

## *Sifting for Pips and Stalks*

When Sarah Horton revisited the Christmas pudding factory in Derbyshire where she worked as a student, the manager had a warm greeting: “It’s great that you loved it here enough to come back.” Certainly, the job made a deep impression on her, but her feelings were more complex – so much so that she decided to revisit the Matthew Walker factory after 35 years and explore the similarities and differences between her work there and her subsequent career as an artist in a film and a series of paintings, presented here in *Sifting for Pips and Stalks*.

The title refers to Horton’s role on the production line, removing pips and stalks from raisins so they could go into the pudding mix that a machine continuously dropped into bowls. A short-term employee, she felt like an outsider, recalling that “regulars loved it when students cocked up” – which often happened if they failed to concentrate on their dull, repetitive tasks. Having grown up in a working-class family in Derby, she wondered what she might have done had she not been able to go to university – as was the case for many people from a similar background, especially in the recent past. Having studied Visual Arts and then become an artist and lecturer, she realised how her practice often involved repetitive actions that felt mundane yet transformative. She decided to bring her work experience into her art, trying to work under factory conditions with the pressure to produce a certain output every day, speeding up and slowing down as she used all manner of paintbrushes and decorating rollers to produce 10 metre scrolls of black lines, mostly batched into blocks of 24, a nod to the number of hours in the day.

The point of this “almost pointless” activity, says Horton, is to keep the lines straight within an allocated time and with a whole range of painting tools. This is considerably difficult as they are up to 150 cm in length, and much of the work was in “correcting” erroneous lines, making the paintings look like a heavily redacted text. Contrasting it with the present-day production line at the pudding factory, the film shows this process, completed in Horton’s temporary staff studio in the former Barclays Bank building in Norwich, which now belongs to Norwich University of the Arts. Numerous artists now work in the building, which has become a combination of office spaces, studios, workshops and a café – a familiar scene in post-industrial Britain, where converted factories, offices and shops are turned towards the cultural production that successive governments hoped would regenerate (or gentrify) ailing towns and cities. As an artist, Horton is both the factory line worker and the quality control manager, rooting out mistakes in her paintings. Given their intentional similarity, even if they can never quite achieve the identical perfection of the ideal production line, the paintings are either named after the month and year when they were made, hinting at the difficulty in distinguishing between time period when employed in factory work, or the audio book Horton listened to while making her artworks. These include classics such as George Eliot’s *Middlemarch* – a masterpiece of the Victorian high point of British industrial labour, even if it deals less directly with such work as Dickens’ novels – and acclaimed contemporary novels like Anna Burns’ *Milkman* or *Tomorrow and Tomorrow and Tomorrow* by Gabrielle Zevin, both of which touch upon work, and the hierarchies within industries.

The film contrasts Horton’s studio processes with those of the Matthew Walker factory, which remains reliant on human labour, rather than automating its employees out of their jobs.

While it was not the easiest environment, there was a sense of choreography to the work, and of collaboration and camaraderie amongst the workers, that still appealed to her. For those who have never worked such a job, or haven't done so for a long time, it's tempting to romanticise such labour, in the same way that people who do not do creative work romanticise the idea of artistic 'inspiration'. Documenting his writing process, Belgian author Jean-Philippe Toussaint said that artists should not wait for 'inspiration'. Rather, they must work hard to build up a sense of urgency, thinking carefully about form and content before putting in hours of graft, building up momentum through writing and rewriting, and Horton aims to demystify the artistic process in a similar fashion.

This ambition appealed to the factory manager, who suggested Horton apply the same logic to the production line, leading her to make this split-screen film showing automated and physical labour. Horton's first foray into moving image, made with filmmaker Sam Tring, it shows the Matthew Walker factory making 100,000 pudding units a day for distribution to supermarkets and other shops across the UK, eschewing the "humanising" focus on particular workers that a television documentary might choose in favour of showing how the people have to behave like machines. Horton admits that the decision to impose factory conditions on her artistic practice could be seen as "quite spurious", but it breaks down the idea that the artist is somehow different to – and separate from – the rest of society. Like most contemporary artists except for the most privileged, Horton's practice was shaped by the work she did to support herself as she struggled to break into the arts: the attitudes and techniques she learned on the production line informed not just the content of her art but the processes behind it, as she makes explicit here. (The same is true of the clerical work I did for a decade as I developed my craft as a writer – the organisational skills proved useful in pursuing a freelance career, but also, like Horton, that world of work became the subject matter of various stories and articles.)

The four screens show the artistic as mechanical and the mechanical as artistic, with Horton clocking into her studio as a worker enters the factory floor, and both begin the routines that will create their outputs. They both wear blue plastic gloves: Horton to paint, the worker to load the pudding mix onto a conveyor belt. From there, we see how Horton arrives at her black blocks, and the factory with mass-produced, moulded desserts. The 'unseen' and yet clearly visible labour here is in the editing, as two concurrent days' work are boiled down to the length of a pop song, with crucial moments skilfully (and rhythmically) matched to each other. This is not Warhol's factory, and there are no 'superstars' in this film – just a helpful reminder that in any line of work, the only reliable route to creativity is through graft.

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