

I FELT THAT

CURATED BY JOSEPHINE BAILEY

30 JUNE – 3 JULY 2022

An interview with Mhairi Bell Moodie



Q: Can you please introduce yourself and your practice as a documentary photographer?

A: I'm a portrait and documentary photographer from Scotland, and now based in Liverpool. After achieving my BA in Professional Photography from Edinburgh College in 2016, I went straight into freelance life, working predominantly with charities and non-for-profit organisations. My personal work primarily focuses on women, young people and the queer community. The aim of my photography is to highlight and empower marginalised communities - both those I photograph, and the viewers.

Q: Why did you want to be a part of I felt that? What drew you to the open call?

A: Earlier this year, I created a series called "bleed" which was a way for me to process the abnormal bleeding I'd been experiencing over the previous year and a bit. I had shown it in London in March, and almost immediately after that, saw the open call for I Felt That. I'd had such a positive response from "bleed" - and is often the case, you realise that when you start to speak about something so personal, you find others experiencing the same issues. The open call just seemed to be a perfect fit with what I was trying to do with my work. Experimenting with new mediums gave me the confidence to apply for things I previously wouldn't have, including I Felt That. And I'm so glad I took the risk!

Q: In your application to this project, you spoke about your work "bleed". It was very impactful for me and definitely resonates with my own experience. Could you talk about the thought process behind it?

A: As a photographer, my initial instinct was to create photographs. I had taken snaps on my phone in various medical settings, but I found it hard to navigate appointments as both a patient and an artist. When the bleeding and pain initially started, I expected that a cause would be found quickly, and therefore treated - but as the months went on, it became apparent that wasn't the case. Eventually I felt the urge to make some kind of work retrospectively about my experience. I had kept track of the bleeding days for practical reasons, but at the start of this year, when I was bleeding for more days than ever before, I wondered how I could depict this through art. I was drawn to paint, rather than photography, and the dots became a visual way to document the days I'd been bleeding. When I physically saw how many days I had been bleeding, I

actually shocked myself. It reassured me that I was not exaggerating my symptoms, that my symptoms were very real and very valid. Accompanied by my written diary entries, I hoped that sharing my experiences in this way would highlight gynaecological healthcare, particularly in queer people like myself.

Q: What is the work you've decided to show in the exhibition?

A: I wanted to take what I'd done with the dots in "bleed" and make it even more impactful. Using the same technique of painting red dots, I instead used sanitary products to create a mobile in a piece I have called "Your Calendar is Wrong". In 2020, I became aware of NASA's 13th constellation - Ophiuchus. While many pondered what this could mean for their zodiac sign, I wondered how a calendar designed by women would look. I worked out that if we actually had 13 months in a year, each month would last 28 days (with just one day left over). As anyone who menstruates knows, a cycle is 28 days. This made much more sense to me and gave me a new appreciation for the typically tainted number 13. I also find it fitting that there are 13 of us in this exhibition! The mobile challenges the patriarchal documentation of time - and emphasises the misogyny of medicine, featuring details which represent contraception, menstrual cycles and the sexualisation of the female body.



Mhairi Bell-Moodie, Your Calendar is Wrong, 2022

Secondly, I created a small set of self-portraits in period stained underwear. I wanted to add some humanity to the red dot theme, but also play on the idea of the visible/invisible woman - another recurrent theme from our workshops.

Q: How have you found working with such an array of artists over the last three months? Have you worked collaboratively in the past? How have you found the experience of sharing ideas before they've fully formed to the group?

A: It has been an incredible experience! I have learned so much about art history and other artists, as well as my own practice - but also so much about medical history and my own body. I have never worked collaboratively before and was a bit nervous about how it would work logistically. Typically, I would create work and then submit it to exhibitions, so it felt back-to-front to apply for an exhibition and not know what I would be exhibiting. It was a challenging experience and I really felt out of my comfort zone at times. But the group was so supportive of each other - I felt so comfortable sharing my experiments and work-in-progress and appreciated the feedback I was given. Ultimately, we were all in the same situation with our work, but also with our bodies. I was particularly moved and comforted when Jenny Williamson noted in one workshop that it feels appropriate that work around pain and bodies might be rough or unfinished, because sometimes we can only make what our bodies are capable of doing. If ever there was an exhibition where this was acceptable, it would be I Felt That!

Q: Has there been a "defining moment" or research point for you throughout the project?

A: The medical history lecture was a real eye opener for me, as was reading Caroline Ciado Perez's book *Invisible Women*. Both highlighted in immense detail how the patriarchy endangers the lives of women on a daily basis. It's frustrating to realise how ingrained misogyny is in the medical world - but it's also important to be more informed. Having this knowledge has better equipped me to advocate for myself. As an artist, I've gained confidence from working out-with my usual remits. The research is ongoing, as is the development of my practice. I'm grateful to have had the opportunity to be involved in something so challenging, powerful and poignant