

though poppies grow
Patricia Ayres
Jun 12 — Aug 9, 2025

Mendes Wood DM is pleased to present *though poppies grow*, Patricia Ayres's first solo exhibition in Belgium. Ayres's works explore how systems of societal constraint – such as the church and the carceral state – inscribe themselves on the body. Drawing from a background in fashion design, she uses elastic textiles to create corporeal forms that speak to notions of injury, restraint, and control.

The exhibition takes its title from the war poem *In Flanders Fields*, written by Lieutenant-Colonel John McCrae inside the back of an ambulance in 1915. McCrae had noticed how poppies sprang up around soldiers' graves, as if their vivid petals had drawn color from the blood-soaked soil. These flowers flourish in disturbed ground, where sunlight finds its way through the cracks. As the war dragged on, the battlefields bloomed a vibrant, deep red.

How can beauty emerge from such cruelty? Ayres's sculptures appear wounded, tortured even. Yet, they stand, simultaneously vulnerable and defiant, like the flowers in McCrae's poem. Balancing delicately on a narrow base, they push upward against gravity and the quiet force of constraint. The artist uses the strongest elastics, made for military and medical purposes, to keep them upright. Parachute straps hold the strain. This physical tension lends the works their emotional weight.

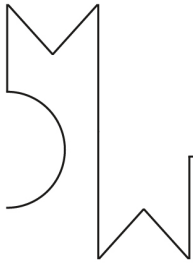
Ayres brings her skills and materials as a fashion designer to her sculptures. Elastics – usually concealed within garments – now make up the flesh of her figures. She buys them in large rolls, dyes them by hand, then wraps and stitches them to develop bodily forms. One can almost feel what it's like to inhabit their skin. A series of soft shapes, suspended from butcher hooks, hang in the air like carcasses, unsettling in their stillness. Another body of work features elastic forms, roughly the size of a human head, resting on totems that resemble hollow bricks but are cast from plaster and pulp, coated in the same desert-colored latex paint used inside U.S. correctional institutions.

The combination of these heavy blocks with the battered shapes on top suggests the threat of violence, yet the sculptures possess the dignity and solemnity of statuary figures. They show the artist's command of her materials: Working with a restrained palette of black, white, and flesh tones, she gives each sculpture its own distinct character. They carry the names of saints, translated into numbers, hinting at both religious authority and the erasure of individual identity within the prison system.

Ayres often stains her sculptures with anointing oil or sacramental wine, imbuing the works with ritual significance and personal memory. As a child, she attended church with her grandmother, a former nun who left the convent for love. If falling in love is always an act of daring, breaking with religious and social norms raises the stakes. Desire becomes a force of transgression, and perhaps, a source of shame.

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“Shame is felt before the eyes of others and also in facing oneself,” writes Anne Carson, who reminds us that, according to an old Greek proverb, shame lives on the eyelids. A new series of concrete and bronze sculptures reflects on this intimate link between shame and visibility. Shaped like spires and arranged to entrap or repel the viewer, they invite multiple readings. They might resemble church spires, rising above their surroundings, pointing heavenward, and reminding us that we too are watched from above. Or perhaps they echo the conical hats known as *capirotas*, worn by Christian penitents to shift attention away from themselves and toward God. Originally made of cardboard, these hats became tools of public humiliation during the Spanish Inquisition, when they were imposed on the accused. This practice may have given rise to the dunce cap, which was placed on the heads of schoolchildren as punishment for misbehavior. In the twentieth century, its silhouette took on another life, adopted by the Ku Klux Klan as a symbol of white supremacy. Evoking layered histories, Ayres’s works reflect on these legacies of violence.

To create the sculptures, the artist cast concrete into cardboard molds held together with duct tape. These fragile beginnings remain legible in the hardened surface. Burnt palms, or church ashes, were mixed with a paint-on sealer to produce a tar-like finish. A twelfth spire was cast in bronze. Sharp points protrude from the top, indicating danger and reinforcing the sense of being enclosed by a hostile architecture.

For the final work in *though poppies grow*, Ayres cast elastic bandage balls in bronze and beeswax sourced from the state of Washington in the U.S., where inmates participate in prison reform programs, training as beekeepers. Carefully arranged on church pew parts placed on the floor, these candle sculptures will be lit one by one during the exhibition. As the deep red wax spills, it seems to reflect how violence continues to spread through society, while the flame becomes a quiet symbol for both hope and loss – like the poppies in the fields of Flanders.

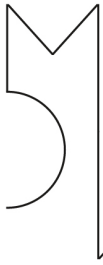
– Tim Roerig

Patricia Ayres (b. 1975, New York, USA) lives and works in New York.

Ayres attended the Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture in 2019. She received her MFA from Hunter College in 2018, BFA from Brooklyn College in 2015, and an AS degree in Fashion Design from the Fashion Institute of Technology in 1995. Her recent solo exhibitions include *though poppies grow*, **Mendes Wood DM**, Brussels (2025); *Unrequired Remnants*, **TANK**, Shanghai (2024); *Patricia Ayres*, **Matthew Brown Gallery**, Los Angeles (2024); *Singular Views: 25 Artists*, **Rubell Museum**, Washington, DC (2023); *Critical Mass*, **Mendes Wood DM**, New York (2023); *Patricia Ayres*, **Rubell Museum**, Miami (2022); and *Bound*, **Matthew Brown**, Los Angeles (2021).

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Her recent group exhibitions include *Ignite our skin*, **Sculpture Center**, Queens (2025); *Once Within a Time*, **12th SITE Santa Fe International**, Santa Fe (2024); *Fresh & Flowers: Made in America*, **NoName Creative Projects**, Paris (2023); *House in Motion / New Perspectives*, **de la Cruz Collection**, Miami (2023); *Field of Vision*, **Zuzeum**, Riga (2023); *New Full and Pure: Body, Materiality, Gender*, **Green Family Art Foundation**, Dallas (2023); *Esfíngico Frontal*, **Mendes Wood DM**, São Paulo (2023); *Together, at the Same Time*, **de la Cruz Collection**, Miami (2022); *Matter & Form*, **The Bunker Artspace**, West Palm Beach (2022); *Some Kind of Monster Roster*, **Analog Diary**, Beacon (2022); *This Basic Asymmetry*, **Museum of Contemporary Art Santa Barbara**, Santa Barbara (2022); *Reflections Part 3: Sculpture by Women Artists*, **Workplace**, London (2022); and *Entering a Song*, **Koenig & Clinton Gallery**, New York (2019).

Ayres was recently Artist-in-Residence at **UrbanGlass Fellowship**, New York (2023) and **Dieu Donné Workspace Program**, New York (2022). Her previous residencies and fellowships include **Shandaken: Storm King Sculpture Park**, Catskill (2022); **Fountainhead**, Miami (2022); **Monira Foundation**, Jersey City (2021); **Sharpe-Walentas Studio Program**, New York (2019); **Lower Manhattan Cultural Center: Su-Casa**, New York (2020); **The Studios at MASS MoCA**, North Adams (2019). Ayres received a **NYSCA/NYFA Artist Fellowship in Sculpture/Craft**, New York (2020) and was a **Rema Hort Mann Foundation Emerging Artist Grant Nominee**, New York (2019).

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