

Profile: *Hettie Judah* reveals
the gracious intimacy and fortitude
of an artist who leaves no trace

Ghislaine Leung



How to identify Ghislaine Leung amid the lunching crowd at a south London cafe? In this image-greedy world, Leung is that rare creature: a public figure of whose physical person no trace seems to exist online. Google suggested a scant handful of faces in response to the prompt: ‘Ghislaine Leung, portrait’. Among them, jarringly, was my own. It turned out to be the headshot from my article about Leung’s nomination for the 2023 Turner Prize. Still, I felt disconcertingly like I was on the receiving end of a conceptual prank.

Leung makes art that explores, among related subjects, the labour conditions of making art. Often, this is through what she refers to as ‘scores’: written descriptions or instructions to be followed to physically realize the work. For ‘Holdings’, Leung’s spring 2024 exhibition at the Renaissance Society in Chicago, these scores included ‘An object that is no longer an artwork’ (*Holdings*, 2024) and ‘A song from a film the artist’s father watched repeatedly before moving to the United Kingdom in 1970’ (*Wants*, 2024). Leung is an artist who lays down clear rules of engagement, who establishes boundaries. Part of the way she does this is by ensuring that the images which circulate are of her work rather than her self.

We met. Leung did not have my face.

Leung stopped making art for many years. Between her BA (2002) and her MA (2009), she swerved from fine art to aesthetics and art theory. For over a decade, she held positions at art institutions including LUX and

Previous page

Public Sculpture, 2018, Score: *A group of toys in the collection of a public library is given a catalog or call number inclusive of the group. The group is loaned and displayed in an exhibition space.* ‘Fountains’, 2023, installation view. Unless otherwise stated, all images courtesy: the artist; Simian, Copenhagen, and Maxwell Graham Gallery, New York

Opposite page

Fountains, 2022, Score: *A fountain installed in the exhibition space to cancel sound.* ‘Fountains’, 2023, installation view

Below

Violets 2, 2018, Score: *All parts of a ventilation system removed from Network Aalst Bar during its 2017 refurbishment are reinstalled within the space of the exhibition and fixed from the floor, using as much of the material as possible while keeping it all interconnecting. Spare pieces that do not fit in this configuration are bracketed together in smaller formations. A welcome sign is installed.* ‘Fountains’, 2023, installation view

Tate. It was only in 2015, midway through her 30s, that she started practising as an artist again. In the intervening period, she had watched her peers getting ‘run through the mill of the industry’, she tells me. Some survived as artists. Most didn’t. They had made art for low or no pay, turned up for events, posed for photoshoots, complied and participated, yet still struggled to satisfy the demands of this voracious industry.

Working at that level was something you could only sustain for a few years before burning out, she thought. That wasn’t what she wanted. ‘People like to say that anyone can make art. Well, maybe. But there’s a really big question of who can *continue* making art, who that life is available to and on what terms.’ The practices that most interested Leung were those of ‘octogenarian women’ who had been developing their work for years. ‘I began to think: how would you build a practice that would do that? How would you aim for a six-decade career? You would have to have a very different commitment to energy and to yourself.’

Withdrawing her image was less a gesture of pure refusal than a strategy towards a sustainable career. To resist the pressure to package herself as a commodity, to be present, to be visible. Her conceptual practice is formed around the question of how to make art possible: working with scores rather than physical objects, she needs neither a dedicated studio nor a storage unit. In theory, the performance of Leung’s scores can be delegated to others, meaning that the art can circulate independently of her. This is not always the case in practice. Leung’s instinct is to be engaged and collaborative. I think she sometimes tells herself off about this.

During the years in which she didn’t call herself an artist, alongside her jobs in the art world, Leung wrote. She still writes – her first book, *Partners*, was published in 2018, and the second, *Bosses*, in 2023 – but it was a realization about the limits of what she was doing with the written word that pushed her back into making art. She had been asked to write a text on vulnerability. ‘I wrote what I thought was a pretty great essay: good citations, bibliography was intact, it was well written. And then I realized that, formally, it was absolutely antithetical to the politics of vulnerability I was talking about. The form was defensive. It was an essay: a well-defended thing.’ Leung wanted instead to find a way to make something vulnerable. Hence, art.

Not being recorded or photographed creates a space in which Leung feels able to be maximally vulnerable. Or, to put it another way, it helps the artist allay what she describes in *Bosses* as ‘the fear that turns you towards conservatism’.

It’s interesting, though, thinking back to the earliest work of Leung’s I saw – her Chisenhale Gallery commission, ‘Constitution’ – in 2019. That didn’t feel particularly vulnerable. It felt cool and distanced. Hermetic. She used gloss and black paint to make the functional structure of the space evident. Attention was drawn to the portals in the white cube, and the presence of offices, broom cupboards and storage rooms beyond. There was an unyielding sound work and a row of gift mugs cellophane-wrapped in pairs running down the middle of the room. It felt smart and highly controlled. Things change, though. People change. Leung changed.









Motherhood became part of the context in which Leung made art, but it took her a while to reconcile that with her work.

Hettie Judah

Last summer, I performed live public readings of a book-in-progress on art and motherhood. Most attending the readings were artist mothers. There was a passage on ‘Balances’, Leung’s 2022 exhibition at her New York gallery, Maxwell Graham. Her scores for the show included *Monitors* (2022), ‘A baby monitor installed in one room broadcast to another’, and *Gates* (2019), ‘Child safety gates installed on all thresholds of the exhibition space’. The *pièce de résistance*, however, was *Times* (2022), which dictated: ‘Access to exhibited works is limited to the studio hours available to the artist. Thursday 9am–4pm and Friday 9am–4pm.’ *Times* always got a laugh from my audience. They all knew *that* feeling. The studio week shrinking from a caffeine-fuelled abundance to a few, hard-fought slivers.

Leung’s book *Bosses* opens with a brutal account of giving birth and struggling to breastfeed, of being consumed by guilt and helplessness, of no longer recognizing herself, of feeling set adrift. She invites her readers to think about her body and its functions, weakness and sickness. This feels like a very different person to the

artist who created ‘Constitution’. Here, Leung is out of control. She is inviting us in. Motherhood became part of the context in which Leung made art, but it took her a while to reconcile that with her work, to fight against the internalized prejudice she held about art and motherhood being antithetical. In *Bosses* she lays down her new rules of engagement, the shift in her context. ‘I am tired of hiding everything about it,’ she writes. ‘Hiding becomes intolerable at some point.’

Leung’s immediate instinct had been to grasp hard onto her old life and ways of doing things. ‘Two weeks after I gave birth, I was doing meetings. I was terrified. The identity as an artist was so hard-fought for me. I was frightened that this thing that was so precious to me would be taken away.’ It had taken her a long time to ‘come out’ as an artist and would also take her a long time to ‘come out’ as a mother. ‘I realized that I was fighting to keep this artist identity, while I had another new nascent identity to take care of,’ she recalls. ‘I felt like I’d been trying to push against a pull door.’

Opposite page
Gates, 2019, Score:
Child safety gates
installed on all thresh-
olds in the exhibition
space. ‘Balances’,
installation view

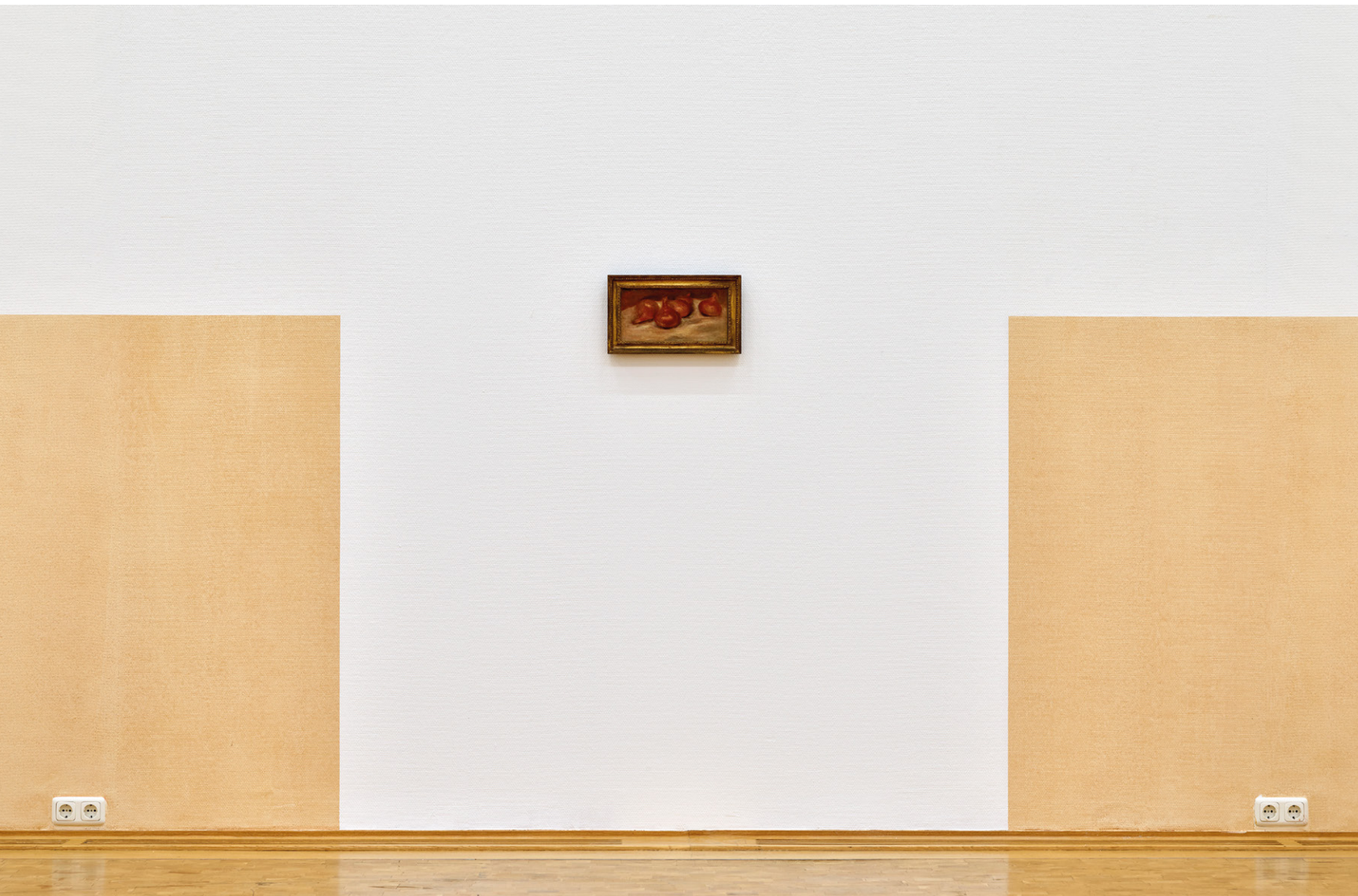
Above
Bosses, 2019.
Courtesy: the artist;
Chisenhale Gallery,
London, and Maxwell
Graham Gallery,
New York; photo-
graph: Andy Keate

Leung's voice is animated by laughter. There is a lot of humour to her work, though she says that when she tries to write something funny, people find it sad, and when she tries to write something sad, people find it funny. "Balances" was an angry show: I became very rageful on becoming a mother. It was a real awakening to a massive structural inequity that I thought I was aware of but, it turned out, I was not – at least, not in a lived situation.'

The scores, originally a strategy for sustainable art-making, turned out to be well-adapted to the constraints of motherhood. Likewise, the constraints of working during the pandemic. In June 2021, Leung's exhibition 'Portraits' opened at Museum Abteiberg in Mönchengladbach. Unable to travel, Leung 'started to realize how much I could let happen without me there. I've never really done that. It was a plan, but I've always turned up for installs. And, suddenly, I couldn't because of COVID, and because I had a kid. Suddenly, the scores had to work 20 times harder. And then the work was much better. I was so much braver because I had to put my trust into somebody else.'

All of the things I do in
my practice are not because
I'm good at them, but
because I'm bad at them.

Ghislaine Leung



'Portraits' included *Browns* (2021) for which the score ('All available walls painted in brown to standard picture-hanging height') really doesn't convey the unleashed colonic impact of flooding the interior of a museum with watery paint the colour of baby poo. Leung wouldn't get to see her own exhibition until four months after it opened.

There is a thread connecting many of the artists Leung cites during our conversations – among them Stanley Brouwn, Trisha Donnelly, Lee Lozano, Agnes Martin and Charlotte Posenenske – of refusal, withdrawal, non-compliance. She admires their fortitude, their cool, their integrity. Refusal is not something that comes naturally to her. 'I'm not a "no" person. I'm very verbose. I'm giggly.' She tells me that she used to have an alarm that went off on her phone every day that read: 'SAY NO.' She recounts a story of Donnelly delivering a talk at the Museum of Modern Art in New York and, at the end, asking if there were any questions. Then saying: 'No questions.' Leung is in awe, but she also wants to resist her own instinct to control things. In her talks, she does the opposite: rather than preparing a presentation, she invites a collective Q&A. 'All of the things I do in my practice are not because I'm good at them, but because I'm bad at them.'

Leung and I talk a lot about the expectations placed on artists – the enduring clichés of modernism that romanticize obsessive behaviour, privation, the rejection of family life and, on the flipside, the intersecting factors that make art-making impossible for many people. Her display for the 2023 Turner Prize exhibition included *Hours* (2022), a work that related to *Times* but which represented the studio hours available to her through a wall painting of a gridded timesheet.

Hours and *Times* are not only about childcare, but the full range of things she has to fit into the hours around making art: a support structure that includes salaried employment. Working for a living – possibly even in a job you enjoy – isn't part of the modernist vision of the ideal artist, disengaged from normal life. It is, however, the reality for most artists, though squeamishness around admitting it endures. At the Renaissance Society, Leung showed *Jobs* (2024), a poster baldly listing all the positions she had held over a 20-year period, including curatorial and lecturing roles as well as babysitting, various internships and 'mother'.

At the time of our meeting, Leung is working towards an exhibition at Kunsthalle Basel. She is thinking of calling it 'Commitments'. Some years ago, she asked the director of an institution what they looked for in an artist. They said 'commitment'. This answer gnaws at her. 'What do we understand as commitment? If it's the capacity to give our all to the practice, what does that mean for life, especially when labour conditions in the art world are not conducive to being able to support life?' She locates the shame she's felt about having other jobs and becoming a mother as internalized anxiety that she will be judged insufficiently committed as an artist. 'I want to change that, because the capacity to work in other roles is what allows me to make art.'

Babysitter
Flyer Distributor
Retail Intern
Charity Volunteer
Graphic Design Intern
Massage Therapist
Retail Assistant
Glass Collector
Call Centre Operator
Studio Assistant
Retail Assistant
Gallery Volunteer
Studio Manager
Flyer Designer
Videographer
Casual Gallery Assistant
Art Handling Technician
Casual Art Handling Technician
Editorial Intern
Writer
Curatorial Intern
Curatorial Assistant
Audio Visual Technician
Distribution Manager
Curator
Associate Lecturer
Visiting Tutor
Visiting Speaker
Mentor
Head of Programme
Artist
Artist Assistant
Casual Teacher
Editor
Hourly Paid Lecturer
Trustee
Lecturer
Mother

R

GHISLAINE LEUNG
HOLDINGS JAN 20–APR 14, 2024

Opposite page

Browns, 2021, *Score: All available walls in brown to standard picture hanging height.* and *Onions*, 2021, framed oil painting, 'Portraits', installation view. Courtesy: the artist; Museum Abteiberg, Mönchengladbach, and Maxwell Graham Gallery, New York; photograph: Achim Kukulies

Above

Jobs, 2024, *Score: A list of jobs held by the artist.* 'Holdings', installation view. Courtesy: the artist; the Renaissance Society, Chicago, and Maxwell Graham Gallery, New York

A late inclusion in 'Portraits' was *Onions* (2021), for which her description simply read: 'Framed oil painting'. Specifically, it was a reproduction of a small painting by Pierre-Auguste Renoir that had once belonged to Leung's German-Jewish grandparents, sold under duress as the family fled persecution in the 1930s. The reproduction hung in Leung's house growing up. She had always known it as 'the onions'. In fact, it is a still life of pomegranates. *Onions* acknowledges the broader context of Leung's family and its relationship to art, but the title is also a reminder of how little control there is over interpretation once art enters the world. You paint pomegranates. They see onions ●

Hettie Judah is a writer and curator. Her latest book, *Acts of Creation: On Art and Motherhood*, will be published by Thames & Hudson in July.