



## Leeds Arts University alumni explore gender and identity in new exhibition, *Middle of the Road*

*Middle of the Road*

16 September - 15 December 2022

BA (Hons) Fine Art alumni Jenny Beard and Connor Shields present two new commissions as part of their exhibition, *Middle of the Road*.

*Middle of the Road* is a collaborative exhibition between Beard; a contemporary painter whose exploratory process is built upon automatic drawing and abstract shapes; and Shields; an artist who uses dichotomous materials such as steel, knitted wool and concrete as an inquiry into the nature of maleness.

This exhibition is a collaborative approach that ties together their practices through commonalities on materials, textures and colours. The art is concerned with questions around gender, queerness, class, northern identity and dialect.

Pops of vibrant colour, re-appropriation of industrial materials and road signs, abstract notions and shapes characterised by immediacy and rawness emerge as a humorous and playful critique of class and gender prejudice. Similarly, the use of language in both practices act as a conversation on working class identity and gender performativity whilst revealing tensions within toxic masculinity.

**Leeds Arts University Curator, Dr Marianna Tsionki, said:** “We are delighted to present new commissions by two outstanding graduates (2018) of our BA Fine Art, Jenny Beard and Connor Shields. For our upcoming exhibition at Vernon Street Gallery Jenny and Connor combine forces to explore class, identity and gender in painting and sculpture.”

*Middle of the Road* runs from 16 September - 15 December 2022 at Vernon Street Gallery, Leeds Arts University. More information, including full opening hours can be found at [www.leeds-art.ac.uk/middle-of-the-road](http://www.leeds-art.ac.uk/middle-of-the-road).

-ENDS-

### For images, interviews and further information:

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Press are invited to preview the exhibition on Thursday 25 September, 5-7pm, Vernon Street Gallery. Please contact [klara.piechocki-brown@leeds-art.ac.uk](mailto:klara.piechocki-brown@leeds-art.ac.uk) if you would like to attend.

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## Listings information:

### Middle of the Road

16 September - 15 December 2022, Monday to Saturday 10-4pm

Vernon Street Gallery, Leeds Arts University, LS2 8PH

[www.leeds-art.ac.uk/middle-of-the-road](http://www.leeds-art.ac.uk/middle-of-the-road)

### Images:

*Jenny Beard, Disingenuous, 2022, Oil & emulsion on canvas / Connor Shields, Sandbag, 2022, Plaster, sand, resin.*

**Jenny Beard** is a painter working within contemporary painting, and her process is built upon automatic drawing, using digital tools to create and manipulate sketches. Abstract imagery is used to explore optical space, depth, and flatness. The work is open ended and explorative, dealing with the paradox of appropriating abstract marks for abstract paintings. During this mimetic experience, the work could be read as representational. In Jenny's text-based pieces, the themes of gender and class are explored. The paintings are used as a tool for 'thinking out loud', as the artist comes to terms with her own uncomfortable relationship with expressing emotions and addressing issues. The observations, questions and musings are tinged with self-deprecation, humour and acceptance. Digital methods are embraced in Jenny's practice, but the work is always finished traditionally and meticulously. Painting doesn't die; instead, digital exploration opens up new ways of seeing and laying paint, which creates a refreshing relationship between artist and painting.

**Connor Shields** is an artist practising in Leeds. His practice is an inquiry into the nature of maleness through the use of dichotomous materials such as steel, knitted wool and concrete. An investigation of these industrial materials and craft techniques realises a visually powerful dynamic in which ideas of 'working-class masculinity' are explored. Originating from Middlesbrough, Shields' work develops as a response to experiences of post-industrial upbringing. The process of making is explorative, combining often contrasting objects which develop a sense of tension within the work. His current series of work, Shields takes inspiration from construction sites and the imagery associated with these spaces. Random assemblages of objects feel almost sculptural in how they are stacked, bundled, twisted and entwined together.

## Leeds Arts University

Founded in 1846 as the Leeds Government School of Art and Design, Leeds Arts University has contributed significantly to the development of art education in Britain and across the world. In 2016 the University was granted Taught Degree Awarding Powers, and in 2017 was awarded full university status, making it the only specialist arts university in the North of England.

Leeds Arts University has been recognised for its industry-standard facilities at the Whatuni awards (winners in 2019 and 2016, runner up in 2020), and was announced winner for Student Support in 2020. In 2021 Leeds Arts University appointed acclaimed musician Skin to the role of Chancellor.