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frieze



Profile:
Donna Huddleston

50 Years of
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Remembering
Ana Mendieta

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FRIEZE

Donna Huddleston and the Luminous Language of Drawing

The former set designer turned draughtsperson constructs psychologically charged worlds where theatre and literature converge



BY **CHLOE ARIDJIS** IN **PROFILES** | 03 JUN 26



At the far end of a tiny courtyard in Bethnal Green, perched above the surrounding rooftops, back gardens and allotments, I find Donna Huddleston's studio. The courtyard itself is a glimpse of a bygone London: there's a former brush factory from 1777 and, in the tympanum of another old brick building, a clock with rusty red hands stopped at 5:10. It is Monday, mid-afternoon, and yet the place is enveloped in an almost pre-industrial silence as I climb a flight of metal stairs and step into a long rectangular room, the roof organized into skylights and protected wooden beams. The very location, its sense of apartness, captures something of the suspended, gossamer nature of Huddleston's own creations.



Portrait of Donna Huddleston commissioned for *frieze*, 2026. Photograph: Bex Day; assistant: Jess Raynsford

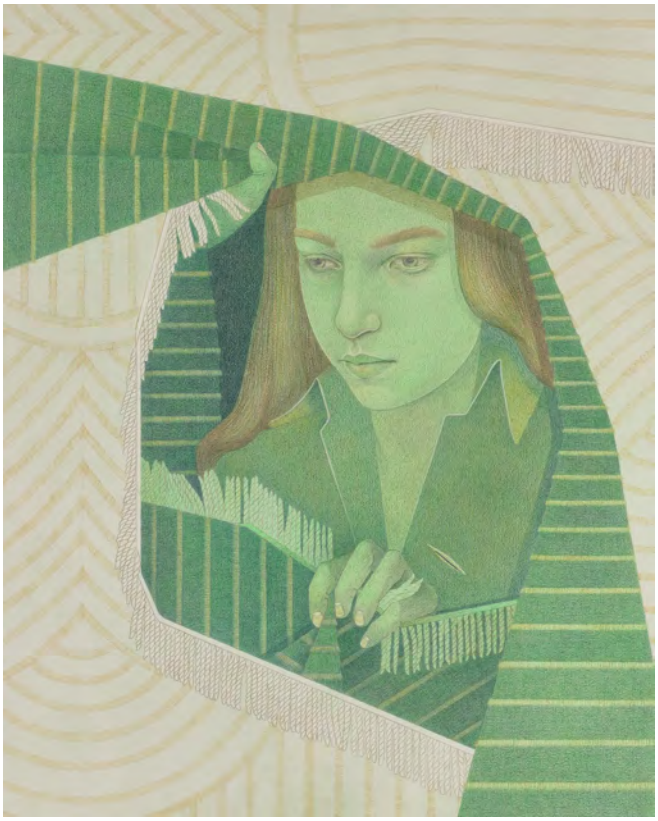
Born in Belfast in 1970, Huddleston left with her family at the age of three – fleeing the Troubles, the decades-long sectarian conflict that ravaged Northern Ireland – and emigrated to Australia. Her father, a Catholic, was a painter and decorator. She studied drama at the National Institute of Dramatic Art in Sydney and learnt the intricacies of lighting, costume design and performance by working on productions of William Shakespeare, Anton Chekhov, Henrik Ibsen and Tennessee Williams. Around the time of her graduation, Fox Studios opened in Sydney; there wasn't much theatre work, so she found jobs on film sets. Yet she was increasingly aware of a yen to stage her own *mises-en-scène*. 'What I actually found the most rewarding were all the tools – the drawing, the research, the world-building – and I wanted to make my own work,' she tells me in her studio.

She came to England and began illustrating moments from her past. Graphite, both durable and erasable, seemed like a befitting

medium with which to approach the elusive essence of memory. An encounter with a large, multi-panelled drawing by German artist Kai Althoff at a gallery 'was both a revelation and an inspiration', she reflects. 'While the work Kai creates is very singular, it was the technique and above all the texture of his colour pencil work that chimed loudly with my own practice.' From early on, Huddleston's main implement has been a set of coloured Caran d'Ache pencils called Luminance, with which she has forged her distinctive creamy, oneiric scenes with a patina that almost floats over the paper like a dream – less anchored, more luminous and granular, than paint.

Huddleston's ideas spring mainly from literary sources: a mood, a place, a figure.
CHLOE ARIDJIS

In 2005, she put on her first ever exhibition, 'Dear Hilma', together with artist Frank Hannon, in a set of dilapidated rooms in London's Fitzrovia. 'We had just seen a Hilma af Klint show in Dublin and it was just extraordinary. We thought of it as writing a letter to her,' she recalls. This homage of sorts to the Swedish mystic, who regarded her artistic creations as transmissions from the other side, would prefigure the otherworldly geometry in Huddleston's own work and the sense of a hidden order that emerges from the terrain of a dream.



Donna Huddleston, *Bernadette*, 2026, Caran d'Ache and graphite on paper, 70 × 58 cm. Courtesy: © Donna Huddleston and Ortuzar, New York; photograph: © Prudence Cuming Associates

Another woman, more imaginary yet also potent in spirit, is the animating force of Huddleston's show at Ortuzar in New York, opening this month: Bernadette. 'The title "Bernadette" operates conceptually for me as a conductor of visions. St. Bernadette had an extraordinary vision of Mary at Lourdes. As a young Catholic child, enthralled by this, I chose the name Bernadette as my confirmation name,' she tells me. Within the show, three separate works have this title, linked only by name. In *Bernadette I* (all 2026), a young girl, chlorophyll in colour, peers out from a gap in a tasselled blanket. In *Bernadette II*, a youngish woman stands in front of a golden gate, one hand propped on her hip. She wears a waistcoat and wide-collared shirt, her hair fastened by a flowing ribbon. *Bernadette III* moves further into the territory of a vision: a depiction of a sailboat onto which is grafted the enigmatic portrait of Kathleen Senn, the woman who inspired Patricia Highsmith's Carol in *The Price of Salt* (1952). Highsmith glimpsed Senn in the

toy department of Bloomingdale's, where she was working one Christmas. The woman ordered a doll for one of her daughters. Armed with her address, Highsmith drove to the house and lingered outside in her car. Yet they never had another encounter.

You sense in Huddleston's imagination a similar causality between an impactful moment and the complex narrative it might detonate, and now she is the one who draws inspiration outside a stranger's home: the show's centrepiece will be a large pencil frieze of Highsmith's house in Tegna. Located five kilometres from Locarno in the remote mountains of Switzerland, it was to be the author's final abode. Photographs show a one-storey, flat-roofed structure, brutalist in style, against an alpine backdrop. Highsmith designed the house herself with the help of a Zurich-based architect, Tobias Ammann, and described it as her dream home. Friends called it her 'bunker'.



Donna Huddleston, *Tegna*, 2026, Caran d'Ache on paper, 1.7 × 2.5 m. Courtesy: © Donna Huddleston and Ortuzar, New York; photograph: © Prudence Cuming Associates

Mapped across nine panels, Huddleston's drawing depicts two women standing on the front lawn of Highsmith's abode, their soft curves pronounced against the hard lines of the house. One woman

holds a drawn bow, a flame rising from the tip of the arrow. The other, in a red hat, peers up at an androgynous figure perched in a tree. It is dusk; soon the arrow will fly and the sun will sink. 'When I have an idea for a large drawing I don't make small sketches, I go straight to thinking about the work itself,' she says. 'I knew the house was the central thing in the composition, and then everything around it becomes like the armature for the scene. In some ways I've always thought about my big drawings as a projection, also related to theatre.'

> **The stand-in is steeped in the possibility of performance and the mix therein of desire, hope, disappointment, success.**
> DONNA HUDDLESTON

Theatre may be the governing structural and conceptual model, yet Huddleston's ideas themselves spring mainly from literary sources: a mood, a place, a figure that hints at a complex inner universe. In the past, a writer central to her sensibility was Tennessee Williams, in particular *The Glass Menagerie* (1944), 'a designer's dream in terms of atmosphere, characters and set,' she says. Most of her own figures, however, possess a composure that eludes Williams's tormented souls. Ever since drama school, Huddleston has been interested in the concept of the theatrical stand-in, and doubling – the private self and the public, the relaxed individual behind the scenes and the self-conscious image we present to others. 'The stand-in for me is deeply steeped in the possibility of a performance and the mix therein of desire, hope, disappointment, success,' she says. 'The double, on the other hand,

is a more complex existential dilemma – which self?' To exist within any society, as the sociologist Erving Goffman described in his book *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1956), is a highly performative affair. Our body language changes when we cross the threshold from one space to another in the knowledge we are observed. In their charged stillness, Huddleston's figures express the tension of being both observer and observed. During our conversations, she often mentions the word proscenium, the section of the stage that lies in front of the curtain, where everything is visible.



Donna Huddleston, *Chaperone*, 2026, Caran d'Ache and graphite on paper, 93 × 128 cm. Courtesy: © Donna Huddleston and Ortuzar, New York; photograph: © Prudence Cuming Associates

This philosophical engagement with notions of self-presentation is most overtly at play in her drawing *Chaperone* (2026), which has Sandy Dennis, an actress she has always admired, sitting in a bathtub. In this double portrait, Dennis is reading a copy of *Time* magazine from 1967 with her face on the cover (it's likely that Highsmith would have read this issue). In what should be an intimate scene, the performative self supersedes the private, and the bathroom is transformed into a stage, with its pink, candy-

striped curtain, green tiles, hanging tassel and purple, swan-shaped soap dish. Dennis, half submerged, sits upright in her pearl necklace and pointy yellow sunglasses, which do not completely hide her eyes.

Huddleston's drama background has also shaped the way she constructs her settings. Flat and geometrical, they have the feel of scenery that can be slid in and out of view. 'The first thing you do as a theatre designer, when reading a text, is think about exits and entrances, the movement of the play, and then you think about the silhouettes of the characters, the shape they make on the stage, before you even get to the detail. These are things I think about when I start making a drawing,' she confesses. Over the years, the poetic, mood-driven drawings of the Swiss architect and stage designer Adolphe Appia, with their textures and light, concentrated or diffuse, have been a great inspiration: light as a structural force, as important to the production as any actor. A large graphite drawing of a stage, seemingly empty but full of shadows, is a tribute to him and 'a way of bringing a piece of theatre directly into the show'.



Donna Huddleston, *Hunting in the Desert*, 2025, Caran d'Ache and graphite on paper, 74 × 85 cm. Courtesy: © Donna Huddleston and Ortuzar, New York; photograph: © Prudence Cuming Associates

Alongside each work in progress, Huddleston has taped a constellation of images to the walls of her studio: stills from films, photographs of actors, gardens, objects, architectural details, reproductions of other artworks. Some may make their way into a painting or drawing; others function more obliquely. A still of the pyramids from Zeina Durra's atmospheric film *Luxor* (2020), in which visions of Egyptian antiquity become entangled with an Englishwoman's psychodrama, speaks mysteriously to Huddleston's trio of drawings of female English tourists in Egypt, entitled *Hunting in the Desert* (2025). One shows a woman in a purple headscarf, windshield sunglasses and harlequin-patterned blouse standing in a tourist shop surrounded by souvenirs – a replica of a sculpture of the baboon deity Thoth, an antique vase and a black granite Horus, which she grasps. 'The woman is shopping for treasure; maybe she's looking for religion, or she could be having a vision. It's ambiguous. I wanted her to be lifting an object so you could feel the weight of it.' A surrealist air envelops the piece, the feeling that at any moment this hyperrealist scene could lapse into something illogical or absurd.

In 2013, at Drawing Room in London, Huddleston staged the performance *Witch Dance*, in which eight female dancers reinterpreted the German expressionist choreographer Mary Wigman's 1926 performance of the same name. Moving as though under a spell, they interacted with a mysterious full moon projected onto the wall. It is no surprise to learn that two of Huddleston's favourite directors are Chantal Akerman and Rainer Werner Fassbinder, for whom gestures often carry more weight than the spoken word. 'In Fassbinder it's his extreme and intense female characters. In Akerman, it's her lucid and unswerving eye. Her humour, too,' she explains.



Donna Huddleston, *Witch Dance*, 2013, performance view, Drawing Room, London. Courtesy: © Donna Huddleston and Ortuzar, New York; photograph: Polly Braden

From among the female characters presiding over Huddleston's studio, one androgynous male figure emerges from an orange mist. Soulful and melancholy, the late singer Prince stares out from a life-size pencil portrait. Beside him hang photographs from the 2015 Grammy Awards, just one year before his death. The images show him walking on-stage in a shiny orange outfit – a costumed figure, stepping into and out of set, in and out of his own construction. 'Every now and then I really feel the urge to make a portrait,' Huddleston explains. 'With Prince, I felt he needed a special shape. He's become like a vision. If I wanted anyone to appear to me, maybe it would be Prince.' She experienced a similar urge upon meeting the writer Lynne Tillman, struck by her intensity; the result was an extraordinary feat of pencil and graphite on paper, capturing Tillman's face and hair in an almost spun, celestial pale blue (*Lynne*, 2023).



Donna Huddleston, *Lynne*, 2023, Caran d'Ache and graphite on paper, 68 × 55 cm. Courtesy: © Donna Huddleston and Ortuzar, New York; photograph: © White Cube and Theo Christelis

Huddleston's show at Ortuzar will consist of seven drawings and four paintings. (Painting is a relatively new medium, debuted in 'Company', her exhibition at White Cube Mason's Yard, London, in 2024.) In her studio she moves between them, teasing them forth by turns. With every layer of pencil, a scene is further patterned and textured. 'The initial tactility and softness give way to sharpness,' she explains. During my visits, as the works begin to echo one another and enter into dialogue in increasingly visible ways, two figures in the room have been absorbed in another sort of contemplation. On a pedestal at the far end sits a model of the upcoming exhibition space, with a pair of little figures placed inside for scale. The two figures are of Hanna Schygulla and Fassbinder. The actress and director, individuals all too familiar with on-stage selves and off-, with what it means to be 'in character' and out, have been granted a special preview to all her exhibitions.

'***Donna Huddleston: Bernadette***' *will be on view at Ortuzar, New York, from 4 June to 1 August*