

# FRIEZE

Isaac Julien: "The Top Ten Shows in the UK and Ireland in 2023"

BY Sean Burns

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Main image: Isaac Julien, *Sonata*, 2022, Canson Platin Fibre Rag, 2.7 x 1.8 m. Courtesy: © Isaac Julien and Victoria Miro, London

## From a posthumous Martin Wong retrospective in Camden to Matthew Arthur Williams's sensitive debut in Dundee

*It has been a big year for the UK art scene, marked by the opening of countless new commercial gallery spaces, the staging of several monumental monographic shows and the launch of a number of fledgling editorial platforms. Here, I have noted my favourite shows – from a special, one-room painting exhibition in Glasgow to a demanding film survey in London. In no order:*

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Martin Wong  
Camden Art Centre, London



Martin Wong, *Big Heat*, 1986. Courtesy: Martin Wong Foundation and P-P-O-W, New York

Martin Wong's posthumous retrospective, 'Malicious Mischief', was the UK's most talked-about exhibition of 2023. The survey - which brought together painting, sculpture and ephemera from across the late artist's career - felt perfect for the proportions of Camden Art Centre. In April, Travis Diehl visited the show's first iteration at KW Institute for Contemporary Art in Berlin, remarking on Wong's psychedelic storefront paintings: 'It's all there behind the gate, that mottled store of oblivion, where all hungers are satisfied, all mysteries explained, all pain exchanged for wisdom.'

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Matthew Arthur Williams  
Dundee Contemporary Arts



Matthew Arthur Williams, *Soon Come*, 2022, production still. Courtesy: the artist and Dundee Contemporary Arts

In January, I travelled to Dundee to view Matthew Arthur Williams's 'Soon Come', an exhibition of photographs, personal objects and a two-channel film installation. I was struck by the materiality of his prints and the quiet consideration he demonstrated towards handling his concerns, as Helen Charman discovered: 'Ancestral histories are positioned alongside broader narratives of the decline of Stoke's industrial significance and the history of **West Indian migration to Britain - the "mother country" - after World War II.**'

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Chris Ofili  
Victoria Miro, London



Chris Ofili, *The Swing*, 2020–2023, oil and charcoal on linen, 3.1 × 2 m. Courtesy: © Chris Ofili and Victoria Miro, London

Comprising seven canvases embellished with painstakingly detailed layers of coloured dots and swirls, Ofili's latest solo show offered an exploration of what the accompanying literature described as 'sin and the complex experience of sinfulness'. Chloë Ashby visited this kaleidokaleidoscopic celebration of free love and excess at the height of summer, noting: 'As I pass from painting to painting, I find myself moving closer to lap up the rich and glittering paint surface [...] There are nods to William Blake and Sigmar Polke as well as to Ofili's own practice, which has always fused the sacred and the profane, the spiritual and the physical.'

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Nicole Eisenman  
Whitechapel Gallery, London



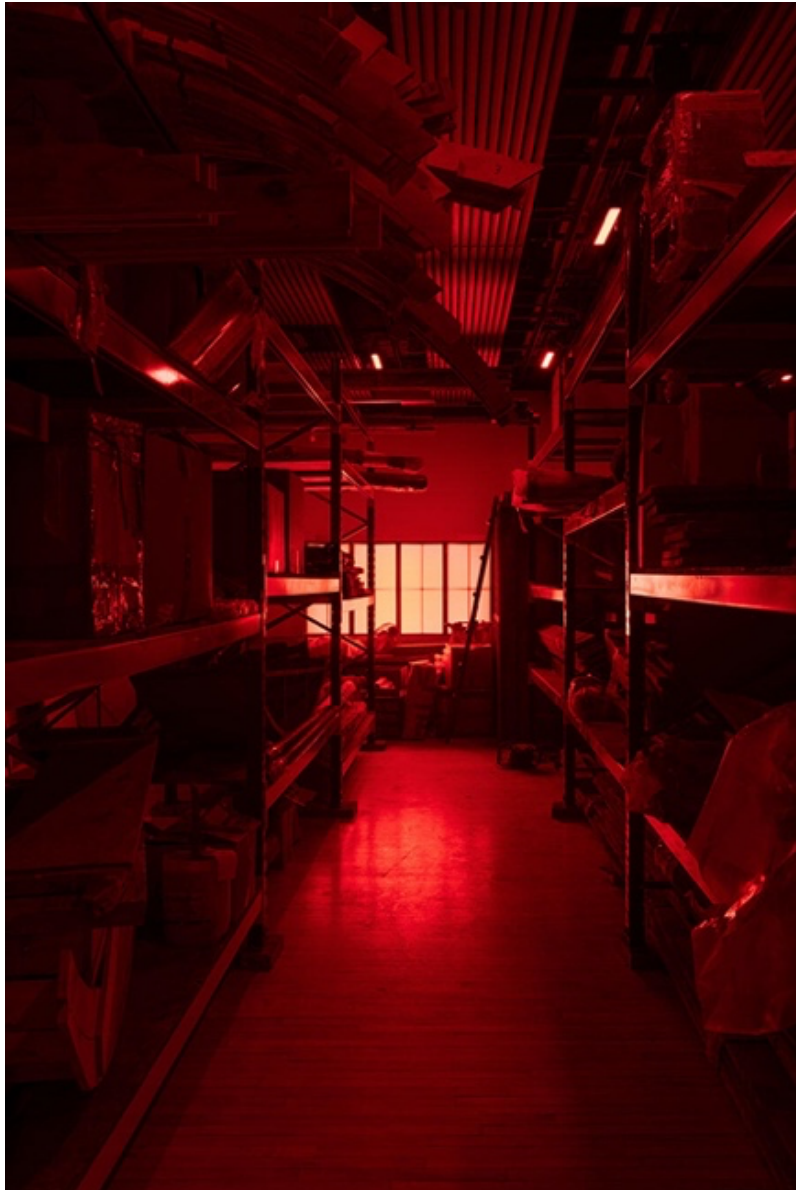
Nicole Eisenman, *The Triumph of Poverty*, 2009, oil on canvas, 165 × 208 cm. Courtesy: Leo Koenig Inc., New York

American artist Nicole Eisenman's work occupies a painted territory that encompasses a mix of caricature, political commentary and autobiography. Throughout 'What Happened', she reckons with the absurdity and contradictions of artmaking, deploying a collapse of historical styles and references. Of the artist's relationship to literature, novelist Isabel Waidner observed: 'Eisenman is an effortlessly referential painter who draws on source material as diverse as renaissance art, 1930s socialist murals and cartoons like *Bambi* (1942).'

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Mike Nelson  
Hayward Gallery, London



Mike Nelson, *I, IMPOSTER (the darkroom)*, 2011, installation view, various materials.  
Courtesy: the artist and Hayward Gallery, London; photograph: Matt Greenwood

In February, I arrived at Hayward Gallery to interview Mike Nelson, who was in the final throes of installing his survey, 'Extinction Beckons'. After 20 minutes wandering amongst the debris of his career – decommissioned machinery, stacks of wood, etc. – the artist eventually emerged from within a vast mound of sand. The subsequent show, which 'remixed' his best-known installations, was epic in scale and ambition. As Nelson told me: 'The reconfiguration of works becomes like a studio apparatus in that there's potential for strange juxtapositions and disjunctions to suggest a future for the works.'

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EVA International  
Various Venues, Limerick



Clodagh Emoe, *Reflections on a City Lot*, 2023, installation view. Courtesy: EVA International

In September, Nadia Egan reported on the 40th edition of this Irish biennial, which sought to address prescient ideas of citizenship and nationhood. Remarking on the curatorial team's deft weaving of delicate issues into the fabric of Limerick, Egan noted: 'Intended to become part of the city's cultural tapestry, this programme has a subtlety that allows it to have a broad reach while maintaining a strong connection to the surrounding community.'

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Alice Neel  
Barbican, London



Alice Neel, *Andy Warhol*, 1970, oil on canvas, 1.5 x 1 m.

Courtesy: © The Estate of Alice Neel, David Zwirner and Whitney Museum of American Art, New York

I was struck by the quiet solemnity of the Barbican Art Gallery's Alice Neel retrospective, 'Hot Off the Griddle' – a more expansive version of an earlier show at Centre Pompidou in Paris. In places, Neel's glistening, oily blacks and blues still seemed tantalizingly wet. As Wilson Tarbox observed in his review for *frieze*: 'Her fearless and loving approach to rendering the human figure in all of its beauty, ugliness and diversity speaks to Neel's warmth, love and openness towards others.'

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Carole Gibbons  
Céline, Glasgow



Carole Gibbons in her St. Vincent Crescent studio, Glasgow, c.1994. Courtesy: the artist and 5b

This beautiful, one-room exhibition united six works produced over 30 years, showcasing Carole Gibbons's exceptional use of colour to render scenes that are at once domestic and magical. The chalky ochres, blues and greens of her canvases felt collegiate with the hues of the exposed plaster walls of the artist-run space. Writing of the artist in May, I evoked Alasdair Gray, who said of Gibbons: 'No collection, no show of modern Scottish art is complete without her.'

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Isaac Julien  
Tate Britain, London



Isaac Julien, *What Freedom Is to Me - Homage*, 2022, Canson Platin Fibre Rag, 2.7 x 1.8 m.  
Courtesy: © Isaac Julien and Victoria Miro, London

Isaac Julien's survey 'What Freedom Is to Me' reimagined how films could be displayed in a museum by enabling viewers to determine their own route around the show. The scope of Julien's unique vision unfurled as we followed his lens through São Paulo with architect Lina Bo Bardi (*A Marvellous Entanglement*, 2019), Sir John Soane's Museum in London (*Vagabondia*, 2000) and the streets of Shanghai (*Ten Thousand Waves*, 2010). Speaking to Deborah Willis for *frieze* in April, Julien observed: 'My investigation into the ways in which there were so many absences and erasures in archives led me to view them as a springboard for reinvention.'

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Mike Silva  
The Approach, London



Mike Silva, *Curtain*, 2023, oil on linen, 106.7 × 76.2 cm. Courtesy: the artist and The Approach, London

Whispering curtains, kitchen cabinets and parched succulents populate the universe of Mike Silva. His hazy sepia and cloudy green oil-on-linen paintings of nostalgic interiors are obfuscations of photographic memories. Finn Blythe visited 'New Paintings' at The Approach in July: 'By carefully balancing light and dark, interior and exterior, past and present, Silva attempts to reconcile photography with memory and, ultimately, transience with loss.'

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