

Auto Italia,

SAFETY CURTAIN

ALEX MARGO ARDEN

17 January – 23 March 2025

Auto Italia presents *Safety Curtain*, a solo exhibition of newly commissioned works by UK-based artist Alex Margo Arden. Spanning painting, sculpture, photography, and installation, *Safety Curtain* recovers evidence of recent actions by climate activists in museums and art galleries, considering how such actions change the histories of the artworks they have interjected. The exhibition speaks to the long history of protests in which artefacts have been targeted, including direct action by the suffragettes between 1913 and 1914, along with the vandalism of plaster cast collections during the 1960s student protests. With a new wave of climate activism taking artworks as their aim, tensions between activists and cultural institutions have reemerged, raising questions of value, impact and access.

Arden's practice often examines incidents of crime and punishment in the fields of culture and entertainment. Previous research projects have included a reconstructive endeavour relating to Kenneth Halliwell and Joe Orton's collages on Islington Library books, and the recovery and reinterpretation of the Santa Fe Sheriff's Office's evidence in the Alec Baldwin *Rust* shooting incident. In her exhibition at Auto Italia, Arden uses theatrical methodologies of staging and reproduction to explore material tensions between protest actions and protections around them, including the role of a safety curtain in theatres, and the protective glass installed over paintings in art museums. *Safety Curtain* reinterprets actions and images relating to the defacement, conservation and restoration of art, considering how restorative processes that erase the effects of time on artefacts might also conceal their physical and political histories.

Safety Curtain includes the series *Barricade* (2024), comprising photographs of Arden's backcloth painting of the same name hung in empty theatres, including

the London Coliseum, Theatre Royal Drury Lane and the Royal Hippodrome Theatre. This work is juxtaposed with *Cancelled Performance* (2025), an installation on the gallery's facade that references the cancellation of a performance of *Les Misérables* in London's West End in 2023, following a mid-performance protest by climate activists. Composed of multiples of the same poster, the installation references the dissident practice of flyposting, featuring an overlaid addendum that the performance has been cancelled.

The exhibition also presents a series of new paintings by Arden: reproductions of renowned artworks after being the target of direct action by protestors. By transcribing the works with the residue of the protests integrated into their compositions, Arden rematerialises, restages and gives permanence to the material impact of these actions. Among these works are *Scene [29 May 2022; Louvre, Paris] I* (2024), *Scene [14 October 2022; National Gallery, London]* (2024), *Scene [14 June 2023; National Museum, Stockholm]* (2024).

The sculptural work *Backstage Campaign* (2025), composed of decommissioned art handling crates previously used to store part of the Royal Academy of Art's cast collection, stages a behind-the-scenes look at museological practice and infrastructure. Populated with reclaimed ladders, condition reports, cleaning utensils and sprawling boxes of archival material, the crates serve as signifiers of invisible cultural labour and traces of political intervention.

ALEX MARGO ARDEN

(b. 1994, Croydon, UK) is an artist who lives and works in London. She uses theatrical methodologies to interrogate the production, interpretation, restoration and restaging of histories. Through her research projects, Arden often employs remaking and re-performance to question authority, authenticity, and labour. Recent solo exhibitions include *Attention Restoration* (2023) at Quench, Margate; *Rock Paper Scissors* (2023) at Royal Academy of Arts, London; *Responsibility, Responsibility, Responsibility* (2023) at Art-O-Rama, Marseille; *All Clear* (2022) at Ginny on Frederick, London; *THE FARMYARD IS NOT A VIOLENT PLACE...* (2020) at Cell Project Space, London. Recent group exhibitions include *Recital* (2024) at Arcadia Missa, London; *On Feeling* (2024) at The Approach, London; *Color of Pomegranates* (2024) at Gallery Artbeat, Tbilisi, Georgia; *Vampire Problem?* (2024) at N/A Gallery, Seoul; *Rouge Ravager* (2024) at Skandia Theatre, Stockholm; *How to Destroy Angels* (2024) at The Horse Hospital, London. Currently in her final year of study at the Royal Academy Schools, Arden previously graduated from Goldsmiths where she was awarded the Hamad Butt Memorial Prize.

1. *Cancelled Performance*, 2025
Vinyl on windows
Dimensions variable

2. *Scene [4 November 2022; Palazzo Bonaparte, Rome]*, 2024
Oil on canvas / 64.2 × 80.3 cm

3. *Scene [23 October 2022; Museum Barberini, Potsdam]*, 2024
Oil on canvas / 73 × 92.5 cm

4. *Scene [14 October 2022; National Gallery, London]*, 2024
Oil on canvas / 92.1 × 73 cm

5. *Scene [4 June 2023; National Museum, Stockholm]*, 2024
Oil on canvas / 81.6 × 92.6 cm

6. *Scene [10 February 2024; Museum of Fine Arts of Lyon]*, 2024
Oil on canvas / 60 × 81 cm

7. *Scene [6 November 2023; National Gallery, London]*, 2024
Oil on canvas / 122.5 cm x 177 cm

8. *Scene [29 May 2022; Louvre, Paris] I*, 2024
Oil on canvas / 77 × 53 cm

9. *Scene [29 May 2022; Louvre, Paris] II*, 2024
Oil on canvas / 77 × 53 cm

10. *Scene [29 May 2022; Louvre, Paris] III*, 2024
Oil on canvas / 77 × 53 cm

11. *Barricade [London Coliseum]*, 2024
C-type print on paper / 48.7 × 39.4 cm

12. *Barricade [Theatre Royal Drury Lane]*, 2024
C-type print on paper / 48.7 × 39.4 cm

13. *Barricade [Royal Hippodrome Theatre]*, 2024
C-type print on paper / 48.7 × 39.4 cm

14. *Safety Curtain*, 2024
C-type print on paper / 39.4 × 48.7 cm

15. *Backstage Campaign [removed panels]*, 2025
Removed panels from art handling crate used as storage for the Royal Academy of Arts cast collection, assorted traps,

labels, ink, paint, stain, marker, biro, pencil
190.5 × 118 × 29 cm

16. *Backstage Campaign [I]*, 2025
Art handling crate used as storage for the Royal Academy of Arts cast collection, assorted ladders, assorted brooms, assorted brushes, assorted broom handles, mop, squeegee broom, broom brush, rope, wire, chain, carabiner, tape, string, rubber bands, hair grip, paint, stain, labels, ink, marker, biro, pencil, dust, dried leaves, fluff, foam remnants, display identification blocks
210 × 188 × 97 cm

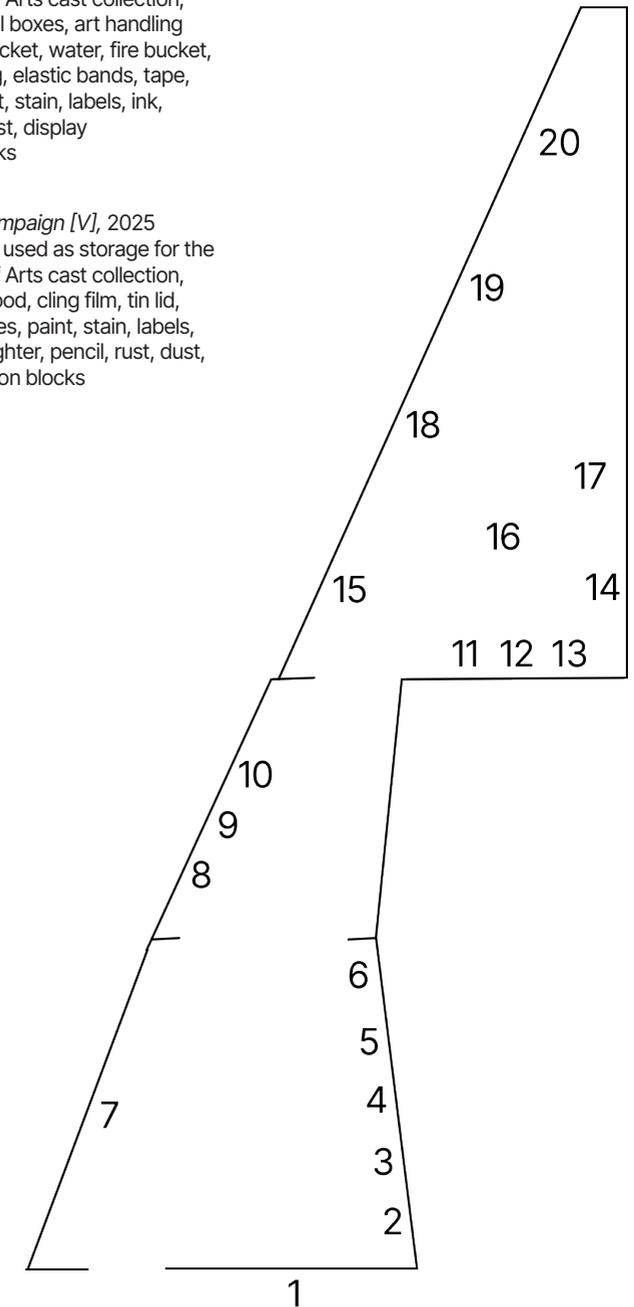
17. *Backstage Campaign [II]*, 2025
Art handling crates used as storage for the Royal Academy of Arts cast collection, ladder, folding chair, assorted wooden trays, assorted box files, assorted tins, assorted boxes, assorted notebooks, index card boxes, false book file, condition reports, drawings on paper, labels, cotton tape, index cards, damaged and recomposed pressed flower, frame, crutch, clipboard, assorted t-squares, assorted brushes, assorted mallets, assorted rulers, assorted pencils, assorted scissors, paint brush, carpenter's try square, chisels, callipers, tweezers, assorted hand tools, bells, assorted clamps, assorted clips, fabric scraps, assorted screws, assorted hooks, assorted clasps, spring, buckles, nibs, thermometer, tin of soup, adapted pallet knife, tissue paper, rubber bands, string, rope, tape, paint, stain, ink, marker, biro, highlighter, pencil, rust, dust, display identification blocks
204 × 100 × 129 cm

18. *Backstage Campaign [III]*, 2025
Art handling crate used as storage for the Royal Academy of Arts cast collection, artist's stool, assorted wooden boxes, assorted frames, assorted paint brushes, assorted oil paints, assorted paint mediums, assorted conservation chemicals, assorted pencils, rubber eraser, artist's palettes, set square, folding ruler, brush, assorted hand tools, assorted chisels, tin, assorted bottles, pins, cotton tape, woollen blanket, tins of soup, chain, string, strand of hair, paint, stain, labels, ink, marker, biro, highlighter,

pencil, dust, display identification blocks
183 × 72 × 126 cm

19. *Backstage Campaign [IV]*, 2025
Art handling crate used as storage for the Royal Academy of Arts cast collection, cardboard archival boxes, art handling skate, brooms, bucket, water, fire bucket, cotton tape, string, elastic bands, tape, tape residue, paint, stain, labels, ink, marker, pencil, dust, display identification blocks
187 × 91 × 79 cm

20. *Backstage Campaign [V]*, 2025
Art handling crate used as storage for the Royal Academy of Arts cast collection, replica museum food, cling film, tin lid, tape residue, leaves, paint, stain, labels, ink, marker, highlighter, pencil, rust, dust, display identification blocks
155 × 85 × 80 cm



EVIDENCE RECONSTRUCTION EVIDENCE RECOVERY

Alex Margo Arden

Why reconstruct evidence? Well, throughout the history of art, reproductions and remakings have often outlasted their originals: the most obvious example being Roman copies of Greek sculptures. Other instances include plaster casts and 3D scans of Assyrian reliefs and architectures surviving the originals which were destroyed by ISIS; and 20th century drawings and photographs of paintings which were assumed destroyed by the bombs of World War II, or looted by the Nazis and never recovered.

I have used evidence reconstruction processes in previous works to question notions of interpretation, truth in image-making, and the value of retracing as a performance process. In my project *Responsibility, Responsibility, Responsibility* (2023), I remade evidence from the Rust shooting incident involving Alec Baldwin. Through repossessing the Santa Fe Sheriff's Department's evidence, these works challenged the investigation, indictments and safety provisions at the core of the case, as well as further complicating the responsibility of the artist with regards to reproduction and interpretation.

Another of my projects, *Condition Report* (2024), also employed methods of secondary evidence recovery. I saved, paired, merged and overlaid found documentary evidence, in an attempt to gather a high-resolution insight into the conditions of Marilyn Monroe's iconic "Happy Birthday, Mr. President" dress both before and after it was

worn by Kim Kardashian at the 2022 MET Gala. Following this, I initiated a process, commissioning commercial painters to rematerialise the images, re-documenting the various conditions of the dress into oil on canvas. As each crystal, thread, and weave of the fabric is transcribed, details are missed, reinterpretation occurs and accuracy becomes questionable – and yet there does undeniably appear to be damage and change to the dress. When this material is rearticulated in painting, it becomes a representation of the evidence, rather than the evidence itself. In their remaking as oil paintings the evidence is retouched; the content is restaged through reproduction. Subtle, conscious and subconscious reconfigurations are indicative of the process of moving through hands, digital motions and movements of the brush.

Building on these processes and methodologies, in *Safety Curtain*, I am again primarily concerned with the reconstruction and recovery of evidence from pre-existing evidence; not recreating what is lost, but preserving and re-materialising what is here, for now. I have specifically reconstructed evidence relating to activist action in museums, with a focus on climate protests since 2022. At Auto Italia, I present a series of nine paintings re-materialising the point-of-impact from actions that took place between 2022 and 2024, including the effects of a break glass hammer, tomato soup, pea soup, red paint, mashed potato, and a cream cake. The targeted

paintings remade in the exhibition are *Spring* (1882) by Claude Monet, *The Artist's Garden at Giverny* (1900) by Claude Monet, *Sunflowers* (1888) by Vincent van Gogh, *Grainstacks* (1890) by Claude Monet, *The Sower at Sunset* (1888) by Vincent van Gogh, *The Toilet of Venus* (also known as 'The Rokeby Venus') (1647-51) by Diego Velázquez, and *Mona Lisa* (1503–1506 [possibly up to 1517]) by Leonardo da Vinci. The original actions were undertaken by various climate activists and groups, including Just Stop Oil, Letzte Generation, Riposte Alimentaire, Ultima Generazione, and Restore Wetlands. In the exhibition, the only work presented multiple times is the *Mona Lisa*, with the triptych serving as a three-stage document of the splatter pattern: the initial point of impact, and two hand actions of security guards who used paper towels to try and quickly wipe the glass clean of the cream cake residue.

Painting holds the enduring power to immortalise its subjects and defy ephemerality. The medium safeguards images and ideas from the eroding effects of time, rendering in perpetuity the visible and abstract worlds of thought, feeling and emotion. In re-materialising and reimagining these protest actions in this way, the images of stained paintings – actions which I would say cause 'symbolic damage' (as the works targeted are protected under a layer of protective glass) – become objects in themselves. They are not fleeting or digital but rendered permanently as physical objects, which now firmly exist, and would have to be destroyed to be no longer. In the recapturing of these moments of action within newly created objects, time to reflect is expanded,

and the roles of the audience and the witness are restaged.

The very presence of protective glass installed over the surface of the paintings has led to them becoming targets for protests, allowing protestors to further their cause by creating high-impact media images for mass consumption while allegedly leaving the works themselves undamaged. The latter, however, has been disputed by conservators and curators, who have identified sustained damage from these actions, often to the frames of artworks, which harbour great historic and financial value in and of themselves.

Processes of evidence reconstruction or even reperformance recur within *Cancelled Performance* (2025) and *Barricade* (2024). These works reference the mega musical *Les Misérables*, with *Cancelled Performance* drawing attention to a climate action protest during a performance, which led to the cancellation of the remainder of the show that evening. The posters are reconstructed to-scale using soft pastel and have a weathered or aged appearance. Remade through hours of soft scratching of the pastel on paper, this labour is held in the pigment dust, semi-unbound, *just* holding the image. There is fragility in its anchoring and the potential of its disturbance by touch, or breath, or movement. In *Safety Curtain* the original pastel poster is not present, but has been photographed and printed on vinyl, then adhered to the public-facing windows of the gallery.

The most iconic piece of scenery in *Les Misérables* is the barricade, originally designed by John Napier and recently redesigned by Matt

Kinley. In the redesign, the barricade was reduced in scale, movement, and complexity to be more practical for touring and the day-to-day running of the musical, though it remains as impressive. I worked from documentation of these two versions of the set – collating, combining and layering these images into a collaged drawing. The barricade is constructed out of shards of wood, cartwheels, cobblestones, ladders, bed frames, windows, doors, crates, and barrels; with each incarnation of the set becoming a differing assemblage of the same objects in the same dark wood colour scheme. They all look remarkably similar but also notably different, as the exact scale and specificity of various items are not able to be maintained. My design was developed to become the ultimate compression of a set piece into a single dimension: that of a scenic backcloth. To realise the full-scale object, I re-employed scenic painters from the original *Les Misérables* production, who were responsible for the set maintenance until its redesign, to assist with repainting my barricade backcloth. I then approached various technical managers and fly crew at some of the West End's leading theatres to obtain access to covertly hang and photograph the cloth within their venues. Thankfully, this was successful and I was able to make the series of photographs: *Barricade [London Coliseum]* (2024), *Barricade [Theatre Royal Drury Lane]* (2024), *Barricade [Royal Hippodrome Theatre]* (2024). In *Les Misérables*, the barricade is a powerful symbol of revolution, representing themes of resistance, transformation, and the struggle for justice. Constructed from everyday objects, the barricade repurposes these possessions in the face of revolutionary ideals, while

also becoming a site of ultimate sacrifice as the resting place of those who lose their lives fighting for their beliefs.

A further meditation on reconstruction underlies the repurposing of art handling crates within the sculptural installation, *Backstage Campaign* (2025). The disassembled panels of the crates, emptied of their plaster cast body contents, have been reassembled and repopulated by scenes absent of figures. The Royal Academy of Arts has a significant cast collection of classical sculptures and écorchés, usually reproduced in plaster and sometimes painted or stained to invoke the materiality of the originals they replicate. Nowadays, cast collections are relics of the pedagogy of the past: historically art students were encouraged to use these plaster casts as the source imagery for their own work and artistic development. In this way, art education was grounded in learning from the dominant European art historical canon. In the late 1960s, there were great shifts in society and student protests followed, with many casts being deliberately graffitied, vandalised, and damaged, reflecting students changing attitudes to art history and education, which could no longer centre these outdated ideals. The impact of this led to many cast collections being destroyed, neglected or relegated to the basements of institutions. Towards the end of the 20th century, scholars began to identify the value of casts as means to evidence the previous conditions and preservation histories of sculptures which have been subject to damage by the elements and human intervention. In the present day, these casts can be used to bring together sculptures, which

are otherwise dispersed across the world, to facilitate comparison, differentiation, and study. The Royal Academy of Arts collection of casts has been restored and maintained over recent years and was returned to display in the Royal Academy Schools cast corridor following a large renovation project. The art handling crates, which form the central structures of my *Backstage Campaign* sculptures, were obtained following the reinstallation of the casts.

In *Backstage Campaign*, I have staged museum processes. The work is not a reenactment of the actual backstage goings-on at an art museum, but rather suggestive of the maintenance and conservation practices employed therein. In the sculptures, we bear witness to an inventory system being implemented, condition reporting in progress, art handling crates opened, emptied and reoccupied, objects packed and unpacked, restored and conserved. In this sculptural work, there is a numbered display system of small clear prisms punctuating areas within the sculpture, often numbering empty space: spaces where things once were, have been, or could be. In this way, some of the evidence presented here connotes the absence of evidence or the evidence of absence. Within museums there are often very old, even antique display objects, transportation and storage structures, and narrative props that are not considered part of the collection, are not assigned an inventory number, and would not be subject to a deaccession process. These museum objects hold a history of display that runs in tandem with the history a museum might collect or portray – a history

of museum practice: of how the museum presents, communicates, engages, or even emotes.

An archive of eight pencil drawings titled *Pattern Analysis [28 January 2024; Louvre, Paris] I-VIII* (2024–5) comprise one of many intricate details presented within *Backstage Campaign*. Stacked inside a wooden letter tray, with only the top drawing fully visible, the series depicts drawn interpretations of the splatter pattern of pumpkin soup hitting the *Mona Lisa* in a second action by climate activists, following the first instance depicted in the triptych within my exhibition. The drawings which make up this work are uniform in scale and materiality, but have been made by various anonymous commissioned hands. The artists were instructed to simply execute an observational drawing of the splatter pattern across the protective screen, referring to primary source documentation of the action. The investigative interpretation of the splatter brings us back to the historical complexities of copying as a practice shaped by labour and the dynamics of artistic production. Each artist, fully aware of their anonymity, had to grapple with the nuances of the splatter during their reenactment. They do not merely replicate; they witness and recontextualise the evidence before them. The act of copying reveals itself not only as a mode of inquiry and a means of instruction, but as a practice that destabilises traditional binaries – between authority and interpretation, presence and absence – demonstrating the interpretive power embedded in replication.

Opening hours:
Thursday to Sunday,
12:00 – 17:00

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Safety Curtain is commissioned and produced by Auto Italia,
with support from Arts Council England, National Lottery Project
Grants and The Henry Moore Foundation.

Auto Italia's commissions are made possible by
our Exhibition Circle and Member supporters.



Supported using public funding by
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