



CONTAGIOUS ACTS

JAMIE HOLMAN

Contagious Acts

[7 mins]

By Fergal Kinney

Ahead of a new solo exhibition at the Whitaker Museum, the visual artist Jamie Holman speaks candidly for the first time about the life and experiences that informed the work he has been producing since 2014.

When inspiration strikes, it isn't always convenient. When visual artist Jamie Holman realised that it was time to return to visual art, he was stood observing a riot in 1970s Belfast. The hush of an everyday terraced street had suddenly been broken by flames, smoke, armored cars, exploding debris and panicked screams. "I just thought," he says today hesitantly, "I need to make something." It was, he concedes, "a strange experience."

Why? Because 1970s Belfast was happening in the northern England of the 2010s: it was a film set, and Holman was observing his Blackburn College students taking part in the filming of a fictional nail-biter set at the height of The Troubles. "The Daily Mail had celebrated Blackburn as the town that looks most like 1970s Belfast," says Holman today, "people had really made it into this virtue. I thought it was appalling!" A pause. "But here were all these kids dressed up. And the main

character looked a lot like my dad.” What did it mean, that Holman’s hometown in the austerity era was a dead ringer for wartime Northern Ireland half a century earlier? What did the recreation reveal about the past, never really dead, but being acted out alive and well in the contemporary present? In the decade since that lightbulb moment, the art of Jamie Holman has looked at those questions and more, exhibited internationally and celebrated by *The Face* and *The Guardian* for his work which asks ink black questions about identity and belonging during our present moment of upheaval and political instability.

Jamie Holman was born in Inverness in 1973, but raised in a terraced house in Blackburn where his mum and grandmother were both born before him. “My dad was a Protestant soldier,” says Holman, “and my mother from an Irish Catholic background. That sectarian thing didn’t really exist in our family home, but it did when they met.” Holman’s father, Stan, had been shot on duty in Belfast’s Falls Road when he was an eighteen year old soldier, shortly before Holman’s birth. When Jamie was ten, Stan died suddenly with an unexpected brain tumour. “That was as a result of the shooting,” says Holman of his father’s passing, “they didn’t know in those days.”

Holman drifted, entering a spell in foster care and leaving school without any GCSEs. At this time, Blackburn was undergoing one of Europe’s largest, earliest and most vital

party scenes at the turn of the 1990s. “The acid house stuff was really visible,” says Holman. He kept his distance. “Some of those people were genuinely not safe to be around at the time if you liked the bands that me and my friends liked,” says Holman - which was the psychedelic sounds of The Jesus and Mary Chain, Spacemen 3 and the ever present guiding light of New Order. Instead, Holman experienced it at a remove, which turned out to be more useful. “We were spectators, we’d go and watch the convoys and these gatherings of people. We used to have conversations about the punkiness of it all, all the self organisation and self realisation that was actually really apparent.”

Holman is an archetypal case of a working-class boy radicalised into art by the mass pop culture of post-war Britain. “It’s not uncommon in the British psyche,” offers Holman, “that people who get involved in the arts from a working class perspective tend to get engaged via Top Of The Pops. I definitely learnt about art through being obsessed with music.” The foundational example for Holman would be Factory Records. “Factory was gateway stuff,” he points out, who he credits with “introducing Situationist language into record collections and then into working class bedrooms.”

Something cohered for the teenage Holman in the early 1990s when he enrolled on an art course at Blackburn College. Whilst others were discovering the latest possible nights and blissed-

out mornings, Holman at college was realising the vocational allure of the twenty-four hour art life. "The college was great," he says, "like, incredible. I sort of became activated creatively." Some of that activation was down to Brian Nicholson, who ran the Ikon video wing of Factory Records. "He was incredible and into all of this early video art, and the college was willing to do it." Soon, Blackburn College was pioneering bizarre community cable television. Holman remembers being encouraged to watch the September 1993 transmission of Derek Jarman's 'Blue' film as it was simulcast on Channel Four and BBC Radio Three. "And here's another trope," he grins, "absolutely life changing, like a real punk rock moment for me."

It's never really been documented - and gets written off in reductive and clichéd 'left behind' narratives - but 1990s Blackburn was propelled by a thriving bohemianism and DIY nightlife. So much so that when Holman enrolled at Chelsea College Of Art and Design, the move to London was in some respects a comedown from what he had experienced on his doorstep in the North West. "I'd been spoiled," he says, "it sounds really romantic now, but I went expecting the world and I was at times disappointed." Instead, once studying at Chelsea, Holman knuckled down. The best bits were working on the Kings Road, passing teenage hero Malcolm McLaren on the street, and being part of a crew of Northerners in exile in London's still just about affordable bedsit land.

"I went every day, I went on Saturdays," says Holman of his Chelsea education, "I worked really hard when I was there. I loved it, and it very quickly felt like anything was possible because all of those other YBA artists were doing it."

Today, there's a contemporary debate about working class access to arts being limited by things like imposter syndrome or low ambition, arguably easier to point to than the dismantling of the welfare state that once poured working class people into all areas of creativity in Britain. It was on graduating his M.A. degree that Holman realised exactly what economic barriers were in place compared to some of his peers. "At the end everyone asked what was your plan," he says today, "and I didn't really know what they meant. Everyone was like, I'm going to Prague. Come to Berlin!" Holman recounts a meeting with a well-known London gallery. "They said to me that what I needed to do was get a studio in the East End," says Holman, who pointed out that he did not exactly have the resources for that.

Something unexpected happened. "Accidentally," he says, "I ended up forming a band." 'tompaulin' were named after the Northern Irish poet and critic Tom Paulin, and became an unexpected indie success in the early 2000s for their literate, pastoral and abrasive take on post-Belle and Sebastian indie, winning acclaim from NME and The Guardian. It shouldn't really have worked. "We were split across London and Blackburn,"

says Holman of the band's unconventional commercial formula, "and we had ten minutes of press, a couple of John Peel sessions, a few little tours. But all the things I was writing about, it was a shorthand way of saying what I would later say with my artwork."

Around this time, Holman began working at Blackburn College, returning to the institution as a teacher. It was a moment of coming full circle with a place that had been so formative to shaping his creative life. "I went in there as a young artist who wanted to learn how to teach," says Holman, "and the better, the more accomplished I became as a teacher, the further away I moved from being an artist. There is a definite tension for lots of people in that stuff." Holman raised a family, and taught hundreds of teenagers as the Blair boom hardened into the brutal austerity era.

It was through Blackburn College that Holman came to be on the film set of a thriller about Northern Ireland. The film production company had turned up at the college to scout for young people willing to work as extras. "They began recruiting students to be in the riot scenes," he remembers. After that day, Holman quietly set about producing visual art for the first time in decades. "I made one thing," he says, "and then I quietly made another, and then I had a body of work. It was thinking about place and class again, but with no video work. Sculptures, prints and photographic works."

From the mid 2010s onwards, Holman began working once again as an artist. Suddenly, the themes that had preoccupied Holman throughout his life - and that he had lived across the 1970s to the 2020s - were erupting into work that examined masculinity, class and the complex legacies of violence and the British state. Holman is keen for his post-2015 work to speak for itself - wherever you may encounter it - but crucially its roots are in Holman's unique journey to this point

"It felt and it still feels very live and important to consider what artists should be looking at if we're talking about class," says Holman, "often we have a very nostalgic notion of what working class means. And all of this complex, contradictory thinking is manifesting in this ongoing sort of collapse of identity. That's a lot of the things I'm interested in, and really excited by, in British culture."

What it comes back to, though, is work. "I'm prolific because I work a lot. A lot of artists will come and talk about the work in terms of it being research now," he says, "and I see it very much as, and I still do, going to the studio, keeping work hours, because that's the expectation." A pause. "And I think that it's hopefully got a depth to it, that it's got value, because it isn't a vocation or some notion of being talented or special. I make a lot of work because I go to work a lot, I go to work and make it happen. I can't really imagine it being anything else other than a job, other than work."

The Forlorn Hope

Fibreglass, handcrafted 35mm
glass marbles, acrylic plinth
330 x 200 x 100cm
2025

A full size replica horse mounted on a museum glass case containing three tons of marbles. An archeology of play and resistance - the horse ultimately dominates the space and the sculpture, mounted high above the viewer upon layers and layers of the Victorian style childrens marbles that are contained in the case. The title refers to the ancient military strategy used by the British to break a castle Siege. The first wave of attackers were referred to as 'The Forlorn Hope', but those that survived were able to gain promotion to officer ranks that were denied to them in peace time due to class. 'The Forlorn Hope' was the dilemma of certain death or the slim chance of social mobility.



England Expects

Two tonnes of handcrafted
35mm marbles, engraved
Yorkstone paving slabs
Dimensions variable
2025

Half of the floor in the gallery is flooded with a ton of Victorian style childrens marbles, in a site specific response to the former mill owners residence. As in gallery one, the marbles represent workers' resistance, and introduce colour, fragility, refraction and a frivolity that is in direct opposition to the aesthetic of work and the symbol of 'the big house.'

The title of this work - 'England Expects' is taken from a news paper report of the Haslingden Strikes, from the Whitaker archives, where the phrase 'England expects every man to do his duty,' is read by Jane Horrocks as she declares the names and events of the local strike, that were in direct opposition to the mill owning residents of The Whitaker at the time.



The Forgotten Five A-Side

Acrylic painted hand-stitched
footballs
19 x 19 x 19cm
2024

Hand made footballs from Sialkot Pakistan that are painted in the 'truck art' vernacular. The balls are turned 'inside out' to reveal the craft and cultures contained in the ball - as vessel for identity. Holman questions the accepted history of working class cultures and communities - and the impact of nostalgia on forming identity and politics. Holmans research into football as a post industrial working class culture, places hijabi women at the origin point, disrupting the 'white male' history associated with the game.



A Century of Industrial Resistance

Audio

Narrated by Christopher Eccleston

2023

This oral performance by English actor, Christopher Eccleston, proposes a relentless history of uprisings that begin with the formation of the Labour Party in 1900, and conclude with the anti-capitalist protests of 2000 and the global anxiety of the 'millennium bug.' This period also signifies what Holman refers to as a 'crisis of identity' in working class communities, as industry declined and whole areas of the country are laid waste.



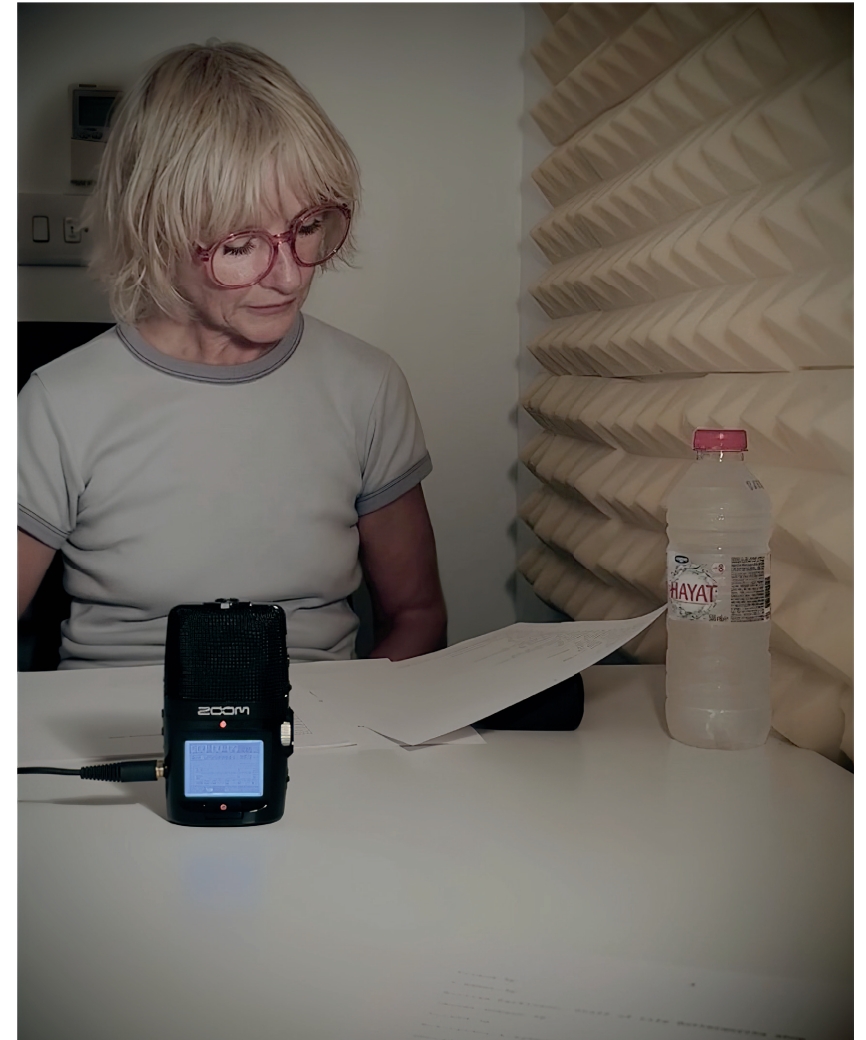
A Concise History of Rural Resistance 1800-1900

Audio

Narrated by Jane Horrocks

2024

Jane Horrocks voice echoes through the former drawing room of the mill owner as she reads a chronology of 19th Century historic resistance, gatherings and cultural explosions that narrate the shift from the rural to the industrial by way of land reform, suffragette actions, the cotton famine before concluding with the formation of the Labour Party in 1900.



In Every Dream Home a Heartache ⁽¹⁾



In Every Dream Home a Heartache ⁽²⁾



Oil on canvas
108 x 196cm
2024



Oil on canvas
160 x 108 cm
2024

Womens Work

Crocheted balaclava
165 x 30cm
2022



Salient / Passant

Slip-cast ceramic with hand
applied decals
25 x 25 x 6 cm each
2024



24 Hands

Slip-cast ceramic with hand
applied decals
22 x 22 x 54cm
2023



17 Piece Service

Slip-cast ceramic with hand
applied decals
10.5 x 5 x 5cm each item
2022



Dishing it Out

Slip-cast ceramic with hand
applied decals
Dimensions variable
2023



Power / Resistance

Printed Textile 'Tapestry'
111 x 133.5 x 5 cm
2022



Labour / Leisure

Printed Textile 'Tapestry'
111 x 140.5 x 5 cm
2022



In God We Trust (Retreat)

Hand embroidered calico
71.5 x 59 x 7cm
2024



God Be With Us (Battle Cry)

Hand embroidered calico
71.5 x 59 x 7cm
2024



Anonymity

Oil on canvas
93 x 93 x 5cm
2023



Contagious Acts

Oil on canvas
93 x 93 x 5cm
2023



Fragment

Printed textile 'tapestry'
52.7 x 51.4 x 6.5 cm
2022



Destriers

Video.
Narrated by
Jane Horrocks
2023



Cheer

Framed polaroid,
8 x unique works
27 x 20.5 x 3cm
2024



On the Bench

Acrylic painted handstitched
football
19 x 19 x 19cm
2024



Clapping Music (After John Cage)

Video
1 min 13 secs
2025



Colonial Amusements

Abalone shell, 24c moon gold,
gold leaf, acid etching, glass and
enamel
132 x 104 x 4cm
2021



Interview with Jamie Holman

[16 mins]

By Gaynor Seville

Gaynor Seville: Talk to me about the show, Jamie. Tell me what we're going to see.

Jamie Holman: You're going to see quite a lot of new work, some of which responds directly to the collection of The Whitaker, and some of it is more broadly developed around collections in general. Many collections in museums, particularly in Lancashire, have a context that is often post-industrial, colonial or Empire facing and very class specific in terms of who established and contributed to the collections or acquired and bequeathed art the works or objects you encounter as a viewer. There's also the question of why particular pieces from certain times make it into collections, and why there is an absence of others. I'm interested in broadening that out, to understand objects, artifacts and the collection itself, and even the building as part of a larger conversation about place.

I'm interested in how the collections speak to each other across this small geography, when we talk about class and heritage it tends to

be a generalised narrative. For example, in terms of industry, does it change across Lancashire, and if so how does that reflect the communities, architecture, cultures and behaviours of that place? Lancashire is a mix of coastal, rural and industrial, so how does that affect the collections? The Grundy in Blackpool, for instance, doesn't have much of a permanent collection, whereas Blackburn's collection is extremely cotton-centric, with gifts from mill owners who collected and bequeathed incredible items and complete collections to the town. It's an interesting context in which to create contemporary artwork.

I've been zooming out, making works that locate place itself as part of the collection, the buildings, and people as part of the collection.

Gaynor Seville: Do you start off with an idea, a theme, and then go and research and try to find collections to work with as part of that, or do you let the collections guide you first? Is it about exploring the collections and letting them inspire and lead you?

Jamie Holman: I think themes emerge that I want to pursue and interrogate, particularly around how culture manifests in these places. Collections are a

great way to confirm or make visible ideas about culture—its manifestations, its origins—that haven't been visible before.

Alongside broader themes such as colonialism/empire and class, there's also this lens through which contemporary communities are often viewed: low engagement in arts, being left behind, and so on. From the 1980s onwards, these narratives have framed places like Rossendale in a very specific way. My work contests that and positions these places as cultural origin points. Football, for example, started in working-class spaces in Lancashire and is now a global culture.

That said, I also like to encounter things that trigger a response. Often, it's small details—in the case of the Whitaker, a line in a letter, a newspaper report—that help unlock the collection. There's a difference in responding to collections and unlocking collections. I'm interested in unlocking narratives rather than just responding or confirming collections, principally because my intention is to make contemporary art works that function independently in a contemporary context.

Gaynor Seville: Who do you want to reach with this work? Who

is the ideal audience for you, and how does that align with a place like The Whitaker?

Jamie Holman: It's plural. Initially, our own audiences—the people in these places. But at the same time, the work should be as strong as anything shown anywhere, and the works and artists we bring to our museums and galleries should be as good as everywhere else. No apologies for ambition to originate high quality works, or to bring high quality works and artists to Lancashire. It's about striking a balance: engaging our extremely literate and engaged local audiences, while also making work that can travel beyond the region.

There's often a hierarchical, derogatory notion of 'local' artists and 'local' audiences, but I reject it completely. Everywhere is local to someone. I want my work to resonate with the people here but also be recognised on a national and international level. I'm making work for you at the moment that I hope engages existing audiences and attracts new audiences.

Gaynor Seville: Arts venues and museums often have an elitist perception. Some people still feel like coming into an art gallery is intimidating, like it's for 'others' and not for them. At The Whitaker, we

want to challenge that. I respect people's desires to encounter challenge or provocation. I don't have to dumb exhibitions down just because we're not in Manchester City centre. What's your perspective on that?

Jamie Holman: I completely agree. There's this prevailing data led audience segmentation that often positions people, regions, towns, even by gender and ethnicity; as disengaged, but that's based on narrow definitions of what constitutes art and culture, and what constitutes engagement. White working class men in particular are vilified in terms of arts metrics and the wider culture. A lot of my work interrogates the impact of these narratives, which feels particularly prescient at the moment.

What are we talking about when we discuss art and culture? If you consider the cultures and 'making' traditions of sport, music, cinema, and workplace traditions of painting and poetry etc, it's immediately evident that our communities have always been highly engaged in cultural activity, in fact these are the places where culture is made.

Much of my work is about contesting these narratives. Places like Rossendale

aren't culturally dormant; they are important sites of cultural production. In fact I've seen really challenging, internationally significant art in Lancashire over the last few years and in comparison have found the work emerging from the cities, or the work being brought to the cities, as a bit pedestrian, self referential and in some cases a bit parochial. This tells you a lot about the ambition and appetite for risk from our festivals, museums and galleries – but also about the appetite for challenge from our audiences.

Gaynor Seville: Artists are finding that we have a lot to offer in terms of the quality of our collection, and the impact that it can have on a range of practices, but also the benefits of showing in a place like The Whitaker in terms of what we can offer to support artists to make ambitious works.

Jamie Holman: It's all about perception and those hierarchies again isn't it. If you are commissioned to work with the collections at The British Museum than the perception is obviously amplified – but as an artist you are as likely to encounter equally exciting or valuable collections in these industrial revolution collections in Lancashire because of the high level of spending and collecting that

the industrialists engaged in – and bequeathed to local museums. When I work with collections in Lancashire, the access and appetite for risk from curators and commissioners is remarkable.

Gaynor Seville: Thinking a lot about your work recently and about what we do here at The Whitaker – what we're about – and our strapline: "exploring the past, meeting the present, creating the future." With our collections, we're always thinking about how to use them not just to look back nostalgically, but to ask: how do these collections help us think about where we are now, where we're going, and what we want?

I was thinking about your work, particularly the themes of resistance and challenging authority. It feels like your work isn't just about looking back or representing the past. Instead, it feels like part of an ongoing cycle of resistance that continues today and into the future. That's something I find really interesting in your work. I don't know if you want to talk more about that?

Jamie Holman: I completely share that idea, and I often say my work considers "who we were, who we are, and who we might yet become." In *Contagious Acts*, I started developing and testing ideas about how

things are made, where they're made, and what their content might be to reflect these exchanges. This was on my mind during your first studio visit with me, when I first showed you some of the ideas for the police horse paintings. That was long before we got to the big sculpture pieces that emerged later, when we confirmed what the response to the collection would be.

By the time I started painting family portraits with balaclavas, we were talking about how to run that engagement with people in Rossendale, to initiate the photography that informs the paintings. Since that work emerged there's been a real swing toward the rise of the right, riots across the country, and I'm creating work ex-governance and football gatherings. When we first met I was worried it might feel nostalgic. But now it feels prescient rather than nostalgic.

I think this demonstrates how some collections—and responses to them—can appear dormant, depending on the cultural or political climate. But when we're living through times of extreme change, collections and artworks can become activated differently, unexpectedly. I've been having conversations with Alex (Zawadzki) about how my work

dialogues with the collection in a current context. What do these works do when placed together? How can we avoid nostalgia, fetishism, or exoticism? There's a lot of potential for that in the museum collection and in my own work, if it's not curated in the right way.

Gaynor Seville: That makes sense. I'm also thinking about resistance and the future. Where might future resistance come from? How will fast-changing technologies influence how we continue to rise up and resist? Are there specific works in the show that touch on this?

Jamie Holman: Yes, there are some big propositions. One of the centerpiece works, 'The Forlorn Hope', is the largest thing I've ever made. It's a monumental sculpture—a huge vitrine filled with marbles, with a full-scale resin horse mounted on it, above head height. The title comes from military history, where the term 'forlorn hope' described soldiers who led the first wave of an attack on a castle or town siege. Their chances of survival were slim, but if they succeeded, it was the only way a working-class soldier could become an officer. It became a highly sought-after role in terms of guaranteed social mobility. It's horrific really, but

I find the term poetic—it mirrors how the future often feels, particularly at the moment, but this work is about class. So, 'The Forlorn Hope' is symbolic of class resistance but also examines the dominance of governance by horseback, which goes back to the Bayeux Tapestry and is unbroken right up to the football this weekend and any mass gathering that will take place anywhere in the U.K. Additionally, the audio works with Chris Eccleston and Jane Horrocks remind us of the relentless nature of state sanctioned violence in this country, from 1800–2000. Two hundred years of resistance. Nostalgia often softens history, making movements like trade unionism, the suffragettes, abolition of slavery, gay rights – you name it; feel inevitable when, in reality, they required relentless effort and collective action to be removed from law. These audio pieces narrate the galleries and remind the audience that when we gather, we become powerful.

This show focuses on those moments of gathering—both in workplaces and in leisure spaces, the two principal spaces that we inhabit in terms of class. It's through gathering that resistance manifests.

Gaynor Seville: In your show, you've got a wide range of art forms—sculpture, film, installation, and paintings. I wonder if you'd like to say anything about the future of artists working in traditional methods? There's a lot of talk at the moment around AI, issues of ownership, and so on. In your show, you've worked with many other artists and people who contribute to the creation of the work. For example, some of the paintings were created in China. Would you like to speak about that?

Jamie Holman: It's a simple answer for me, but one that's complex to articulate. First, the way I work—through production— isn't quite collaboration because that implies equal authorship, but I don't want to undermine the contributions of the artists and makers who contribute to the work. This way of working isn't new of course, it's rooted in a classical Renaissance model of studio production and is common in monumental sculpture for instance. This model extends into contemporary art forms like filmmaking, which is inherently collaborative and involves a multitude of skills, and the history of the ready made, collage, etc etc – I could go on. I use A.I. as a tool to communicate visual propositions, it was really useful in Pakistan where there was a

language barrier. Like all of us I'm learning about the environmental implications and the ethical conversations as they emerge. The authorship element is complex in terms of how A.I. can be used, is on my mind a lot – but again it's not new. Photoshop, collage, the internet, sampling in music and 'readymades' in art have all been the focus of similar conversations in the recent past. A.I. is emerging beyond these examples though and I'm considering it as I learn more about it.

I've used industrial processes of course, as I often do, as it's a legacy appropriate to Lancashire. But that language has been extended for this show. For example, the marbles were made in China—three tons of them, in fact. Similarly, some paintings were also made there as a response to engagement, an approach that speaks of the migration of manufacturing and industrial skill sets globally, as well as to how art is made now.

Lancashire's industrial history fascinates me, particularly in terms of the often problematic historic relationships with the Southern States of America, South Asia and increasingly how much contemporary manufacturing moved to China in the 1980s. I've interviewed people about their experiences in factories, discussing

how those processes migrated. This isn't about outsourcing something I can't make here—it's about intentionally engaging with the global movement of labor and making that visible in the work.

Gaynor Seville: That relationship between labor, migration, and art is fascinating. How does that play into the broader themes of your work?

Jamie Holman: A lot of the work in this show explores the intersection of these themes. For instance, footballs have been made in South Asia since the 1870s, but those communities are often invisible in the cultural narrative of football's history and in the contemporary landscape. By placing these works next to portraits of white working-class families painted in China, I'm creating a complex dialogue between the objects, the collections, and the places they come from.

I want to move beyond the nostalgia that often surrounds craft and industry. Nostalgia can simplify or sanitize these histories, making them seem benign or 'old-world.' Instead, I see craft as part of a dynamic, ongoing dialogue that includes A.I. new technologies and the migration of goods and people. For instance, trade tariffs

and cultural identities associated with ‘making’ are very much alive today. These tensions are present in my work.

Gaynor Seville: This exhibition feels like a culmination of a long journey for you. It brings together many themes, ideas, and production techniques that you’ve been working on for years. With the significant investment from Arts Council England, this feels like an important moment in your career. What does this show mean to you?

Jamie Holman: It’s two things. Firstly, it’s deeply about place. When Lancashire bid for City of Culture status, it forced me to see the county and its towns differently. This region, often dismissed as “left behind” or having low engagement in culture, is actually a place where I can make work to the highest standard — work I might not be able to make anywhere else.

Secondly, this show ties together years of smaller commissions and projects. It’s about unlocking collections and places and connecting them in meaningful ways. The Whitaker offers a unique space to do that. The scale of this solo show would have been unthinkable here ten years ago. It’s also a shop window for high-level

commissioning and curating in the North West. My work has developed through various stages — smaller ACE grants, festival commissions, DYCP funding, private commissions and my relationship with my gallery The Second Act. This show represents an extended body of work, connected across geography and collections. Having the space and support to realise this work at The Whitaker is important, not just for me, but for how Lancashire is seen in the cultural landscape. It proves that ambitious, challenging contemporary art can emerge from places like this.

Songs of Work & Labour

[7 mins]

A Playlist inspired by Contagious Acts

By Alex Zawadzki

With support from Hope Gallegos

The history of work songs stretches back to the ancient world. Initially, they took the form of call-and-response chants that helped workers maintain a steady rhythm — a “hammer song” to sustain motivation. Over time, work songs evolved into ballads of the working classes. Simple to learn and sing, they told stories of toil and hardship and eventually became a means of expressing solidarity and resistance against those in power. As workers became organised, these songs became Union anthems of collective struggle and uprising. By the late 19th century, these songs had been used as inspiration for modern rebellious popular music.

Notably, one of the earliest significant written documentations of these songs is ‘The Little Red Songbook’, created by the Industrial Workers of the World. Whereas the earliest audio recordings of labour songs were made by pioneering field recordists John Avery Lomax and Alan Lomax. While some of these recordings still exist, the broader history of labour songs is poorly documented, and many songs in this collection are modern recordings of historic pieces.

This playlist begins with 19th and early 20th Century labour songs, often rousing, anthemic expressions of pride and solidarity; before unraveling into tales of exploitation, workplace injustice, and inequality. Here, you'll find modern recordings of Lancashire ballads and folk songs, carefully selected to reflect the working-class experiences of Northern England, particularly those of miners and weavers.

A turning point in the playlist comes with John Lennon's 'Working Class Hero', after which the selection shifts toward traditional and modern trade union songs, spanning from Joe Glazer to Billy Bragg. That said, the playlist is also shaped by personal taste. While the focus remains on Northern English labour traditions, I've also included American songs (I couldn't leave out Woody Guthrie.)

Finally, the playlist concludes with The Rawtenstall Annual Fair. Although Lee Nicholson's recording of this folk tune deviates from the core labour themes, its connection to working-class leisure and its setting, the hometown of The Whitaker Museum and Art Gallery, where Contagious Acts is exhibited, make it a fitting end to a Lancashire labour inspired playlist.



Scan the QR code for the playlist.

1. We Do the Work Jon Fromer

(believed to be written in 1989)

A favourite at union rallies and workers' rights protests, this song reflects Fromer's lifelong activism. Blending folk and blues influences, he ensured his music was both emotionally stirring and highly singable.

2. This Land is Your Land Woody Guthrie

(1940)

The song originally included more radical verses, often omitted in mainstream versions. One such verse critiques private property and highlights economic injustice:

There was a big high wall there that tried to stop me / The sign was painted, it said 'Private Property' / But on the back side, it didn't say nothing / This land was made for you and me.

3. Beg Your Leave Pete Smith

(21st Century)

While not widely known, this song echoes the UK's long tradition of protest folk music, particularly from the industrial centres of the North, where labour struggles were intense throughout the 19th and 20th centuries.

4. Cotton Mill Colic Mike Seeger

(written 1926–1929)

A darkly humorous take on textile mill life, this song laments low wages, harsh conditions, and the unfulfilled promises of industrial work.

5. The Four-Loom Weaver *(1810s–1830s)*

The Oldham Tinkers

Sung in a thick Lancashire dialect, this song vividly portrays early industrial poverty, following a weaver struggling to afford food—an all-too-familiar reality during economic downturns.

6. The Hand-Loom Weaver's Lament *(19th Century)*

Harry Boardman

Historically accurate, this song reflects how hand-loom weavers were among the first skilled labourers to suffer from mechanisation, long before factory workers.

7. The Miner's Lockout *(late 19th Century)*

Harry Boardman

Likely inspired by events such as the 1926 UK General Strike, in which miners played a key role in a nationwide standoff against industrial bosses.

8. Song on the Times *(19th Century)*

Windborne

Adapted multiple times for modern movements, this is a rare example of a 19th-century protest song with lasting relevance.

9. The Preacher and the Slave *(1911)*

Utah Phillips / Joe Hill

The phrase 'pie in the sky when you die' originated from this song, which mocks religious groups that discouraged labour activism by promising heavenly rewards instead.

10. The Chemical Worker's Song (Process Man) *(1970s)*

Great Big Sea

A rare example of a labour song from Newfoundland, highlighting the dangers of industrial work, particularly in oil refineries and chemical plants.

11. Workers' Song *(1979)*

Dick Gaughan

Gaughan's powerful delivery gives this song an almost hymn-like quality, making it a modern favourite among trade unionists.

12. Working Class Hero *(1970)*

John Lennon

The song's bleak lyrics contrast with its simple melody, creating a stark and powerful statement about working-class life. Some radio stations initially banned it due to explicit language.

13. Smashing of the Van *(20th Century)*

Tallymoore

The song's bleak lyrics contrast with its simple melody, creating a stark and powerful statement about working-class life. Some radio stations initially banned it due to explicit language.

14. I Ain't Marching Anymore *(1965)*

Phil Ochs

One of Ochs' most famous songs, embraced during Vietnam War protests. He famously performed it outside the 1968 Democratic National Convention as police cracked down on demonstrators.

15. Which Side Are You On? (1931)

Pete Seeger / Florence Reece

Written by Florence Reece, the wife of a coal miner, while hiding from anti-union thugs in 1931. The song has been covered in countless labour movements worldwide.

16. Talking Union (1941)

The Almanac Singers

The Almanac Singers, featuring Woody Guthrie and Pete Seeger, used this song as an instructional tool, teaching workers how to organise a union.

17. Workingman Unite (1980s)

Joe Glazer

Often performed at picket lines and union meetings, earning Glazer the nickname Labour's Troubadour.

18. Union Burying Ground (1930s)

Woody Guthrie

A tribute to labour martyrs who died fighting for workers' rights, this song carries the same mournful tone as traditional folk ballads about tragic events.

19. Roll the Union On (1930s)

John Handcox

Handcox, a Black sharecropper-turned-union organiser, used music to inspire poor Southern farmers to demand better wages and conditions.

20. Casey Jones (Union Scab) (1940s)

Pete Seeger / The Almanac Singers

A satirical twist on the famous railroad ballad, portraying Casey Jones as a strikebreaker who gets his just deserts.

21. Part of the Union (1973)

Strawbs

Despite its pro-union chorus, the song's ironic verses sparked debate over whether it was genuinely pro-labour or a subtle critique. It became a UK Top 10 hit in 1973.

22. There Is Power in a Union (originally 1913)

Billy Bragg

Bragg modernised this classic song by labour activist Joe Hill, infusing it with rock-driven energy.

23. Unionise - CNT Singles (1980s)

Redskins

One of the few openly socialist punk bands of the 1980s, the Redskins blended radical politics with soul-influenced punk rock.

24. Never Cross a Picket Line (1988)

Billy Bragg

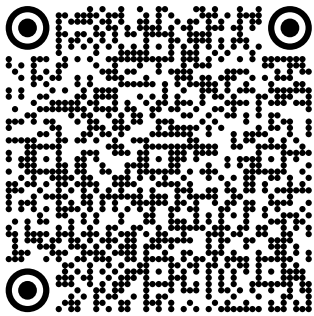
A straightforward, uncompromising anthem emphasising solidarity, often sung at strikes and protests.

25. Rawtenstall Annual Fair

(20th Century)

Lee Nicholson

While not a protest song, this lively folk tune captures working-class culture in Northern England. It's often performed at gatherings celebrating working-class heritage.



Scan the QR code for the playlist.



'Contagious Acts' interrogates the heritage, rituals and aesthetics of gathering — whether on the medieval battlefield, the dance floor, the factory floor, or the football stadium. These spaces remain battlegrounds of power and protest while also functioning as sites of cultural production and resistance.

Jamie Holman explores the intertwined histories of class, governance, and the politics of collective gatherings — across the two fundamental spheres of working-class experience: Labour and Leisure or Work and Play. Connecting a heritage of English subjugation; to its ongoing state in the present.



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