

SOUVENIRS & SUBURBIA

Lu Williams

A new public art commission for
Southend-on-Sea



**CREATIVE
ESTUARY**



Art Fund_

Focal Point Gallery and Creative Estuary are delighted to present *Souvenirs & Suburbia* by Lu Williams, a major new public artwork welcoming visitors and residents to Southend-on-Sea.

Souvenirs & Suburbia takes the form of a large-scale fridge magnet and postcard, referencing the tourist attractions, cultural icons, landscapes, and visual histories of the local area, celebrating Southend-on-Sea as a home, holiday destination and commuter hub. The work has been shaped by public contributions gathered through an open call, school submissions, and community group workshops carried out by Williams and Focal Point Gallery.

This playful sculpture will transform the gateway to Southend-on-Sea's High Street, drawing visitors and residents into the city centre and breathing fresh life to the often-used but often-overlooked entrance to the city.

The commission has been generously funded by Creative Estuary, Southend-on-Sea City Council and Art Fund.

Interview: Lu Williams (LW) and Laura Bowen (LB), Curator, Focal Point Gallery

LB: To start off with, could you share a bit more about your background and areas of interest?

LW: Hello! I'm Lu, I am an artist based in Southend, where I have lived for nearly 10 years. I grew up in nearby Billericay, and went to school in Chelmsford for a few years, so it feels really good to be making an artwork in Essex, for Essex. Like a lot of people in Essex, my family are originally from London. I have gone far enough back to see that two of my great-great-great-grandparents met in a workhouse in Bethnal Green; the

family moved there from South London after a few years of being ten-pound Poms in Australia, finally landing in Southend. Living here has brought me closer to my family's history and this commission has given me the chance to really research Southend through the eyes of its residents, historians and my own family, which feels really special.

I graduated from The Ruskin School of Art, Oxford University in 2016, where I focused on making sculpture and installation. Alongside this, I DJ'd and ran club nights which is where I first started making zines (self-published mini magazines) and merch. Some early merch-works included mini tyre earrings to match giant pink bouncy car-tyre sculptures, custom 6-inch heels, temporary tattoos, beach towels, painted jackets and diamanté tracksuit bottoms with my DJ name.

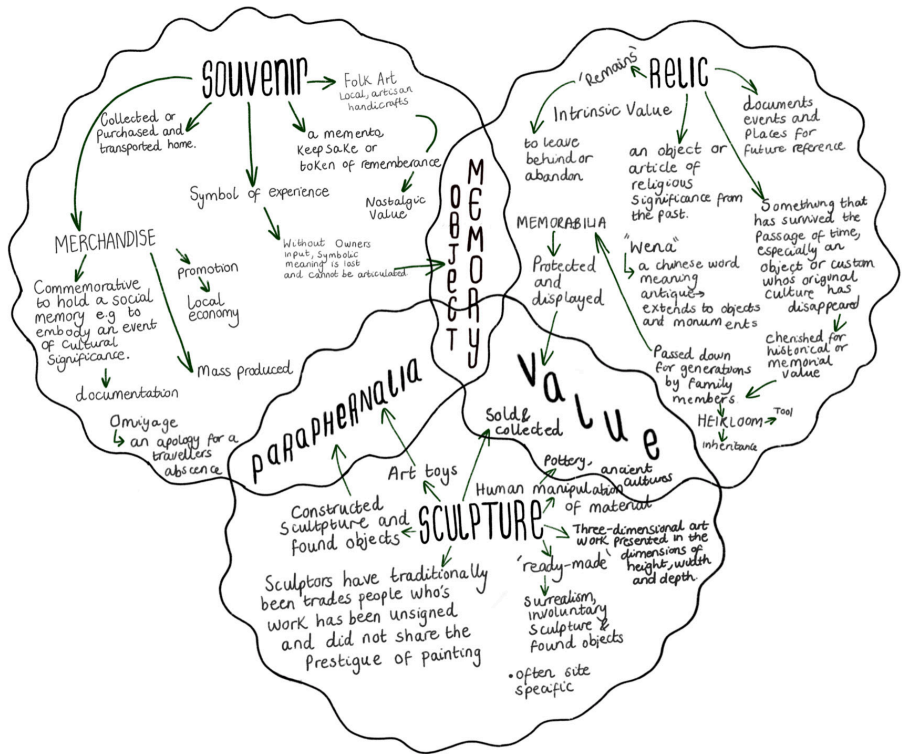
I have always been fascinated with readymades, production lines, customisation, the punk movement, offcuts and questioning what is thought of as an art object: how an object can be regarded as a relic or tat, and what constitutes actual value versus assigned value. I think this comes from a concern with accessibility - who can afford to collect art, but also who can afford to make art.

At Oxford, you are technically not allowed to have a job while you attend University, which adds to the inaccessibility for working-class students. So having my art practice function outside of traditional white cubes was a necessity, both to make some cash and to work in an affordable medium. With that in mind, cultural offcuts, merch, paraphernalia - objects that can be functional, accessible and multi-purposeful artworks are what interest me most. You will see this a lot in my work, in my personal practice, my collaborative project with artist Emma Edmondson Dog Ear (where we make art dog toys) and Grrrl Zine Fair, a platform for artists who make zines.

My interest also expands into the digital realm and I coined the term cyberobject to describe moments where human-made-ness blurs with the digital in a way that is degraded, such as glitches, pixelated images, early biotech and evidence of the human when so much content is AI generated. These elements blur the line between the self and the other, often evoking feelings of horror and disgust or unease, which feels innately human and bodily. There is a lot of overlap between this and my interest in elements of the handmade in trashy or kitsch objects, such as a spelling mistake on a T-shirt or an out of place blob on a fridge magnet. In both objects and art I like to see both the hand of the artist and of the production line worker. I often question why one is considered an artist and the other a labourer, the same way I question what is considered functional and what is purely decorative.

In *Souvenirs & Suburbia*, parts of the drawing are intentionally outside the lines and slightly pixelated, so you can see the texture of the photographs. This deliberately brings the human back into an artwork that, on this scale, could potentially look over-produced. The form also suggests that the fridge-magnet sculpture is pinning the postcard to the wall, in the way we use fridge magnets in our home. I like to use humour and play with a sense of scale and unexpected materiality – an explosion of the everyday in a large-scale, whimsical way.

In past works, I have enlarged a roll of arcade ticket stubs, mulched spam mail into a relief that sits on a letterbox plinth, converted manhole covers into marble-like sculptures and made bouncy foam car tyres. These objects are not quite like their original counterparts – there is something slightly off about them.



LB: How does Souvenirs & Suburbia comment on consumer culture and the idea of collecting memories through objects?

LW: Fridge magnets emerged at the crossroads of consumer culture, with brands using them for promotion, the functionality of household goods, increased globalisation, and leisure time for working and middle-class families, who had more time and money to travel. An affordable holiday destination for many were British seaside towns like Southend, which then began to cater to tourism, creating merchandise like fridge magnets to generate income.

Postcards date back even further, to the late 19th and early 20th centuries, as an affordable and quick way to communicate.

During my zine workshops, where I talk about fanzines, fan mail and connecting with people through the mail system, I often reference how regular the postal service once was. There were four post deliveries a day, with the last one at half past nine at night, and in rural areas there could be up to 12 collections a day. This decreased to two a day after WWII. It was possible to post a letter in the morning and receive the reply that same day. I have included some vintage postcards in my sculptural editions *Crooked House and the Fairy Castles*, which have messages hidden in them.

Souvenirs themselves have been around for centuries, from ancient Greeks and Romans keeping mementos from their travels, to pilgrims from the Middle Ages, collecting 'pilgrim pins' – small metal badges worn as proof of pilgrimage. Later, aristocrats travelling across the world, particularly around Europe, would collect objects as souvenirs. At the time, the word initially meant 'recollection'. In Latin the root verb is *subvenīre*, meaning 'to come to mind'. It is composed of *sub* (up from below) and *venīre* (to come), suggesting a memory bubbling up from the depths of the mind. I picture *Souvenirs & Suburbia* bubbling up from the sea.

After WWII and with the rise of production-line technologies, snow globes and novelty items became cheaper to produce. The Festival of Britain in 1951 was a particularly interesting period for souvenirs. It was a year-long festival held after WWII and functioned essentially as a re-branding of the UK as a progressive nation, while the fall of the empire and Britain's extensive role in the slave trade was conveniently left out of this writing of history. It was also a way to boost morale at a time when government debt was huge, cities needed rebuilding and the sheer loss of human life must have felt overwhelming. The amount of souvenirs produced for this festival was massive: pens, shot glasses, brooches, cufflinks, tea towels, tie slides, teapots, place mats, soap, handbags, magazines, jigsaw puzzles, scarves, biscuit

tins – I have even heard rumours that there was a branded rat catcher.

So with souvenirs, there is this idea of feeling nostalgic and wanting to remember something – a place or a time – but they are also an exercise of branding, selling an idea of a place to you, which I think creates an interesting tension. At the heart of *Souvenirs & Suburbia*, instead of telling audiences what Southend as a place is (think Rossi ice creams, the pier), I have co-designed a new definition of Southend with the people who live here. That's why the workshops were such an important part of its development. When I had a vague idea that there would be fridge-magnet designs, the content of the work was shaped by what participants felt Southend meant to them. It was an exercise in collecting memories but instead of a fridge full of worlds, we've made one collaborative giant world of Southend – of which there are, of course, many others!

LB: How does the artwork draw parallels between traditional sculptural reliefs found in cathedrals and museums and contemporary handmade fridge magnets?

LW: I find it really interesting that certain craftsmanship and artistry is considered more valued than others. Traditionally artists have been commissioned to create works of art to commemorate patrons, events, or people throughout history. I have used this idea and applied it to a traditional public-sculpture format, transforming it into a form that is usually regarded as a kitschy ornament. I hope the work encourages people to reconsider the artistry and craftsmanship of souvenirs, especially in an era when so much of the design work we see is now AI generated. Even fabricators I have spoken to mention outsourcing parts to AI or 3D printing. A great book for learning more about the history of commissioning work and the commissioning process

is *Commissioning Contemporary Art: A Handbook for Curators, Collectors and Artists* by Louisa Buck and Daniel McClean.

For our commission, we were lucky to find a fabricator who could hand-build a lot of the sculpture. All the reliefs, for example, have been carved from a type of sculpting foam and then cast in fibreglass. This allows the sculptures to be lit from within, giving them a translucent quality, the feel of a night-light – a nod to Southend’s historical illuminations.

LB: Can an object be both sentimental and kitschy? How does the artwork explore this contradiction?

LW: Yes, definitely. Trinkets are especially popular right now, and this desire to express individuality and curate your own persona has just grown and grown. People use objects, accessories, clothing, keepsakes, charms, and more to reveal parts of their personality or interests. I also like to think back to chatelaines – chains with attached objects such as keys, mirrors, pencils, perfume, and small trinkets, often functional as well – which were used by women in the 19th century to display their social status and role in the household. Nowadays, Labubus, for example, show a kind of flexible social status, which can change on a whim.

Along with fridge magnets, these objects are often collected to form a kind of world reflecting who you are and the person you want to be. During this commission, we instead asked, “What kind of place is Southend? What kind of place do you want Southend to be?”. The images and stories that came up were a mix of beloved parts of the area and places that no longer exist – a real mix of sentimentality but also leaning into playful kitchen-seaside tropes. I think it is important to remind ourselves that we are part of a community and are not just individuals, and I hope

this artwork can be a reminder of Southend as a community we are all part of, with shared memories and aspirations.

LB: How did public contributions influence the development of the artwork and why is community involvement important in your practice?

LW: When I was first commissioned, I had the idea of creating a giant souvenir and exploring fridge magnets as a medium, but I had no idea what kind of iconography the final work would include. It was so special to invite members of the public into this process, and we tried to reach as many people as possible. We sent worksheets to schools, ran workshops in community groups, popped up in The Victoria Shopping Centre, advertised in local newspapers and online, and were able to engage a good number of people. Everyone who wanted to be listed is now on the information plaque by the sculpture, which I think is important. The commission was to create an artwork for Southend, and I strongly believe that artists should use some form of consultation process, especially when making work that people encounter in their everyday lives.

I work a lot with other people – artists, teachers, producers, engineers, carpenters, marketing and strategy teams, historians, archivists, and members of the public who want to get involved. Some examples include *Basildon Tenants Handbook* (2019), *Ebbfleet Citizens Handbook* (2024), *Right Here & Tomorrow* (2023), *Manifesto for Essex* (2023), and *Care Contractors Artist Collective* (2024-25). In all these projects, I invited people to help make the work, and it is always such an interesting process. It is not just about “letting people decide”, because artists have a skill to generate new ideas and make something visual out of them, but to involve others in a way that feels comfortable giving them something to respond to, give feedback on, or comment on. For this work, people knew what a fridge magnet was. I gave

them the materials and skills to shape it, and resources to think about what symbols might be meaningful to them. Together, we produced hundreds of little fridge magnets. These initial mini sculptures, drawings, collages, photo submissions, and written contributions were then processed by me and transformed into this large, layered mash of memories and stories.

About the artist

Lu Williams (b.1993, Essex) is an artist producing sculpture, print, zines, drawing, writing, video, events and workshops through research, community engagement, collecting and collaboration.

They make work around the themes of place and memory; community and collaboration; collecting; class and upbringing; accessibility; and platforming and uplifting marginalised voices- through the lens of queerness, neurodivergence and working classness. They are interested in class and taste, queerness, ecology, systems, paraphernalia and the notion of the 'disposable'; elevating everyday offcuts, often ephemeral and nostalgic, into the valued but functional 'art object'.

In 2015 they created Grrrl Zine Fair, a place for self-publishing and DIY art, music and culture surrounding feminist publishing. In 2017 the Grrrl Zine Library was born and hosted 600+ queer feminist zines, housed at The Old Waterworks. In 2020 they co-founded Dog Ear, dog toy sculptures and accompanying publications produced by artists, with artist Emma Edmondson. They continue research on 'The Cyberobject', an investigation into 'the upheaval of contemporary media toward the entropic and bodily aesthetic. Cyberobject explores "the embodiment in a world of inconsistent human built data, the desire for In Real Life (IRL) bodies through screens, uncanny animatronics, and seeping pores of human skin pawing, at the cloud."

Williams is currently based in Leigh-on-Sea, working from The Old Waterworks artist studios, Southend-on-sea and is on the Southend Community Investment Board, as well as the Creative Estuary Board.

Big Screen Southend

George Morgan, *Lu Williams: Souvenirs, Suburbia & Southend*, 2026, film, 14:10 minutes. Courtesy the artist.

Artist filmmaker **George Morgan** has been capturing Lu Williams and the making of *Souvenirs & Suburbia*. The full video will be screened on the Big Screen Southend daily.

Limited Editions

While working with ephemeral objects such as fridge magnets, Lu Williams became hyper-focused on how people value different objects within their homes. As an artist producing fridge magnets, they were technically artworks but not necessarily understood or treated as such.

Ideas of working-classness and taste run consistently through their practice, especially the hierarchy of good and bad taste, who defines it and who is excluded from it. These sculptures extend that line of inquiry. They originate from Williams's early fridge magnet designs created for the commission but have been expanded into sculptural forms that move beyond their original domestic function.

The works incorporate symbols and tropes specific to Southend-on-Sea, including Prittlewell Priory's medieval door, fish and chips signage, Never Never Land castles, the Balmoral Tower Blocks

forming part of the skyline, the Curly Bridge in Leigh-on-Sea, and palm trees and ferns referencing The Shrubbery and the seafront.

Hand-sculpted in clay and cast in resin, each piece has been meticulously coloured with varying opacities, with vintage postcards and their secret letters embedded into the surfaces. Williams intended each piece to operate as a convergence of historical and contemporary references to Southend-on-Sea. The embedded postcards, sourced from historical object dealers, range from intimate love letters to simple messages home, placing the works within personal and collective memory.

These sculptures function as night lights, generating an atmosphere of magic and nostalgia that many people associate with Southend-on-Sea, particularly when recalling childhood visits to the city. In this way, the works move between domestic object, souvenir, sculptural form, and repository of local histories, while reflecting the artist's ongoing interest in taste, value and cultural hierarchies.

Lu Williams, *Crooked House and Fairy Castles*, 2025

Edition no.1 (framed)

Resin, pigment and postcard of Southend High Street from 1905;
frame: wood, MDF and resin

60 x 50 cm

£1,800

Lu Williams, *Crooked House and Fairy Castles*, 2025

Edition no.2 (framed)

Resin, pigment and postcard of Southend High Street from 1905;
frame: wood, MDF and resin

60 x 50 cm

£1,800

Lu Williams, *Crooked House and Fairy Castles*, 2025

Edition no.3 (framed upon purchase)

Resin, pigment and postcard from the 1980s depicting Southend illuminations and Never Never Land and Fairy Falls

60 x 50 cm

£1,800

Lu Williams, *Crooked House and Fairy Castles*, 2025

Edition no.4 (framed upon purchase)

Resin, pigment

60 x 50 cm

£1,800

Thank Yous

A special thanks goes to those that have helped shape this commission: Aisha, Aiste, Alesandro, Amber & Bertie, Andrea, Andrea E., Angela-Precious, Anna, Anne P., Anne W., April, Aunt Debb, Avie, Barry, Ben, Billie, Brandon, Charlotte H., Charlotte, Chinonso, Chloe S., Claire, Courtney W., Contemporary Elders, Danny F., Diana, Edward S., Eleanor S., Ella, Elle G., Elliot G., Elliot B., Elliott T., Emily, Emma M., Estuary High School, Esme, Eve, Fleur, Frankie, Gemma S., Georgia M., Georgia T., Gillian, Havens, Hollie, Ida, Ilhys, Isaac, James A., James S., Jamie, Jane, Janine, Jessica R., Jessica R., Julius, Karen, Karina, Keith, Kerry, Kim S., Konrad, Laura, Leanne R., Leni, Leon, Lilith, Lillith, Lilly, Lily, Louisa, Lydia, Mark, Martha T., Martha, Matilda, Mel, Mia, Michael, Michael S., Michelle, Millie, Milton Hall School, Monika, Natalie, Natasha, Neil, Oliver, Paige, Paula, Pearl, Penny, Phoebe, Porter's Grange Primary School, Project 49, Reate, Rebecca, Roger, Rosie L., Rosie M., Ruben, Ryan, S.A, Sahara, Sairah H-J., Sairah, Samantha, Sandra, Sarah L., Sebastian, Serhat, Shama, Sidney D., Sydney C., Tamara, Tiffany, Tom, Westcliff's Age Concern Group, Zafiyo, Zoe, and all anonymous contributions.

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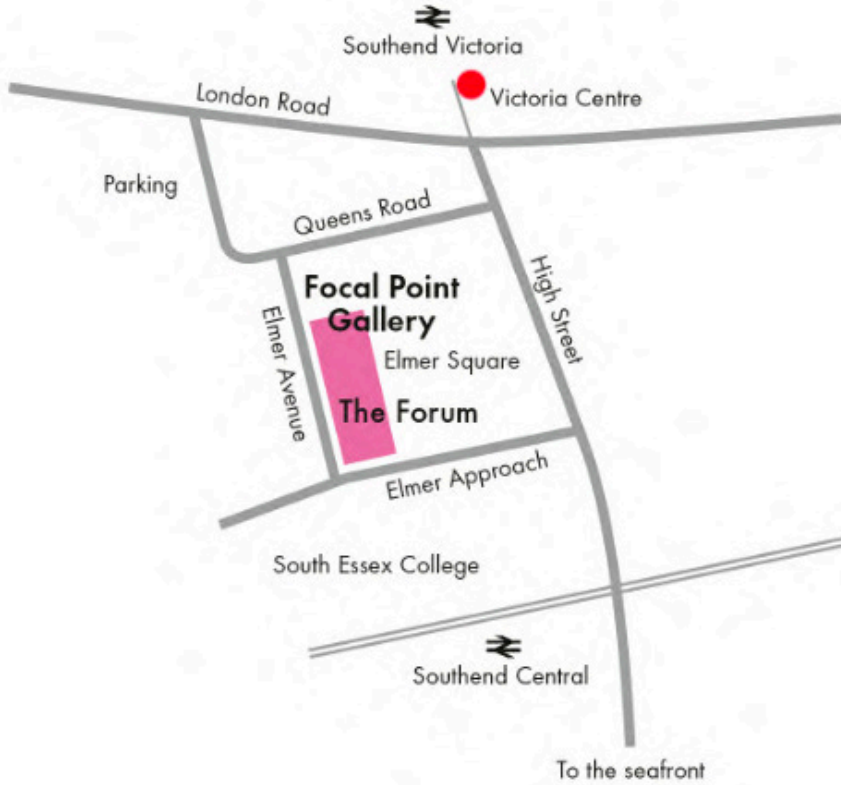
We would like to dedicate this work to Sharon Byrne and Josephine Melville, two icons of Southend that are sadly no longer with us, but who contributed to this project in its early days and were passionate about culture and celebrating the city.

The commission has been generously funded by Creative Estuary, Southend-on-Sea City Council and Art Fund.

Donate

Focal Point Gallery is a not-for-profit organisation, which relies on support from grant-giving bodies, trusts, businesses and individuals for its exhibition, learning and public programmes. All donations directly support these programmes and our ambition to support great art across Essex. Speak to a member of our Front of House team to make a donation to the gallery.

Souvenirs & Suburbia is located outside The Victoria Shopping Centre



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