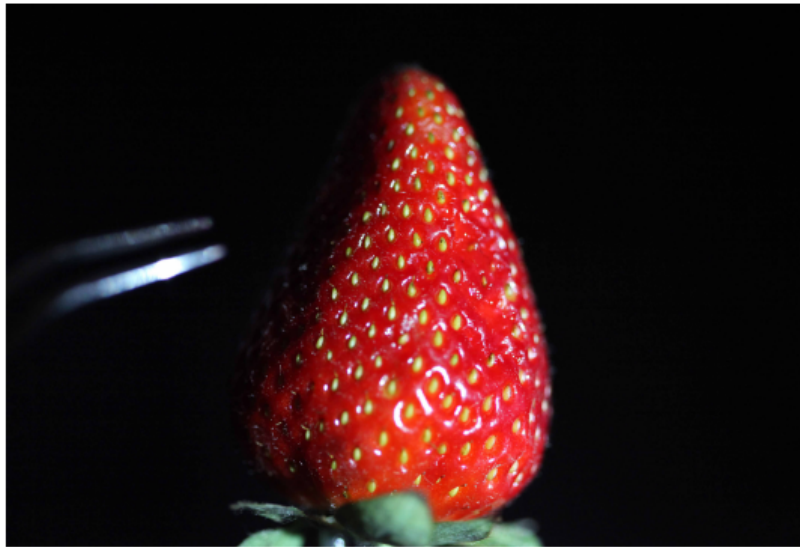


to the things themselves



I felt FELT

It's the first Wednesday of the month and I've just stepped through the double grey wooden doors from Compton Street into FELTspace. I listen out for the quiet 'thunk' as my foot hits the ramp, taking me from the entranceway into the gallery proper. I look down to see the carpet that covers it, noting that its fuzzy surface seems cleaner than the last time I was here. At the same time my hand runs along the top of the wooden handrail to my right, adding to the smoothness worn down from years of nights like this one.

My eyes scan the room, looking out for people that I know and for initial glimpses of the art works. I smile hello to a few and head to the bar in its usual place by the window. The cider is cold, the bottle covered with condensation, the label slipping from its place. I take a sip, feeling the thickness of the glass between my lips, the alcohol sliding over my tongue.

I walk along the southern wall of the gallery, guiding myself between groups of people. I know I should look more closely at the art but there are so many things that fight for my attention. I look upward, roughly tracing the details of the air vent above the door to the hallway at the back, its spaces almost clogged with paint. To its right I see the cracks in the wall, repaired and painted but visible just the same and my eyes follow one down, to the bottom edge of a painting. I look up again, at the spotlights this time, and mentally make the connection between each light and the depth and angles of the shadows being cast.

The babble of noise made by other people's conversations washes over me as I catch glimpses of the scuff marks on the grey painted floor between their feet. I love the slight cracks between boards, where the tiniest of dust is allowed to gather and the gaps beneath the wall where the two don't quite meet.

My shoes squeak with each step as I weave my way to the front so I can pick up a catalogue and floor sheet. I pay attention to the glossiness of the paper in my hand, the pointiness of its corners and the crispness of the type on the page as I read. I fold it in half, noting the imperfect crease

from going against the grain, before slipping it easily into my pocket.

As I start to move towards the back, I see the shadow line cast on the wall by the open door and the last of the evening sun. It is subtle, the point where the light becomes dark barely distinguishable, but it frames and separates the chaos of the shelves from the ordered space of the gallery. I crouch down to rearrange what's in my hand and run my fingers over the bottom of the wall, where the brick is painted but hasn't quite been covered. The texture is rough, contrasting with the smoothness of the plaster. There is red dust on the floor from a hole drilled above.

As I enter the back space I notice for the first time that the door frames and skirting board that once lined the back wall are missing. Although it now matches the rest of the space, it somehow feels naked, rather than complete, but I like the line of marks left behind. Inside, I look for the shadow on the northern wall. It is similar in angle to the one at the front but more definite, coming from the strong lights in the other room. My eyes shoot upwards, to see the black cable ties holding the fluoro light to the metal lamp in the centre of the ceiling, and then down again to the key hole in the old door. I bounce on my toes to test the floor, knowing full well it has been repaired and no longer threatens to collapse under my weight.

There is a 'clinking' of glass on glass as I add my empty bottle to those in a soggy cardboard carton by the bar. I say goodbye, looking at the buttons on people's coats, the stitching in their shoes, the shine of light on their stockings. The left hand door has been closed, the bolts slid into the lock at the top and so I turn my body sideways to leave.

The tree outside has begun to blossom and is silhouetted against the sky. I walk right, towards the market, the surface of the pavement beneath my feet made of tiny stones and the occasional black spot of old gum. My shoes continue to squeak...

Jessie Lumb
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