotour *Women of Record* (all works 2018), Lady Anne was perpetually ignored by husband Lord Richard, who left her feeling stranded in

the lonely English countryside. Anne's lamentations are combined in Wilson's piece with the voices of contemporary British women despairing over their menfolk – the emotional neglect, gambling debts, infidelities, looming creditors – with striking similarity to their historic predecessors. An unwritten female history emerges in *Women of Record* as an uninterrupted march of punishing marriages, stretching with remarkable uniformity from the 17th century to the 21st.

Women were treated to special inequality at Knole, where an ancient family law decreed that house and title could only be passed down the male line. Famously, the writer Vita Sackville-West (1892-1962) was prevented from inheriting her beloved childhood home because she was a woman. The 1928 novel *Orlando* was 'a love letter' to Vita, as author Virginia Woolf described the multi-gendered fictional biography of her longtime friend and lover. *Orlando's* original manuscript is held in the house archives, and in it Vita/Orlando survives miraculously intact across centuries – just like Knole itself. Impossible leaps in time also feature in Lindsay Seers's beautifully shot films *2052 Selves (a biography)*, viewable online only. Presented across three principal chapters, and often splitting the screen into a triptych, Seers's films are obliquely based on the 'three Vs' haunting Knole – Virginia, Vita and her mother, Victoria – intertwined with the gender-shifting autobiography of actress Sara Sugarman, who offers a candid and mesmerising performance. Emily Speed's tiled, working fountain (titled *Innards*) focuses on Lady Victoria, and the rituals conjoining a wealthy woman's toilette and her gardening: the watery care of a woman's body (at the dressing table) and her flowers (in the garden), both expected somehow to remain perpetually in bloom. Lubaina Himid examines one of the house's least leisured inhabitants, the 17th-century black maidservant Grace Robinson; *Collars and Cuffs* are tiny, highly stylised paintings concealed within a courtyard where 'the blackmoor' Grace laboured for years. Alice May Williams's video *By the Accident of Your Birth*, tucked away in a side-turret, considers the continuing impact of the 'faults' or incidents of birth – gender, class, geography – so vividly played out at Knole.

In sum, Knole's centuries-long story is unusually fraught with struggles centring on women, class, sexuality and power, and for good reason curators Lucy Day and Eliza Gluckman have sited 'A Woman's Place' here as part of the National Trust's 'Women and Power' programme this year. Idyllic Knole – where in 1967 the Beatles were filmed singing *Strawberry Fields Forever* – conceals a conflicted history that merits critical scrutiny, and to this end the selected artists have produced sensitive and informed works. No doubt curating duo Day+Gluckman jumped through countless bureaucratic hoops in order to realise new artworks adhering to the heavy restrictions surrounding a bona fide Grade I architectural treasure, plus the abiding demands of heritage tourism.

The pair's curatorial solution was to literalise women's historic near-invisibility by hiding artworks in alcoves (Williams) and behind drain pipes (Himid), or dematerialising them in a soundwork (Wilson) or online films (Seers). In practice, the unfortunate impression is that women – whether as artists or the subject of art – remain as banished to the backstairs and recesses of Knole



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as ever. This uneasy sensation worsened as I discovered that Williams's video was not working and that Speed's fountain had been switched off. I am guessing that I was the rare Knole visitor that morning to request Wilson's actually quite moving soundtrack, judging from the blank register when I returned my borrowed headphones and audio gear.

Sevenoaks is better known for its banker-belt conservatism – the town overwhelmingly voted leave in the Brexit referendum – than an affiliation with cutting-edge art, and the effect of hitching the 'women's cause' to contemporary art here seems to yoke together two equally uncertain house guests: assertive women and new art. Certainly contemporary art fared better at Knole in the distant past, judging from the position of pride enjoyed by nine Sir Joshua Reynolds paintings collected by then-contemporary art patron John Sackville, including an immense commissioned portrait of the dashing duke lording over the grand Reynolds Gallery. The unintended message is that historical artworks created for and by men command far greater attention than artworks made and commissioned today by women, sequestered to the house's edges and concealed corners.

In her 2013 performance-essay *Is the Museum a Battlefield?*, artist Hito Steyerl (Interview *AM375*) noted a near-perfect match between the shape of a military-use ammo-cartridge and the missile-shaped floorplan of the Berlin building where those very bullets are manufactured. Knole's courtyard-filled floorplan looks like a cluster of isolated enclosures, like thick-walled cells – perhaps to hide women and their art? In *Orlando*, Woolf reversed Vita's fate and allowed the lead character to win the family estate: the art of fiction was enlisted to overcome an injustice endured in real life. In this spirit, Himid's second work *Flag for Grace* – planted atop the Gatehouse tower in tribute to the house's long-ago servant – seems the most successful artwork here. Where CJ Mahony's *Still Life*, *Still Waiting* is a stained-glass-based image that merely represents Knole in a woman's hands, Himid has seemingly staged a silent coup and declared that women of any age, class and race have finally captured the castle. A gesture small in scale but symbolically huge, *Grace's* proudly waving flag displays a spirit of triumph and reversal that otherwise feels absent here, despite good work and good intentions. ■

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## Morag Keil: Here We Go Again

Project Native Informant London

14 July to 28 October

**Lindsay Seers**  
*2052 Selves* (a  
biography) 2018  
online video

**Lubaina Himid**  
*Collars and Cuffs*  
2018

Morag Keil is not going to hold your hand. There is zero contextual information in the gallery for her show, aside from the title 'Here We Go Again' written on the wall in a dripping green slime typeface, along with the artist's name in flesh pink and a big black number two. The suggestion is that the Scottish artist's second show at Project Native Informant – reached after clambering up three flights of stairs, the building's lift being out of order – equates to a horror movie sequel. (Keil likes this kind of pop-cultural conceit: a 2016 Berlin show entitled 'passive aggressive' was followed in 2017 by a New York show entitled 'passive aggressive 2'.) On PNI's website, meanwhile, there's just an overhead view of a warren of rooms that zooms in and out; and this, in physical form, turns out to be what you encounter. Keil has built a series of cramped corridors and stark rooms behind cheap doors, some locked – a little brass doorknob came off in my hand – and others not, though the open ones don't deliver closure.

The corridors are painted either the same green as the title or the pink of the name; continuing this binary scheme are a pair of uplighters, which glow – again, like sconces in a horror movie – as you pass. The green walls might immediately remind you of a green-screen background, so that content can be pasted on later, blurring real and artificial; the pink, contrasted with this, is a clear cipher for the human. How our increasingly digitised experience nevertheless bumps up continually against raw physicality has been Keil's core concern for years: her Cubitt show in 2013, for instance, involved a cheap Dell workstation streaming a film concerning message-board comments and selling images to adult websites. Here, screens recur. Trying doors, you walk into one little space and see a monitor that plays a fragmentary view of somewhere you've already seen: the stairway directly outside the gallery, with its brass handrail. The camera moves within this space as in a first-person-shooter videogame. 'Walk through the door,' a voice instructs. 'Walk five steps.' You're not playing, though; you're being lightly disenfranchised. Soon enough, the screen resolves to a circle, a glow moving around its circumference like a countdown, and then you're back in the real-life video game.

Another door, locked, features a peephole and emits sounds. 'What would you like to have a conversation about?' a voice asks. It doesn't matter what you say, this isn't interactive. After a while it asks, 'are you still there?' Then it tells you that 'your account will be