

Herbert

Art Gallery & Museum, Coventry

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thirteen ways of looking

02.10.20 – 13.12.20

#13waysoflooking

Thirteen Ways of Looking

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Thirteen Ways of Looking

An Overview by Dr Sylvia Theuri

“ When the blackbird flew out of sight,
It marked the edge
Of one of many circles.”

‘Thirteen Way of Looking at a Blackbird’ (1917)

The title of this exhibition is inspired by Wallace Stevens’ poem entitled **‘Thirteen Way of Looking at a Blackbird’**. The blackbird appears in many forms throughout the poem, presenting the reader with myriad ways to ‘see’ and engage with the bird. The content and structure of the poem both lend themselves to an exploration of varying viewpoints through the creation of multi-perspectival views of the bird as subject.

Stevens uses metaphor to explore the subject from many angles, such that the blackbird is flexible, fluid and decentred. The methodology employed in the poem is central to the thinking and curatorial stance behind this exhibition. It is a tool that is used to explore what it means to pull apart and decentre cultural and socially normalised single-story narratives. This strategy is enacted in order to give space for the centring of international, multicultural, multi-faith and feminist perspectives, which seek to ‘interrupt, appropriate and transform’ (Soja 1996:98) the gallery through the artworks, the subject matter and the forms that the artists explore.

It is with this thinking behind it that *Thirteen Ways of Looking* brings together the work of 13 artists and curators at different stages of their careers. Working in a wide range of media, they bring forth varied and multifaceted perspectives as they resist containment to one-sided perspectives. Their individual working methodologies actively create space for multiple realities, lived experiences and ways of being.

This exhibition builds on work by New Art West Midlands in supporting recently graduated and emerging artists from the West Midlands and the International Curators Forum 2017 Diaspora Pavilion at Venice Biennale. It showcases the work of 6 artists from the region who were selected through a partnership with New Art West Midlands, International Curators Forum, and Coventry Biennial – Hira Butt, Andreana Fatta, Navi Kaur, Shiyi Li, Farwa Moledina, and Matías Serra Delmar. Throughout the exhibition the works of the 6 artists are in dialogue with the work of 7 other artists and curators from various part of the country. Collectively all the artists explore different strategies of resistance that overlap and intersect throughout the exhibition. The themes that their works explore are ever more pertinent during this significantly challenging time, as we battle with the devastation caused by the Coronavirus pandemic and as sweeping protests against deeply imbedded and historically racist structures lead to global declarations that ‘Black Lives Matter’.

In this exhibition the work of Andreana Fatta, Roshini Kempadoo, Farwa Moledina and Keith Piper explore the archive and personal and cultural memories as strategies of resistance. Hira Butt, Eddie Chambers, Sonya Dyer, Hyphen-Labs, Navi Kaur and Shiyi Li centre the lived experiences and knowledge of people of colour in and through their work. Shama Khanna and Matías Serra Delmar disrupt traditional ways of viewing art and force us to question where art belongs. Hyphen-Labs, Shama Khanna and Donald Rodney explore digital spaces as sites for disruption and representation. The importance of imagined, futuristic, geographical, domestic and faith spaces in relation to home and belonging can be seen in the work of several of the artists.

The exhibition begins outside with the work of Matías Serra Delmar, utilising his experience of growing up in Argentina to inform his practice. This has resulted in work that disrupts and decentres how one would normally encounter or move through an exhibition environment, thus we are able to question who this gallery space is historically made available to and how we should engage in it and with it. Then as you enter the main gallery you are presented with the work of Farwa Moledina which centres Muslim women and their notable achievements which are often rendered invisible in the history books. Moledina's piece includes audio of the artist quietly reciting *'The bullet doesn't kill, what kills is the silence of people'* a poem by Sudanese poet Azhari Mohammad Ali calling for revolution.

The show also includes selected key artworks made by members of the Blk Art Group – Eddie Chambers, Keith Piper and Donald Rodney – highlighting the group's connections to Coventry, including the initial meeting of members Eddie Chambers and Keith Piper 40 years ago as students at Coventry University. The Blk Art Group has had a substantial impact on the visual arts in Britain, providing a backdrop and foundation upon which there emerged artists of South Asian, African and Afro-Caribbean descent, making artwork that would form part of what came to be known as the 'Black Arts Movement'. The artists and the movement decentred and destabilised the arts regionally, nationally and internationally.

The exhibition ends with the work of Hyphen-Labs, who have created a piece of virtual reality speculative fiction. Among other things their work explores racial discrimination and the politics of identity, whilst also speculating of a future that goes beyond these challenges. We can view their work as evidence of the 'cultural dissidence' of people of colour. Rather than creating utopian, imaginary and unrealistic examples of the experiences of people of colour, we should view their work as creating a space of 'tranfigurative politics' in which minoritised communities contrast new and

better possibilities against their current realities in which societal inequalities exist (McLeod 2004:16).

This overview provides insight into some of the themes explored by the artists and curators in this exhibition. There are more that have not been discussed but can be discovered as you engage with the exhibition both in the physical gallery, and through the online content that will be shared throughout the duration of the exhibition.

It is with this thinking behind it that Thirteen Ways of Looking brings together the work of 13 artists and curators at different stages of their careers. Working in a wide range of media, they bring forth varied and multifaceted perspectives as they resist containment to one-sided perspectives. Their individual working methodologies actively create space for multiple realities, lived experiences and ways of being.

Key Partners and involvement

International Curators Forum

International Curators Forum (ICF) was invited by New Art West Midlands to partner on this initiative to select a cohort of early-career artists to exhibit in the 2019 Coventry Biennial and to provide an opportunity to a Curator in Residence to work with 6 of those artists and 6 established artists on an exhibition at the Herbert in 2020. These professional development opportunities took up aspects of ICF's Diaspora Pavilion programme and built upon ICF's decade-long dedication to supporting and profiling emerging practitioners from diverse backgrounds. Throughout her undertaking of the curatorial residency, ICF has been offering Sylvia mentorship around the development of her curatorial framing for her exhibition at the Herbert. From the beginning of the residency, Sylvia expressed a clear interest in curating in the digital realm as a means of bridging the gap between museum spaces and the wider public, the importance of which has taken on a new dimension in the face of the complex and restrictive environment created by the Covid-19 pandemic. In the recent months, ICF has worked to assist Sylvia and the exhibiting artists in thinking through this relationship between the physical exhibition and its expansion into digital platforms.

ICF publicly promotes the work of cultural practitioners, and to encourage and develop artistic and curatorial practice and discourse about contemporary visual art across all forms. ICF does this through commissioning new works, programming and presenting these and other artworks in exhibitions, projects and events. ICF also promotes and supports the professional development and public visibility of cultural practitioners through programmes that include public exhibitions and events, residencies, mentoring and masterclasses that aim to equip artists and curators to create and present contemporary visual art of high merit from which a diverse public can benefit.

Herbert Art Gallery & Museum

Herbert Art Gallery & Museum is a museum, art gallery, archive and creative arts facility in Coventry. The Herbert was invited by New Art West Midlands to work in partnership to present a new commissions-based exhibition model during the autumn of 2020. The Herbert hosted Sylvia's curatorial residency

and supported her in developing and realising the exhibition with 6 early-career artists and 7 established artists and curators, working alongside the exhibitions, marketing, media and technical teams at the Herbert.

The exhibition is the first show to open following the COVID-19 pandemic and has provided an opportunity to showcase diverse perspectives which overlap and intersect in the physical spaces of the gallery and digitally online. Key to the Herbert's future ambitions is to utilise virtual spaces as an extension of programming and to provide a space for meaningful discussions to take place. Thirteen Ways of Looking has enabled this through the combined skills of the marketing team, artists, curators and creative partners working together to generate a wide range of outputs targeted at a variety of audiences.

New Art West Midlands

New Art West Midlands is the Contemporary Visual Arts Network for the region. Their purpose is to strengthen and develop the contemporary visual arts sector in the West Midlands, working collectively to safeguard the future of artists and our sector as a whole. Together with their partners, they create defining opportunities for artists and arts professionals to develop their practices through a distinctive, critically-engaged programme. Their programme strands include the annual New Art West Midlands exhibition for recent graduates, and Engine, their region-wide professional development programme for artists and curators.

New Art West Midlands plays a leading role in the development of a closer, strategic partnership between Higher Education arts institutions, arts organisations, artists and independent arts professionals. Together they are developing a regional Visual Arts Strategy that aims to support artists at every stage of their career, as part of a shared commitment to creating an ecology that values and celebrates the visual arts as an essential part of people's lives in the West Midlands.

At a national and international level New Art West Midlands works closely with the other regions of England under the banner of CVAN (the Contemporary Visual Arts Network). The UK's contemporary visual arts

sector is the world leader in this field, and together they work to advocate, evidence and demonstrate its contribution to national and regional economies, and to society in general – a contribution that returns far more than the small amount of public subsidy it receives.

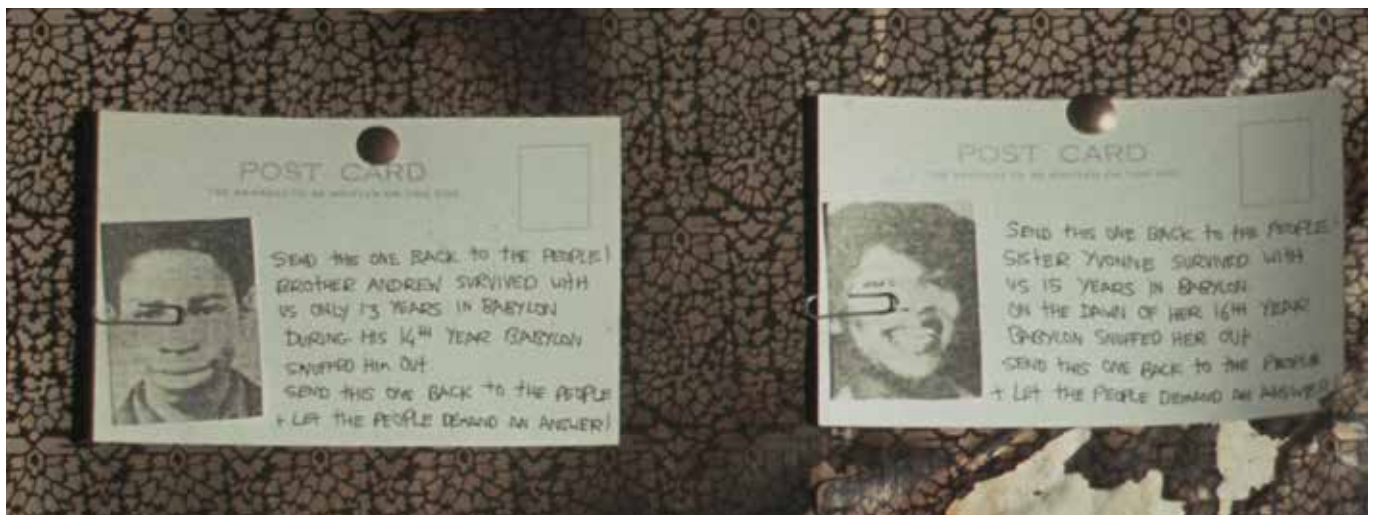
Coventry Biennial

Coventry Biennial is the UK's social biennial. They support and present socially, politically and critically engaged artistic practices in Coventry and Warwickshire to local, national and international audiences. They support artists and community groups to respond to the world(s) around them and encourage collaboration, partnership and other kinds of informal support between artists, organisations and citizens.

In 2019 they worked with New Art West Midlands and International Curators Forum to present the work of twenty early career, recently graduated artists in

a project called Coventry Biennial x New Art West Midlands during *Coventry Biennial 2019: The Twin*. Following that exhibition six of these artists were selected by Sylvia to make new artworks for *Thirteen Ways of Looking* at the Herbert Art Gallery & Museum. Coventry Biennial have also provided technical expertise and support throughout the production of this significant exhibition ensuring that the artists and curators can achieve their aims in these difficult and unprecedented times.

Coventry Biennial's vision is to play an active part in provoking and participating in the growing cultural debates in Coventry and Warwickshire as well as nationally and internationally and the themes explored, presented, challenged and addressed throughout *Thirteen Ways of Looking* resonate strongly with Coventry Biennial's commitments to inclusivity, accessibility, diversity, comfort and collaboration.



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Artists and Curators



Hira Butt

Dhee Kahani (Daughter's Tale)

2020

Mixed media

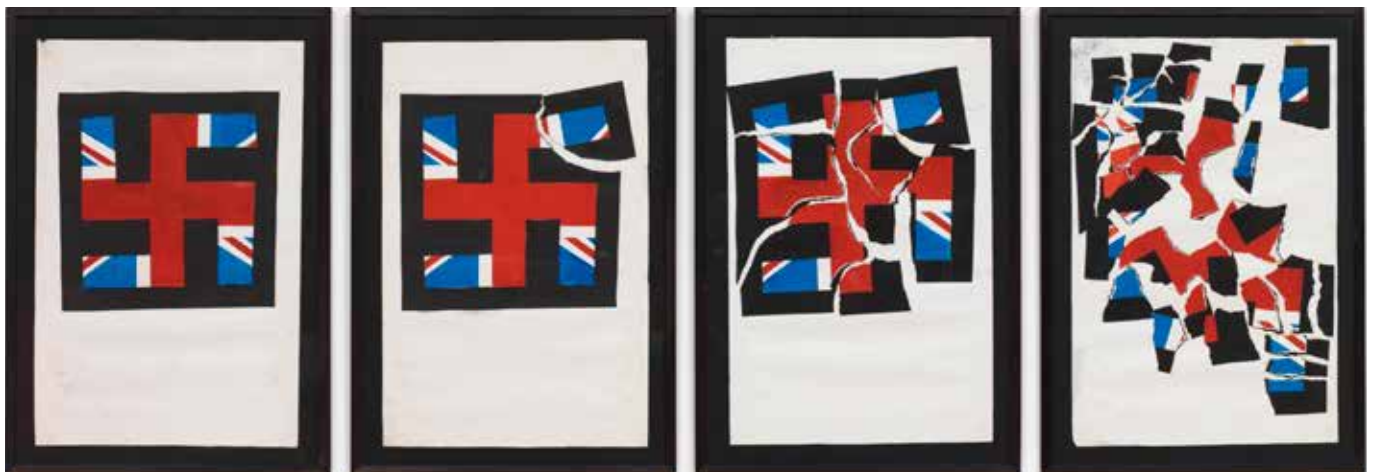
Hira Butt's work explores the place of South Asian women within marital and domestic spaces. This work has developed as a result of personal experience and conversations with married Pakistani women during a recent trip to Pakistan by the artist. Butt explores the layered complexity of traditional culture and how it can be used to exploit the meaning of relationships. Her piece centres on golden bangles which are often gifted to Pakistani women on their wedding day, as a symbol of trust and value. The bangles are unassuming, seen by Butt as having become part of South Asian women's personal lives. Butt reworks these bangles, intertwining them with pieces of 'dupatta', an adorned red scarf that forms part of the bride's traditional wedding attire. This process of reworking changes their function, raising questions about the wedding day and the life promised that may not materialise.

Eddie Chambers

Destruction of the National Front
1979-80

4 screen-prints on paper on card

This artwork was created while Eddie Chambers was a student on an art foundation course at Coventry University, where he first met Keith Piper. Chambers was a member of the Blk Art Group in the early 1980s. Alongside Chambers the Blk Art Group included Keith Piper, Donald Rodney, Marlene Smith and Claudette Johnson. The work they produced engaged directly with the socio-political issues of the time. The 1970s saw the rapid rise of the National Front (NF), a political party which called for a ban on non-white immigration and for enforced repatriation. This work is a response to the appropriation of the British flag by a racist ideology. Chambers tore up and reconfigured an image of the Union Jack as a swastika, indicating the widespread association of the NF with the Nazis. The collage, consisting of scattered fragments, is no longer recognisable as either an image of the flag or the swastika.



**This work is a response
to the appropriation
of the British flag by
a racist ideology.**

Sonya Dyer

Hailing Frequencies Open

2019

Video

The two films in the exhibition are part of an ongoing series of video works generated from interviews by Sonya Dyer with Black women scientists*, exploring the meaning of HeLa cells, the collision between Black bodies and medical sciences and the relationship between science and science fiction. *Hailing Frequencies Open* is an expansive body of work by Dyer, intersecting the Greek myth of Andromeda, actor Nichelle Nichols' (*Star Trek's* Uhura) astronaut recruitment activism and the complex genesis of HeLa cells.

* Dr Chanda Prescod-Weinstein & Dr Miranda Lowe





Andreana Fatta
Μια Ατελείωτη Συνομιλία
(An Endless Conversation)

2020

Video, archival footage 1981,
ongoing digital archive, green vinyl

Andreana Fatta's practice addresses the colonial history of Cyprus and how this has affected the culture and identity of the island's citizens. This work focuses on archiving family footage and materials. These merge with the artist's own experiences of Cyprus, her own displacement and the concept of the Buffer Zone or Green Line. The United Nations Buffer Zone divides the island into north and south. Cyprus has become a country where borders and checkpoints are normalised. Fatta's current research and artworks reflect her experience of going through the Buffer Zone in the capital Lefkosia (also known as Nicosia), which remains the only divided capital in the world. The film contains

found footage taken in 1981, including clips of Fatta's uncles trying to find their abandoned home from within the Buffer Zone. Alongside the film, a green line runs through the gallery space from east to west, mirroring that of the island.



NSAF was created partly as a response to Black Lives Matter in relation to the killings of Black men in America - Philando Castile and Alton Sterling.

Hyphen-Labs

NeuroSpeculative AfroFeminism

2017

Objects, Virtual Reality

Hyphen-Labs uses objects and virtual reality (VR) as another dimension in which to tell stories and center the experiences of women of colour. **NeuroSpeculative AfroFeminism (NSAF)** is a transmedia exploration told through speculative product design, emerging technologies, cognitive research, and transhumanism. Created by and for women of colour, Hyphen-Labs presents a multi-layered possible future that transcends the constraints of the present; a realm which *The New Yorker* has called "another plane of consciousness."

NSAF was created partly as a response to Black Lives Matter in relation to the killings of Black men in America - Philando Castile and Alton Sterling. The work presents Black women as neuro-scientists using the space of the beauty salon as a revolutionary underground system for a fundamentally new shared exchange of ideas.

For this exhibition Hyphen-Labs are showing a teaser of their VR film and visual examples of objects from the film. The VR experience is the first chapter of a science fiction story placing you in a "neurocosmetology lab" where Black women are the pioneers of brain optimization. Here, instead of ordinary braids, customers are fitted with transcranial electrodes that allow access to a surreal digital temple blending the physical with the digital. Themes of security, privacy, and visibility unify six speculative products, ranging from UVBeams (a transparent sunscreen specifically formulated for skin high in Melanin) to Hyperface (a facial recognition obscuring, anti-surveillance textile developed in collaboration with artist, Adam Harvey).

Navi Kaur

5:22pm

2020

Film

Navi Kaur's work is inspired by the lives of her paternal grandparents, Surinder ('Budimom') and Karamjit ('Baba Ji'). She intimately and playfully documents themes of domestic, cultural, and spiritual significance. 5:22pm comprises two short films that place narratives of minoritised voices at their centre - in this case the Punjabi traditions housed in modern day Britain. They give insight into Kaur's grandparents' day-to-day routines, highlighting their dedication to their Sikh faith, despite being unable to visit the Gurdwara (Sikh temple) during the isolating lockdown period. You are invited to rest, reflect, and reimagine how your own rituals can play a wider part in your daily activities, from reciting prayer at specific times of the day to lovingly and carefully making a sandwich for someone close to you.

They give insight into Kaur's grandparents' day-to-day routines, highlighting their dedication to their Sikh faith, despite being unable to visit the Gurdwara (Sikh temple) during the isolating lockdown period.





Shama Khanna

Shama Khanna is an independent curator, writer, and educator from London via Nairobi, where they were born. Khanna is committed to creating opportunities for marginalised artists and publics to practise and engage with the arts, as much as possible, on their own terms. Khanna curates *Flatness* which is a long running commissioning and sharing platform – a website that showcases the work of a range of artists. The site gives space for artwork to be seen outside of the gallery space. West Midlands artists Hira Butt, Andreana Fatta, Navi Kaur, Shiyi Li, Farwa Moledina and Matías Serra Delmar, who were commissioned to make new work for this exhibition, will be featured on the *Flatness* homepage and archived within a contributor page. Through this collaboration there is an overlapping and intersecting in the physical spaces of the gallery and digitally online. Khanna has also written a critical research piece about the site looking at the ways in which, through deconstruction and disorder, it challenges the way audiences predominantly view and experience artwork within a white cube space. This text will be available to read online at flatness.eu.

Roshini Kempadoo

Virtual Exiles

2000

Giclée photographic prints



Roshini Kempadoo's works interpret and re-imagine contemporary and historical experiences of the particular and every day. She evokes women's perspectives through fictional writings, photographs, recordings, music, interactivity, and networked environments, focusing on what is often less visible, underrepresented, or unsaid.

“ Virtual Exiles contributes to our own version of what it means to step between two spaces at once. To visually describe this difference becomes an important inscription to everyday encounters and our writing of the past ... ”

**David Dabydeen, January 2000.
Caribbean author, poet, scholar.**

This work explores the experiences of persons who have left their country of origin and who are now at 'home' in another. Engaging with historical, family, and contemporary photographs of Guyana, the work investigates Kempadoo's status as refugee/exile/expatriate/emigre in relation to her own country of birth, England, and her country of origin and upbringing, Guyana.

Roshini Kempadoo

Moove...[s] In solidarity

2020

Giclée prints

Try

Try to imagine being arrested at 14

Fourteen....

or try

*Try to imagine your child seeing you fall because you
were tasered*

*Or imagine receiving a letter after 50 years in this
country stating*

"LIABILITY FOR REMOVAL"



*It's happening out there, beyond the boundaries and
confinement of home in Lewisham*

I see, feel and hear nonetheless.

*This body is consumed and rocked by sadness, anger
and heartbreak as I hear of killings and brutality – by
police, by politicians' lack of caring, by abhorrent
cronyism, by white privilege.*

But I know something unprecedented is erupting

*in-between environmental crises and
outmoded dysfunctional systems of capital*

*This body embraces the John Lewis eulogies and
black women's sounds of affirmation, affiliation, and
beauty*

*And most of all, humbled by voices of young folk -
who persevere despite a broke and racist system
calling for change, for lifeness and futurity.*

*"... So love your neck; put a hand on it, grace it, stroke
it and hold it up."*

Toni Morrison (1987) Beloved

Shiyi Li

Dreamerfly and other stories

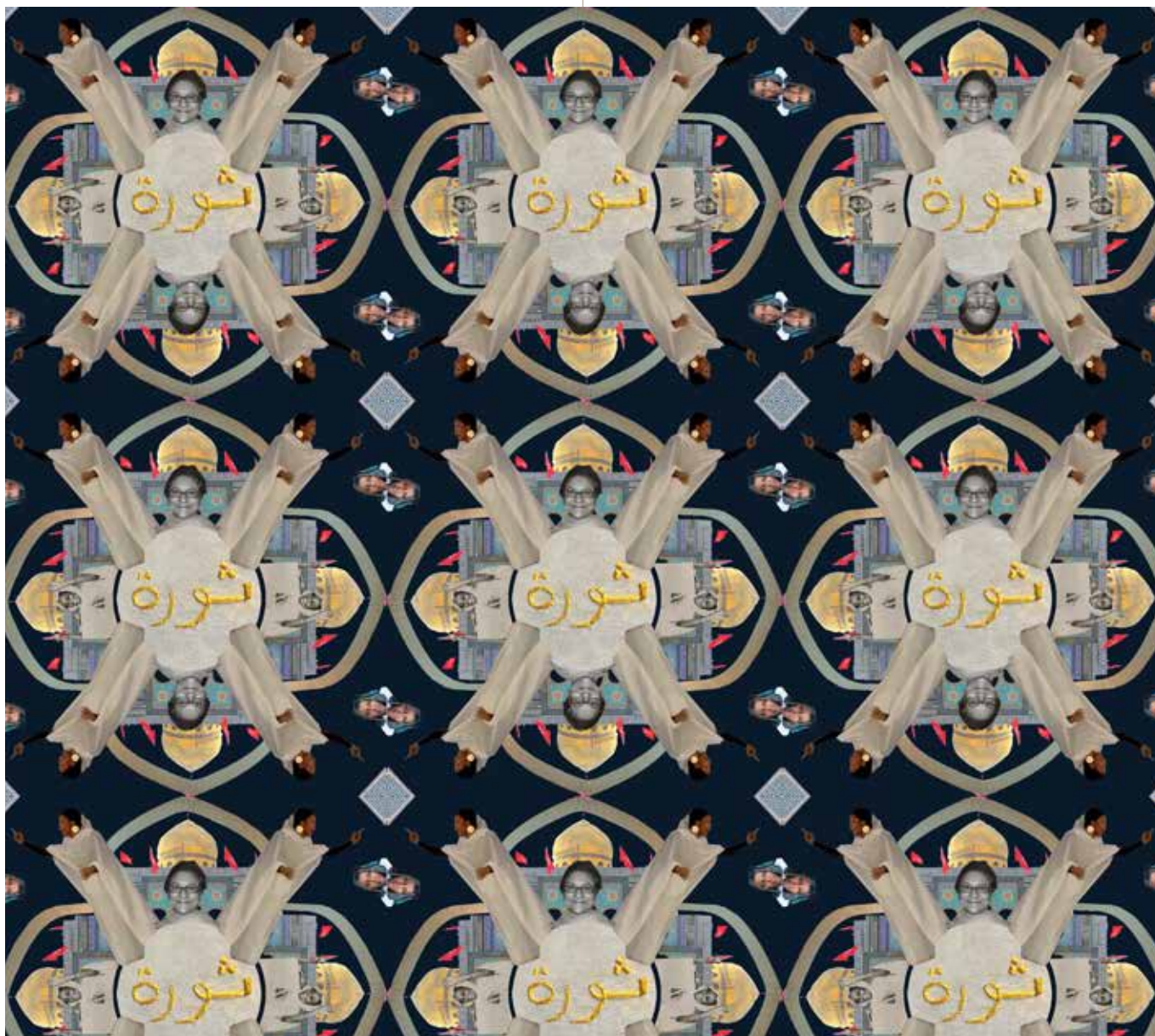
2020

Video installation



Shiyi Li's practice encompasses collaborative performance, contemporary jazz music, multi-screen animation projections and live art performances.

Shiyi Li's practice encompasses collaborative performance, contemporary jazz music, multi-screen animation projections and live art performances. This work consists of a short, animated film incorporating original music composed by James Owston. Li's work presents the narrative of a Chinese woman who has recently migrated to the UK, exploring the awakenings brought to her as a result of entering a new space. It considers themes of struggle, loss, loneliness, balance, and rebirth by comparing a macro world to a micro world. Li simultaneously places the universe, the individual and nature at the centre of the narrative. For this piece Li was inspired by the ancient Chinese philosophical narrative 'A Butterfly Dream' by Chinese philosopher Chuang Tzu, which highlights tensions between illusion and reality.



Farwa Moledina

Thawra / ثورة

2020

Digital print on fabric, mixed media

Farwa Moledina's work is concerned with the lived experiences of Muslim women. This piece explores the erasure that Muslim women have faced throughout history.

Its title 'Thawra', meaning 'Revolution', is a term and concept which gained momentum and notoriety in the protests of the Arab Spring in the early 2010s. The work comprises a pattern woven through columns

of gold thread. An unwoven outline of Alaa Salah, one of many Sudanese women leading protests against the government in April 2019, is central to the work.

This image of Salah taken by photographer Lana Haroun went viral on social media, although largely only within Muslim communities. Moledina's choice to leave the outline unwoven is a political one and symbolises the erasure of Muslim women's histories and contributions. The pattern woven within hints at the nature of Moledina's work, obvious to those who have a knowledge of the complex histories of Muslim women.



Keith Piper

'THIRTEEN DEAD'

January 1982

Mixed media on hardboard

'THIRTEEN DEAD' was made in response to the New Cross Fire of January 1981 in which 13 young black people lost their lives in an apparent act of racist violence. This traumatic event massively influenced the formation of political consciousness among Britain's black community in the early 1980s, leading to the 'Black People's Day of Action' in March 1981, and a series of events that culminated in the Brixton Uprising of April 1981. As a young artist and part of the Blk Art Group, Keith Piper was looking for ways of responding to the contemporary political events in his art practice.

This work featured in *The Pan-Afrikan Connection*, an exhibition by the Blk Art Group held at the Herbert Art Gallery & Museum in March 1983.

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Donald Rodney

How the West was Won

1982

Acrylic paint on canvas

This work was painted when Donald Rodney was 21 years old and a student at Nottingham Trent University. It dates to a time when Rodney was part of the Blk Art Group. The work highlights the racial implications of historical events through dark humour and the appropriation of images from popular culture. Historian Eddie Chambers has argued that in *How the West was Won* Rodney critiques 'Hollywood's "cowboys and

Indians" films that tended to present Indian resistance to settler domination as the criminality of savages, for which ruthless suppression was the only fitting response'. Rodney's work highlights the violent history surrounding the colonisation of the American West.

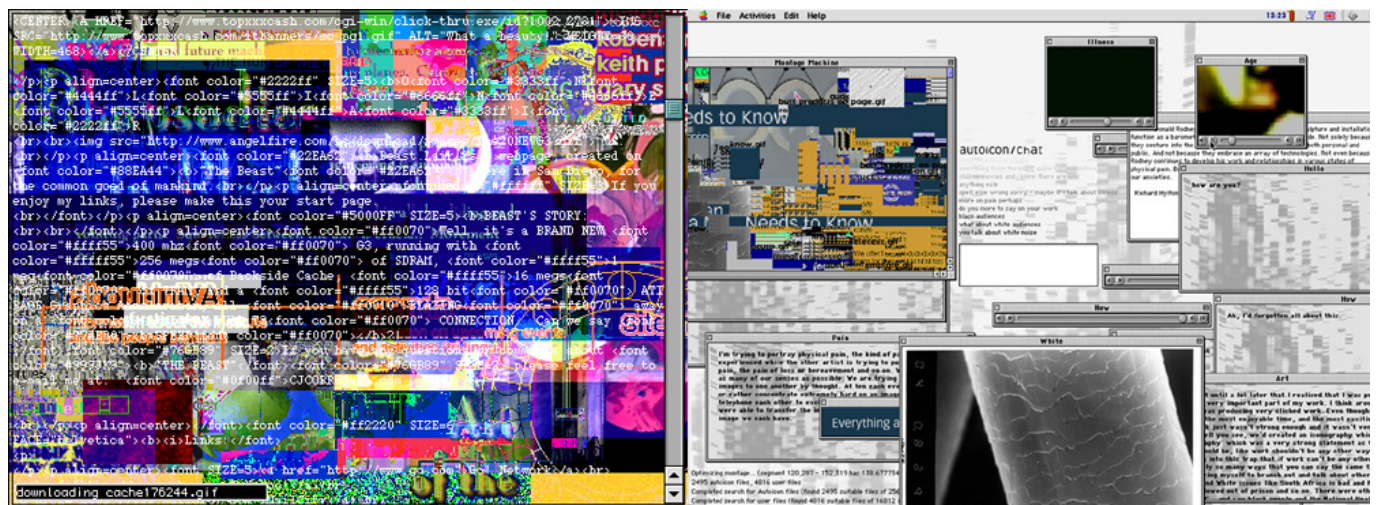
Donald Rodney

Autoicon

2000

Digital

Autoicon is a dynamic internet work and CD-ROM that simulates both the physical presence and elements of the creative personality of the artist Donald Rodney, who died from sickle-cell anaemia. The project builds on Rodney's artistic practice in his later years when he increasingly began to delegate key roles in the organisation and production of his artwork. Making reference to this working process, *Autoicon* is developed by a close group of friends and artists: his partner Diane Symons, Eddie Chambers, Richard Hylton, Virginia Nimarkoh, and Keith Piper. They have acted as an advisory and editorial board in the artist's absence and specified the rules by which the 'automated' aspects of the project operate. Users of *Autoicon* encounter a 'live' presence through a 'body' of data, which refers to the mass medical data produced on the human body and engage in simulated dialogue.



The project builds on Rodney's artistic practice in his later years when he increasingly began to delegate key roles in the organisation and production of his artwork.

Matías Serra Delmar

Mixed media

Buckets

Wood turns ash

Distant calamities

such-and-such

Music plays in the background

Simultaneity makes me sick

Berries need picking – those birds

Canvas stretched over pandemic,

fingers cut/ stinging nettle

Senti-miento

(Sign not currently in use)

The same. The old

volatile

statues.

Did you mind that?

Buckets and spades

raw materials found encircling construction sites in fast-growing cities, specifically the precarious constructions that one finds in Buenos Aires in Argentina, where he was born and raised. For this exhibition Serra Delmar has created a number of site-specific installations that incorporate canvas paintings. He seeks to break up the exhibition space and decentre the audience from the traditional utilisation of gallery spaces. Serra Delmar experiments with the boundaries between installation and painting. The nature of the materials and the way that they have been assembled conveys the notion of something that is both 'under construction' and confused.

Matías Serra Delmar's work makes reference to the



Thirteen Ways of Looking

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Herbert Art Gallery & Museum, Coventry

thirteen ways of looking

Thirteen Ways of Looking is curated by Dr Sylvia Theuri by way of a New Art West Midlands and International Curators Forum Curatorial Residency in partnership with and hosted by Herbert Art Gallery & Museum, in association with Coventry Biennial.



Supported by

