









# IRENE LEES

## *BELOW THE SURFACE*

13 April - 11 May 2019

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Irene Lees in her studio, The Lizard, Cornwall, 2014  
Photographed by Dan Stevens





Left brain, right brain: whatever the differences between artists and scientists, they share one thing in common - a questioning mind.

Irene Lees never stops questioning things, which may seem surprising in a working class woman who spent most of her life as a wife and mother. But all the while the questions must have been brewing, because she took herself off to do a Diploma in Art and then on to University in her sixties – a time when most people are contemplating retirement – they've been bubbling to the surface.

It began with fast fashion. Twelve years ago, when the fair trade clothes shop she used to patronise in Bristol was put out of business by the opening of a branch of Primark, she found herself asking how women



in the west could bargain down the prices of garments sewn with sweat and tears by female workers in the Third World. In her graduation year she started making large monochrome drawings of empty dresses, following the thread of her thought over the paper in a continuous drawn line: "I used knitting in my mind as a metaphor for life; if you make a mistake in life you can't correct it," she explains. Three of those drawings were immediately selected for Jerwood Drawing Prize, the Cheltenham Art Prize and the Royal Academy Summer Exhibition.

The knitting metaphor got more complicated when her questions began to involve historical research. Curiosity about why women have willingly imprisoned their bodies in corsetry led her to the library of the V&A, where reading about the social history of underwear she found she could memorise passages of text. This gave her the idea of incorporating explanatory text in her work. Without so much as a preparatory pencil outline she found she could draw a corset with a continuous line of writing, winding the text round and round within the form until it was filled with a fine mesh of letters. The resulting images were wrapped in a veil of meaning that could theoretically be unravelled by following the thread of text with a magnifying glass, just as the meaning of Leonardo's backwards writing can be deciphered by holding a mirror to the page.

Leonardo, too, was an obsessive questioner, though his obsession was with the workings of the natural world; Lees's obsession is with human psychology and social history. Where she senses social injustice she will pick up a thread and follow it to the source of the trouble, like Theseus tracking the Minotaur through the maze. Her drawings are a record of these journeys, charged with the emotions felt en route. In contemporary conceptual art research can easily be uncoupled from visual imagination, but Lees's work is a perfect fusion of the two as she literally weaves the research into the image. Her work is conceptual in the true sense of the word: "Every time I'm doing something, it has to have a meaning."

In a recent series celebrating the dignity and fortitude of the mothers of the Nigerian schoolgirls kidnapped by Boko Haram, colour made its first appearance in her drawings, brightening the patterned fabrics worn by the women. Injustices borne by women are a constant concern for a female artist "brought up in an environment... in which it was understood that life's *raison d'être*, as far as women were concerned, was to serve the men, cook, wash and clean, and rear the children." Returning to her hometown of Oldham recently, she was reminded

of local suffragette Annie Kenney who worked in the same mill as her grandmother. The memory inspired a new drawing of a pair of tailors' dummies upholstered in the purple livery of the Women's Social and Political Union with VOTES FOR WOMEN emblazoned on their chests. The drawing is titled, *pace* Churchill, *Never Have So Many Owed So Much to So Few*.

The origins of her new *Bell Jar* series lie further back, in a visit to the grave of Sylvia Plath in Heptonstall in the 1970s, when Lees, then a mother of four young children, struggled to fathom how a woman could kill herself and leave her children behind. In one drawing, a nude Plath stands suffocating under a glass bell jar; in another, a split fig evokes her vision of sitting in the crotch of a fig tree starving to death, unable to choose which fruit to pluck lest it close off all other female career options.

The *Bell Jar* images have been ripening slowly, but another new line of enquiry, into Picasso's muses, has borne copious fruit. Having previously thought of the painter of *Guernica* as "a good socialist", Lees's eyes were opened by the discovery of his remark to Françoise Gilot: "For me there are only two kinds of women, goddesses and doormats". The more she read about the artist's models and mistresses, the more astonished she was at how he treated them "as one would any other commodity, like paint, crayons, an easel, food or clothing", rendering them unrecognisable in images that merely screamed 'Picasso'. In her new series of drawings in the master's style, she sets out to avenge them. Picasso left later biographers to tell the stories of his women; by writing their stories into her images, Lees allows them to speak for themselves. She is not out to rewrite patriarchal history. "People say, take the monuments down. I say no: keep the monuments, but tell the story." Even so, she marvels at how for more than four decades Picasso "just replaced one mistress with another. In a way, it was like Russian dolls, popping them one inside the other."

Russian dolls are next on her creative agenda. For this incurably inquisitive artist one thing leads to another, in an unbroken line.

Laura Gascoigne

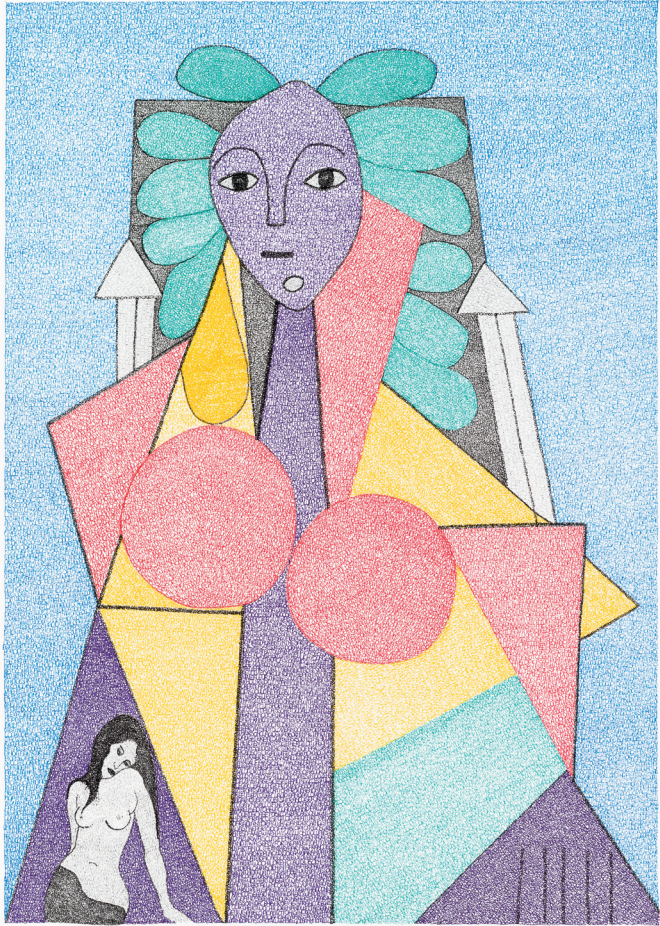
March 2019



## GODDESSES AND DOORMATS

In this series, Irene Lees directs her considerable mastery with a pen towards exploring the social and cultural imbalances between the sexes. Through her method of creating hand drawn rhythmic loops or layers of text, brought about through meticulous skill in research and application, she examines the many tumultuous relationships of one of arts most renowned womanisers, Pablo Picasso.

It is said that the artist changed his female companions as often as he changed his painting styles. Few of these women made it out of his orbit unscathed. He is known to have told one of his mistresses that “for me there are only two kinds of women: goddesses and doormats” and that “women are machines for suffering”. Lees’ addition to the original compositions include realistic depictions of each of these women, raising questions about why, despite the fact that most of these mistresses, models and muses were fundamentally inspirational in their own lives, they are obscured almost beyond recognition. A fact Lees uses to highlight what some consider to be an ‘unpalatable truth’ about the much-loved Spanish artist.

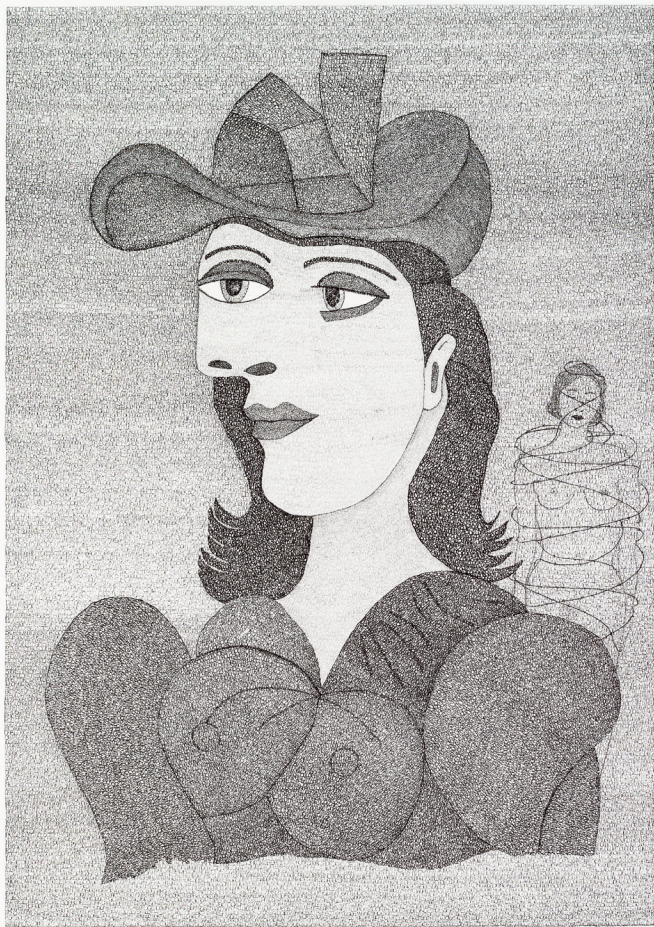


*Sacrificed For Art*, 2019  
Fernanda Olivier  
Archival ink on watercolour paper  
97 x 77 cm



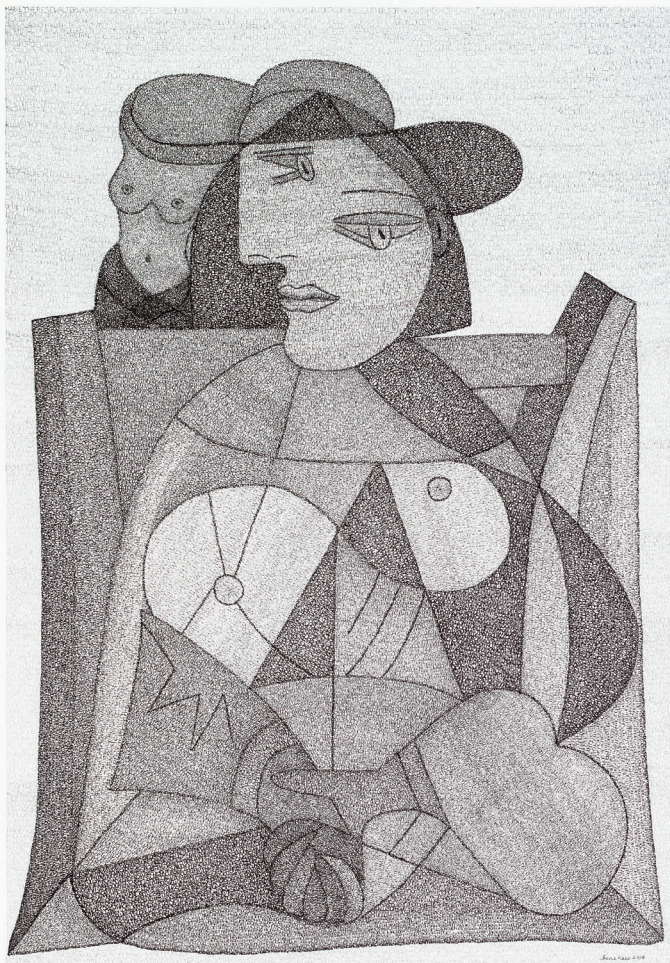


*Revered to Reviled*, 2019  
Olga Khokholova  
Archival ink on watercolour paper  
97 x 77 cm



*Unrequited Devotion*, 2018  
Marie Therese Walter  
Archival ink pen on watercolour paper  
97 x 77 cm





*Me Too*, 2018

Dora Maar

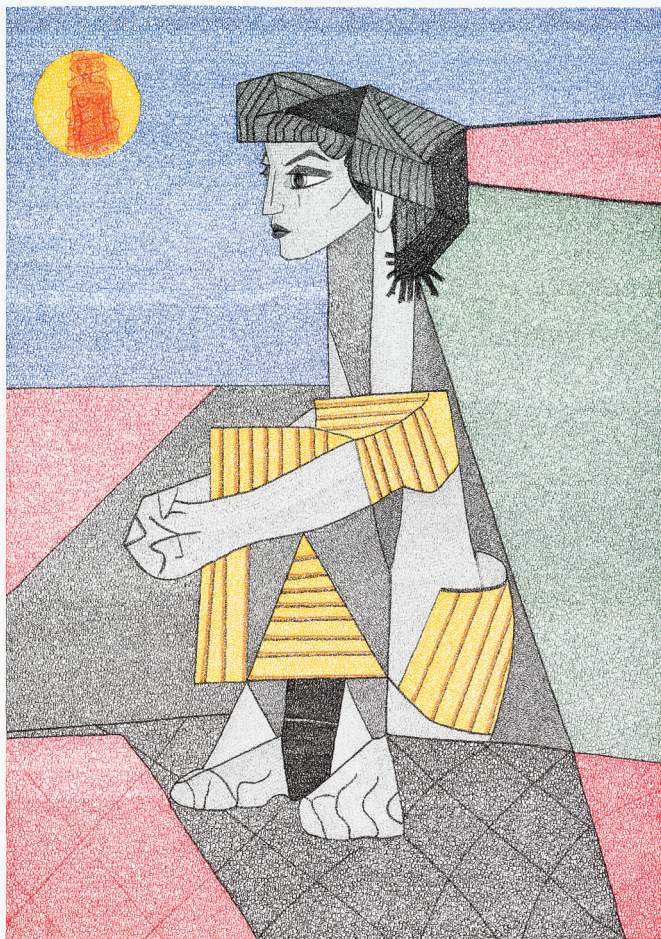
Archival ink pen on watercolour paper

97 x 77 cm

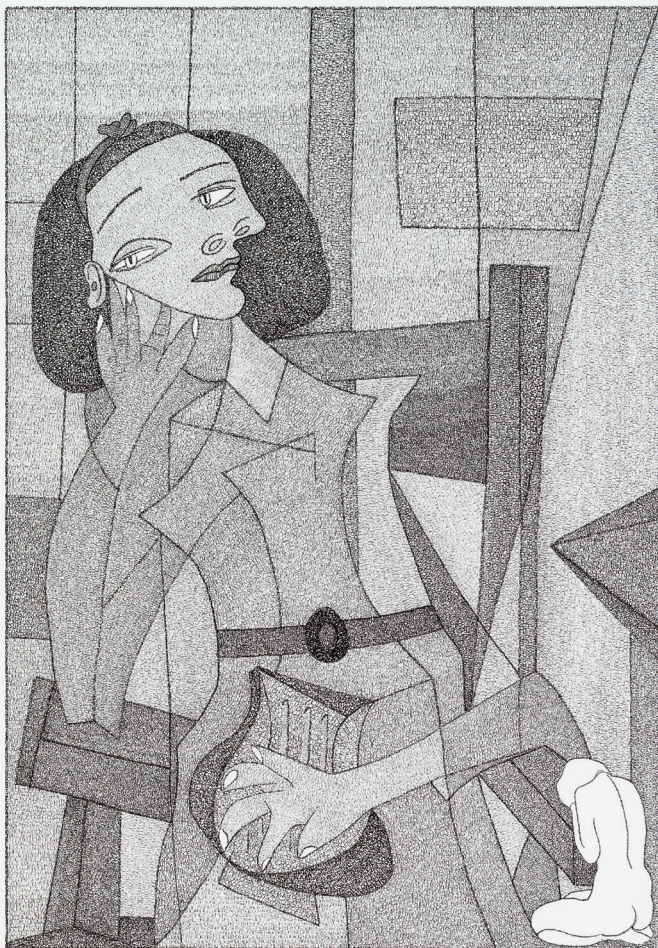


*The Past Creates The Future, 2019*  
Francoise Gilot  
Archival ink on watercolour paper  
97 x 77 cm





*Picasso's Female Icarus*, 2019  
Jacqueline Roque  
Archival ink on watercolour paper  
97 x 77 cm



*Elephant In The Room*, 2018  
Nusch Eluard  
Archival ink on watercolour paper  
97 x 77 cm





*Picasso's Women*, 2019  
Archival ink on watercolour paper  
56 x 65 cm





*Picasso Series, Russian Dolls, 2019*  
Archival coloured pens on watercolour paper  
All approx 26 cm high

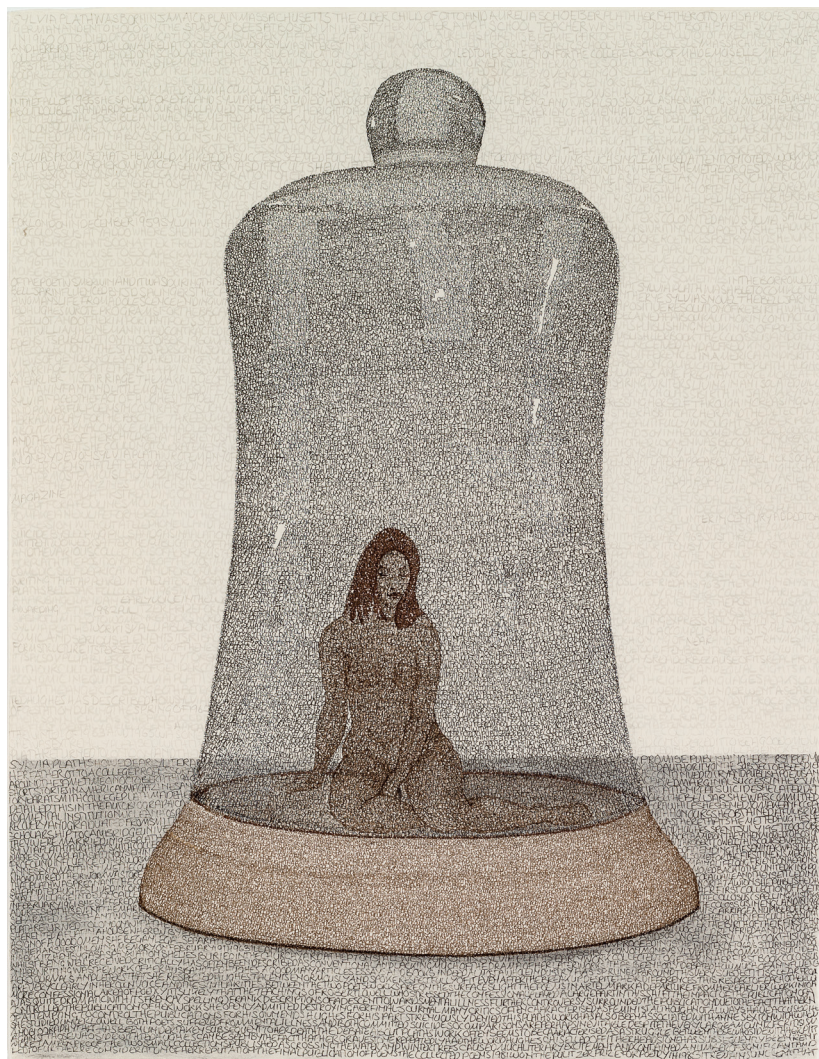
# THE BELL JAR

In this collection of drawings Lees depicts imagery from *The Bell Jar*; A feminist, semi-autobiographical novel addressing power, male domination, sexual equality and mental illness, published by American author and poet Sylvia Plath. Choosing key imagery from the text, Lees hopes to reveal the novels relevance in today's society. She compares the imagery of the Fig Tree with a quote by Louise Bourgeois; "We all live in 'cells' they are part of our everyday life, they are spaces for withdrawal and/or punishment, of confinement, of oppression. It is like a huge cage, where we can step in, but we are not sure whether we will be able to leave, at least unharmed". Lees explains that the suffocating feeling of indecision is something that nearly every woman and young person can relate to. The knowledge that if you choose the wrong path (fig) the right one might fall before you get it.



*The Fig Tree*, 2019  
Archival ink on watercolour paper  
29.5 x 43 cm





*How You See Me*, 2018  
Sepia, black pen and pencil on watercolour paper  
77 x 63 cm



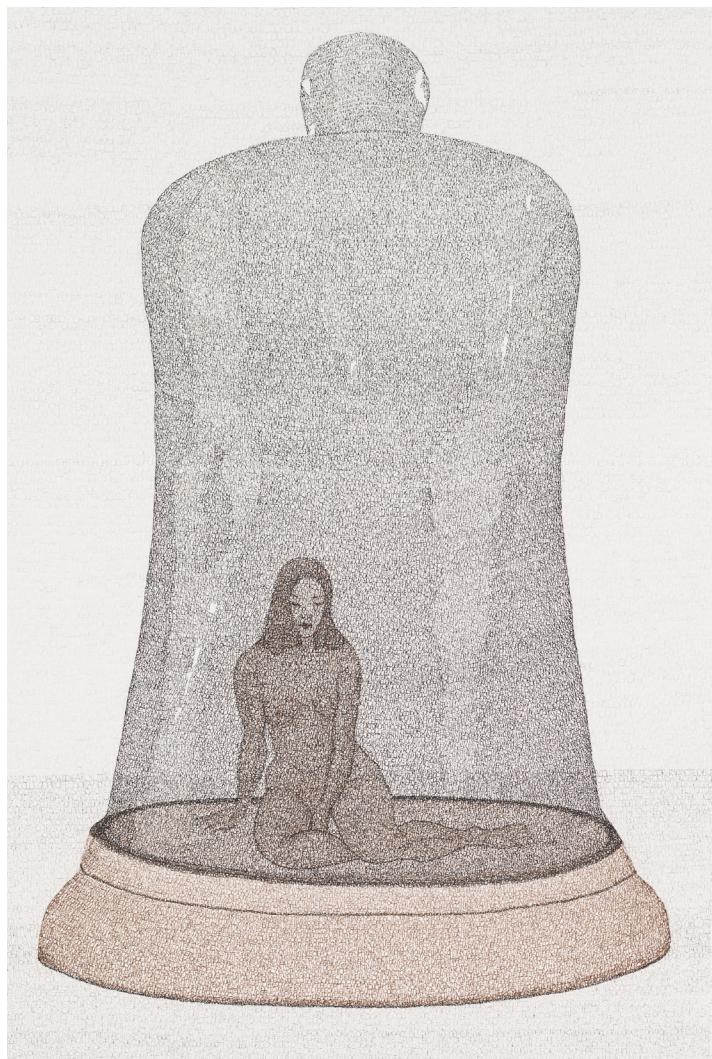
*Dysfunctional Creativity*, 2018  
Sepia and black pen on watercolour paper  
73 x 63





*Living Without Air*, 2018  
Sepia, black pen and pencil on watercolour paper  
58 x 38 cm





*Contained Anguish*, 2018  
Sepia, black pen and pencil on watercolour paper  
56 x 36.5 cm

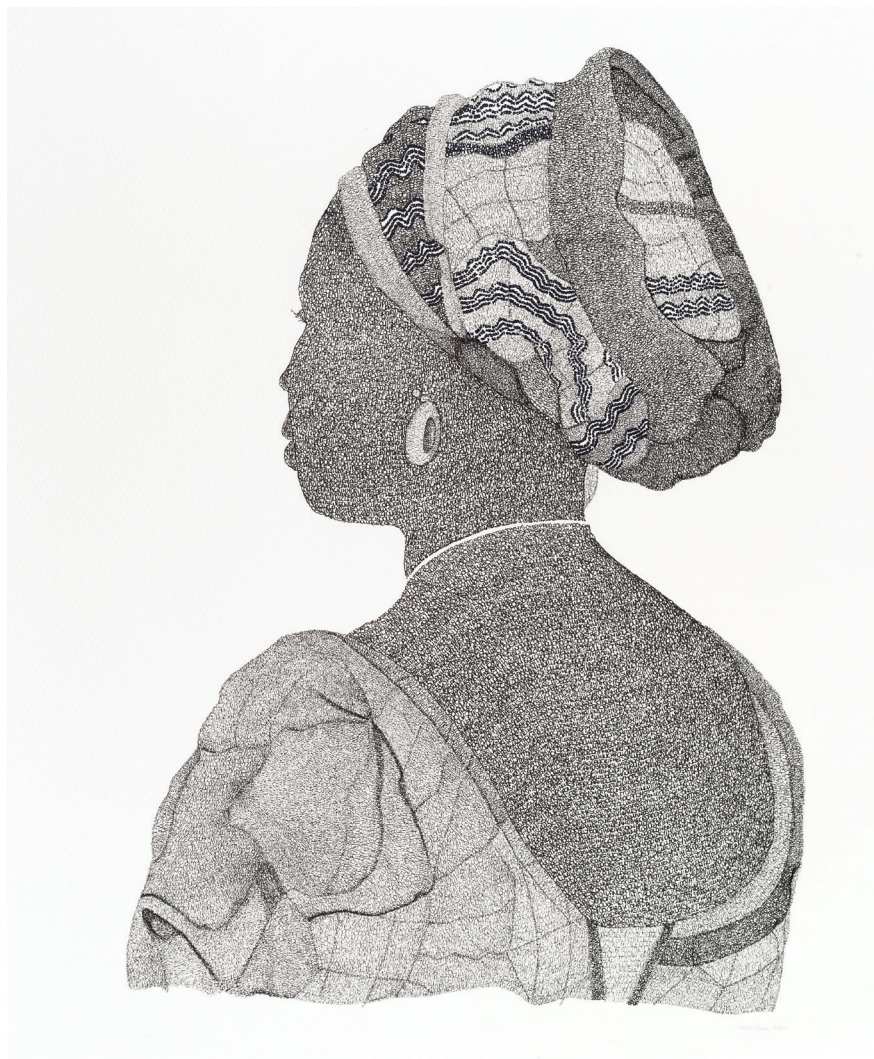
# BOKO HARAM

This series of drawings uses the written word to explain and illustrate the enduring strength of the mothers of the 219 girls kidnapped by Boko Haram in 2014. Their pictorial beauty and sartorially elegant brightness present a contrast to the strongly felt human emotions they capture. These women's children remain the property of Boko Haram, whose objective is to enslave women for their gratification and by doing so enforce and justify their religious conviction to wage 'Jehad' against the people of Nigeria.



*The Lookout*, 2017  
Archival ink on cotton rag paper  
56 x 47 cm





*Release Our Girls*, 2017  
Archival ink on cotton rag paper  
56 x 47 cm



*Our Future Is Without Boko Haram*, 2017  
Archival ink on cotton rag paper  
56 x 47 cm





*Alone*, 2017  
Archival ink on cotton rag paper  
51 x 43 cm





*My Silent Scream*, 2017  
Archival ink on cotton rag paper  
71 x 53 cm

# WOMEN AND THE VOTE & THE HISTORY OF BODY PACKAGING

Featured in this exhibition are the exquisite burkas and bodices from the series, “The History of body packaging” started in 2011. This collection looks at the common myths and misunderstanding behind this notorious garment and its changing significance over the centuries. Irene carefully selects and weaves together texts on the history of underwear and questions why constricting and quasi-barbaric items such as chastity belts and basques appear as erotic to today’s liberated woman. Her work hopes to explore social history, as well as analysing a seemingly ‘female’ obsession with surface appearance.



*Never Have So Many, Owed So Much, To So Few, Deeds Not Words, 2018*  
Archival ink on watercolour paper  
93 x 73 cm





*Never Have So Many, Owed So Much, To So Few, 2018*  
Archival ink on watercolour paper  
93 x 73 cm

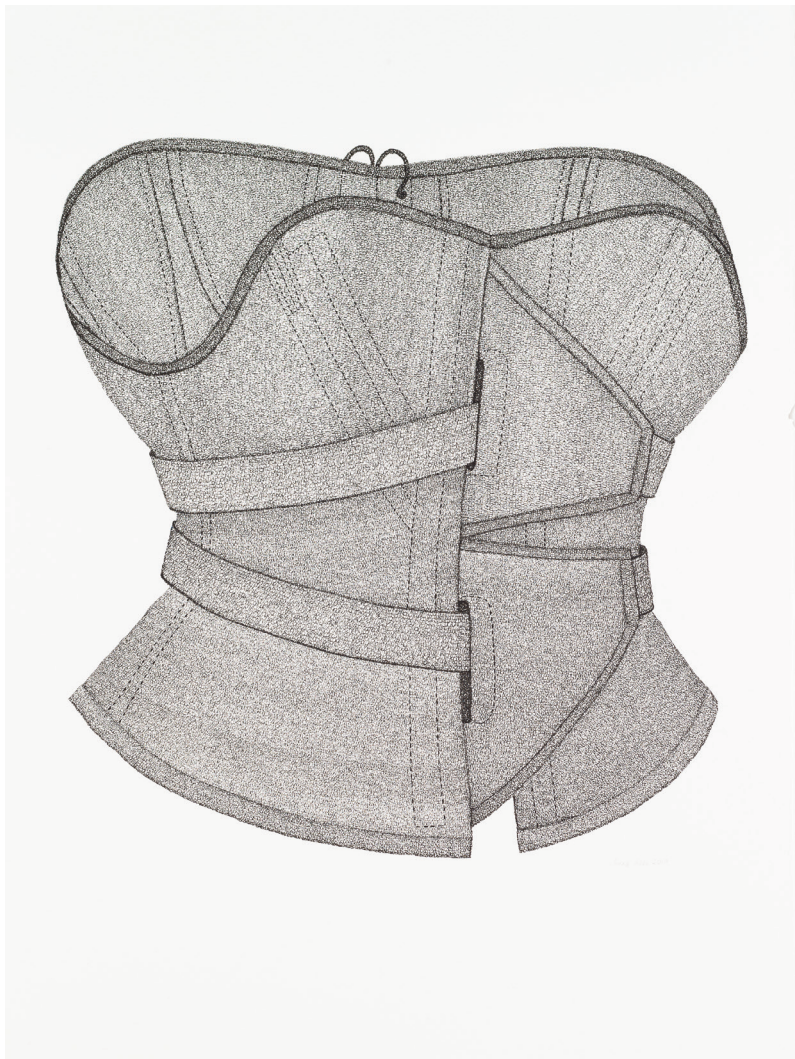


*Ready For Anything*, 2018  
Archival ink on watercolour paper  
56.5 x 33 cm



*A Whalebone To See Through*, 2011  
Archival ink on cotton rag paper  
79 x 60 cm





*Packaged To Go*, 2019  
Archival ink on watercolour paper  
76 x 56 cm

## ITS ONLY WORDS TURNER PRIZE 1984-2010

In this series, titled "It's only words; Turner Prize 1984-2010", Lees documents the personal tales of the winners of the esteemed award. Grayson Perry inspired the urn and much of the content, while Chris Ofili, Damien Hirst, and Tracey Emin are amongst artists featured in the collection. The Picasso and Egon Schiele pots humourously illustrate the artists who Lees would award the Turner Prize.



*Turner Prize, Chris Ofili, No Woman No Cry, 2011*  
Archival ink on paper  
85 x 64 cm



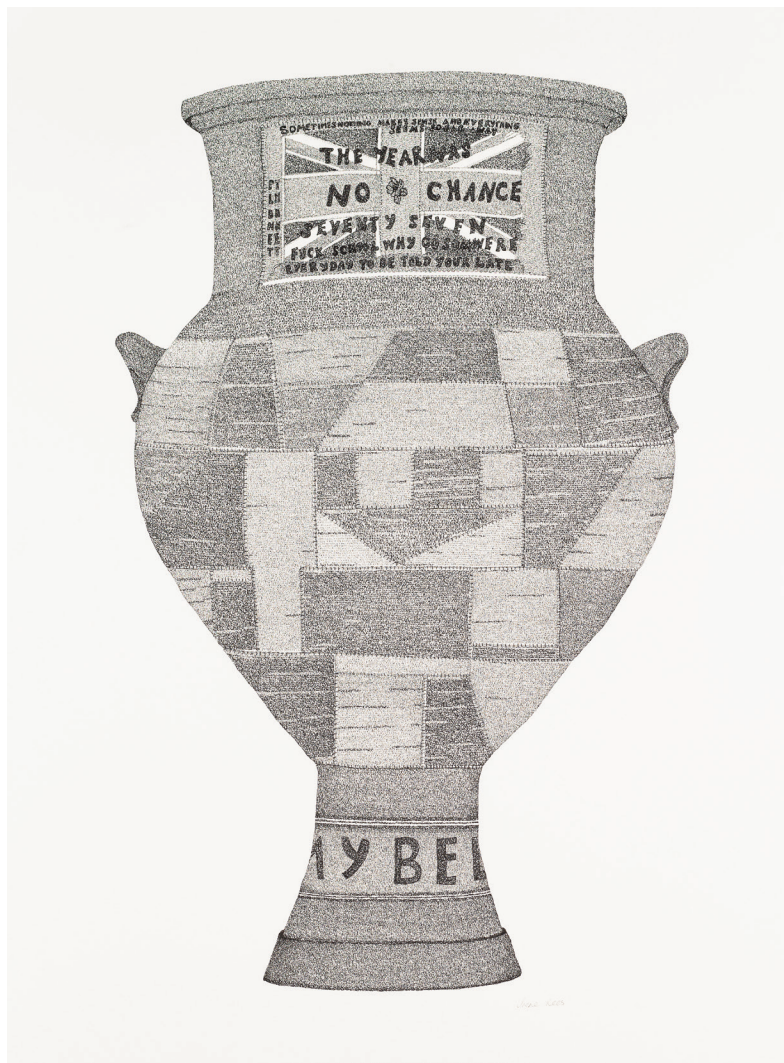


*Egon Schiele 2011*

*Turner Prize, Egon Schiele, 2011*  
Archival ink on paper  
85 x 64 cm

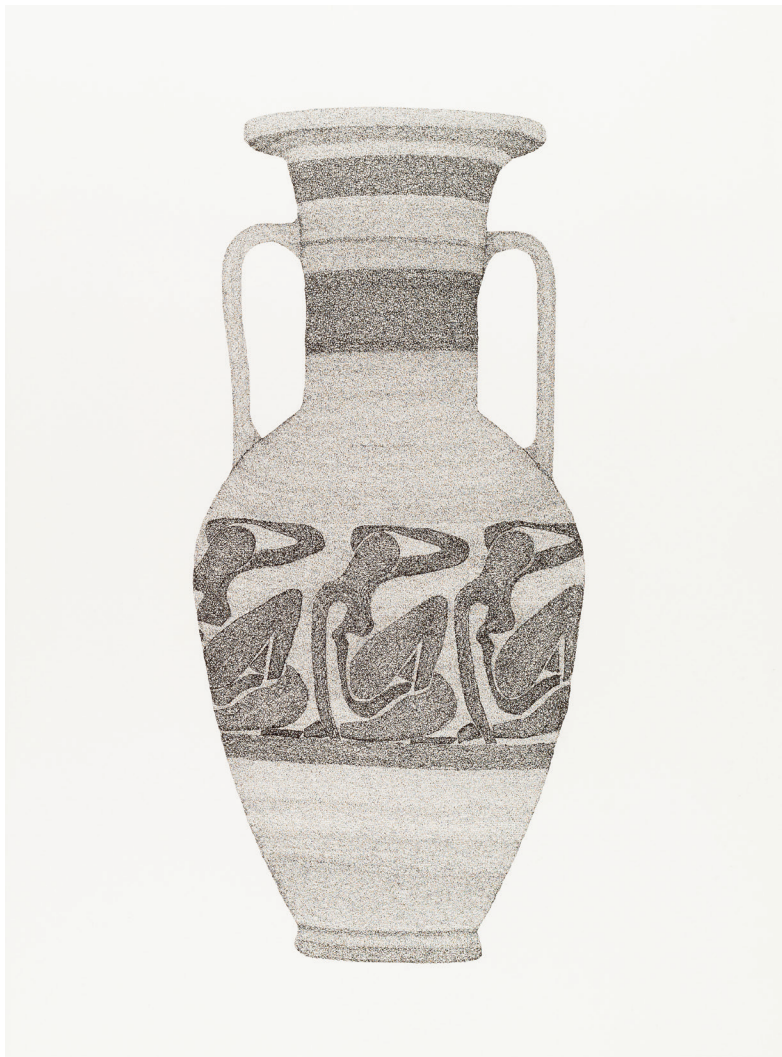


*Turner Prize, Grayson Perry, To Be Or Not To Be, 2018*  
Archival ink on paper  
76 x 45 cm



*Turner Prize, 1979 The Year Of No Chance, 2013*  
Archival ink on paper  
73 x 63 cm





*Turner Prize, Matisse or Schiele?*, 2008  
Archival ink on paper  
76 x 57 cm

## EDUCATION AND QUALIFICATIONS

- 2005 BA Hons: Drawing and Applied Arts UWE
- 2002 Diploma Art and Design – Distinction Weston Super Mare
- 2007 – 2019 Society of Women Artists
  
- 2018 Trinity Buoy Drawing Prize, London and Tour
- 2018 Gallery Different, Muse, Model or Mistress
- 2018 SWA 157th Exhibition, Mall Galleries, London
- 2018 Little Book Exhibition, Sennan Cove Cornwall
- 2018 Little Book Exhibition, Tremenhare Sculpture Park
- 2018 London Art Fair with Candida Stevens Gallery
- 2017 Petronilla Silver, Tremenhare Sculpture Park
- 2017 Wills Lane Gallery, Cape Cornwall
- 2017 SWA 156th Exhibition, Mall Galleries, London
- 2017 Candida Stevens Gallery, Good Nature
- 2016 Candida Stevens Gallery, ICON
- 2016 Wills Lane Gallery, Cape Cornwall
- 2016 SWA 155th Exhibition, Mall Galleries, London
- 2016 TCAPS, Toowoomba, Australia
- 2015 SWA 154th Exhibition, Mall Galleries, London
- 2015 Candida Stevens Gallery, Good Figures, Mall Galleries, London
- 2015 Candida Stevens Gallery, Good Figures, Chichester
- 2015 Gallery Different, London
- 2015 Wills Lane Gallery, St Ives
- 2014 SWA 153th Exhibition, Mall Galleries, London
- 2014 Wills Lane Gallery, St. Ives
- 2013 Millennium Gallery, Freedom from Torture
- 2013 SWA 152th Exhibition, Mall Galleries, London
- 2012 SWA 151th Exhibition, Mall Galleries, London
- 2012 Exchange/Newlyn Art Gallery, Turner Prize, it's only words
- 2012 Wills Lane Gallery, St. Ives
- 2011 SWA 150th Exhibition, Mall Galleries, London
- 2010 Royal Academy of Arts, Summer Exhibition
- 2010 SWA 149th Exhibition, Mall Galleries, London
- 2009 Royal Academy of Arts, Summer Exhibition
- 2009 SWA 148th Exhibition, Mall Galleries, London
- 2009 Coutts Bank, London, Depth of Vision
- 2009 Full Circle, London
- 2008 Holt Gallery, Norfolk SWA
- 2008 Coutts Bank, London, Depth of Vision
- 2008 Wills Lane Gallery, St. Ives An Image of Place
- 2008 Full Circle, London
- 2007 Jerwood Drawing Prize, London and tour
- 2007 RWA Bristol, Jerwood Exhibition
- 2007 SWA 146th Exhibition, Mall Galleries, London
- 2006 Picture Craft Gallery, Norfolk, SWA
- 2006 Here Gallery, Bristol, Twisted

2006 SWA 145th Exhibition, Mall Galleries, London  
 2006 Cheltenham Art Prize – Pitville Gallery, Gloucester  
 2006 The Smithfield Gallery, London Immeasurable Adoration  
 2006 Royal Academy Summer Exhibition, London  
 2006 London Art Fair with The Drawing Gallery, A Whalebone to See Through  
 2006 Sherwell Centre, University of Plymouth, Drawing About  
 2005 Stroud House Gallery, Fulcrum  
 2005 Foyer Gallery UWE, Bristol, Trap  
 2005 Jerwood Drawing Prize, London and tour  
 2005 Art Gym Hengrove School Bristol Draw – Second Site  
 2004 Octagon Visual Arts Centre Bristol, First Few  
 2004 Royal West of England Bristol, Fishing Trap  
 2003 Iguana Gallery Stroud  
 2003 Foyer Gallery Draw, UWE

## REVIEWS AND AWARDS

2017 Unite Education Art Feature  
 2016 Unite Education Art Feature  
 2016 Western Daily Press, Art Feature  
 2009 Unison Calendar  
 2008 Unison Calendar  
 2008 – 2017 Who's Who in Art  
 2011 New Zealand By Design – History of New Zealand, Art Feature  
 2008 Western Daily Press, Cornwall Today – Art Feature  
 2008 BBC Cornwall Art Review  
 2008 Unison Callender  
 2007 Cornwall Today Art Feature  
 2006 Sunday Herald, Glasgow, Art Feature  
 2006 University of West of England, Prospectus  
 2005 Bristol Evening Post, Art Feature  
  
 2018 Fine Art Award, SWA, London  
 2017 Special Fine Art Award SWA, London  
 2012 London Art Co. Drawing Award SWA  
 2013 Frank Herring and Son Easel Award (Drawing) SWA  
 2005 Cliff Moss Memorial Prize, UWE  
 2006 Martini Prize, Cheltenham Art Festival



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