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**FT. HELEN MARTEN,  
MARTINE SYMS,  
OLIVIA LAING, WU  
TSANG, DIAMOND  
STINGILY, JOY  
JAMES, JOANNA  
NOVAK, MISHA  
HONCHARENKO,  
PHILIPPA SNOW  
VALERIE SOLANAS**

# Helen Marten is Messing with Meaning

INTERVIEW BY CLEM MACLEOD  
PHOTOS BY SARAH WHITE

CLEM TALKS TO THE TURNER PRIZE WINNING ARTIST HELEN MARTEN ABOUT THE WRITING PRACTICE THAT RUNS ALONGSIDE HER VISUAL PRACTICE.

Helen Marten's writing is hard to define. Her debut novel *The Boiled in Between* contains a multitude of complicated characters that you can't help but hate, and reading it is a highly stimulating ride. Much like her visual work, her writing is diagrammatic; it maps language whilst messing with it in equal measures. With each read of the book, further narratives reveal themselves and meanings unfold. Her art is sentences, and her book a work of art. Clem talks to Helen about writing vs. making, and messing with meaning.

**Clem MacLeod:** I wanted to start off by asking you how you liken the writing process to that of your physical art practice?

Helen Marten: I mean, it's such a complicated question. I think language is part of a manipulatable index of materiality in a similar way to a twig or a stone or a flower. So when I'm making things sculpturally, I often begin

with a very linguistic impulse. And maybe that's a sentence or it's a combinatory set of things that I've read somewhere or vice versa, maybe it comes from an image and that image is steeped

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**"...with books, the process is much slower [than making art]. When people read it, everybody has a critical opinion. People edit. It's far more murderous"**

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or saturated in a universal coding that we recognise, but by virtue of its displacement, it becomes something 'other'. And what I love most about a text is that it's a minute cosmos into which you can

dive, set up a scaffold and begin to hang other kinds of scraps from it: eventually, by virtue of their mixed fluttering, these scraps reform into something else.

I think as a producer both making and writing, you sit in this incredibly dense world where everything is narrative. Whether what you're handling is shouting declaratively or looping you into a much slower drawn out narrative, or both of these things, substance is continually exercising impulses of pleasurable distrust and nothing ever stands still. When I wrote the novel, I felt like such a fraudulent person. Returning to the studio, I was like a baby with enormous hands. I had no idea how to begin again, because I thought 'well, art can be so easy and we rely so much on the system into which it is put, to give it credibility'. I think that can ultimately leave you with very lazy self-inhabited gestures and this predisposed attitude to assume that because something is destined for an exhibition or a gallery space, it has content. Whereas with books, the process is much slower. When people read it, everybody has a critical opinion. People edit. It's far more murderous. It's something like a real ego shock, when suddenly all of these things that you imagined had power or impetus to do something are trashed and you begin again.

So when I did go back to the studio [after writing the book], I just felt like everything I was doing had to be reassessed through a more intense lens, whereby I could have both my own hermetic devotion to it, but also think about how everything responds more universally to an audience that is not necessarily versed in whatever you're looking at or thinking about. And that's kind



of why I started writing the novel. I had an incredibly busy year and I just felt so deflated by the lack of critical response. And then I was like, 'well this is clearly my fault.' I must not be signalling with the right attitude or the right accessibility.

So yeah, it's really a confusing brain space to sink into because often I wonder if I'm trapped between the perversity and the beauty of fiddling with material things, with all that beginning syntax and basic finger-level touching, and then the inevitable text-structure that happens alongside - the meaning, the applied structure, the wider modules that spill out over each other. There is certainly something similar between how I formally begin a sentence or start planning a text to the way I dream images into reality. There's definitely a mutuality to it that is interesting and I still haven't quite figured out what the limits of language are in that sense. It's almost like there's a gap between quotation and authenticity and where that gap or time period begins, opens up a space that's more ragged or more bright and that's the fractional moment to dive into. That's that moment of finding newly uninhabited space or imagining that a shadow has a sentence in the same way that a piece of wood or a child has a shadow and moving back and forth between those different types of density. Often I get stuck and I'm like, which one?

**That's so interesting because I feel like a lot of people, especially writers but also artists that comment on writing, say that language is so limited because we only have words and**

**"... text can be absurdly convoluted, like Joyce, or it can be immediate like Diane Williams."**



**we only have words for certain things. And there are some languages that have words that aren't translatable into English, so you can't explain them. But I feel like you have the opposite approach. You're like, 'okay, no, actually language is everywhere' and it's so embodied. In your work, language and materiality supplement each other, they work together rather than it being one thing or the other.**

Yeah, in both cases I'm trying to portray the mathematical experience of living in the world. Asking spatial questions that become discursive algorithms. So, how human touch interacts with nature or product or our living relationships or our body. Or asking weird questions to dizzy myself and force new connections. If I raised my legs in the air and cycled them round, could I create shadows that could replicate the movement of a clock, and would that portray time? Empirical time or metaphorical time? Trying to understand how both of those things have this wild plurality that means that they can be defined mutually by both substance and language. I'm working on this little critical text at the minute that is kind of about that and I've plotted out an idea of *nets* and *vectors*. Specifically imagining the complicit parallels in both sculpture and language where the net is a catchall system for setting a parameter or a mode of capture for a set of meanings and the vector is a more direct hit, a less oblique means of landing on a target. The vector is expedient, a straight-to-the-point directional indication.

I feel like text, whether it's narrative or theory or lyrical, has both of those kinds of attitudes, those stances; a text can be absurdly convoluted, like Joyce, or

it can be immediate like Diane Williams. There is horror and joy in both and there's also a mutual reflexivity for something to behave in so many different ways. I find that the same is true for sculpture.

**It's funny that you say this about messing with meaning because my interpretation of the Messrs in *The Boiled in Between* was that they were messing with meaning. When I read that book, I realised it was not about the narrative, it was about my personal experiences and personal associations to what was going on in the book. There were certain lines, like "memories rustle up their own pleasure labyrinth" and "what is memory really but a reissuing of history via simple triggers" and I realised that it was those simple triggers which defined the reading experience for me. I felt like I was creating my own narrative around it, which I feel is usually a response to art, rather than a literary experience, traditionally. I think that's amazing because the book in itself triggers more of an artistic response, or more of a spiritual response than what you would usually feel reading a novel.**

The Messrs were so fun to write because they were so mean. They were aloof and critical in the same way that a literal jury might be, or an analyst or a therapist. Or our own harsh subconscious motoring along beside us to tell us off. I was really thinking about the idea of the Stoics and stoic principles for living - that virtue might be sufficient for happiness or that domestic goods should be regarded with indifference or that the world is providentially ordered by God whatever that God may be, whether God is a dog

or a stone, so be it. The Messrs' were present throughout and they came in at a later stage, to fulfil this more structuring idea of narrative that linked a call and response scenario for the characters to do whatever they did, which was very little. But The Messrs commentary inched you along, not necessarily through a narrative but through a durational period where you could suddenly plausibly imagine *The Boiled in Between* as a day or a week. Within that sense of micro space, there is again the possibility to enter a newly legible cosmos, finding interest in the most minute of things. There kind of is, and there isn't, a story. And I like that ambiguity. We imagine a conventional narrative has a certain type of space and unfolds in a certain way, but wouldn't it be fun to crucially change or butcher those parameters? I loved how clear

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the Messrs were, but also how fundamentally judgy they were. The mechanics of their voice was like a kinetic offering to drag two horribly beige characters (laughs) into either self-awareness or motivation or something other than their own solipsistic and soggy collapse.

**I feel like the more traditional rules of literature are**

**becoming slightly obsolete. So it's interesting when you say that you found that the editing process was a bit harsh because you felt like you had to stick to certain rules. I feel like if I was editing your work, I would be like, 'okay, this is yours, run with it.' So I want to ask you about that process, but I also want to ask about whether you feel like that has now come into other aspects of your art making and you see yourself refining or thinking about certain rules in your other practice?**

Yeah, a little bit. When we were editing, both initially with my agent and then later with the publisher, we were constantly talking about this idea of 'raising narrative flags.' I thought that was such a beautiful metaphor for how little sculptural *punctums* might work in an installation. I was interested in an experience of dissonance where you are not entirely sure what the legible situation of the novel might be. I lose interest when too many flags are raised because you opt out of signalling a more scenic route for your audience, or for your reader. And I feel like the delivery is somehow softer in a sense. Both with writing and with art making, I'm interested in this condition of a diagrammatic clarity being wilted by a state of collage or entering from formal certainty to a coagulated soup of potential meaning. You define the parameters but within that there's so much room to force things to cohabit; a stylistic orgy of information can be incredibly generative for new ideas, for new concepts. With art making, I always have a very distinct plan, but when I'm writing, if I'm not writing a text for an artist or a more essayistic text, I have no idea where it's going. The plan is so ill-defined, and often by virtue



of literally putting things next to one another, forcing them to stack up and sit down, it's like a jumping point for a new rhythm, a new kind of cohabitation of images and ideas that eventually leads somewhere else.

*The Boiled in Between* was never intended as a novel. It just kind of all dragged on and I didn't know how to move it or to finish it. It simply became longer and longer and longer. It was only finally when the Messrs were introduced as the external third character that the book actually began to take a more defined shape. It became something more analytical and more architectural because the space for characters to literally move, dictated by the narrative chord struck by the Messrs, was finally in place.

**I have this image of you with all your ideas and references floating around in your head and then coming out onto the page. Then the Messrs coming in later and being the editors like, "this is what's going on and this is the structure of all the characters."**

Yeah, it's almost like the Messrs were my first reader and they were telling me off as a mechanism to mobilise everything else - tautology or a self-reflexive critique that created kinetic friction..

**Have you always been into reading and writing? Was that something that you've been doing since you were younger?**

I was such a book nerd when I was a kid. I always loved books and I always loved audiobooks. I couldn't fall asleep as a child without an audiobook. I had cassette tapes and I would put

on a cassette tape every night and the click of it finishing would wake me up, and I'd flip the tape and begin again. I started writing more prolifically when I was a student and I founded a funny little journal with a few friends that never really went anywhere - *Van Gogh* it was eventually called - but we interviewed artists via telephone from the administration office and all wrote these horrible theoretical texts. Then for the last 10 or so years, I've been writing essays or texts for catalogues on other artists' work, on concepts that interest me. The impulse to write the novel was kind of accidental. 2016 was such a visible year and I was frustrated and I just thought, 'if there's ever going to be a moment to not be in the studio it's now.' It was the beginning of 2017 and I sat down at home in my pyjamas and didn't leave for almost a year. It was so much fun, so exhilarating and so rewarding beginning all of these intense dialogues with new people who were outside of the art world. I was so dedicated to the

**"I love the idea of staggering forwards or moving forwards through error."**

idea that it wouldn't be just an artistic vanity project facilitated by an exhibition or a gallery, but something external.. Whilst I was writing it, I was also writing love letters to authors that I liked, and many of them wrote back. I'm still in touch, as *pen pals*, with various people I so seriously admire, and think, 'how on earth did this happen?' It totally expanded my

notion of dialogue. How a critique could happen magically from afar. Being in the studio is often quite a silent experience and you pursue all of these mental dialogues with yourself and ultimately it can become dangerous because you're an enclosed creator of all these different systems or sets of ideas. Ultimately they don't get shared in a way that feels meaningful because you've gone so far with having that hermetic dialogue with yourself that any critique from an external source feels like it's missed the point.

**Do you have a daily writing practice outside of your professional practice?**

Not really. I have to sit down and know that I'm doing it. I take many notes all the time, but I don't do morning pages or a diary or anything like that. I just write when I feel like it. At the minute, I've been constantly writing texts for other artists. I've just finished a script for a new video and I'm working on two books and I don't know where they'll go yet. One's a collection of non-fiction and the other one is a new novel, but I'm not taking time out from the studio this time. So it's a complex balance of putting on a different hat every time you sit down with yourself and a new conversation, knowing that engagement every time is very different. Sometimes I find writing utterly exhausting and other times it just rushes out and I can never predict how or why or when that happens. Writing *The Boiled in Between* was a fountain, it just didn't stop. I think that was because I'd literally carved out a space of silence from other responsibilities. So this is different, but it's nice because the exchange with my own more objective overview of it is longer, so I can spend more time with it

and it's very easy to see what isn't working.

**Who were some of these writers that you wrote love letters to and that you continue to be pen pals with?**

One was Elfriede Jelinek. She has an amazing website, an old style blogspot that has much of her writing on it. A lot of it is in German, but it also features some incredible photographs of her and her collection of stuffed monkeys. I'm such a diehard fan of her writing: I think she's a genius. It's brutal and beautiful and hilarious. I just wrote to her and she wrote back. I've sent packages and vice versa. She eventually wrote a blurb for *The Boiled in Between*, which was the greatest gift ever. The other writer is Helen Dewitt who also wrote a blurb for *The Boiled in Between*. I also think she's a monumental brain. All the women wrote back. None of the men wrote back!

**Sounds about right. Would you say that those were your literary influences for *The Boiled in Between*?**

Oh no, when I was starting *The Boiled in Between*, I was revisiting the collective essays of Montaigne - maybe this is where the voice of the Messrs came from. This idea of life as philosophy and philosophy as life. Again, virtues of living that would mandate a social order or an ethos of happiness that was innocent and sort of providential. For a book written, what was it late-1500s? It's so radical and I think there's so little that comes close to it in terms of the gymnastic ability to pull, different and fragmented ideas together alongside social structures, politics, religion, sexuality and other complex philosophical ideals. So I was reading that and

stealing so much. I was also reading a lot of nasty literature.

**(LAUGHS) Like? Or depressing literature**

**"We don't move forwards cleanly or smoothly often, sometimes we crawl, other times we don't get out of bed. Or we fall over and are sick of ourselves. Other times we dash along, we don't notice a thing."**

like *The Sky Changes* by Gilbert Sorrentino, which is an exquisite book, but it's so depressing. Or Karl Kraus's *The Last Days of Mankind*, Pessoa's *Book of Disquiet*, lots of poetry. I have a terrible habit of reading so many things at the same time, so I'm surrounded by piles because I think if I too quickly banish something to a bookshelf, it's declared as read, and I become anxious I've missed something. So I'm surrounded. I have many piles of unfinished things; it's both very liberating and very stressful.

**I'm the same. Then I buy loads more books and make a pile of the ones that I'm going to read. Then I end up buying more. I work in a bookshop as well, so when a new book comes in, I'll start reading it. I end up reading 11 books at once and it becomes very confusing.**

**(LAUGHS)** The thing I find frustrating about book organisation is how to split them between my home and studio. If I'm in the studio and I want to look up something from a book of poetry or a theory book, then they're all at home. My dream is to have a great big library space, but I'd need a lot of space.

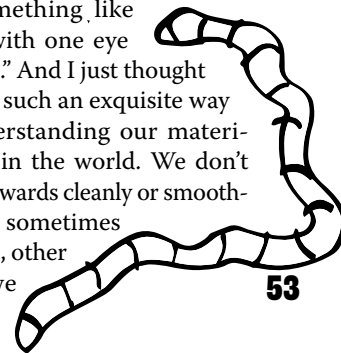
**I get very distracted having books in the studio.**

Yeah.

**It's interesting you say that about the poetry, because I felt like there were kind of poetic influences in the book. It almost reads like an extended poem. I was going to ask you about the writing process in relation to that, but I feel like you've explained it, it was not necessarily a stream of consciousness, but without a plan.**

I was adamant that it was absolutely not a poem. I was certain it was a novel, but it's absolutely not something linear. It has a structural analytical sense, but it's fragmented and equally elliptical. It's deliberately diffuse with mystery. It does have the same insistence on identifying and understanding the world around us as my sculptural work does, whether that's metaphor or symbolism but it doesn't have a physical need for continuity. I love the idea of staggering forwards or moving forwards through error. Someone like Rosemary Waldrop said something like

"living with one eye on dying." And I just thought that was such an exquisite way for understanding our material place in the world. We don't move forwards cleanly or smoothly often, sometimes we crawl, other times we





the cohabitation of a mayonnaise pot and a yoghurt pot against a piece of cardboard a thrilling prism of space to learn from or indulge in. Ultimately the most delightful constellation of meaning or philosophy is nestled in the most prosaic flints of a day. The characters find true poetics in very dull things and that's where the title came from - from the duality of the words: how the adjective is affected by the verb and vice versa. . So *boiling the in between* or imagining that what exists *in between* is *boiled*: is an odd state of a substance transformation, like eggs. I love eggs. I love the idea of an egg, love the symbolism of an egg, that you have a perfectly contained shell structure that holds something liquid, proffers the experience of life, but also, you know, drop it into hot water and it undergoes a literal chemical transformation and becomes solid. What mystery! That state of continual flexible possibility is something magical, and I'd hope the joy of that is very much present in *The Boiled in Between*. The story is told through acts of material and emotional persistence.

**What about the kind of physical aspect of the book? I always think about how people say you shouldn't judge a book by its cover, but we all do.**

You absolutely should judge a book by its cover!

**Yeah, exactly. Especially as visual people, I feel like the actual physicality and the product of the book is so important to it. I wanted to know how much involvement you had with the actual design of your books?**

With all the books I make for my art practice, I often work on the design myself. I love graph-

ic design, typography; I find it so fun, so interesting. With *The Boiled in Between*, I was so lucky because the graphic designer was the partner of my agent, so we were closely intertwined. He is a fabulous graphic designer and we share very similar formal inclinations. I think book design is important and so gratifying if both the content and the visual experience of handling it is an excellent one. There's an amazing magazine called *Caterpillar*, founded by Clayton Eshleman, started in the sixties and it's absolutely incredible. It's very beautiful, typographically experimental and so varied in its experience of looking at literature. It's a very alive object and it undergoes radical transformations from issue to issue. It's full of language experiments that are replicated by odd formal rhythms on the page. It's just such a nice object to handle. Whereas in contemporary publishing, I feel like there are so many utterly hideous books, even by writers that I admire or books that contain things I love. Often you see a respectable imprint and it's like, who let that out? **(LAUGHS)** who did it?!

**Yeah, it's funny. The design of a book has such a big impact on the communication of the book's message and content. I think people underestimate that so greatly. I'm a total book design nerd, so maybe that is just something that I think about lots. What are you reading at the moment?**

I've been moving through my piles. I've got quite a few things I'm reading. My bedside table is a disaster zone. It was my birthday two days ago, so I got a bunch of books from friends. One is a book called *Days* by Eva Figes. Another is the *Ubu Roi* by Alfred Jarry,

which is such an amazing looking book. Beautiful. But it's convoluted and hinged on a slightly surrealist and very manic attitude to the world. I'm obsessed with rats. So I'm reading a lot about rats because my new work is predicated deep down on the idea that

**"I'm a glutton for gruesome and dark literature."**

we're all rats, that they are a model, in terms of their permeation of the world, for how we live within the metrics of a unit of currency. How the rat becomes that: a unit of currency. I've stolen that idea of currency from the Polish writer Witold Gombrowicz, from a book called *Bacacay*. There's a brutal short story in that book about rats, about one peasant criminal in the countryside who's terrorising everyone: drunk, murderous, rapacious. He's eventually captured by a juror who puts him into a personal prison in his own home, and he can't figure out how to tame his violence. Suddenly a rat infiltrates the cell by accident and the prisoner is completely, diabolically terrified; pathologically afraid of this rat. He loses his voice. He is tormented by the idea that the rat will enter his orifices and pollute him. Rats completely mutate his personality. It's such a simple story and it's full of weird vindictive morality, but it's brilliant. I've also been reading *The Rat* by Gunther Grass and some other sort of more biological books about rat behaviour.

Nice.

I'm also reading an amazing book by the French theorist Roger Caillois. It's called *Man, Play and Games*. It's about how contem-

porary familial and social relationships could be described as a systematic set of games, and how games of all kinds are performed both for pleasure, but also for violence. It's really extraordinary. In fact it's kind of blowing my mind. I'm a glutton for gruesome and dark literature.

**Yeah, I mean that's great. I loved gruesome and dark literature. Are you familiar with Kathy Acker? For Christmas I got this new Kathy Acker book *Get Rid of Meaning*, it's been annotated by all these different art writers and critics and artists that were around her at the same time that she was writing. I can't wait to get into that.**

Who published it?

**Konig. I haven't had a proper look yet. It's got McKenzie Wark, Eleanor Antin, David Antin, Paul Buck. Just so many amazing people.**

Sounds awesome.

**Yeah, I'm really excited. And then I got a Martine Syms book as well, so I'm in for a treat.**

Which bookshop do you work in?

**Donlon books on Broadway market.**

Oh, near my studio. I'm literally on the canal by Broadway market. Pop down for a cup of tea in the studio.

**I would love to come and look at your books.**

Yeah, totally.

**Yeah. Nerd out on the books.**

Throw all the ugly books in the canal.



don't get out of bed. Or we fall over and are sick of ourselves. Other times we dash along, we don't notice a thing. I only found that quote recently, so it certainly wasn't there when I was writing *The Boiled in Between*. But it's a nice metaphor for how these characters behave, because they are despicable as people. You don't want to hang out with them, you barely want to read about them, but there's something compelling about the obstacles that they face and how they can find

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