



Title

Fiona Banner AKA The Vanity Press

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About the author(s)

is a London-based writer, editor and curator. She is the founder of Babe Station, an art and research group exploring the relationship between making art and motherhood.

Cover image:

Fiona Banner AKA The Vanity Press

by Millie Walton • 21.03.2025

Fiona Banner AKA The Vanity Press (b.1966) **FIG.1** creates work that expands and evolves through time and across different scales and mediums. In 1997 she launched her own publishing imprint The Vanity Press with the one-thousand-page book *The Nam*, which comprises blow-by-blow textual accounts of such well-known Vietnam War films as *Full Metal Jacket* (1987), *The Deer Hunter* (1978) and *Apocalypse Now* (1979). Over the years the book has been 'edited' into various new forms: drawings on paper and walls, a pulsating plastic bag **FIG.2** and wooden sculptures **FIG.3**. In other works, the language and imagery of violence collides with that of sex. In 2002 she was shortlisted for the Turner prize for *Arsewoman in Wonderland* **FIG.4**, a descriptive transcription of a pornographic film. The text, printed in pink on a vast billboard **FIG.5**, details the film with a deadpan detachment. Installed alongside it were sculptures of giant, gleaming full stops, which resembled bullets or bombs as much as grammar.

Although the links drawn between different types of assault and exploitation – on the body, on the landscape, on language itself – are often unsettling and confronting, there is always a sense of play to what Banner makes, a sending-up or collapsing of 'grand' ideas but also of her work. For her Tate commission in 2010, for example, she bought and installed two full-size fighter jets – a Sea Harrier aircraft and a SEPECAT Jaguar aircraft – into the Duveen galleries, creating an environment that was alternately monumental and sad. She later melted the planes down into ingots, which she keeps in her east London studio. Ahead of Banner's solo exhibition at Frith Street Gallery, London (21st March–3rd May 2025), Millie Walton spoke to the artist about language, time, motherhood and military aircraft.

Millie Walton: In 2009 you registered yourself as a publication, even giving yourself an ISBN. What led you to make that decision?

Fiona Banner AKA The Vanity Press: I'd been making books – some slightly absurdist – and I realised that books are equal in status to what might be considered a major sculptural endeavour or a big gallery, museum or public work. So, I started to think of showing work as an act of publishing. The Vanity Press was playing on the idea of vanity, but also the absurdity of that vanity, toying with the supposedly egotistical nature of publishing your own work. As an artist you're always publishing your work. Every time you make something, you're not doing it because anybody wants it. It made me think it's all vanity publishing.

But registering myself as a publication came after I had my daughter. It was the first summer I hadn't spent in the studio and that was weird to me because the summer used to be a really good time to be there, when everyone else is on holiday. I went away with her that summer and just before, I left a piece of paper on the floor with a stencil on it that read 'summer 2007'. When I came back and took the stencil off, what was left was like a bikini mark of language. I gave it an ISBN, registered it and published that. It was about registering that period of time as significant through absence but also thinking you can be somewhere else and it doesn't mean work isn't happening. I guess it was an attempt to navigate a new relationship to time in my practice.

MW: Which was linked to becoming a mother?



Fig. 1 Fiona Banner AKA The Vanity Press in 2024. (© Fiona Banner Studio; courtesy the artist and Frith Street Gallery, London; photograph Leroy Boeteng).

FB-AKA-VP: Yes, it tenderised time in a way, and made it more crucial. Becoming a mother definitely has an impact on how you are

in the studio or in any situation, but it doesn't mean that you're working less; you're working differently. There's a low-key politics behind that in terms of how we, as mothers, levy our time and work, but I was thinking more emotionally about time. The season had changed when I got back. The paper had gone a bit crispy, like an autumn leaf. And then the next summer, I made a similar stencil but of an ISBN number. That's how those pieces started. It was super ephemeral. They became photographs of significant little bits of time, which kind of saved it from being lost time. I also carved an ISBN number into a stone **FIG.6**. So, I was thinking playfully about publication but also increasingly realising that there's no hierarchy within my practice, whether I was making a book or a sculpture or whatever. I was also contemplating the myth of biography, which is something I've always thought about and which seems very tied in with the myth of linearity and 'historic' time. That's when I thought: 'Okay, well actually a biography is something completely unedited'. I could view myself as a completely unedited publication.

MW: Publications such as *The Nam* or *Arsewoman in Wonderland* seem to play on that idea as well as being textual translations of films.

FB-AKA-VP: I wanted to create completely unedited texts. My thought was that in a world in which nothing is prioritised, maybe you could translate a film in its entirety. I realised that's ridiculous: you can't, because your view is always going to be subjective. So *The Nam* became this slightly grandiose way of making fun out of a pseudo-heroic notion of a completely unedited book. That was my first publication and I wanted to do a book tour with it, which I did quite seriously but also in a mildly ridiculous way. I remember doing a reading in New York and people thinking it was funny because I was reading this uber-American male banter in an English accent. The things that came out of it enlivened me to publishing as a performative act. I'm thinking now of this show at Frith Street as work that I'm about to publish.

MW: Are you suspicious of film as a medium?



Fig. 2 *Breathing Bag*, by Fiona Banner AKA The Vanity Press. 2015. Plastic bag and microcontroller, 46.5 by 37.8 cm. (© Fiona Banner Studio; courtesy the artist and Frith Street Gallery, London; photograph Steve White).

FB-AKA-VP: I'm suspicious of images. Roger Ebert said that film is an empathy-making machine, but it's also a highly manipulative medium – one that I'm extremely susceptible to because I really enjoy movies. I'd already seen the films that I wrote about in *The Nam* when they came out in the cinema. That made me aware of the misunderstandings that can occur from watching historical, propagandist Hollywood films, and that they can get inside of you. I misunderstood swathes of history because my main reading of it had been through film. The making of *The Nam* was sort of an undoing of that, or a reflection on it, and at the same time an acknowledgment of the momentum or force of it.

MW: Collaboration seems to be a key part of your practice. For example, you made the soundtrack to your film *DISARM (portrait)* with friends. Why is it important to include other voices in your work?

FB-AKA-VP: There's a strand to making work that's social and making a film is definitely social. Even the short films I make tend to involve more than just me and even if it were just me, it would include using an iPhone, which has been made by somebody else – and already has built-in algorithms and expectations – but it's also just that I know people who are better than me at certain things. Or sometimes it's about the energy and fun that happens with a certain group of people. I naturally choose to work with friends because there's an empathy around the subject or project, and that's important because when you're making work, you don't always understand it. I think that's a good place to be: to leave some unknown elements, but to have people who can feel the pulse with you.



Fig. 3 *Not so much a Coffee Table Book, as a Coffee Table* by Fiona Banner AKA The Vanity Press. 2015. Coffee table constructed from birch plywood, 130 by 50 by 180 cm. (© Fiona Banner Studio; courtesy the artist and Frith Street Gallery, London).

MW: Where does your interest in military aircraft stem from?



Fig. 4 *Arsewoman in Wonderland*, by Fiona Banner AKA The Vanity Press. 2002. Screenprint on paper, 4.1 by 6.1 m. (© Fiona Banner Studio; courtesy the artist and Frith Street Gallery, London).

FB-AKA-VP: There isn't really a single thing, except that I went to a lot of air shows when I was young because we lived relatively near an RAF base. There was a sort of growing criticality with me thinking this is a weird family day out but we were all really excited about it. I was also interested in the relationship with the

landscape: the violence of the planes in the pastoral space of North Wales, which is where we were then. My grandparents' flat was also full of war memorabilia and the Vietnam War had only just stopped being broadcast on the television. I remember going to see a Magnum photographer's show at the Royal Academy of Arts, London, which made me think about the role of reportage and how deeply complex a lot of conflict images that have become iconic are. Then I started reading a lot about war and cinema. This was in the early 1990s when people like Paul Virilio were writing about drones: what they meant and would come to mean.

FORWARDS AND RESTS A HAND ON HER NECK, FEELING HER THIN GOLD NECKLACE V
 THAT SHE IS MUCH QUIETER. SHE TURNS OVER ONTO HER KNEES, PUSHING HERSE
 N THE GIRL OVER. SHE MOVES SLOWLY, SHYLY, OUT OF THE BLUE NEON LIGHT AND T
 SS. THE DRESS FALLS DOWN TO HER WAIST. THE GIRL WITH THE AUBURN HAIR SITS
 AND LICKS IT FROM SIDE TO SIDE SO YOU CAN SEE HER TONGUE AND THE NIPPLE C
 TH THE AUBURN HAIR TAKES HER OTHER BREAST IN HER HAND AND LIFTS IT UP TO
 OWLY CROUCHES DOWN BEHIND HER, FOLLOWING THE CURVE OF HER BACK AND BU
 E END OF THE BENCH WITH HER FEET APART, BUT HER KNEES TOGETHER. THE SLOW
 RNER OF THE BENCH. THE OTHER GIRL LOOKS AWAY, LIKE SHE'S CHECKING NO ONE I
 PUSSY UP A BIT, SO THAT IT IS ON HER MOUTH. THE OTHER GIRL IS KNEELING BETW
 ER HEAD UP SO SHE CAN SEE HER DOWN THERE BETWEEN HER LEGS. SHE LOOKS FE
 KE IT MUCH LONGER. UP CLOSE YOU SEE HER LICKING HER CLIT UP AND DOWN ALL
 E. HER CLIT IS SWOLLEN AND PINK AND SHINY, A TRICKLE OF SWEAT ROLLS DOWN I
 ACK A BIT AND SUCKS THE SIDE OF HER CLIT, PULLING IT OUT SO ITS EVEN MORE S
 OPS HER HAND OVER HER SHOULDER AND GRABS THE GUYS ERECT COCK BEHIND
 HER HAIR IS STUCK TO HER FOREHEAD, SHE HALF OPENS HER EYES AND PARTS HE
 TCHES HER LIPS, HER NEAT ARSEHOLE JUST BENEATH. SHE SHUDDERS AS SHE LICK
 LIGHTER BETWEEN HER FINGERS. SHE PULLS HER HEAD UP OFF THE BENCH AND L
 S AND STARTS KISSING HER. SHE STROKES THE BACK OF HER HEAD, KISSING HER P
 R STOMACH. THEN TURNS HER ON THE BENCH, PUTTING HER WEIGHT ON HER HAND
 OCKS SHINE. SHE LOOKS BROWN AND SMOOTH. THE GUY WAS THERE WANKING HIS
 R BACK THEN RESTS IT ON HER SMOOTH BUTTOCK. HIS COCK IS HARD STILL. SHE FE
 BUTT OCKS. THE OTHER GIRL KNEELING AT THE SIDE, LOOKING ON WIDE EYE D. SHE R
 N'T SEE, JUST A SHINY STREAK OF SWEAT COMING DOWN ONTO HER CUNT AND HIS
 OES ALL THE WAY TO HER PUBES. HIS COCK SLOWLY PLUNGES INTO HER, SHE STICK
 UTS IT SPLAYED ONTO HER BUTTOCKS, PULLING HERSELF OPEN, SO YOU SEE THE DA
 TO HIS, HE TILTS HIS FACE FORWARDS INTO HER HAIR FOR A MOMENT, THEN LIFTS
 PUBES CATCH THE LIGHT, HIS BALLS ARE HAIRY AND TIGHT, HE FUCKS HER ALL TH
 N HER THIGHS AND STARTS TOUCHING HER CLIT, SHE SQUEEZES HER FINGERS AR OUI
 TWEEN HER BREASTS AND THEN STICKS HER FINGERS IN BETWEEN HER LIPS, SHE M
 IGHLY. HE COMES ALL THE WAY OUT OF HER, HIS NOB IS HARD, SHE IS ON HER FR
 SES EACH PEACHY CHEEK. SHE PLUNGES HIS HARD COCK INTO HER MOUTH, JUST TH
 K STRETCHES HER WHOLE FACE. HE STARTS WANKING HIMSELF IN HER FACE, RUNN
 I HER LIPS AGAIN. HE'S STRETCHING HER MOUTH SO MUCH THAT YOU CAN'T EVEN
 ERY RED. SHE'S LICKING THE END. WHITE CUM SPURTS OUT OF THE END, SHE'S LICKI
 RE. HE'S STILL WANKING HIMSELF. HER HAIR'S CAUGHT IN HER MOUTH AND WET IN
 H THE BLOND HAIR LOOKS ROUND. HER FACE FLASHES NEON PINK. SHE FOLLOWS H
 WITH AN ALICE BAND. THE DWARF RUNS THROUGH ANOTHER DOOR, AND DISAPPI
 I A BLACK COUCH, IT'S LIKE A DENTISTS CHAIR. HER HANDS ARE CLASPED ON HER
) THEN TAKES THE REST OF THE MUSHROOM OUT OF HER LOCKET AND SAYS, OH YEA
 IAN THE MANICURER FOR MAN SPADES LAUGHING HIS HEAD OFF

Fig. 5 Detail of *Arsewoman in Wonderland*, by Fiona Banner AKA The Vanity Press. 2002. Screenprint on paper. (© Fiona Banner Studio; courtesy the artist and Frith Street Gallery, London).

MW: Are you drawn to using particular types of aircraft for their specific characteristics or is it more about what they symbolise in a broader sense?

FB-AKA-VP: With *Harrier* [Fig.8](#) and *Jaguar* [Fig.9](#) I was very particular about the aircraft – that they were still in service and named after these forces of nature. There were various things about their physiognomy that were interesting to me and so it was really important that I bought the aircraft. I did a lot of research into each of those particular planes and what active service they'd had. I ended up on all of these forums with pilots who'd flown them and a lot of that information wasn't in the public domain. At the end of all that, I didn't really want them: I melted them down and turned them into ingots [Fig.10](#). In 2023 I used Merlin helicopter blades as mannequins in an old Topshop, where I had an exhibition [Fig.11](#). I like that the blades have a human scale. It's very easy to say we have nothing to do with objects like these, but we do and it's about trying to make apparent that connection. Needless to say,

military aircraft are very complicated things.

MW: What was the starting point for your *Disarm* series of works?

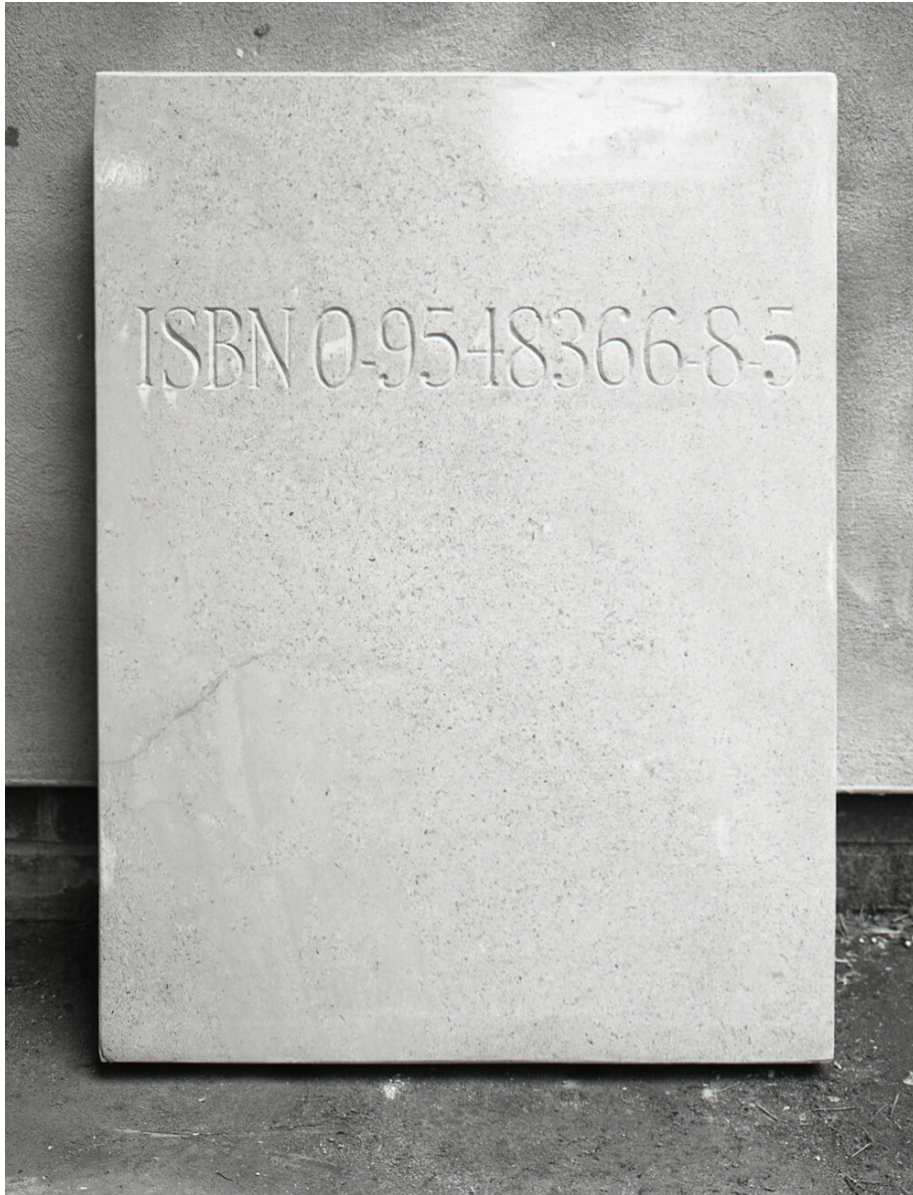


Fig. 6 *Sleep*, by Fiona Banner AKA The Vanity Press. 2009. Hand-engraved stone, 72 by 53 by 7.5 cm. (© Fiona Banner Studio; courtesy the artist and Frith Street Gallery, London; photograph Emma Summerton).

FB-AKA-VP: We get these flypasts above the studio and every time it happens, Simon English, who I've shared a studio with for decades, and I rush out to watch the planes coming over. We're quite excited by it and afterwards, I always turn to him and say, 'God, that was obscene or pornographic or gross or whatever'. It feels like such a hot ego moment. And after one of the flypasts, I made a collage that said 'Disarm' as a kind of response I suppose to the hubris of the display.



Fig. 7 Still from *DISARM (portrait)*, by Fiona Banner AKA The Vanity Press. 2023. HD digital film, duration 6 minutes 52 seconds. (© Fiona Banner Studio; courtesy the artist and Frith Street Gallery, London).

MW: Is collage the way you often begin?

FB-AKA-VP: Yes. It's the quickest way to visualise something – I mean collage as in scissors, printouts and photocopies. I made this crappy collage and then I started to think about the concept of language in action, which was almost a joke – a dark joke – because a flypast is such an extreme performance. I was thinking about

language on the edge. How do you say a word that's so calcified in its own cliché, overuse or naivety? I think disarm has some currency because it has the body in it: the arm. But also, that's something you can do in art: speak the unspeakable or, maybe, manifest the impossible.

MW: The first *Disarm* [Fig.12](#) film you showed was at CIRCA 2024. It ended up being shown at a very precarious time in terms of geopolitics, which imbued the work with political overtones. Was that your intention?



Fig. 8 *Harrier*, by Fiona Banner AKA The Vanity Press. 2010. BAe Sea Harrier aircraft and paint, 7.6 by 14.2 by 3.71 m. (© Tate Photography; courtesy the artist and Frith Street Gallery, London; photograph Andrew Dunkley and Sam Drake).

FB-AKA-VP: We couldn't find a time when it didn't feel on the nose, conflict is sadly always moving, changing and becoming seemingly ever more complex and entrenched, so we went ahead

and showed it last spring. I can't control how my work is going to be interpreted, and I don't think of it as being static: it's subject to time and environment, so interpretations change. When I made my film *Pranayama Organ* [FIG.13](#) it was before the Ukraine War began, but by the time I was showing it, in Venice, Russia had invaded, which made it super-sensitive and it felt very resonant. I may worry about how it will sit at any given time, but I can't control the reception of my work. But I also don't make work in response to a specific conflict. It's more about our universal bind to conflict, I think.



Fig. 9 *Jaguar*, by Fiona Banner AKA The Vanity Press. 2010. Polished Sepecat Jaguar aircraft, 8.69 by 4.92 by 16.83 m. (© Tate Photography; courtesy the artist and Frith Street Gallery, London; photograph Andrew Dunkley and Sam Drake).

MW: The body is always in your work but it seems more directly present in the *Disarm* series, in terms of imagery and language.

FB-AKA-VP: Yes. I think the word 'viewer' prioritises the eye but you receive work as a body, so the body is always there. But the mannequin parts in these works came into being because of the show in Topshop and there being lots of discarded mannequins around, which spoke to me of a kind of post-consumer, post-age of hope. The film *DISARM (portrait)* is definitely a bodily work, which is why I started calling it portrait. It's a portrait format and is installed free-standing in space, so it has a kind of mirror-like, human presence. Then, there are all these mannequin parts flying around with 'disarm', 'delegation', 'throwback arsenal' written on

them. But it's also a poem because of all of the language. I called it a concrete poem, but it's not really a concrete poem because it's a very fluid thing. It's sort of an un-concrete poem.

MW: Your work deals with some heavy subject-matter but there's always a lightness to it, whether it's in the word play or the imagery. What role does humour play in your practice?

FB-AKA-VP: You can say things that can't otherwise be said or that you can't find language for through humour. It's about a kind of lubricating of possibilities. I never set out to make something funny but I'm aware that it's there and that it keeps the work moving or gives it some energy.



Fig. 10 *Harrier and Jaguar Ingots*, by Fiona Banner AKA The Vanity Press. 2012. Metal from BAe Sea Harrier aircraft ZE695 and Sepecat Jaguar aircraft XZ118, each 40 by 9.56 cm. (© Fiona Banner Studio; courtesy the artist and Frith Street Gallery, London).

MW: That word 'lubricating' seems to capture a feeling of slipperiness that seems to be essential to how you approach or think about your art?

FB-AKA-VP: I think it's good for surprising things to happen that you didn't necessarily design but in some way invited while you were sleeping one afternoon in the studio or something. There's a new work in the exhibition, *Vulva Volvo* FIG.14, that was like that. I remembered that during lockdown I'd written a text about the shared etymology of the words 'Volvo' and 'vulva'. I started editing it and changed the word vulva but in the Volvo font. So, it's sort of both. It's a work that surfaced because I was thinking about what a hack linearity is as a concept and how the mainstream often sells you stuff through that notion of linearity. Yet, the word comes from the opposite of linear. It comes from a sort of endlessly unfurling space. I like my shows to have something that fits but

doesn't fit, that takes you onto the next thing.

MW: If your exhibition at Frith Street is a publication, does that mean you're finished with this body of work?



Fig. 11 *DISARM Blade*, by Fiona Banner AKA The Vanity Press. 2024. Merlin helicopter blade and collage, 177 by 44 by 16 cm. (© Fiona Banner Studio; courtesy the artist and Frith Street Gallery, London; photograph Ben Westoby, Fine Art Documentation).

FB-AKA-VP: Well, hopefully the exhibition enables me to see the work. It's the act of making the work public that gives it some objective.

MW: So exhibiting work is an important part of the process?

FB-AKA-VP: Yes, but not making work is also really important. I often make full stops when I'm not making work. They're a way of holding a bit of space and time when things haven't come together.



Fig. 12 Still from *DISARM (landscape)*, by Fiona Banner AKA The Vanity Press. 2024. HD digital film, duration 4 minutes 41 seconds. (© Fiona Banner Studio; courtesy the artist and Frith Street Gallery, London; photograph Fiona Banner Studio).



Fig. 13 Still from *Pranayama Organ*, by Fiona Banner AKA The Vanity Press. 2021. Video, duration 10 minutes 26 seconds. (© Fiona Banner Studio; courtesy the artist and Frith Street Gallery, London).



Fig. 14 *Vulva Volvo*, by Fiona Banner AKA The Vanity Press. 2025. Aluminium from Tornado ZE728, dimensions variable. (© Fiona Banner Studio; courtesy the artist and Frith Street Gallery, London; photograph Fiona Banner Studio).

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