

Emma Talbot. A Journey You Take Alone

02.12.2023 – 28.04.2024



**Please note**

The exhibition contains magnets that can affect implants such as pacemakers.

## Introduction

The exhibition **A Journey You Take Alone** with works by British artist Emma Talbot (\*1969 Stourbridge, lives in London and Italy) at the Kunsthalle Gießen centres on birth and death – the beginning and end of human life. Talbot's work is closely connected to her own experiences and memories and deals with themes of love, grief, age and transience. Her drawings, which are often executed on silk or other textiles, form narrative sequences that, despite their personal perspective, can be placed in a broader social context. Birth and death are deeply personal moments that can barely be communicated, but are universally experienced by every living being.

Talbot's works explore human existence from a female perspective. In doing so, gender inequality and power structures as well as our relationship to nature, technology and language take centre stage. From her emotions, her pain and her dreams, Emma Talbot develops inner lyrical landscapes that she ties together with social realities and theories drawn from literature, philosophy, psychology and feminist science. The artist subtly creates visual worlds that are shaped by a profound social critique and condensed into a narrative web.



Emma Talbot, *The Human Experience (Your Death)*, Detail, 2023, Courtesy the artist + Galerie Onrust + Petra Rinck Galerie, Photo: Erik Sæter Jørgensen, 2023

## Visual language

Organic patterns and forms proliferate time and again in Talbot's concise drawings and animations that are populated by faceless, largely female figures, creating a sense of permanent growth, fluidity and becoming. The spatial constellations that in part take on a cosmic quality appear detached, without time or place. Not only her large silk works but also her animations are characterised by vibrant psychedelic colours, in which text, figuration and exuberant ornamentation combine to create a shimmering fabric that transcends classical categorisations such as illustrative, abstract or naturalistic. A striking feature is her pictorial lettering consisting of

her own texts, quotations from songs and classical and contemporary literature. The text drifts across the drawings like fragments of thoughts, yet at times they also seem to address the viewer with direct questions and statements. These take on equal status to the delicately drawn creatures that wander through the finely crafted ornamental work as recurring protagonists. Faceless, they are representations of the artist herself, who cannot see her own visage without a mirror. Simultaneously, the figures serve as a projection for the viewer to not only imply the artist's experiences, but to explore their own feelings in the face of intense questions.

Talbot's works are distinguished by their sensuality and the impression of a particular immediacy and intimacy. The artist exploits the potential of drawing as a direct medium of expression that promises to convey inner experiences and emotions. Talbot understands drawing as a means of realising thought itself, of articulating ideas and thoughts that are difficult to grasp and thus imbuing them with reality. In this respect, drawing can be seen as the root of Talbot's interdisciplinary oeuvre. Even the three-dimensional objects – mysterious, enigmatic creatures with opulent snake-like bodies presented on experimental tables – can also be understood as spatial drawings and render Talbot's characteristic visual language tangible, consistently interspersed with questions and statements about human existence.

Talbot's work is characterised in particular by its materiality. Her large-format works are created on silk. Despite their extensive size, Talbot's paintings on this lightweight and transparent material do

not seem monumental or intimidating. Moreover, the seams of the 3D works testify to the artist's technical skill.



Emma Talbot, Rootless Plant, 2023,  
Courtesy the artist + Galerie Onrust + Petra  
Rinck Galerie, Photo: Erik Sæter Jørgensen,  
2023

## A Journey You Take Alone

Talbot, with her interdisciplinary works, transforms the Kunsthalle Giessen into a human life cycle and makes visible the close connection and coexistence of life and death.

The title of the exhibition **A Journey You Take Alone** refers to our human existence, which the artist understands as a chaotic network of events and connections that we, as reflective subjects, attempt to understand. Beginning and end, birth and death are fixed points, whereby we cannot remember the former and can hardly conceive  
[Kunsthalle-giessen.de](http://Kunsthalle-giessen.de)

of the latter. Being born and dying are moments that cast the individual back on themselves and their own stripped-down existence. Talbot's work attempts to find a visual language for these life events and our existence between them. In doing so, she devotes as much space to dying as to living and manages to depict the beauty and elegance of mourning without any theatrics.

In the exhibition, the two large-format silk works *The Human Experience (Your Birth)* and *The Human Experience (Your Death)* stand across from each other, at either end of which an eye is recognisable. When joined together, they form a pair of eyes, symbolising the inextricability of birth and death. By splitting the pair apart, on the other hand, the question arises as to what we know and are able to recognise about ourselves and our lives.



Emma Talbot, *The Human Experience (Your Birth)*, Detail, 2023, Courtesy the artist + Galerie Onrust + Petra Rinck Galerie, Photo: Erik Sæter Jørgensen, 2023

*The Human Experience (Your Birth)* deals with the first half of life – from formation in the womb to middle age, which is regarded as a time of recapitulation and reflection. The silk painting commences with the central question "What is the human experience?" before going on to explore the beginning of human existence and our roots. In the central part of the work, Talbot explores how we exist as thinking and feeling individuals in our physical bodies and examines how our feelings and experiences are related to bodily processes.

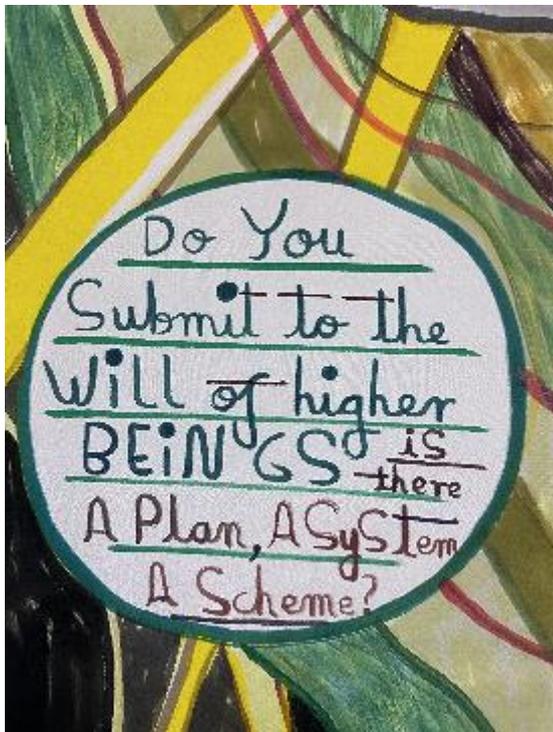
“Can you find a self in all this turmoil, tell the stories that shape its form”



Detail from: Hildegard von Bingen, Liber  
Divinorum Operum, 1230

The wings and monsters that frame the intertwined bodies in this section are inspired by the world vision of the Christian mystic,

abbess and polymath Hildegard von Bingen (\*1098 Bermersheim von der Höhe, †1179 Bingen am Rhein). They not only symbolise protection, but also the threats that every person experiences from the outside world. Hildegard von Bingen was a visionary who recorded her religious inspirations in pictures, writings and music, creating a "Lingua Ignota" (Latin for unknown language), a secret yet universal language to which Talbot refers. For the British artist, this language represents the unconscious narrative of our existence that we all carry within us but can scarcely communicate. The monumental drawing ends with questions about the possibility of a collective consciousness and the extent to which we need to believe in a higher power in order to make something meaningful (a self, a story) out of our chaotic existence.



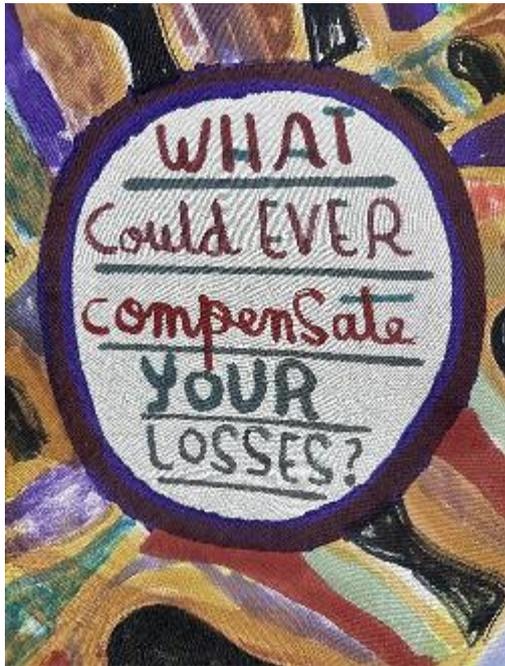
Emma Talbot, The Human Experience (Your Birth), Detail, 2023, Courtesy the artist + Galerie Onrust + Petra Rinck Galerie, Photo: Kunsthalle Gießen

*The Human Experience (Your Death)* begins with middle age and ends with death. The dependence of human existence on our planet at its centre. The figure struggles with an earth in chaos, facing an ecological disaster, and is confronted with its own transience and finally its end. The optical nerve that extends from the eye divides the painting into two spheres up to death – the universe and the human world. Talbot focuses on the relationship between man and the universe. "Does your insignificance scare you? Put in perspective against the vastness of space." However, it also addresses power in social relations and current crises such as war and climate catastrophe. "Endangered and threatened for what". In the final sections, the aged figure finds a resting place and her body disappears. "How will you exit the body". As the figure finally dissolves into the billowing ornamentation of the silk painting, it ends with the question: "How will you be remembered".



Installation view: Emma Talbot, *A Journey You Take Alone*, Kunsthalle Giessen, 2023, Photo: Emma Talbot, 2023

Between the two monumental silk paintings, Talbot presents her installation work *Your Birth: The Epic Historical Moment You Can't Remember*, in which the female process of giving birth is illustrated. The raised platform both celebrates and showcases childbirth. For instance, one of the protagonists takes a photo of herself using a selfie stick, indulging in self-staging. Talbot seems to be alluding to the constant scrutiny and judgement of the role of mother and to how childbirth is a solitary act.



Emma Talbot, *The Human Experience (Your Death)*,  
Detail, 2023, Courtesy the artist + Galerie Onrust +  
Petra Rinck Galerie, Photo: Kunsthalle Gießen

In the grey room, Talbot atmospherically addresses the topic of mourning, a taboo in our society. Grief represents the last connection the living have to the dead. Talbot emphasises this once again when she asks: "Are you a living thing that is dying or a dying thing that is living?" With the animation *Keening Songs* (2020), Talbot recalls a forgotten practice of collective mourning: the Celtic tradition of "keening", a form of vocal lamentation with which a group of women typically aided the bereaved in mourning their dead.

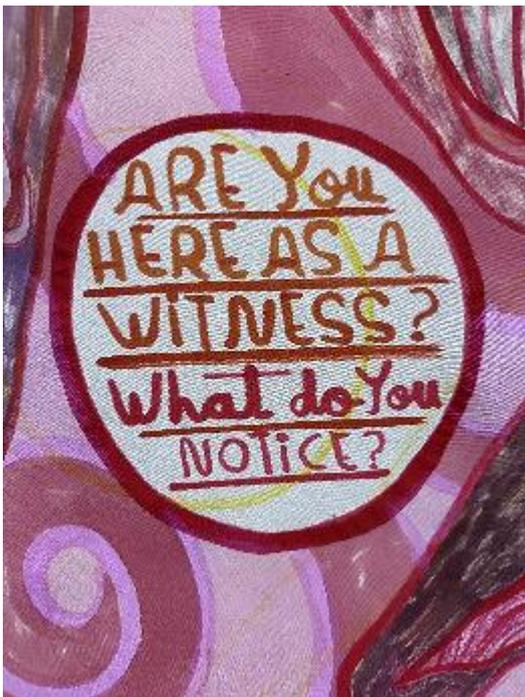
The animations bring Talbot's drawings to life. They represent a more recent development in her work, since she taught herself how to animate during the coronavirus lockdowns when she was unable to go to her studio. In the video work *The Trials* (2022), a female figure marked by age has to complete twelve tasks reminiscent of the Greek hero Hercules. However, instead of killing or dominating

like her ancient predecessor, Talbot's figure is concerned with preserving life, mourning her losses and reimagining the destroyed landscape in an intact state. Inspired by the twelve principles of permaculture (agriculture that imitates the principles and cycles of nature in order to preserve them), Talbot creates an ethical alternative to the classic heroic epic that is more relevant today than ever before.

Where do we come from? Who are we? Where are we going?

The exhibition **A Journey You Take Alone** by British artist Emma Talbot revolves around these universal questions about human existence and immediately places them in relation to world events.

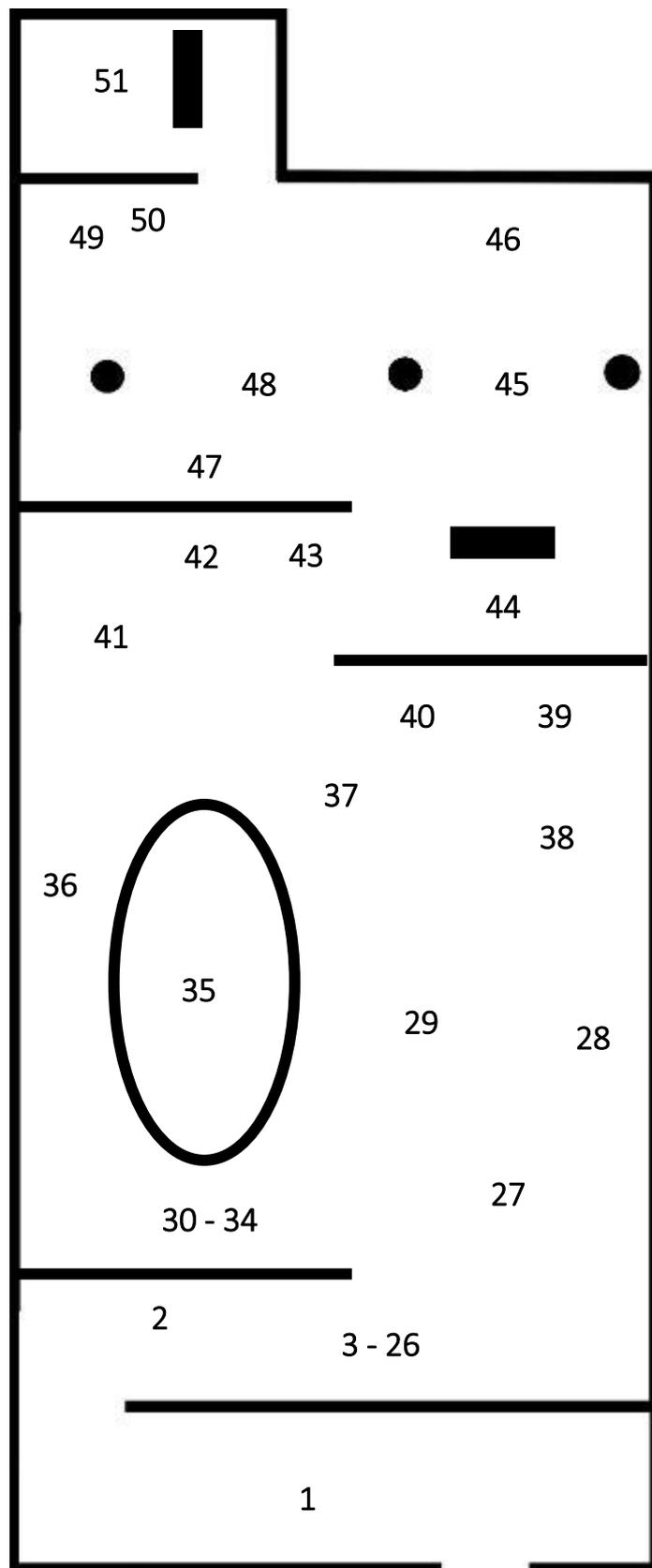
"A solitary journey adrift in the storms of this world your own story unfolding".



Emma Talbot, *The Human Experience (Your Birth)*, Detail, 2023, Courtesy the artist + Galerie Onrust + Petra Rinck Galerie, Photo: Kunsthalle Gießen

## Biography

Emma Talbot was born in 1969 in Stourbridge in the British Midlands and studied at the Birmingham Institute of Art & Design and the Royal College of Art in London. Today she lives in Italy and London. Talbot is the winner of the 8th Max Mara Art Prize for Women and was represented at the 2022 Biennale di Venezia in The Milk of Dreams. Her work has been exhibited at Whitechapel Gallery, London; Collezione Maramotti, Italy; Beiqiu Museum, China; Victoria Miro, London; Eastside Projects, Birmingham; Kunsthaus Centre D'Art Pasquart, Switzerland; Arcadia Missa, New York; KM21, The Hague, Netherlands; Turner Contemporary, Margate; The Freud Museum, London; Lisson Gallery, London; Galerie Onrust, Amsterdam; Petra Rinck Galerie, Düsseldorf; Neuer Aachener Kunstverein, Germany and Tate St. Ives, England.



1	<p><i>A Journey You Take Alone</i>, 2023, 420 x 250 cm</p> <p>Material: acrylic on Silk</p>
2	<p><i>All That Is Buried</i>, 2020, 04:14 min</p> <p>Animation</p>
3 – 26	<p>Various Drawings, n.d., ca. 30 x 42 cm</p> <p>Material: watercolour on Khadi paper</p> <p>Top row, from left to right:</p> <p><i>Moon journey   Autumn, plants.   Ancient Tree   Roots   Storm portal   Living plant   Generation   Solar   Life Force   Depths   Living matter   Broken ground</i></p> <p>Bottom row, from left to right:</p> <p><i>Sun   The things we carry   Gathering   Rising and setting   Universe   In fragments   Ghost   Tempest   In chaos   Webs   Forces   Ancient Root</i></p>
27	<p><i>What Passes Between Us</i>, 2023, 132 x 75 x 80 cm</p> <p>Material: mixed media</p>
28	<p><i>The Human Experience (Your Death)</i>, 2023, 1400 x 260 cm</p> <p>Material: acrylic on silk</p>
29	<p><i>Gathering</i>, 2023, 186 x 61 x 70 cm</p> <p>Material: mixed media</p>

30 – 34	<p>Various Drawings, n.d., ca. 30 x 42 cm</p> <p>Material: watercolour on Khadi paper</p> <p>From left to right:</p> <p><i>Fingerprint   Entry   Womb   Beginning. Volatile World   Everyone Is Born</i></p>
35	<p><i>Your Birth: The Epic Historical Moment You Can't Remember</i>, 2019, 800 x 300 cm</p> <p>Material: mixed media</p>
36	<p><i>The Human Experience (Your Birth)</i>, 2023, 1400 x 260 cm</p> <p>Material: acrylic on silk</p>
37	<p><i>No shade</i>, 2023, 136 x 61 x 75 cm</p> <p>Material: mixed media</p>
38	<p><i>Life Forms (Schema)</i>, 2023, 104 x 50 x 65 cm</p> <p>Material: mixed media</p>
39	<p><i>Opening</i>, n.d., 60 x 43 cm</p> <p>Material: watercolour on Khadi paper</p>
40	<p><i>Fortune Tellers</i>, 2020, 136 x 182 cm</p> <p>Material: acrylic on silk</p>
41	<p><i>Rootless Plant</i>, 2023, 100 x 60 x 106 cm</p> <p>Material: mixed media</p>

42	<i>Don't let your Dreams die</i> , 2020, 142 x 190 cm Material: acrylic on silk
43	<i>Seed</i> , n.d., ca. 60 x 43 cm Material: watercolour on Khadi paper
44	<i>Keening Songs</i> , 2020, 15:00 min Animation
45	<i>Resting Place</i> , 2023, 132 x 78 x 67 cm Material: mixed media
46	<i>Do You See Yourself Projected?</i> , 2019, 415 x 250 cm Material: acrylic on silk
47	<i>Grief reveals the most profound love</i> , 2023, 415 x 250 cm Material: acrylic on silk
48	<i>In Spirit</i> , 2023, 102 x 61 x 136.5 cm Material: mixed media
49	<i>Tree of Life</i> , 2023, 135 x 60 x 82 cm Material: mixed media
50	<i>Onward Journey</i> , n.d., ca. 30 x 42 cm Material: watercolour on Khadi paper
51	<i>The Trials</i> , 2023, 25:32 min Animation

## All works

Courtesy the artist + Galerie Onrust + Petra Rinck Galerie

## Special thanks to

Galerie Petra Rinck, Düsseldorf

Galerie Onrust, Amsterdam

Morgenstern & Wildegans

## Accompanying programme

### Guided Tour by the curator

Dr. Nadia Ismail

Thu, 08.02.2024, 6 pm

### Art education in individual conversations

Every Sat, 2 – 4 pm (except 23.12. + 30.12.2023 + 30.03.2024)

### Guided Tours

Sun, 17.12.2023 + 21.01. + 18.02. + 17.03. + 28.04.2024,

Each 3 – 4 pm

### Further information

[Kunsthalle-giessen.de](http://Kunsthalle-giessen.de)

Fig.: Emma Talbot, The Human Experience (Your Birth), Detail, 2023, Courtesy the artist + Galerie Onrust + Petra Rinck Galerie, Photo: Erik Sæter Jørgensen, 2023

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**Free Entry**

Kunsthalle Gießen  
Berliner Platz 1  
D-35390 Gießen  
+49 (0) 641 306 1040  
kunsthalle@giessen.de  
kunsthalle-giessen.de

**Opening Times**

Di–So: 10–18 Uhr  
Closed:  
23.12.23 – 01.01.24  
29.03. – 31.03.24