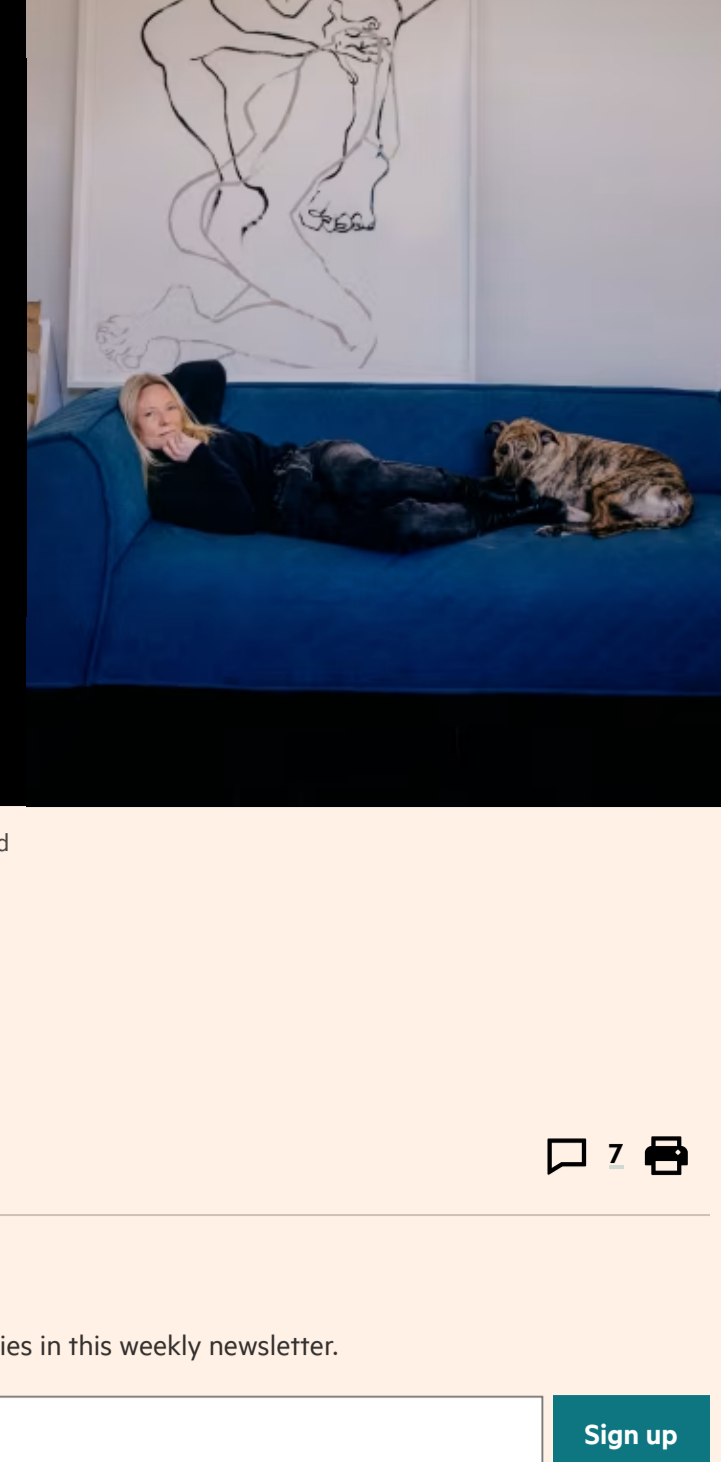


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Luella Bartley unmasked

Since the death of her son Kip, the British fashion designer has channelled her emotions into artworks that are powerfully raw. It's all part of a desperate longing to be honest about who we are



Luella Bartley in her studio with her lurcher Prince © Julian Broad



Victoria Woodcock. Photography by Julian Broad

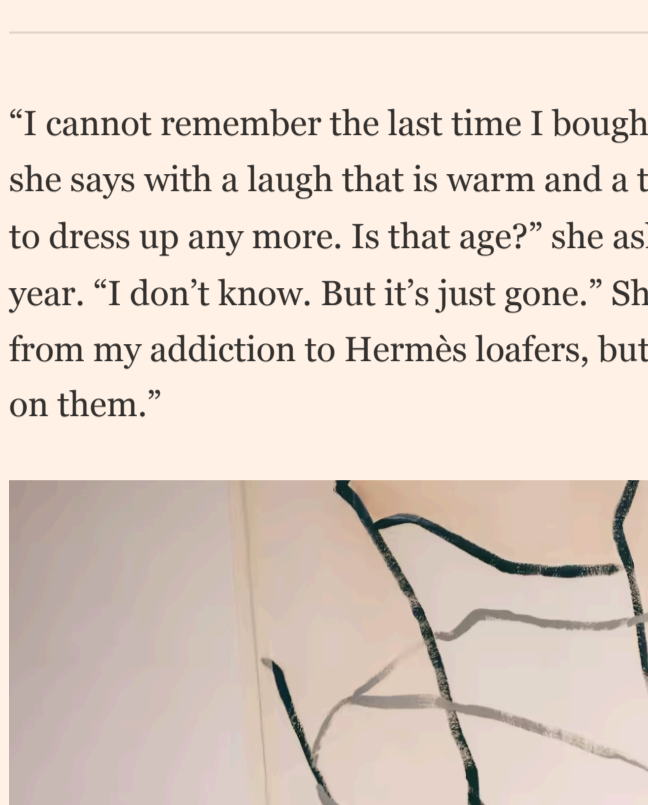
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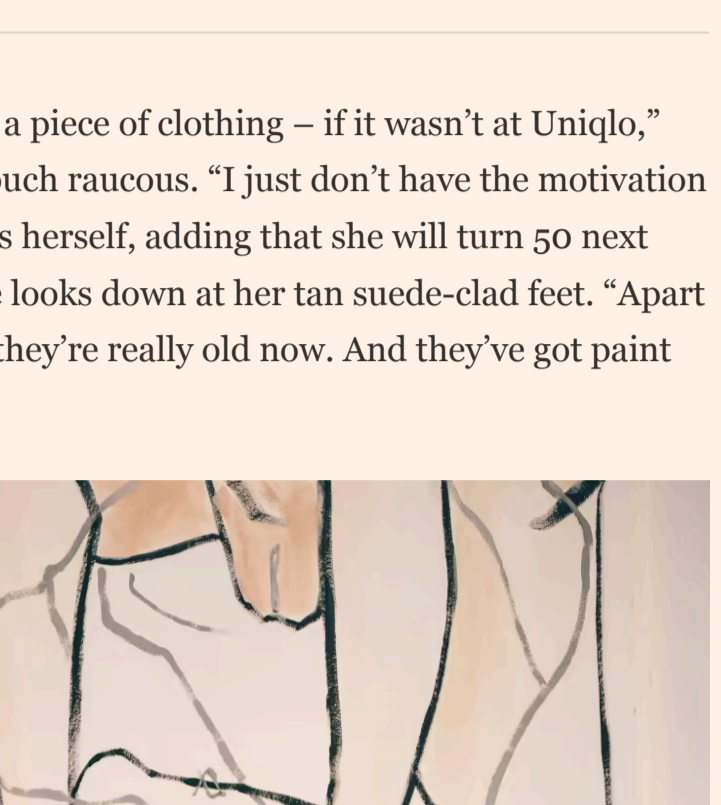
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Roula Khalaf, Editor of the FT, selects her favourite stories in this weekly newsletter.

On a snowy day, Luella Bartley is making cups of tea in the kitchen of her Bloomsbury townhouse. As she adds oat milk to wibbly-wobbly Feldspar mugs, she's shadowed by her two dogs – Guido the dachshund and a lurcher called Prince. It's a cosy scene, yet the unfussy, Dickensian-made-modern interiors are as cool as you would expect from a fashion designer who injected naughty British fashion with a rock-chick edge. Who launched her own label, Luella, in 1999, with the tongue-in-cheek, artisto-chic collection titled Daddy, I Want A Pony. Who was flatmates with Elastica frontwoman Justine Frischmann and Mathangi Arulpragasam (aka rapper M.I.A.), but later moved to Cornwall with her fashion photographer husband David Sims and raised three children. Whose CV includes roles at Marc by Marc Jacobs and Calvin Klein, not to mention the eponymous venture Hillier Bartley, with friend and former colleague Katie Hillier.



Sculptures in progress in Luella Bartley's studio © Julian Broad

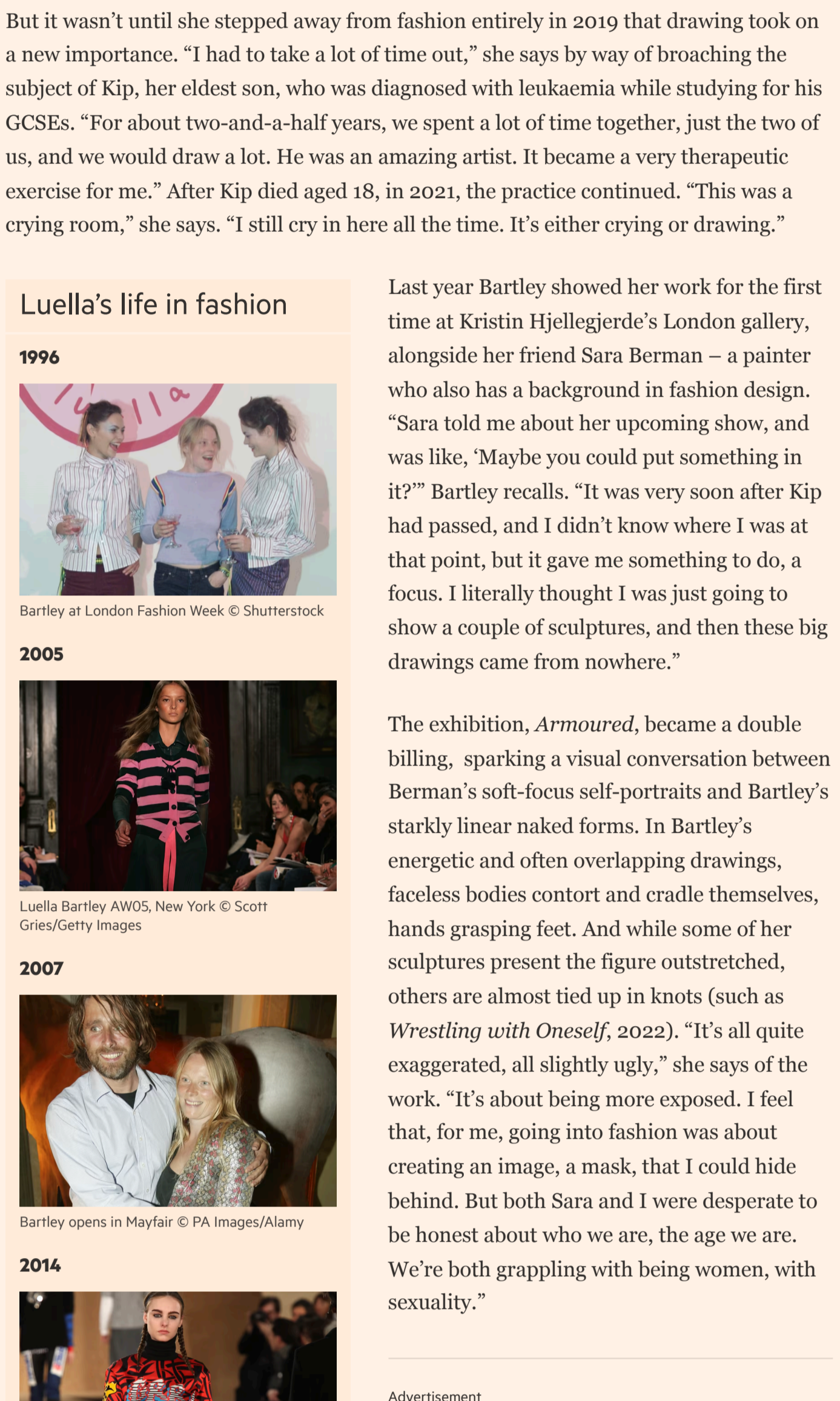


Paintings and reference images © Julian Broad

Beyond her elegant stairwell – all bare walls and hefty stone-slab steps – a garden-facing first-floor studio space reveals her new creative chapter. “I’ve always wanted to do art,” says Bartley, surrounded by a series of her striking, strident line drawings, all of the female nude. In the window, a bright-white sculpture reveals a contorted mass of limbs, placing chunky feet poking up from the practice-wrapped ceiling. “Right now, I want to plough into this,” she says of the art practice she has been developing over the past couple of years. “I still love fashion. I can see that friends of mine are doing beautiful, creative things within it. It’s just not where I want to express myself at the moment,” she adds, dressed for the day’s inclement weather in a navy cashmere crewneck and light-blue jeans. Her blonde hair is characteristically messy. Her earrings are subtly mismatched, and she’s wearing a simple gold chain, belonging to her late son Kip, which she plays with while we chat.

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“I cannot remember the last time I bought a piece of clothing – if it wasn’t at Uniqlo,” she says with a laugh that is warm and a touch raucous. “I just don’t have the motivation to dress up any more. Is that age?” she asks herself, adding that she will turn 50 next year. “I don’t know. But it’s just gone.” She looks down at her tan suede-clad feet. “Apart from my addiction to Hermès loafers, but they’re really old now. And they’ve got paint on them.”



Bartley in her studio in her north London home. Her painting *Hidden*, 2022, is on the wall behind her © Julian Broad

She refers to the shift from fashion to art as a “progression”. “I can look at stuff I’ve done in fashion and it definitely has a direct link to what I’m doing now,” she says, citing Hillier Bartley, which she founded with accessories designer Hillier, her long-term collaborator, in 2015. “That was when I started to draw. It was a very creative, more experimental pursuit – not a very business one,” she adds with a quiet chuckle. But it wasn’t until she stepped away from fashion entirely in 2019 that drawing took on a new importance. “I had to take a lot of time out,” she says by way of broaching the subject of Kip, her eldest son, who was diagnosed with leukaemia while studying for his GCSEs. “For about two-and-a-half years, we spent a lot of time together, just the two of us, and we would draw a lot. He was an amazing artist. It became a very therapeutic exercise for me.” After Kip died aged 18, in 2021, the practice continued. “This was a crying room,” she says. “I still cry in here all the time. It’s either crying or drawing.”

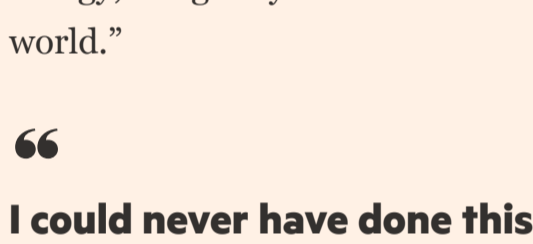
Luella's life in fashion

1996



Bartley at London Fashion Week © Shutterstock

2005



Luella Bartley AW05, New York © Scott Gries/Getty Images

2007



Bartley opens in Mayfair © PA Images/Alamy

2014



Marc by Marc Jacobs AW14 © Antonio de Moraes Barros Filho/FilmMagic

2016



With Katie Hillier (left) at Coach AW16 © David M. Bennett

2022



Stevie Sims models for Hillier Bartley © Indigo Lewin

inspiring young man; he led by example and didn’t let anything stop him. So I have to take something from that. I have to do something.” Even though he was only a teenager, Kip, like his mother, had already made an impression on fashion. He worked for [Kim Jones](#) and his younger, cover shoot for Italian *Vogue*. His younger sister Stevie, 17, is on the books at Kate Moss Agency as a model and is planning to study fine art after her A-levels. “She’s a great painter,” says Bartley, adding that her youngest, Ned, 15, is also “into fashion and doing bits with Kim”. The world of fashion is still writing large in the family’s DNA. And it has also been a huge support network for her during this new period of artistic expression. The response to Bartley’s “something” was instantly positive: “People loved Luella’s work; they were clamouring to buy it,” says Hjellegjerde. “She has a lot of support; people really adore her.” Including Jones, who says, “I love Luella’s energy, her gently kind heart and thoughtfulness. She has a unique perspective on the world.”

“I could never have done this any younger; it just wasn’t in me

Luella Bartley

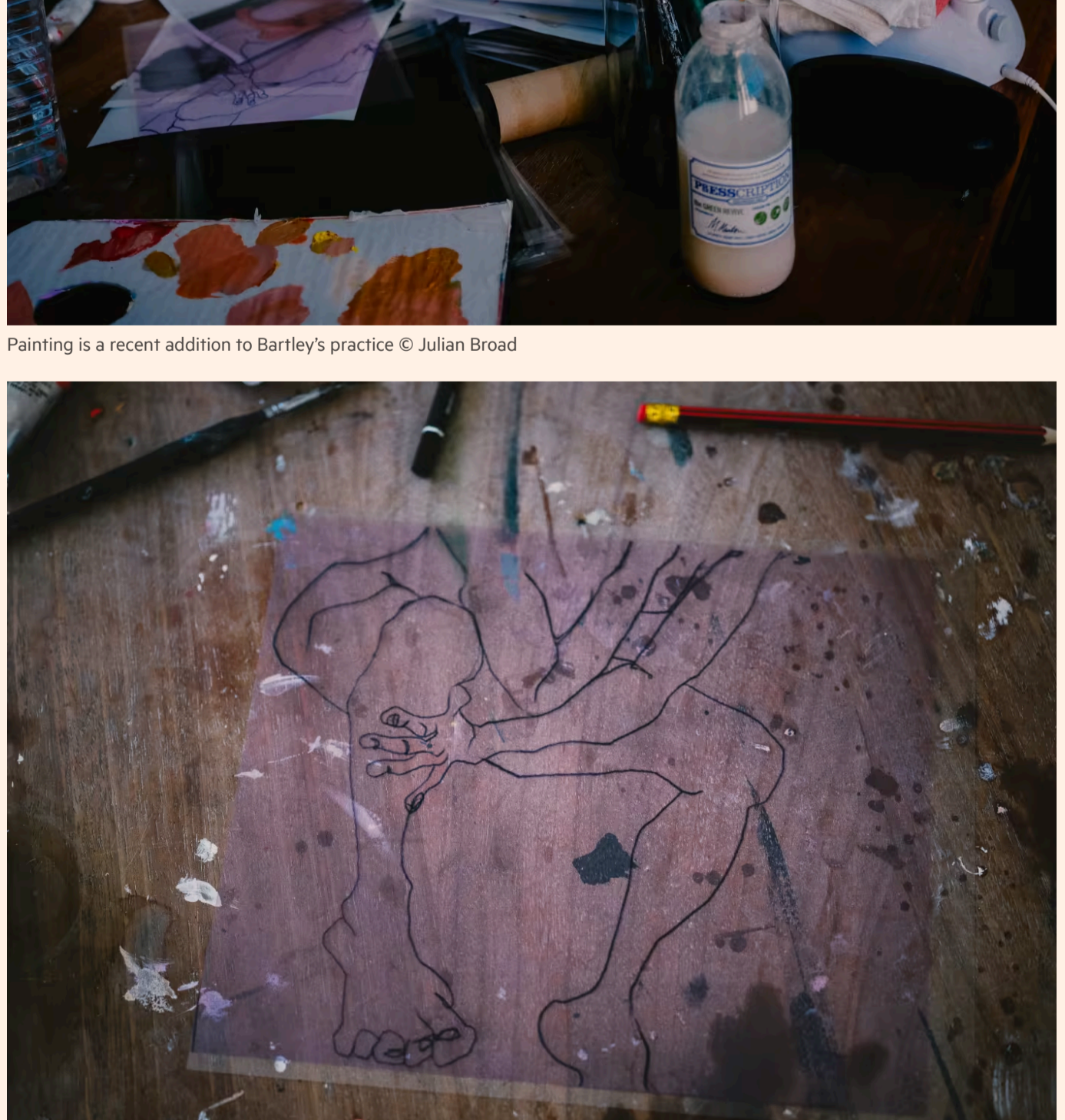
says, harking back to her first career in fashion journalism – including a time as fashion editor of British *Vogue* – and her approach to designing the Luella collections. “I would always write a narrative. Luella was quite biographical, maybe slightly autobiographical – always more about a story than, say, the visceral feel of the fabric.”

In June, Hjellegjerde will host Bartley’s first solo show in her London Bridge gallery. Of the new work in progress, Bartley says: “It sounds so crap, but it is more about the journey than the end product – more about the process of getting the darkness out.” Writing is also an important part of the process. “I wake up and write for an hour before I do anything,” she says, harking back to her first career in fashion journalism – including a time as fashion editor of British *Vogue* – and her approach to designing the Luella collections. “I would always write a narrative. Luella was quite biographical, maybe slightly autobiographical – always more about a story than, say, the visceral feel of the fabric.”

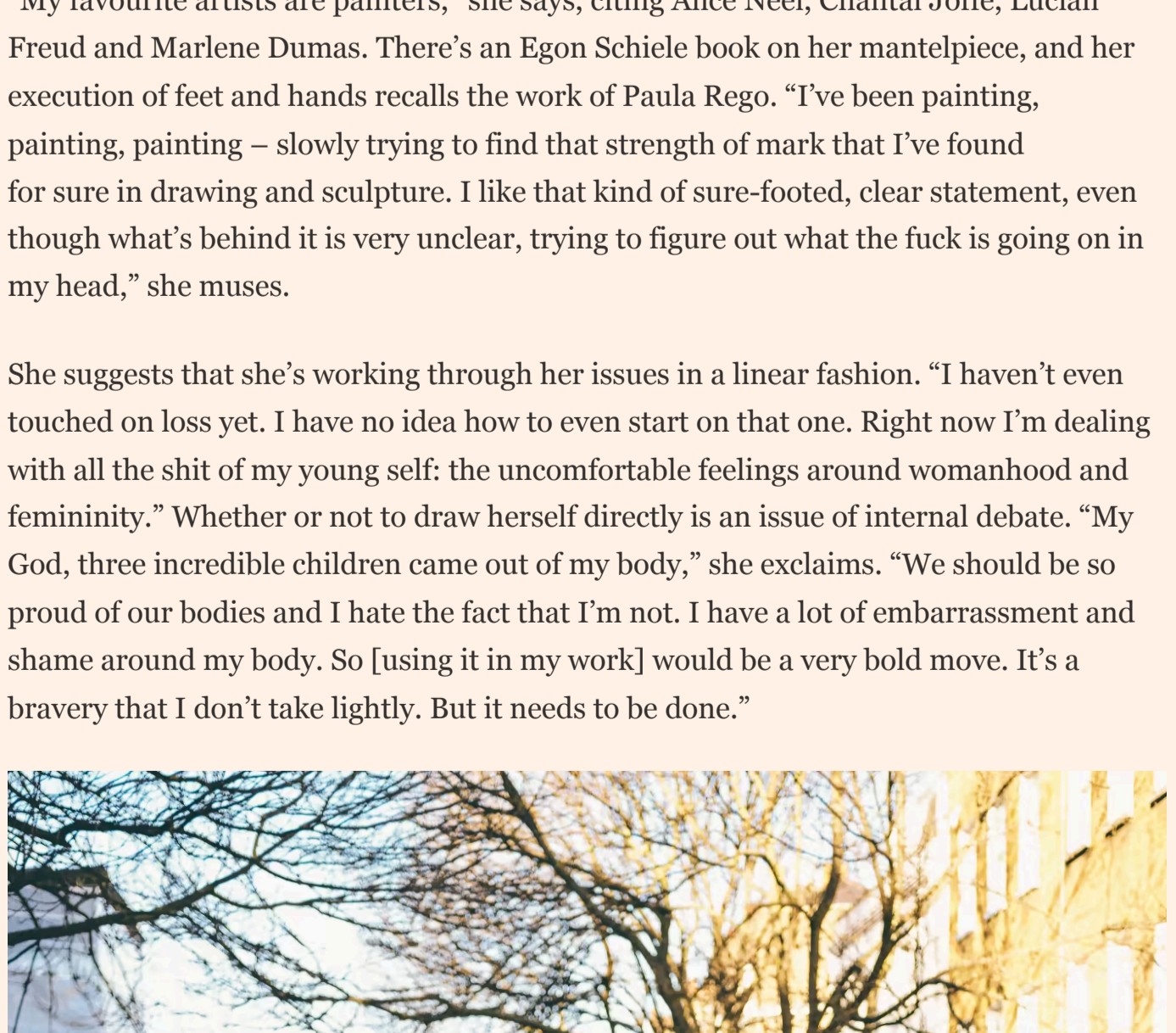
“Luella’s really great at coming up with a concept that has huge commercial potential; I was always in awe of that,” says Hillier, the veteran fashion consultant who is now the creative director of [J&M Davidson](#). She was introduced to Bartley by fashion stylist Katie Grand – “the three of us are all only children, so we’re like sisters” – and they started working together in the early days. “We brought different things to the pie – I think maybe I was the crust and she was the filling – and by the time we got into doing Hillier Bartley, it was really something special.” Of their Savile Row-inspired line of womenswear, Hillier adds: “It’s not dead. It’s on a pause.”

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“I don’t feel like I have much to offer Hillier Bartley at the moment,” says Bartley, “but I love Katie, and to have a pathway open to create together is really important.” She’s definitely not ruling out future fashion projects. And she’s currently working on something in fashion, although not in a design capacity. “I’m setting up a charity – the Kip Fund,” she says of an initiative that will provide routes into fashion jobs for young adults who wouldn’t otherwise have the opportunities and financial means to do so. “The directive for this came from Kip. He felt very privileged to have been able to work for Kim, and wanted others to have the same opportunities.”



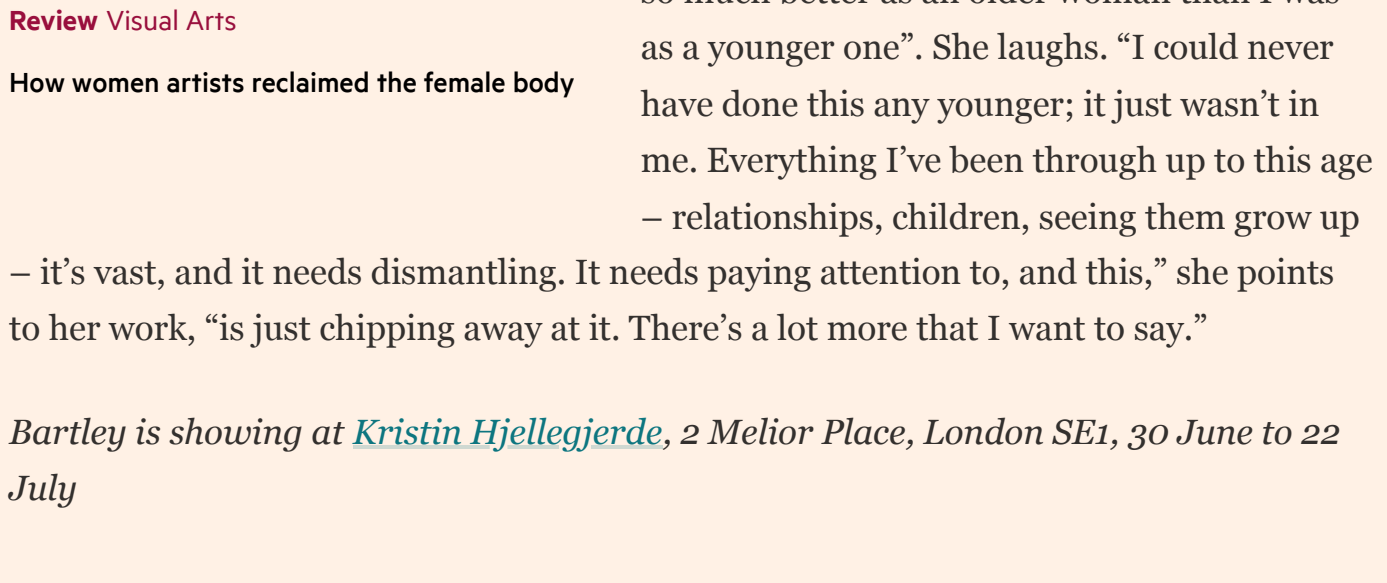
Painting is a recent addition to Bartley's practice © Julian Broad



One of Bartley's drawings of the female nude © Julian Broad

Right now, though, Bartley is immersed in [painting](#) – a new addition to her practice. “My favourite artists are painters,” she says, citing Alice Neel, Chantal Joffe, Lucian Freud and Marlene Dumas. There’s an Egon Schiele book on her mantelpiece, and her execution of feet and hands recalls the work of Paula Rego. “I’ve been painting, painting, painting – slowly trying to find that strength of mark that I’ve found for sure in drawing and sculpture. I like that kind of sure-footed, clear statement, even though what’s behind it is very unclear, trying to figure out what the fuck is going on in my head,” she muses.

She suggests that she’s working through her issues in a linear fashion. “I haven’t even touched on loss yet. I have no idea how to even start on that one. Right now I’m dealing with all the shit of my young self: the uncomfortable feelings around womanhood and femininity.” Whether or not to draw herself directly is an issue of internal debate. “My God, three incredible children came out of my body,” she exclaims. “We should be so proud of our bodies and I hate the fact that I’m not. I have a lot of embarrassment and shame around my body. So [using it in my work] would be a very bold move. It’s a bravery that I don’t take lightly. But it needs to be done.”



Bartley in the street of her London home © Julian Broad

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– it’s vast, and it needs dismantling. It needs paying attention to, and this,” she points to her work, “is just chipping away at it. There’s a lot more that I want to say.”

Bartley is showing at [Kristin Hjellegjerde](#), 2 Melior Place, London SE11, 30 June to 22 July

Sitting with her knees crunched up to her chest, she displays the same combination of fragility and strength that is present in her artwork. She talks about being somewhat “introverted” and recent feelings of imposter syndrome. But at the same time, “because her life experience as a strong point, she sees I’m so much better as an older woman than I was as a younger one”. She laughs. “I could never have done this any younger; it just wasn’t in me. Everything I’ve been through up to this age – relationships, children, seeing them grow up – it’s vast, and it needs dismantling. It needs paying attention to, and this,” she points to her work, “is just chipping away at it. There’s a lot more that I want to say.”