

## Tender Inversion

### Notes on Geoffrey Watson's *Reverse Still Life* for Liverpool Powerhouse

By Sam Lieblich

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Reverse Still Life is an ongoing project in which Geoffrey Watson subjects items common in still life paintings—sourdough, parsnip, mandarin, banana—to a process of inversion.

He flays the object of its outer layer, turns it inside-out, then sews it back up using a raised chain stitch. Raised chain stitch consists of rows of parallel lines of equal length with a thread woven between each row to form a column of linked 'Y's. It's not how a surgeon stitches the skin, it's elaborate and prominent, it's for bold outlines, and borders; it announces the seams Watson has created in these everyday objects. One wonders though, were the seams there all along? Has he flayed the fruit or surfaced the stitches?

In this iteration of Reverse Still Life, the artist has presented the composition in three different states: as a photograph, as a chemically treated and ceramicised sculpture that will never rot, and as an arrangement using untreated organic materials designed to rot throughout the course of the month-long exhibition.

The artist discovered this practice as a tender act of mercy to the insides of objects. He told me "As a teenager I felt sorry for the insides of bricks and rocks because they never got to see sunlight, so I did this inversion with mandarins, and then in a more committed way since 2021". One can perhaps sense an identification with the object turned inside-out: inversion, introversion, hidden away, gay.

Watson is primarily a dancer, and there's certainly movement implied in these objects which can only be seen to have been turned inside out and then to have been elegantly recovered—the balletic process of intervention worn on the surface of the fruit—surfacing so much of what is *\_already\_* unnatural about the human experience, about the cultivation of domesticated species, about the human touch imparted to things in the way we use them; the mandarin already bears the marks of human intervention at every level of its being because there is no type of mandarin untouched by human practices of cultivation; this fruit that has only been in England since 1805!

But once the inversions get going the practice seems to surface a series of inversions and inversions of inversions that confuse the very idea of inversion so quickly that all of life becomes an ever-tumbling somersault. One imagines wearing a monkey costume inside out, the synthetic hairs catching on every part of the body with each step. What does the banana feel like when it touches its own yellow skin? Does it rub uncomfortably on *\_its\_* flesh? They did surgery on a grape. But this isn't surgery, or it is but it doesn't want to look like surgery. Imagine if when they sewed you up after taking your appendix they used a raised chain stitch? You'd come out looking half like a doily

and half like a torture victim, flayed alive but then unflayed in a very particular way. Like why are you playing with your food? There is no doubt it's erotic, to play with one's food, to feel the squelch of banana through the fingers after squashing it in a closed fist or to feel the dribble of mandarin juice down the forearm, cool and liquid at first—soon—viscous and sticky. Ok, but why is it erotic? "Invert", that's what Freud called homosexuality, and why? Why is it erotic to simply reverse, to turn something inside out, to turn out a rectum or get inside a foreskin. Nature is healing. That's what we said when all of a sudden the dolphins swam back into the Hudson. If it's because the well-off world of the salaried is inside watching television while the gentle creatures of elegant living are somehow out there frolicking, that's healing. If it were a plague of cockroaches running across deserted streets we'd not have said Nature Is Healing. But nature is grafting itself back onto whatever this is that we've made. A core that's been unnatural since we first grafted scion to rootstock. If it were stitched up perfectly, it'd be surgery, but imagine the surgeon was a sneaky bedroom artiste. Imagine the surgeon sewed their initials into you with a decorative band stitch of parallel Whys. Sometimes you just want to punch your way through traffic, sometimes one wants to explode in rage. You can put it back together again, but in a funny way that demonstrates putting it back the way it was is both the way it was in the first instance anyway and also the way you made it in the second instance too so that when you return in it the third instance it gets confusing. All we have is a list of instances then and it seems unwise to draw them on a calendar or to give them a circular itinerary.

All these themes of discomfort, of degradation, of preservation and artifice are apparent. The still life genre was always intended as a reminder of mortality as much as a celebration of domestic life and craft. There's something desperate and bittersweet in the attempt to extend the short-lived beauty of these foodstuffs through Watson's careful rendering of them in another medium.