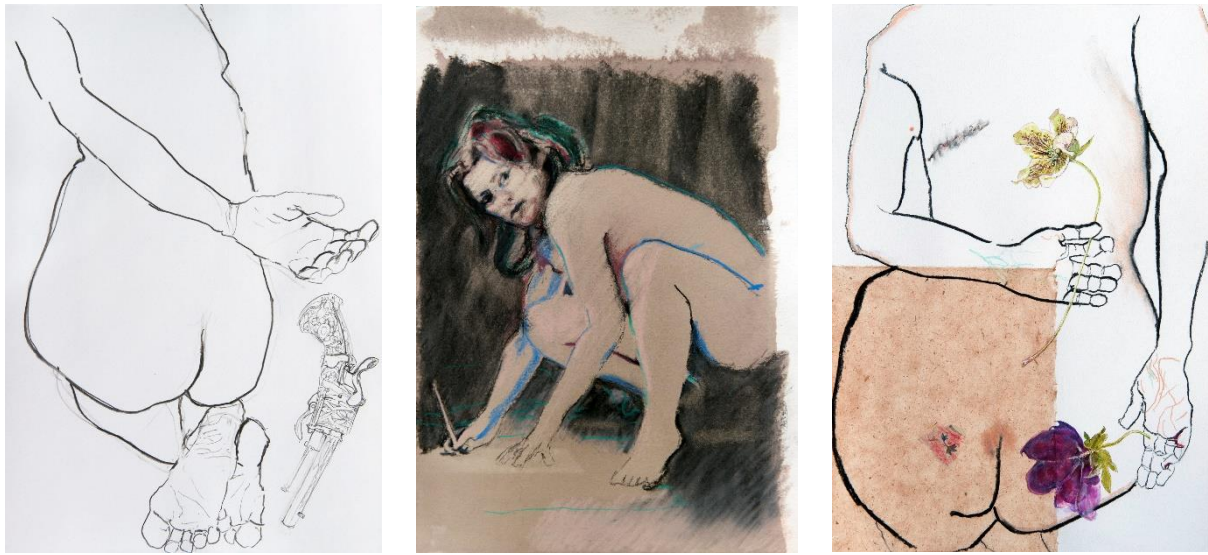




Above left to right:

The disarming and the disarmed #2 (Charcoal on Bristol board, 297 x 420 mm, 2020).

Woman drawing (Charcoal and chalk on silver nitrate photograph, 250x250 mm, 2018).

Winter garden (Mixed media on lokta and rag paper, 350 x 500 mm, 2022).

Below: *The body as counterpoise #3* (Photograph on archive paper with chalk 495 x 330 mm, 2019).

Denise Webber works with photography, drawing and film, often using herself as her subject and her childhood experiences and memories as source material. Everything that she does intrigues. She frequently combines photography and drawing. "I like drawing on photographs. They have a surface you can't really penetrate, a kind of flat imagery, and the colours can be quite grey."

Many of her motifs: shoes, a vixen skull, windows, reoccur in different iterations. An arched niche in a wall appears in her film *The Shoreline*. Hands move across the white roughened surface, feeling tentatively for handholds, for safety. Abandoned shoes litter the dunes, are lost to the waves, and pencil-thin heels are caked in mud. Like so many of her images they are deeply evocative.

Shoes reappear in *Threshold*, her exploration of the entrance to a Taoist building in Singapore. Feet lifted over a raised step transition from a street space to a sacred place. The focus is on the sense of physically, metaphorically and emotionally moving from one state or condition to another.

Webber has travelled extensively for work over the years and the blank canvas of a hotel room cries out for her interventions. Windows, a perennial theme, offer an opening with the potential to watch and be watched. *Everywhere that is not home* presents anonymous spaces unpeopled except by the artist herself. They have a particular resonance for her because she watched tanks rolling through the streets of Famagusta as a sixteen-year-old when war broke out in Cyprus. She challenges the sense of agoraphobia, daring herself to leave what appears to be a safe space: "In order to be on the street

you have to have validation. It's dangerous if people don't know why you are there." She feels safer carrying her camera.

In *The body as counterpoise* Webber places herself half in half out of a much-photographed window. She photographs herself and draws on the photo, adding an extra layer of meaning. Drawing on photographs is in itself problematic because the shiny surface resists marks.

There is a sense of displacement in *The inability to return*. Revisiting Famagusta, she risked taking photographs of the forbidden area of Varosha. Flimsy wire barriers prevent people entering what was a militarised zone. She was arrested by the police and forced to surrender her passport and driving licence. They deleted photos in which there were glimpses of buildings but allowed her to keep images of plants, and released her, for which she was grateful. The tangled vegetation growing in and through the wire fence symbolised containment and escape, territory and barriers. It reminded me of Cal Flynn's account of visiting the same place in her powerful book *Islands of Abandonment: Life in the post-human landscape*.

More recently, Webber has become entranced by a found vixen skull. In drawings and photographs she explores it as a symbol of mortality, seeing it as representative of the fierceness of the wild creature and the maternal fight to protect. She combs her hair with it and the actress in *The Shoreline* carries it with her at one point.

Much of her work evokes memories that are uncomfortable and sometimes disturbing. Her images of children handling machine guns and other assault weapons are shocking. This is not America, where such weapons are common in domestic settings; this is in Dorset, where children are handling decommissioned weapons in a safe environment, just as they might handle snakes in a zoo. For Webber these images 'sit somewhere between play and reality' and evoke memories of her frightening escape from Cyprus.

It is the art of suggestion, that anything is possible, which is so powerful in her work. Her experiences are gifted to the viewer in such a way that each individual can identify their own concerns within that narrative and take ownership of it for themselves.

Fiona Robinson is an Irish British artist, writer and curator, and President of the Royal West of England Academy, Bristol.

