



ROGER HIORNS

Today

You've applied the pressure to have me crystalised (...)
The XX, *Crystalised*, 2009

*As I moved in and out of his rectum the light-borne vehicles
soaring along the motorway drew the semen from my
testicles.*

JG Ballard, *Crash*, 1973

*I want some discipline in here
I want some discipline in here
I rargh rargh rargh rargh rargh rargh
That's a good boy, that's a big boy*
Throbbing Gristle, *Discipline*, 1981

Crystallizations, aircraft engines, motors, X-ray machines, the nude bodies of young male actors, fire, foam, and brain matter are among the diverse materials that Roger Hiorns employs, almost alchemically, in sculptures, paintings, and large-scale installations. Hiorns gained recognition with the uncanny installation *Seizure*, for which he was nominated for the Turner Prize in 2009. It featured a London social housing unit whose interiors were completely covered in massive blue crystallizations.

The Kestner Gesellschaft is presenting the first institutional solo exhibition by the British artist in Germany, which is divided into two rooms. Hall 1 features a selection of his famous *Pathways* (Sex Paintings). In Hall 2, his iconic living sculptures from the series *Untitled* (Youths Sculptures) are presented. Along with other works, both series interact in search of the fragility of the human condition, which is subjected to authoritarian, political, and ideological structures. The title of the exhibition refers to the BBC Radio morning show "Today," which is presented as a sound installation, placing the entire presentation in a current political context.

Youth

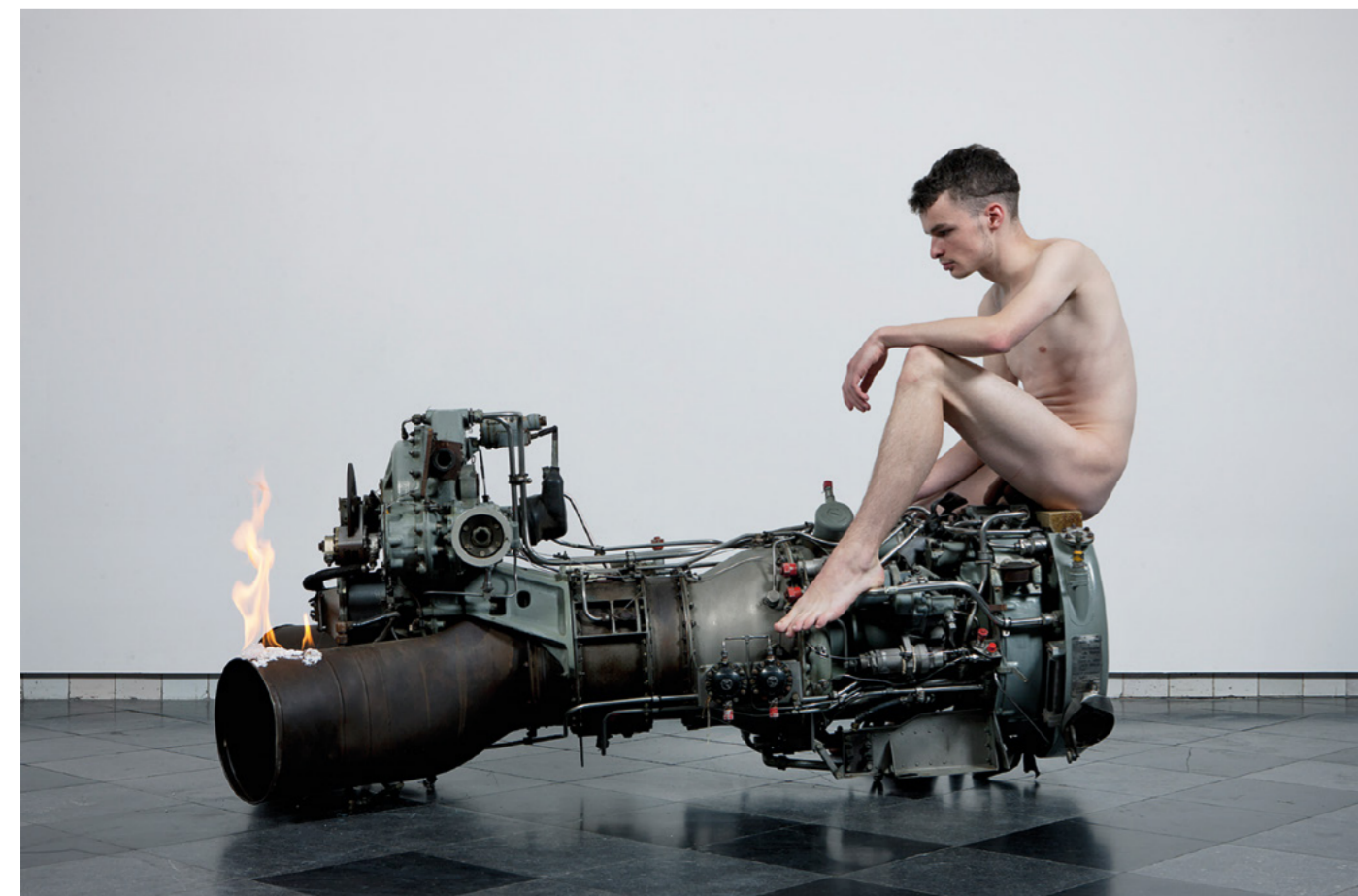
In the works from the Youths series, we see the contrast between "dead" materials such as discarded large motors, jet engines, X-ray equipment, or refrigerators, and young, naked male bodies that "occupy" them. In their nudity and resting poses, they resemble sculptures from antiquity that have come alive, or Auguste Rodin's *The Thinker* (1882). It is a quiet dialogue between the young bodies and the remnants of machines. The theme of male youth here encompasses the tender and not yet complete, the vulnerable and fragile, which stands in stark contrast to the old motors and turbines, thus gaining a strong political component. These situations evoke images of young soldiers, the military and its rigid handling of people, who are depersonalized and shaped into war material to be consumed. Sometimes, a flame can be seen burning on the body of the machine. It is a small, still



ROGER HIORNS, *Foam Leaning Youth*, 2020

young fire that is not yet a conflagration, but could be a harbinger of total catastrophe. Or they are the last flames after the inferno of an accident, a plane crash, or on a battlefield, still flickering in isolation.

Roger Hiorns's sculptural installations can be interpreted as bodies in a state of war or bodies at war, reflecting both the historical and current political situation, as well as the struggle in the everyday social environment and in one's own mental state. The human body, its psyche, and its soul are in a process of connection with the machine, or with what it can stand for: societal power structures, and the pressure and arbitrariness of authority, transforming and becoming indistinguishable.



ROGER HIORNS, *Untitled*, 2013



ROGER HIORNS, *Prayer Painting*, 2024

With the 2024 theme **Between Past and Future**, Kestner Gesellschaft concludes a trilogy of its self-reflection which began in 2022 with the investigation of the notion of tenderness (Olga Tokarczuk) and was continued in 2023 by a series of exhibitions, focused on the concept of anabasis (Paul Celan).

Amor Mundi and eight exercises in political thought *Between Past and Future* by one of the most relevant thinkers of today's age, Hanover-born Hannah Arendt (1906–1975) are considered master-narratives for this year's exhibition program, and constitute a frame of reference for the future.

The exhibition **TODAY** by Roger Hiorns inaugurates this program by examining our experience of **authority**. Hiorns's work is a thoughtful reflection on the fragility of human life and the matrix of political structures on which it depends. The notion of authority, the authoritarian systems and the control they impose lie at the core of his multifaceted practice. For Hiorns, the consideration of disobedience and the norm, humility and resistance contribute to the understanding of the three "losses" Arendt writes about: the loss of tradition, the loss of religion, and the loss of authority. In "What Is Authority?", Arendt observes that our inability to understand authority is, in fact, symptomatic of our inability to understand democracy and its core commitment to freedom. "We mistakenly equate power with subordination, and subordination with coercion," she explains. Authority is, of course, hierarchical, but it does not coerce. Arendt investigates the possibility of power without coercion, and freedom without control; she offers an alternative to existing forms of authority that confronts us with the possibility and indeed the necessity of developing human capacities for "building, preserving, and caring".

Adam Budak

The French philosopher Michel Foucault describes in the chapter "Docile Bodies" from *Discipline and Punish* how the human body and the machine are in a transitional state:

The human body is entering a machinery of power that explores it, breaks it down, and rearranges it. A "political anatomy," which is also a "mechanics of power," is being born; it defines how one may have a hold over others' bodies, not only so that they may do what one wishes, but so that they may operate as one wishes, with the techniques, the speed, and the efficiency that one determines. Thus discipline produces subjected and practices bodies, "docile" bodies.²

Hiorns's focus on youth, particularly on young men, in the context of authoritarian power and the allure of idealized images, evokes fascist concepts reminiscent of the Hitler Youth or Socialist Youth, the young body that is first idealized to make it obedient, available, and thus usable. This specific image of youth, alongside Foucault's concept of the "docile body," also incorpo-

rates a strong erotic element, fetishizing this scenario. It conjures images of sexualized authority, obedience, fascism, war, and the conflict that finds its resolution (and redemption) in death, the final emotional explosion, "la petite mort," the ultimate orgasm.

Sex

The concept of "the little death," as the orgasm is referred to in French, is also a theme in Roger Hiorns's paintings. In his large-scale *Pathways* series (sex paintings, 2020–22), we see depictions of sexual acts through multiple male figures. Both oral and anal penetrations are shown. Some figures are surrounded by dildos or severed penises. The gestural painting style keeps the bodies anonymous and rather abstract. Pale, gaunt, and al-



ROGER HIORNS, *Prayer painting*, 2023

most corpse-like, the scene resembles necrophilic pornography. The bodies seem as if they are dissolving. The bright, fluid paint that fixes the naked bodies on black polypropylene resembles the consistency of fresh semen, threatening to liquefy the next moment, from which the gaunt figures emerge. It is an orgiastic, almost ghostly frenzy, like a wild, occult dance that Hiorns captures in a snapshot in painting.

The detail of the severed genitals against the dark background could be read as an indirect reference to *Foam Leaning Youth* (2020). These sculptures, from which ejaculatory foam emerges and slowly drips down, recall the genitalia that Kronos severed from the god Uranus and threw into the sea. From the resulting *aphros*, or foam, Aphrodite, who was born from the foam, emerged. Roger Hiorns's "foam sculptures" consist of bizarre formations that could be torn prostheses, from which the foam springs forth. Amputation and castration paint a morbid picture of transience and eroticism, of old and new materials. The foam represents the moment of fleeting youth, which must continually be produced to generate perpetual energy, the life drive, or Eros—just as the part of the living models, in contrast to the old engines in the *Youths* sculptures, must remain interchangeable to guarantee the state of youth.

Brain

In *The History of Sexuality*, Michel Foucault examines how our conceptions of sexuality are determined by the power of society. Christianity, in particular, has moralized and restricted sexual freedom through confession and its admission, thereby defining



ROGER HIORNS, *Pathways*, 2020–2022

what is considered normal and what is perverse. Especially sexuality that deviates from the norm has been associated with perversion, criminality, or mental illness. This ties in with the *Prayer Paintings* series (2023), which reduce the act of praying to hands folded in front of the face. Here too, the depictions are simplified and shadowy, partially painted with blue copper sulfate. Furthermore, the paint was mixed with brain matter, which could be a reference to consciousness, which must be influenced to achieve control, whether through media, political indoctrination, religions, or treatment with psychotropic drugs. A tragic portrait of mind-body dualism emerges. The blue, referencing crystallizations from other installations, in this context appears as an infestation and assault on the brain.

Through the interplay of these diverse, transgressive series of works by Roger Hiorns, which amalgamate the contrasts and the moment of past and future, a continuous friction is created. It generates a specific energy that brings forth the *abject*.³ This is the crucial moment that uncovers and names the "depraved". Hiorns defies the moral gaze of society, in the hope of uncovering a secret, the hidden, and thus the truth.

Robert Knoke

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Design
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Cited texts
1 The song *Crystalized* by The
XX was inspired by Roger Hiorns'
installation *Seizure*.

2 *Foucault Reader*, Random
House, 1984, p. 182.

3 Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror,
An Essay on Abjection*, Columbia
University Press, 1982

Front page
Roger Hiorns, *Youth Pathways*,
1999

Back page
Roger Hiorns, *Foam Leaning Youth*,
2020, metal frame and 14 foam
emitters

Roger Hiorns, *Untitled*, 2013, Jet
engine, fire, anti-depressants and
youth

Roger Hiorns, *Pathways*,
2020–2022, Acrylic and latex on
polycarbonate

Roger Hiorns, *Prayer Painting*,
2023, Copper sulphate and
pigment on canvas

Roger Hiorns, *Prayer Painting*,
2024, Photographic emulsion and
copper sulphate on canvas

We sincerely thank the artist and
the gallery Corvi-Mora, London.

CORVI-MORA

Roger Hiorns, born in 1975 in Birmingham, England, lives and works in London. He received his BA (Hons) in Fine Art at Goldsmiths College, University of London in 1996. His works have been shown in international solo and group exhibitions. These include the Venice Biennale, MoMA PS1, New York, the Tate Modern, London, the Armand Hammer Museum of Art at UCLA, Los Angeles, the Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, and De Hallen, Haarlem. Hiorns' works can be found in institutional collections such as the Museum of Modern Art, New York, the Art Institute of Chicago, the Frans Hals Museum, Haarlem, and the Tate Modern, London. In 2009, Hiorns was nominated for the Turner Prize.