

LUNGLEY

Text by **Maria Hohmann**

Exposed Tender

'Everyone sees what you appear to be, few experience what you really are.'

Niccolò Macchiavelli

William Mackrell (London, b. 1983) uses his very personal, bodily sensations in relation to his chosen subject matter as well as his direct surroundings as the key to creating his performances, photographs, paintings and installations. For the exhibition *Exposed Tender* Mackrell has created a new series of works in which he reflects upon death and the bodily experience and process of grief as he mourns the sudden loss of his father with whom he was very close.

The series of works are exhibited in two rooms, the main room softly light with red, dimmed light. To enter, the visitor must go down a couple of short stairs descending into an intimate space. The centrepiece of the exhibition, installed in the main room, is *Sleep RED*, a large sculptural installation for which Mackrell used his own mattress from his childhood bed at his parents' house. After Mackrell left his parental home, his father took over his bedroom and slept in his old bed until his end. The mattress, worn by time and use, patched up with gaffer tape to prolong its life a little bit longer, represents the cycle of life from being born to die. Mackrell slept one last time on the mattress, wrapped in delicate carbon paper to trace and imprint his fathers' body but also his own. Where does his dad's imprint stop, and Mackrell's trace begin? The two imprints become one and show how deeply Mackrell's identity is connected to that of his late father. The mattress was then disassembled, showing only its spine, while covered in the creased, see-through red paper as if covered in old bedsheets. The piece, illuminated by ominous seductive, but also unsettling red light, is placed vertically in an acrylic box, as if standing as a body. Together with the piece *Sleep RED pillow*, it forms a unity, whereby the pillow represents the head of the body.

A series of small dark purple red lipstick drawings, *Exposed tender (working drawing)*, *Divine (working drawing)*, *Slide, Release - Back of My Mouth*, and *Memory Fade* act as companion pieces for the larger works. The drawings, created in the past year, were made during a residency, the 15th International Arts Festival at the Novigrad Lapidarium Museum in Croatia in 2024 and were part of research for a site-specific performance painting titled *Exposed Tender*, also chosen as name for this exhibition. In this piece, Mackrell dragged his mouth in a loop smearing lipstick in the pulsating rhythm of breathing across the interior glass walls of the museum, whereby the traces of spoken word slowly grow faint and dissapear, representing how memories - although when stuck in our head go on and on – until they slowly fade. The speech gestures, made in a moment

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37 Foley St, London, W1W 7TN.

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in time when the wound of loss was still very fresh, also show how the body takes over when the spoken and written word fall short to express our intense emotions during a period of loss and grief. At Lapidarium Museum, the movement of the mouth pieces were based upon the motif of fragments from old Roman gravestones held in the collection of the museum, dating back to the 3rd Century AD, in which vine leaves and grapes intertwine in a loop, into infinity.

Building further on the same theme, but executed with a bright red colour, the large lipstick drawings *Pulling Up*, *Divine Loop* and *Recliner Splurt* seem to express a different energy. In the soft red light they seem to glow and radiate a lightness as if shining from within. In *Pulling Up*, two paths of traces start on the bottom side of the paper, opposite of each other, creating an upward movement that clashes when the traces of the lips meet, to disperse and slowly disappear into the void. In *Recliner Splurt*, the traces on the paper start intensely, moving over the paper as a wave rolling ashore, while the traces slowly evaporate in different directions, as the wave breaks onto the rocks. The gestures on paper reveal the performative nature of emotion, waves of feeling that are pure impulse.

Red, an intense colour, the colour of blood, associated with danger, sexuality, sensuality and strong emotions as passion, longing and love acts as a leitmotif in the exhibition. The colour sheds light onto the nature of the works and the character of the sculptural installations, while creating an immersive, beautiful albeit slightly disturbing experience for the visitor as one's eyes slowly adapt to the atmosphere. The colours seem to change within the space from red, to pink and on leaving even a blueish green as if following the emotional ambience of the exhibited works. The viewer is given a glimpse into Mackrell's most profound feelings in his most autobiographical work to date. As a storm that slowly settles and calms down and the sky opens up again, the heart and body slowly heal and recover to find peace over time, while trying to maintain and nurture the memories of the past, so deeply ingrained in our bodies and being.

Maria Hohmann is an independent Art Historian, Project Coordinator at LaunchPad LaB, Writer and Editor.



Exhibition view: *Exposed Tender* at Lungley Gallery, London (2025).