

FINDING
MY البحث عن
BLUE ما لي
SKY الزرقاء

The Search for Feeling in Art, again.

Omar Kholeif

FIRST SNOW

Standing on the corner of Bell Street and Penfold Street, uncharacteristic perspiration is being induced by the British sun. The show is up. I am here to tune-in to the neighbourhood. A cigarette lit – offers me a marker of time, roughly three minutes. The quiet street suddenly blooms with children in green, blue and grey uniform; both joyous and agitated car honking and the sweet melody of the Arabic language sung in myriad tongues. School pick-up time. The storied streets of Edgware Road and Church Street that bookend this cross-section between Lisson Grove and Bell Street have been places that I've longed to wander through, during my diasporic childhood in Britain and abroad.

The neighbourhood around here, nicknamed "Little Cairo" or "Little Beirut", would perhaps more aptly be suited to the title of: "Petit Maroc" or "A slice of the Eastern Mediterranean", to be more demographically representative.

A sense of comfort arrives, trailing a cool breeze. Another flame lights another cigarette. I hanker for this nostalgic reverie to continue. I have developed a certain sentimentality for storied places – the ones you read of in books, which are heralded via familial gossip through the aunts and uncles, the grandparents and their friends. Mine, they hailed from Egypt and Sudan.

I begin to tune into the voices, the different codes – accents varying in speed and tempo to accommodate the many dialects. The constituency demands that one designate the other with the appropriate, practical, modicum of courtesy when greeting. I look to the ground and notice an ice cream cone. Brand spanking new, barely unwrapped, melting under the open sky. A gentleman from the local barber shop passes by and pulls my gaze, "Stop smoking and go to the gym, brother! Come on already!" He says this in a west London accent.

Embarrassed, I extinguish and pick up my cigarette butts.

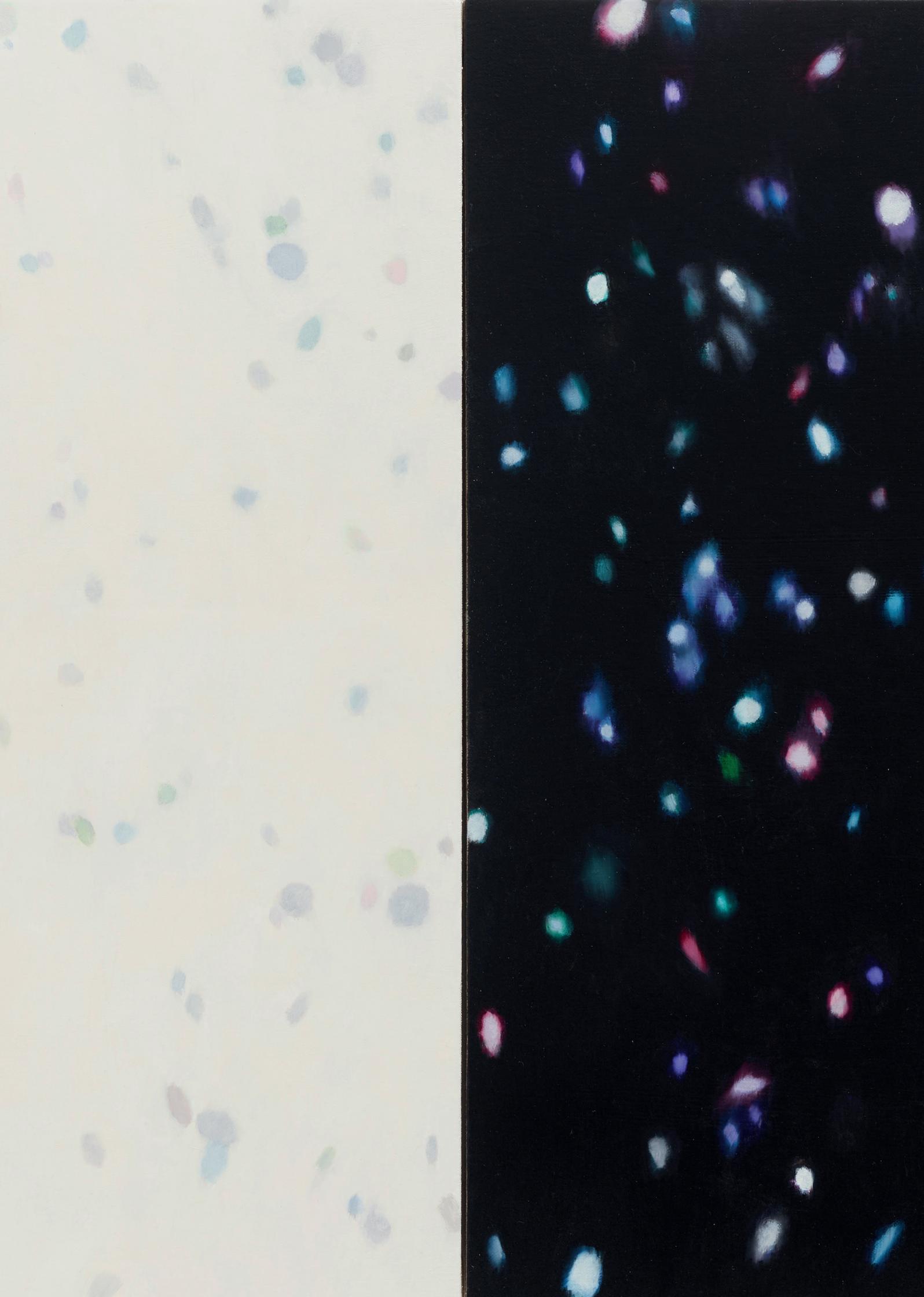
In his series of ongoing *Moving Objects*, the artist Ryan Gander presents enamel painted bronze objects resembling fallen ice cream cones in all manner of exhibition spaces. His observation as articulated to me by curator Sandra Guimarães is that this "instant loss" of the near pristine, of that barely touched, desirous ice cream, can alter a child's comprehension of the world. It ushers in the first feelings of regret or of loss, and it begins one's preparedness for life's journey and one's awareness of death.¹ This realisation haunted me.

The exhibition, *Finding My Blue Sky* across both spaces of the Lisson Gallery, London, emerged as a response to multiple shifts in culture. One of these involved the chaotic awareness of bearing witness to the lament of inner lives – that which is often sealed and concealed, made manifest on Zoom and on social media during the global lockdowns that ensued during the Covid-19 pandemic. My first question to myself was: "What happens after the world supposedly ends, and then you wake up, again? How does one see through the madness and the despondency, to suture, mend, imagine, and daydream, *again*?"

Otobong Nkanga has long been inspired to find the truth in nature. Like Donna Haraway, her view, although decidedly her own, is that humans are a "companion species". We must negotiate, respect and



Ryan Gander, *A Moving Object, or Solid Ideas*, 2017





Paul Heyer, *Two Snows*, 2025

traverse the borders set forth by our given environment.² My earliest awareness of nature came about as a child, living in Glasgow, Scotland, as I encountered my first snowfall. It was as incomprehensible an experience as it was transcendental. To learn that the snow thickened and softened into peaks and troughs on mountain tops touching skies that were higher than I had ever conceived, set my imagination in motion.

Speaking of this experience to the artist Paul Heyer, it transpired that he had spent two decades dreaming of Japanese snow – the myth of its sensuality, as well as its signifying role in the history of painting. In *Two Snows*, 2025, a newly commissioned diptych for *Finding My Blue Sky*, Heyer renders the minute, the sensuous, the subtle details of a morning and evening snow, tenderly, side by side. As I began to place the pieces of this temporal puzzle in-situ, Heyer and I once again returned to ongoing debates around the metaphorical use of clouds and their abstraction.

His painting, *I Am the Sky (Caroll Street)*, 2025 presents an anterior to painterly Romanticism. His delicate magenta brushstrokes puncture the possibility of any bulbous form. Fragments of queer voice combine with pieces of lyric and prose that inspire him. Catholic symbolism and rave culture – all collide here under one sky.³ But that is only one version of the story. For the reader, consider: what world would you like to make, to compose out of these scenes? The pursuit begins, to find a sky.

THE SEARCH

One can enter a story through several channels, portals or chambers. You land decidedly where you are because of the intentions of the narrator – their penchant for acts of *storying* and fabulation.⁴ *Finding My Blue Sky* began in 2019 as a film, then as a short story – one of searching for feeling, for and of being seen, one of situations that overlap... but how does one enter it as an exhibition?

For decades, neuroscientists, historians and semioticians have experimented across the spectrum of visual culture to consider how the received wisdom of ‘the story’ is imbibed and transmitted through images and afterimages.⁵ For the human mind is not merely a container of data, rather, it is a landscape that can be stirred. It may also operate as its own picture palace (an inner camera), projecting images back inside the sensorium of the mind to be examined, decoded, re-dreamed and experienced – as hatcheries for ideation and innovation.

This is the space of ‘feeling’ and of ‘affection’ with and for the constituent elements of the world around us. It all enters or is received by the body, somehow, in the end.⁶ Depending on the person’s context – that is the setting – be it one’s specific geography, habitat, or access to resources, they may choose to reassemble and ascribe the *felt* or lived experiences of looking at art to different vectors of memory, place and time.⁷

Let us build our own mythologies, the artist Michael Rakowitz once reminded me, as we discussed the looted artifacts destroyed by conflicts in Iraq and Syria. Rakowitz famously reimagines these phantoms in his project, *The invisible enemy should not exist...* (2007–

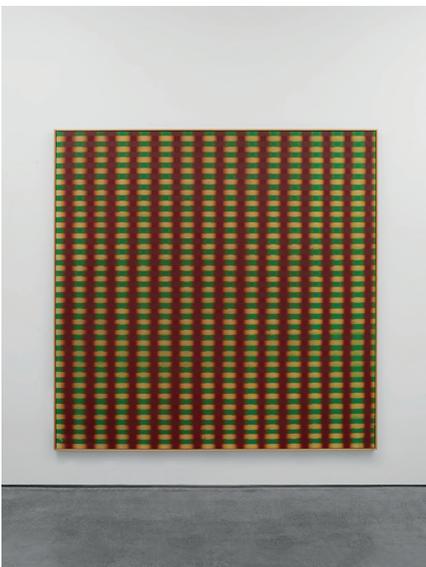
ongoing). Invoking the complex history of folklore laid down by poets, storytellers and historians alike, his thought-forms link me to a world familiar to that of the late anthropologist-turned visual artist, Susan Hiller. Hiller's adventures generated space for her to construct her own self-portrait using almost every medium, methodology and technique possible.⁸ The pull of mind over body was likewise fuel for artist Huguette Caland. For her, the concept of the 'imagination' served as her metaphorical 'country' – a cosmos of one's own co-creation.

Let us consider: What role do institutions play when holding or exhibiting the dreams of artists? In the silent vault of history – be it the storage units of so-called "encyclopaedic" museums, gazing at the industrial museum racks found in freeports of both private and public collections or in 'open' storage facilities. Amidst this silence, exists part of a shared DNA, the chord that connects oral history to material culture. As curators, especially ones who have studied the nomadic archive – that which we grew up being told "did not exist" – it is a responsibility, to consider the burden and weight that these incubators hold. The museological orbit's centre includes numerous vessels, which allow one the potential to re-author, re-situate, and re-locate, not only the history of art, but that of humankind. The experience of being an exiled subject studying archives of exile, has taught me that the inclusive practice of offering spectators the keys to sketch their own narrative is one of the greatest gifts that one can offer to their audience.

Finding My Blue Sky expectantly seeks to give possibilities for art's intermingling with light and air, to create space for pause and breath. It is an open studio where multiple histories, at once seemingly parallel, begin to bisect, intersect, overlap, and embrace one another. The work of a Portuguese artist, who died in 2009, Luísa Correia Pereira, which was seemingly lost to time, has been painstakingly re-constituted here. Her display interfaces with the glazed ceramic relief, *Wave Under the Sky*, 2024 by Simone Fattal, as well as nearby painting and sculpture by Huguette Caland. All three women lived in Paris at the start of the 1970s. And yet, although the much-deserved recognition for Caland and Fattal's artistic careers came late, for Pereira, her artistic existence was to begin, only to evaporate, into the confined memory of a handful. Would it have been different, had someone managed to orchestrate a gathering—to imagine a meeting-point where all three women might have convened and shared their art and life? In these galleries, they are offered space, under open skylights that allow for reflections to create different visual effects across the span of any given day.

SOFT ENDINGS

Around the corner, reminiscences might abound for a young Sean Scully, who created the pulsing square painting shown here, *Soft Ending* in 1969, while the artist was a student at Newcastle University. It was completed soon after returning to Britain following a searching quest to probe modernist impulses via travel. His exploration led him to Morocco. Here, he was keen to explore the significance of the place and people – to reflect on Morocco's pressing inspiration on the inspiring figure, Henri Matisse. For Scully, the visual lexicon of his time, shifted his gaze decidedly inwards and back in a towering pattern of change—a painting



Sean Scully, *Soft Ending*, 1969

as scaffolding, as relief, as ocular site for the release of memory.

Soft Ending marks a key inflection point in the artist's career. Scully, a skilled figurative painter up to this point, moves to a lifelong journey to make visible structures of feeling through abstraction, except the human interplay with systems is fundamentally apparent. Over decades, the artist would produce many more paintings, sculptures, watercolours and photographs in dialogue with this topographic sphere. The history of African art and history unfold in landmark works such as *Morocco* (1970), *Africa* (1989), *Dakar* (1989) and *Tetuan* (1991). The subject of these warrants closer textual analysis and perhaps could serve to revision how engage with modernism's relationship to African visual culture.

The ocular rift generated by *Soft Ending's* tessellating forms begins a melodic chain found in the 1970s drawings of Monir Shahroudy Farmanfarmaian, whose calligraphic abstractions transmute into musical notation. The score carries the eyes from Shiraz to Tabriz across the artist's woven geometric reliefs. With this, a visual crescendo. The dance unfurls us to a bodice-like form in Sonia Balassanian's 1978 *Untitled*. Inspired by Armenian caves, it adjoins Haroon Mirza's corporeal painting, which uses a solar panel as its base. Now you are enrapt within a 360-degree field of aesthetic culture – kinships, forms and melodies that may have never lived side by side before.

As the bulbous cloud forms in Lawrence Abu Hamdan's *Air Conditioning* (2022) come into full view, one can choose to bounce back to Scully's *Soft Ending* – to a split in time, or to Simone Fattal's watercolours of interstitial housing structures, or exit via a courtyard, where artist Hrair Sarkissian has re-visioned the urban decay of post-Soviet Armenia with *City Fabric* (2005), imprinting it onto London. The social and urban stratification of our beloved hometown enters a hymn-like movement. The sound of Sarkissian's second skin flailing, flapping, almost wailing to the rhythm and pace decided upon by the wind on the gallery's exterior.

LOOKING BACK

If you look back upon yourself again, upon this route that you have just taken, strips of spray-painted tape transpire. Do they conjure wool? For some, they may also evoke mathematical grids, software, computer systems, the motherboard. You may begin to feel a sense of dualism between mind and body, as you continue to move and parse through it. It is up to you to do what you do. *Finding My Blue Sky* is an invitation to travel. The word for *travel* in Arabic *safar*, denotes a journey, a rite of passage, an act of *becoming*. In this case, I have sought to construct a space of dreaming, or a proposition that I refer to as “dreamwork”.⁹ This is the work required to create spaces of and for freedom. To protect art when it is under threat of being withdrawn from our schools, universities, museums and galleries.

As writers, we are often taught that the difference between a good and great story is in the details. Art and its histories traverse myriad routes – there are no singular paths. So, it felt apt, to begin and end the exhibition with a question to help shade and contour the scope of the exhibition, “What World Would You Like to Dream of?” I ask of you.



Hrair Sarkissian, *City Fabric I*, 2010

For it is what *we do* with the experience of art after having witnessed it, where *change* can truly begin. That is the gift of a collective imagination.

BLUE: A BIOGRAPHY OF YOU

In the 21st century, we find ourselves in a dialectical dance around colour. Numerous books on the subject, from the ancient to the new appear in print, from *The Book of Colour Concepts, 1983-1963* (2024) to the facsimile reprint of the 800-page hand-written, *Traité des couleurs servant à la peinture à l'eau/Colour Qualities of Watercolour Paint* (1692). The colour blue for its seeming ubiquity, is the scarcest of all primary pigments in nature. Is this alluring quality part of the measure of its popularity? The author Skye Arundhati-Thomas notes:

The earliest known blue was distilled from lapis lazuli, first mined in what is now Afghanistan over six thousand years ago... During the Renaissance, blue was five times more expensive than gold. Blue was used to colour angels, and to paint the robes of the Virgin Mary, the Queen of Heaven... Blue glides between the living and the dead. Blue is not a colour found in the soil; it is not made of the Earth. Blue is a colour conjured by tricks of light in clear, still water, in cloudless skies – it is a concept as much as it is a colour. Of the primary colours, blue is the most slippery, the most subjective, the most permeable, and diffuse.

Blue is a duplicitous metaphor, one of inherent contradiction. Blue is associated with low-mood, melancholy, languor, and despair. It is also soothing, cool – a moisturizing balm. The treacherous sea, the unknown ocean, a reference to the vastness of 70% of the Earth's waters, and the seemingly infinite possibilities of the sky. All things perceived by the human eye as being the colour blue. Yet, bottle up a jar of sea water. Over here, the gaseous state of the atmosphere, and what do we see?

An illusion. An interplay of light and structure that is fundamental to the very conception to how visual artists construct the world around them. *Rabat Blue* (2024) engages this complex history of colour and is thus a landmark painting in the oeuvre of artist Sean Scully. I was lucky to be able spend nearly two years in conversation with Scully in the lead-up to the exhibition, exploring the concept of “emotional abstraction”. A passage that has seen the artist decidedly seek to re-inscribe “the human” and “humanistic” qualities of abstraction into the field of art.¹⁰

One can conceive of *Rabat Blue* as a sort of ancillary to his 1969 breakthrough work, *Soft Ending*. Feeling is structured to evoke the sea, as it swoops in and washes away. Window-like structures can serve as indirect metaphors for fishing nets, mosquito nets, or the webbed net of history itself – narrative script transmuting across time. Every work of art, in the end, is made animate by one's own set of lived experiences. In a summative sense, *Rabat Blue* in its entirety, can be said to be leaking and seeping, yet its composition is such that the weave of the hand constantly pulls the eye upward to details, movements, texture. Here, you might ask, of the duality of what is seen and what is concealed; of what metaphorically one might conceive as the soul versus the soil of Earth.

Across an expanse of light sit three of artist Lubaina Himid's *Freedom Kangas*, an ongoing project that connects her to ancestral



Sean Scully, *Rabat Blue*, 2024



Lubaina Himid, *There Could Be an Endless Ocean / We Were Always Saying Goodbye / How Do You Spell Change?*, 2018

heritage. A pattern, annotated with a poem, invokes the East African clothing of Zanzibar, where Himid was born. Here, we are reminded that a pattern when repeated, forms a body, as much as a constellation. It also serves as a metaphor for a social fabric, a sense of communion or of a specific societal movement. It may also be appreciated for its formalism. At the heart is often a riddle or question. Although Himid would not meet her father, who poignantly died from malaria, when she was a matter of weeks old, kangas remained a connective tissue in Himid's life and artistic practice. As she notes, they speak as much of society, politics, and history as they do of the garments themselves:

Kangas are also about the women that wear them. When my grandmother wanted to go to a wedding, she and her friends would make my father buy a whole set of kangas, so they would all wear the same kanga and all go together, all of one piece.¹¹

These paintings on paper, examined at a distance and then up close, begin to resemble flags, icons, reliefs. For *Finding My Blue Sky*, the artist suggested that they be reproduced as murals that occupy the corner of Bell Street and Penfold Street. Of the three works, one returns us to the essence of blue's unceasing influence. Set between a pair of crimson lungs against a backdrop of grey and sky blue, read the words, "THERE COULD BE AN ENDLESS OCEAN". Manifest at over 8 feet high at the corner of a street junction, this painting reads as much as a manifesto as it does a question. For between the two lungs lives the beating heart. The centrifugal engine that governs life. Can we imagine that the invisible heart is conjuring a space for a tender, loving, politics – one that marches to its own drumbeat, both during the day and night?

Take a breath and remember that the street is yours. "There could be an endless ocean" is a fragment of a poem along with several others, cited from the voices of poets who have often been marginalised in our time. To this eye, the words invoke the unknown seas, the possibility of endlessness, of ascending and extending, as much as they might elicit emotions of fear of the unknown. This is the power of art, and the honour of being able to preserve and sanction spaces for its exhibition, conservation and narration.

Finding My Blue in sea or sky. Here is a site where anyone's biography can be supplanted in place of the author's (in this case, the curator), to construct their own pathways, to lead them down meandering paths, to otherwise, and elsewhere.

STEP INTO THE HORIZON

Two cylindrical forms, each annotated with stair-like grooves ascend to a skylight – an architectural feature distinct to Lisson Gallery's Bell Street gallery. Here, beneath the sky, one will find, *In the Looking Glass* (2025), a newly created installation by artist, Magda Stawarska. Within the sweep of several metres, there seem to be countless possible horizons to rest one's eyes. What does it mean to submit to the horizon or to the notion of a 'meeting point' where the earth meets the sky? Could it also be conceived as a fault line, where the purity and singularity of form – the resolve of Cartesian dualism, is intentionally diffused? Are we being struck into a liminal groove?¹²

Before you are cut and primed sheets of aluminum and copper



Magda Stawarska, *In the Looking Glass*, 2025
(detail)

on a wall, raised from the ground, presenting an epic painting of interior and exterior scenes from Warsaw. This is a painting that also becomes a sculpture about to yoke space out of thin air. It retracts, echoes, shimmers, wakes and sleeps, all with the seasons. It is animate architecture – an archive of things *felt* – located between multiple screens, which are prone to temporal slippage.

The spectator may analyze the plait of the pictorial plane to locate a fragment amidst the shadows. But those experiences, like the latent secrets of the past, desire a privacy. The exhibition *Finding My Blue Sky*, in a similar vein, invites you to decide what demands to be looked at. “What world would you dream of?”, I continue to remind audiences, as they enter, and exit both London galleries on Bell Street and Lisson Street, respectively. The question is a seemingly impossible one. It could be interpreted as an encapsulation of modernism’s absolute resolve to progress towards contemporaneous thought. Or it could serve as a nod to the very gallery street’s own geolocative shift, the freefall and cultural schism wrought by and propagated by urban gentrification and tiered property development.¹³

The question has been seen by some visitors to the gallery as a provocation, by others as an invitation to unbuckle oneself from pre-determined expectations of looking. Artist-founded galleries such as Lisson boast – as one art critic informed me in the lead-up to the exhibition – their “own institutional history... one cannot simply intervene”.¹⁴ These spaces seek to maintain archives and resources worthy of some of the world’s greatest public institutions –resources that in this project, I sought to use, from within ‘the looking glass’ as it were, but also, while coterminously asking if I too could *learn from the gallery*. Over a period, I was afforded the necessary tools required to help me shift aspects of the ocular. Through workshops with staff, roundtables and bundles of one-to-one conversations, it seemed apt to propose an act of staging, which considered revisionist modes of exploring history. *Finding My Blue Sky* could be seen in such terms as an invitation for one to speak in many tongues – to story, to sing, and experiment, outside of the bounds of the knowable.¹⁵

Throughout, the immense pressures and practicalities that are expected of artists at this specific moment became apparent to me. The resulting project, this show, thus aspires to a civic commitment and purpose. I have attempted to afford artists invested time, close attention, and care. And then there is our community! My desire to give the gallery back to the street, to make the interior lines of memory flow from the specters of Stawarska’s painting into the street and to be captured by Leiko Ikemura’s dreaming sculpture, *Lying Head*, 2020, came to be as I had imagined it.

Over the course of two years, Lisson Gallery staff perambulated with me, in and around both of its sites, across Church Street, the Edgware Road and back, with the choice of ‘the sky’ as the metaphorical motif continuing to resonate. It is the only spot from where I could imagine perching my cloud, to conjure this scene, one where ideas could be formed, dissolved, written, re-written, resourced, and thus coming to be part of a conscious act of worldbuilding.¹⁶



Leiko Ikemura, *Lying Head*, 2020

HISTORY IS A CONTINUOUS MOVEMENT

The polymath-like artist Simone Fattal – painter of light, sculptor of mythological environments and publisher of the landmark Post-Apollo Press, an experimental poetry and literary press – introduced me to the concept of “history as continuous movement”.¹⁷ For Fattal, chronology is an imperfect metric through which to view the world and to measure time, something that spatially allows us to time travel, and re-author the so-called misnomers of history. In *Finding My Blue Sky*, it felt apt to embrace the slippages of the memory fold, the dissonance of the past. What visual lexicon would come to the fore? An early conversation with artist Anuar Khalifi kept returning us both to the apertures of the street and to the patterns that contain the building blocks of European aesthetic culture.

Khalifi chose to engage this context because of his own personal connection to the street as a person of dual Moroccan and Spanish heritage. “I can feel the pattern of your story, the shape of it.”, he said, immediately after I had invited him to participate. He is based between Barcelona and Tangiers, somehow also in the space between these two places, where the geographic line is negligible. An ideological weight can become an affliction for some. But not for Khalifi. Instead, much like a young Kerry James Marshall, he has crafted a space for Black and Brown men to be celebrated and seen within their own visual culture realm. His figures can be ambivalent, wounded, soft and fragile, often at the crest of an epic shift in their lives. I know of very few painters who submit themselves to the canvas like Khalifi. Once an idea has arrived, the scenes unfurl onto unstretched canvas set against a giant wall in his studio.

The specially commissioned triptych, *Aqiqah or aqeeqah* (2024) translates to *The truth or be it the truth, or not*. It is a riddle that is decoded through the way one mouth stresses upon the words, slipping them off the tongue. The title is also a pattern, a code that switches, back and forth, much akin to the tiles that Khalifi has painted here across all three panels, which encourage the spectator to dance beneath three godly figures in a gallery that I have dubbed “the secular church”. The latter is a reference to the icons, the stained-glass pictures, and where we as children first encounter art, whatever scripture we are raised and taught to read. The camp, central presence in Khalifi’s painting (call him Christ reincarnated), finds his balance in a carefully choreographed air of translucence.

Leiko Ikemura’s blueish transparent head, lit or unlit, sits regally distended, upended on what feels like a plinth about to rotate into outer space. This mythological vessel is no witch, or is she? May we call her a saintly creature, a fairy godmother, or rather, is she the mother who constructs the matrixial gaze, the matrix for and of looking? Mother Mary, the soothing spirit who is kin to Hrair Sarkissian’s skin-landscapes and Hugh Hayden’s *Hug* (2025).

The loose thread of John Latham’s *The New Economics* (1975) pulls you upwards to find a historical zone where two women take center stage: Barbara Walker and Huguette Caland. Walker uses graphite for its opulent and familiar proximity to skin. Here, she has visioned two swagger-style portraits in scale and composition, only to



Anuar Khalifi, *Aqiqah or aqeeqah*, 2024

bluster one's expectation with the finer details. Walker's son Solomon and her grandson sit before us as interrogating the threshold of race and masculinity. Adjacent, are rarely seen self-portraits by one of the pioneers of late modernism, Huguette Caland. Constituted out of script, pen, mixed medium on paper, these fragments of self might perplex those familiar with the breadth of the artist's specific painting practice. Staging this scene, of these two women, both at a cross section, is my act of storying.

What if we could set a scene where a mother from Birmingham could be sharing her ideas with a mother from Beirut who was living in self-exile in Venice, California? The outcome is for you to decide.

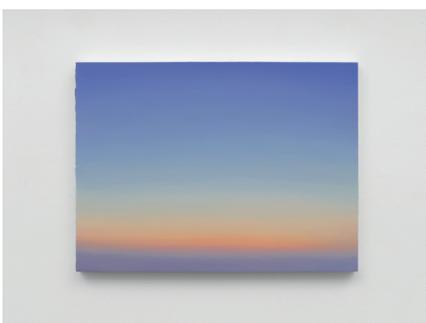
LAND AND SEA

Lubaina Himid, in a conversation about William Hogarth, once said, "I start every brightly coloured painting thinking what I really want is to do this in subtle shades of northern European grey".¹⁸ Yet, her desire to creatively constitute visual space for diasporic lives—figures ostracized, or ignored entirely, desire, as W.J.T. Mitchell articulates in "What do Pictures Want?", a different kind of structure and texture.¹⁹ Himid amplifies and reimagines scenes for voices that have been sidelines and fashions currents for them through vibrant and culturally codified uses of colour.

The preoccupation with Britain's graduated landscapes has long been an obsession of the artist, Celia Hempton. Her painting practice began in early childhood growing up near the market town of Stroud in Gloucestershire. She is the daughter of two artists; one being the painter Paul Hempton (b. 1946, Wakefield) – who spent much of his professional life teaching in art schools – and the other being painter Marget Balfour (b.1946, Liverpool). Hempton notes that painting began immediately for her, but that a significant shift occurred during a fellowship to the British Academy in Rome after her formal art education. Here, everything changed. The "high contrast" of the city's beaming light overhead left her breathless.

She began to imagine the pictorial plane as one of possible Technicolor. Life would become her subject. Her paintings took on a formalism derived by situation. Hempton often delves into interstitial spaces, working between the screen and the tactile world. That which exists behind an operating room window, in a demolition site, in charged libidinal spaces, unfolding in an act of negotiation. Her linen, oil, and aluminium panes are charged. Some are considered performances unto themselves, often painted in one sitting, after extensive periods of planning and contemplation.

In the process of making *Finding My Blue Sky*, I allowed myself to submit to an act of un-learning, and re-learning with Hempton. The cinema of my dreams I found unspooled in paintings, in glass cases of emotion, each of varying sizes that take on the span of a decade's worth of Hempton's art. Here, we look at the world first *en plein air*, via online encounter, through CCTV footage and other static surveillance screens, through the glass panes of life, but also through sealed buildings and hospital operating rooms, as well as in the raw interiority of the unfurling demolition site. Weaving throughout the show, from point A



Celia Hempton, *Isola Rossa, Italy*, 9th April 2025, 2025

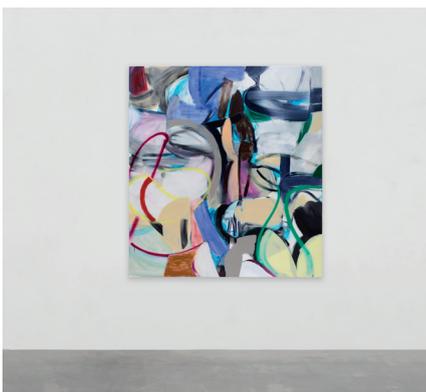
to Z, Hempton's paintings serve as talismans, sacred skins vested with ancestral knowledge that speak to the importance of "human word and action." They are purposeful gestures, which bear a newfound responsibility as they enter the public domain, to cite Jean Fisher.²⁰ Just so, Hempton's paintings are a series of dreamscapes, akin to the characters found in Rachel Eisendrath's *Gallery of Dreams*²¹. They foster a panoptical curvature that wraps around and cleaves itself to the exhibition as one singular painting – a self-portrait, shapeshifting to the end of time.

LIFESCAPES

It is peculiar that painting presents itself at this juncture of digital overload as one of the most technologically adventurous of mediums. It, indeed, remains one of the most beguiling ways to initiate a conversation around visual literacy – of visibility, of ontology – the physiological and experiential processes of being present within the world itself. With paint one can zoom in and out of the frame, a lesson I learned from the artist Magda Stawarska, whose interplay of silkscreen printing and hand painting onto copper, aluminium and linen, is a process that is constantly generative. Just as it is material, her frames of reference encompass the realm of her films, with their choreographed crews, such as in *Music and Silence*, 2024, which in and of itself offers vistas for errant voices left in seams that we did not know of.

In assembling the threads of thought that would constitute what would come to be, *Finding My Blue Sky*, one constituent, unceasing question presented itself. How does art contain the very specific histories that surround its making? When exhibited: how do we as spectators establish ways, not merely of looking at it, but living with it, *feeling* our way through the objects and their lived history? Liliane Tomasko's *Shapeshifter (Chilled to the Bone)* (2024) enters the frame. It is at once a self-portrait unfurling, as it is an embodied dance to the end of time. Our eyes here elide multiple seats of reference. Tomasko embodies the actionist verve of Lassnig and energies redolent of Joan Mitchell's energetic period in the early 1960s. Movement, for her, becomes a possibility for her (us) to take flight from the wounds kept in earthly nature. Nature being her ultimate site of solitude. *Shapeshifter* here is an embodied vestige of coyote, of raven, of trickster, transmuting across time through vibrant bluets that sink the eyes into the sweep of time.

Art, in most cases, resolves to outlive us. These objects are also our witnesses and companions. They are present as we fall in and out of love. They may be passed down through familial generations; become part of museum collections; be loaned to significant international exhibitions; see themselves re-contextualized and re-visioned into myriad stories across time. Chelenge Van Rampelberg *Waiting for Friday Flowers* (2023) sits at this juncture of space and time. It is as if the artist has taken a detail from a Renaissance painting and exploded it into a large than life frame that soaks over us. Gor Soudan, conversely, here, uses painting to stitch, fragment and re-stitch the space of painting. His modular paintings featured in this exhibition remind us of the cumulative possibility of accruing sight—of feeling our way through art and its histories.



Liliane Tomasko, *Shapeshifter (Chilled to the Bone)*, 2024

All these artworks present a cartography, a landscape of a life. As the author Ann Wroe aptly called this “space” a “lifescape” – a biographic entry-point that allows one to search for the makers, and perhaps even the owner’s, soul.²² If *Finding my Blue Sky* seeks to achieve one thing, it is to serve as a summoning, a porous opening, some kind of a beginning. Imagine that the street is yours and you are filled with all the curiosity of a child lusting to play.

Perhaps, it’s time for you to fall in love [with the world] again?

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ENDNOTES

- 1 Conversation with Sandra Guimarães at Helga De Alvear Museum, Cáceres, Spain on 22 April 2025.
- 2 Donna J Haraway, *The Companion Species Manifesto: Dogs, People, and Significant Otherness* (Chicago/London: an imprint of the University of Chicago Press/Prickly Paradigm Press, 2003); pages: 1-3.
- 3 Paul Heyer interviewed by Austen Tosone (2018). *Interview Magazine*. Available [here](#), accessed 1 June 2025.
- 4 The landmark biography *Lose Your Mother* in many a regard bridges *storying* into the realm of “critical fabulation” is emblemized beautifully in: Saidiya Hartman (2007/2021) *Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route*. London: Serpent’s Tail. Also see Kevin Young (2012) *The Grey Album: On the Blackness of Blackness*. Minneapolis, MN: Gray Wolf Press.
- 5 W.J.T. (William John Thomas) Mitchell (2005) *What Do Pictures Want? The Lives and Loves of Images*. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press.
- 6 Gilles Deleuze (1986-9). “The Movement Image and its Three Varieties.” In *Cinema 1: The Movement-Image*. Trans. H. Tomlinson and B. Habberjam. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota Press; pages 91-104.
- 7 See for instance: A. J Barnier, & A. Hoskins (2018). “Is there memory in the head, in the wild?” *Memory Studies*, Volume 11(4). Pgs. 386-390. Or listen and engage the work of neuroscientist Daniel Glaser (2018) “How we read word”. *The Guardian*. Available [here](#), accessed 21 June 2025. Or “Where perception ends, and hallucination begins.” *The Guardian*. Available [here](#), accessed 22 June 2025.
- 8 Isabel Stevens (2016) “Susan Hiller’s Search for the Right Medium”. *Apollo*. Available [here](#), accessed 20 June 2025.
- 9 See: Omar Kholeif (2025) “Ryan Gander’s After-Affects; and the Ryan Gander Epistles”. In S. Guimarães (ed.) *Ryan Gander: Grunts, hoots, whimpers, barks and screams*. Berlin: Germany.
- 10 This was articulated by Scully at the inauguration of his exhibition, “A Romantic Geometry of Colors” in October 2024 at the Centre Pompidou, Paris. For further context, see [here](#), accessed 20 June 2025.
- 11 Dorothy Price (2021) “Dreaming Has a Share in History”: Biding Time in the Work of Lubaina Himid. *Art History*, Volume 44, Issue 3; pages 650–675.
- 12 Didier Maleuvre (2011) *The Horizon: A Cite of Infinite Longing*. San Francisco: University of California Press.
- 13 One can speak further and at great length regarding this historic subject and neighbourhood, of Lisson Grove and the streets that bookend it. To engage it, we need to narrate and engage a social history such as the ones found in the following resources: [Huck Magazine](#), accessed 20 June 2025. [St. John’s Wood Memories](#), accessed 20 June 2025. [Grand Union](#), accessed 20 June 2025. [The archive of the “Centre for Possible Studies”](#), accessed 20 June 2025.
- 14 The concept of what constitutes an “institutional” history aside, Lisson Gallery was constantly forthcoming in negotiating the bounds of how one could dialogue with, or even against such histories. A freedom not necessarily afforded in the public sector, i.e. the desire for change-making.
- 15 Omar Kholeif (2016). “To Speak with Many Tongues at Once.” *Poetry* 208, no. 1. Pgs. 68–71.
- 16 I consciously invoke the planetary, the nebulous, the seemingly infinite, the supple, the sensuous, but also the volatile, porous skin that orbits us, as an inversion of Samuel Beckett’s *Imagination Dead Imagine* from 1965, which presented an imagination hemmed in by closed, narrow cylindrical forms. A text that was introduced to me by the artist, Judith Barry.
- 17 Negar Azimi (2019), ‘History is a Continuous Movement’: An Interview with Simone Fattal, *Frieze* (March 15, 2019).
- 18 Lubaina Himid in conversation with Omar Kholeif (2022). In O. Kholeif (ed.) *Plaited Time/Deep Water*. Sharjah: Sharjah Art Foundation; pages 45-46.
- 19 W.J.T. (William John Thomas) Mitchell (2005) *What Do Pictures Want? The Lives and Loves of Images*. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press.
- 20 Jean Fisher (2012) “The Importance of Words and Actions”. Musée d’histoire de Nantes. ‘Fictional Histories’. Talks Series: *Afterall* Exhibition Histories. Archived [here](#), accessed 22 June 2025.
- 21 Rachel Eisendrath (2021) *Gallery of Clouds*. New York: New York Review of Books Publishing, pages 4-5.
- 22 Ann Wrote (2023), *Lifescapes*: London: Jonathon Cape. Pgs. 5-11.