

## Respawn

Curated by Bob Bicknell-Knight

Bob Bicknell-Knight, Roc Herms, Emily Mulenga, Léa Porré, Total Refusal, Georgie Roxby Smith and Angela Washko

18th April - 18th May 2024, Thursday to Saturday, 2 – 5 pm or by appointment

SEAGER, Distillery Tower, 2 Mill Lane, London, SE8 4HP, UK



The third in a four-part exhibition series exploring how artists make work with and about video games, Respawn investigates violence, war and politics in the digital realm. The exhibition reflects upon how artists use video games and game aesthetics to speak about conflict, from exploring the history of deserters through the lens of digital warfare to confronting misogynistic portrayals of women in games.

Each exhibition in the series is accompanied by a reading list of books that inspired the ideas behind the exhibition, as well as several books selected by the exhibiting artists that inform their practice, available to read within the gallery space whilst sitting on a custom-built bench. As the series of shows has continued, the separate bookshelves have been slowly filling with books, becoming an archive of the four exhibitions.

Within game worlds, death is often trivialised. The term respawn is associated with game characters reappearing in the world after being killed. Rather than being an end state, within virtual space it's common that the only penalisation for dying is repeating part of a level after watching a loading screen. The option to start over, learn from your mistakes and press play again is all too tempting. Death then, like in the physical world, is omnipresent in the digital, and so is the violence associated with it. Simulated violence within video games comes in many forms, from the graphic, over the top style typically seen in military shooters, to the fantastical, psychological or environmental. Through games, death and violence become a common thread, something that game players are constantly aware of and becoming accustomed to.

What happens when artists, as is the case in Respawn, reflect, pick up, and comment upon how this is affecting society as a wider whole, whilst harnessing the same games and visual language that has proliferated this seismic shift?

A sequence of small prints that line one of the walls of the gallery, collectively titled *Study of Perspective* (2015) by Roc Herms, appropriates and hijacks Ai Weiwei's series of photographs of the same name, where the artist took first person photographs raising his middle finger to various institutions, landmarks, and monuments from around the world. Herms' photographs, however, were produced within the popular game world of *Grand Theft Auto V (GTA V)* (2013), a virtual replica of Los Angeles. Through this gesture, Herms appears to be saying that the injustices that Weiwei was rallying against in his work, like restrictions of speech, tyrannical governments and corporate monopolies, are being actively repeated, both within the virtual worlds we inhabit and by the companies that develop them. The developers behind *GTA V* are Rockstar Games, a company well known for its crunch culture. Crunch refers to the practice of requiring employees to work long hours, often unpaid or under extreme pressure, to meet tight deadlines or milestones in game development. Crunch is an industry wide problem and is perpetrated by almost all big budget (AAA) video game companies.

Searching for possibilities for peace within virtual worlds, Total Refusal's *How to Disappear* (2020) is an anti-war film, its narrators voice echoing around the gallery. Shot within the world of *Battlefield V* (2018), a game set across the military campaigns of World War II, the film is a tribute to disobedience and desertion in both digital and physical warfare. Revolving around the history of deserters, a part of human history which is rarely discussed, performances and creative interventions within the game world explore the scopes and limits of the audiovisual entertainment machine. The film highlights the confines of the game space in relation to its portrayal of real-world events, finding that its impossible to put down your arms, or even to simply walk away from the virtual field of combat.

Created in part using game development software, Léa Porré's series of tapestries throughout the exhibition, collectively titled *error. Vendée?* (2018 - 9), depict scenes of violence from the unrecognised Vendée Génocide, a civil war that occurred in the Vendée region of western France, which lasted for much of the 1790s. Like many atrocities, past and present, the Vendée Génocide has been historically downplayed. Through virtually recreating the violence, as well as having the tapestries digitally produced from afar, Porré is confronting the subjective frame of history and its decisive role in shaping our collective memory, as well as the potential agency of the non-event.

Laying in the middle of the gallery is *Playtime (Greed)* (2023) by Bob Bicknell-Knight, a child sized sculpture of Wally, an anthropomorphised loot box from a fictional video game. The sculpture is part of a body of work exploring loot boxes in video games, how they have transformed and embedded themselves within the video game industry and the gamification of everyday life, alongside exploring ideas surrounding Christianity, faith, morality and wealth inequality. Loot boxes are items bought within video games for real world money, which can be "opened" to receive a randomised selection of other items, ranging from power-ups to in-game weaponry. As the items are randomised players regularly spend thousands of pounds attempting to gain specific products in different games. Loot boxes have been likened to illegal lotteries, with many of the victims being children and young people, spending more money than they have access to whilst becoming addicted to gambling at an early age. Accompanying the figure is *Crucifix VI (Greed)* (2023), a small sculpture by Bicknell-Knight depicting Wally nailed to a cross, crucified for their actions.

Interested in the political space of *World of Warcraft (WoW)* (2004), the most popular massively multiplayer role-playing game of all time, in 2012 Angela Washko founded "The Council on Gender Sensitivity and Behavioral Awareness in World of Warcraft" as an intervention within the game world. Instead of following the quest structures of the game, Washko instead facilitated discussions with players inside the game about the ways in which the communities therein address women and how players respond to the term "feminism". Being an avid player of *WoW*, Washko was interested in the impulse of the player-base to create an oppressive, misogynistic space for women within an environment and community that is otherwise accessible, inviting and incredibly diverse. *A Bad Apple Can Ruin The Bunch* (2013) is one of many documented performances that Washko underwent within *WoW*. In the work a discussion about feminism evolves into a conversation about women's health and its relationship to job demands, periods, communism and how it relates to feminism, the nature of equality, and hiring discrimination.

The character of a pink bunny has, for several years, appeared throughout Emily Mulenga's practice, frequently within animated films created using the chat metaverse *IMVU* (2004). Materialising in films

and printed media, the bunny acts as a stand-in for Mulenga, escaping to cyberpunk cities and pristine beaches, exploring the role of the internet in self-expression, early 2000s nostalgia, anxieties surrounding hypercapitalism and the inherent violence embedded within these systems. Several stills taken from previous films by Mulenga depicting the bunny moving through her digital life appear throughout the exhibition. One of the larger prints, *21st Century Life* (2024), hangs on the wall with magnets and shows the bunny playing a rhythm game, where players must step on buttons in sequence corresponding to music. Other works by Mulenga, *Malibu, what a view* (2024) and *Knocking on midnight's door* (2024) are prints on aluminium displayed on 3D printed shelves, showing the bunny forlornly looking out onto the ocean and singing on stage in a bar.

The final work in the exhibition is *The Fall Girl* (2012) by Georgie Roxby Smith, exploring the oversexualisation of women in video games, the male gaze and the relationship between soft and hard violence, through the documentation of a "death glitch" within *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* (2011). This glitch, which is widely known by anyone who has played the aforementioned game, occurs when your game is saved just as the player character is about to die, so when the character respawns you end up dying again in the same way. After multiple respawns, and attempts at out-manoeuvring the glitch, players will ultimately succumb, being inevitably forced to load a different save, losing their in-game progress to the glitch. Within the work we see Roxby Smith's in-game character wearing nothing but her underwear repeatedly falling down the side of a mountain, with the glitch magnifying and distorting the violence against the female body. Its relentless, blurring the lines of intention between suicide, murder, accident or perpetual punishment, with the audience becoming acutely aware of the hyper-representation of the character and the violence enacted against her.

#### Reading List:

- Little Eyes by Samanta Schweblin, 2018 (recommended by Bob Bicknell-Knight)
- You've Been Played: How Corporations, Governments and Schools Use Games to Control Us All by Adrian Hon, 2022 (recommended by Bob Bicknell-Knight)
- Screen Images: In-Game Photography, Screenshot, Screencast by Winfried Gerling, Sebastian Möring and Marco de Mutiis, 2023 (recommended by Roc Herms)
- Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative? by Mark Fisher, 2009 (recommended by Emily Mulenga and Total Refusal)
- Disziplin: Soziologie und Geschichte militärischer Gehorsamsproduktion" by Ulrich Bröckling, 1997 (recommended by Total Refusal – only available online here – [bit.ly/Ulrich-Bröckling-TR](https://bit.ly/Ulrich-Bröckling-TR))
- The Secret History of Dreaming by Robert Moss, 2008 (recommended by Léa Porré)
- Interface Fantasy: A Lacanian Cyborg Ontology by André Nusselder, 2009 (recommended by Georgie Roxby Smith)
- Glitch Feminism: A Manifesto by Legacy Russell, 2022 (recommended by Angela Washko)
- Algorithms of Oppression: How Search Engines Reinforce Racism by Safiya Noble, 2018 (recommended by Angela Washko)

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Bob Bicknell-Knight (b. 1996, Ipswich, UK) is a multidisciplinary artist and curator working with digital media producing films, paintings, sculptures and installations. His practice comes from a place of pessimism, exploring power structures that proliferate online and in new forms of technology. Bicknell-Knight runs the online curatorial platform [isthisit?](https://isthisit.com), and has previously curated exhibitions at The Art Station, Saxmundham, UK (2023); [Senne], Brussels, BE (2021); Harlesden High Street, London, UK (2019); Annka Kultys Gallery, London, UK (2018) and arebyte Gallery, London, UK (2018). Selected solo exhibitions include Sunday School at Number 1 Main Road, Berlin, DE (2023); Insert Coin at CABLE DEPOT, London, UK (2023); Non-Player Character at Klaipėda Exhibition Hall, Klaipėda, LT (2023); Digging History at INDUSTRA, Brno, CZ (2021); Eat The Rich at Galerie Sono, Paris, FR (2021); It's Always Day One at Office Impart, Berlin, DE (2021) and Bit Rot at Broadway Gallery, Letchworth, UK (2020).

Roc Herms (b. 1978, ES) is an artist working with photography as a learning tool, exploring an interest in the Internet, video games and parallel realities. On the same year of Herms' birth, Gary Thurek and his assistant Carl Gartley sent the first mass email with advertising purposes, reaching 393 users at the Advanced Research Projects Agency Network (called the ARPANET), unaware that they just sent the

first example of what would later be known as SPAM. 28 years later Herms discovered photography as a tool to learn, and he manages to combine it with his interest in the Internet, video games and parallel realities: showing his passion for technology and the need to take a step further in the photographic practice. His works have been exhibited in "From Here On" (Centre d'Arts Santa Monica, Barcelona) and "Photography 2.0" (Circulo de Bellas Artes, Madrid) curated by Joan Fontcuberta, as well as in the Noorderlicht Photo Festival (Netherlands), Platine Festival (Germany), Fotomuseum Winterthur (Switzerland), Hammer Museum (USA) and Les Rencontres d'Arles (France).

Emily Mulenga (b. 1991, UK) is a multimedia artist whose practice spans video, digital collage, sculpture and live coded music. Using visuals and sound that draw upon video games, cartoons and the internet, her practice explores themes of capitalism, feminism, technology, millennial nostalgia, love and existential anxieties. Mulenga's output reflects a ravenous consumption of digital media, where gloss and escapism meet humour and unease, spanning past, present and future. Mulenga has exhibited internationally and led projects at Tate Britain, Firstsite and Camden Art Centre. She holds an MA in Fine Art from Chelsea College of Arts, funded by the Frank Bowling Scholarship.

Léa Porré (b. 1996) is a French and Belgian artist based in London. She graduated from the Royal College of Art in 2021 and Central Saint Martins in 2018. Her research-led practice investigates cyclical time through the interrelations of memory, history and myth, specifically deep mapping historical and sacred sites. These sites are re-imagined through 3D Worldbuilding to create Videos, Installations, Sculptures and Framed Paintings. She imagines impossible encounters taking place in cyclical time, as a strategy of resistance against linear time, by blending reality, dreams, and tales, creating transhistorical visions. She aims to channel a form of healing towards our complex heritage, whilst using it as a tool for future forecasting. She has exhibited her work internationally, most recently at Pavillon Southway and MAMO Modulor in Marseille, Center Pompidou and Brownstone Foundation in Paris, Residence Gallery, COB Gallery, Paradise Row Projects, Tate Modern in London, UK.

Total Refusal is a pseudo-marxist media guerilla focused on the artistic intervention and appropriation of mainstream video games. They upcycle video games in order to reveal the political apparatus beyond the glossy and hyperreal textures of this media. Since its foundation in 2018 the collective has been awarded with numerous prizes like the Diagonale Film Award for the Best Short Doc, the Contemporary Visual Arts Award of Styria Province and Vimeo Staff Pick Award among others. Total Refusal has been screened at more than 130 film and video festivals like Berlinale (2020), Doc Fortnight at MOMA New York and IDFA Amsterdam (2018) and they been exhibited at various exhibition spaces like the Architecture Biennial Venice 2021, the HEK Basel (2020) and the Ars Electronica Linz (2019).

Georgie Roxby Smith (b. 1976, Melbourne, AU) works across a range of disciplines exploring new pathways between virtual and physical worlds. Employing a variety of tools - including 3D graphics, live performance, shared virtual and gaming spaces, installation and projection - these works explore the increasingly blurred border between identity, materiality, reality, virtuality and fantasy in contemporary culture. Since 2012 Roxby Smith has been focusing on online identity, gender representation and violence in video games, particularly that directed towards women on screen and in online communities. Roxby Smith has exhibited extensively both nationally and internationally including Art in Odd Places, New York, Prospectives International Festival of Digital Art Nevada, Game Art Festival at Hammer Museum Los Angeles, Gamerz Festival (FR), Festival Miden (GR) and Generation i.2 - Aesthetics of the Digital in the 21st Century at Edith Russ Huas for Media Art (DE). Other highlights include curating and showing in NOW13: New Media Art Now, Substation Contemporary Art Prize and Self Help at Rawson Projects Brooklyn, curated by Jocelyn Miller (MoMa PS1).

Angela Washko (b. 1986, Pennsylvania, USA) is an artist, filmmaker, and experimental game developer who creates new forums for discussions about feminism in spaces frequently hostile towards it. Her practice spans interventions in virtual environments, performance art, media installation, documentary film, and video games. A recipient of the United States Artists Fellowship, Creative Capital Award, National Endowment for the Arts award, Franklin Furnace Performance Fund, Impact Award at Indecade, and Jury Awards for Best Documentary at the American Film Festival, San Francisco Documentary Film Festival, and Buffalo International Film Festival. Her projects have been presented internationally at venues including Museum of the Moving Image, Centre Pompidou-Metz, Los Angeles

Museum of Contemporary Art, the Milan Design Triennale, the Shenzhen Animation Biennial, and the Korean Film Archive. Her recently completed feature-length documentary film, *Workhorse Queen*, has won numerous awards at international film festivals and is currently being broadcast on STARZ, Amazon Prime, AppleTV, and more. Angela Washko is an Associate Professor of Art at Carnegie Mellon University.



Respawn, 2024  
Installation View



Respawn, 2024  
Installation View



Bob Bicknell-Knight  
Crucifix VI (Greed), 2023  
PLA, acrylic spray paint, glue  
20 x 11 x 5.8 cm





Bob Bicknell-Knight  
Crucifix VI (Greed), 2023  
PLA, acrylic spray paint, glue  
20 x 11 x 5.8 cm



Respawn, 2024  
Installation View



Angela Washko  
A Bad Apple Can Ruin The Bunch, 2013  
Video with sound  
20 min 7 sec



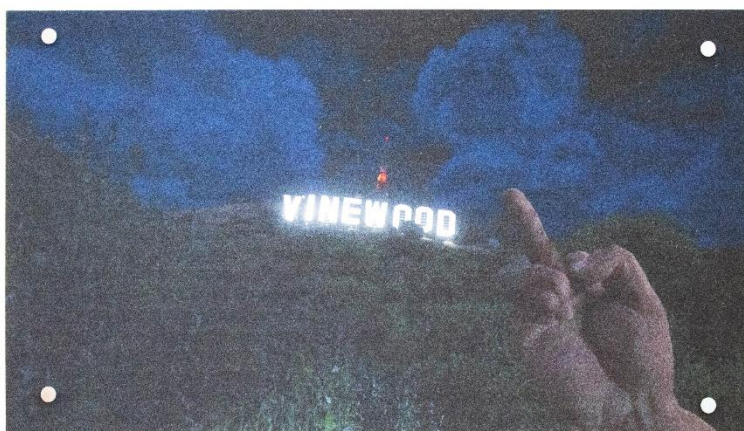
Total Refusal  
How to Disappear, 2020  
Video with sound  
21 min 6 sec



Respawn, 2024  
Installation View



Roc Herms  
Study of Perspective, 2015



Roc Herms  
Grand Theft Auto V\_20141220025147.jpg, 2015  
Print on 310gsm Hahnemuhle paper, magnets  
8.4 x 15 cm



Roc Herms  
Grand Theft Auto V\_20141220141809.jpg, 2015  
Print on 310gsm Hahnemuhle paper, magnets  
8.4 x 15 cm

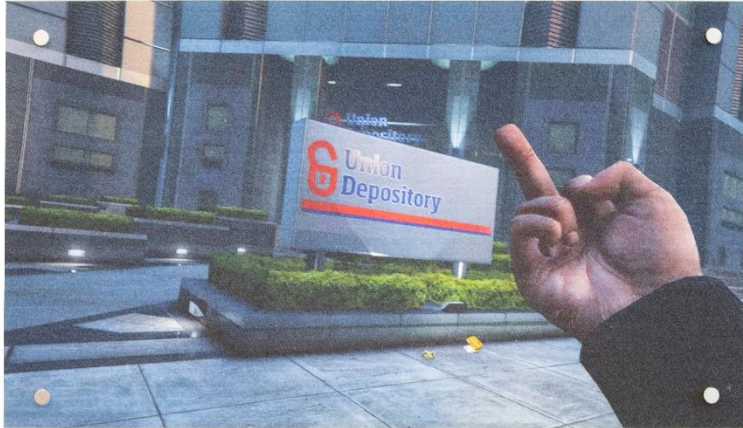




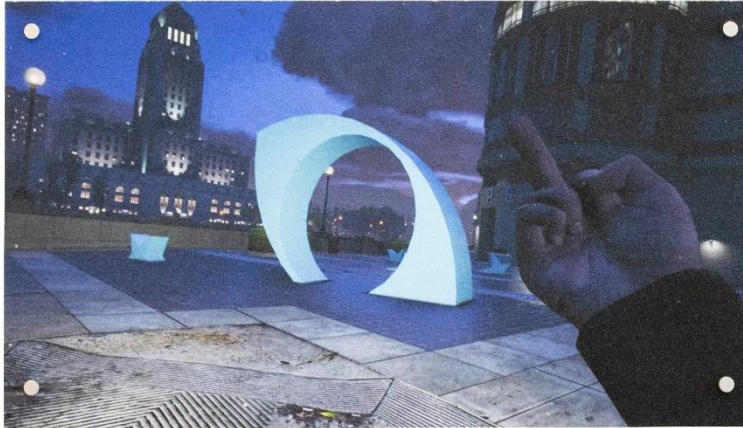
Roc Herms  
Grand Theft Auto V\_20141220170225.jpg, 2015  
Print on 310gsm Hahnemuhle paper, magnets  
8.4 x 15 cm



Roc Herms  
Grand Theft Auto V\_20141220170708.jpg, 2015  
Print on 310gsm Hahnemuhle paper, magnets  
8.4 x 15 cm



Roc Herms  
Grand Theft Auto V\_20141220170958.jpg, 2015  
Print on 310gsm Hahnemuhle paper, magnets  
8.4 x 15 cm



Roc Herms  
Grand Theft Auto V\_20141220170818.jpg, 2015  
Print on 310gsm Hahnemuhle paper, magnets  
8.4 x 15 cm



Roc Herms  
Grand Theft Auto V\_20141220030418.jpg, 2015  
Print on 310gsm Hahnemuhle paper, magnets  
8.4 x 15 cm



Roc Herms  
Grand Theft Auto V\_20141220030001.jpg, 2015  
Print on 310gsm Hahnemuhle paper, magnets  
8.4 x 15 cm



Roc Herms  
Grand Theft Auto V\_20141220172342.jpg, 2015  
Print on 310gsm Hahnemuhle paper, magnets  
8.4 x 15 cm

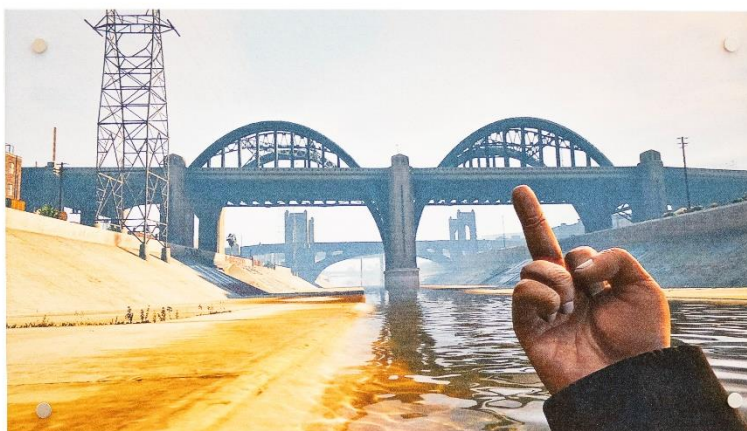


Roc Herms  
Grand-Theft-Auto-V\_20141223135309.jpg, 2015  
Print on 310gsm Hahnemuhle paper, magnets  
8.4 x 15 cm





Roc Herms  
Grand Theft Auto V\_20141220135539.jpg, 2015  
Print on 310gsm Hahnemuhle paper, magnets  
8.4 x 15 cm



Roc Herms  
Grand-Theft-Auto-V\_20141223162446.jpg, 2015  
Print on 310gsm Hahnemuhle paper, magnets  
8.4 x 15 cm



Roc Herms  
Grand Theft Auto V\_20141220174028.jpg, 2015  
Print on 310gsm Hahnemuhle paper, magnets  
8.4 x 15 cm



Roc Herms  
Grand-Theft-Auto-V\_20141223143325.jpg, 2015  
Print on 310gsm Hahnemuhle paper, magnets  
8.4 x 15 cm



Roc Herms  
Grand Theft Auto V\_20141220175723.jpg, 2015  
Print on 310gsm Hahnemuhle paper, magnets  
8.4 x 15 cm



Roc Herms  
Grand Theft Auto V\_20141220180445.jpg, 2015  
Print on 310gsm Hahnemuhle paper, magnets  
8.4 x 15 cm



Roc Herms  
Grand-Theft-Auto-V\_20141223163943.jpg, 2015  
Print on 310gsm Hahnemuhle paper, magnets  
8.4 x 15 cm



Roc Herms  
Grand Theft Auto V\_20141220134209.jpg, 2015  
Print on 310gsm Hahnemuhle paper, magnets  
8.4 x 15 cm





Roc Herms  
Grand Theft Auto V\_20141220171250.jpg, 2015  
Print on 310gsm Hahnemuhle paper, magnets  
8.4 x 15 cm



Roc Herms  
Grand Theft Auto V\_20141220171218.jpg, 2015  
Print on 310gsm Hahnemuhle paper, magnets  
8.4 x 15 cm



Respawn, 2024  
Installation View



Respawn, 2024  
Installation View



Léa Porré  
error.Vendée? (1-up), 2018 – 9  
Tapestry, wrought steel hooks and bar  
150 x 120 cm



Léa Porré  
error.Vendée? (1-up), 2018 – 9  
Tapestry, wrought steel hooks and bar  
150 x 120 cm



Respawn, 2024  
Installation View



Respawn, 2024  
Installation View





Respawn, 2024  
Installation View



Emily Mulenga  
21st Century Life, 2024  
Print on 180 gsm epsom enhanced matte paper, magnets  
100 x 178 cm



Emily Mulenga  
21st Century Life, 2024  
Print on 180 gsm epsom enhanced matte paper, magnets  
100 x 178 cm



Respawn, 2024  
Installation View



Respawn, 2024  
Installation View



Respawn, 2024  
Installation View



Emily Mulenga  
Knocking on midnight's door, 2024  
Print on aluminium, PLA  
20 x 32 x 5 cm



Emily Mulenga  
Knocking on midnight's door, 2024  
Print on aluminium, PLA  
20 x 32 x 5 cm





Respawn, 2024  
Installation View



Léa Porré  
error.Vendée? (2-up), 2018 – 9  
Tapestry, wrought steel hooks and bar  
150 x 120 cm



Léa Porré  
error.Vendée? (2-up), 2018 – 9  
Tapestry, wrought steel hooks and bar  
150 x 120 cm



Respawn, 2024  
Installation View



Georgie Roxby Smith  
The Fall Girl, 2012  
Video with sound  
8 min 7 sec



Georgie Roxby Smith  
The Fall Girl, 2012  
Video with sound  
8 min 7 sec



Georgie Roxby Smith  
The Fall Girl, 2012  
Video with sound  
8 min 7 sec



Emily Mulenga  
Malibu, what a view, 2024  
Print on aluminium, PLA  
20 x 32 x 5 cm





Emily Mulenga  
Malibu, what a view, 2024  
Print on aluminium, PLA  
20 x 32 x 5 cm



Respawn, 2024  
Installation View



Respawn, 2024  
Installation View



Bob Bicknell-Knight  
Playtime (Greed), 2023  
3D printed PLA plastic, acrylic spray paint, steel bolts  
40 x 110 x 62.1 cm



Bob Bicknell-Knight  
Playtime (Greed), 2023  
3D printed PLA plastic, acrylic spray paint, steel bolts  
40 x 110 x 62.1 cm



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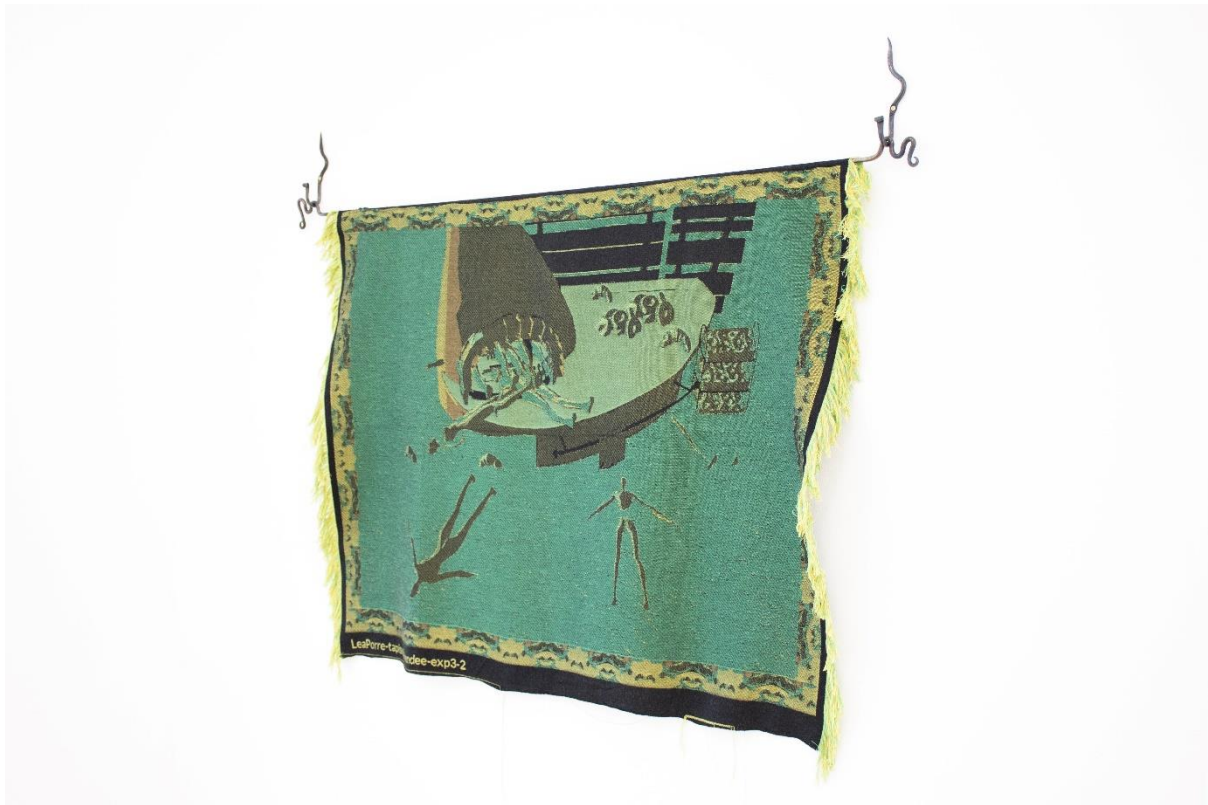


Respawn, 2024  
Installation View





Léa Porré  
error.Vendée? (3-up), 2018 – 9  
Tapestry, wrought steel hooks and bar  
150 x 120 cm



Léa Porré  
error.Vendée? (3-up), 2018 – 9  
Tapestry, wrought steel hooks and bar  
150 x 120 cm



Respawn, 2024  
Installation View



Respawn, 2024  
Installation View