



Fern O'Carolan:
chloé
(with an *i*)

What was your forbidden fruit? The thing that you saw, did, heard and after that moment everything was different. In the Summer of 1998, a million tween boys grew up all at once when ...*Baby One More Time* landed on MTV and the story that goes with it is well documented – but for some girls, it was like seeing God. The sublime sensation of something the same as you but simultaneously existing in a Universe beyond comprehension. Once we saw Britney, we couldn't ever go back.

On my first day of high school, I wore; a skirt below my knees, long, frizzy, unstyled hair, big clumpy boots and little bobbles in the shape of ducks. All the other girls were already in makeup, they looked like adults and I looked like a child. There was a girl called [REDACTED] who just looked like the absolute Trouble TV Teen Dream – long blonde hair, perfect skin and dark eyeliner. I was just this complete other thing.

The search for identity starts all at once, we realise that the things we like decide who we are. Our shoes pick our friends, we are mercilessly bullied over backpacks and haircuts. Social tribalism is the only means of survival and the perfect way to cement our thrust into individualism is to find a few other people who look, think and act exactly like we do. Those associations become more important than family, running hotter and thicker than blood. Our joy and pain is shared and manipulated by the group – certainty is more certain than it could ever be.

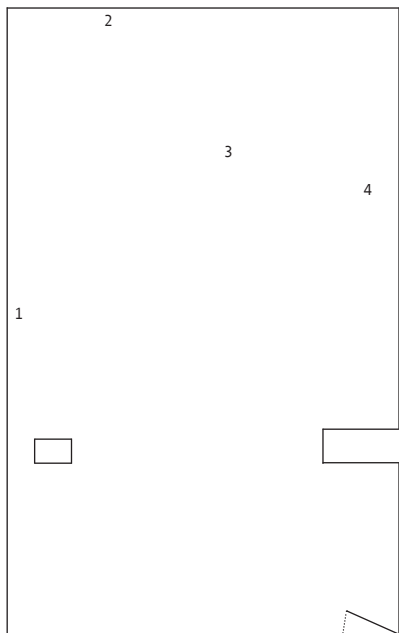
*When I was fourteen years old I started listening to Finch and cut off all my hair. I went from some nerdy little kid to a blue-black box-dye backcombed monster, all the boys who ignored me before wanted to go on a date. My mum bought me all of those cds; the first Silverstein record, *Enema of The State* (Ireland is behind), *Funeral For A Friend* and I uploaded them all to my pink Ipod Mini (with my name engraved on the back) at an internet cafe. I'd get kicked out all the time for downloading Limewire on the public computers, sitting on Bebo with my friends while weirdos watched Mud Wrestling next to us.*

That new identity is power, it's a break from the hierarchy and a break from history. We're building little empires, choosing who we are instead of having it thrust upon us. In our adolescence, everything changes so quickly and every moment is more important than the last – these are the friends we'll love for the rest of our lives (until tomorrow) and so are the next ones. We're sharing cigarettes and vodka hidden in energy drink bottles, we're licking wounds and plotting revenge. Utopia is always rocked from inside and out, cells splinter and start again – we're reborn every morning, on the bus through our headphones.

At some point, boys asking you to kiss in the park stops being gross and starts being kind of interesting. There was a boy with pink hair at the other school and my friends said I had to kiss him because I couldn't go into year 2 being a frigid. We became friends and eventually things got a little weird, his tone changed and he wanted to be more than friends. That's something that's happened to me all my life and I suppose that comes from connecting to people through subculture, there's a built in topic of conversation and it's easy for people – especially men – to mistake cordiality for attraction. The boy with the pink hair from the other school was the first, and I still remember that feeling. It's weird, disappointing, confusing but also powerful, like a woman and not a girl.

That feeling of filling up, becoming powerful, moving in the world as a free individual is short lived – if work don't get you then the warheads will. That certainty we built up is rocked, we fall apart. For fleeting moments we crawl back into the womb, embracing our infancy in fits of sobbing. The constants aren't so constant anymore and all the kids are cops – I hate to break your little heart, but chaos just ain't you. It feels so sweet to hide under your covers and feel that ache flow through you, feel that ache leave you and feel the realisation that this might be the last time it ever comes. We're reborn every day for so long, shot shrieking into the light until we're not anymore.

Text by Allan Gardner



- 1 *Adorned*
Velvet, metal connectors, ball chains,
faux leather, stainless steel nails
134 x 80cm
2023
- 2 *Adorable*
140 x 106cm
Velvet, metal connectors, ball chains,
faux leather, stainless steel nails
2023
- 3 *Blossom*
Quilted faux leather, faux leather,
yarn, hair bow, teddy bear fringing,
love heart diamonds, wadding, stuffing
110 x 100 x 35cm
2023
- 4 *Vogue*
Velvet, metal connectors, ball chains,
faux leather, stainless steel nails
144 x 84cm
2023

Slugtown are pleased to present *chloé (with an i)*, the debut European solo exhibition from Leeds based artist Fern O'Carolan. O'Carolan's work skewers aesthetics of girlhood, adolescent searches for identity and the achy space between knowing everything and knowing nothing.

Recent solo and group exhibitions include: *You'll Never Get To Heaven*, No Gallery, New York (solo); *The Other Side of Paradise*, The Bomb Factory, London; *I'd Rather Be Your Enemy*, Grove Collective, London; *Let's Get Together*, WASTE Gallery, London and *Ceremonial Burning (of a turtleneck)*, SCREW Gallery, Leeds. O'Carolan has been shortlisted for the Ingram Prize, and SPACE Studio Award, and is working on her first artist book with Village, Leeds.

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