

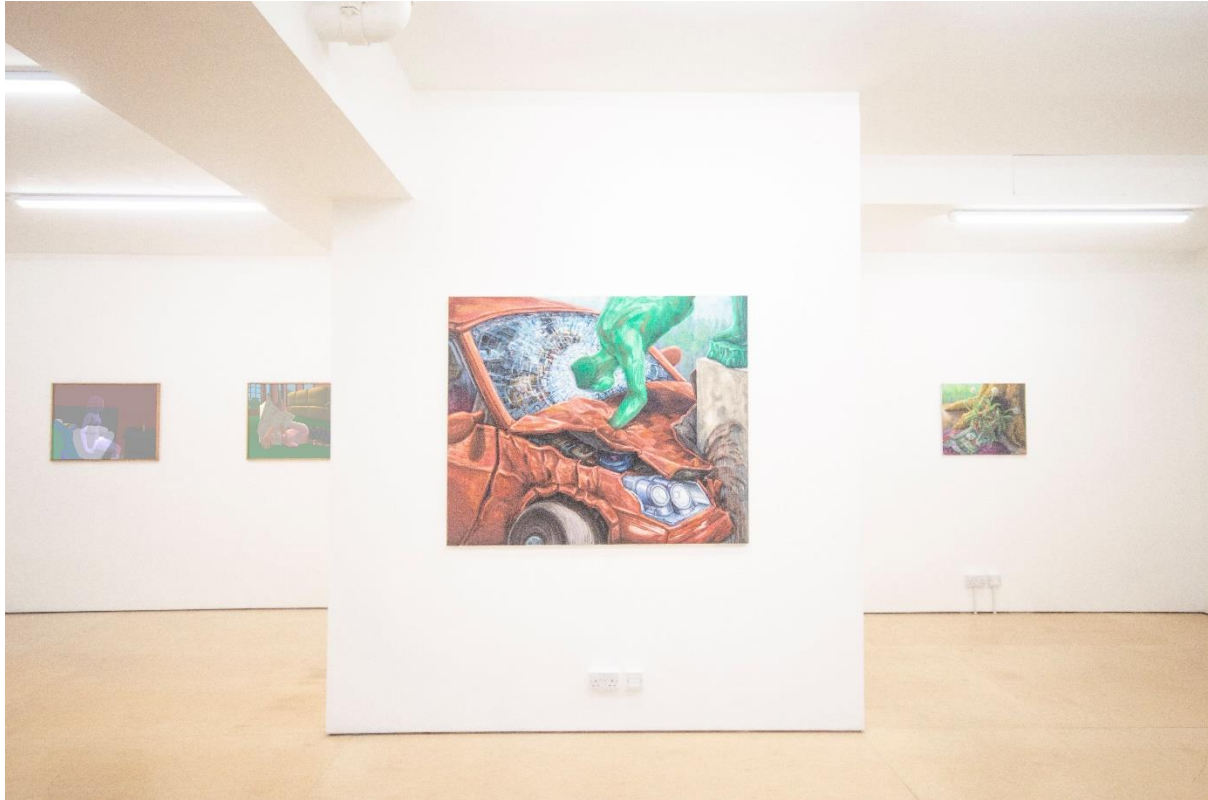
Character Creator

Curated by Bob Bicknell-Knight

Bob Bicknell-Knight, Jamie Janković, Cassie McQuater, Petra Szemán, Willem Weismann and Stacia Yeapanis

14th March – 14th April 2024

SEAGER, Distillery Tower, 2 Mill Ln, London SE8 4HP, UK



The second in a four-part exhibition series exploring how artists make work with and about video games, *Character Creator* investigates the idea of the avatar, second selves and lives lived online. The exhibition reflects upon how artists use video games as a vehicle for speaking about representation in the digital space, escaping into virtual worlds and finding oneself through the act of play.

Each exhibition in the series is accompanied by a reading list of books that inspired the ideas behind the exhibition, as well as a number of books selected by the exhibiting artists that inform their practice, available to read within the gallery space whilst sitting on a custom-built bench. As the series of shows continue, the separate bookshelves will slowly fill with books, effectively becoming an archive of all four exhibitions.

Within the world of video games, a character creator is a tool, usually appearing at the beginning of the game, that enables the player to design and customise the avatar that they will be playing as. The options available to a player will vary from game to game. In some the differences may simply be cosmetic, like changing a character's hairstyle or height, whilst in other, more complicated experiences, the player will be able to modify their avatar's mental and psychological state, adding in-game points to certain social and physical attributes. In many cases, these subtle changes will alter how the game world reacts to the player, echoing how, in the physical world, your personality and outward appearance will affect how you move through life.

The works included in *Character Creator* highlight and comment upon the avatars we design to represent ourselves within the games we play, and what that says about the human condition.

As you enter the gallery, Petra Szemán's voice from the film *Monomyth: gaiden / Departure* (2018), echoes throughout the exhibition space. The work is the first of a four-part series exploring the artist's

relationship to their digital avatar, Yourself, as well as the processes involved in the creation of a multi-layered image world. As a self-aware protagonist moving along the frayed edges of fictional and real worlds shaped by narrative traditions, Yourself attempts to navigate landscapes that have become oversaturated with movies and fiction. The narration also implies an interplay of roles between the Character and the Player, describing how visual decisions such as clothing or piercings might be driven by either party, at one moment recounting how their 'real life body' had to be changed to better represent the latest, levelled-up version of the avatar.

Several paintings by Willem Weismann are present throughout the exhibition, depicting scenes related to decay and a slow decline into chaos. Weismann's paintings, although not explicitly about video games, inhabit a hazy second space, an alternate world built, seemingly, atop our own, which a cast of characters appear to dwell within, carving out a meek existence. Both *soy bean man* (2023) and *dandelion man* (2023) present the heads of figures overwhelmed by plant life, potentially referencing the vegetable-based diets of our collective future, whilst *airbag* (2023) depicts a car that's crashed into a statue, its occupants frozen in their seats. Weismann's figures, especially those seen in *airbag* (2023) and other recent works within his oeuvre, become a mirror, reflecting our own anxieties and afflictions, much like the avatars that we inhabit and live through within video game worlds.

Considering those who find solace in video game spaces, Jamie Janković's *A Woman on the Internet (or, The Eternal Scream)* (2021), combines filmic moments and poetic subtleties in an experimental documentary format. The film explores the jarring juxtapositions of friction, toxicity, joy and liberation that trans people, queers and femmes experience when playing as their own custom character creations in video game spaces. The film follows a series of perspectives and first-hand experiences, whilst showing footage captured from within the video game *Grand Theft Auto V* (2013), where an avatar of Jankovic explores the landscape of the game. This type of film is called a machinima, a filmmaking technique that utilizes video game graphics and engines to create animated movies or narratives.

Created within the video game world of *The Sims 2* (2004), Stacia Yeapanis' prints *Waking Up Transparent* (2006) and *Standing In My Stomach* (2006) are an early example of artists using videogames as a medium to produce their artworks. Part of Yeapanis' project *My Life as a Sim* (2005 – 2007), the works depict, as is a repeated motif within the exhibition, an avatar modelled after Yeapanis' own likeness in a series of poses and situations. Instead of living a life of normality, however, Yeapanis' avatar appears to be distorted within the game world. When originally producing the work Yeapanis was interested in producing these glitches, exploring how they could be perceived as emotional and psychological metaphors for her virtual double. From the characters perspective, these strange moments might be identified as signs from God or the universe trying to communicate.

Reflecting on the virtual beings we encounter within digital spaces, Bob Bicknell-Knight's paintings *Hey! Listen!* (2022), *Can You Help Us With Some Items* (2022) and *Why Buy Tomorrow What You Can Buy Today* (2022) contain quotes spoken by a variety of Non-Player Characters (NPCs) from different video games, combined with video game landscapes. An NPC is a character in a video game that is controlled by the game's artificial intelligence rather than by the player. The paintings explore short one-line audio clips that are spoken by NPCs. These short sentences are called barks and can be random or in reaction to the player or events happening within the game. The phrases are often repeatedly spoken to the player, sometimes heard hundreds or even thousands of times. These works are hybrid paintings, beginning as digitally edited images which are then printed onto canvas and painted onto with acrylic paint, with the artist's hand interacting with the digital image. The paintings are held in a series of elaborate 3D printed frames, taking inspiration from traditional frames from the 18th century that deliberately drew attention away from the subject of the work to emphasise the artificial nature of the painted representation.

Utilising assets repatriated from two distinctly different video games, Cassie McQuater's *HALO (V)* (2016) and *(VI)* (2016) are part of a series of machinima reenactments and re-visualizations of the military science fiction video game franchise *Halo* (2001 – present). The characters within the works are taken or modelled after avatars from *Halo* and *Dream Stripper* (2005), a game where the player controls an array of customisable female erotic dancers. Each work moves the characters through found or stock "dying" animation loops, whilst koi, dining chairs, asteroids, guns, flowers, torches, pinball machines, pillows, and remnants of suburbia explode around them. McQuater's work brings to the

foreground some of the juxtaposing dominant cultural tropes and motifs of videogame culture; the trivialization of death and the depiction of the female body as a sexualized object.

Reading List:

- The Candy House by Jennifer Egan, 2022 (recommended by Bob Bicknell-Knight)
- Klara and the Sun by Kazuo Ishiguro, 2021 (recommended by Bob Bicknell-Knight)
- Fake Accounts by Lauren Oyler, 2021 (recommended by Bob Bicknell-Knight)
- Things I Learned from Mario's Butt by Laura Kate Dale, 2021 (recommended by Bob Bicknell-Knight)
- Videogame Atlas: Mapping Interactive Worlds by Luke Caspar Pearson and Sandra Youkhana, 2022 (recommended by Jamie Janković)
- The Complete Stories of Leonora Carrington by Leonora Carrington, 2017 (recommended by Cassie McQuater)
- The Anime Machine: A Media Theory of Animation by Thomas LaMarre, 2009 (recommended by Petra Szemán)
- Animatic Apparatus, The: Animation, Vitality, and the Futures of the Image by Deborah Levitt, 2018 (recommended by Petra Szemán)
- The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction by Ursula K. Le Guin, 1988 (recommended by Willem Weismann)
- In Watermelon Sugar by Richard Brautigan, 1968 (recommended by Willem Weismann)
- Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture by Henry Jenkins, 1992 (recommended by Stacia Yeapanis)

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Bob Bicknell-Knight (b. 1996, Ipswich, UK) is a multidisciplinary artist and curator working with digital media producing films, paintings, sculptures and installations. His practice comes from a place of pessimism, exploring power structures that proliferate online and in new forms of technology. Bicknell-Knight runs the online curatorial platform *isthisit?*, and has previously curated exhibitions at The Art Station, Saxmundham, UK (2023); [Senne], Brussels, BE (2021); Harlesden High Street, London, UK (2019); Annka Kultys Gallery, London, UK (2018) and arebyte Gallery, London, UK (2018). Selected solo exhibitions include Sunday School at Number 1 Main Road, Berlin, DE (2023); Insert Coin at CABLE DEPOT, London, UK (2023); Non-Player Character at Klaipėda Exhibition Hall, Klaipėda, LT (2023); Digging History at INDUSTRA, Brno, CZ (2021); Eat The Rich at Galerie Sono, Paris, FR (2021); It's Always Day One at Office Impart, Berlin, DE (2021) and Bit Rot at Broadway Gallery, Letchworth, UK (2020).

Jamie Janković (b. 1995, Plymouth, UK) is an artist filmmaker, poet and gigantic gay nerd who moonlights as a video game necromancer, their practice reanimating existing video game worlds and filming inside of them to create spaces for new narratives. They are currently working on new entries in their ongoing series of film works, *Identity Quest*, exploring the psychological relationship between themselves and their favourite video game characters when they were growing up and the mixture of euphoria and toxicity that is the general trans/queer gaming experience. Their favourite video game character of all time is Fran from Final Fantasy XII, who they believe made them trans based simply on their aesthetic and maximum level of slay. Jamie has an MA in Experimental Film from Kingston School of Art and has previously shown work at Milan Machinima Festival, London Short Film Festival, BUoY Arts Center Tokyo, The White Pube, Oberhausen International Short Film Festival and Scottish Queer International Film Festival amongst others.

Cassie McQuater (B. 1987, USA) is a new media and video game artist living and working in Los Angeles. Her practice involves hours of surfing the net, mining for digital artifacts, and repurposing them as a way to reflect on and reinvent our relationship with interactive storytelling. Grounded in the practice of net art, investigating networked systems of digital power, her work often deals with themes of cyberfeminism while critiquing and seeking to subvert sexist tropes in video games and media. She received her BFA in painting from the University of Michigan School of Art & Design in 2009, and she taught herself to code and started working in interactive media and video games in 2013. Recently, her work has been shown and featured as part of the Smithsonian American Art Arcade, with New Museum's First Look: New Art Online and has won awards including the 2019 Independent Games

Festival Nuovo Award, the Rhizome micro-grant for net.art, and the 2019 Lumen Prize for Art and Technology.

Petra Szemán (b. 1994, Budapest, HU) is a moving image artist working with animation and game-like landscapes. Their practice focuses on the murky borderlands along the arbitrary line separating real and fictional, and the kind of lives and experiences that are possible there. Using a virtual version of themselves as a protagonist journeying through animatic realms, they explore liminal spaces and threshold situations, looking to dissect the ways our memories and selves are constructed within a landscape oversaturated with fiction (both on- and off-screen). Turning away from thinking of the cyberspace as a radically 'other' realm, Petra hopes to walk the line situated between dystopian and utopian frameworks, eyes set on new queer horizons. Szemán is a BA Fine Art graduate from Newcastle University (2013-2017), and has exhibited since at BALTIC Centre for Contemporary Art in Gateshead, Fotomuseum Winterthur in Switzerland, NTT InterCommunication Centre in Tokyo, as well as various galleries across England, Continental Europe and East-Asia.

Willem Weismann (b. 1977, NL) studied at ArtEZ Institute for the Arts, Arnhem (NL) from 1997 to 2002 and Goldsmiths College, London (UK) from 2003 to 2004. Discovering what lies behind a facade, or beneath our feet beyond the smooth surface of the pavement, is a central motif in Weismann's work. His works depict absurd urban environments; various rooms cluttered with debris of contemporary life and the excess of consumerism. Bathed in a beautiful light, these vibrant scenes in chromatic hues are at once eerily familiar and unsettling, confronting us with the direct aftermath of our existence. Weismann was awarded with the East London Painting Prize in 2015. He has had solo exhibitions at the Zabłudowicz Collection, London (UK); Cabin Gallery, London (UK); The Nunnery gallery, London (UK); Galeria Quadrado Azul, Porto (PT); and Museum voor Moderne Kunst, Arnhem (NL). Recent group exhibitions include Summer Show, Turps Gallery, London (UK), Secret European Studio at ArthouSE1, London (UK) and De Meest Eigentijdse Schilderijen Tentoonstelling at the Dordrechts Museum (NL).

Stacia Yeapanis (b. 1977 Virginia, USA) is a Chicago-based, interdisciplinary artist, educator and writer. She explores the relationship between repetition, suffering and impermanence in cross-stitch embroideries, remix videos, temporary collages and improvised, sculptural installations. Stacia is an Adjunct Associate Professor in the Department of Fiber and Material Studies at The School of the Art Institute of Chicago, where she earned her MFA in 2006. She was a 2011-2012 Artist-in-Residence and a 2012-2013 Mentor-in-Residence at Chicago Artists' Coalition's BOLT Residency. Her solo exhibitions include shows at Siena Heights University (Michigan 2013), Heaven Gallery (Chicago 2014), Indianapolis Art Center (Indianapolis 2017), Robert F. DeCaprio Art Gallery (Palos Hills, Illinois 2018) and Kent State, Stark (North Canton, Ohio 2019), Finlandia University (Hancock, Michigan 2020) and Material Exhibitions (Chicago 2022).



Character Creator, 2024
Installation view



Character Creator, 2024
Installation view



Character Creator, 2024
Installation view



Petra Szemán
Monomyth: gaiden / Departure, 2018
Video with sound
12 min 14 sec



Jamie Janković
A Woman on the Internet (or, The Eternal Scream), 2021
HD video with sound
22 min 28 sec



Character Creator, 2024
Installation view



Character Creator, 2024
Installation view



Bob Bicknell-Knight

Can You Help Us With Some Items, 2022

Ink and acrylic on canvas, plywood, 3D printed marble PLA plastic

21.3 x 34 x 3.5 cm



Bob Bicknell-Knight

Can You Help Us With Some Items, 2022

Ink and acrylic on canvas, plywood, 3D printed marble PLA plastic

21.3 x 34 x 3.5 cm



Bob Bicknell-Knight

Why Buy Tomorrow What You Can Buy Today, 2022

Ink and acrylic on canvas, plywood, 3D printed marble PLA plastic

21.3 x 34 x 3.5 cm



Bob Bicknell-Knight

Why Buy Tomorrow What You Can Buy Today, 2022

Ink and acrylic on canvas, plywood, 3D printed marble PLA plastic

21.3 x 34 x 3.5 cm



Character Creator, 2024
Installation view



Bob Bicknell-Knight

Hey! Listen!, 2022

Ink and acrylic on canvas, plywood, 3D printed marble PLA plastic

21.3 x 34 x 3.5 cm



Bob Bicknell-Knight

Hey! Listen!, 2022

Ink and acrylic on canvas, plywood, 3D printed marble PLA plastic

21.3 x 34 x 3.5 cm



Character Creator, 2024
Installation view



Willem Weismann
dandelion man, 2023
Oil on linen
56 x 66 cm



Willem Weismann
dandelion man, 2023
Oil on linen
56 x 66 cm



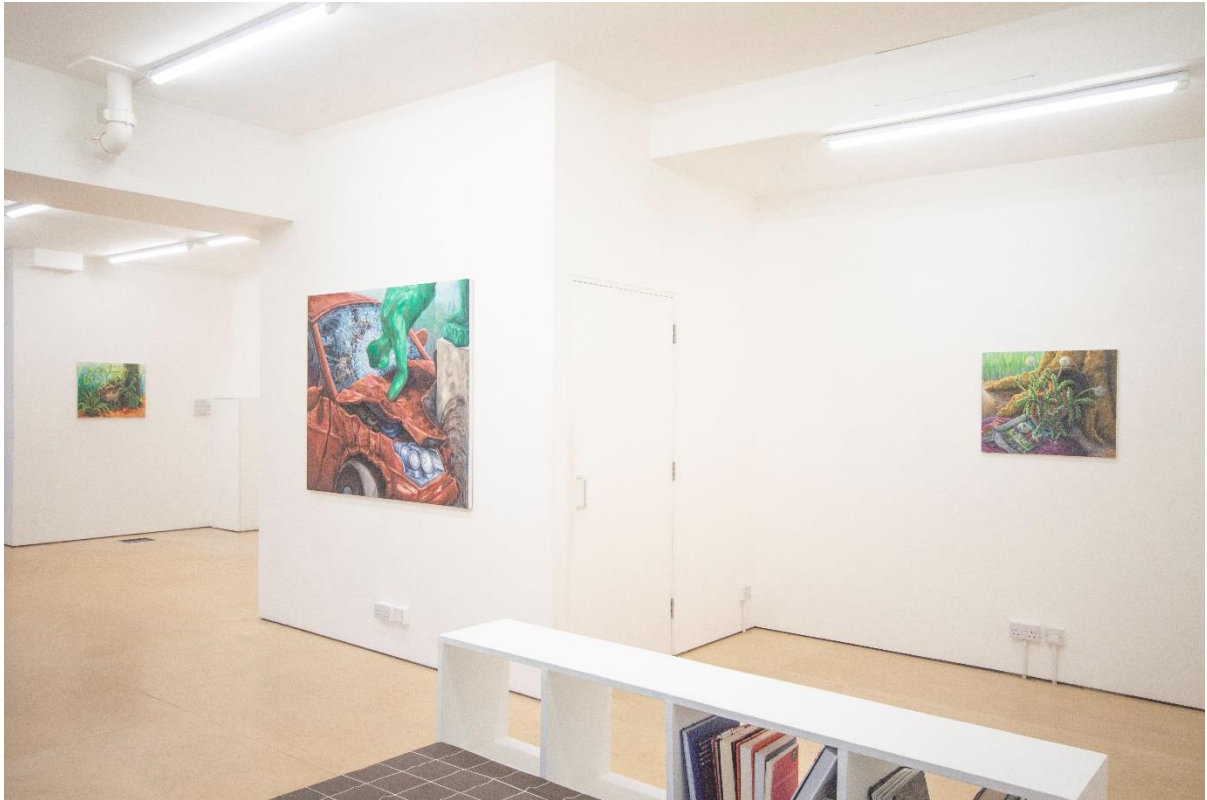
Willem Weismann
dandelion man, 2023
Oil on linen
56 x 66 cm



Character Creator, 2024
Installation view



Character Creator, 2024
Installation view



Character Creator, 2024
Installation view



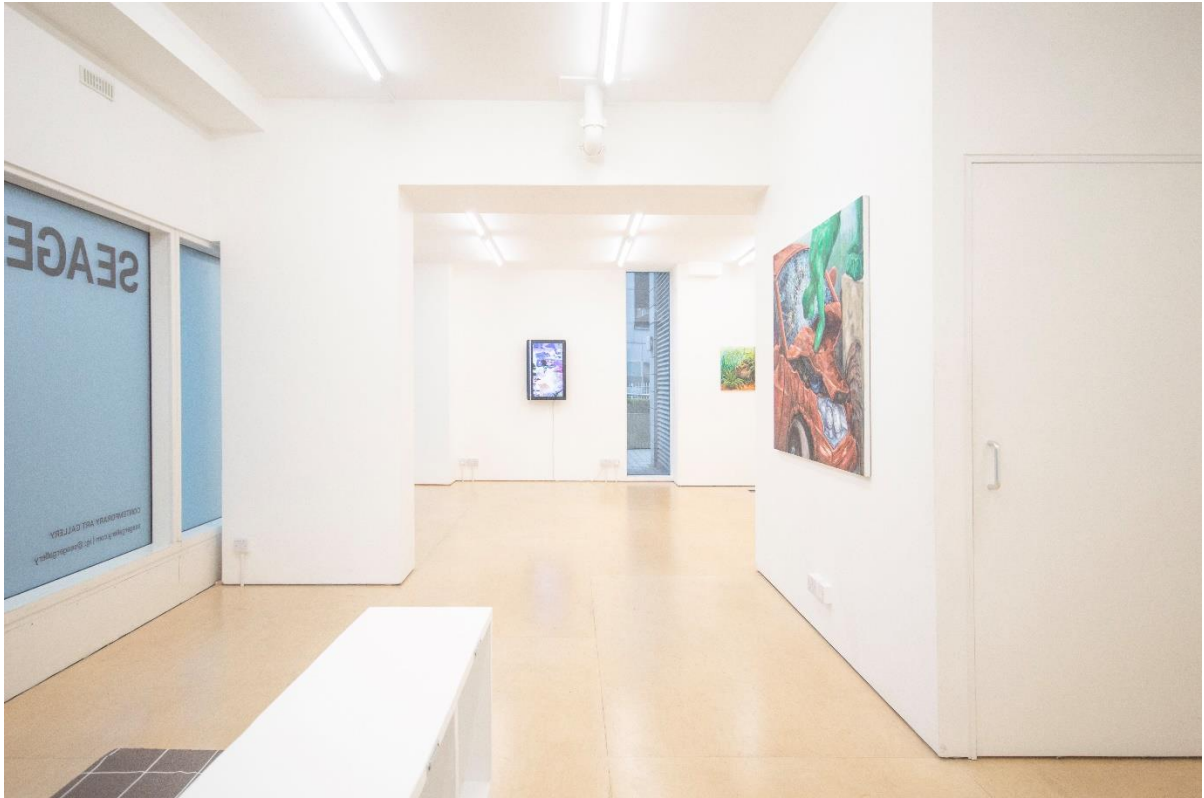
Willem Weismann
airbag, 2023
Oil on linen
120 x 145 cm



Willem Weismann
airbag, 2023
Oil on linen
120 x 145 cm



Willem Weismann
airbag, 2023
Oil on linen
120 x 145 cm



Character Creator, 2024
Installation view



Character Creator, 2024
Installation view



Character Creator, 2024
Installation view



Character Creator, 2024
Installation view



Cassie McQuater
HALO (V), 2016
Machinima, looping HD video
2 min 01 sec



Cassie McQuater
HALO (V), 2016
Machinima, looping HD video
2 min 01 sec



Cassie McQuater
HALO (V), 2016
Machinima, looping HD video
2 min 01 sec



Stacia Yeapanis
Standing In My Stomach, 2006
Print on 180 gsm Epsom enhanced matte paper
60 x 80 cm (framed)



Stacia Yeapanis
Standing In My Stomach, 2006
Print on 180 gsm Epsom enhanced matte paper
60 x 80 cm (framed)



Character Creator, 2024
Installation view



Character Creator, 2024
Installation view



Stacia Yeapanis
Waking Up Transparent, 2006
Print on 180 gsm Epsom enhanced matte paper
60 x 80 cm (framed)



Stacia Yeapanis
Waking Up Transparent, 2006
Print on 180 gsm Epsom enhanced matte paper
60 x 80 cm (framed)



Stacia Yeapanis
Waking Up Transparent, 2006
Print on 180 gsm Epsom enhanced matte paper
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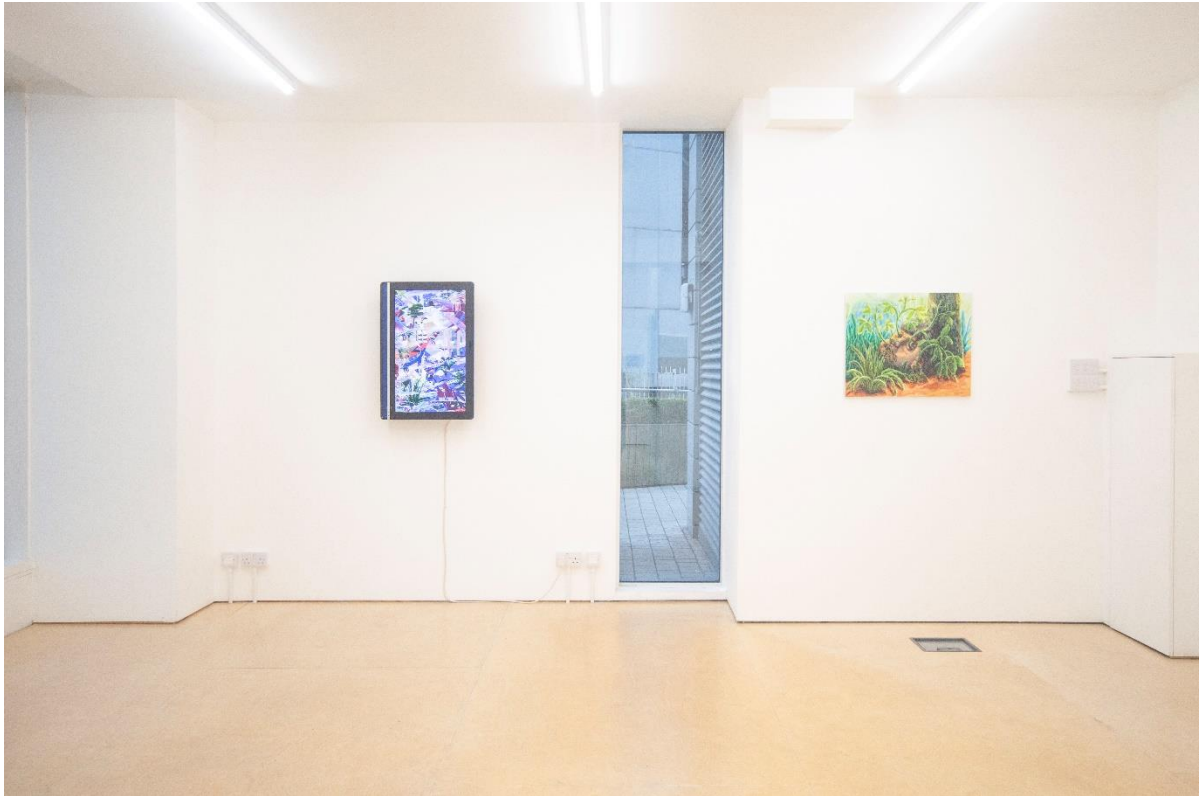
Willem Weismann
soy bean man, 2023
Oil on linen
56 x 66 cm



Willem Weismann
soy bean man, 2023
Oil on linen
56 x 66 cm



Willem Weismann
soy bean man, 2023
Oil on linen
56 x 66 cm



Out Of Bounds, 2024
Installation view



Cassie McQuater
HALO (VI), 2016
Machinima, looping HD video
1 min 58 sec



Cassie McQuater
HALO (VI), 2016
Machinima, looping HD video
1 min 58 sec



Cassie McQuater
HALO (VI), 2016
Machinima, looping HD video
1 min 58 sec



Out Of Bounds, 2024
Installation view



Out Of Bounds, 2024
Installation view