

S U S A N J A C O B S

the ANTS in the  
*are* idiom



**BUXTON  
CONTEMP  
ORARY**

Curated by Jacqueline Doughty

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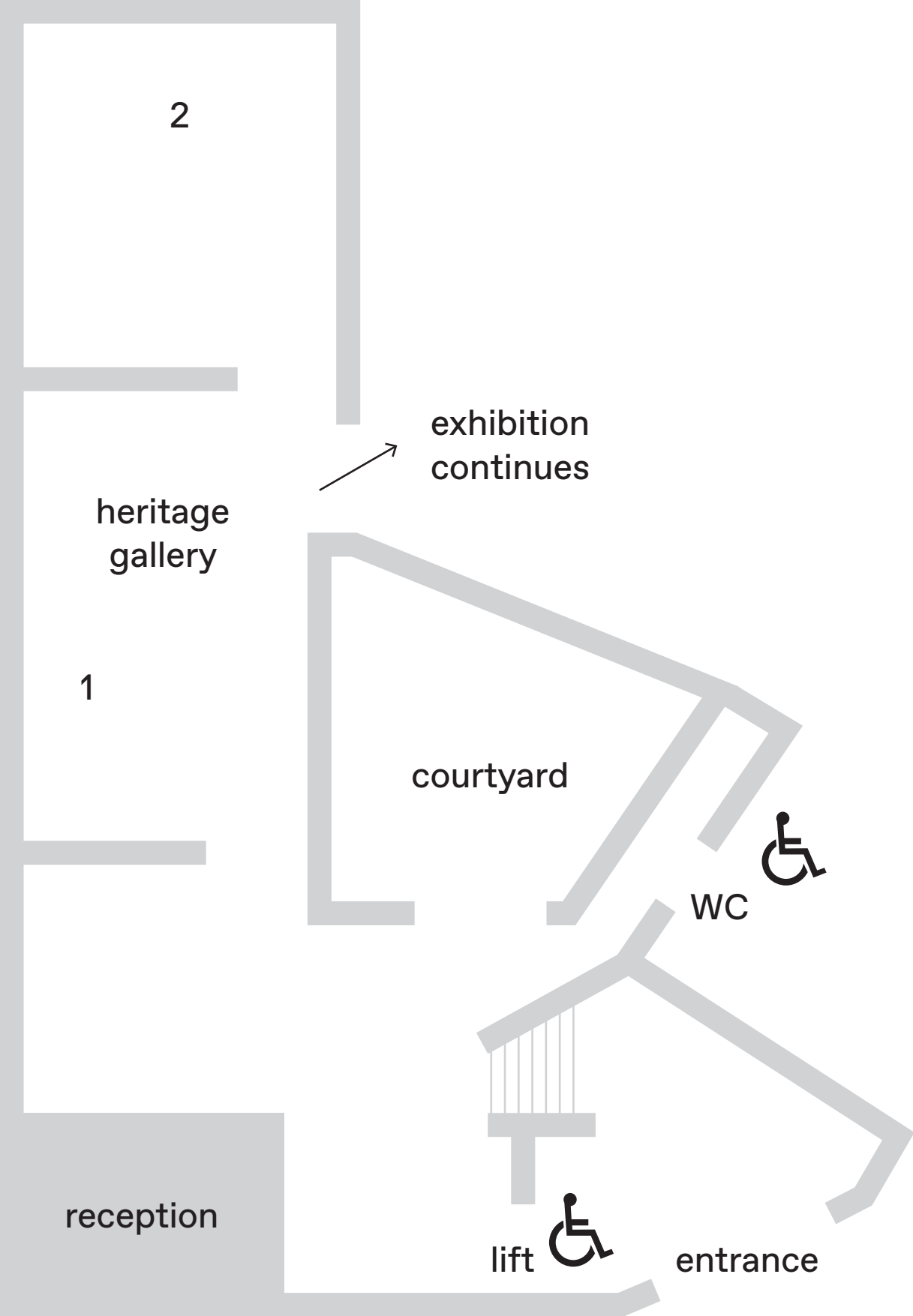
## The ants are in the idiom

*The ants are in the idiom* is a presentation of newly commissioned work by Australian-born, London-based artist Susan Jacobs. A meditation on the relationship between language and matter, the exhibition is an expansive sculptural environment that draws the viewer into a web of visual riddles.

Jacobs' poetic approach to materials is underpinned by research into systems of thought that have shaped – and mis-shaped – human knowledge. Playful allusions to science, psychology and mythology jostle with visual puns and word games. Enlivened by the imaginative potential of misinterpretation, the exhibition is a rhizomatic sculptural network that stimulates a process of associative looking in the viewer.

The artist has developed this work over several years, experimenting with materials in her studio to articulate a sculptural language informed by cumulative layers of environmental observation and historical research. *The ants are in the idiom* could be read as an allegory for a way of working as an artist or, on a more universal level, for the human drive to make meaning of our surroundings.

# Ground Floor Floorplan



1

**Susan Jacobs**

born 1977 Sydney; lives and works in London

*Hindsight 20/20 2022*

gypsum, acrylic, gold and silver leaf

Collection of the artist

The word 'hindsight' suggests the action of looking back or behind. It denotes a clearer understanding with the benefit of time, as in the saying 'hindsight is 20/20'.

The gypsum tablets in this work have been cast from a rear vision mirror, found lying on the ground during a walk in the London streets. The play of light on the mirror's smashed surface caught the eye of the artist and her friend, creating a shared optical illusion, a reflected apparition of the Virgin Mary.

The artist has cast this found object again and again, gilding the replicas in lustrous metallic leaf in a futile attempt to repeat her momentary vision. Reminiscent of mosaics or Byzantine icons, the glistening surfaces invoke the illusions that sometimes appear in our peripheral vision. *Hindsight 20/20* prompts a consideration of the way sensory perceptions are mediated by the mind and refracted by preconceived systems of belief and knowledge.

2

**Susan Jacobs**

born 1977 Sydney; lives and works in London

*A Recipe for Scorpions* 2021

ceramic, steel, clay, plastic, infrared lamps, electronic mist system, holy basil oil, deionized water

Collection of the artist

This installation is based upon a recipe for scorpions proposed by Belgian physician and chemist Jean Baptiste Van Helmont (1577–1644) to demonstrate the theory of spontaneous generation. Dating back to ancient Greece, the erroneous notion that living organisms could arise from decaying matter, without parents or seed, persisted throughout the Enlightenment until it was finally disproven in the mid-19th century.

The emphasis in this work is on psychology as much as science; on the cognitive errors that lead to fantastically wrong conclusions. In order to make sense of its surroundings, the human brain employs mental shortcuts, called 'heuristics', to screen out excess stimuli and process information efficiently. The resulting perceptual biases can lead us to see patterns and relationships where none exist.

For the artist, these misinterpretations are generative. Mistaken connections lead to new and fruitful possibilities, making a case for the imaginative potential of getting things wrong.

3

**Susan Jacobs**

born 1977 Sydney; lives and works in London

*A Recipe for Mice* 2022

ceramic vessels, ceramic wheat grains,  
Edwardian deadstock underwear

Collection of the artist

A companion piece to *A Recipe for Scorpions* in the Heritage Gallery, this work recreates another of Jean Baptiste van Helmont's spontaneous generation theories. A vessel is stuffed with vintage underwear and tiny grains of clay 'wheat' in a futile endeavour to spark a germ of life.

Slightly larger clay pellets resemble mouse poison or excrement, an abject touch that speaks to the artist's interest in hierarchies of value and arbitrary distinctions between noble and debased materials. The work draws parallels to 17th century still life painting traditions, specifically the *sottobosco* (forest floor) genre, which featured lowly or maligned creatures associated with otherworldly darkness and the recesses of the human psyche.

Multiple allusions to the word 'bloom' evoke the sprouting of new vegetation, the growth of mould, the yeasty loaves of bread known as 'bloomers' and the capacious underwear of the same name, which in this work, fortunately, fails to generate baby mice despite its fertile nomenclature.

4

**Susan Jacobs**

born 1977 Sydney; lives and works in London

*Cope (Tree)* 2022

bronze, mixed media

Collection of the artist

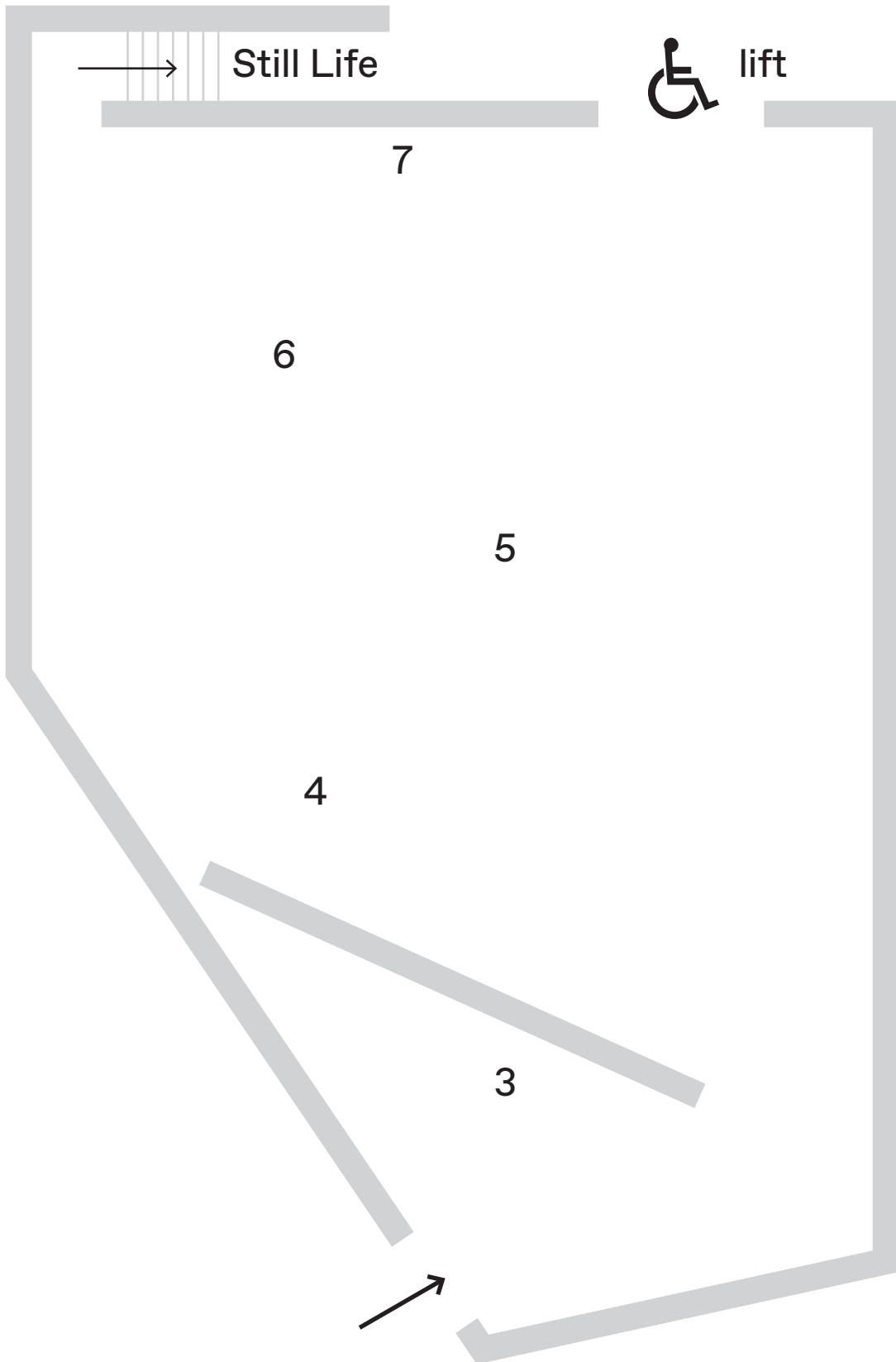
The delicate bronze forms on this tree-like armature have been cast from sycamore seeds that appear to spell the word 'cope'. Describing a steadfastness in the face of hardship, 'cope' is a reassuring word for challenging times. Reflecting upon her discovery of this poignant message on a city street, the artist writes,

The human tendency to seek patterns in random information can see false conclusions dressed as 'signs from the universe'. The temptation to form links where there are none is a human trait, both flawed and psychologically affirming. The double take or misapprehension that happens in such chance encounters sharpens consciousness and unleashes the magic of the mind's invention.

When a word is uttered over and over it begins to seem strange; reiteration causes confusion rather than clarity. The replication and clustering of the seeds in this work recall the cognitive mechanism of pattern recognition, which finds meanings in repetition that can lead us astray.



# Ground Floor Floorplan (Continued)



5

**Susan Jacobs**

born 1977 Sydney; lives and works in London

*Market Fray* 2020–22

mixed media

Collection of the artist

*Market Fray* sprawls across the gallery like a rhizomatic network connected by myriad visual and verbal associations, or what the artist terms ‘equivalences’. The artist has employed a methodology of ‘literalness’ to generate sculptural form, riffing on analogies and like-for-like substitutions. Casts of curling citrus peel resemble shed snake skins and make visual parallels with extruded clay spirals, which in turn evoke drill bits or shaved wood, links in a multiplying chain of references.

Across the four bodies of work that constitute this installation, references to urban environments such as street markets are evident, as are allusions to the hostile architectures that control behaviour in public spaces, from bollards to the metal studs and spikes that dissuade people and birds from resting on architectural features.

The pathway each viewer chooses to take through this three-dimensional riddle will guide their interpretation of the work, bringing an element of chance and contingency to the engagement.

## *Pasteur's Grapes Inverted as The Lovers*

wood, epoxy, silk, acrylic, bronze, ceramic, plastic, milk protein fibre, metal

This work is based upon an image of the model used by French chemist and microbiologist Louis Pasteur (1822–95) to demonstrate the principle of fermentation, one of several experiments he conducted in 1862 to disprove the theory of spontaneous generation. One bunch of grapes is exposed to air and another is wrapped in sterilised cotton wool, to show that only grapes exposed to airborne yeast spores would ferment.

When Jacobs inverted the two bunches of grapes, the tableau reminded her of the painting *The Lovers* (1928) by French artist Rene Magritte (1898–1967), with one head covered, and one revealed. For Jacobs this work is, 'a fusion of research and subjectivity, an homage to enduring love and a reflection on mortality during a time of extreme isolation.'

*A Saint, a Scholar and a Nasty Streak*

felt, epoxy, graphite, hemp, Perspex, steel, bronze, ceramic, acrylic

This work plays upon various forms of headwear. A trash-strewn halo is fashioned from anti-nesting spikes, the type installed to protect buildings from the indignity of roosting birds. Systems of value are questioned in an assemblage that considers the word 'mortarboard' and its associations with scholarly achievement and manual labour. A perforated rubber cap, used by hairdressers to separate and 'streak' strands of hair, is transformed into a helmet.

## *Market Mesh*

### *Market Mesh (Rotten Rare)*

gypsum, acrylic, plastic, Perspex

### *Market Mesh (Calendar)*

plastic test tube stands, Perspex, gypsum, acrylic, milk protein fibre, mint fibre, bleached flax

### *Market Mesh (The Noble Rot)*

gypsum, shellac, acrylic, Perspex, silk moire

### *Market Mesh (Bag Hide)*

epoxy, graphite

### *Market Mesh (Fox Hole)*

wood, shellac, Perspex

A steel mesh structure displays curious forms that blur the line between found and constructed object. Cast morsels of mushroom, carrot and raisin are displayed like rotten remains, reimagined as rarefied commodities or calcified reliquaries. Notions of value are teased out further in an epoxy and graphite replica of a spread-eagled polyethylene shopping bag. Its form suggests a flayed animal hide and carries a historical reference to an ancient form of currency – ox hide ingots – shaped like livestock and equal in weight and value, but easier to transport than their animal equivalents.

## *Tables of Contents*

### *Easter*

brass, wood

### *Apple Massage*

gallium, acrylic, plastic, metal, wax, epoxy, ceramic, wood, heat lamp

### *Bag O' Bones*

porcelain, stoneware, tea, steel, wax, cotton

### *Bread So White it's Blue*

zinc, linen, cotton, wood, gypsum

### *Brains and Brawn*

ceramic, copper, epoxy, graphite, pigment, synthetic sinew

### *Fruit Bones*

bronze, acrylic, epoxy wax, oil paint

### *Walnut Veneer*

epoxy, acrylic, shellac, wood

### *Limb, Gauntlet*

ceramic, acrylic, plastic, anti-nest spike

### *Spiral Bits*

ceramic, ink, wood

### *Hemlocked*

compressed hemp, acrylic, hemlock wood, iron, pigmented glass wax, bronze

### *Animalls*

ceramic, glass, bronze, wax, metal

This installation consists of an array of sculptural objects and assemblages displayed on tables, like the trash and treasure left unsold at the end of the day in a flea market. Correlative forms draw from cultural, historical and biological references, merging animal, vegetable and mineral. Surfaces are withered, cracked, mouldy; there are tableaux of bones, fruit and flesh, all contributing to a sense of mortality and decay reminiscent of the 17th century vanitas genre of still-life painting.

6

**Susan Jacobs**

born 1977 Sydney; lives and works in London

*Understanding Crossed Wires 2022*

wire, mixed media

Collection of the artist



7

**Susan Jacobs**

born 1977 Sydney; lives and works in London

*We Fill the World with Cracks*  
(*A Garden Path Sentence*) 2022  
ceramic, mortar

Collection of the artist

The exhibition title *The ants are in the idiom* is a play upon the linguistically slippery ‘garden path sentence’, in which ambiguous syntax leads to misinterpretation. This work is based upon a method of mending fissures in brick walls with mortar that is inscribed with the dates of repair.

Imagining a tracery of repairs without the bricks, the artist has created a mortar wall drawing that functions as an etymological diagram. A reference to the exhibition title, this tree-like map charts the journey of the word *Answer* from its Old English origin to its contemporary meaning, beginning with *Andswaru* (*Ant* ‘front, forehead’, *Swaru*, *Swesian* ‘to swear’, ‘sworn statement’) and ending with ‘solution to a problem’.

For the artist, the answer to sculptural, material problems often lies in language, in its idioms and layered significations. Tracing the origins of language reveals hidden pathways to root words where the physical and linguistic meet. In art and in life, language and matter are inextricably linked.