

As *Commuter*, 2024-2025 came to a close, we thought it would be really nice to talk to Katie Watchorn about her practice and her process of reworking an old idea for *Shimmer x Amarte*. The interview here, between myself and Katie, had been edited down to a few pages but the real conversation was for a couple of hours and far more pages than we expected. We spoke about everything from preparing to go to art school as a teenager, interests outside of artmaking, other artworks and other lives before this one.

What you miss from the conversation is laughing, swearing, losing track of what we were going to say, the “ums” and the “ahs”, a whole lot of “you knows” and an embarrassing story that can’t be shared, because it is too embarrassing (about me or about Katie, you’ll never know :D).

What we do discuss here is how Katie is currently understanding her practice as it unfolds, learning from teachers, parents, from herself and the contexts that Katie finds herself in. We end the conversation with her thinking about *Commuter*, the work that *Shimmer* commissioned with *Amarte*.

At the end of the interview, we include photos of the work that Katie and I are talking about and a text that Jason Hendrik Hansma and I wrote in response to Katie’s work.

For us, it was a special experience to work with an artist in a new way, and we thank Katie for working with us, and thank *Amarte* for making it possible.

Thanks for reading,
Eloise

“That feeling of a whirlwind”:

**a conversation with
Katie Watchorn and Eloise Sweetman**

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Eloise Sweetman: how do you describe your work?

Katie Watchorn: The word that comes to mind is 'sculpture' straight away. It's a reaction to my immediate environment.

I don't even really have a drawing practice. Everything's embedded, for me, in material. I can't seem to get away from that, so I'm just going to have to accept it. But it was one of the things when I was going to De Ateliers that I was like, maybe there's a way I can make work that isn't this material heavy.

For some reason I thought that that might be easier, you know, that there would be an ease to it, because sometimes I find that I get really bogged down in material as well. But that's what I'm drawn to.

ES: What does a day in the studio look like for you?

KW: I don't need to be in the studio all the time. Though the studio is incredibly important, because it's this space where things sort of coalesce, you know, where I'll bring objects in, in the hopes that they spark each other off, or I'll bring a material in in the hopes that it'll spark off, and sometimes that mightn't happen for years.

It's just having that space where things are in my peripheral vision. Of course then there comes that moment of a deadline or something where I have to make things spark but usually at that point something already has. A day in the studio is definitely not necessarily always physical or making things.

I only make things when the conditions are kind of right, or when things have come together in the right way, or when I have to, nearly. I spend a lot of time sitting. And looking at the objects, looking at the things or Googling things or scrolling on the internet quite a lot. Reading, doing applications, doing my taxes, you know, all these other things that end up happening in the studio, or I'm not there at all. I'm out walking or cycling a lot of the time. When I was in Ireland before I came here, my actual studio space, I would've thought of a lot of times it was my car. And I would have done a lot of driving in Ireland. That

was where I did the bulk of my thinking as well. At the moment I don't have a studio. I think for a while I was like, that's okay and it'll work out, but now it's really starting to grate on me not having a space. Everything's just packed in the storage room at the minute.

ES: Is it all completed in your head first then?

KW: Yeah. The stuff I would have done before was heavily built. It was a lot of welding and a lot of working with timber, a lot of casting, so much casting. I became proficient to some degree in those things, which was a goal of mine, because prior to that, prior to COVID, I would have worked mainly with my Dad, and he was a technician for me in a lot of ways. I had something I wanted to build, I would work with him, which kind of brought about, because he's not an artist, and there's no like, let's stand back and think about this for a second. I would have to tell him exactly what I wanted, and he would do it for me.

I had to know the measurements, I had to know the size, the scale, and he would then go about it with me. I'd be there, but I didn't understand the making of it as well as he did. I couldn't interrupt him because I was already asking a favour of him. I felt like I couldn't ask him, can we stop and can I look at it for a few hours. That brought that kind of working way into my realm. I'm not saying that that's the right way to work. It's a way. It's a way to work. So then during COVID, because I didn't have access to Dad for a period, but I had deadlines. I started to learn a lot of those skills myself. That allowed for thinking through the making and being a bit slower. As I didn't necessarily have a studio space, I was in a cold workshop a lot of the time and it meant I had to work with a sense of urgency.

Then something sort of shifted in my thinking when I was making work, they were kind of replicas of works or of things that existed in the real world, in my reality, which at the time was farming. I was making these approximations of things. Eventually I got to the point where I was like, I don't really feel like making an approximation of this thing. I needed to take an entire step back from everything.

that I thought was how I made work or these long established ideas I had in my mind of how I go about making work. I kind of wanted to pull everything apart.

ES: So the scrolling on the internet is looking at the different materials and objects used in industry?

KW: Or I've noticed something in my day to day that's been percolating and I'm researching that. That's a theme from past work and I don't think that will ever go away where I'm really interested in the properties of objects or how they, like real life functions or specific, specific roles that they play in specific industries. There is a material I used a lot in the past called "Parlor Top", which is concrete aggregate that you float onto a concrete floor that you just laid in a milking parlour. It was there because it was harder than concrete. It doesn't break down from spilt milk, the lactic acid doesn't break the floor down as fast as it would break down concrete. It came in this range of colours which were all grass or earth tones. I was interested if there is some psychology to this for like making the animals think that they're outside when they're inside.

ES: Yeah.

KW: I think that's a pretty straightforward leap to make. [I am interested in] things like that, where there's like specific properties attributed to materials or objects, and that usually then puts them in specific industries as well. If I've noticed something in my peripheral vision, and then I start looking into why and how it's where it is, that usually leads me down the garden path in some way. Sometimes other things will spawn off, like the air curtains weren't the first thing in the studio. The first thing in the studio were the thermal mugs and they spawned nearly everything that then subsequently came in, just from thinking about the properties, function and history of the thermal mug led me into a huge cavern of other things that do the same thing, but in a different way.

ES: It makes sense that once you left the direct connection to the farm and moved to a city like Amsterdam that you would also look to a different environment for inspiration.

KW: Yeah. Yeah. I think the works in this show and the works that I did just before this were all about movement and traveling through places because that was what I was doing.

I was in Ireland and living in Dublin there was always this push-pull wanting to be in the city, but the work being not from the city and showing work in the city that wasn't in any way really related to the city. And it was about this really personal lived experience happening, not far away, but kind of outside of other people's consciousness sometimes. When I came to The Netherlands and I had wanted to shed a bit of that as well, I wanted to be able to make work outside of this very personal place of the farm at home, which was the really difficult bit of figuring out how to, it wasn't that I wanted to forget about it or that I wanted to pretend like it had never happened. I wanted to open it a bit wider and reflect more my constant fluctuations between these places.

ES: The farm you're talking about is your family farm.

KW: Yeah the family farm. There are still these really small, like my father's, very small farms that are like a blip in terms of what they're producing. To come back to the first question (before the interview started) again about how I got into art, is that I started making work about farming. There were two things that led me to this was my portfolio teacher told me to start looking at what there was at home that I could draw, which for me was the farm. Then when I was in college, I was trying to figure out what I am interested in as I was starting to head towards my degree show. I started looking at Dad, he's an inventor, so all these like random sculptures that he was making for function, purely for function and utilitarian stuff, because he didn't want to go to the shop and buy something that was specifically agricultural.

He'll look at it and say, "I can just make my own version of that" and he would end up with these kind-of mad approximate things at home. And that fascinated me. He is very good at building and making things with his hands. So there were all these tools everywhere. Those things were

how I first got into making the work about farming or how I got into making sculpture. In the work I make now, I can see I still have the same sensibilities, I'm still drawn to a similar scale of stuff. I'm still drawn to a particular form. That all goes back to some kind of utilitarian function of objects that I'm interested in.

ES: In your biography you write about being immersed in the context and the histories of objects and material. What do you mean by "immersed"?

KW: I become fascinated about those things and use them as a means to propel the work forward in some way, or propel the idea forward in my mind. Sometimes how has a material been used historically, or how has an object been in a building or part of a system historically or how has it operated. I suppose some of that's hidden in the work. I know all the properties of a material, but it's not necessarily shared in the mediation of the work to the audience.

When I started working with beef fat, which is such a potent, heavily laden material with the ways you could read into. There's the way I was approaching it, which might not be the way that other people might approach it. But that material got used. I procured it myself and I cleaned it myself and I then used it as a casting material over and over and over again. Everything melted and reused over and over and over again in a big cycle. That material had a lot of weight to it. Then in The Netherlands I was thinking a lot about this approach to art making. Why did I kind of zone in on something and need to use it over and over again. I think it was because it was so potent that it didn't need that much outside context, you know, or outside information for there to be multiple ways that it might be able to be read.

ES: What does beef fat look like, and what work are you talking about?

KW: It looks like wax.

ES: Is it these shells that you made? (show image on Katie's website). I was thinking like beef fat seems so messy and I don't feel like your work has that quality.



Image 1

KW: These ones. (show image of work)



Image 2

ES: Oh, wow. So it's really hard. I really thought this was wax or even plastic.

KW: Yeah. It's solid at room temperature.

ES: And then this, this too.



Image 3

KW: No, that's sugar. Sugar. sugar glass. The stuff they use in, um, TV and film for like making fake glasses and bottles to smash.

ES: Your work is very minimal and refined.

KW: Yeah that was what I was trying to say, I was kind of confused by that. I didn't know everything got so stripped back, and still does, when it comes to the point of exhibition.

When it comes to showing the artworks, I end up putting the work through a pretty rigorous process of editing. I didn't really understand that about myself. I think it's because I feel like these properties I'm talking about, or these functions, or these small things I wanted to pay attention to in the materials need a whole lot of space around them for that to be able to be read.

I think that's why I do that. And I think that still continues now, even with the, with the air curtains even though that was situated in a room that had so much context, that was enough for me.

ES: Can you say something about developing upon an existing idea for Commuter at Shimmer?

KW: I think the biggest thing is the triggering of the work, which was something that I really wanted to do for a previous work but didn't have the time, just could not get that bit done. It was so complex, everything else. And there were issues because everything was secondhand.



Image 4

I didn't know how things were going to work for a long time until I got an electrician in and then I got a plumber in and there were issues with that, that the audience triggering, it was way too much work for me to manage, on my own anyway. So I got to work with Kees Reedijk, who works with electronics and programming. I wanted to work with programming. I was interested in this, because when I was thinking about the air curtains, I was thinking about their location in our everyday lives, which is above your head going into a supermarket. And then I was thinking about the automatic doors and how they get triggered and not that that triggers the air curtain, but that that allows you into that valve space right there, the valve that lets you into that space where you feel this synthetic breeze, if you notice it, feel the effects of an air curtain. So I was interested in using another thing from that environment, which was a motion sensor. And it's something I would, if I showed the others again, I think I would maybe try and work it into it is that they only operate after the space is inhabited by a body. Then it immediately becomes about you and there's something intimate in that, that I was really interested in that I didn't get to play with. They ran on relays in their first iteration. They're just on these relay timers where one clicks out, the other one clicks in.

It's just like an analog system of turning something on and off infinitely. There was no rhyme or reason to how they came on and off, even though that was something I thought was really important. So here having them be triggered by motion sensors, and then run through a program of intensity, different intensities is really important, that was the development of the work. The programming was the biggest development.

As well as it being situated in the old public transport building but also that it is in a stairwell. The architecture of the stairwell lends itself to that feeling of a whirlwind going upwards, and people transiting through that space. That it isn't an exhibition space, it's a throughway or a means to get to somewhere else, that's where there is something happening that is also only happening because someone triggered it by going somewhere else.







Overlooking the Rotterdam port, a breeze can be felt, intensifying into a strong wind. Generated by air curtains, *Commuter (2024)* by Katie Watchorn refers to constant movement and intercity living, typical of the Randstad experience. Often working in transitory spaces, the artist activates the “threshold” between inside and outside. An air curtain is a system typically used at the entrances of supermarkets to keep insects and dust out while regulating the air—warm in winter, cool in summer—in short, separating through what is formless.

The white noise produced by the machines has a meditative effect, permeating the rooms and studios of the building. Like mindfulness (the ever-productive person’s meditation), where the flow of noise (read: consciousness) pauses, the impact of the work becomes apparent in its absence. Click, click, click then off—until the motion sensor detects your body again, and the cycle repeats. Vertical columns of air fill Shimmer’s stairwells and the curves of the modernist building—oh, to undo, how lovely life could be.

Throughout the building, hidden behind Shimmer’s door, are thermoses—one a cast, three others ‘real,’ as real as an object can be when it keeps your drink warm for hours on end. These vessels mark the presence of people constantly on the move, those without time to pause for a coffee, who stretch a moment into an entire day. In this stretch, life becomes a series of in-between moments before being swept away by the wind. City living.

ABOUT THE ARTIST

Katie Watchorn makes sculpture. Key to the artist’s process is an exploration of the history and functions of objects and materials. By immersing herself in the full context of these items, Watchorn seeks to ‘unlock’ their hidden qualities, fostering a dialogue between the components that invites new sculptural possibilities. This process allows items to communicate with one another, opening up a fresh narrative that was previously concealed.

Her recent works reflect a personal tension between her rural roots and urban existence, particularly through the lens of travel and commuting. She conveys the movement of the individual through the use of motion-activated devices, the retrieval

Commuter (2024) by Katie Watchorn
Sunday 29 September 2024 until
February 2025

Shimmer x Amarte

of typically hidden systems from public spaces, and the depiction of bodies in advertising.

Recent presentations include *Underbelly* at De Ateliers, Amsterdam, 2024; *Move-Set-Move* group show at The Complex, Dublin, 2023; *From Here to There*, three person show at The Douglas Hyde Gallery, Dublin 2021–2022; *Zero Grazing*, solo show at Studio Pavilion, Glasgow International, 2021. Her solo show *Dry* brimming will open in mother’s tankstation | Dublin in September 2024.

ABOUT SHIMMER X AMARTE

Earlier this year, Shimmer x Amarte made a call for existing works that could be adapted for the stairwell leading up to our space. We encouraged artists to propose old ideas or existing works that could be modified for this project. By opening up Shimmer in this way, we continue to serve as a site of reflection for artists.

X Amarte is a platform dedicated to supporting cultural organizations and institutions that focus on showcasing talented creators through various projects, open calls, and events.

Image 1: Surrogate I (field)

Image: Matthew Barnes

Image 2: Untitled, 2021. Cast beef fat, welded and bent steel, gallery paint, stitched headliner fabric, wadding, plywood. Image: Louis Haugh

Image 3: From Here to There, 2021. Plywood, agricultural surfacing aggregate, cast sugar glass, welded steel mesh. Image: Louis Haugh

Image 4: Dry brimming thresholds (commutes between fantasies), 2024. GELU industrial air curtain, timer relay, thermal travel mugs, corporate promotional thermal travel mugs. Image: Geert van der Rooij

Image 5, 6 & 7: Commuter (2024) by Katie Watchorn, two air curtains, arduino devices, (motion sensors) approximately 7 minute program, pigmented jesmonite, thermal flasks, dimensions variable. Courtesy of the artist and Shimmer. Photography by Jhoeko.

Shimmer

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Open on Sundays and by appointment

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