A Stone in the Shoe

22-25th October 2026
Presented by Gem Bryant at *Five Years*
Unit 2B1 Boothby Road, Archway, N19 4AJ

In Ursula Le Guin's 1986 essay 'The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction', the writer proposes that the stories we tell to ourselves and one another are defined by the containers we place them in. A car becomes a vehicle when it is transporting goods and/or people. An oat becomes food once it has been absorbed and broken down by the mechanisms of the stomach. Context, for Le Guin, is just as important as the thing itself – it is the primary indicator of meaning. Without context, a car is an apparatus of gas and metals, an oat is a fallen seed from a plant. A stone on the pavement is a fragment of a grounding force; the stone in your shoe is just a nuisance.

It is a "human thing to do", writes Le Guin, "to put something you want, because it's useful, edible or beautiful, into a bag, or a basket, or a bit of rolled bark or leaf, or a net woven of your own hair, or what have you, and then take it home with you, home being another larger kind of pouch or bag, a container for people, and then later on you take it out and eat it or share it or store it up for winter in a solider container or put it in the medicine bundle or the shrine or the museum, the holy place, the area that contains what is sacred, and then the next day you probably do much the same again."

The usefulness of our possessions is determined by their containers. A phone, a wallet, a tin of Vaseline and tangled wired earphones collide in a rucksack or a handbag; these are the items that inform the routine of our existence, we place them in vessels that travel with us, never too far from our fingertips. On the other hand, the inherited toolbox, the photo albums, the scraps of childhood drawings, live in boxes stored in sheds and under beds. They are contained but out of reach, as if to infer the irrelevance of their daily utility. Or perhaps, the shed is the sacred space; it is the seemingly immovable carrier bag that shields its contents because it contains the objects of our identity that warrant protection. After all, the rucksack and the handbag are exposed, stained and beaten up by the whims of daily life – their contents are, in equal parts, important and expendable.

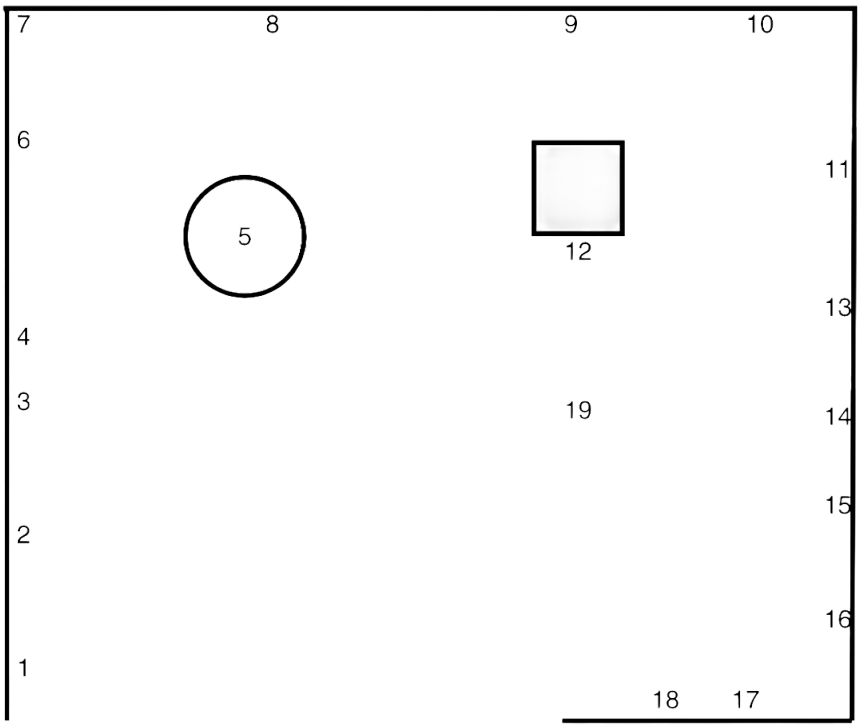
How does the carrier bag that contains the objects of our lives form a sensation of belonging? A two-pence coin stored in your purse which is then balanced on the edge of a garden bench. Childhood drawings folded into the pocket of the jacket that you wear every day, then borrowed by a loved one to keep them warm in the smoking area. A wooden crucifix hung on your grandmother's living room wall (at a perfect straight angle), and then placed again on your own bedroom wall (hanging slightly wonky this time). A cardigan button held by a loose thread; once removed, is placed into a metal yeast tin, joining a button collection passed down for generations.

This is a question being asked by multidisciplinary artist Gem Bryant (b.2001, Essex) in their debut solo exhibition *A Stone in the Shoe.* The exhibit collates 19 works that span two years of the artist's practice, shown altogether for the first time. Using materials that include spontaneous found objects, familial ephemera, and impulsive Vinted purchases, Bryant considers how we prescribe notions of worthiness to everyday items – what distinguishes 'tat' from a cherished heirloom, and how do we signify the idiosyncratic from the banal?

Anchored in the motifs that arise from their Catholic upbringing and subsequent reckoning with what it means to have Faith outside of religion, Bryant's research explores themes of exile and belonging; possession, re-possession and dis-possession; considering how *stuff* can become resting places for ideas, faith, love and grief.

A Stone in the Shoe is a documentation of this return to Faith, acknowledging how time and place create a shifting sense of belonging, or lack thereof, mapping the sensations, as well as the circumstances, that this creates. These ideas became central to Bryant's practice during their BA at Camberwell College of Arts (2020-3), and remained the engine of the work on the Associate Studio Program (2023-5), supported by ACME and UAL. Bryant currently makes work from their studio based in South London.

Text by Sinéad Campbell



1. ***Untitled (Brewing)****,* [2026]
   Heating element, badge. (27 x 39 x 7cm)

2. ***Coin Toss****,* [2024]
   Graphite on newsprint. (126 x 29.7cm)

3. ***Untitled (Bring)****,* [2026]
   Malibu tin, copper coins. (29.5 x 10.5cm)

4. ***Jane, Jill, Linda (Leaning)****,* [2008]
   Photograph. (15x10cm)

5. ***In a month of Sundays II****,* [2026]
   Birdbath, trophy base, brass ring, Davidoff Cool Water perfume. (52 x 72cm)

6. ***Closer****,* [2025]
   Driftwood, barrel bolt. (30 x 2.7 x 1cm)

7. ***Untitled (Minding)****,* [2026]
   Hanging basket, yeast tin, buttons, ceramic figurine. (33 x 20 x 17cm)

8. ***Pull***, [2026]
   Unopened vinted parcel, door label. (26 x 16 x 4cm)

9. ***Untitled (Wait)***, [2026]
   Padlock key. (3 x 1.5cm)

10. ***If I could be anyone that I wanted to be, I'd be me, just lovin' you***', [2026]
    Steel brackets, glass shelves, cassette, Nivea moisturiser end, glass (26 x 41 x 7cm)

11. ***Whisper****,* [2026]
    Fuel cap door, card (28 x 19 x 1.3cm)

12. ***Five for Silver****,* [2024]
    J Cloth, wheelie bin sticker, plywood (31 x 10 x 1.2cm)

13. ***Untitled (Pilgrim)****,* [2026]
    Souvenir box, pearl dove (8 x 6.5 x 7.5 cm)

14. ***You and Me***, [2024]
    Sublimation print on fabric (30.5 x 40 x 4cm)

15. ***Ownedly***, [2026]
    Curved glass frame, photographs (22 x 18 x 12cm)

16. ***Down and Out***, [2025]
    Ash tray, losing raffle ticket (11.5 x 11.5 x 0.9cm)

17. ***Untitled (Resting)****,* [2026]
    Bench ends, pound coins (71 x 65 x 41.5cm)

18. ***Keep***, [2026]
    Coin bag, post it note, kirby grip, embroidery pearls (12.5 x 9.5 x 1cm)

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