

arts

'It's such good snooping': the art of the to-do list

An exhibition by the artist Alice Instone offers a peek into the day-to-day lives of Cherie Blair, Emma Freud and Shami Chakrabarti in their own words, reports Nancy Durrant

Secret Santa. Dettol. Get teeth cleaned. Photograph porno calendar. Gerhard Richter. Yoga. Thank-you letters. Pulsating corpse pile. Melinda Gates. Nails. Apples. Re-read counter-terror bill. Ring National Trust — trees? Squirrels?

This is not a new and fiendish puzzle set by the Times quizmasters, but a selection of items from the to-do lists of notable women. They include the designer and actress Sadie Frost, the artist Fiona Banner, the art collector Anita Zabludovitch, the novelist Emma Freud, the photographer Amanda Eliasch, the former director of Liberty Shami Chakrabarti, the choreographer Lynne Page and Sam Taylor, the editor of *The Lady*. Good luck if you can guess which item is from whom.

They come from a stash assembled by the artist Alice Instone, 40, who was inspired to investigate the to-do lists of women when, while juggling her painting and the care of her two small children, Bee and Arlo, she became frustrated by her inability to get anything done. "I was trying to make work and thinking about the

next project and feeling quite frustrated," she remembers over a cup of coffee in a child-free café in King's Cross, a train ride from the Kent farmhouse where she lives with her husband, Hugh, a financial adviser.

"People would often say, 'Has your work changed, having children?' And I'd say, 'No, not at all, carry on, just the same' and finally I had to admit, OK, I've lost the plot now. I write to-do lists and I flippantly thought, that's where all the time has gone, into my to-do lists — I should exhibit my to-do lists. Then I started talking to other women and realised they're all obsessed with their to-do lists."

Instone decided to use her lists as the basis of a new body of work, which goes on display in London next week alongside lists donated by other women. To make her large-scale giclee prints, Instone scanned her scribbles, blurring them up and layering them to create blocks of jumbled words infused with glitter.

Alongside the other lists, which will be displayed on furniture from Instone's home, and a room of washing lines on which Instone hopes visitors will peg their own to-do lists, they give a vivid sense of the constant domestic noise that most women live

with every day. "As I laid out these lists it was like they were screaming at me," Instone says. "File me, do me! They're really noisy."

One fascination about these little scraps of paper is that "it's such good snooping". There is indeed something delicious about finding that Emma Freud needs to ring the "fireball man", while also speaking to her son Spike about teacher meetings; or about deciphering Shami Chakrabarti's scrawl to discover that she needs to sort out the leaves in her front drive. I'd love to know what the interior designer Jo Berryman is going to do with that "27K", though I'm chilled, if not surprised, to find that Cherie Blair keeps all her to-do lists in her head. Brrrr.

But they're more than just sneaky peeks through the front window of the famous, as Instone points out. She finds them rather beautiful — "as an artist I'm interested in mark making and I love the way that they aren't self-conscious. They're people's real writing, scribbling they're more alive than a lot of drawings". Yet she also thinks of them as tiny, candid portraits, a sort of opposite to the Instagram edit of someone's life, with all the tedious, incidental details intact



The artist Alice Instone in her studio

Take, for example, a list Instone received from a woman she doesn't know, Hilary Stafford-Clark. "She obviously has good intentions because she's got 'eat porridge' on it," says Instone. "She's musical, 'practise the piano', and 'warming pill for Dixie' — she's got pets. None of these things I knew about her but reading her list I thought, 'I feel like I know you a little bit.'" They also provide a portrait of a moment, Instone thinks. One

“Lists are more alive than some drawings — they're people's scribbles”

list-maker is going through breast cancer, her list is in the book accompanying the show alongside the list of her friend — the second has all the tasks she's doing to help the other. "The first combines her treatments and finding things for her daughters to do while she's in hospital with her bills and the quotidian household tasks that don't go away just because you're ill."

"Then there's a list of people I was supposed to contact that Barbara Taylor Bradford wrote for me eight years ago, and both people on it have died!" Instone confesses. "The lists reflect the human condition and the tragedy of the way that time passes. If you look at lists from now in ten years' time it'll be totally different."

"There's a girl who's getting married, people who are getting stuff for their

children — in ten years some of those children will have left home."

The project certainly seems to have struck a chord. "I've got lists coming in every day from people who've taken the time to write the envelope and post it. I find it very touching, there's something about the handwritten envelope that someone's bought a stamp for, and the little list inside from this person you've never met, sharing, unburdening themselves. There's definitely a lot of that going on, the unburdening," Instone says. "They have expressed frustration with the amount of stuff they've got to do but they clearly enjoy moaning about it."

Instone's interest in the imbalance of domestic work — she has failed to find any men who write to-do lists in the same way that women do, and

certainly none that combine the professional and the domestic like this, a position borne out by my own unscientific study at the office — is a continuation of the artist's long-held fascination with women and power.

Previous painting series include *The House of Fallen Women*, depicting contemporary women as women of the past noted for their sexuality — for example a pregnant Emilia Fox as Marie Antoinette, Jo Wood (Romney's ex-wife) as Madame de Pompadour and our own Caitlin Moran as the 18th-century courtesan Kitty Fisher — and *She Should Have Known Better*, which was made in response to the work of Henry James and displayed in his house, "because that's what his books were about".

This obsession is borne, she freely admits, out of "rage, fury and frustration" at the continued inequality she sees in the lives of herself and other women.

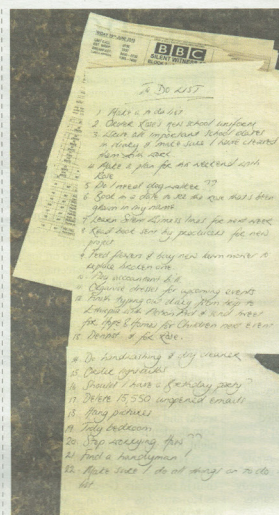
"We're still so unaccommodating to women's roles. It makes me hot with fury that it's assumed that you'll do all the school runs and order the uniform and that small stuff," she says. "And why is it that whether or not you've

got children and whether or not you work, you're still doing 80 per cent of the housework? We're particularly bad at that in this country, apparently. And maybe people come over and my husband's cooked a meal. And they say, 'Oh, aren't you lucky, Hugh cooked the lunch.' I'm like, are you serious?"

She tries not to get too infuriated, she says — "It's lovely making a home and fiddling about with cushions or whatever, and being with your children is nice" — and notes that plenty of stuff on our lists is arguably self-inflicted. "Like the thank-you letters and the birthday presents and birthday cards, which men don't do at all, and getting your nails done."

However, she thinks that things are changing, slowly. "With flexible working and all that kind of thing I just hope that everybody's attitudes will change in the future. In the meantime I feel like this is a heartwarming thing to be doing, because everyone is sharing their feelings and clearly enjoying it so much."

Alice Instone: *The Pram in the Hall* is at 1 Cathedral Street, SEL, March 9-26. aliceinstone.com



“People express frustration with the amount they have to do but they enjoy moaning about it”

The actress Emilia Fox's to-do list

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