

## Stuart Middleton: The Human Model

Carlos/Ishikawa, London, 7 March to 20 April

Fear of the unknown continues to compel us; the way one might sit forward when an unexpected sound in a horror film plays. Stuart Middleton's exhibition 'The Human Model' thrives in that strange, uncertain space, at once human and artificial; propulsive and static; frightening and tender.

At the core of this exhibition is *Radial arm maze made from synthetic duvets (15 single, 21 double)*, a maze-like room in the shape of a pentagram with a speaker at head-height at each of the star's points. As the title outlines, the work is constructed by the hanging of duvets over a series of high-tensile steel cable wires in what appears to be a floating den in which to hide or keep warm. Diffused in the intimate glow of light inside the maze and away from the sterility of the white gallery - beams of light creep in from the floor and points where the duvets have been joined with white plastic cable ties - it is easy to become disorientated. This is compounded by the layered, complex sound design, created in collaboration with sound designer Richy Carey, in which hundreds of samples are looped and crashed over one another, a kind of overture to what sounds like industrial chaos. Whenever the maze falls into silence, a sound from a solitary speaker breaks the insulated quiet, and whose source you try to seek out along the pentagram.

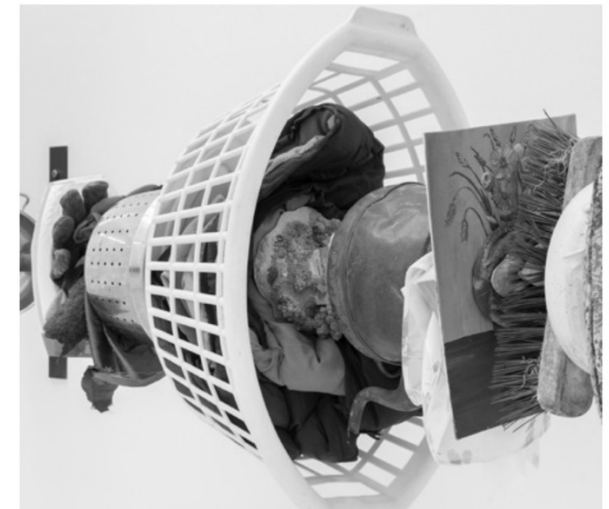
The cacophony is in fact the artist attempting to mimetically recreate the sounds of machinery, perhaps in answer to the question posed in an accompanying text: 'why do kids do that brum-brum choo-choo thing?' One wonders if the human model of the exhibition's title might be Middleton himself, constantly pushing against the limits that define it. It appears that the greater the number of sounds made by the artist, the less human they sound; what begins as evidently human becomes the guttural roar of a motorcycle engine.

The space is also physically warm, the bedding structure appears as an invitation to relax, yet it also has the air of something incomplete about it; the wires on the perimeter that hold the installation's shape are visible while the washing guidance tags that warn users to keep the duvets away from fire haven't been removed. Middleton's maze suggests something of the alienation but also the absurdity of modern existence, of 'man' as 'machine'. However, the pentagram itself also speaks of a different order of time: that we are involved in some kind of incantatory ritual to release the spirits of the dead. As Middleton's text reminds us, 'the occult means "hidden"'. Standing in this maze, as strange noises echo from each point of the star, an unsettling feeling takes root; the kind of filmic revelation one sees on the face of an actor when it has just become too late to escape the coming dread.

In the following room are a series of sculptures that the artist refers to as 'kebabs' - or, to use their full title, *Personal effects and things that are biographical in amongst material that might be understood as generic without clear separation under compression (Kebab)*, 2024. Under the clinical lights of the gallery, the works appear like detritus from a lost world that was simply washed up and arranged, kebab-like, along a steel bar. Given the lack of context, it is tempting to try to work out what makes the work tightly biographical and what is simply generic; one person's discarded stuff looks similar to another's, except of course, it isn't - we can deduce the wealth of someone, whether they lived in rural and urban areas, what eras the objects were purchased and what values of taste they had. The amalgam of material, like the stop-gap of a kebab when all other places have closed for the night, resembles a quick way to dispense with the problems of sorting through one's life, as if Middleton has used his art to build a structure around these otherwise very exhausting problems of clearing out the contents of a house - a gesture that's often associated with a kind of finality, or death of a loved one.

Focusing in on one of Middleton's 'kebabs', one sees a glove on the end of a vase which, the longer you spend looking at it, seems to animate back into the hand that once rested inside it - the vase taking on the shape of a wrist and forearm. It's through amassing these small details, from the dust coating a book to the juvenile absurdity of Middleton making himself sound like an engine, that the work leaves us thinking about the 'human condition' above all else, even as a world of monsters and mechanisation threatens to make us redundant.

Sam Moore is a writer, artist and editor. Their most recent book is *Chesil Cliff House and other failures*, Sticky Fingers, 2023.



Stuart Middleton, *Personal effects and things that are biographical in amongst material that might be understood as generic without clear separation under compression (Kebab)*, 2024, detail