

Stephen Friedman Gallery

Evening Standard

The best London exhibitions of 2021 - from Hogarth to Helen Frankenthaler

Ben Luke and Melanie McDonagh

23 December 2021

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Image: Detail view of Jah Shaka, 1983 by Denzil Forrester / Mike Newman

Even after having to rescheduled many of their biggest shows, museums and galleries stayed open and kept us going in 2021.

Theaster Gates: A Clay Sermon

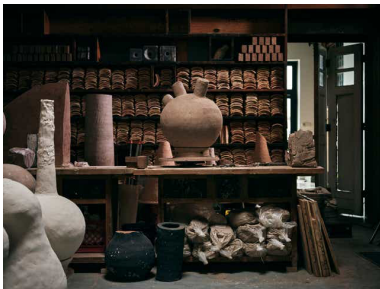


Image: Exhibition view / Courtesy of Theaster Gates Photo by Chris Strong

Whitechapel Gallery

Gates is best known as a catalyst for social change through his art and architectural projects in Chicago, but this marvellous exhibition, on until January 9, 2022, focuses on one key aspect of his practice: ceramics. Beginning with a potted history of clay, from ancient China to medieval Iran, the racist caricatures of Deep South America and the purity of Modernism, it slowly introduces Gates's own work. It pauses for a lyrical video on his process and his ceramics' connection to gospel (including some beautiful singing) before reaching a thrilling climax with a display of Gates's sculptures in clay, wood, tar and other materials. The Whitechapel has never looked better.

Helen Frankenthaler: Radical Beauty



Image: Madame Butterfly, 2000 by Helen Frankenthaler / © 2021 Helen Frankenthaler Foundation, Inc. / ARS, NY and DACS, London / Tyler Graphic Ltd., Mount Kisco, NY

Dulwich Picture Gallery

The most beautiful show of the year. In her prints, Frankenthaler chose to use the woodcut medium, which seems counterintuitive given her loose, gestural, liquid abstract style. But, working with master printers, she conjured extraordinary effects from the technique, achieving a spontaneous feel from works that took up to three years to complete. The revelation of this show is that we follow that process, and gain access to the thinking of a truly great artist – we see the prototype paintings from which her collaborators made test prints, and her notes that led to the luminous final results. Magnificent, and you have until April 18, 2022 to see it.

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Life Between Islands: Caribbean-British Art 1950s to Now



Image: Oceans Apart, 1989 by Ingrid Pollard / Ingrid Pollard

Tate Britain

A stunning, thoroughly absorbing show of art made by artists born in the Caribbean and those born in the UK with Caribbean heritage. Featuring 40 artists, from Aubrey Williams to Alberta Whittle, with everyone from Frank Bowling and Lubaina Himid to Chris Ofili, Isaac Julien, the Otolith Group and Njideka Akunyili Crosby in between, it sets the stage for wonderful conversations between artworks across the decades. With an extraordinary variety of materials, from hard-hitting documentary photography and assemblage, to

Carnival-inspired exuberance, lyrical painting and Afrofuturist visions, it's beautifully paced and often tremendously moving. A must-see, and on until April 3, 2022.

Pablo Bronstein: Hell in its Heyday



Image: Pâtisseries and Confections, 2020-21 by Pablo Bronstein / Pablo Bronstein

Sir John Soane's Museum

Bronstein's magnum opus. A self-confessed Soane Museum obsessive, the Argentinian-British artist has created a remarkable series of watercolours that match the museum's mood of abundance and erudition, imagining Hell as a place of architectural and design excess, realised in the form of the utopian posters of the past. With dizzying references to the fine and decorative arts, hints of autobiography and reflections on queer identity, alongside a biting social commentary on the ravages of empire, the illusion of progress and humankind's ecological folly, it is dazzling, funny and sobering at once. Catch it, by January 2, 2022, if you can.

War Inna Babylon: The Community's Struggle for Truths and Rights



Image: Exhibition view / handout

ICA

For this show on institutional racism and police brutality, community solidarity and protest, the ICA gave over its building and programme to Tottenham Rights, a racial advocacy organisation, who, with curators Kamara Scott and Rianna Jade Parker, created an urgent, devastating exhibition. Using photography, film, press cuttings and explanatory text, with artworks dotted through the archival materials, it began with post-war African Caribbean immigration to the UK and detailed relentless systemic prejudice and the Black community organising and resistance that followed. Its dramatic ending was Forensic Architecture's investigation into the police killing of Mark Duggan, exposing flaws in police evidence that make a mockery of the "lawful killing" verdict.

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Sophie Taeuber-Arp

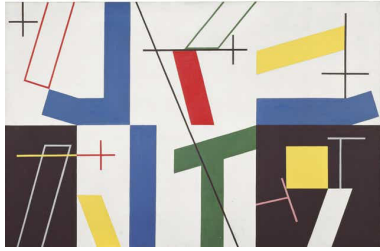


Image: Sechs Räume mit vier kleinen Kreuzen, 1932 by Sophie Taeuber-Arp / Kunstmuseum Bern, Schweiz / Muse

Tate Modern

Like so many women in the Modernist period, Taeuber-Arp is only now getting her due, and Tate Modern did her proud, with a perfectly judged show. It argued that much of her oeuvre emerged from her early studies in dance and her performances with the Zurich Dada group – Dada founder Hugo Ball described her movements as “full of spikes and fish-bones”. Taeuber-Arp wanted to create works that were alive with movement, in whatever form she made them, from playful marionettes, to beautiful textiles, richly colourful paintings, zinging optical reliefs, and the exquisite drawings made just before her sudden death in 1943.

Poussin and the Dance



Image: The Triumph of Pan, 1636 by Nicolas Poussin / National Gallery

National Gallery

Poussin may be the artist's artist, influencing painters from Cezanne to Picasso, but he usually strikes observers as a touch austere. But here we have him in another mood in Rome, taking in the classical remains around him and replicating them in his own paintings of gods at play and everyone dancing... Bacchanals, stately dances, processions. The paintings are grouped round three beautiful pieces of Roman work so we can see how direct their influence was. This is a small exhibition but it changes the way we see Poussin. It finishes, aptly, with A Dance to the Music of Time.

The Credit Suisse Exhibition: Dürer's Journeys: Travels of a Renaissance Artist



Image: Detail of Lion, 1494 by Albrecht Dürer / Hamburger Kunsthalle, Hamburg

National Gallery

Albrecht Dürer's trips to Venice (twice) and to the Low Countries at a time when travel was difficult and dangerous, were opportunities to make useful contacts, develop ideas about perspective, pick up techniques and meet and flatter potential patrons. This exhibition shows Dürer on the move in Europe at a moment of profound change - we find humanists (Erasmus), Reformers (Luther) and rulers (Margaret of Austria) and glimpses of the New World alongside the saints of the old. It shows Dürer as an artist among other artists - and what a curious, interested and practical-minded observer he was.

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Elizabeth and Mary: Royal Cousins, Rival Queens



Image: Exhibition view / handout

British Library

This excellent exhibition is about a tragedy but it has elements of a horror story. We see the two women in their youth – Mary, the beautiful French Queen and Elizabeth, vulnerable at her sister's court; then their situations are reversed as rival monarchs. The terrible trajectory of Mary's fate is shown here through coats of arms, portraits, letters and artefacts, from her tapestry worked in confinement, her impassioned letters to Elizabeth, the menacing notes of the spymasters who monitor her incriminating correspondence, and the layout of her execution, remorselessly choreographed by Robert Cecil. The net closes round her as we watch.

Late Constable



Image: Rainstorm over the Sea, ca. 1824-1828 by John Constable / Royal Academy of Arts, London

Royal Academy

Finally, an exhibition that takes you away from The Haywain to show another side to Constable: the artist of the weather, the man who could depict a rainstorm in a series of angry vertical black brushstrokes, whose obsessive cloud studies translated into wonderful skies where the land simply shows up the magnitude of the skies. His later painting is freer and more expressive too; you can see the thickness of the paint, smeared on with a knife. I'd like to have seen something about the artistic influences on Constable, but this little exhibition shows he was more than a sentimentalist.

Hogarth and Europe



Image: A Scene from The Beggar's Opera VI, 1731 by William Hogarth / Tate

Tate Britain

Notwithstanding the title, there's curiously little here about its notional subject, Hogarth and Europe – travels and influences – but much about the evils of colonialism and slavery. It's only in passing we find that Hogarth did travel to France, nearly got arrested as a spy in Calais and met Chardin.

But if you can get over the obtrusive wokery, there are some beautiful and arresting pieces here both by Hogarth and his contemporaries – Chardin almost steals the show – some of which haven't been seen here for decades. In comparison with the Europeans, btw, Hogarth is a better moralist.

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Thomas Becket: murder and the making of a saint

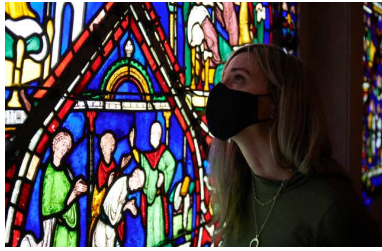


Image: Exhibition view / British Museum

British Museum

An exhibition originally intended to mark the 850th anniversary of Becket's Murder in the Cathedral but events obliged the museum to celebrate 851 years instead. No matter. This was a compelling account of a saint whose fame spread through Europe by dint of his execution but who was a Londoner. It was revelatory to see some of the Canterbury cathedral stained glass at close hand – the way the artificers would have seen it – and what a glorious work it is. There are objects relating to the martyrdom from all over Europe, including a remarkable Swedish altarfont with a Noggin the Nog style depiction of the scene.