

Masquerade, Susie MacMurray

Assembly Room



Masquerade (2018)

Silk-velvet, wire

Image © Matthew Andrews



Medusa (2014)

Handmade copper chainmail

Image © Matthew Andrews



Host (2016)

Reclaimed military barbed wire,
composite Portland stone

Image © Matthew Andrews

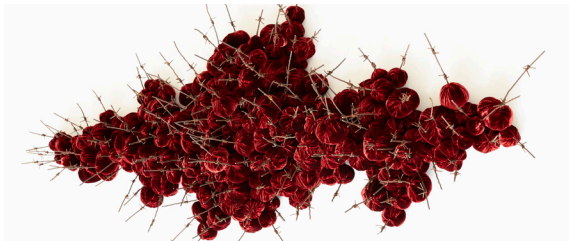


Orphan (2014)

Black annealed wire, bull's nose
ring

Image © Matthew Andrews

Old Waiting Room



Strange Fruit (2017)

Reclaimed military barbed wire,
silk-velvet

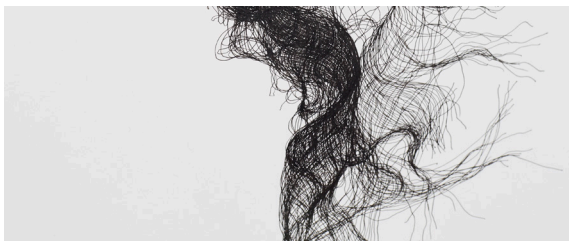
Image © Matthew Andrews



Gauze Bandage 1 (2018)

Pen on paper

Image © Matthew Andrews



Gauze Bandage 2 (2018)

Pen on paper

Image © Matthew Andrews



Rapture (2014)

Handmade aluminium chainmail

© Susie MacMurray

***Masquerade*, Susie MacMurray**

Our opening exhibition brings artist Susie MacMurray to St Albans to create a new installation *Masquerade* inspired by the architecture and history of the building, accompanied by related, recent artworks. The sculptures and drawings presented share the themes of masquerade, freedom and memorial.

Assembly Room

Masquerade celebrates the women of the past who since the inaugural ball in 1831 would have danced in all their finery within the Assembly Room. We imagine Georgian ladies circling the floor in elaborate gowns, their puffed sleeves and elegantly coifed hair. Yet we know that beneath the masquerade and glamour, these women's lives were highly restricted and they did not enjoy the rights and freedoms suffrage would bring some decades later.

MacMurray's installation cascades out of one of the original fireplaces comprising over 700 handmade silk-velvet objects. Their exteriors are suggestive of the dancers' puffed sleeves, yet each one is filled with a tangle of raw, low-grade wire – the dichotomy of their lives replicated in contrasting materials. It is a metaphor that extends to the whole building; the dressing of wealth and privilege upstairs, contrasting unsavoury activity within the courtroom and cells below.

***Medusa*:** In the Greek Myth, related by Ovid, the beautiful auburn haired maiden Medusa was raped by Poseidon and in her furious response Athena transformed Medusa's hair into serpents. Famously, this transformation caused anyone who looked upon her to turn to stone. Her power continued after she was beheaded by Perseus and her head was placed on Athena's shield to protect the goddess. This process also made Medusa a mother, she produced Pegasus and Chrysaor.

Medusa has been depicted throughout art history as a vile, brutal monster. MacMurray rejects this traditional portrayal and instead reinterprets her as a beautiful and wronged heroine. The Greek icon is meticulously created by the artist in handmade copper chainmail. She stands proud recalling classical stone sculpture, her defiance represented by a mass of elegant tentacles at her feet.

Host acts as a memorial to soldiers lost in the Second World War and the women whose lives were indirectly effected by the conflict. Sourced from British Army Barracks in Aldershot, Hampshire, the barbed wire is over 40 years old and holds significance as a witness to the training of thousands of soldiers who went onto serve in Afghanistan, Kosovo and The Falklands.

The theme of contrasting materials continues in *Host*; thorny branches sit in opposition to the bejewelled crystal chandeliers. The barbed wire grows upwards, searching for light and hope from a base of Portland stone; the tradition material used for public memorials.

Orphan is left beached on the floor, its presence felt. A mass of hand-crushed wire, it sits vulnerable and alone inviting our empathy. As with the artist's other work, the meticulous and time consuming process emphasises the poignancy of the piece. The sculpture is one of a number of pieces that MacMurray has created on the theme of offspring and motherhood. Does the bull ring at its head suggests a creature whose freedom is in question?

Old Waiting Room

In **Strange Fruit** MacMurray uses similar jarring materials in this as in other works; barbed wire protrudes from taught, gathered velvet. The title and form offer a contradiction – a fruit that is dangerous to eat, rather than nutritious. *Strange Fruit* is a reference to those who suffered injustice and shares a title with the American protest and anti-lynching poem written by Abel Meeropol in 1937, and most famously know as a song performed by Billie Holiday

Two new drawings from her **Gauze** series represent MacMurray's prolific drawing practice which unfolds in parallel to her sculptures and installations. These rigorous, meticulous drawings take considerable time to make. The dynamic silhouette of a female form is suggested in the utilitarian fabric of gauze. The simple weave structure is delicately manipulated by the artist to reveal hidden bodies, lines of thread become traces of movement. A material associated with both injury and healing, gauze could sit alongside the barbed wire on the battle field.

Rapture echoes the slithering base of *Medusa* in the Assembly Room created with handmade aluminium chainmail. Snake-like, and in close proximity to *Strange Fruit*, it alludes to the life of another female who has been judged harshly by history; Eve.

The structure recalls a Mobius strip (a mathematical shape where there is no beginning or end) where one attempts to orient oneself in relation to its form. *Rapture* seems to suggest continuity yet also restraint and restricted freedom.

As with many of MacMurray's sculptures, the contrast of materials reflects an internal struggle; from those who fought in the world wars to the historic users of the building – all with their own stories to be retold and re-interpreted.

Masquerade was curated by UH Arts, the arts and cultural programme for the University of Hertfordshire. UH Arts brings arts and culture to campus and local communities, and works in partnership with St Albans Museum + Gallery to deliver exhibitions, commissions and events.

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Susie MacMurray is a British artist whose work includes drawing, sculpture and architectural installations. She lives in Manchester and has an international exhibition profile, showing regularly in the USA and Europe, and is represented by the Danese Corey Gallery, New York.

susie-macmurray.co.uk

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