

Trick me twice

The act of tricking someone. You set up conditions in a certain way perhaps through revealing and concealing certain bits of information so that someone arrives at an outcome you have already anticipated. To successfully trick someone you need to understand what someone expects to see how they are likely to interpret it and how those expectations can be used to produce the outcome you had in mind.

A trickster therefore has a keen understanding of perception and knows how to play with expectations. In *Backstage machinations*, Isabella Amram and Juliet Dodson explore how one can work within preset conditions to produce a particular outcome.

Amram approaches the trickster through Tarot, translating the behaviours she identifies in particular cards into actions for making the paintings. In *The Moon (Nocturne for the Unseen)*, concealment becomes a physical process. Bright passages of pinks, blues and violets are painted over with dark, sweeping greens, leaving fragments visible through gaps in the surface. Brushstrokes surface, are obstructed, and disappear beneath later layers, making it difficult to determine what sits in front and what lies behind. The painting continually offers the eye something to recognise before concealing it again. In *The Queen of Pentacles (Nymphéas on Fire)*, cunning operates through responsiveness rather than veiling. Amram understands the Queen's power as an attentiveness to the living world: rather than dominating her surroundings, she reads their conditions and adapts to them. This extends into a dialogue with Monet's *Nymphéas* series, where the garden becomes an environment to work within rather than control. Dense red gestures push through an already teeming field of greens, while scraped and dragged passages alter the direction of what came before. No single gesture controls the composition; each appears to respond to the conditions created by another. The paintings therefore enact two different forms of trickery: one manipulates what can be seen, while the other finds ways to move within conditions already in place.

Dodson approaches the trickster through theatre, where deception is part of how a spectacle is made. In *Trapdoor*, Dodson reveals the mechanism that is usually hidden. Propped up, you can see the actual trapdoor through which actors can disappear. Yet a glass puff of smoke appears to have escaped from underneath it, suggesting that something has happened without you seeing it. The work reveals the mechanism while making you think you just missed it. In *Threadbare*, Dodson plays with the relationship between the stage, the audience and the gaze. A metal curtain and two cinema chairs

meet uncomfortably, with the curtain occupying the space between viewer and performer. It interrupts the view, creating a barrier that can conceal the body while also drawing attention to it. Here, to be able to look without being seen becomes a form of power. The work plays with this imbalance, disrupting the expected relationship between the spectator and the spectacle. In *In the Limelight*, an organically shaped structure directs its gaze back onto its own body. The title refers to the material origins of theater light, created by and to the familiar phrase 'in the limelight', which originates in nineteenth century theatre, where calcium oxide, or quicklime, was heated to produce an intense white light. The work turns a mechanism designed to direct attention onto something else into an object that directs attention back onto itself.

The exhibiiton understands the trickster not as someone who controls the conditions they are working within. They understand them well enough to find another way through. Cunning, in this sense, is not simply deception, but a way of reading a situation and knowing where there is room to act. *Backstage machinations* turns its gaze to the mechanisms of trickery: what happens when you cannot change the conditions, but can understand how they work well enough to use them to your advantage.