

## Interview with Sara Barker

Reading time: about 12 minutes.

This interview with the artist Sara Barker took place before and during the temporary closure of the exhibition 'All Clouds Are Clocks, All Clocks Are Clouds', which opened on the 7 February 2020 at Leeds Art Gallery. Here, the artist answers questions posed by exhibitions curator Holly Grange, revealing insights into a new body of works produced especially for the exhibition. Sara Barker also discusses a display of Leeds Art Gallery collection works that she selected and curated alongside her exhibition.

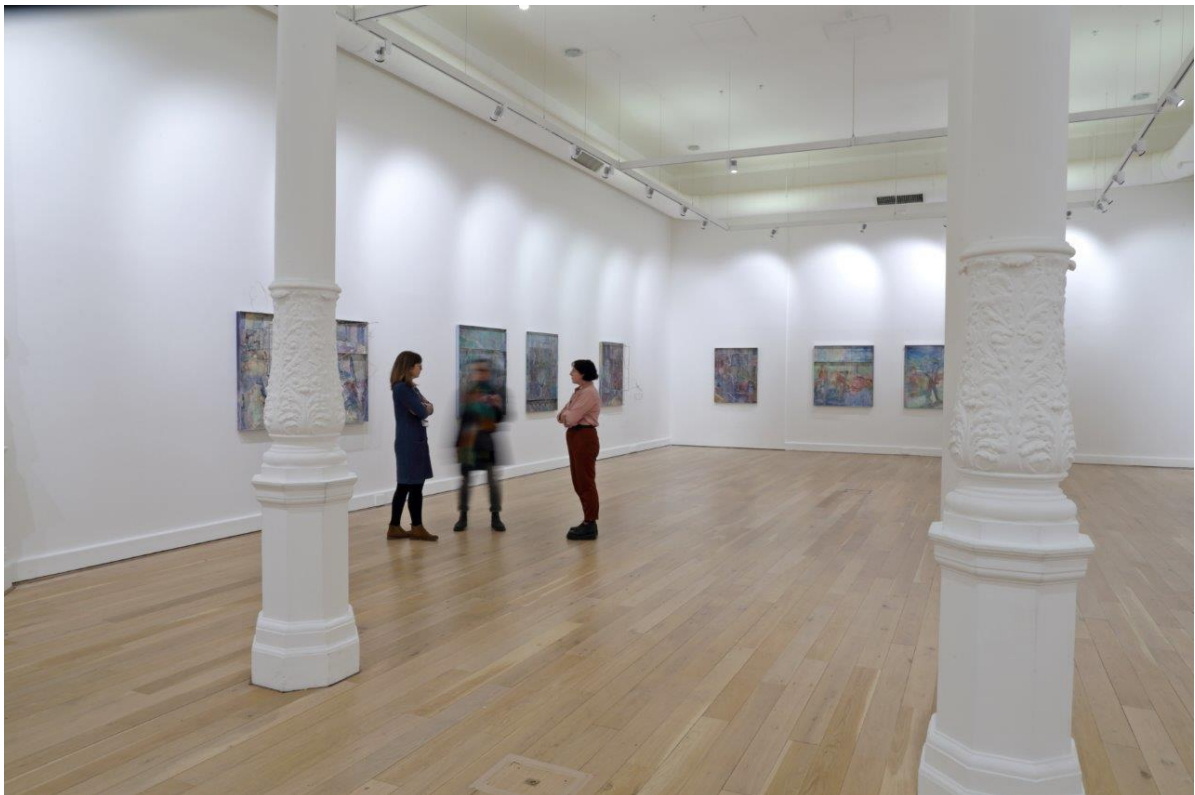


Figure 1: 'Sara Barker: All Clouds are Clocks, All Clocks are Clouds', at Leeds Art Gallery, 07 February 2020 – TBC.  
Photo: Simon Warner.

**Holly Grange:** This is not the first time that you have shown with Leeds Art Gallery. In 2012, you were part of the exhibition 'Drawing: Sculpture', which was a partnership between the Drawing Room (in London) and Leeds Art Gallery. This was a group show that explored the fertile relationship between three-dimensional sculpting practices and drawing in an expanded sense. It's wonderful to welcome you back to the gallery and the city.

What can our audiences expect to see from the new exhibition and can you say a little about how this new collaboration came about?

**Sara Barker:** Since we opened the conversation around sculpture and drawing in 2012, Sarah Brown (Principal Keeper at Leeds Art Gallery) and I have kept in touch. In that exhibition, my work spoke about drawing in its provisionality. The pieces were characterised by their delicacy, linearity and relationship to the body. In the early works made just after this time, those that I have exhibited with works from the Leeds Art Gallery collection, you can see these qualities – sparse wiry anthropomorphic shapes that resemble the figure and a kind of architecture at once. Where I had cut and collaged painted surfaces to make the sculptural drawings of 2012, I soon after began a journey of separating painted surface from precisely crafted metalwork, which is fully realised in my solo exhibition at Leeds Art Gallery.



Figure 2: Sara Barker, 'Washable Colour' (2012) Stainless steel round bar, aluminium sheet, watercolour and pencil crayon. Courtesy of the artist & Mary Mary, Glasgow. Installed at Leeds Art Gallery in the 'Drawing: Sculpture' exhibition, 2012.

**Holly Grange:** Can you tell us a little bit about your rationale for the title 'All Clouds Are Clocks, All Clocks Are Clouds'?

**Sara Barker:** The title came out of my thinking about my creative process in relation to the sculpture I am making for permanent display in the The University of Leeds' International Centre for Engineering and Physical Sciences (ICEPS). The scientific notion that clocks represent an ordered processual way of thinking, whereas cloud 'behaviour' is unpredictable, messy and fluid, and that echoing the juxtaposition of my rigid structural metalwork against the fluidity and action of the way I use paint. I have the need to think dually, to make and experiment within a system that has boundaries, and reciprocally, to adopt a playful and open approach that questions our assumptions about the world. Perhaps now in the unsettling times we live in, I would hope the title pulls into focus the speed at which times passes and asks us to question our behaviours.

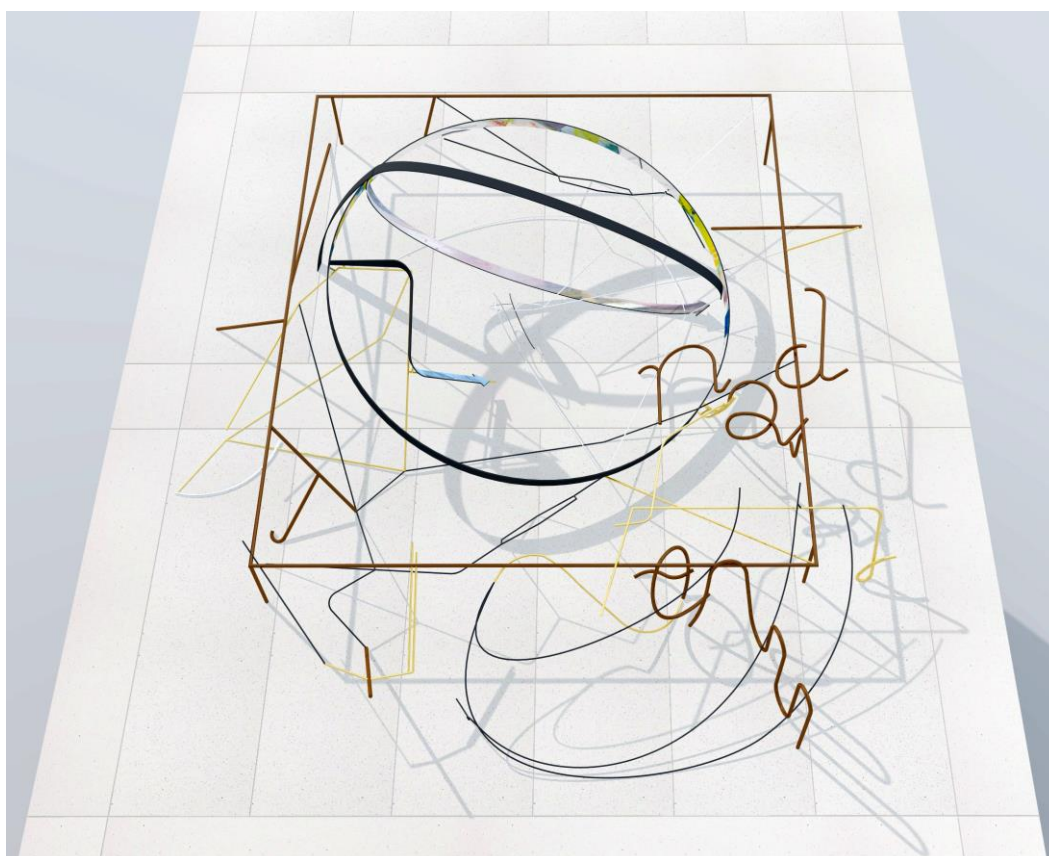


Figure 3: Visualisation of Sara Barker's outdoor sculpture 'The Worlds of If' (2020), to be installed from May 2020 on the external façade of the ICEPS Building, Woodhouse Lane Boundary, University of Leeds.

**Holly Grange:** There appears to have been a shift in your practice – with the new body of works containing more recognisably figurative elements perhaps than your earlier work. The metal-work in some of the pieces such as 'Pulled Apart and Patched' (2020) (see Figure 6) have letters and characters that may not spell out legible words but appear like fragmented remnants of spoken language or half-remembered sounds. How would you say your practice evolved over those eight years since your last showing in Leeds?

**Sara Barker:** The tray works exhibited in the White Gallery at Leeds Art Gallery have developed from smaller trays in single colours, but often mirrored or overtly metallic, to works that really explore painted surface, colour, narrative in a way that was always private in the past. I've always made paintings but the edit has been crucial to how I use collaged sections of surface to make sculpture, never revealing the whole painting. There was a part of me that wanted to indulge in the process of painting more, to expose the references and allow the gesture and colour of paint to add life to the formerly sparse and paired down semi-industrial structures.

Similarly, I wanted the influences in the work to be more transparent, and for my influences in literature and art and life to be more present in the final work. For me, gesture in drawing and language has always been linked, manipulating line to form narratives across mediums. Phonic sounds, abstracted letters, literally float and fix themselves to walls and furniture in my house, as I teach my children to read, as a matter fact so do bananas in a fruit bowl, demonstrating their potential to describe and abstracted elements somewhere between fiction and biography finding form in the work.



Figure 4: Detail from Sara Barker, 'Pulled Apart and Patched' (2020).  
Image courtesy of the artist and The Approach, London and carlier | gebauer, Germany. Photo: Simon Warner.

**Holly Grange:** You have made a series of eight new ‘tray-trench’ works for the exhibition- using a broader range of tools, technique and media to build up surfaces and also using jesmonite to create texture and tactility. Can you talk about the process used and your decision to use the metal tray in place of the traditional painting stretcher?

**Sara Barker:** The tray with edges to contain, for me is a sculptural object, that allows me to think in a different way. Paint and jesmonite are just materials I can use to build up a surface, make marks, find forms, experiment on the surface, and out of this material form emerges.

I begin with drawing in metal rod, I can roughly weld and tape elements together, as if it were a sketch that will be formalised and remade in a more time-consuming way when the other elements are resolved. I then work with the metal tray in parts, a continuation of my relationship to collage and editing, with the self-knowledge that I need the capacity to be able to reorder and change things throughout, to satisfy my own curiosity and allow to work to remain unresolved through the process. I sand the metal tray and build up a surface with automotive paint and matter, using tools to make and create textures, and sanding and thinning paint back to expose the tray again. The painted tray is then fitted and veiled with the layers of brazed and welded and polished metal and Perspex.



Figure 5: Detail from Sara Barker, ‘Crushed to Powder Returned to Earth’ (2020). Photo: Simon Warner.



Figure 6: Sara Barker, ‘Pulled Apart and Patched’ (2020). Image courtesy of the artist and The Approach, London and carlier | gebauer, Germany. Photo: Simon Warner.

**Holly Grange:** Can you talk about what you were looking at, reading and listening to whilst in your studio and making these works?

**Sara Barker:** Revisiting the collection at Leeds Art Gallery and then working in my studio with the images of works by artists Shelagh Cluett, Paul Nash, Sylvia Wishart all around me, has influenced the work no doubt. The importance of these artists has always been there, but studying their surfaces in the store here at the gallery, in half light, investigating their details, it feels like I've really as if I've understood them in a different way, lived with them, looked at them from the perspective of making them, placed myself behind the canvas. I have felt incredibly privileged, and a real connection to a time and place and process. Dare I say, I've developed a relationship with the works I've selected from the Leeds Art Gallery's collection that feels close to possession.



Figure 7: 'Sara Barker: All Clouds are Clocks, All Clocks are Clouds', at Leeds Art Gallery, 07 February 2020 – TBC. Photo: Simon Warner. Photograph shows Barker's works alongside Leeds Art Gallery Collection works.

I'm always reading around the making, so often short stories and poems, often modernist, imagist, and more recently Japanese literature. A story by Kōda Aya, *Fragments* (1948) has been an important work for me in many ways; in making the connection between the duality of sculptural painting and the broken up nature of the work; an expectation of the sculptural material that it should be made fluid and liquid as paint, and yet be hard and occupy space, at once; in trying to understand the cultural commonalities in the qualities of language and mark making. The title of one of my works 'Crushed powder returned to earth' comes from this influence (see Figure 8).

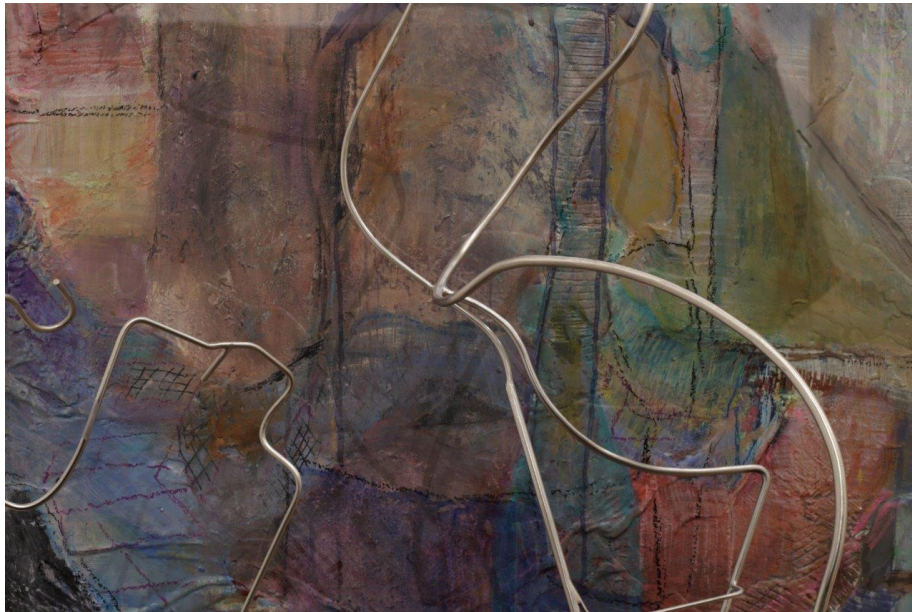


Figure 8: Detail from Sara Barker, 'Crushed to Powder Returned to Earth' (2020). Painted aluminium tray, jesmonite, stainless steel rod, automotive and oil paint and pastel. Image courtesy of the artist and The Approach, London and carlier | gebauer, Germany. Photo: Simon Warner.

**Holly Grange:** In your works the audience's view is compressed, reflected and refracted. The image is often split or divided by metal extrusions or expands out by way of these skeletal rods. Your pieces often inhabit this liminal space between painting and sculpture- appearing on the wall and the floor- and casting shadows out beyond their physical dimensions. Are you thinking about the viewers' relationship to the works in a bodily sense when you are making them? And if so, what do you hope the bodily affect/s are of the works?

**Sara Barker:** I think what I expect of the metalwork in my work has changed fundamentally. Since I've been working in the material, I have needed it to be sculptural - rigid or at least strong enough to provide support to sheets of Perspex, glass, mirror and painted surfaces. It has often been the less compromising skeleton, the architecture of the work, and to that end was regular in shape. And then bent out of that shape, but even in its relationship to figuration there was a simplicity.

However, in the painted tray-trenches the metalwork is really intended to add to the graphic storytelling of the painted trench, in fact a roughly hewn version of this is the drawing right at the beginning of the process guiding the narrative; I really draw and add important detail through it, albeit tangled and crafted and woven; it pulls the painting out of the surface and offers us those imagist multiple perspectives, all the while actively dissecting imagery. Something else happens when a simple even naïve form is wrought out of steel or brass, and it becomes a key or set of symbols for the painting.

The Perspex further alters our perception of form and colour, as it plays with light on the surface, changes and distorts colour. The way it does that is multifarious and unpredictable, but the way I approach it is simple. I think of it like lacquer or glaze or linseed oil, in that it pulls a veil over particular and changing parts of the painting, subduing or pronouncing or temporarily editing shapes as we move around the work.

Crate these objects up and they really do occupy space, but the translucency of materials, light colour onto metal, and slender rods are just strong enough keep the objects light in the space. Some of the works are densely layered, others project out into space to meet the viewer and invite them into the environment of the painting. It is that relationship to the viewer through their reflection and by extension and tension, which keeps the pieces fluid and alive and curious for me.



Figure 9: 'Sara Barker: All Clouds are Clocks, All Clocks are Clouds', Leeds Art Gallery, 07 February 2020 – TBC. Photo: Simon Warner.

**Holly Grange:** For this exhibition you have chosen some paintings from the Leeds Art Gallery collection to display alongside your work. The works you have selected seem to share an affinity with your works and are placed in dialogue with them. In many of the collection works there is a blurring of line and colour. Landscape and the hues we associate with the outdoors predominate in the works you've selected, especially the blues and greys of sky and sea and the greens of the natural world. So too do fluctuating patterns of light and weather, evoking the elemental forces of nature. Can you talk about the choice of particular works and the connection between these works and your own?





Figure 10: Photograph of Cashtal yn Ard, Isle of Mann.

**Sara Barker:** There was a real affinity for some work in the collection – those works that must be included – the shoe would just have to fit. I grew up on the Isle of Man, and in my early life I would say that my experience of sculpture was almost exclusively seeing the standing stones there, Cashtal yn Ard, a Neolithic burial ground (see Figure 10) and Celtic carved metalwork – there was the art. Sculpture was situated in the landscape, exterior, in my understanding of it. Nash’s dramatic depictions of ancient landscape did always resonate – the animate forces of hill, stone, sky, light and water pulling us into an ancient landscape, finding the uncanny and surreal there to make it feel vividly relevant. As if all that searching for the mystical or human meaning in those primitive heavy stones in my earliest memories, beyond just their looming presence and particular arrangement in space, was legitimised.

I hope there is a painterly connection between my work and that of Sylvia Wishart (1936–2008) (see Figure 11). She works on bare canvas, varying her brush strokes, moving between heavy daubs of paint and paired down dry brush marks and there is such rawness and tactility in what is in one sense a landscape in flux. The boundaries between colours and edges so soft and indistinct to have us puzzling over our proximity to gauzy reality. There is certainly a fascination and it came out of my relationship to the domestic and modernist before I understood the elemental as a metaphor. For me her works offer us a self-portrait, and Wishart’s control over our view is her presence in the work. We feel as if we are interior on the window’s edge, in her room, with that sense of intimacy



Figure 11: Sylvia Wishart, ‘The Sneuk with Snow, Orkney’, 1966. On loan from The Stanley and Audrey Burton Gallery, University of Leeds.

and sanctuary, all the while on the threshold of experiencing the wildness of the elements in Stromness (on the island of Orkney, where she was born and raised).

**Holly Grange:** I was particularly taken by the relationship between your work and Shelagh Cluett's (1947-2007) sculptures and drawings that you've selected from the collection. There seems to be a particular shared language between Cluett's fluid line drawings and delicate linear metal structures and your own work. Can you speak about why you were drawn to her work in particular?

**Sara Barker:** It was in around 2012 when I met Jonathan Watkins (Director of Ikon Gallery) with a group of curators in the studio, he was struck by the parallels in my work to Cluett's. I was aware of her practice, and perhaps inadvertently influenced, but only then I began looking at her broader practice and concerns. I've always been drawn to her lightweight linear gestural pieces like *Flux IV*, made in the late 70s and early 80s, that sketch out space with the most frenetic and intense of gestures, with all the speed and personality of an autograph. But yet exist as a thing in space that has been created and refined, not only found, and in its detail is brittle, cretural, compiled, and crafted. In Cluett's work there is often this tension between the sculptural making and crafting of bitumen, wax, clay and wood; and the unmaking, apparently found, what we might call the remnant. It is this illusive light touch that I, like so many artists, am so drawn to.



Figure 12: Shelagh Cluett, 'Nullah II', 1980, alongside William Scott 'Blue Still Life', c.1957. Selected by the artist as part of 'Sara Barker: All Clouds are Clocks, All Clocks are Clouds'. Photo: Simon Warner.

**Holly Grange:** This is a really exciting moment to have your first institutional show since 2016 plus a new public realm commission within the same city. As you mentioned, your new two-storey high sculptural commission at Leeds University will be installed in a prominent

position on the outside of the new ICEPS building later in the year. Can you talk about your relationship to the architectural and what it has meant for your work to travel outside the gallery walls and to be situated in relation to the landscape and built environment?

**Sara Barker:** In the gallery I've always avoided a scale that would determine a piece as being either more architectural or more figurative. The opportunity to make works outdoors has been profound. It has changed everything I do and the way I think – about our experience of colour in different light, seasons and environments, the sort of paints I use and their application, the way I understand scale, the way I work with other people, and the gravitational pull I feel towards landscape as subject when I return to the gallery.

I remember my first work in the landscape, 'Patterns' (2013) at Jupiter Artland, as a huge learning curve, and a key moment where I needed to learn from Robert and Nicky Wilson (founders of the sculpture park Jupiter Artland, near Edinburgh) Susanna Beaumont (curator) and Sculpture and Design Ltd., about a new process and the differences this evolving space would make to the work, experiencing the pockets of space carved out, flooded with light, layered with a hierarchy of foliage as if for the first time.



Figure 13: Sara Barker, 'Patterns', 2013, installed at Jupiter Artland, near Edinburgh.

The hard edges of the urban environment pose a different proposition entirely. The work for ICEPS will be positioned at the gateway to the University Campus on the stonework façade, and the architectural palette is distinct, combining glass and anodised aluminium, materials I have a relationship with already, with Portland stone and the subdued tones of paving and neoclassical building around.

An inspiration for this commission was an exhibition of handwoven silks based on specific crystal diagrams, put on by the Festival Pattern Group in 1951. The silks have a very

particular aesthetic and colour scheme which I wanted to bring into the city – a vivid palette of deep greens and purples, turquoise and magenta, bronze and gold, signifying a future facing optimism, then in the years after World War II, and I hope for us now, as we look to the extraordinary scientists working in the ICEPS development, as we face this global pandemic in 2020.

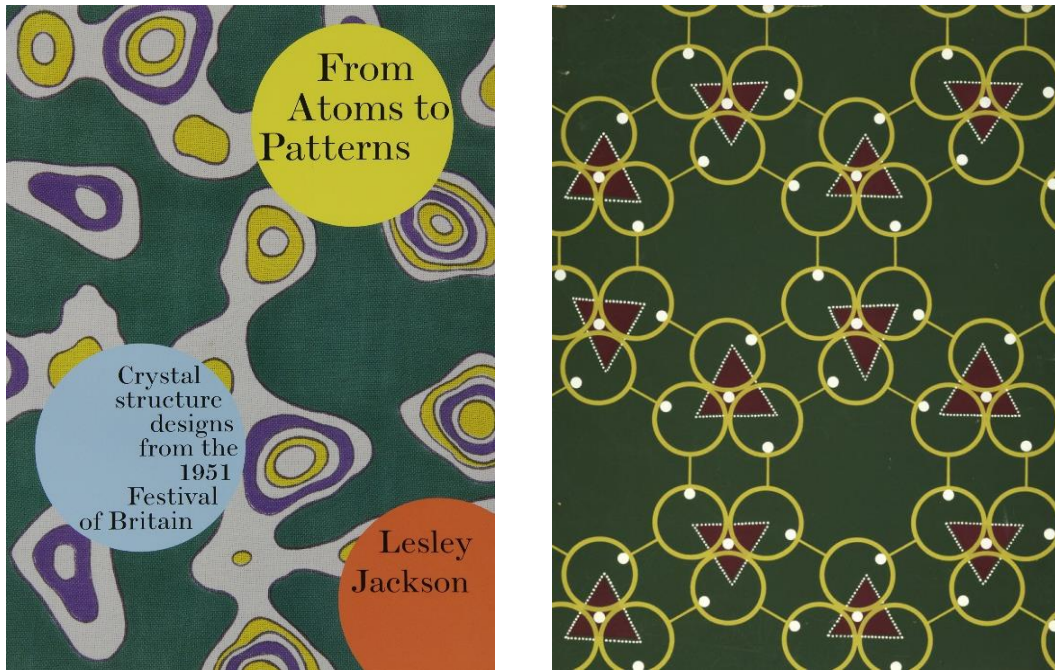


Figure 14: In 1951 Festival Pattern Group hosted the original exhibition, 'From Atoms to Patterns' a collaboration between textile designers and X-ray Crystallographers, making a link between the aesthetics of molecular structures and their resemblance to the textiles of familiar domestic objects.

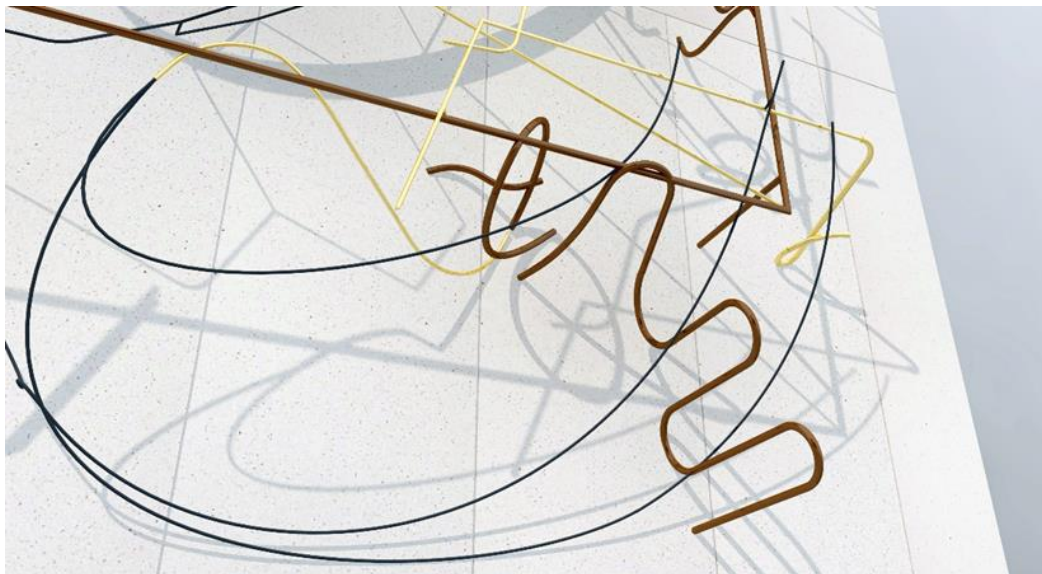


Figure 15: A visualisation of Sara Barker's outdoor sculpture 'The Worlds of If' (2020), to be installed from May 2020 on the external façade of the ICEPS Building, Woodhouse Lane Boundary, University of Leeds.