

Among the flotsam, jetsam, lagan and derelict – Lucy Jackson



Flotsam: the wreckage of a ship or its cargo found floating on or washed up by the sea

Jetsam: unwanted material or goods that have been thrown overboard from a ship and washed ashore, especially material that has been discarded to lighten the vessel

Lagan: (in legal contexts) goods or wreckage lying on the bed of the sea

Derelict: goods that have sunk to the ocean floor, relinquished willingly or forcefully by its owner, and thus abandoned, but which no one has any hope of reclaiming

My fears are full of contradictions. I love the sea, but I'm afraid of ships. I know going to the doctors for a checkup is preventative, but I faint at the sight of blood and medical waiting rooms make me queasy. Standing in Mark Schroder's exhibition 'it's only a scratch' was the worst combination of these two fears. It made me feel like I was waiting to have blood drawn on a sinking ship. Or perhaps the ship was already sunk. Maybe I was part of the flotsam or jetsam,

with the debris of the failure floating around me. Both the unintentional debris and the stuff discarded on purpose in an effort to keep the boat afloat. *It's only a scratch* nods to another fear many must have deep down - investing in something that will just sink to the bottom of the sea floor, derelict. Schroder's exhibition explores what happens to start ups, from the optimistic aspirations through to the disappointments when efforts are lost to keep it afloat. *It's only a scratch* probed deep into my fears, but that is why I found it effective. Art doesn't need to make you feel good. It's only a scratch, it won't hurt. The clue is in the title, what we are about to experience in Schroder's exhibition is the 'scratch' for some, and the much larger consequence for others.

Entering play_station you come across the first of three 'zones'. This area is a green, somewhere between swamp green and a fresh lime. It is the reception area and the waiting room complete with modernised and sanitised furniture, carpet squares and motivational posters. The ephemera state mottos such as 'detect, prevent' and 'we treat you like a guest, not a number'. The posters aim to personalise our visit, putting us at ease that it's only a scratch. Porthole-like windows in the separators nod to the feeling of being on a ship. Brochures are made available for you to take home. Meticulously designed, they state the client and product privileges of being a *Be Well* member, discussing the technology of their services and above all promoting their brand and the benefits of the wellness centre in order to "Be Well". I choose not to take any, I know in the past this has led to my fear increasing. Sometimes you'd rather not know. Innocence can be bliss.

- Zone One is confident in its premise and promise. Schroder references *Theranos*, a blood test startup from 2004 which started out in a basement in California before moving to plush digs. *Theranos* promised blood tests that required only 1/100 to 1/1000 of traditional blood tests to provide the same results. It was estimated at a value of \$9 billion by 2014 after raising \$400 million in funding.

Walking from Zone One's clean, pristine, hospital-like clinical qualities into Zone Two offers a complete contrast. Dirt crunches under my feet as I walk around, music starts playing on my entry, and litter is scattered everywhere across the room, including soiled postcards. They show images of a bar with people frequenting it, and images of the bar, seemingly underwater. They are mysterious. The walls of the room are painted to halfway in brown with the brushstrokes obvious - emulating a dado, the lower part of the wall under a skirting board. On one wall is the number '38' in the same way numbers are marked in a port. In the centre of the room there is a large table, covered in dirt. Above it hangs a fluorescent yellow light and yellow electrical cord from the ceiling, twining around the table legs. It makes me think of jaundice. The table holds empty coffee cups, a number 8 ball, darts, and a spinning circle - a roulette board. Around the

room there are more posters, this time aimed not at the client but at the investor - 'Risk it all'. Another poster states 'it's only a splash'. Zone Two in fact is a retired conference room, used to inspire investors in the start-ups wants and wishes. "Take a gamble on us" it whispers. 'A splash' promises to be just a small part of one investors mountain of funds. It promises us everything. There are water marks on the walls - the tide is starting to take over. The gamble does not pay off, it has been exposed as a risk without return. All that is left is empty coffee cups and business cards for crisis management consultants.

- *Theranos* was exposed as a sham in 2015 when investigative journalist John Carreyrou of The Wall Street Journal enquired into the technology. The results? Its blood test technology was misleading and possibly inaccurate. Financial projections never proved true either. The repercussions were a string of enquiries by medical, legal and financial authorities into the business. The Founder of *Theranos*, Elizabeth Holmes, went from being Forbes "youngest and wealthiest self-made female billionaire in America" to one of the "World's most disappointing leaders". By 2016, Holmes' net worth went from \$9 billion USD to nothing. And what has happened to the investors? For some, the money lost is only a scratch, for others I'm sure it is much more.

Zone Three speaks of an attempted rejuvenation. A semi-completed structure sits as a pool fence in the space, with some outer layers nailed on, others just chain link. Blue tarps hang behind the structure, nodding to both the materiality of them (tarps often being used for building projects), and the blues emulating the ocean (some are printed with dappling waves on them). In the middle of the structure is a pile of rubble - or is it the flotsam and jetsam? There are stones - my mind jumps to images of stones being used to weigh things or people down in the ocean, they are literal sinkers -, a flat sports ball (was this all just a game?), there's cleaning supplies such as a Chux cloth (an effort to clean things up), and a model ship, on its side, wrecked.

- Attempts were made by *Theranos* to rebuild itself and cover costs from 2015 onwards. Nearing bankruptcy in 2017, *Theranos* received a \$100 million USD loan from the Fortress Investment Group in an attempt to revive the business. The conditions were mortgaging all of *Theranos*' assets to the Group in return for the loan. Another condition was to finally produce the audited financial statements of *Theranos*. By 2018, *Theranos* key people, including Holmes, were being sued for fraud, alleging they had "defrauded investors out of hundreds of millions of dollars and also defrauded doctors and patients"¹. *Theranos* was also back to bankruptcy. In September, *Theranos* turned over ownership to

¹ <https://www.marketwatch.com/story/the-last-days-of-theranos-the-financials-were-as-overhyped-as-the-blood-tests-2018-10-16>

Fortress Investment Group, leaving \$5 million USD for distribution to unsecured creditors, a simpler solution to bankruptcy proceedings for Fortress.

- The shipwreck is in fact a reference to the *Mikhail Lermontov*, a Russian cruise liner that sank in the Marlborough Sounds in February 1986. Captain Jamison made the decision to take a shortcut between Cape Jackson and the Cape Jackson lighthouse, resulting in the ship hitting rocks 5.5m under the ocean surface. The grungy postcards on the floor in Zone Two turn out to be the 'before' and 'after' images of the ship. Humorously, the 'before' photo has the words 'On the Rocks' superimposed on it. The artist writes that the *Mikhail Lermontov* is an example of "too much trust placed in one (over-confident) individual." It is a lesson to us all about cutting corners.

I turn around after inspecting the attempt of rejuvenation, which I suspect has been abandoned like goods from a ship. The sham of the startup is exposed as I walk back through Zone Two and Zone One. I was right to find the green colour sickly. In the small yellow room right at the start/end of play_station sits an aquarium startup kit. Is it warning us to start smaller next time, to try raising a few goldfish before moving on to sharks?

- *Theranos* might be 'done', but its 'legacy' lives on. Carreyrou published his book *Bad Blood: Secrets and Lies in a Silicon Valley Startup* about the company in May 2018. Furthermore, Jennifer Lawrence will star as Elizabeth Holmes in a film of the *Theranos* story.

Beyond the connotations to *Theranos* and startups in general, it also has me thinking about the litter left behind. Zones Two and Three expose the abandoned material (the flotsam, the jetsam, the lagan and the derelict) after this catastrophe. Regardless of the litter of the startup, the exhibition almost points the finger, at us. We might think our bit of rubbish is just a scratch on the big surface and therefore it doesn't matter. But of course, it does – especially as an island nation. Just as *Theranos* might have believed an investment was 'just a splash', it is all part of a bigger picture.

The space doesn't feel like it's exclusive to one crowd or audience. The beauty in Schroder's exhibition is that anyone can walk in and have an experience. The transformation of play_station's space does away with the concrete-bunker like facility it's working with, and subtracts the white walls and air of an exclusive art group mentality. *It's only a scratch* allows the visitor to participate by just standing. We can walk over the crunchy floor of sand, dirt and around the debris. The effect is almost of a haunted house, but nothing supernatural is going on

here. It is all due to human disaster. We are unsettled - something is not quite right perhaps - but we are also intrigued. Without knowing about *Theranos* or the reference to the *Mikhail Lemontov*, my first reading was related to climate change, littering our seas with trash, and big corporate global oil organisations. The gallery takes on a different identity, one that takes the visitor on a real journey. Clearly the artist is appealing to our senses, but this is not done in a way to attain ‘entertainment’ or ‘shock’ value. Instead it is smart and considered – Schroder gets me thinking, and keeps me thinking.

Choosing to think positively after experiencing an exhibition that really does leave me humbled and intrigued, I make the parallel of a startup to the artist run space and the artist. *Play_station* is located in a basement as *Theranos* originally was, but I’d hope the literal similarities stop there. The Artist Run Initiative has been open for just over two years and has shown a myriad of exhibitions by contemporary artists. They require donations in order to keep them afloat, but they are not for profit. They are for art’s sake, not money’s. They, like the artist, are at the start of their journey. So does the phrase ‘it’s only a scratch’ also point to the tip of more to come? More exhibitions by both the space and Schroder in the future?

It’s only a scratch makes us wonder about the politics of startup companies, their longevity, perhaps the parallel to the artist run initiative, the gambles that are taken by whom and who they affect. So Schroder’s exhibition really only leaves us with one question; is it only a scratch? I think absolutely not. When the nurse takes our blood and consoles us “you’ll just feel a tiny scratch” we know they’re hiding the reality that we could feel much more.

Lucy Jackson