

Liz Elton: Renewal  
Text by Anna Souter

‘Elton asks us to do the work of staying with the grief as something non-linear and inherently connected to the processes and ecological cycles of life. Compost-like, her metamorphic practice generously opens up a space between letting go and holding on, a site for conversations and continuations.’

So often contemporary curatorial and museological practices propose that art works should be indelible objects, to be preserved for future generations, locked away in controlled environments if need be. Under this formulation, the continued existence of the artwork in “pristine” condition is more important than the necessity for the artwork to be seen and experienced. Yet seams of research exist, infiltrating this expectation of permanence, employing unstable materials to speak of our era of climate breakdown, food insecurity, and future uncertainty.

Liz Elton creates works that are intentionally transient; produced primarily from biodegradable materials such as cornstarch and dyed with pigments extracted from kitchen waste. These pieces are not designed to outlast their maker or viewers, but to live vividly and briefly, undergoing constant change and degradation. Instability is treated not as an existential threat, but as a guiding creative principle.

Elton works extensively with the cornstarch bags we use to discard of food waste, as well as photographing the contents of her compost bin to produce still-life images that hum at the boundary between life and death, heavy with art historical weight while simultaneously enacting a radical uncoupling from that tradition. The materials that end up in this bin – funeral flowers, vegetable rinds, bones, or shells – resemble constellations, planetary formations, or fields of flowers, expansively recalling the conditions in which they grew, lived, and were consumed. In this work, waste becomes a portal, a site of transformation, in which grief and decay are inseparable from renewal, evoking the punchy vivacity of rot.

Through presenting the bin as a liminal site between food consumption and its disappearance, Elton asks us to take notice of our waste, and the capitalist systems through which we produce, discard, and monetise it. Her work scratches at the surface of these systems in order to reveal the absurdist logic of such approaches to food, nutrition, and waste, in which we make bags from food (cornstarch) in order to throw away other food. Money and industry circulate around our actions of throwing things away; in this context, to reuse, re-narrativize, or avoid that waste becomes a quietly rebellious act, a moment of pushback against an all-encompassing system. Pieces like *One Hundred Harvests*, which references a prediction about the planet’s dwindling soil fertility, hold deep ecological grief. But even here, Elton is looking to find not despair, but a fundamental question about how we go on, how we continue to live and work and love when we know what we know about the state of the planet. Many of her works are embedded with seeds, chosen for their relationship to the site-specific development of particular pieces; for instance, the piece *Market* was displayed near Chapel Market and incorporated seeds from market-stall fruits, while another work inspired by the histories of Deptford included seeds from plants that thrived on local waste ground, inviting a vision of life finding footholds amid loss. The seeds suggest an exploration of future growth, inviting questions of where we might one day find hope and nourishment.

The seeds also offer a sense of the artworks' latent potential, the enchanting possibility of germination, new life sprouting to nurture other species, their ground becoming one with the earth. Of course, this could only happen if the works were treated in a way that seems unthinkable to a culture used to thinking of artworks as objects to be preserved indiscriminately. As the works age, they unnervingly begin to disintegrate, because they are produced using materials that are designed to be composted. Their structures sag and stretch at unexpected junctures, wrinkles and pock-marks developed by time and environment.

Elton's works hover between painting and sculpture. Hung lightly from walls or natural supports, they shift in response to air currents and viewer's movement, giving a meditative quality to their motion, like a breath or tide. Their presence is insistently physical, yet they refuse the weight and permanence of traditional painting. Their materials are fragile, even fugitive—translucent membranes that stain and wrinkle, and over time, fall apart, becoming part of the real world and the landscapes by which they are inspired.

Where some works have begun to deteriorate, they have begun to catch their falling detritus in their own folds, stitched pockets becoming archival spaces for their own disintegration, capturing the process of a slow collapse. Some pieces, such as *Tender*, have been shown multiple times in slightly different formats at different stages of delicacy. Having been displayed at an overseas conference, and then documented and videoed at the Rothko Museum in Latvia, where Elton was participating in a residency with the Mark Rothko Memorial Trust, *Tender* was beginning to collapse. In its last iteration, unable to support its own weight, the piece was placed on a stretcher to give it more stability. Works such as this are granted a new lease of life under a different guise even in the midst of their dying. In their moments of greatest fragility, they are arguably also at their most beautiful.

Elton stitches her materials together with silk thread, leaving raw edges and hanging threads, giving a sense that the piece is falling apart even in its moments of making. The stitching suggests narratives of both healing and scarring, recalling the surfaces of the skin, which is a central metaphor in Elton's thinking. Our skin mediates our connection to the environment; absorbing and releasing chemicals, sensing the world around us, and etching the stories of our pasts as we age. Like skin, Elton's paintings are sites of exchange, which often include bruised tones such as purples, pinks, yellows, and greys, echoing fleshly viscosity.

Grief runs through the work, where it is met not with fear but with tenderness, attention, and even joy. Through her practice, Elton explores the notion that grief is in everything, and questions how we can exchange the secondary joys of consumption to the primary joys of interaction and community. In looking into the compost bin, thinking about death inevitably involves thinking about new life; similarly, looking grief in the face is intrinsically mixed up in ideas of joy. Where compost becomes ground for new existence, and metaphorically becomes ground for new ideas and new ways of living, Elton asks us to do the work of staying with the grief as something non-linear and inherently connected to the processes and ecological cycles of life. Compost-like, her metamorphic practice generously opens up a space between letting go and holding on, a site for conversations and continuations.