

Little Italy: restaging and renewal

Fiona Anderson writes
about Catrin Huber's
Expanded Interiors
Re-Staged exhibition

Expanded Interiors Re-Staged, Hatton Gallery, 3 July - 10 August 2021

Image credit: Colin Davison.

I grew up about twenty miles north of the Antonine Wall, which stretches from Bo'ness at the mouth of the Firth of Forth to the village of Old Kilpatrick on the banks of the Clyde. Scotland's Roman wall is a turf fortification built on a low-slung stone base, modest, never too big for its boots. It was abandoned shortly after the death of its namesake, Emperor Antoninus Pius, in AD161, when troops returned south to Hadrian's Wall, which was built twenty years earlier and measured about twice as long. The grassy ramparts were reinforced during the Scottish Wars of Independence in the late thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, reactivated in the service of another border conflict.

I visited its ruins near Bonnyrigg on a class trip and walked its way when visiting my grandparents in Kirkintilloch. They lived on Roman Road, which wound out of Peel Park, following the route of the ancient defence. The evocative proximity of the wall was heightened by the discovery of a Roman fort under the football field of my primary school in the 1980s. It seemed to pull this historic lumpen structure closer in both space and time. The digs were imbued with an almost magical status, the ruined fort taking on the character of a burial ground, filled with soldiers, in village folklore. At school, I learned about archaeologists gently uncovering iron arrowheads and the northern reach of the Roman empire as part of an initiative to emphasise Scottish topics in state education. Scotland's

Roman ruins were being reactivated again. I think I misunderstood our teacher's use of the word *remains* in those classes; most of what was found there, in addition to timber foundations and 'ankle breaker' ditch defences, was pottery. But on early winter evenings in the mid-1990s, walking back from Brownies hand in hand with my mother, I saw what I imagined to be ghostly centurions with white plumed helmets walking between the pebbledash houses around the primary school. The site of the fort was properly excavated the year before we moved away.

When I first came to the North East of England in the mid-2010s, I quickly became aware of traces of the other northern Roman wall. Taking the Metro from the university to my flat by the coast, I spotted signs for Segedunum and Latinate passenger directions at Wallsend, as if the latter name wasn't evidence enough of Hadrian's whereabouts. I read articles in the *Chronicle* about previously obscured points of Hadrian's Wall which had been discovered in built-up sections of the city, exposed during routine municipal work such as the oddly historical, even archival, labour of maintaining the Victorian water networks that run underneath Newcastle. The articles were invariably accompanied by photographs of newly introduced neighbours of the wall standing proudly next to a dirty line of stone, visible through apertures in the tarmac. Parts of the wall were found just outside the Mining Institute on Westgate Road. It runs under the Cooper's Mart building. The remains of a small Roman fort lie near the Newcastle Arts Centre, five minutes up the road. There's a bit of the wall behind St Dominic's Catholic Club, near Stepney Bank. In many ways, reading these stories and looking at these photographs interested me more than the legendary and much-photographed Sycamore Gap, set in a striking dip in the rural sections of Hadrian's Wall, where it follows cliff edges and cuts across farmland in Northumberland, west of the city. In town, the wall can't stand in dramatic isolation. It must co-exist with train lines, pavements, buildings, and roads.

The ordinariness of the wall's presence in the centre of Newcastle, easily overlooked or inaccessible, feels both jarring and entirely fitting, like the bustle of present-day Pompeii or the confluence of Ercolano and Herculaneum, where blocks of apartments with balcony washing lines abut the edges of the now sunken ancient Roman town. But the Hadrian's Wall National Trail runs along the quayside walkway on the banks of the Tyne when it reaches Newcastle, rather than following the true route of the wall through suburbs in the west end of the city. There, the ruins of a temple dedicated to Antenociticus lie in a cul-de-sac, watched over by a regiment of red brick 1930s semis. The visible foundations of a turret sit just off the A69, by the multi-lane City West roundabout in Denton. A brief

description of the Denton turret on the English Heritage website directs visitors to Roman ruins in the affluent village of Corbridge, sixteen miles away.¹ Benwell residents have found remnants of the wall in their back gardens and archaeologists have undertaken small digs there. 'The wall here is everywhere, the whole area', one local said recently: 'I don't know why it's not called Little Italy'.² I like to imagine muddy archaeologists sipping cups of tea on the patio and chatting about the Roman times, amphorae sitting underneath the magnolia bush.



Along or Through, Catrin Huber, *Expanded Interiors Re-Staged*, Hatton Gallery, 2021. Image credit: Colin Davison.

These kinds of unexpected convergences and this temporal informality, playful and layered, dramatic but without fanfare, underpin and animate the work of *Expanded Interiors Re-staged*. At the Hatton, the interior spaces of Pompeii and Herculaneum and their historical uses were both expanded and re-staged, across three galleries and by way of both new and existing artworks by Catrin Huber and Rosie Morris.³ In *Along or Through* (2018), which Huber describes as a painting installation, a large steel structure, wall-like and sturdy yet evocative of the anticipatory ephemerality of a stage set, bisected the linear gallery, framed by its columns and Corinthian moulding, emblematic of the Edwardian Neo-Baroque architecture of this rather grand space. Huber playfully refers to these later historic flourishes in subtle but insistent ways, as the sharp corners of her installation follow the lines of the gallery space. The striking black, yellow, purple, blue, and red of the painted

trompe-l'oeil, both a corridor and a barrier, contrast with the white leaves and berries of the pale Edwardian plaster above and the bay window that looks out to the leafy collegiate quadrangle.



Around and Up, Catrin Huber, *Expanded Interiors Re-Staged*, Hatton Gallery, 2021. Image credit: Colin Davison.

In the next gallery, darker than the first, another painting installation creates a room within a room, amplifying the ‘enigmatic corners’ of the Hatton.⁴ Through slivers of blue, the works hint at waterways and Roman baths, sites of personal care and public interaction, moving, always moving, through light and darkness. We are a long way from the damp passageways of the House of the Cryptoporticus, yet their spatial complexity and the sense of transition and connection they embody is present here too, activated in a different way. The supports securing the freestanding works at the Hatton, which at Pompeii were hidden from view, running along the walls of the underground passageways, are visible as you walk around these painting installations, taking up Huber’s invitation to venture along or through, around and up, to see in ways that were not possible at the work’s original site, disrupting the idea that there ever was one way of looking at this work, or one static body of work at all.



Around and Up, Catrin Huber, *Expanded Interiors Re-Staged*, Hatton Gallery, 2021. Image credit: Colin Davison.

Equally and cheekily disruptive are the smiling faces on the digitally scanned and printed objects positioned across the angular abstract connective imagery of *Along or Through*. They are informed by the kinds of functional objects that Roman soldiers might carry with them while on duty and leave behind or lose. They signal to the pleasure of archaeological and historical discovery, in which oil lamps, cups, and arrowheads, remnants of past uses of places whose heyday is long gone, take on an anthropomorphic energy, enlivened by stories and by imagination.

These face cups also hint at the unknowability of the ancient past, smiling to gently remind us of its inaccessibility, not for want of trying. Might we engage in this practice of back-and-forth and discovery as a kind of game or a conversation, rather than an act of domination? A quotation from a fictional and anonymous Roman woman wall painter at the entrance to the gallery, part of a longer dialogue with historic artists written by Huber, reminds us that this sense of crossing temporal barriers was a core part of the painting practices referenced here. 'A reoccurring motif, such as that of closed doors', the Roman painter says, 'could be read as the threshold between this world and the next ... a sacred place. [...] the real - the here and now – was connected to metaphysical worlds evoking past, present, future'.⁵ Her

voice punctuates and opens up the space and the works within it, inviting us in and encouraging us to wonder who is speaking, who is making, who is looking back at us as we wander along or through.



Along or Through (detail), Catrin Huber, *Expanded Interiors Re-Staged* at the Hatton Gallery, 2021.
Image credit: Colin Davison.

Later in the exhibition, a staged recording of this conversation plays in the gallery space, filling the room. The anonymous Roman woman wall painter laughs along with Kurt Schwitters and El Lissitzky as they talk about site-specificity, architecture, and politics. She keeps her early twentieth-century artist colleagues on track, subtly undertaking the timeless emotional labour of mediation between men. She argues for the importance of humour, openness, and difficulty. She has, she says, like all Roman wall painters, ‘a trust and a belief in the visual and intellectual capabilities of the audience – and a recognition that challenging them is good’. ‘Complexity, difficulty, and multi-layered-ness is the key to the future!’ she concludes.⁶ The anonymous painter is both a conversation partner and a kind of avatar for Huber herself.



Bella Ciao, Light Trap, Black Hole, Catrin Huber, *Expanded Interiors Re-Staged* at the Hatton Gallery, 2021. Image credit: Colin Davison.

The recorded imagined conversation between Schwitters, El Lissitzky, and the anonymous Roman woman wall painter plays in the gallery that hosts Huber's work *Bella Ciao*, a layered structure that recalls the scaffolding that supports buildings across Pompeii and Herculaneum and brings digitally scanned objects from the latter site which depict women together in a collage-conversation. As at Herculaneum, viewers can look through the work and create their own visual and imaginative networks, informed by their line of sight and by the play of light in the space. Indeed, Huber named this final installation at the Hatton *Light Trap*. The movement of light between and through the scaffolding-like installation is reflected in the shimmering and velvety-dense quilts which hang on the walls around it. Their titles turn the idea of an open-air museum into something with galactic potential: *Black Hole*, *White Dwarf*. This sense of the work folding in and opening out literalises the practice of generating new perspectives through installation and provides an imaginative way to engage with the historic practices of collage and assemblage and their relationship to the trompe l'oeil techniques of Roman wall painting. Reuse and assemblage are core parts of the practice of quilting, too, and, like the wall paintings discovered in Pompeii and Herculaneum, quilts have a complex and intimate relationship to the domestic sphere and

to the idea of art, particularly that made by women, as decorative. To make a quilt is to engage in conversation with women from the past and participate in an inherently multi-layered narrative practice with a long history of resistance and care, each stitch a 'subversive stitch'.⁷



The Corner Escape, Black Hole, Catrin Huber, Expanded Interiors Re-Staged at the Hatton Gallery, 2021, wallpaper and wall hanging. Image credit: Colin Davison.

What Huber exhibited at the Hatton was, in some ways, an archive of the paintings and installations she had produced for and shown in situ at both Pompeii and Herculaneum as *Expanded Interiors* two years before. The archaeological sites of both Pompeii and Herculaneum are places which are themselves a kind of archive or an archival engagement with both the literal cities and with the roles they have taken on in the cultural life of the area and in the ancient Roman imaginary. Archives are always sites and subjects of not only power, but interpretation; to archive or to preserve *is* to re-stage. It is to interpret and reinterpret something with an eye on both the past and the present. The forms that work might take and the outcomes it might produce will differ depending on who is archiving, who is looking, and where. Ensuring a relationship to and a relevance for those in the present (a temporal marker that is, of course, always shifting) is a key feature and responsibility of any archival labour. In Pompeii and Herculaneum, the dualistic nature of preservationist or archival work is constantly visible because it takes place in the context of an 'open-air museum' where weeds grow, modern-day materials support unstable ancient buildings, and colourful wall paintings once preserved accidentally by volcanic ash must be consciously and carefully restored and maintained by teams of archaeologists. Crucially, while Huber

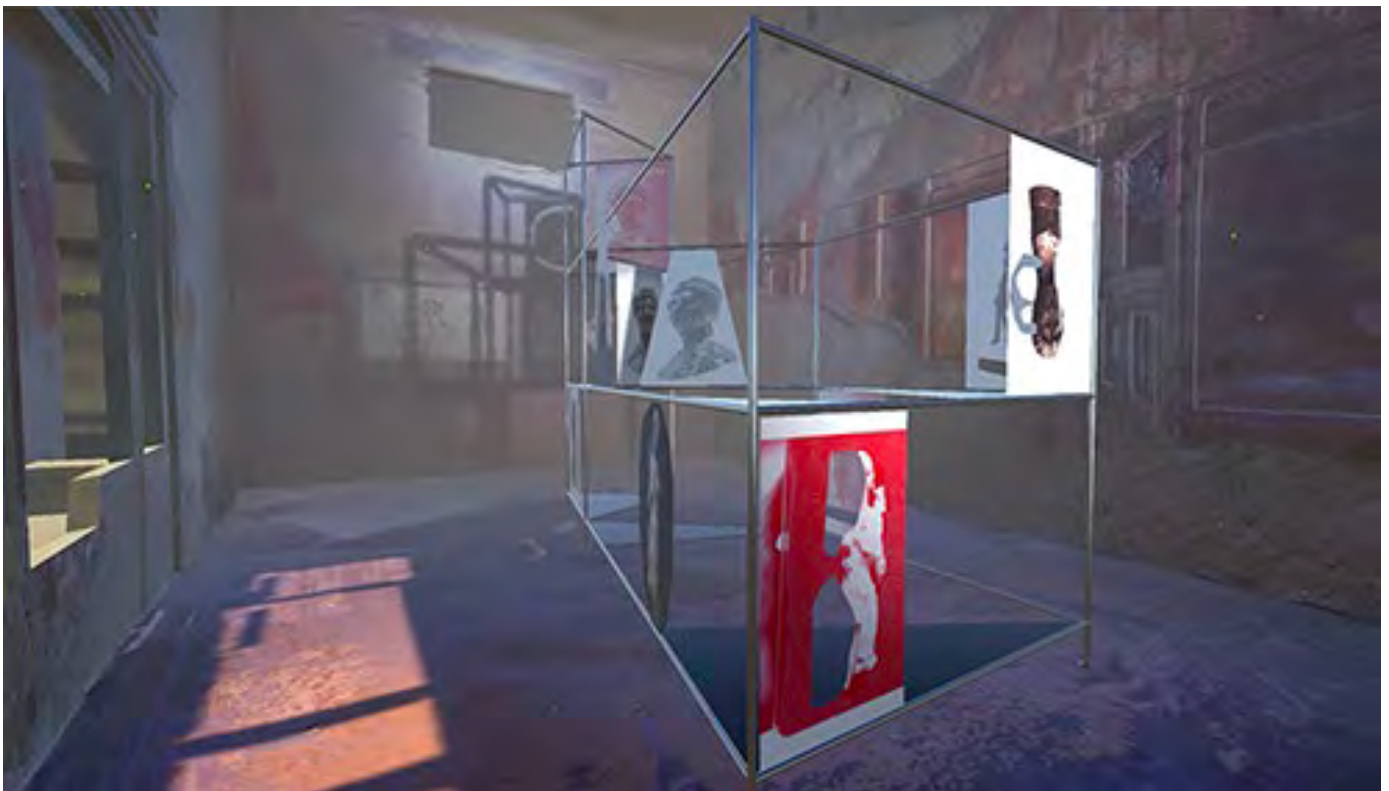
worked closely with archaeologists (and educators) at all three sites, she did this archival work as an artist, combining 'imagination *and* reality' in order to 'engage the perceptive viewer in a game of hide and seek', one that is suggestive of both the labour of archiving and preservation and the intimate act of remembering itself.⁸

In her book *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas* (2003), the performance studies scholar Diana Taylor, writing about protest and performance as forms of sharing cultural knowledge that are both fleeting and enduring, notes that 'archival memory works across distance, over time and space'. 'What changes over time', she argues, 'is the value, relevance, or meaning of the archive, how the items it contains get interpreted, even embodied'. What an archive actually is, Taylor argues, is up for debate and constantly in flux, and is informed by misunderstandings or wilful misinterpretations of what an archive can do or what it might include. 'There are several myths attending the archive,' she writes: 'one is that it is unmediated, that objects located there might mean something outside the framing of the archival impetus itself'. Another is 'that the archive resists change, corruptibility, and political manipulation. Individual things [...] might mysteriously appear in or disappear from the archive', trails might be rerouted off course and objects reactivated or indeed deactivated.⁹

In a city like Newcastle, often described as 'post-industrial', a long way from its mining and shipbuilding days, its landscape shot through with a 1960s motorway and shaped by corrupt planning contracts (when 'a funny thing happened on the way to utopia'), the effects of cycles of ruin and renewal and their political nature are deeply felt and always present.¹⁰ As in Pompeii and Herculaneum, there is growing public concern about how Hadrian's Wall is maintained and where. That the Hadrian's Wall National Trail runs along the Newcastle quayside rather than the actual route of the wall through housing estates and by the West Road is partly practical: the river path makes for a more pleasant day out than a busy dual carriageway. But it also raises questions about how a city's histories are preserved and shared, for and by whom. For Chi Onwurah, Member of Parliament for the Newcastle Central constituency, who was born in Wallsend, the fact that the wall is not as well preserved or even visible in poorer parts of the city, that visitors to the Denton Turret are encouraged to spend the day in Corbridge rather than following the wall through the west end, is also about the material culture of urban deprivation and the class politics of conservation. The wall's course makes the socioeconomic underpinnings and the stakes of cultural preservation visible. The area around the West Road is what Onwurah calls 'a vibrant, multicultural but, yes, economically deprived area of the city'. Rather than taking the

grand history of the Roman wall off course, she notes, the demographics and the landscape of contemporary Benwell and Denton resonate with the character of the area in the time of Hadrian. For Onwurah, making the West Road portions of Hadrian's Wall visible 'is about making sure the story of our nation from Roman times represents our present as well as our history'.¹¹ Ruins are always being reactivated for contemporary ends, re-staged, acting as threshold spaces and offering new perspectives, even when they've been hiding in plain sight for centuries, under layers of other histories; playful, persistent, a threshold between worlds.

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Still from 3D real-time environment: *Light Trap*, Catrin Huber, *Expanded Interiors Re-Staged* at the Hatton Gallery, 2021. Developers: Animmersion Ltd.

¹ 'Denton Hall Turret – Hadrian's Wall', English Heritage, accessed 2 September 2022, <https://www.english-heritage.org.uk/visit/places/denton-hall-turret/>

² Paula Robinson, quoted in Mark Brown, "We need to celebrate it': Newcastle seeks its place on Hadrian's Wall trail', *The Guardian*, 29 January, 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2022/jan/29/newcastle-deprived-west-end-see-boost-hadrians-wall-west-road-roman-remains>

³ Expanded Interiors Re-Staged was an exhibition by Catrin Huber with a commission by Rosie Morris. Rosie Morris' commission is discussed in: Anneka French, 'Close your eyes; press down on your lids: Anneka French reflects on Rosie Morris' new commission, *In / out / of this world*', <http://www.rosiemorris.co.uk> or <https://research.ncl.ac.uk/expandedinteriorsrestaged/resources/>

⁴ Catrin Huber, Rosie Morris, Harriet Sutcliffe, eds., *Expanded Interiors Re-Staged* (Newcastle: Hatton Gallery, 2021), n.p.

⁵ Catrin Huber, 'Art, Architecture, and Life – a Fictional Panel Discussion', in *Expanded Interiors at Pompeii and Herculaneum* (Bielefeld: Kerber Verlag, 2019), 127.

⁶ Huber, 'Art, Architecture, and Life – a Fictional Panel Discussion', 129.

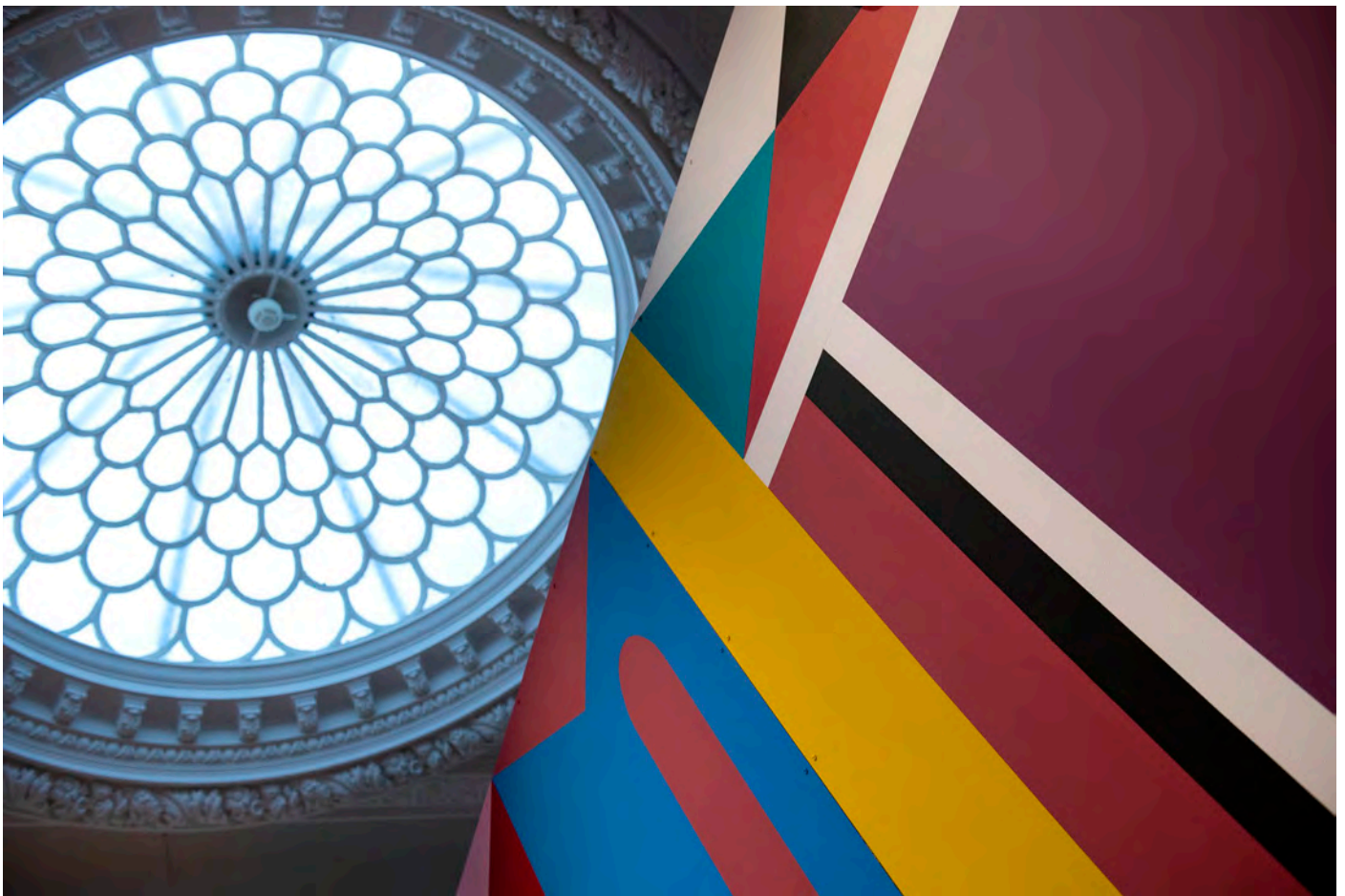
⁷ Rozsika Parker, *The Subversive Stitch: Embroidery and the Making of the Feminine* (London: Bloomsbury, 2019) [first published 1984]

⁸ Huber, 'Art, Architecture, and Life – a Fictional Panel Discussion', 127.

⁹ Diana Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 19.

¹⁰ A phrase borrowed from the strapline for the film *T. Dan Smith*, Amber Films Collective, 1987, 85 min.

¹¹ Chi Onwurah, quoted in Brown, 'We need to celebrate it': Newcastle seeks its place on Hadrian's Wall trail'.



Along or Through (detail), Catrin Huber, *Expanded Interiors Re-Staged* at the Hatton Gallery, 2021.
Image credit: Colin Davison.