



HOXTON MINI PRESS

An Opinionated Guide to British Art



Text by Lucy Davies

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From William Blake to a wearable washing machine, discover the most iconic British artworks.

What's so great about a Hogarth? Why should we care about a shark in a tank? What does it matter that they are both British artworks? This short but very opinionated guide takes you on a whirlwind tour of 65 iconic artworks, and explains in no uncertain terms why they matter and why British Art is amongst the most exciting in the world. Lucy Davies shares the stories and meaning behind these wonderful works of art with wit and wisdom.

The first book in a new series of Opinionated Guides on art movements, mediums and ideas which builds on the success of Hoxton Mini Press's Opinionated Guides to London.

Lucy Davies is the former visual arts editor of the Telegraph, and now a writer and curator based in London. She is the author of several books on painting and photography and a regular contributor to national newspapers and magazines. She's also written lots for Hoxton Mini Press.

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Sample spreads

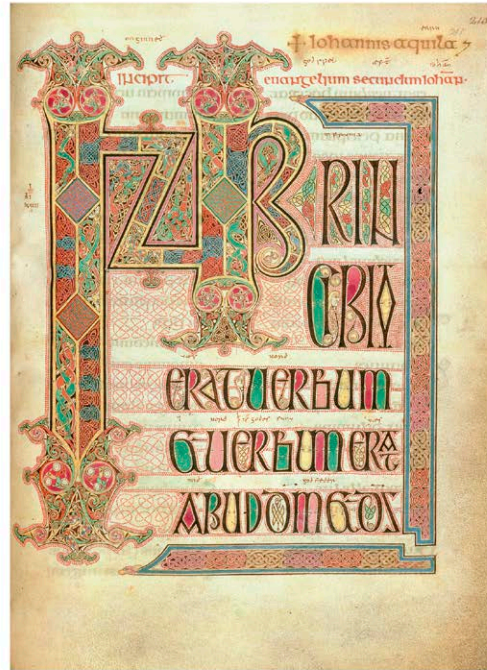
EADFRITH OF LINDISFARNE

Lindisfarne Gospels, c.700

The manuscript that became an icon

Everyone should see the Lindisfarne Gospels at least once. The 1,300-year-old manuscript is as much a treasure as the Sutton Hoo or Staffordshire hoards – its Anglo-Saxon contemporaries – and much more mesmerising. Today the book resides in the British Library, though it is regularly removed from display for enforced ‘rest’ and travels only rarely. It has always enjoyed such fierce protection. The stories of its incredible rescue from drownings, Viking raids and the clutches of Thomas Cromwell’s emissaries during the Dissolution of the Monasteries, are part of its charisma. Although more extraordinary is that its delicately scripted, elaborately decorated pages are the work of just one man: Eadfrith, Bishop of Lindisfarne. On that wind-whipped crumb of rock, in his bone-cold scriptoria, Eadfrith laboured on the Gospels for a decade. To each disciple, he gave a spectacular intro: first a portrait, then a ‘carpet’ page (a swirling, minutely detailed pattern that resembles an Ottoman rug) followed by an ‘incipit’ page, on which the text begins in large ornate letters. Here it’s John: ‘In the beginning was the word,’ which, given Christianity, the religion of the book, was in the process of replacing older oral traditions, seems beautifully apt.

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Incipit page to the Gospel of St John, from the *Lindisfarne Gospels*, c.700, Bishop of Lindisfarne, parchment, British Library

WENCESLAUS HOLLAR

‘Long View’ of London, 1647

Soaring panorama from before the Great Fire

But for Wenceslaus Hollar, our grasp of 1600s London would be slight. In his etchings and drawings the city that was reduced to rubble by that century’s Civil War and Great Fire returns to intoxicating life. Born a nobleman in Prague, Hollar came here aged 30 as engraver to the Earl of Arundel. London enthralled him. Off the clock, he sketched it compulsively (he was ‘a very passionate man’, noted a contemporary). Many of these drawings informed his *Long View*, a soaring, six-panel panorama that he pieced together from the tower of St Saviour in Southwark. Its detail is mouth-watering. Hollar manipulated his burin with dizzying range. In whiskery dashes and hatchings, he describes every roof tile, every street cobble, watermen on the Thames, strollers on the bank. These figures are millimetres tall and yet so tenderly done that you half expect them to move. If you could just get a little closer, you begin to think, you could see the buttons on this one’s doublet, the bodkin in that one’s hair. ‘People sometimes say to me,’ wrote the Victorian etcher and Hollar disciple Francis Seymour Hayden, “What is it you see in Hollar?” and I always answer, “Not quite but nearly everything”.

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‘Long View’ of London, 1647, Wenceslaus Hollar, etching, 480 x 405 mm, Royal Collection Trust



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GEORGE STUBBS

Whistlejacket, c.1762

Hyper-real portrait of a prize stallion

In the late 1700s England went wild for horses. Breeding them, racing them and especially betting on them. Entire fortunes were made and lost on a single punt. Whistlejacket was a favourite; famous for winning his owner, the second Marquess of Rockingham, £2,000 (over £300,000 today) in a single race. It was he who commissioned this muscle-ripler of a portrait. Traditionally only royals were awarded such a grandeur-bestowing scale. What's more, Stubbs scrutinised Whistlejacket in the manner his portraitist colleagues would a person. So discernible are the horse's features, in fact, that you'd recognise him in the stables, even if Whistlejacket didn't: a (probably apocryphal) story says he mistook the canvas for a rival and went for it. Stubbs – a teetotal workaholic – went to extreme lengths to achieve such verisimilitude. Holed up in a remote barn in Lincolnshire, he suspended horse carcasses from the ceiling, injected them with wax to slow decomposition and spent 18 months dissecting and drawing every slice. The painting's blank ground tormented his contemporaries, who couldn't fathom that it was intentional and so concluded it must be an unfinished portrait of George III.



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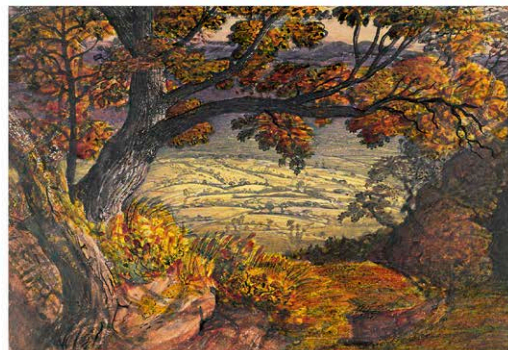
Whistlejacket, c.1762, George Stubbs, oil on canvas, 2961×2480 mm, The National Gallery

SAMUEL PALMER

The Weald of Kent, c.1827–8

Landscape with divinity in every leaf

Palmer's early paintings have a hallucinatory, slumbry quality. He once said that he felt as if he had been blessed with the powers of spiritual vision, which perhaps explains it. *The Weald of Kent* was painted near Shoreham, where the twenty-something Palmer and his middle-class London friends decamped to form The Ancients, a group of artists united in admiration for William Blake (p.36) and their intent to leave the modern world behind. Palmer's Shoreham paintings are joyously strange: lathery hedgerows you could plunge your hands into, blossoms that seem as if they appeared all at once. Here, a 'repoussoir' of trees gives the land beyond the feel of a faerie kingdom, as if spied through a tunnel or hollow-way. The paintings were not palatable to the artistic establishment, but Palmer knew that. He locked them away in his so-called 'curiosity portfolio', where they languished until the modernists fell in love with them in the 1920s. A generation later, they also attracted the attention of the infamous Tom Keating, who confessed to forging 13 in 1976, though experts think the number nearer to 20. They're now as collectible, if not as pricey, as Palmer's originals.



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The Weald of Kent, c.1827–8, Samuel Palmer, watercolour and gouache on paper, 187×270 mm, Yale Center for British Art



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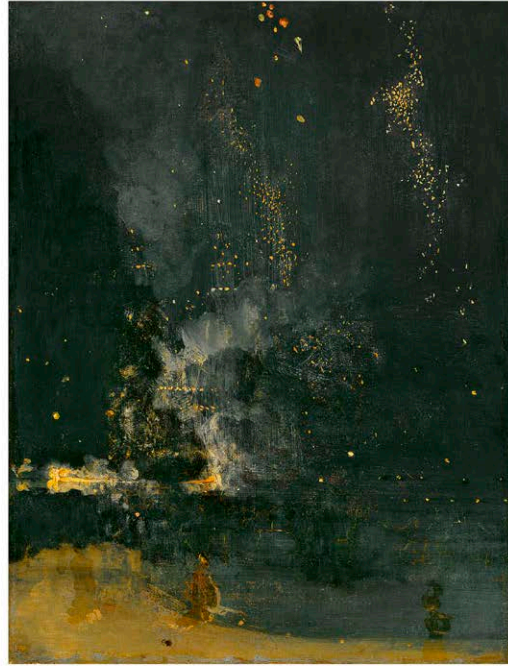
JAMES ABBOTT MCNEILL WHISTLER

Nocturne in Black and Gold, The Falling Rocket, 1875

An evening painted from memory

American by birth, Whistler lived in London most of his life and his paintings of the city are among its most sensitive portraits. You see it best in his pictures of the Thames – his odes to the working river at Limehouse and Wapping, or night-time scenes near his Chelsea home. Whistler made about 30 of these ‘Nocturnes’ (he hoped the association with Chopin’s music would help viewers understand that his smudged colour and soft shapes were not meant to be representational). He painted them from memory. Two brothers from a local boathouse would row him to the middle of the river in the thick of night and wait while he imprinted the view on his memory. The following day, he’d recreate the half-remembered scene, using thinned paint he called ‘sauce’. It sloshed and pooled to such a degree that the canvas had to be flat on the floor to prevent the colour from running. The *Nocturnes* made him enemies – most famously Ruskin, whom Whistler sued for libel when the critic called him a ‘coxcomb’ (vain) and this painting an impudence akin to ‘flinging a pot of paint in the public’s face’. Today, though, they are considered a milestone in the evolution of modern, abstract art.

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Nocturne in Black and Gold, The Falling Rocket, 1875, James Abbott McNeill Whistler, oil on panel, 602 × 467 mm, Detroit Institute of Arts

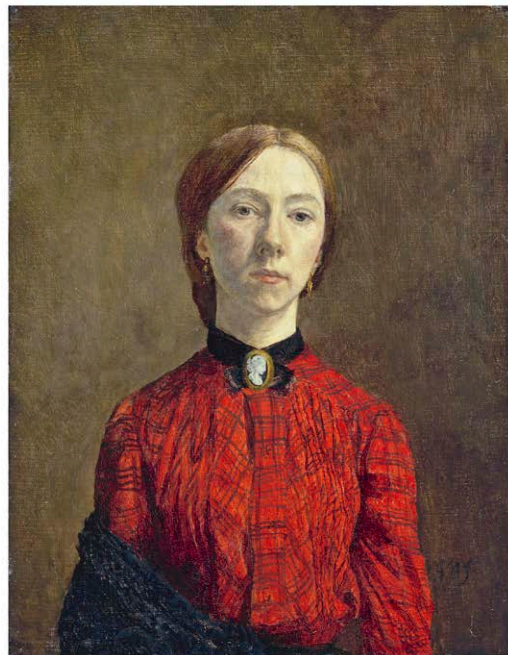
GWEN JOHN

Self-Portrait, 1902

Portrait of the artist as a modern girl

Gwen John was 26 when she painted this Jane Eyre-like self-portrait. Every inch the repressed, brooch-wearing Victorian, you’d think, though she’d already fought her father to study at the Slade and spent a year in Montparnasse. Once you know that, the whole tone of the painting changes – her measured gaze the sign of spirited single-mindedness. She hasn’t quite cut loose, but she’s on the cusp of it. Behind that composed countenance there’s a world of something trying to get out. It soon did. The following year, she and her friend Dorelia decided to walk to Rome, sleeping in fields and paying their way by singing and selling portrait drawings. They gave up at Toulouse whereupon John moved to Paris, supporting herself by becoming an artist’s model, famously for Rodin. Her friendship with the sculptor, 64 to her 28, developed into a painful love affair. She wrote him more than a thousand letters – sometimes three times in a day. ‘Love is my illness,’ she wrote, ‘and there is no cure till you come.’ It’s this paradox that makes her paintings captivating. Delicately toned, muffled by the ground chalk used to stiffen her paint, they are so completely remote from her passionate reality.

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Self-Portrait, 1902, Gwen John, oil on canvas, 448 × 349 mm, Tate



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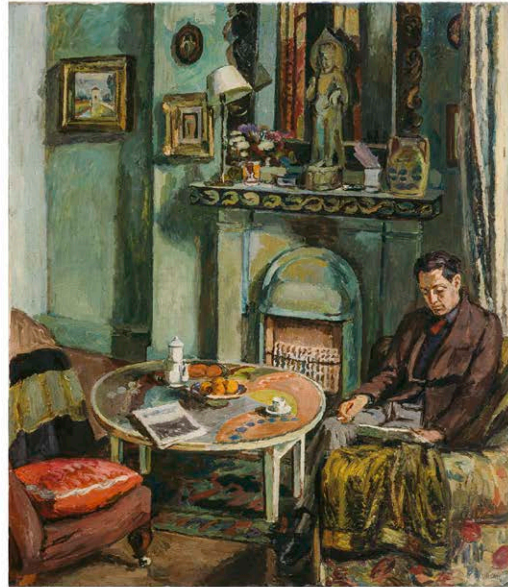
Sample spreads

VANESSA BELL

Interior with Duncan Grant, 1934

A time capsule of Bloomsbury chic

Paintings of light-washed domestic interiors were a great favourite of British modernists. Not the impersonal, status-oriented backdrops of Victorian and Edwardian art, but warm, lived-in rooms bearing the owner's imprint. Here, Bell spins the concept into something both covetable and still intensely relatable. It pictures her romantic partner, the painter Duncan Grant, in a sitting room at Charleston, the modest but magical Sussex farmhouse to which they moved in 1916 with Grant's other lover, David 'Bunny' Garnett. Both artists chronicled their household, which became a focal point for the baggy circle of avant-garde artists and writers known as the Bloomsbury Group. Their paintings preserve the genius loci of the place: picture to picture, the impression builds, of a quiet but soul-warming life lived by persons deeply interested in one another, and in new ways of being. Bell's recreation of the setting here is so vivid that we can imagine the sound of Grant turning the pages of his book, or leaves rustling through the window on his left – and look how those same leaves make the light ripple on the green wall. It's as if Bell has left a door open, through which we can temporarily step.



Interior with Duncan Grant, 1934, Vanessa Bell, oil on canvas, 1122 x 973 mm, Williamson Art Gallery

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JACOB EPSTEIN

Jacob and the Angel, 1940–41

Jacob's all-night struggle with an unknown assailant

Today it's in the Tate – rightly revered for its radical modernity – but *Jacob and the Angel* spent its early life as a curiosity on Blackpool's Golden Mile, installed in an old song booth and advertised as for 'Adults Only'. We might jeer at such philistinism, but the impresarios of the promenade exhibited Epstein's work when museums would not, bringing a sensational showmanship to the display of modern art that has never really gone away. Hundreds of thousands paid to see it. Critics were undecided – 'Is this a miracle or a monstrosity?' asked the *Daily Mail* – but the uneasiness the sculpture provokes is precisely its power. Everything about it is designed to overwhelm, from its blocky heft to its viscera-like colours. Its confusing, near-carnal embrace. Truth is, *Jacob* didn't stand a chance. Epstein was already well into what he called his 'Thirty Years War' with the British public – his progressive ideas thought an affront to morality. It's rather sad, then, that only shortly after Epstein's death, *Jacob* was thought moderate enough to be loaned to Liverpool Cathedral.



Jacob and the Angel, 1940–1, Jacob Epstein, alabaster, 2140 x 1100 x 920 mm, Tate

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L.S. LOWRY

July, the Seaside, 1943

Vision of an artist who stands apart from the crowd

Lowry was 52 when he was discovered by a London art dealer and given his first exhibition. By the time he was 81 he had turned down an OBE, a CBE and a Knighthood. He made an exception when he was elected to the Royal Academy – ‘I oughtn’t to have been pleased to get in but I was’ he said – though he chose not to attend the annual banquets. None of it was a stand against the establishment. He was just a guarded, solitary man. Those qualities, however, were doubtless what fired the way he saw the world. His paintings of the smoke-belching towns of his native Lancashire and its people are unmistakable. He was drawn, he said, to their ‘poverty and loneliness,’ which had a ‘private beauty that has haunted me most of my life.’ Cotton mills, town squares and street corners feature in the greater part of his pictures, but he also painted coastal scenes, some inspired by childhood holidays, some by trips to Berwick made after he retired from his job as a rent collector. But it’s doubtful he so much as stuck his toe in the sea. He is never in or even close to the crowd, when he paints it, merely observing from a distance.



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July, the Seaside, 1943, L.S. Lowry, oil on canvas, 667 x 927 mm, Arts Council Collection

LUCIEN FREUD

Girl with a Kitten, 1947

A young woman under intense scrutiny

This ferociously descriptive portrait is one of three Freud made in 1947 of his soon-to-be-wife, Kitty Garman, when she was 21. He painted her five times more before they divorced in 1952, yoking her decisively to his artistic development. Pre-Kitty, he worked in pencil, crayon and charcoal – 200 drawings for every painting, he said – and his first paintings of her, like this one, are a continuation of his fastidious early style. But come the 1950s Freud became restless: ‘The idea of doing paintings where you’re conscious of the drawing and not the paint just irritated me,’ he said, and so he stopped. The daughter of sculptor Jacob Epstein, for whom she also posed, Kitty must have been accustomed to scrutiny, though perhaps not at a Freud-level. In search of ‘accuracy’ and ‘focus’ he positioned himself a scant foot away. You see it in her sticky eyelashes, in the minute reflection of a window in her eye. Even the static framing her head was fair game, though in all that careful enunciation of detail some vitality is lost. The painting best succeeds as a reincarnation of one of Leonardo da Vinci’s most famous portraits, *Lady with an Ermine* (c.1489–91). In glance, in grasp, in how the animal delivers a copy image of its owner, the woman mirror each other across the centuries, though the anxiety Kitty radiates is all her own.



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Girl with a Kitten, 1947, Lucien Freud, oil on canvas, 395 x 295 mm, Tate



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PETER BLAKE

Self-Portrait with Badges, 1961

A Pop Artist displays his Americana

Peter Blake was at the Royal College of Art when he made this self-portrait. He was a bit of an outlier there, having come up through technical college in Gravesend where he studied graphic design. He also dressed like a Mod when most students were lolling about the art rooms in corduroys and polo necks. Denim jeans and jackets – essential Mod gear – had only recently become available in Britain, though Blake had been cutting his own from boiler suits for years. That plus the baseball boots, Pepsi badge and his Elvis magazine proclaim Blake's esteem for American pop culture. It seems so bold and bright compared to the suburban setting, even if this balding, mournful artist is less Rebel Without a Cause, than shy with multiple causes. The pose – and the air of melancholy – echo grand portraits of the past, particularly Gainsborough's *Blue Boy* (1770). Subconscious, Blake says, but those historical antecedents enrich the painting. The portrait won him a prize, and soon after, a drawing commission from the *Sunday Times* in California. It was his first trip to the hallowed lands, and he did it in style – in a gold Corvette Stingray.



Self-Portrait with Badges, 1961, Peter Blake, oil on board, 1743 x 1219 mm, Tate

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DAVID HOCKNEY

Mr and Mrs Clark and Percy, 1970–71

20th-century marital tensions

It seems so supremely 1970s, this double portrait of the artist's friends, Ossie Clark and Celia Birtwell. Plastic phone, long-pile rug, bare feet, Chelsea collar and kaftan – it couldn't be more Age of Aquarius if it tried. But Hockney is nothing if not agile, and the painting's outwardly straightforward surface is stiffened by smart, piquant little flashes of pictorial tradition. Ossie's shoulder-length waves and fine, forceful chin have wheeled through time from 1400s Florence. Its set up resuscitates the 'conversation piece' – faux-informal group portraits in domestic settings that were all the rage in the 1700s. It's particularly like Gainsborough's *Mr and Mrs Andrews* (p.38), only Hockney has reversed his Mrs and Mr. He made a cluster of double portraits, all of them almost life-size, at the end of 1960s. All of them set in a never-ending triangle: one subject looks at the other, who looks out at Hockney, or, as here, both look out at him. *Mr and Mrs Clark* was actually a wedding present, though the Clarks' relationship was already in tatters. Did Hockney weave his inside knowledge into the painting? Many have noted a tension in the couple's stance. But then, hindsight is a wonderful thing.



Mr and Mrs Clark and Percy, 1970–71, David Hockney, acrylic on canvas, 2134 x 3048 mm, Tate

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SONIA BOYCE

Missionary Position II, 1985

Double self-portrait about miscommunication and frustration

At 25, Sonia Boyce became the first Black woman to have her work enter the Tate collection. It was this pastel drawing, purchased in 1987. Boyce took up pastel after learning how the medium had historically been a form of resistance among female artists, who, because they were excluded from the academics, had little opportunity to learn the knack of painting in oils. An exhibition of Frida Kahlo paintings, meanwhile, had encouraged Boyce to feature her own life in her work. *Missionary Position II* mirrors Kahlo's *The Two Fridas* (1939): both paintings are double self-portraits and explore contesting identities. At the time, self-portraits were important to Boyce. At art school she felt that, 'the tutors were dismissive. I was Black, therefore I wasn't there. I needed to see myself'. This painting is less about her appearance, though, than a vehicle for her concerns about relationships in which there is an imbalance of power. The title has multiple connotations: Britain's 'mission' of empire-building; the strict sexual propriety advocated by missionaries in Africa; the submission of Black society to white. In Kahlo's painting the two figures clasp hands, but here, that instance of connection is broken. Closed eyes, that unmet outstretched arm. It's all about miscommunication, and frustration.



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Missionary Position II, 1985, Sonia Boyce, watercolour, pastel and crayon on paper, 1238 x 1830 mm, Tate

PHYLLIDA BARLOW

Object for the television, 1994

Surreal sculpture that defies monumentalism

Phyllida Barlow's sculptures have a grimy lawlessness about them. Rather than bronze or stone, Barlow used reclaimed timber, papier-mâché, tar, scrim, cement and black bin bags, often in the same work. It all comes together in dramatic installations that defy and spoof the monumentalism and immaculate finish of her predecessors. Having to duck under or squeeze around it is often part of the piece. She once described her art as 'an adventure of objects', which is about right. Barlow was in her mid-sixties when she gained international recognition. The work shown here is from long before that – a time she categorised as 'a lot of teaching and a lot of parenting'. She had to duck under and squeeze around those restrictions, too, working in short bursts and with whatever she had to hand, which is how her 'Objects for ...' series came about. Juxtaposing familiar household items with abstract sculptural forms, it included an envelope for a piano, a larva-like creature on an ironing board and this bunny-eared beret for a television. It's funny, vital and disconcertingly suburban, but it also foreshadows the way Barlow's mature work short circuits our constant wish for things to make sense.



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Object for the television, 1994, Phyllida Barlow, plaster, television and television stand, 1508 x 1035 x 515 mm, Tate



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CHANTAL JOFFE

Blonde Girl Sitting on a Picnic Table, 2007

Portrait of an emotional crossroads

What does it feel like to be a teenager? Many would prefer not to remember, but Chantal Joffe is fascinated by life's brinks. Motherhood, separation, bereavement, old age, anger – her paintings tremble with them. Here it's the long crossing into adulthood, the girl marooned, watchful and a little defiant. Though Joffe sometimes paints from life – in 2018 she made a self-portrait nearly every day of the year – mostly she works with 'found' images from magazines and photographs, including those of her own family. It's her style that's captivating. She paints in a free and fluid way that slips between figuration and abstraction. Her brushwork is elastic, the detail spare, the colour muted – but all of it combines to create such a feeling of realness, such emotional heft. Perhaps those emotions are Joffe's own: she has said that her paintings 'are a mash-up of everything that is preoccupying me at that time' and that, 'the heavier the emotion the more abstract way I use the paint. It's almost like it's too much, they need to be simplified.'



Blonde Girl Sitting on a Picnic Table, 2007, Chantal Joffe, oil on board, 2430 x 1820 mm, Victoria Miro

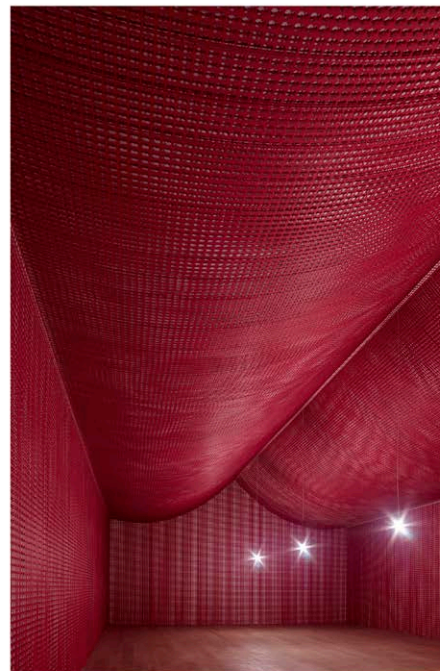
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CORNELIA PARKER

War Room, 2015

Spectacular yet intimate memorial

It's hard not to think of blood or internal organs when you're inside *War Room*, but that's the point. The work is an installation; a room draped with red waste sheets from the factories that make our Remembrance poppies – 45 million each autumn. The paper is suspended, hung like a canopy. It's meant to echo the vast, pavilion-like tent that Henry VIII had constructed for the *Field of the Cloth of Gold* (p.24) in 1520 – the drawings for which are in the British Library collection. The pattern on the paper comes from thousands of perforations: punched-out absent poppies that summon lives lost, the soldiers who never came home, the hole a death leaves in a family's heart. There are two layers of paper and, because the perforations don't exactly overlap, what you get is a mesh that looks like camouflage netting. These layers and their shadows combine to create a hallucinatory ripple effect, compounded by the work's low-watt hanging bulbs. Desolate, stifling, intimate, mystical. You make the space what you will. When it was displayed at the Whitworth in 2015, army veteran choirs turned up to sing inside it – a guerilla act that delighted Parker.



War Room, 2015, Cornelia Parker, paper installation, The Whitworth

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