

INSTITUTE OF CONTEMPORARY ARTS

TANOA SASRAKU MORALE PATCH



7 October 2025 – 11 January 2026

Morale Patch is a solo exhibition by Tanoa Sasraku (b. 1995, Plymouth; based in Glasgow) featuring all-new works on paper, found objects, and sculpture. Emblems and mementos related to the oil industry are mined for the complexity of their context: as subject and medium they speak to corporate power, national pride, the cultural economy, and the place of the individual therein.

Sasraku has developed a deliberate, research-led practice grounded in the properties of materials and a process-based approach to making. Her earlier work used foraged pigments from the UK and Ghana to hold and transmit complex stories of land, nationhood and identity. With this new commission she expands her approach to the narrative capacity of material.

She foraged – this time online – for crude oil, assembling a collection of corporate paperweights, each encasing a vial of that primordial substance. Arranged on velvet-lined trays resembling a chessboard, they chart a global history of extraction, military violence, and the geopolitical machinery driven by the fetishisation of a finite and vanishing resource.

Another series of works on paper addresses military emblems affiliated with oil-motivated campaigns. Printed using only UV light and blank newsprint, they will continue to fade as the exhibition is on view. A monumental work on paper, *Allomother*, strips the American flag of stars and drains it of colour, straining the enduring authority of that iconic form. In the back gallery, newly fabricated paperweights incorporating Scottish and American flags deliberate on the intersection of national glory, capitalist industry, and human cost.

Sasraku's work operates across multiple parallel and conflicting registers – symbolic, material, political, emotional, and cultural – and they don't always align. The viewer is invited to take a position, or accept the lack of a singular picture. In a moment shaped by resource crises and global conflict, Sasraku interrogates these everyday relics of empire, exposing how they communicate, how they enlist the individual in broader ideologies of power, and how we might begin to disarm them.

MAIN GALLERY

1 *Watchlist, 2025*

**32 found acrylic paperweights encasing crude oil,
Italian velvet-lined lacquered wood**

In the centre of the main gallery is *Watchlist*, a strange, chess-like game suspended in an unknown state of play. Taking the role of game pieces are acrylic paperweights produced by global oil companies, each containing an internal capsule of crude oil. Each bears the company's logo and an inscription marking the place and date of the oil's extraction, sometimes embellished with representative details: artificial sand dunes, bright blue seas, oil derricks and rigs.

Commonly produced by oil companies, these corporate commemoratives are manufactured to mark momentous events: discoveries of oil, record-breaking yields. Over the past year, Sasraku has sourced them from online auctions and second-hand sellers, assembling a collection of corporate relics. Colloquially, they are known as 'tombstones', a term drawn from their use as gifts to retiring employees. Once destined for executive desks and home mantels, here they become tokens of a larger order: the fetishisation of a dwindling resource and the world built around it, propped up by the powers that thrive on its extraction.

Manufactured by acrylic companies that typically produce trinkets, awards and trophies, the material of these objects is itself a petrochemical product. These paperweights don't just contain oil – their very materiality belongs to the petroleum economy; acrylic is oil in another form. The chessboard is composed of individual velvet-lined display trays originally intended to present fine jewellery. Sasraku has tiled them into a gridded landscape, their colours (tan, white, light blue and black) mimicking the terrains of primary oil extraction sites (the sand, the snow, the sea) and the oil no longer contained by those environments. These geographies are echoed in the paperweights' inscriptions: 'Texas Gold', 'Alaskan Oil', 'North Sea Oil'.

Through their placement on the velvet trays, they speak the language of luxury. Oil – glossy, golden, viscous – has a sensory pull. The paperweights highlight its precious allure: inky hourglasses, wanting to be held and turned. One, marked ‘light crude oil’, contains a large teardrop of Saudi oil – an ostentatious display of the wealth commanded by the world’s top exporter. At a glance, the ‘Texas Gold’ droplet could be high-end jewellery. Others take the shape of diamonds, with gilded lettering evoking imperial grandeur. One, marked ‘Enterprise Oil’, equates a vial of oil extracted from Nelson Field in the UK sector of the North Sea with London’s Nelson’s Column, forging a direct link between resource extraction and national pride.

The period of their production (most originate from the 1970s to the 1990s, with some outliers from the early 2010s) was a time defined by global conflict over oil as a strategic resource. These decades saw the Iran-Iraq War, the Gulf War, the US-led invasion of Iraq, and NATO’s intervention in Libya – all shaped by struggles over access to and control of oil. The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan brought Cold War tensions close to the oil-rich Persian Gulf, while British involvement in the Gulf and, later, in Iraq reflected the persistent alignment of military force with energy interests.

These corporate mementoes, with their garish containment of the economy of extraction, were made to project power, success and technological mastery. Reconfigured here as artefacts of empire, they become pointed encapsulations of the volatility and violence that underpin the geopolitical landscape from which they emerged.

Sasraku’s arrangement of these trophy-like objects within the context of a strategic game reads like an attempt to map oil’s central role in shaping global alliances – coursing beneath the machinery of empire as it courses beneath the earth. But no real map emerges, no alliances are made legible. Instead, these meanings remain suspended in *Watchlist*’s dense material and referential complexity.

2 *Subdued Morale Patch, 2025*

Series of six works, respectively subtitled: *War on Terror, Medal of Honor, Cold War, Desert Shield, Prisoner of War, and Enduring Freedom*.

Newsprint, UV printed using a sun bed, binder clips, studio water, rust

Lining the main gallery walls is a series of six works on paper based on military service ribbons – the rectangular decoration worn on the uniform in place of full-sized medals to signify particular honours, achievements, or participation in campaigns or tours of duty. In Sasraku's rendering, these codified bands of colour are reinterpreted and amplified at a striking scale.

Thick stacks of blank newspaper stock, held together with coloured binder clips, form the works' foundation. Onto them, Sasraku has projected the ribbon's design through a photogram-like process, using digitally printed acetate negatives and the UV light of a tanning bed. The exposure imprints muted bands of light into the paper's surface, which, when soaked in water to set the image, leaves the surface warped and rippled as if a fabric curtain. The binder clips around the edge of the sculpture repeat the colourful pattern of the referenced service ribbon, while the centre remains drained of colour.

Each composition reflects the design of a specific ribbon. *Subdued Morale Patch [War on Terror]* takes its design from the Global War on Terrorism Expeditionary Medal* awarded by the United States Department of Defence, distinguished by two conspicuous 'twin tower' stripes. *Subdued Morale Patch [Desert Shield]* mimics the Gulf War's Kuwait Liberation Medal,** which is itself derived from the national flag of Kuwait. The original ribbons are unsettling in their distillation of complex and often devastating histories into condensed, decorative forms. The materials Sasraku uses in these works – newsprint, binder clips – evoke the administrative bureaucracy that underpins military

operations: the paperwork, the record-keeping – the apparatus of war’s daily execution.

The title of the series – *Subdued Morale Patch* – refers to unofficial military insignias worn to boost a soldier’s morale: a way to lift spirits amid grim duties or to offer comfort in the form of shared justifications. Often rendered in muted tones to blend with camouflage, these patches serve as redemptive reminders a soldier can carry anywhere. With these works, then, Sasraku subjects the bold colours of the service ribbons to the same dulling transformation, into a ‘subdued morale patch’, suggesting a similar gesture towards false comfort.

In Sasraku’s rendering, on paper printed with fugitive UV light, these symbols will literally fade over time. By design and materiality, they reflect the faded ideals and aesthetics of power. In this act of translation, the artist holds these loaded military emblems up to the light, revealing their fragility, artifice, and deep insufficiency.



* Ribbon from the Global War on Terrorism Expeditionary Medal



** Ribbon from the Kuwait Liberation Medal

3 *Allomother*, 2025

Newsprint, UV printed using a sun bed, binder clips, studio water, rust

Allomother is the largest of the newsprint works, created using the same UV printing process as the *Subdued Morale Patch* series. It is composed of two horizontal halves that reference the pattern of the American flag.

As a symbol, the flag is as capacious as it is contentious. It immediately establishes a relationship: one's reading of it depends on proximity to, or distance from, the national culture it represents at a particular time and place. For Sasraku, a British artist who grew up devouring American popular culture, the flag once evoked liberty, fantasy and cultural authority. From her recent vantage – adulthood, the changing role of the US on the world stage, a heightened awareness of Oval Office vitriol – it has come to mean something else. And yet it remains open to contradiction. It is a contested emblem, requisitioned by opposing sides of the political spectrum to assert justice, inclusion, exclusion or nationalism. It resists being fully claimed by any one regime.

In *Allomother*, the flag is pared down to its essentials but remains legible. Its stars are absent – either faded or never printed. (Elsewhere in the exhibition, they reappear.) By reproducing this iconic design, Sasraku joins a long line of artists engaging with the flag's visual and symbolic form explored since Jasper Johns' formative deployment of the flag as both image and object. The title, *Allomother*, comes from anthropology and biology: it describes a maternal figure who is not a biological mother. It suggests a surrogate force – nurturing, modelling, or protective. Sasraku's flag is drained of colour and materially fragile. The paper is crinkled and brittle from the printing process; the stripes are faint and tentative, actively fading. Though large in scale, the image is halved, a result of working within the fixed dimensions of the newsprint. We are reminded that the meaning of the flag, like all symbols, depends entirely on how and when it appears.

BACK GALLERY

4 *Shell (I) and Shell (II), 2025*

Ten custom screen-printed acrylic paperweights encasing iron gall registrar's ink

A new two-part sculptural installation in the back gallery continues Sasraku's exploration of oil and nationalism. It features ten custom acrylic paperweights the artist designed, modelling them after the found objects in *Watchlist*. Like their counterparts, they replicate familiar oil extraction landscapes: undulating golden sands and wavy seas. Unlike the originals, which often note geographic locations with text or maps, these make the national stakes explicit with a screen-printed overlay of two flags. A crisp American Stars and Stripes covers the desert landscape paperweight, while Scotland's diagonal St. Andrew's Cross tops the seascape. The overlaid flags and rectangular shapes immediately evoke the coffins of fallen soldiers returning home.

The title, like much of Sasraku's work, usefully equivocates. We might take 'shell' to mean a bullet casing, a soldier fallen in an oil-motivated war, or the coffin shape itself. 'Shell' may also point to Shell, the British multinational oil and gas company, one of many with active drilling operations in the Scottish North Sea. Even the seashell feels like a happy stretch, a nod to origin and erosion. At the same time, a shell can be understood as a hollow form – a polished exterior that conceals absence, or a justification emptied of meaning but maintained for appearances.

The American paperweights form two orderly rows on an army-green surface, evoking a military ceremony. In contrast, the Scottish weights are spaced in a haphazard array on a navy ground, in the loose configuration of ships, or offshore rigs, at sea. The ocean setting recalls the North Sea oil boom that began in the 1970s, where workers still face demanding and hazardous conditions on active rigs. The use of the Saltire instead of the Union Jack, combined with the coffin-like forms, could highlight the unequal distribution of costs and profits from the

boom – something many argue favoured Westminster over Scotland. Oil is variously invoked in the American paperweights as well, with the sandscape pointing to the desert oil fields common in Texas, likewise, oil as a motivator for the American penchant for waging war on foreign soil.

In the ICA's back gallery, the paperweights are displayed on green and blue wool-lined tables, resembling military terrain models or wargaming tables. Their scale, similar to that of Action Man figures, feels playful. Unlike the found paperweights in *Watchlist*, which contain crude oil, these new weights include slender vials filled with iron gall ink. Iron gall ink has been used in Europe since the Middle Ages to sign important documents such as the Magna Carta and official records like birth and death certificates. This ink serves as a practical substitute for crude oil in the found paperweights, a materialisation of life and death much easier to procure by an individual. Sasraku designed the weights and had them made by Midton Acrylics, a Highland factory that produces oil-paperweight 'tombstones' for oil companies.

As a whole, the objects that comprise *Shell (I)* and *Shell (II)* operate on multiple functional and symbolic levels: as weights or game pieces, as metonyms for the bodies of soldiers or workers, and as representations of national emblems and material artefacts. Together, they continue Sasraku's ongoing exploration of how mementoes can hold and express the layered emotional, economic and political realities of resource extraction – realities that shape both individual experience and collective identity.

ARTIST BIOGRAPHY

Tanoa Sasraku (b. 1995, Plymouth; based in Glasgow) works across sculpture, printmaking, drawing, textiles, installation and filmmaking. Her hybrid practice is rooted in the material and symbolic properties of land via landscapes, pigments and minerals, and informed by a personal relationship to textiles and pattern-making. Research plays a significant role in Sasraku's work, in which she draws on personal histories of family and place and extends her inquiries into historical and geological investigations, culling from individual, mythological, and collective narratives. Past projects have seen her forage for million-year-old pigments across the UK and in Ghana, her paternal homeland. Sasraku studied at Goldsmiths, University of London (BA, 2018) and the Royal Academy Schools (Postgraduate, 2024). Her process-driven approach combines traditional art-making techniques, such as printmaking, with skills from outside the fine art context, including sewing and garment construction. She often allows the materials to guide the direction of the work, resulting in outcomes that resist fixed interpretation and continue to evolve. She has held solo exhibitions at Vardaxoglou and Peer in London, and at Spike Island in Bristol. Her moving image works have been shown at the 18th London Short Film Festival and Berwick Film and Media Arts Festival, and her work is held in several public collections, including the Arts Council Collection and the Government Art Collection.

EVENTS PROGRAMME

Monday for Members: Curatorial Tour

Monday 13 October, 6:30pm, Lower Gallery

Artist's Film Picks: There Will Be Blood

Wednesday 22 October, 6:30pm, Cinema 2

Tanoa Sasraku in conversation with Rosalind Nashashibi

Tuesday 4 November, 6:45pm, Cinema 1

Artist's Film Picks: Fahrenheit 9/11

Wednesday 19 November, 6:30pm, Cinema 2

Morale Patch Reading Group with Ishy Pryce-Parchment

Thursday 20 November, 7pm, Studio

Book Launch: *Morale Patch* + Q&A

Wednesday 26 November, 6:45pm, Cinema 1

Artist's Film Picks: Lessons of Darkness

Wednesday 10 December, 6:30pm, Cinema 2

Artist's Film Picks: Jarhead

Wednesday 7 January 2026, 6:30pm, Cinema 2

With thanks to Vardaxoglou Gallery, ICA Patrons and supporters.

Cover: Tanoa Sasraku, *Watchlist* [detail], 2025. 32 found acrylic paperweights encasing crude oil, Italian velvet-lined lacquered wood.
Photo: Jack Elliot Edwards. Courtesy the artist.

