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## Handmade Histories



Rivane Neuenschwander, *(a) casos eroticos [Erotic Cases] 2* (2014) © Rivane Neuenschwander. Courtesy of Rivane Neuenschwander and Stephen Friedman Gallery, London

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## Rivane Neuenschwander, *(a) casos eroticos (Erotic Cases) 2 (2014)*

Often the quietest voices are those that make their presence most lastingly felt. The vivid clusters of bubbling, biomorphic shapes which feature in this pair of works by Brazilian artist Rivane Neuenschwander are not much bigger than the palm of my hand. The works, in which overlapping, colored forms are crisply enclosed by a looping graphic line, are reminiscent of doodles that meander across a notepad during tedious telephone calls.

Riffing on the chance methods of Marcel Duchamp's *Three Standard Stoppages* (1913-14) as well as John Cage's randomly dropped pieces of paint-covered string, Neuenschwander created her nine-strong series of *(A) casos eroticos* (of which these are two) by dropping lengths of string onto linen napkins. She then embroidered the outline of the resulting shapes, and filled them in with densely stitched colour.

So, on the one hand she's inserting herself into the conceptual canon of art history. On the other, she's mischievously mixing things up with an almost *trompe l'oeil* use of a traditionally "female" medium with her cheerful, decorative palette, apparently sourced from children's coloring books.



Rivane Neuenschwander, *(a) casos eroticos [Erotic Cases] 2 (2014)* © Rivane Neuenschwander. Courtesy of Rivane Neuenschwander and Stephen Friedman Gallery, London

Neuenschwander charges these little works with a delicious tension between their appearance and their physical actuality. What could be more at odds with the laws of chance and the spontaneous spooling of line than the dense, painstaking stitches of needlecraft? What is more antithetical to the systematic color theories of High Modernism than the jolly shades of the nursery? Yet, through her combination of seemingly contradictory components, these works tug at our instincts as well as our intellect and, in so doing, subtly steal the show (*'Entangled: Threads and Making'* at Turner Contemporary Margate)

## *The Resurrection of Christ, English School (around 1450)*



English School, *The Resurrection of Christ* (mid 15th century) © Ferens Art Gallery

This delicate piece of Medieval carving depicts the classic account of the Resurrection as [told](#) in St Matthew's Gospel, but is also shot through with distinctly un-Biblical detail. In the densely packed scene, Christ steps gingerly out of his open tomb as two armored soldiers gesture in astonishment. Their two companions are less alert: one leans slackly on his staff, back turned from the action, while his slumbering counterpart is so oblivious that Christ is able to use him as a makeshift step, extending a skinny leg on to the slumped body as he wends his way back to the land of the living. The piece, which would originally have been brightly painted and highlighted with gold leaf, now bears few traces of color.

The work, on show in the newly refurbished Ferens Gallery, is a stark reminder of the cultural cost of Henry VIII's [English Reformation](#). Until the monarch's marital matters triggered his seismic break with Rome in 1532-34, England had been a Christian world leader—and its promotion of the glory of the Catholic Church had led to an abundance of specialist creative

skills. Along with [Opus Anglicanum](#) embroidery and needlecraft examples included the finely carved [Nottingham alabasters](#), small panels produced in workshops across the Midlands and northern England—of which this sculpture is an especially fine example.

Easy to work, but too soft for outdoor use, alabaster was the perfect material for intricate carvings. Conveniently transportable, the Nottingham alabasters were in demand in churches and private chapels across Europe. Before entering the Ferens collection—it is now on show in Hull’s newly refurbished [Ferens gallery](#)—the panel spent the last century or so incorporated into a 19<sup>th</sup>-century altarpiece in a Normandy château.

Now installed in the company of paintings by [Giotto](#), [Duccio](#), [Lorenzetti](#) and [Cimabue](#), this compelling sculpture more than holds its own. I also like the fact that it has been returned to its roots: pre-Reformation, much of the alabaster for these carvings would have been shipped through Hull’s medieval port.

## Lubaina Himid, the viola da gamba player in *Naming the Money* (2004)



Lubaina Himid, *Naming the Money* (2004). Installation view, *Navigation Charts*, Spike Island (2017). Courtesy of the artist, Hollybush Gardens and National Museums Liverpool: International Slavery Museum. Photo credit: Stuart Whipps

Lubaina [Himid](#) first came to prominence in the early 1980s as the organizer of exhibitions of work by under-represented peers. A self-described “filler-in of gaps”, she has made significant contributions as a curator, archivist and writer focusing on the experience of the black [diaspora](#) in Britain. Yet her own art has been overlooked. This seems set to change with two solo shows, [one](#) at Modern Art Oxford and [this](#) one at Spike Island.

For the latter, she has created a spectacular installation called *Naming the Money* of 100 life-size cut-out figures representing Africans brought to Europe as servants. One figure stands out from the throng: a man dressed brightly in a green shirt and blue bandana who is playing the cello-like instrument, the viola da gamba. He is part of a trio of musicians but seems distinct from them because, except for one painted eye, his face has been created from a collaged composite of photographed features which lends him a particular intensity. His eyes meet yours with a solemn and self-contained expression.

Each of the painted plywood figures—musicians, dog-trainers, potters, cobblers, map-makers and gardeners—is identified by a “balance sheet” stuck on their back. These texts are poignant, giving the original names and occupations of the characters, along with their new identities that have been imposed on them by their European owners.

Part of the work is an evocative soundtrack, interspersed with snatches of Cuban, Irish, Jewish and African music. We learn that the free name of our musician is Kwesi, but that now “they call me Henry” and that he “used to play loudly with my brothers. Now I play for kings. But I have the sound of the sea.” In these few lines, a world of loss and longing, cruelty and injustice is evoked. In our current divisive times, Himid’s humane but also hard-hitting work about forgotten and misplaced people seems especially relevant.