Born and Found
Lucinda Bennett

i. Are you so happy to be stuck to the earth?'

When you least expect it and need it even less, you will open your front door to liquid seeping up from below, pooling around your doorstep in evil-smelling puddles. You will cancel work, call your landlord, worry there is a blockage and pray it wasn't you.

A man in a grubby white jumpsuit will arrive with a camera attached to a long wire. He will push it down a pipe and you will wince as your flat undergoes what you can't help but think of as a colonoscopy, the scope snaking into its bowels, finding a blockage, multiple blockages in the sump beneath the shared driveway. An orange digger will arrive and park outside your bedroom window for a week. Men with cutters will smash through the top layer of asphalt so the digger can scoop out the soft earth and damp clay beneath, stopping when it hits pipe the colour of bone. With the delicacy of archaeologists at a dig site, the men will lift out the damaged sections of pipe to reveal the culprit. You will discover that all this time, beneath the padding of sneakers and pressure of car tyres, life has been incubating, unfurling in the fetid dark. Against all odds, tiny seeds have sprouted into strong plants, spiralling and moulding themselves to their cramped subterranean home until it could no longer hold them, until they cracked through the pipes like baby birds pecking their way out of the shell, fighting their way into the light.

*

Matt Arbuckle's paintings make me think of my driveway. Its pocked surface, even more uneven post-excavation, littered with the husks of fallen limes, a neighbour's dropped receipt turning to white mush atop the crumble of asphalt. And below, damp earth and blind life, I know because I've seen it, breathed its loamy scent. Arbuckle's paintings begin on a driveway like mine, are born in the dank, resilient synthetic fabric soaked in a vat of staining liquid and left folded on the ground, exposed to the elements, until again they are soaked and folded, weathered by rain and groundwater, left unlovely to collect grit and sediment in their knitted polyester grain, the cycle repeating until one lucky day when they are retrieved, transported inside and laid out to dry, stretched between wooden bars and lifted off the floor, hung on the wall, finally in the light.

In the light, they are transformed. What once appeared
discarded and grimy has been rehabilitated, not so much scrubbed up as distilled. In the light, dark seams hold weight, hold earth, might-be landmasses, horizons, islands, opaque bands of isthmus floating between watery sea and sky. In High tide (2022), a thick charcoal fold streaked with

imperial red and murky green divides soft cloud from a mirror of slick sand and blue ocean. This central fold forms the horizon, but there are other, gentler creases dappled across the surface. In other paintings, this seemingly random placement evokes the delicate patterning of traditional dyeing methods such as Japanese shibori or mura-zome. Here, these fine crinkles could be pale crepuscular rays of sunlight, the oxygen wake of passing ocean creatures or contrails sublimating into air.

1. Suspiria, directed by Luca Guadagnino (Lionsgate, 2018), Blu-ray Disc.

I am describing light and vapour, ephemeral effects of the terrestrial plane, and yet more often when I stand before Arbuckle's paintings, I feel pulled to the ground, to concrete, mulch, dirt and stone, dragged into subterranean silt and sediment that shifts with the slow, heavy rumblings of geological time. In recent works, Arbuckle has folded horizontally, over and over, the resultant marks appearing as striations, ridges and furrows carved into rock or mineral, their presence a linear record of fault movement. Or else they are strata, bands of different coloured and textured material exposed wherever land has been cut or fallen away, each layer a record of that place throughout time, the composition hinting at environs past: river silt, beach sand, coal swamp, sand dune, lava bed.

In geology, the term 'folding' describes a process by which rock layers bend due to pressure in the Earth's crust. Folding can influence the formation of mountain ranges, the trapping of oil and gas, and the formation of mineral veins. In Arbuckle's works, folding replaces the action of painting, the movement of the surface determining the flow of paint as a brush or other tool usually would. Rivers of pigment pool within a fold, soaking into the fabric to create a stain, in some places drying to opacity while in other areas colour leaches away. For many of Arbuckle's paintings, soaking and folding is the entirety of the process - they will move from the driveway to the stretcher to the wall with no further marks added, the hand of the artist almost entirely absent. It is only Arbuckle's works on linen that return to the studio to be worked over with more paint, oil stick rubbed across the surface in response to the stained marks below, catching on the rough weave, reminding us they were made.

Such a reminder is important in the context of Arbuckle's oeuvre, in which the very best of his paintings are those which appear not to have been made but born. With such works, proximity is required: up close, one can glimpse the bars of the stretcher through the fine mesh of polyester substrate, straight lines and wood grain communicating that this is a painting, even as we are pulled to the ground.

ii. The everyday is a platitude (what lags and falls back, the residual life in which our trash cans and cemeteries are filled: scrap and refuse), but this banality is also what is most important, if it brings us back to existence in its very spontaneity and as it is lived." [2]

2. Maurice Blanchot, 'Everyday Speech' Yale French Studies 73, no13 (1987) 13.

My everyday is not your everyday. What is banal to me might be thrilling to another, and vice versa. Artists often attend to the everyday without meaning to when they immerse themselves in the lives of others then return to the studio and make in response. Arbuckle's version of this is tied to objects and materials, scrap and refuse of an everyday that doesn't belong to him but which holds the residue of daily use. The fabric-guillotine-block paintings came about following a visit to a fabric sampling factory where he noticed discarded piles of the metal blocks factory workers used to punch out fabric samples, geometric shapes formed from blades that, in this context, were unremarkable, common tools of the trade. When Arbuckle talks about the guillotine blocks, he describes how in the home, domestic objects sit below our notice, are taken for granted. But these industry-specific objects are also subject to habitual disregard until something happens to activate them.

Before Arbuckle explained where these metal objects came from, they were just shapes, although I could guess from their material, from the signs of wear and specificity of their form, that they had been designed and used for a specific purpose. In Jacqueline Harpman's *I Who Have Never Known Men*, the narrator is a woman with no memory of normal life on Earth, her knowledge of objects limited to the barest essentials of blankets, bowls, spoons and whips that formed her everyday as a child imprisoned in an underground cage. Each new object she encounters is a revelation or a mystery:

I took out a strange instrument that I had to examine closely to find a very thin blade sandwiched between two metal plates, all mounted on a handle that was very easy to hold. You couldn't use it for cutting unless you removed the blade: it took me a long time to guess that it was a razor [3]

Even with all my experience of the world, would I have ever guessed the niche function of these blocks? Would I have bothered to wonder, to examine closely, had they not been activated by paint and carefully composed? As artworks, the guillotine blocks remain themselves, ready at any moment to be recognised; yet detached from their intended usage they have become indeterminate, the specificity of their meaning ebbing away, subordinate to the formal concerns of shape, line and colour, existing only as residue.

3. Jacqueline Harpman, I Who Have Never Known Men (Vintage Publishing, 2019), 155-165.

iii. Anagrams

Finding, folding, soaking, staining, assembling, rubbing, marking; these are some of the processes by which Arbuckle evokes certain notions of time, place, loss and chance, but there are others. When I first visit his studio, gnarled bronze panels resembling detritus you might find on the garage floor are laid out on the rug, each work variously comprised of metal grids, offcuts of pipe and grooved surfaces recalling the lines left when a broom is raked over wet concrete. Casting in bronze, a material used throughout history to create statues of gods, ritual vessels, busts and icons, Arbuckle has then experimented with ageing the metal, burying some pieces in sulphuric soil, hoping they would patina. A few weeks later, I visit again and Arbuckle carries a flattened cardboard box in from the car, cradling bundles of wet polyester with blackened organic matter on top, dyeing the pale fabric to something almost like a photogram. Stacks of photographs line the mantel, each image carefully altered, some with light leaks, others faded from bathing in methylated spirits, or the gel emulsion sanded on frottage to create grids, cruciforms, eerie absences. Paintings are hung and stacked against the wall, but so too are small slabs of marble, and eventually Arbuckle shows me what these are for.

In his most recent body of work, Arbuckle has gone beyond evoking the geological and begun employing actual marble in his work, interposing real slabs alongside painted panels echoing their clouds and veins. Having once worked as a paint finisher, using feathers and badger-hair brushes to mimic those imperfections that make marble so diverse and desirable, Arbuckle could choose to continue the stone, to render the painted surface indiscernible from the patterns made as limestone metamorphosed into marble. Instead, he chooses to respond to the marble through a process not entirely dissimilar to the frottage he has employed in his works for years, although rather than rubbing over a surface to create a ghostly imprint of the thing, Arbuckle makes alongside the stone, responding to the specificity of its veins and hues to create something like an anagram. Not just any anagram, but the kind in which the same letters that make up one word are rearranged to form not only another word entirely, but one somehow still related to the original word, neither twin nor opposite but something stranger, something that feels like a revelation, hidden meaning unearthed: dormitory becomes dirty room, fluster becomes restful, silent becomes listen. In the marble paintings, hard-edged tendrils of white stone might find their anagram in diffused orange-pink lines echoing the fishbone form, or a thick vein might continue from rock to substrate, transformed from grey granular seam to bright aqueous blue. Like linguistic anagrams, either panel could stand alone, operating in the world without guile.

4. I borrow this idea of "a world without objects" from the abstract painter Agnes Martin. Ann Wilson,"Linear Webs," Art and Artists 1, no 7 (October 1966).

5. Paul Smith, "The Grid & The Jester: On the Trope of the Grid," The Seen: Chicago's International Fournal of Contemporary and Modern Art 3 (2021): 49, https:// theseenjournal.org/grid-jester-trope-grid/

iv. A world without objects +

It is easy to read Arbuckle's marble works as assemblage, yet the philosophy of assemblage also informs the making of his paintings. Not only are they built from the textures and debris of found surfaces, but the material which simulates and absorbs these is itself a found surface, Arbuckle's having initially happened upon his preferred substrate of knitted polyester voile on the side of the road. Taking the fabric back to the studio, he began experimenting and discovered it was perfect for his purposes, capable of soaking up organic and inorganic pigments, holding the stain without breaking down or turning rancid, and sheer enough that we are always returned to the grid of the stretcher.

"Grids occupy even the most banal settings," notes Paul Smith in his essay *The Grid & The Jester: On the Trope of the Grid* [5]. They are present in the tight weave of soft furnishings, mapped onto roads, erected across the urban landscape to delineate who owns what. They arise in Arbuckle's paintings when horizontal folds are combined with the vertical to form a cross that thickens until enough folds have been performed that the grid reveals itself. Once revealed, the structure suggests extension, vastness, infinite unfolding in all directions. This is the paradox peculiar to the grid: the way it conjures transcendence while mapping the surface of a painting, bringing us back to the material.

The lines that form Arbuckle's grids are variously thick and thin, wobbly and straight, distinct and barely there; are they even lines at all? I feel more comfortable referring to them as folds, for that is how they were made, and once that process has been revealed, it cannot be put aside. In Track and Trace (2019), the horizontal folds create washes of white over clay, streaked with fine filaments of sulphur yellow, almost everything seen behind a watery bluish veil leaked from the deep-blue vertical folds, sobbed over everything. I think of Windex, woollen blankets and the perceptual illusion of blue veins running beneath our skin, but I also feel the need to draw closer, roving my eyes across the surface to discern layer from layer, to solve the mystery of which came first, of what colour lies atop and what lies beneath.

There is a metal grid nailed across my bathroom window, through which I can see the lumpy concrete of my driveway. The asphalt is dark with rain, furred with slippery green moss. My eyes can still map the edges of the pit they dug to excavate the tenacious lifeform wreaking havoc from below. Arbuckle texts me a photo of his driveway, concrete cracked like a dried lake bed, an uneven grid of fissures, concrete breaking into pieces, edges falling away under the weight of time and car tyres. Arbuckle's grids return us to the banal, to the empirical, to existence, to the driveway where they are born.