

New Contemporaries 2024

Perhaps unsurprisingly, given the current state of the world, many of the artists featured in this year's *New Contemporaries* exhibition at The Royal Scottish Academy are looking for comfort.

This may be in happy memories of a childhood home, or in the apparently simpler life of a remote community. Unfiltered nostalgia can, however, be both limiting and pernicious. We have to try to engage with the times in which we find ourselves, to investigate, interrogate and if necessary oppose the wrongs we see happening around us.

The most engaging works in this exhibition (which unusually features graduates from both 2023 and 2022) do not idolise the past; instead they recognise both the negatives and the positives of what has gone before, and face the future, uncertain as it may be, with strength and even hope.



Kirsty Duguid (Moray School of Art, UHI) constructs fascinating models of buildings from her past and present. Having grown up at Ploverwards, a farm in NE Scotland, she

recognises that her childhood home created her original identity, but notes that this was further moulded by her time working in a bar in the town of Keith; all experience is important, and every experience contributes to the person one becomes. Using recycled materials such as hessian bags, beer boxes and bar towels, she emphasises change and the constant development of new identities. Nothing stands still.



Another UHI graduate, **Shannon Louise Leslie** (Shetland Lerwick), combines her own experiences and attachments with her interest in a less romantic view of nature – malformed

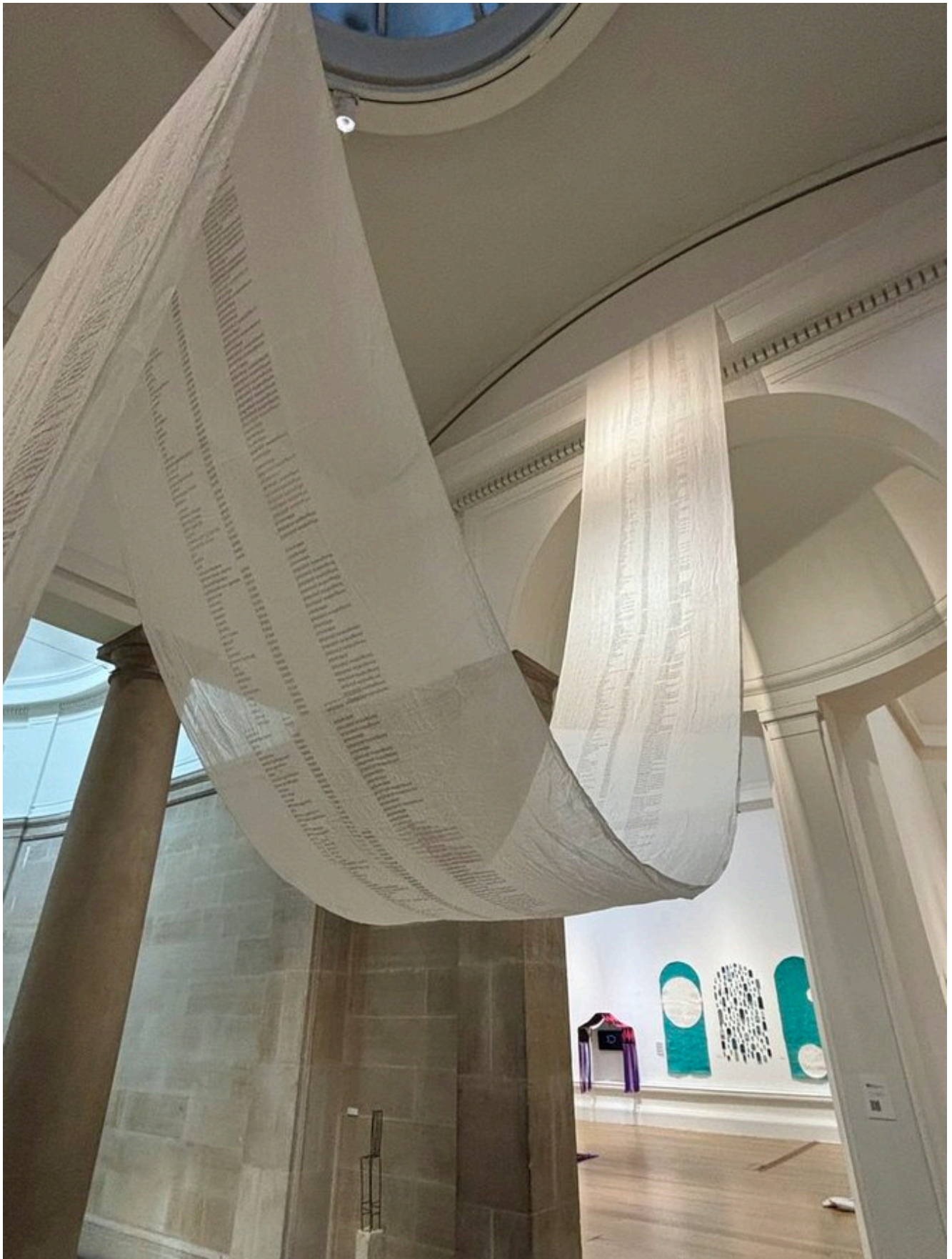
animals, headless beasts, a deformed deer. In the centre of a circle of weird models is a trapdoor; we want to know where it leads, but we also don't. Leslie's work unsettles the viewer; the idea of the natural world as comforter is subverted. Just as many strange and unnerving things happen there as anywhere else – maybe more.



Tama Marie Gray: *Who else will I have ice-cream with?*, 2024
Tama Marie Gray (Gray's, RGU) explores memory and 'the webs of association that connect our past with our present...' Her acrylic paintings show layers of time; in *Who else will I have ice cream with?* a mug of coffee in the foreground gives way to less substantial, dreamlike images of cats, and, when we look beyond them, a woman's head almost hidden from sight, and some writing fading into the distance. There are so many stories held in this beautiful picture, which for me brought to mind the work of Christopher Orr.



I particularly enjoyed **Tegan Chaffer** (ECA)'s miniature oil paintings; these depict what at first appear to be simple domestic scenes, but on closer inspection are revealed to include strange, unsettling figures. Home is never the completely comforting place that our rose-tinted nostalgia may make it seem; it always has the potential for conflict, and a woman's role in the home is especially two-edged. For her, the family home can be as much as burden and a prison as a place of safety and reassurance.



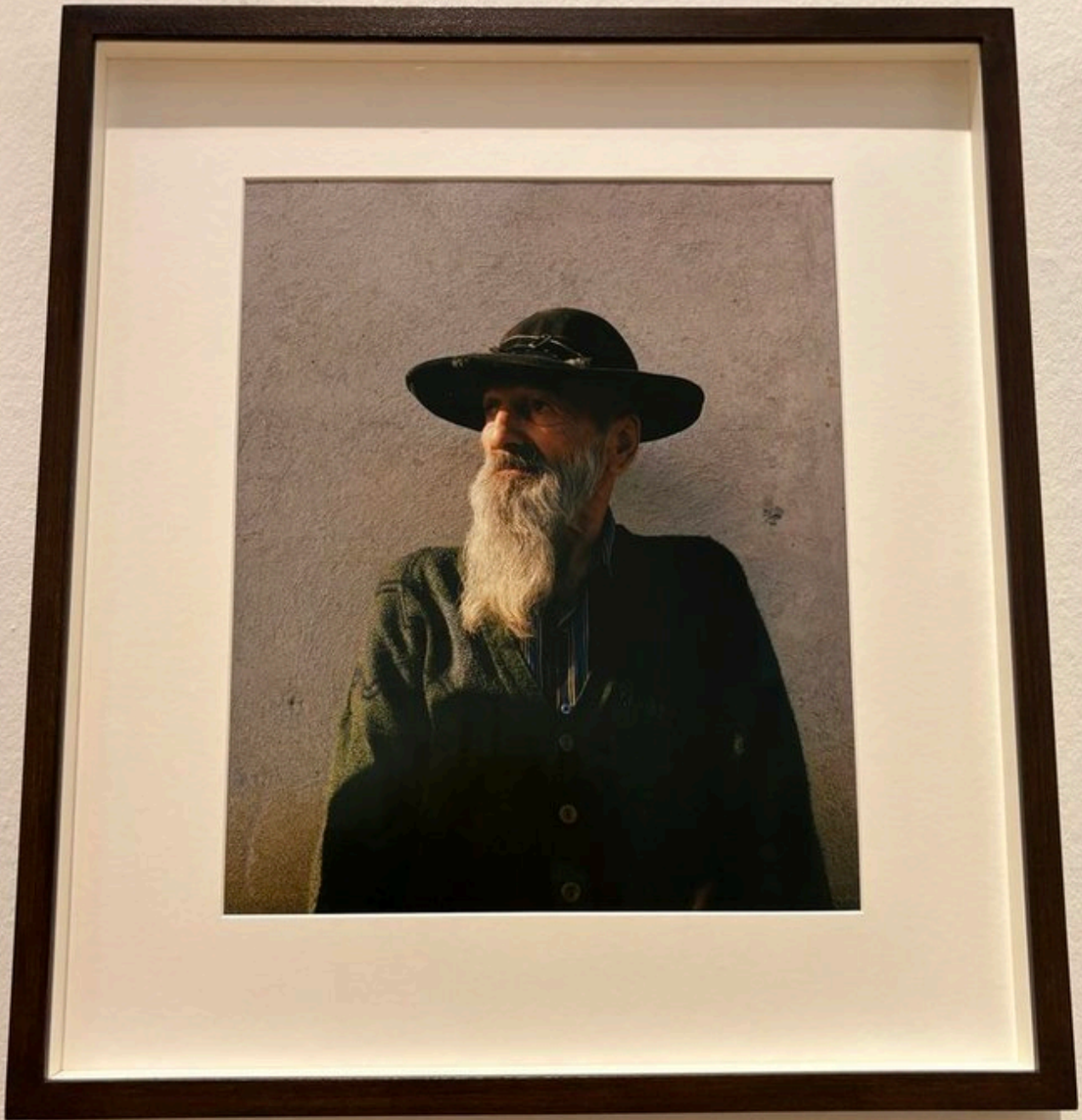
Tracy Exton-McShane; SAVE ME! A 50m Scroll of Endangered Languages

Another theme running through this year's show is threatened communities. The Academy entrance hall is dominated by a 50

metre muslin scroll, handpainted by **Tracey Exton-McShane** (ECA). It lists over 2,500 endangered languages predicted to become extinct by the end of the century. Exton-McShane's choice of material further underlines the fragility of languages that, as she says,

'embody wisdom, customs, and unique perspectives of diverse communities. Holding the essence of collective human experience, their loss leaves an irreparable fracture in global cultural heritage.'

Like the stole, these languages are suspended, exposed, vulnerable, and in need of protection.



Finn Gibson
14 Toamna (Autumn) #9, 2023
C-Type print on Fuji Crystal Archive Matt Paper.
Edition of 5 + 2AP
€400 unframed / €550 framed

Finn Gibson: Toamna (Autumn) #9

Finn Gibson (GSA) displays photographs of the nomadic Roma community in Romania; in 2023 he travelled through forty

Romanian and Hungarian villages documenting this threatened culture and way of life. There he found generous, happy, welcoming people who had a strong sense of community and lived in harmony with the changing seasons, still following ancient customs and traditions. In Gibson's photos children run barefoot through the villages; a woman displays her long hair, braided with red ribbons; an older man in a black felt hat stares anxiously into the distance.



Maria Vina: La memoria de la tierra

A cemetery in Granada is the focus of **Maria Vina** (GSA)'s work. She has studied the traditional cave dwellings of the area; in the 1950s there were 3682 *cuevas* recorded in Granada; they formed neighbourhoods with businesses, churches and social spaces. Many of the residents were from the Gitano (Spanish Roma) community.

After floods in 1963 Franco's government displaced thousands

of cave dwellers; their existence did not conform to its standards. As the cemetery behind the homes expanded to accommodate thousands of people killed in the civil war, the *cuevas* were demolished, although now people are returning to the site to build new homes from recycled clay left behind. Vina's work *La memoria de la tierra* pays homage to the stories of the disappeared, to,

'Memories of music, flamenco, weddings, births, families, hope, freedom, poverty, oppression, loss.'

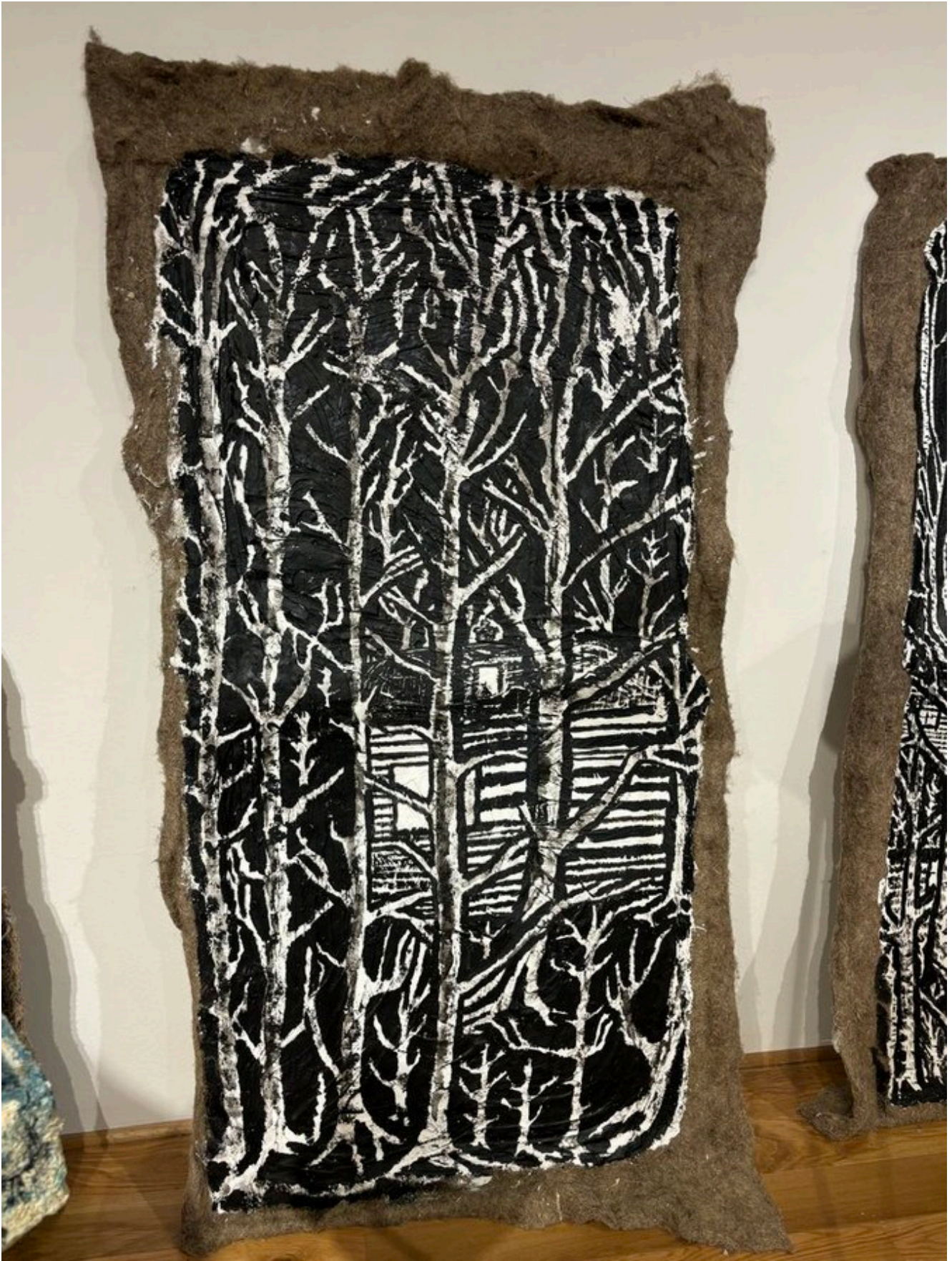
Vina's crescent of remains includes dried cacti, wine bottles, dog teeth, tombstones and blood.



Billy Brown: Hut on Stand – Smoulder

Back in Scotland, another lifestyle enjoying a resurgence is the hutting community. Similar to bothies, these simple

dwelling emerged between the wars, when industrial workers would pay a small ground rent to landowners to allow them to build huts and stay in them with their families. After decades in the doldrums, hutting is again becoming popular as people look for rural retreats from their busy lives.



Billy Brown: Hemp Screen – High Hut

Planning legislation dictates that new huts must be affordable, made of recycled materials and removable with

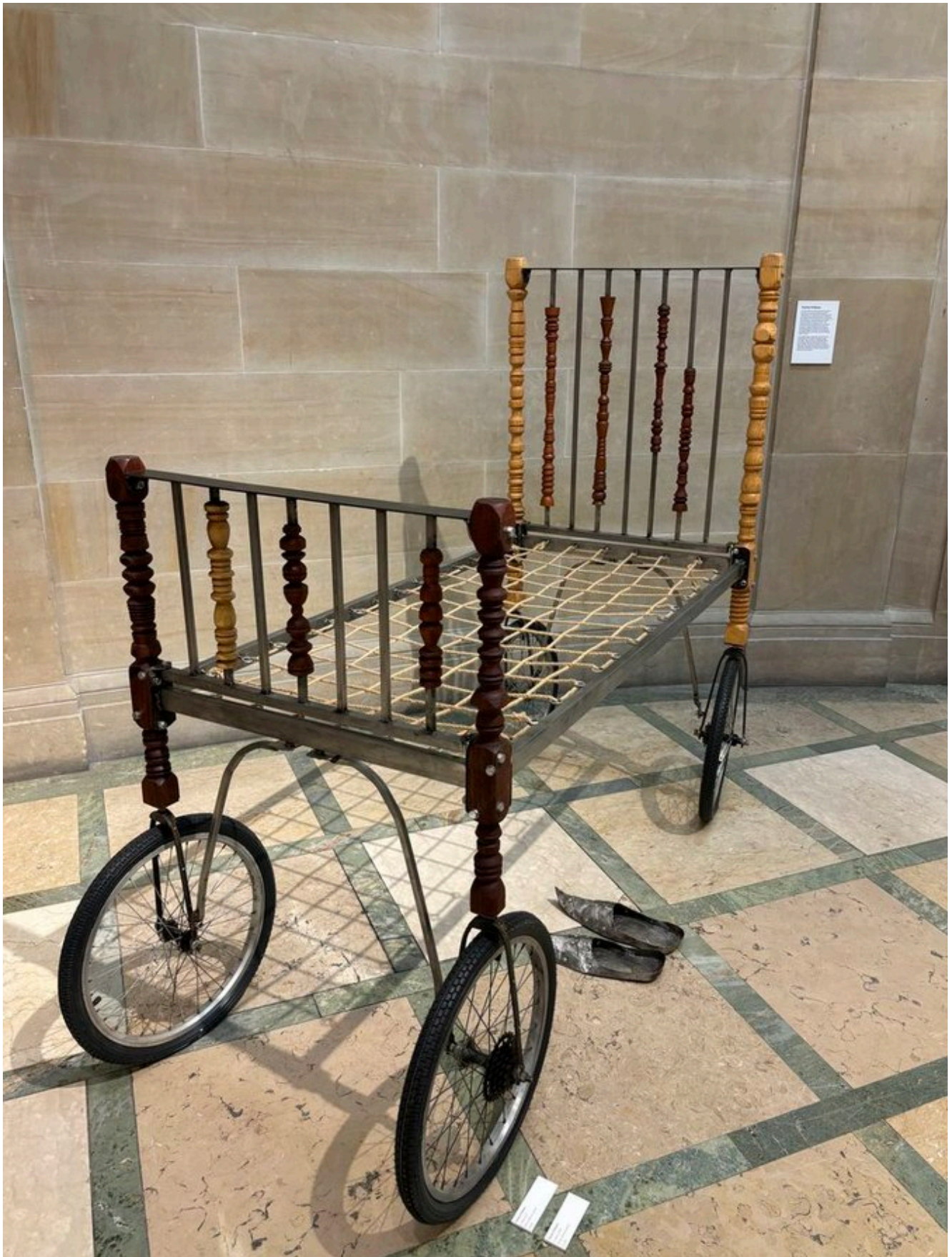
little or no trace at the end of their lives. **Billy Brown** (ECA) has used industrial hemp, lime plaster and acrylic paint to create a series of hut models and black and white screen prints, so combining his love of sustainable materials and of the hutting community. These simple sculptures would easily merge into the Scottish landscape, bringing their occupants back to nature and simplicity.

Reforestation Scotland sets out a hut's main purpose as, 'Primarily being about spending time in nature, peace and quiet, companionship or perhaps solitude, away from busy lives...a space to restore mind, body and spirit.'



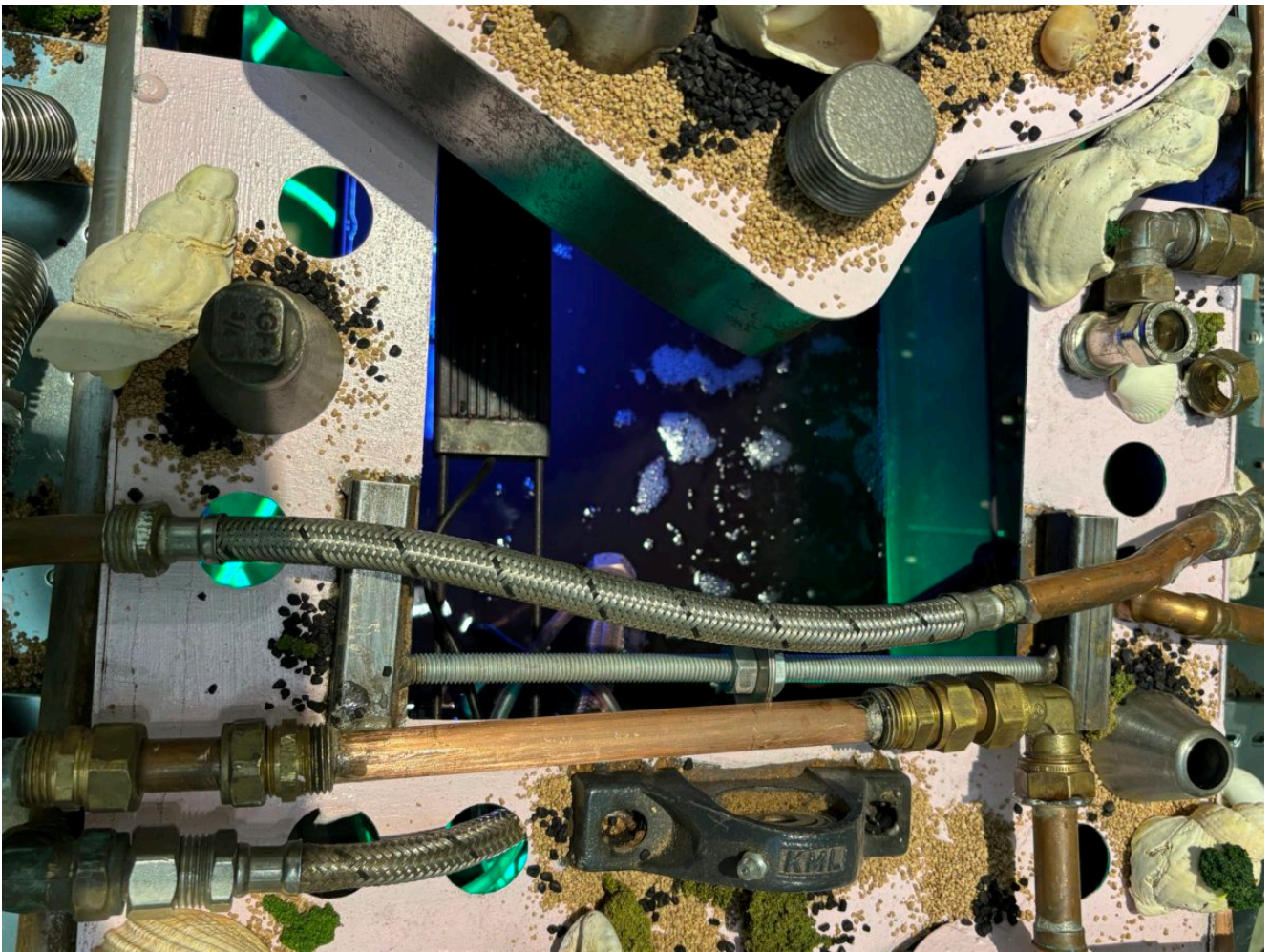
Sara Pakdel-Cherry (DJCAD) turns her attention to a far less appealing subject, the oppression of women in Iran and the mandatory wearing of the hijab. Her powerful film *Kafan-e Siah* takes its title from a term which was used by women to fight against the Islamic state laws. The kafan or shroud is used to wrap a corpse for burial. The film is shown above a

mortuary table, while suspended chadors symbolise the challenges faced by modern Iranian women.



The exhibition includes some impressive metalwork. **Martha**

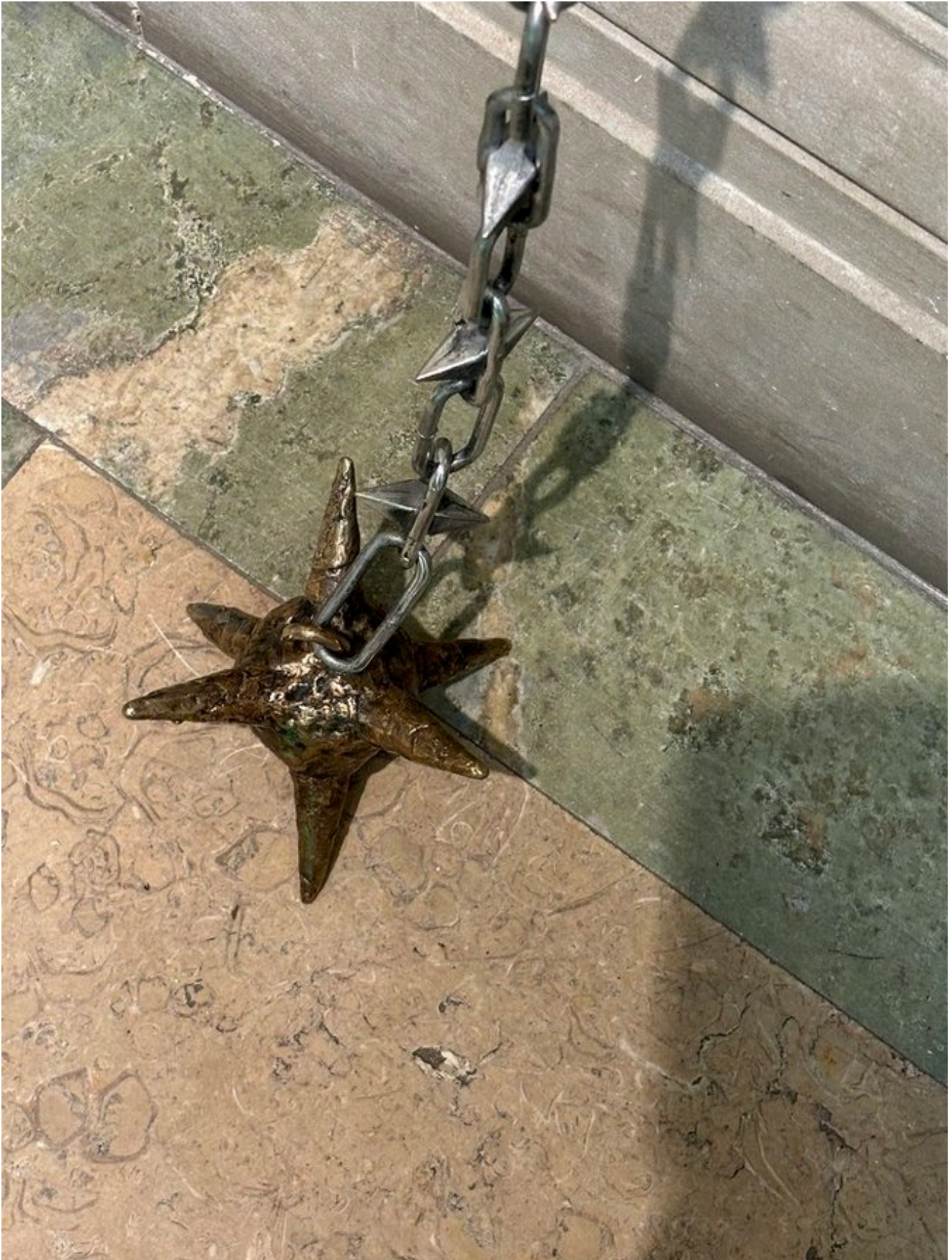
Williams (GSA) is influenced by folklore and storytelling in her creation of the strange from the familiar, subverting an object's original purpose to make us think again about its stories. A pair of metal slippers could once have belonged to a prince or a goblin; a bed whose legs have been transformed into bicycle wheels could be that goblin's place of rest, or their means of pursuit.



Tim Milner: Tank – Tank, 2024

Tim Milner (ECA) now works for Powderhall Bronze; his interests include tanks, dystopian futures and recycled art. Here he shows a series of miniature tanks made from scrap metals. In *The Siege of Jemimaville (2059)* a tank approaches an amphibious vehicle across a bed of gravel streaked with red blood. A larger tank is especially impressive, intricately constructed with various metal widgets but also decorated with sea shells. Inside is a tank of water, perhaps referencing *Mad Max Fury Road* and a future in which water has become a

commodity so prized that wars are fought over it.



Tim Milner: Mediaeval Weapons – Long Flail

Milner also shows a sobering mediaeval weapon – *Long Flail*, a

steel chain with spikes sticking out of it, at one end a heavy bronze cylinder, at the other a spiked and threatening sphere of solid metal.

The best of the exhibits in *New Contemporaries* seek to challenge and unsettle us; when these aims are combined with outstanding practical skills, the work they produce confirms the wealth of artistic talent continuing to emerge from Scottish art schools.

New Contemporaries continues at the Royal Scottish Academy, Princes Street until 24 April 2024.