

Between Fire and Form: Reflections on Creative Process, Ageing, and the Unfinished Self

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Introduction

There are moments in an artist's life when process becomes more than a means to an end; it becomes a mirror. In the years following my PhD (2018), I have been compelled to continue asking: what does making reveal about who I am—now, as an older woman, as someone moving through the shifting terrain of identity and time?

This reflective essay brings together fragments from my sketchbooks, written during the making of recent work, with theoretical ideas that frame creativity as both a deeply subjective and socially situated act. My aim is twofold: first, to articulate the interplay between material, process, and the experience of ageing; and second, to share an authentic account of the inner dialogue that accompanies practice. This is not a narrative of resolution but a record of a continuing quest for resilience and meaning.



Figure 1.1: Bell, A.F. (2025). *Digital Image 1*.

Circumstances and Identity Shift

When I began this body of work, the world had altered. The global pandemic imposed new boundaries on daily life, amplifying feelings of uncertainty and vulnerability. At the same time, the political climate—Brexit, Trump, the rhetoric of division—formed a backdrop that pressed into consciousness. Yet these conditions, while shaping my emotional state, were never my starting point. What called me into the studio was something quieter: a need to make with my hands, to create despite the weight of the external world.

“Lockdown from Covid is taking its toll and I reflect on why I want to continue to work with these now... The slow process, with its complexity and surprise/risk, suits these dark lockdown times.

As life is so tightly controlled and restricted now, having surprise, letting go of control and working with the ‘not known’, feels empowering.” (Sketchbook, Jan 2021)

Ageing inflected this period with its own undertone. The awareness of physical vulnerability, sharpened by Covid, contrasted with an inner determination to continue creating. Scholars such as Gullette (2004) argue that ageing is not a fixed biological reality but a cultural narrative—one that often reduces older women to images of decline. My work resists this narrative, positioning the ageing self not as diminished but as evolving, still capable of curiosity and risk-taking. Creativity, in this sense, becomes an act of agency: a reclaiming of self in a time that seeks to contain it.

Fire as Transformation

If there is a single element that defines this body of work, it is fire. Initially introduced during my doctoral research in *Departing Selves*, fire was then a force of erasure: an attempt to obliterate presence, to burn away material until nothing remained. Yet even in that work, the attempt failed—metal resisted destruction. Looking back, that failure feels symbolic.

“In the ‘Departing Selves’ PhD artwork, I was using it to destroy, to remove completely any presence. Interestingly, it didn’t work... Now, I’m using the fire to alter/change the work’s appearance, not to obliterate but to create new ‘forms’... I play not only with the flame, but with risk.” (Sketchbook, Aug 2020)

This shift—from fire as annihilation to fire as transformation—marks an evolution in both process and meaning. The burning of silk-metal fabric is unpredictable; each encounter is a negotiation between control and surrender. Too much flame, and the piece collapses into ash. Too little, and the traces of labour—the wax, dyeing, etching—remain too visible, too literal. The process requires judgment, but also acceptance.

Donald Winnicott’s notion of the “potential space” (1971) resonates here: a liminal zone where play and creativity enable the self to emerge. The flame becomes an agent within this space, a collaborator rather than a tool. It introduces what psychoanalyst Bollas (1987) terms the “unthought known”—aspects of self that surface through material engagement rather than deliberate cognition. The fire consumes, and in doing so, it reveals.



Figure 2.1: Bell, A.F. (2019).
Silk Form Detail [Mixed media].



Figure 2.2: Bell, A.F. (2024). *Silk Form* [Mixed media].

Ambiguity and the Aesthetics of Risk

To work with fire is to embrace ambiguity. The results are never fully knowable; each burning carries the possibility of failure. Yet, paradoxically, this unpredictability became a source of vitality during a time of global stasis. In contrast to the rigid containment of lockdown, the studio offered a zone of experimentation where uncertainty was not a threat but a resource.

“Standing at the back door, match in hand, fabric on a metal tray... that felt powerful. As if I’d just been working to reach this point of no return. As the flame ate through my carefully wrought fabric, I let go of control and watched in fascination.” (Sketchbook, Oct 2020)

This tension—between meticulous preparation and sudden, consuming change—speaks to a deeper truth about ageing and identity. The desire for stability coexists with a longing for disruption, for the spark that prevents life from congealing into repetition. In this sense, the burnt forms are not merely objects but metaphors: they enact the fragility of structure and the beauty that can arise from collapse.

Macro as Metaphor

The decision to photograph the forms at a macro scale introduced another layer of ambiguity. Magnification reveals detail—frayed threads, molten edges—but also distances the object from its original context. At close range, the forms oscillate between textile and terrain, between the human and the primordial. This optical uncertainty mirrors the internal experience of ageing: the sense that what was once familiar has become unfamiliar, requiring new ways of seeing.

Here, Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology offers a useful lens. Perception, he argues, is not passive reception but embodied engagement; we do not simply look at the world, we inhabit it (Merleau-Ponty, 1962). In the macro images, my gaze becomes tactile, probing the material for what lies beneath. The camera extends this act, translating the intimate into the monumental, the personal into the ambiguous.



Figure 3.1: Bell, A.F. (2025). *Digital Image 2*

Context, Continuity, and the Self in Process

Although this work differs materially from *Departing Selves*, the two bodies of work belong to what I have elsewhere described as a “house with many rooms.” They share an underlying preoccupation: the question of what it means to inhabit a body that is ageing, to negotiate the shifting borders of selfhood. Identity, as theorists such as Giddens (1991) remind us, is not a static possession but an ongoing project—a narrative we tell and retell through time. My practice, then, becomes a form of narrative-making, though not in words alone. Each fold, each burn, each photograph inscribes a chapter in an unwritten autobiography.

Yet this is not a narrative of closure. If anything, the process reveals its own open-endedness. There is no final form, no ultimate statement. There is only the next piece, the next experiment, the next attempt to hold together—however provisionally—the forces that threaten to undo coherence.

“No idea what comes next... This is a slow revealing, a slow unfolding of a complex issue.”
(Sketchbook, Jan 2021)

Closing Reflections

As I write, the studio is quieter now. The forms—fifty or more—suspended from the studio’s ceiling, each a record of fire’s intervention, each holding its own ambiguous beauty. I think of boxing them away, storing them for a time when they might be seen by others. Yet the impulse to continue persists. Not toward an exhibition, not toward a definitive conclusion, but toward the sustaining rhythm of making.

“I don’t foresee an ending to any of this journey. Rather, it’s a quest to find (through my creative process) the resilience to keep going, regardless.” (Sketchbook, Nov 2022)

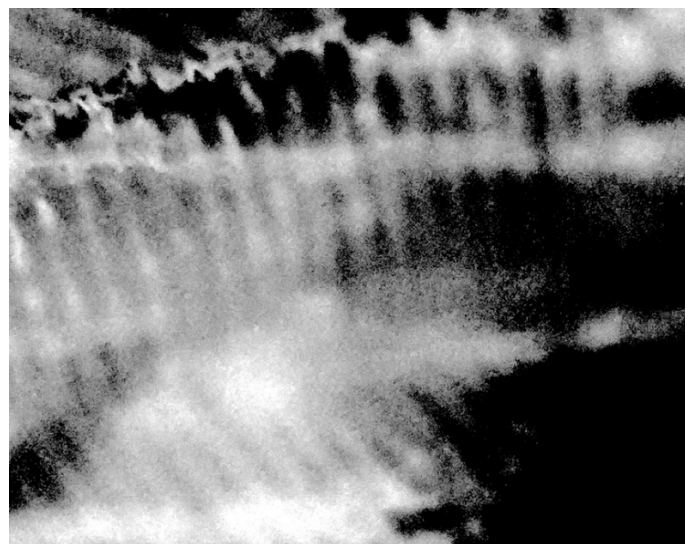


Figure 4.1: Bell, A.F. (2024). *Digital Image 3*

Perhaps this is what creativity offers: not solutions, but strategies for living with uncertainty. In a culture that privileges productivity and outcome, the studio becomes a counter-space, where value

resides not in what is finished but in what is possible. And so, I return—not to resolve, but to remain in motion, between fire and form, between what has been and what might yet emerge.

References

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