



Title

Hayley Tompkins: Far

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Cover image: **Fig. 8** Installation view of *Hayley Tompkins: Far* at Fruitmarket, Edinburgh, 2022, showing, on the left, detail from *Speak Removals*. 2022. Acrylic on panel, 120 by 80 cm.; and, on the right, *Mallet*. 2022. Acrylic on found object, 31.5 by 11.5 by 5.5 cm. (Courtesy the artist and The Modern Institute, Glasgow; photograph Ruth Clark; exh. Fruitmarket, Edinburgh).

Hayley Tompkins: Far

by Kathryn Lloyd • 19.01.2023

It is difficult to define the dominant colour of the installation *But I don't even think it's you* **FIG.1** by Hayley Tompkins (b.1971). It veers between yellow and green, neon and pastel, nauseating and ameliorative. It is perhaps easier to categorise by a process of elimination, as removed as it is from the natural referents one might associate with its base tones: sun, honey, lemon, banana, egg. It recalls the yellow of Post-it notes but is neither soft nor luminous enough to align perfectly with the product range. It is a strange, synthetic colour, seemingly distinct and untethered from signifiers and connotations. The title of the work appears to acknowledge this elusiveness, as though Tompkins set herself a challenge and is unconvinced by the result.

But I don't even think it's you is situated in the small alcove-like gallery on the ground floor of the Fruitmarket, Edinburgh, as part of Tompkins's solo exhibition *Far*. The artist has inserted a low platform, essentially raising the floor and blocking entry to the room, and painted it this specific yet unplaceable colour. On top are five paper bags and a cardboard box, which the artist has coloured with thin washes of acrylic paint. The bags are positioned upright and open, revealing glimpses of their painterly insides, whereas the box is upturned, its emptiness only detectable through holes in its construction. The colours that Tompkins has bestowed on these objects are indeterminate in other ways: they are murky, often verging on a muddy brown; they overlap and bleed into one another. But unlike the acid, monotone floor, they retain the marks of their application, with visible brushstrokes, drips and watery lines of collected paint. Brightly lit and elevated, the installation, which is almost shrine-like in structure, relies on museological modes of display, only for the visitor to be confronted with an assortment of everyday, disposable items.

Tompkins has long been dedicated to the mundane and quotidian, using objects from her immediate environment as surfaces to paint on or to rove her camera over. She is interested in reality rather than representation, often choosing to incorporate elements of her surroundings directly rather than depict them. As Fiona Bradley succinctly notes in the exhibition catalogue, Tompkins 'doesn't paint things, she paints on things' (p.5).¹ *Far*, which brings together works created between 2007 and 2022, includes a plethora of found 'things': chairs, buckets, sunglasses, bags, shirts, coins and sticks. Although these objects are never transformed beyond recognition, and most retain their original use

value, they are made strange by Tompkins's treatment of them. Her methodology pushes them into uncanny territory, where they exist simultaneously as object, material and work of art.



Fig. 1 *But I don't even think it's you*, by Hayley Tompkins. 2022. 6 parts, acrylic on paper bags and cardboard box, dimensions variable. (Courtesy the artist and The Modern Institute, Glasgow; photograph Ruth Clark; exh. Fruitmarket, Edinburgh).

In the larger downstairs gallery, five of Tompkins's moving-image works are displayed together for the first time. Made at different points over the last fifteen years, Tompkins's films pay similar close attention to everyday objects and places. She is more concerned with the camera as a tool for looking than recording, presenting the viewer with streams of images and noises recording her daily life: the ears of her pet cat, the shadow of a plant on the wall, a sunflower, cracks in the pavement. The gallery is lit only by the neon glow emanating from *But I don't even think it's you*, giving the impression of underexposure at one end and overexposure at the other. Each film is projected onto a small block of wood, which is suspended from the ceiling **Fig. 2**. When the footage falters or disintegrates into darkness – as it so often does in Tompkins's fragmentary approach to film-making – it is near-impossible to differentiate between the projection surface and the wall behind it. The room is diffused with the graininess of low resolution, one familiar to the workings of the camera or eye as it adjusts to a world of half-light. Although the films collectively span a long period of time, they share commonalities, most notably a rhythmic clicking sound, which is caused by the shutter of the artist's digital camera. The noise is purely technological but also appears to relate to Tompkins's processes of editing, cropping and cutting; it comes to act as a marker of time, of it passing too quickly, and of our attention being ushered on and on.



Fig. 2 Installation view of *Hayley Tompkins: Far* at Fruitmarket, Edinburgh, 2022. (Courtesy the artist and The Modern Institute, Glasgow; photograph Ruth Clark).

Tompkins's camerawork is ostensibly amateurish. Images shift in and out of focus; transitions between clips are abrupt, followed by prolonged periods of darkness; background audio comes and goes; and filters give the impression of a clouded, blurred or jaundiced environment. At points, the camera movement is so erratic and the subject-matter so indecipherable that the resulting footage appears to be accidental – perhaps capturing the contents of a bag, pocket or floor. This is most evident in *Lent Moving Pictures* **FIG.3**, a thirteen-minute compilation of indistinct, dimly lit passages of film, in which recognisable objects occasionally surface, most regularly advertisements and pages from fashion magazines. Tompkins scans her source material in such close proximity that much of the imagery is impossible to read as anything more than pulsating gradients of colour. Sometimes her fingers creep into shot, allowing a differentiation between the static, printed page and moving, three-dimensional objects. In a moment of rare visual clarity, an advert shows a brown leather shoe **FIG.4**, which Tompkins tips back and forth in a dancing motion. The shoe, isolated and floating on the paper, is reminiscent of René Magritte's object paintings – the apparent inverse of Tompkins's painted objects – emphasising the surrealist nature of her exercise: to collapse the distance between camera and eye.



Fig. 3 Still from *Lent Moving Pictures*, by Hayley Tompkins. 2007. Digital video, duration 13 minutes. (Courtesy the artist and The Modern Institute, Glasgow; exh. Fruitmarket, Edinburgh).

However, unlike Magritte, Tompkins is not interested in illusion. Every element of her work and its display is tempered by its connection to the real world. The diminutive size of the screens that show her films is dictated by the small screen of the digital camera or mobile phone on which they were recorded. In a similar gesture, the lower gallery is filled with eight upright wooden chairs **FIG.5**, painted in blocks, stripes, spots and grids of colour, which visitors are invited to sit on. The instruction is specifically delivered by gallery assistants to avoid any ambiguity: in turning chairs into works of art Tompkins does not revoke their function as chairs. Similar to the paper bags, their hand-painted quality is deliberately emphasised by clear brushstrokes and cloth marks, wobbly lines and drips of paint. It is in this series, completed between 2007 and 2017, that Tompkins most explicitly erodes the distance between object and art object. In selecting a universally identifiable 'thing' as a painting support and transforming it in a way that does not alter its purpose or even its form, Tompkins is able to explore abstraction and decoration free from the historical weight, and lightness, ascribed to such visual languages.

The large upper gallery presents a deviation from the rules that govern the works downstairs: ten paintings on panel line the walls **FIG.6**, which were completed in the eight weeks prior to the exhibition opening. The artist's painterly application is, however, similar to those on less conventional surfaces: built up in watery layers that are scribbled, dripped and brushed on. The colours can be jarring, with large swathes of black set against pastel pinks and neon greens. The darker areas indicate shadows or obliterations,

recalling the recurrent black passages in the moving image works downstairs. Tompkins's approach to colour is distinctly different to her sourcing of surface. Although she freely incorporates ready-mades, the paint itself is never used straight from the tube, but mixed and altered, often with strange, slightly unsettling results.



Fig. 4 Still from *Lent Moving Pictures*, by Hayley Tompkins. 2007. Digital video, duration 13 minutes. (Courtesy the artist and The Modern Institute, Glasgow; exh. Fruitmarket, Edinburgh).

These paintings remain characteristically non-representational, but their traditional flatness encourages readings that her objects do not: shapes emerge that resemble interiors, heads, plants, arms or the shadows they create. Their titles – such as *Speak Removals*, *Speakdriver* and *Speakpatched* (all 2022) – relate to communication, indicating processes of revision and redaction, and the stuttering and stiltedness that can come with speech as much as its opposite. A number of Tompkins's wall-mounted painted objects are shown in close dialogue with these paintings: *No title* **FIG.7**, a pair of sunglasses covered in gouache paint, is installed next to *Speakpatched III* (2022); and *Mallet* **FIG.8** neighbours *Speak Removals*, the titular object painted in a purple that shamelessly clashes with those in the painting. Two painted shirts **FIG.9** are mounted on the wall, a surface that Tompkins has repeatedly returned to. They are painting shirts, deliberately suffused with paint, suddenly the event of the painting as opposed to an item worn while creating it. They are sculptural, as though starched with colour, bringing to mind the sculpted reliefs of Claes Oldenburg, albeit replacing the primary colour palette of Pop art with a kaleidoscope of tonal shifts.

Far is an exhibition of two halves and two paces: the sustained engagement with the everyday that Tompkins is best-known for,

and the 'break-neck speed' (p.5) of the most recent paintings. There is an innate absurdity to the artist's approach to found objects, in her refusal to subsume the ordinariness of objects while turning them into works of art.² This is an absurdity that only accrues over time, as buckets, chairs and coins become older and sunglasses become outdated, yet subject to the preservation and conservation of the art object. This is not apparent in her panel paintings, which instead record ephemerality in an correspondingly ephemeral manner, using quick, responsive marks on a predictably stable surface. They cannot take on the paradoxical permanence she affords to traditionally discardable items. Tompkins's gestures are designed to be small, to edge the everyday into a sort of limbo land. Her work is at its best when it takes directly from the world: familiar, strange and unmoored.



Fig. 5 Installation view of *Hayley Tompkins: Far* at Fruitmarket, Edinburgh, 2022. (Courtesy the artist and The Modern Institute, Glasgow; photograph Ruth Clark).



Fig. 6 Installation view of *Hayley Tompkins: Far* at Fruitmarket, Edinburgh, 2022. (Courtesy the artist and The Modern Institute, Glasgow; photograph Ruth Clark).



Fig. 7 Installation view of *Hayley Tompkins: Far* at Fruitmarket, Edinburgh, 2022, showing, on the left, detail from *Speakpatched III. 2022*, acrylic on panel, 120 by 80 cm.; and, on the right, *No Title. 2008*. Gouache on found object, 14.5 by 5.5 by 5.5 cm. (Courtesy the artist and The Modern Institute, Glasgow; photograph Ruth Clark; exh. Fruitmarket, Edinburgh).

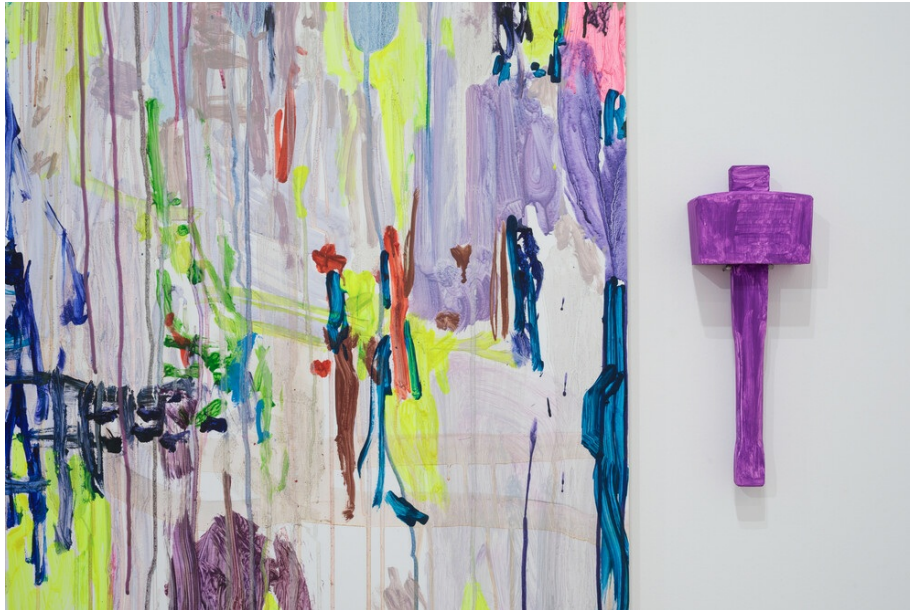


Fig. 8 Installation view of *Hayley Tompkins: Far* at Fruitmarket, Edinburgh, 2022, showing, on the left, detail from *Speak Removals*. 2022. Acrylic on panel, 120 by 80 cm.; and, on the right, *Mallet*. 2022. Acrylic on found object, 31.5 by 11.5 by 5.5 cm. (Courtesy the artist and The Modern Institute, Glasgow; photograph Ruth Clark; exh. Fruitmarket, Edinburgh).



Fig. 9 On the left, *The Shirt Says I Feel III*, by Hayley Tompkins. 2021. Acrylic, shirt and stick, 76.5 by 60 by 8.8 cm.; and, on the right, *The Shirt Says I Feel IV*, by Hayley Tompkins. 2021. Acrylic and shirt, 78 by 56 by 6.8 cm. (Courtesy the artist and The Modern Institute, Glasgow; photograph Ruth Clark).

Exhibition details

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About this book



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Footnotes

- 1** Catalogue: *Hayley Tompkins: Far*. Edited by Fiona Bradley. 80 pp. incl. 32 col. ill.
(Fruitmarket, Edinburgh, 2022), £16. ISBN 978-1-908612-64-9.
- 2** See J. Fiduccia: 'Hayley Tompkins: hypothetically seeing', *MAP* 17 (Spring 2009),
available at mapmagazine.co.uk/hayley-tompkins-hypotheticall, accessed 19th
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