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THE TOE RAG

Summer Issue

ISSUE 03 | A QUARTERLY MAGAZINE | JUNE-SEPT 2024

being alone and horny:
Will Ferreira Dyke on
Dean Sameshima

Louis Blue Newby & Laila Majïd
inner heat

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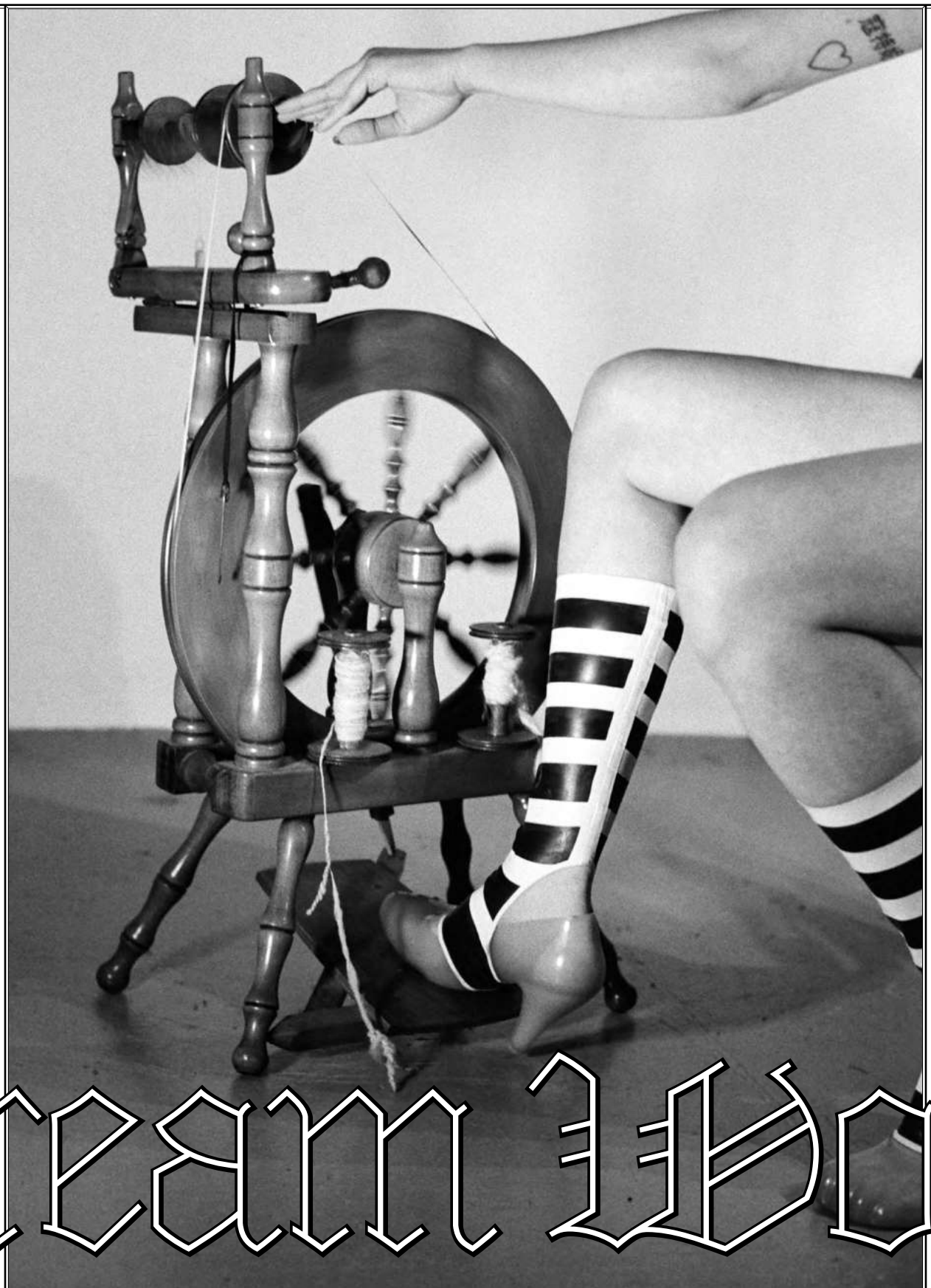
Special
CAMEL TOE with ***Monique Fei***



Bertie Brandes & Ben Ditto
talk indie publishing

Robert Wilson
Mary Said What She Said

24 hours with
Miles Greenberg & Douglas Gordon

Dream Work

Ella Slater ***on speculative cartographies*** ∗ ***The dream of a Vietnamese*** by Georgina Quach
An Introduction to Dreaming by Sebastián Sánchez-Schilling ∗ Alfred Yatlong Yeung's ***Delirious London***
Libraries as Dream Work with Oisín Roberts & Lu Rose Cunningham
Which BBC Proms? by Vee Matsumari ∗ ***Paris Syndrome,*** a play by Nour Ben Saïd
Rally Festival special ∗ ***summer knitting pattern*** by Ilana Blumberg
Horoscopes by Isabella Greenwood ∗ ***cartoons*** by Athen Kardashian
Max Peston lives like ***The Rock*** ∗ ***The Shock of The Now*** with Hector Campbell
+ reviews, fiction and poetry, agony aunt, puzzles, surrealist games & events listings

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STOCKISTS
A Portuguese Love Affair, Alice Amati, Avalon Cafe, Bar Story, Bethnal Green Working Men's Club, Biblioteka, BOOKS Peckham, Brunette Coleman, Burley Fisher, Cafe OTO, Cell Project Space, Central Saint Martins, Cooke Latham, Corvi-Mora, Dalston Superstore, des bains, Drawing Room, Ginny on Frederick, Hannah Barry Gallery, Harlesden High Street, Hidden Sounds, Housmans Bookshop, Ilenia, indigo+madder, Italia Uno, John Sandoe Books, Jumbi, KINDRED, Koenig Books at Whitechapel Gallery, Live Art Development Agency, Lungley, LUX Shop, magCulture, Matt Carey-Williams, Mimosa House, Neven Gallery, Next Door Records, NTS Radio, Palmer Gallery, Paper Dress Vintage, Peckham Pelican, Phonica Records, Project Native Informant, Presse Books at Forma HQ, Pushkin House, Reference Point, Rich Mix Cinema, Rio Cinema, Rose Easton, SET Social, Shacklewell Arms, Sherbet Green, Soft Opening, South London Gallery, South Parade, Soup Gallery, Studio/Chapple, The Amersham Arms, The Approach, The Eagle Farringdon, The George Tavern, The Glove That Fits, The Horse Hospital, The Mosaic Rooms, VITRINE Fitzrovia, Walworth Garden, WASTE! Store, World of Echo, XXijra Hii & more.

SCAN FOR MAP

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A personal essay by Maddy Routon in the spring issue of *The Toe Rag* included suggestions that she was emotionally manipulated and subjected to abuse and coercive control by an unnamed individual. *The Toe Rag* retracts these claims and apologises for their publication.

IMAGE 01
Monique Fei by Isabel MacCarthy, 2024.

IMAGE 02
Cartoon by Athen Kardashian, 2024.



IMAGE 03
Kembra Pfahler, The Manual of Action BTS © CIRCA, photography by Jasper Rischen.

Interview

Louis Blue Newby & Laila Majid

Interview by the editors



IMAGE 29

Photography by Isabel MacCarthy

The Toe Rag: How did you meet and start collaborating?

Laila Majid: We were in the same year at Chelsea on the BA and we started working together the year after we left.

Louis Blue Newby: We always worked in relation to one another at university — we shared space and we lived together, and were talking a lot about each other's works. After we graduated, we missed those conversations, and we started texting each other images that we thought the other would like, and that went on for months and months and it just grew from there. We were doing a lot of digital collages and prints from this image bank.

LM: Like a shared archive of images that we've collected and collated over the years. That started to inform the earlier works that we were making, which were more digital print based.

We weren't living in the same country over COVID, so the only kind of process that was afforded to us was working digitally. By default, that work was digital and flat print-based work.

LBN: We secured the funding for our film south florida sky in March 2020. When we applied, it was meant to be a whole different thing, but became something that had to be produced remotely, so we started working with digital animation and AI generated imagery. The circumstance very much defined our practice for a couple of years. But since COVID, when we've actually been able to get back into the studio together and back in the same city, there's definitely a shift that has happened in the work. We're interested in much more physical processes, and working together in the studio, which wasn't an option before.

The Toe Rag: Your recent show *Beautiful Girls On Top!* (Xxijra Hii at The Shop at Sadie Coles HQ, 2023) worked from 'image archives' made up of fetish imagery, pornography magazines, wildlife encyclopedias, cinema, SFX and VFX journals, anime drawing manuals, iPhone photos, and images mined from online forums. What connects this vast range of imagery? And does the new body of work that you're creating for your upcoming show at the CCA draw from similar sources?

LM: We always speak about the idea of there being a deviancy in the images that we work with, or that there's a non-normativeness about them.

LBN: I think we gravitate towards more challenging imagery, or images that have this quiet perversion to them.

LM: Older works that we've shown, the 'spread works', are largely made up of higher resolution scanned imagery from various printed archives, magazines, newspapers or journals, but the drawings for the CCA show, which are part of a series called *Contact*, are all made up of images that are found online, which are usually quickly generated and rapidly consumed images.

LBN: We're interested in the throwaway reading of imagery that we have now, where you consume something very quickly, scroll past it and forget about it. With the drawings, we're trying to completely upturn that kind of consumption. They're produced over a very long time in a painstaking, meticulous way, which subverts the power dynamic that happens through consumption. The images are now things that require a very different type of reading, and start to — through that weird, very fine texture that they've produced — withhold more information. I guess they hold a bit more power because of that as well. They pull you in, but then they also push away, because you don't really know what they are and what the source is. Because they're produced over such a long time, and then they're going to be framed so institutionally and so formally, in acrylic box frames, they become quite challenging things to approach. Like, you don't really understand what its purpose is. I think they become completely irrational things.

The Toe Rag: And it feels irrational to be asked to spend so much time with something that was designed to be consumed so quickly. Where are you sourcing these images from?

LNB: Instagram, Twitter, Reddit. Pornhub. Any kind of online image bank or social media feeds.

LM: It's quite loving, taking these images that are kind of debased and nihilistic and treating them with this great tenderness.

The Toe Rag: Can you talk through the stages of manipulation that the images undergo before you draw them?

LM: There are so many processes of transformation that occur that the idea of manipulation is really through the mediation of the imagery. They start off as digital screenshots, then we photograph the images that we choose with a thermal printer camera. Those images are then re-scanned, those prints are re-scanned, enlarged to size, reprinted and then drawn from.
The printer camera prints everything using these really fine vertical or horizontal lines, because it uses heat and pressure to create images. You have pixelation in a digital image, which is turned into something structural through these lines, and then that's duplicated in graphite.

Interview: Louis Blue Newby & Laila Majid

LBN: To emulate that printed texture, you repeatedly lay the graphite down and then you rub it away. You slowly build it up, because then that gives it that sense of movement and softness that the printed texture has.

The Toe Rag: It's interesting that in this process of arriving at a final image, you're creating thousands of images through this extended process of composition. Particularly in the way that Laila and Louis are working with negative space and removing layers, bringing images in and out of the same plane. You both have individual practices, and you've described Laila's more 'minimalist', and Louis's as more 'maximalist'. Could you speak about where these converge, and how they change when they come together?

LBN: Our collaboration is at the centre of the Venn diagram of what we do, and responds to how we work individually, thinking about how those two aesthetics or how those two visual languages can collapse into one another.

LM: The 'spread works' we showed at *Beautiful Girls On Top!* are a really useful way of illustrating these relationships, because you have techniques in there that speak much more to Louis' work, with the layering of the images, tissue paper and drawings, but then the cast leather surface that fronts the whole work is quite relevant to what I do. Obviously, leather is literally a skin, but it's also so sensual in the way that it speaks to certain kinds of clothing or certain kinds of subcultural sexual practices. When we were making this work we were really interested in processes of reading that felt more bodily, chemical, or visceral. It was nice that the only way that you could access the work was through this very evocative surface.

LNB: There's an essay called *Sex Writing and New Narrative* by Kevin Killian, where he talks about how when you read pornography or sex writing in literature it provokes a very different type of reading. It's chemical rather than cognitive, and has a much more physical and visceral impact on the body. I think that's also there in the *Contact* drawings — this idea of emulating a prolonged touch that happens, or this contact with an image through a very physical grain. It's an extension of that through a different process.

The Toe Rag: Are there certain artists or writers, or cultural figures who you reference in your work?

LBN: Most of the inspiration comes from the printed material that we work from. There are definitely artists that work with found imagery whose work I really admire, like Dean Sameshima, or Julia Wachtel is someone we both admired very much when we were studying.

LM: We probably think a lot more about writing than we do about artists. For the CCA show, we're referencing an essay called *Secrecy Magnifies Reality*, by Michael Taussig. It's a short essay from his book called Defacement. He has this really nice way of thinking about what happens when 'the secret' is exposed. He talks about 'the secret' as something that's quite volatile, or he uses the phrase 'inner heat', which is actually the name of the show.

LBN: We're thinking about how we consume images privately, and how they function in relation to the way we long or desire things, and how this consumption upholsters this sense of self. My main research and focus has always been New Narrative Literature, which was a queer writing project from the West Coast and the States that lasted from the 70s through to the 90s. They wrote a lot about writing, so it was this very self-aware school of thought.

The Toe Rag: It makes sense that you're not looking to more images when the images you're working with are already so layered. It feels like it would be crazy to then try to decode them through another visual language. What has it been like to work with the extra time, funding and support afforded by an institutional show?

LM: It's been really special. We've had time to create this new body of work, and a lot of space to really think about what we want to hone in on, how we want to work, the images we want to use, and the best way of imagining how the work will be installed.

LBN: When we show, we always consider everything, and we've always treated everything with the most respect possible, but this has meant that we can do something time-ambitious. We're



IMAGE 30

Photography by Isabel MacCarthy

experimenting with showing multiple drawings in a single frame — it's almost going to become almost like storyboards or visual narratives, and they feel quite modular. The largest will have six drawings within a single frame.

LM: We've been interested in collaging things together for so long, so it felt like an exciting way of using that ethos with these drawings. You're thinking about what happens when you put different images together, and what relationships come out within these different images, interior to what's going on, and also as a whole. That really comes through with the long one, because you have this collection of figures that are all looking either towards one another, or out of frame or in different directions.

The Toe Rag: It's interesting to think of them as modular when each individual image is already rich with so many references, particularly the memes.

LBN: The language of memes is really interesting to us because before the image gets to us, it has been on this huge journey: a photo gets taken, edited, a caption attached to it, disseminated, screenshotted, and then shared and shared and shared. The quality of the image goes down, and then we put it through this new process and form of mediation. There's something quite erotic about this idea of usage. That language is very much present in the work as well, this idea of touch and desire, of using and consuming things. A lot of these images speak to a very private form of consumption that you may or may not then choose to share, and the display at the CCA is going to be riffing off that. There are going to be forms of public infrastructure within the space: the walls will be flanked with metal handrails that will go underneath the drawings, and then in the centre there will be metal perch benches, similar to what you would find by bus stops or in tube stations, outside buildings or in public squares.

The Toe Rag: Like sort of in-between-ish infrastructures.

LBN: They're empty gestures of comfort — it's like, you can rest, you can lean, but you can't make yourself comfortable. There's a push and pull there which I think will very much replicate the ways in which the drawings ask you to view them. Because of the palette of the drawings and the palette of the infrastructure, there's going to be an austerity in the space which feels quite important — I think it's going to be a fairly unforgiving environment. Everything is made slightly unfamiliar, maybe you'll feel slightly different or displaced.

The Toe Rag: Laila, you often use architectural elements in your work. What function does that serve in your solo show *Dressing for Pleasure*, which is open right now at Niru Ratnam?

LM: I wanted to see what I could take that had an original function and slightly subvert it or displace it, turning something functional into an object of desire, or find its sensual potential. There's a screen in that space that blocks off part of the room; it references office space architecture or public bathrooms, but it does a very different thing that isn't necessarily of its original function — it serves to construct privacy, but in reality makes you all the more aware of the space behind the frosted acrylic partition. So, subtle textural material changes that enforce some sort of shift. With your work, Louis, so much of the language of the images that you use also comes from public spaces or public forms of presentation.

LNB: Yeah, for sure. My work individually is very interested in this idea of an archive and how archives can function, especially thinking in terms of archives of sexuality and queerness. Traditionally archives are seen as these very protected, insular spaces that are concerned with preservation and sterility, but when you're dealing with things like pornography and sex, those languages become very opposed. My work thinks about how an archive could function within the language of desire. I often treat images and papers with lubricant and oil: they're stained and used and greasy, they're then shown on cork boards, like notice boards. I am interested in that language of public space, where things are left to be exposed to the elements or can be consumed by anyone and everyone.

The Toe Rag: The drawings from the *Contact* series that you're showing at the CCA are archival images in some respect, in that they belong to the archive of the internet.

LNB: It's an interesting form of an archive as well, because they're always saved somewhere, and these feeds don't go away — if you want to scroll for hours and hours you might be able to find the image again — but, for all intents and purposes, they disappear.

The Toe Rag: That was definitely a false promise of the early internet — that it was a space of permanence. There are websites that we want to access from our childhood that you just can't find anymore. It was touted as this archive of knowledge or repository of memories, but now we have to grapple with its transience.

LNB: If you don't save something or screenshot it, trying to find something that you saw even two weeks ago is almost impossible.

The Toe Rag: How does the subconscious register in these images? Collectively, individually or otherwise?

LBN: I feel like there is a sort of psychosis that happens with these images. There is something quite hallucinogenic in them; they're almost like apparitions.

LM: They go in and out of recognisability, in and out of logic. You look at individual things and you're like, what am I looking at? This makes absolutely no sense. But then you start to see different structures emerge.

LBN: It's like that feeling of when you're falling asleep and your mind starts to loosen up in a way that's quite disorientating.

The Toe Rag: But they're also horrifyingly familiar — the visual language of the internet is so known to us all now that you don't have to have seen an image before to somehow recognise it. It's like the collective psychosis that we all participate in. There are a lot of dead fantasies in these sorts of images.

LBN: Yeah, and in the way in which people scroll incessantly for imagery when they're bored; it's a weird, passive form of consumption. You're not necessarily looking at images to look at images, you're looking at images because you want to pass some time. You don't even need to think.

LBN: For the show, we're thinking about this idea of transforming passive viewership into a more active engagement. It's a more self-conscious mode of consumption.

LM: There's that process of wanting as well, of wanting to understand what you're looking at, or having to be quite physically close to these images. Because they're so strange in their appearance and their texture, they want you to be close to them.