



# Once upon a time

Mark Amery on HI! By Sam Duckor-Jones

*"Once there was a pencil, a lonely little pencil, and nothing else.  
It lay there, which was nowhere in particular, for a long long time.  
Then one day that little pencil made a move, shivered slightly,  
quivered somewhat... and began to draw."*

Alan Ahlberg, from *The Pencil*

It starts with a squiggle. Follow the wiry line and see where it goes. Sometimes the line becomes scrunched up in pieces of paper, but sometimes... skyscrapers.

HI! is an invitation to an art party. Come dance with your imagination. Prop up that idea, start a story; let it teeter, wobble, wander, ooze and melt. There is no ending; everything, like crystals in the ground is in formation. Sam Duckor-Jones also works as a tutor in Creative Art Spaces. He likes to give people pencils and let them walk their own line. HI! Come on in! Let's play!

Sam began with a scribble as a starting point for the show. I suggest you draw your own. Use it as a walking map, for looping round the pedestals. Or, as inspiration to follow your own line of thought - leaving mental pencil marks on the white.

Sam has used his scribble to free up his making, creating what he calls a floaty series of smaller scribbles on spindly black plinths. Entering through the gold tinsel curtain there's no doubt it's a party. Indeed, it's a rave, reminding us that on the dance floor we all get to throw shapes, like ceramicists throw bowls. The enclosure gives us license within the cool white cube to make a move. Sam's quickly formed figures are ciphers or empty characters for our own stories to dance. In a peek back to Sam's hallmark fluorescents, there's even a clay glowstick necklace. My generational perspective sees googly eyes and jagged teeth take me back to the painted smiley icons of '90s acid house - Paul Cannell's psychedelic sunburst cover for Primal Scream's *Screamadelica* - or 'Boognish,' the logo for alt rock band Ween.

Sam's first book of poetry was titled *People From the Pit Stand Up*, a call perhaps to everyone 'to wave their hands in the air like they just don't care.' To shine in their own peculiar way. The book is full of love and wayward, playful lines; a brave articulation of human beauty in all its awkwardness. Lines of poetry flow into lines of drawing, transforming here into sculptures. Each form holds the other.

Expressing human flair and awkwardness, these sculptures are like the grand, teetering stacked wedding cakes we might bake for ourselves: all brittle biscuit and chocolate gestural decorations of identity, on top of splodgy ice cream icing. They battle

shyness, to celebrate our interior psychic messy richness.

With ceramics you can make something up as long as you can keep it standing. It's free and playful. It's the opposite of carving, where you seek the 'truth in material' as the modernists championed. In its collection Aratoi treasures 'Galliard - Forms in Movement' a small sculpture by the great British modernist sculptor Barbara Hepworth. It is itself an abstract scribble in the air. A galliard is a Renaissance dance full of fast leaps, jumps and hops - a 15th century rave. I love that these works get to dance in the same building.

"Pay no attention to the man behind the curtain," runs a poem Duckor Jones has written for this show. "Just kidding, Please pay me lots of attention."

Shy but proud, Duckor Jones is our host opening the front door. The works express a social awkwardness I wager we all feel at a party. HI! we say, a little too forced, grinning, waving, eyes popping, crossing the personal Rubicon. Each work has its own personality: awkward strangers in the corner; old friends chatting in the kitchen, the bug-eyed on the dancefloor. "Then there are some I feel I might have to ask to leave soon," Sam quips.

The works speak also to our housing on social media. Today everyone has their own awkward pedestal. Each plinth is its own lockdown bubble, broadcasting a private dance to the other, speaking in emojis.

In its makeshift, sloppy slurpiness HI! is there to make stories with - in the way children do so masterfully with nothing but a pencil or a stick in the sand. There are, Sam says proudly, "a lot of loose threads", counter to that perfection of modernist form. I'm reminded of adolescent influences: sculptor Len Lye and poet EE Cummings. Artists constantly alive to the kinetic wriggly potential of everything; who recognise that things never stop changing. As we talk further I'm also reminded of Alan Ahlberg's picture book *The Pencil*, where the stationary takes on lives of their own. By reply, Sam offers up as inspiration '50s classic Harold and the Purple Crayon where drawing provides a surrounding world to comfort us.

"This evening," he adds, as we loop round HI! in his studio garage, "I might run through here with a graphite and do some more scribbling..."