

Stephen Friedman Gallery

Frieze
Top Ten Shows from the UK and Ireland
Mimi Chu
12 February 2021

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What to look forward to in February, from a new body of work by Harare-based painter Misheck Masamvu to a retrospective by Hong Kongese filmmaker Wong Kar Wai

'My loneliness is killing me/ I must confess, I still believe.' Last week, the #FreeBritney movement exploded with the airing of *Framing Britney Spears* (2021), a documentary from The New York Times, which brought the popstar's ongoing battle over her rights into sharp focus. Spears has been living under a conservatorship, largely under the control of her father, since her 'meltdown' in 2008. But the realities of her court-ordained patriarchy hadn't been taken seriously beyond her core fanbase. Maybe this is the year we address our historical blind spots and invite them to talk to where we currently stand. My exhibition highlights from the UK and Ireland this month takes a similar approach.



Image: Misheck Masamvu, *Thoughts before the Rain*, 2020, oil on canvas, 174 x 235 cm. Courtesy: the artist and Goodman Gallery, London/ Cape Town

What happens when we invite our ancestors for dinner, asks Misheck Masamvu in his first UK solo show, 'Talk to Me while I'm Eating'. In a 2018 feature for *frieze*, Sean O'Toole described the 'metaphorical labours' performed by figures in Masamvu's earlier paintings. But, in these latest works, made in the artist's Harare studio in 2020, the metaphorical labour is in the brushstrokes: figures and elements collide in worlds that lack clear delineation. Negative spaces encroach on outlines and peep through layers of colour, drawing you into the depths of the paintings. In *Thoughts before the Rain*, hints of a crocodile's tail are caught in a web of marks, all converging in a central point around the head of a reclining figure. Suspended in a search for definition, these works invite a sense of 'delayed reality', to quote the artist's accompanying poem, that might 'be used to erase the dead'.



Image: Gauri Gill and Rajesh Vangad, *Truth of Suffering*, 2019, from the series 'Fields of Sight', 2013–ongoing, acrylic on archival pigment print, 158 x 107 cm. Courtesy: the artists and Frith Street Gallery, London

The works in Frith Street Gallery's current group show, 'Contemporary Excavations', play with time and engage with past spirits. Gauri Gill and Rajesh Vangad's celebrated series 'Fields of Sight' (2013–ongoing), for instance, is a compelling investigation into photography's slippery temporality. Gill's photographs capture scenes of a declining way of life, shot in and around the village of Ganjad, in the hills of northern Maharashtra, where the land rights of the indigenous Warli community have been persistently threatened since the 19th century, first by the British, and later by urban encroachment. Is the villagers' resilience and cultural memory traceable in these landscapes? In the hands of Vangad, it is. Trained in Warli painting from a young age, Vangad overlays Gill's photographs with line drawings typical of the region's iconographic art, which dates back to the tenth century, investing them with spiritual substance.

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Image: Luiz Zerbini, Happiness Beyond Paradise, 2020, acrylic on canvas, 3 × 6 m. Courtesy: the artist and Stephen Friedman Gallery, London

Describing his practice in this video from 2017, Luiz Zerbini admits: 'Sometimes the plant grows over what I like [in the painting] and I feel disappointed.' Presumably this

disappointment does not extend to Mayfair, where the windows of Stephen Friedman Gallery are pulsating with living organisms on six metres of canvas (Happiness Beyond Paradise, 2020). Zerbini builds his paintings like environments, layering and interrelating natural, found and abstract elements on grid structures. Vibrant patterns swirl and slot like mosaics. Stems and foliage jut over and between them in sharp 3D. Developing these works from his Rio de Janeiro studio, Zerbini refracts an architectural vocabulary, constituting sites in which nature overgrows and undermines the construction work. Colours and patterns speak to us like embodied forms of their own, peeping through the gridded frame like eyes.

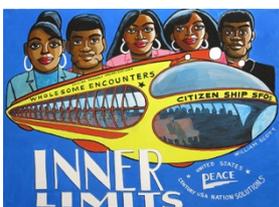


Image: William Scott, Untitled, 2014, acrylic on canvas, 91 × 122 cm. Courtesy of the artist and Creative Growth, San Francisco

'The spaceship helps things become real,' says William Scott in an online discussion about his paintings ahead of his upcoming show at Studio Voltaire. Four figures stand to attention over a spaceship emblazoned with the words 'Skyline Friendly Organizations' (Untitled, 2014). Born in San Francisco, Scott has been making art with Creative Growth since 1992, an art centre that serves artists with disabilities. He has simultaneously witnessed the Bay Area grow increasingly polarized. In the early 2000s, in the wake of the dotcom boom, he proposed removing penthouses from buildings in his models and architectural diagrams. A self-taught artist, his mesmerizing renderings of buildings create worlds in which religion, politics and science-fiction collide. Due to open later this year, Scott's first UK solo show will inaugurate Studio Voltaire's new building, a transformative GB£2.8 million capital project in Clapham, South London.



Image: Abbas Zahedi, Ouranophobia SW3, 2020, installation view at the Chelsea Sorting Office, London. Courtesy: the artist

Housed in a disused sorting office in Chelsea, Abbas Zahedi's Ouranophobia SW3 (2020) opened in December for what was a shorter-than-planned run. It was brought to life again on Instagram at the end of last month. The installation – comprising sound, sculptural and architectural elements – speaks to the history of the site, which is about to be razed for redevelopment. In the main hall, stairs leading to a window, a constellation of bricks and a red corridor invite being virtually perambulated, slowly, opening up the building's history. In the basement, a combination of ruins and devotional architecture is offset by a soundtrack of music and field recordings – voices, banging, scraping – taken from the building's radius, which includes a hospital. In collaboration with Neurofringe – a group of neurologists working in the UK – the exhibition has been hosting physical support groups for frontline staff during the pandemic.

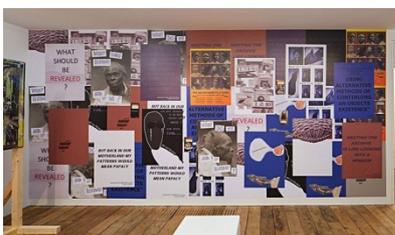


Image: Art Assassins, 'An archive by any other means', 2020–21, exhibition view at South London Gallery. Courtesy: the artists and South London Gallery

At South London Gallery, creative forum Art Assassins has been rejigging historical fragments. Taking British anthropologist Northcote W.

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Thomas's archive as its starting point, the group has been investigating his historical footprint, splicing his records with fly-posters, soundscapes, snippets from daytime television and material from Autograph's Black Cultural Archives. Between 1909 and 1915, Thomas was appointed by the British Colonial Office to conduct surveys in Nigeria and Sierra Leone. His vast collection of photographs and recordings has been interrogated by Art Assassins since 2019, in collaboration with artists Onyeka Igwe and Rosa-Johan Uddoh. In anticipation of their exhibition at SLG, Art Assassins presented their findings in a live Google Doc this week. On Tuesday 16 February, a discussion (with Paul Basu, Yvonne Mbanefo, Carmen Vida and Emmanuelle Andrews) will continue this ongoing investigation of the Northcote Thomas archive.



Image: Robert Roest, Full Moon and Stinky Smelling Spirits, 2021, oil on canvas, 200 × 140 cm. Courtesy the artist and Guts Gallery

Since founding Guts Gallery in 2019, Ellie Pennick has worked on a number of debut solo shows with early-career artists. Responding to a shifting art world, her nomadic space invites cross-generational exchanges between artists and collectors with a view to addressing structural inequalities and improving accessibility and financial support for newer voices. Launched on Instagram in the style of a private view on 4 February and made available on the gallery website for the next month, 'When Shit Hits the Fan' brought household names such as Nan Goldin and Shezad Dawood into dialogue with figures whose careers are still being recognized by the art market, with 50 percent of all established artists' sales being distributed equally to all emerging artists in the show.

For a more brutally honest take on the difficulties of being an artist during a pandemic, be sure to check out 'Memories of Living', a weekly series of video diaries by staff and residents at Islington Mill, an arts hub in Manchester, which compel us to sit with the thwarted plans, everyday anxieties and mundane pleasures of lockdown life. The series has been partly funded by Arts Council England's emergency fund.



Image: Book of Hours (detail), c.1440 - 1470, France, probably Paris. Courtesy: Sam Fogg, London

At Sam Fogg, a digital exhibition aims to reassess the role and representation of women in the medieval period. Showcasing various liturgical and devotional objects from across Western Europe, made by, for and/or through women, 'Medieval Women' re-evaluates the gender dynamics of the period through the lens of female patronage, religious practices and workshop production.



Image: Nina Thomas, Silence, 2020, film still. Courtesy: the artist and LUX, London

At LUX, a new series of film commissions reflects on the possibilities of a Deaf artists' cinema. Accompanying a wider programme, centred around Stephen Dwoskin's extraordinarily personal *Outside In* (1981), these works push and test the possibilities of film to articulate the nuances of living with a disability. Dwoskin described *Outside In* as 'the visual impression left during the process of integration into the so-called able-bodied society'. Nina Thomas's *Silence* (2020) challenges the assumed superiority of speech over sign language, splicing close-ups of children being patronisingly taught how to lipread with empowering shots of people signing with the subtitles: 'I covered up your words/ I kept the words/ That I desired.'

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Image: Christian Turner, *Vesuvius at Home*, 2018, film still. Courtesy: the artist and aemi, Dublin

Another scintillating series of short films is available to watch on aemi, a Dublin-based initiative that supports moving-image works by artists and experimental filmmakers. Curated by Patrick Hough, this screening programme takes us from the wonders of early cinema, as explored in Anna Franceschini's Super 8 film *Doposole* (2013), in which light flickers over a sumptuous piece of fabric, into a probing childhood re-enactment of the Fall of Pompeii (Christin Turner's *Vesuvius at Home*, 2018). Ending with Hough's *And if in a Thousand Years* (2017), this series explores the thin line between invention and excavation on which the film medium treads.



Image: Wong Kar Wai, *In the Mood for Love*, 2000, film still. Courtesy: Janus Films/ BFI/ Institute of Contemporary Art, London

'In 1997, the year Hong Kong stopped being a British colony, one of the quintessential queer films of the Sinosphere, *Happy Together* by Wong Kar Wai, was released,' observes Francesca Tarocco in this feature from 2017. 'The World of Wong Kar Wai', a digital retrospective on the ICA's website, invites further reflection on the afterlife of the Hong Kongese director's soulful films. From the melancholic sensuality of *In the Mood for Love* (2000) to what Tarocco defines as the 'nocturnal cosmopolitan world of urban intimacy' explored in *Happy Together*, these films will undoubtedly be seen anew. As Wong himself states: 'These are not the same films, and we are no longer the same audience.'