

# Purposefully Makeshift

Jean Watt

Elizabeth Englander *The Elizabethan Lumber Room*  
a. SQUIRE, London  
17th January – 7th March 2026

The Henry Moore Institute recently shared a video of *Reclining Woman: Elbow 1981*, one of the artist's large-scale figurative bronzes, being removed from its plinth outside Leeds Art Gallery and taken away for conservation. Strapped at the torso and winched slowly into the air, the monumental sculpture is suspended before being lowered into a crate. In motion, the sheer weight and volume of the figure become clear, revealing how much of its majesty is felt through our perception of its material density. And yet encountering the work's awkward, swinging physicality in this way is also somewhat comic. Recalling the opening of Fellini's *La Dolce Vita* (1960), where a large statue of Christ is flown above Rome by helicopter, neither icon is exempt from the absurd, material reality of moving a heavy object.

The lens of materiality is one of several useful frameworks through which to approach the work of Elizabeth Englander, the New York-based artist showing at a. SQUIRE in London until 7th March. In her first solo exhibition with the gallery, *The Elizabethan Lumber Room*, thirteen small-scale sculptures of Moore-like reclining bodies are housed within and atop four antique, glass-fronted bookcases: a central single-shelf case stands in the gallery centre, with three additional ones around its edges between three and six shelves tall. Each figure is fashioned from a different textile or collaged material – bright fuchsia ruffled knit, concertinaed tartan, gold mylar, purple taffeta – and is stuffed, folded or formed around plaster-soaked jute on wire armatures beneath. The repurposed fabrics are mostly Englander's own that have been inherited or rediscovered, such as her late mother's kilt or a childhood dance costume: a recycling of personal ephemera, which is characteristic of her practice.

The use of found objects lends the works in the exhibition an intimate or youthful quality that is reflected in the techniques

employed to make them. Englander seems to be learning, or demonstrating, how a reclining figure could be built through folding a flag – such as in *Parinirvana (American flag)* – or cutting apart a dress – in *Parinirvana (Sugar Plum Fairy 2)*. The construction of the works leaves seams exposed, plaster drips hardened and wooden plinths unpainted. The figures bulge awkwardly or are uncomfortably flattened, lending a fragility or instability to their forms. In some cases, it appears as though the artist is using a needle and thread for the first time, with visible hand stitching frankensteining the heads of *Parinirvana (UNESCO Betty)* and *Parinirvana (pussyhat)* onto their respective bodies. In fact, textiles have appeared consistently in Englander's practice for the past few years, tracing back to and beyond her *Bikini Crucifixion* series shown at Theta in New York in 2021, where representations of Christ were sewn out of repurposed swimming costumes. The staged immediacy of the works, therefore, the sense that they may have been made quickly or with limited skills, seems to be a strategy used by Englander to imbue the figures with a certain charm. In these terms, there is an intentional humour to the work. It pretends to do something badly, which draws attention, ultimately, to the absurdity of making art. An image of the artist's studio is conjured: an explosion of stuffing, splattered plaster, ripped gauze – the experience of trying to bend a form into being.

The accompanying exhibition text, written by Englander, contextualises these materially expressive works within a dense web of influences, some more immediately legible than others. The figures draw on *parinirvanas* – depictions of the death of the Buddha – as well as the reclining teaching Buddha, filtered through Englander's own Buddhist practice within the Soto Zen tradition. Yet she acknowledges a 'straying from the traditional iconography', perhaps most noticeable in the lack of features

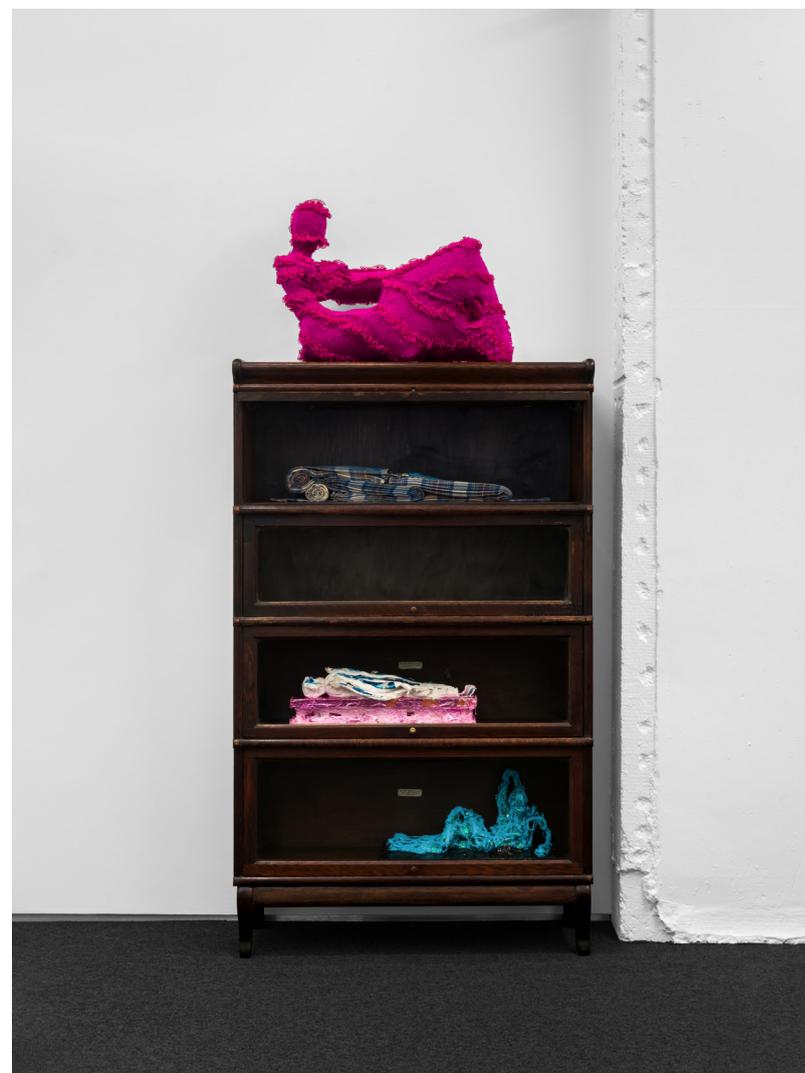
associated with depictions of the Buddha, such as elongated earlobes or snail-shell curls (*kaparda* in Sanskrit). Citing also the influence of the Western sculptural tradition and artists such as Moore or Matisse, the figures register first in the canon of the Modernist reclining nude rather than devotional images. The stuffed Betty Boop, *Parinirvana (UNESCO Betty)*, placed prominently in the centre of the room, is a direct interpretation of Moore's 1957–58 reclining work for the UNESCO headquarters in Paris. This positions the work both in the tradition of studying from the Old Masters, and alongside the sculptural practice of artists such as Moore or Hepworth, who made miniature maquettes for future works. By titling each work *Parinirvana*, followed by a parenthetical qualifier, Englander seems to both insist on and reject the works' apparently Buddhist framing.

More references are woven in associatively to Englander's text. The exhibition's title, *The Elizabethan Lumber Room*, refers to a 1925 essay by Virginia Woolf, in which she likens the mind of under-read seventeenth-century writers, including the polymath Sir Thomas Browne, to a chamber cluttered with inherited objects. Central to the essay is Woolf's claim that such writers worked in a moment of extraordinary freedom and abundance: literature was not yet professionalised or rigidly policed by rules of taste, and writers moved fluidly between poetry, drama, pamphlets and prose, responding directly to life rather than to critical systems. In the exhibition text, Englander reinterprets the metaphor of the 'lumber room' as a psychic interior shaped by imperial accumulation: a subjectivity formed through appropriation and violence. By aligning this with Buddhist concepts of 'no-self', the exhibition reframes Woolf's lumber room as an unstable archive, explored through the organised remains of the artist's own personal history. Other sources, such as Aby Warburg's concept of *Nachleben*, the afterlife of forms, or the portable history of the Globe-Wernicke barristers' bookcases in which the sculptures are housed, are pulled into the exhibition text too. These wide-ranging references, somewhat flattened by their number, seem to be organised according to Englander's own internal, associative logic. By using her first name in the exhibition and several sculpture titles, the works can be understood, ultimately, as both the playful result and the

process of Englander's inner dialogue: an unresolved self-portrait as method. As she acknowledges in the final lines of her text, 'I have likewise tried to meet some of the myriad things which actualize my selfe [sic]'.

What risks being lost amid this density of historical and theological reference is the work's humour. This is a quality that is born out of their construction and produces some of the most captivating details of the exhibition. Building on the works inside the space, five miniature jumpers hang in the vitrine outside: a version of the Thai spirit house shrines outside homes and businesses where offerings are left in hope of good fortune. That the display and its carpet match the gallery interior is sweetly comic.

One of the jumpers has a tiny version of the Second World War icon Rosie the Riveter, another has the word 'Paris' emblazoned behind a woman's lingered silhouette. Coming together with the purposefully makeshift sculptures inside, they draw out a quality to Englander's visual language that recalls a line from a previous exhibition at Theta: 'Art could be improvised, accidental, absurd, clumsy, whimsical, disturbing. It could be funny. It could be liberatory.' As is the case with Moore's bronze swinging heavily through the air in Leeds, what lingers in the mind when viewing Englander's works is not their underpinning theory, but their extraordinary physical presence – often tactile, sometimes awkward and humorous, always tender. ◀



Installation view: Elizabeth Englander, *The Elizabethan Lumber Room*, 2026.



Elizabeth Englander, *Parinirvana (UNESCO Betty)*, 2025.

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