

FRIEZE

The Top 10 Shows in the UK of 2021

These are the best exhibitions of the year – from a chronically overdue retrospective of Paula Rego to a debut offering of obfuscated, sexualised sculpture by Jack O'Brien.

This selection represents – in my opinion – a smattering of stand-out moments in a sea of exceptional insurgent, resurgent and staple practices. In a recent chat with my colleagues Chloe Stead and Terence Trouillot, we discussed how 2021 was a year of recovery for galleries and artists alike. As we teeter on the edge of remission, I invite you to look back over some of the shows and works that persisted, flourished, even, despite the odds – from a chronically overdue retrospective of Paula Rego to a debut offering of obfuscated, sexualised sculpture by Jack O'Brien.



Image: Paula Rego, The Betrothal: Lessons: The Shipwreck, after 'Marriage à la Mode' by Hogarth (detail), 1999, pastel on aluminium, triptych, 1.6 × 5 m. Courtesy: © Paula Rego

Paula Rego
Tate Britain
London

Rego's 1987 painting *The Policeman's Daughter* graced the September cover of *frieze*. It's a work that typifies the tendrils that underpin the artist's 60-year practice – female figures, echoes of Magritte, the uncanny, surrealism, peculiar animals. We tasked Katherine Angel with synthesising this incredible body of work into a neat profile; she wrote: 'Rego's most enduring theme is women alone, dealing with their lot. Not even the Virgin Mary can escape it: depicted in the throes of labour in *Nativity* (2002), she writhes in pain, clutching her swollen belly, her head resting on the legs of an angel who serves as a midwife in a kind of inverted pietà. Installed in the Belém Palace in Lisbon, the seat of the Portuguese government, it serves as a wry reminder of the foundational story of the culture which Rego depicts: a woman's body, in suffering and exultation, whose pain is both her power and her curse.'



Image: Ibrahim Mahama, Malam Dadoo National Theatre, 1992-2016, 2016, installation view. © the artist. Courtesy: White Cube; photograph: © Ibrahim Mahama

Ibrahim Mahama
White Cube Bermondsey
London

Ibrahim Mahama's is a limitless practice that's seen him cloak public buildings in his native Ghana in the distinctive jute sacking that characterises his installation and sculptural work. His autumn exhibition was – with Theaster Gates's solo show at White Cube Mason's Yard – a highlight in the gallery's 2021 calendar. Vanessa Peterson spoke to the artist in the October issue of *frieze* about the country's post-independence, architecture and the importance of his collaborators. 'I'm interested in the point where the relationship between the material and society, or the space it finds itself in, breaks down,' said Mahama. 'I bring jute into the realm of art, which transforms it into a commodity more valuable than the cocoa beans it once contained.'

Stephen Friedman Gallery

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Sean Burns
15 December 2021



Image: Cathy Wilkes, *Untitled* (detail), 2021, cardboard, paper, wire and acrylic, 150 × 69.5 × 40 cm. Courtesy: the artist and The Modern Institute/Toby Webster Ltd, Glasgow

Cathy Wilkes
The Modern Institute
Glasgow

A Cathy Wilkes show feels like a special occasion. Her exhibition at The Modern Institute offers a painfully understated collection of etching, painting and sculpture – cut with her unique take on jilted, inimical domesticity. She penetrates the excess of contemporary life, forcing us to scrutinise sparse cloth, scratches and wiring closely. Helen Charman recently found that, with Wilkes, nothing is ever as it seems: ‘As the weather changes and the light flickers and moves, any certainties of interpretation falter. The specks of red on the floor and on the hand of a wire figure, previously a dead ringer for real blood, reveal themselves to be simply spots of fabric more scarlet than crimson, almost petal-like, an approximation of violence rather than its reality.’



Image: James Barnor, *Drum Cover Girl*, Erlin Ibreck, London, 1966, photograph. Courtesy: the artist and Autograph ABP, London

James Barnor
Serpentine Galleries
London

If you wandered into the Serpentine this spring, the chances of running into the 92-year-old photographer James Barnor were – reportedly – high. His retrospective was undoubtedly the star of this year’s Serpentine offer – and, similarly to Rego, the large-scale recognition had been long-overdue. In a feature from the May issue of *frieze*, Afua Hirsch spoke to the photographer about how his work had shaped the imagination of a generation of Black Britons. ‘I wish I’d had an inkling of what they would become,’ he said. ‘I was ambitious but didn’t in the slightest expect my photographs to inspire and go all over the world as they have today.’



Image: Jack O'Brien, *'Waiting for the Sun to Kill Me'*, 2021, installation view. Courtesy: the artist and Ginny on Frederick, London

Jack O'Brien
Ginny on Frederick
London

In an age of JustForFans and porn Twitter – where everything seems explicit and monetised – it took a series of quiet and yearning assemblage sculptures by Jack O'Brien to ignite the imagination of London’s gays. Arranged in a small former shop unit in Clerkenwell, ‘Waiting for the Sun to Kill Me’ seemed – to me, at least – to distil our thirst for ambiguity and complexity in a time when categories that ought to be collapsing appear to be crystallising. Sam Moore summarised the crux of O'Brien’s project in September: ‘These sculptures, ostensibly about desire and eroticized bodies, are – literally, physically – wrapped in the darkness and potential for violence that has informed the history of queer sex. This exists hand-in-hand with the idea of public sex – attested to in the scuffed socks, a lingering memory of dropping to your knees for a fleeting encounter – to which the exhibition title alludes.’

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Image: Hurvin Anderson, *Grace Jones*, 2020, oil on linen, 2.2 × 1.5 m. Courtesy: © the artist and Thomas Dane Gallery, London/Naples; photograph: Richard Ivey

'A Life Between Islands'

Tate Britain

London

Tate finished the year on a high with an unbelievably packed assessment of Caribbean-British art from the 1950s to the present day. Early works by Isaac Julien shine amongst archive photographs – including works by Neil Kenlock and Ada M. Patterson – with titans of contemporary painting, such as Hurvin Anderson, Peter Doig and Denzil Forrester. Anderson and Doig united again in the November/December issue of *frieze* to chew over how the islands figure in their life and work. 'There was a difference between British-born diasporic Jamaicans and Jamaicans, and it always intrigued me what that thing was,' said Anderson. 'Our home felt like a Caribbean home but then, when I stepped out the front door, I was in Britain. With the paintings, I'm trying to get at where these things overlap or clash. Where they meet or don't meet.'



Image: Phyllis Christopher, *Party, Los Angeles*, 1999. Courtesy: the artist and Grand Union, Birmingham, and BALTIC Centre for Contemporary Art

Phyllis Christopher

Grand Union

Birmingham

BALTIC

Gateshead

A dual exhibition (and forthcoming book from Book Works) of Phyllis Christopher transported us to San Francisco's lesbian scene of the 1990s this autumn. When touch – or lack of – seemed so atomic in our day-to-day lives, Christopher's invitation to pick through her shredded images seemed even more pertinent. In October, Emily Scarrott discovered the artist's delight in queer kinship. 'As the experiences of LGBTQ+ communities become more prevalent in mainstream media,' she wrote, 'focus is often placed on the tragic conclusions of individual narratives, while the joys of queer lifestyles are sidelined. Christopher documents San Francisco between 1988 and 2007, from the height of the AIDS crisis to the years of collective healing that followed.'



Image: Rhea Dillon, *'Nonbody Nonthing No Thing'*, 2021, exhibition view. Courtesy: the artist and V.O Curations, London

Rhea Dillon

V.O Curations

London

You may have deciphered that, in the last year, understated but reverent works have most compelled me. I think it's because they do something to communicate the economy of the present moment – where materials and resources are scarce or curtailed. As a result of intermittent isolation, we have more time, perhaps, to consider the objects around us and their attendant meanings and relations. Donna Marcus Duke – a participant in our inaugural *Frieze* New Writers programme – addressed the layers of ancestral energy imbued in Rhea Dillon's show (curated by Kate Wong) at V.O Curations: 'Affecting, abstracted and, at times, mystical, Dillon's family history becomes a tribute to the ignored and unseen manual work of the Windrush Generation.'

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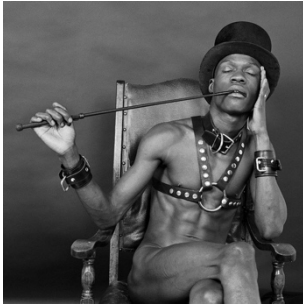


Image: Ajamu X, from the series 'Circus Master', 1997, photograph. Courtesy: the artist

Ajamu X
Cubitt
London

2021 has been a busy year for Ajamu X. He entered the Tate Collection, published a monograph (Ajamu: Archive), exhibited at Glasgow International and, most importantly, appeared on the cover of Frieze in January. But it was 'Archival Sensoria' at Cubitt in the summer that affirmed a new bout of attention in his career-long project to celebrate pleasure and the Black body. Kevin Brazil crept into Ajamu's Brixton darkroom, writing: 'His sex parties were also informed by an archival impulse: they were a way to explore the body as a record not just of pain and trauma, but of pleasure. Through our bodies, as Ajamu puts it: "We bring our archives with us."'



Image: Alberta Whittle, between a whisper and a cry, 2019, HD video, chairs, chain and screen. © Alberta Whittle; courtesy: the artist and Lisson Gallery, London

'An Infinity of Traces'
Lisson Gallery
London

At the beginning of the year, Ekow Eshun assembled a group of UK-based Black artists working with notions of race, history, being and belonging. The resulting exhibition, 'An Infinity of Traces', contained works by some of 2021's most prominent UK practitioners, including the founder of Turner Prize-nominated Black Obsidian Sound System, Evan Ifekoya; Scotland's Venice Biennale 2022 representative, Alberta Whittle; and Turner Bursary recipient 2020 Liz Johnson Artur. In April, Aida Amoako concluded that the exhibition 'explores not only the effects of oppressive forces but also the communities and healing practices that developed (and continue to develop) in response to Britain's legacy of hostility towards Black presence.'

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