

THE COMMON GUILD

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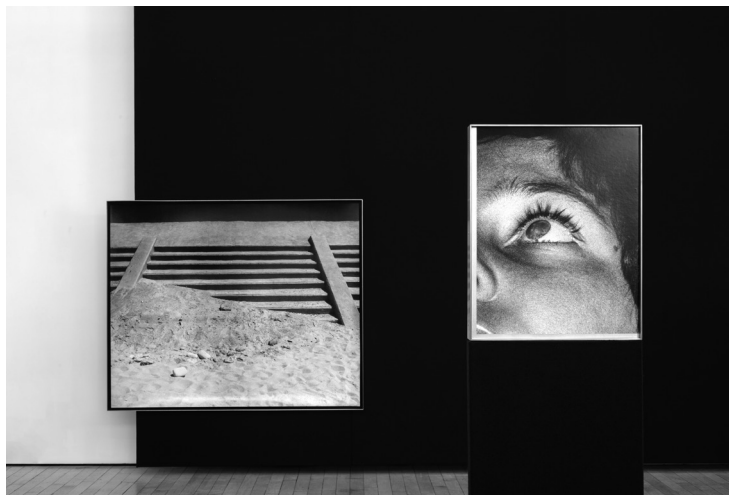


Photo by Ruth Clark

COMMENTARIES

Joanna Piotrowska 'A moment of darkness at noon'

23 May – 18 July



If ever there were an exhibition of photographs that deserved to be opened to daylight, it may well be Joanna Piotrowska's *A moment of darkness at noon*. This constellation of unconscious scenes pulled and pooled, sewn and stitched together from dislodged time, materialises as a tapestry of sculpture, cleaving to the architecture of 5 Florence Street's former school building. Here, we find ourselves in a site where, on a narrow expanse of land across the River Clyde, an imagined congregation glistens into this author's view – a prospective playground where young people can be found catching errant thoughts. One can image them becoming 'wool gatherers' – dreamers, who in their solitude find their creative vision.¹

Virtuous and pure are not the markers imprinted by this artist's gaze. Although for an instant, one may find themselves swept up in the whimsy of certain aesthetics, a hushed duplicity looms. A Minnie Mouse-like ribbon carved out of wood anchors a face held precipitously in the grip of two hands: the fine line between seductive submission and coercion are at a rub. Invited guests – refractive, miniature colourful glass figurines commissioned by the artist, begin to surface. The latter are redolent of marbles or jewellery pieces that one might add to a chain-link necklace, a family heirloom. You may encounter them affixed atop an austere steel frame holding forth, akin to a talisman.

The images that unfold before us, rendered primarily in black and white, some intimately scaled, others larger than human, upon close inspection, are all collages.² Gatefolds to an imagination that serves to situate the spectator

into Piotrowska's preoccupation with Jungian thought. For Carl Jung, collage is deemed a 'democratic' analytical means in therapeutic treatment that allows one to bypass certain logic. It affords space to externalise emotions via the unconscious, illuminating obscured feelings and archetypes, and unburdens the metaphorical overcast 'shadow' leading one to a seat of individuation.³ I use the term 'democracy' here for 'a moment of darkness at noon' both alludes to the errantry of dreaming as it does to the 'solar eclipse' of Austro-Hungarian-born novelist, Arthur Koestler's novel, first published in English and German in 1940 during World War II. Here, Koestler melancholically ascribes humankind to be a flawed race – unable to self-govern nor to navigate toward a democratic state that might benefit the collective.⁴

Piotrowska's pictures may not have been constituted in between the aperture of the shutter and the lens, but they have been conceived between the space of wakefulness and sleep. Amidst an ocean of memory and tears – negotiating the hushed anxiety of young adulthood, where sense and sensuality, the latent wound of memory and memoria brims, unspoken, until. One emerges from this exhibition, looking back at life from within the interstices of a person's soul. As *Father Time* strikes mid-life, one is left querying, what has one left behind to sediment in the Earth? Counting the hour before them, or fearing for all the desires that have been lost?

These are pictorial fields, as W.J.T. Mitchell once explained, that summon for a kiss.⁵ Their barbed, maladjusted edges, at times seemingly lustrous, shimmer only to cool. Industrious

material is decisively chosen and detailed by hand. Each movement is an invitation to pause, to break the fourth wall, and crescendo into an intertidal field where one is left with nothing but to look, or to tunnel into their own memory fold.

When you pull up for air, that inhalation might leave you curious as to the various paths where you have lingered. Perhaps you stretched out across a plank? For this author, you may have walked on a bridge in Alexandria. In this century, or one past. It is not necessary for me to identify where Joanna had to excavate to find these images – many of which are original silver gelatin handprints. I prefer to imagine that the darkrooms in which these were produced serve as sanctuaries – routes for us to time travel through, just as we are integrally positioned in this gallery as vessels in Piotrowska's museological stage where she has decided that we are, likewise, pictographic objects amidst a set of players, in a work of theatre, within a seemingly boundless cast of idiosyncratic characters.

A moment of darkness at noon imbricates the beholder into the situated space of dreaming – to the site of dreamwork,⁶ the meticulous space of process and *processing*. It is as if we collectively, tenderly, are unspooling a roll of film. Unbuckling the carousel of suspension. Thought bubbles form only to be pierced by a strident blue plinth holding a suspended body of a man adrift, collapsing semblance of mountain, sky and sea. This image is as much moving image as it is painting. This is no fork in the road. It resembles a scene from Youssef Chahine's *Alexandria, Why?/ Iskenderia Leb?* (1978) – a coming-of-age

biopic of the late Egyptian cinematic auteur. For another onlooker, it is a scene from an Antonioni film. A fire erupts inside of me, and embers shoot, forming an assembly of thought. The cineplex inside has made the limpid noon-day demon⁷ dissipate and the moving images are ripe to be stirred again. I am wandering through corridors, opening doors and closing them. Hurriedly and excitedly, before the tremors surface. Search for my new life. I too have arrived at the mid-point, and the mutability of 'dreaming', it has transpired, has been one of constant co-option.

An asphyxiating yearning. A perfectly adjusted nude torso framed. A pose in recline. Hark to Jamie Dornan's youthful modelling days before he was franchised in the film series *50 Shades of Grey* (2015). The aspiration to excise my overabundant flesh slips into mind. To grow speckled chest hair. To lay in wrinkled sheets. To live, 'to story' with candid whimsy, even if it were nothing more than an act of 'fiction'. Yet this work, like all the works in the show, which are *Untitled* from 2026 does not heed to self-pity. Its steel edges are bent and crested upward and outward at the seams. A miniature magnetic Mickey Mouse alludes to a teenage fantasy that could not come to bear. A hand separates the neat edges of the pictorial plane – one burnished with age. A Royal Flush amidst a sea of Blue. This room suddenly feels akin to a painted panorama by the late artist, Silke Otto-Knapp – a dress rehearsal for a ballet in her signature watercolours on a canvas in a Yves Klein blue.

I scoop the energy of this curious moment across with me through the wispy white clouds via the skies and down to Highbury Hill. Here in the parking lot of the Catholic Church a stream of bodies effloresces, one that runs down to the Emirates Stadium. People fill the streets with an abundance of the colour red. It is a red that brims with as much metaphor as Renaissance painter Fra Angelico's frescos of passion and sacrifice. Flash mobs transpire in celebratory mode. Bewildered: everyone is in a congratulatory spirit, tempting the other to join them in an act of street theatre. The eyes are hooked on the perimeter of this multi-generational, multi-ethnic cosmos. In that instant I see that there is nothing royally exclusive in the cool blue that wraps around Piotrowska's stage. Just as in this scene, hers is a non-denominational field, pulled from the wheel of nature to liberate us into one of possibility – of a probable, if not possible, site of becoming.

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1. This definition of 'wool gathering' stems from Smith's first memoir: Patti Smith (1992), *Wool Gathering*. New York: Hanuman Books.
2. This is the artist's first exhibition of entirely collage-led work, although to linger on medium would be a disservice to the artwork's intent.
3. Carl G. Jung (1981) *The archetypes and the collective unconscious* (R.F.C. Hull, Trans.) New Jersey and London: Princeton University Press. (Originally published: 1953).
4. Arthur Koestler (1940/2019) (German/English) *Darkness at Noon*. London and New York: Macmillan.
5. This articulation of W.J.T. Mitchell's theory of iconology, i.e. that pictures assert their own agency over humans, which are detailed in his many books, have shaped and contoured the field of visual culture. Most notably in *Iconology: Image, Text, Ideology* (1986) and in *What Do Pictures Want?: The Lives and Loves of Images* (2006) both published by University of Chicago Press. This was distilled to me by Mitchell himself during a conversation at the University of Chicago on 27 November 2025.
6. Sigmund Freud's conception of 'dreamwork' in the simplest sense is the unconscious 'processing' of the 'dream' and its material function – afterimage. Over the last decade, as a response to the maladaptive, and violent co-option of the language of dreaming, I have developed my thesis of 'dreamwork'. My proposal, drawing on African and First Nations knowledge(s) from both so-called Australia and the Americas, argues that creators of aesthetic culture are bounded by a necessity to 'dream' and thus must be cradled by a tribe of 'dreamworkers'. Dreamworkers safeguard visual culture, create space for individual visual literacy and its dissemination. They are the philosophers in a divisive world, where the concept of polyphonous song is met with a grinding axe by politicians and bureaucrats.
7. The exhibition's title also alludes to the 'noon-day demon' a metaphor for depression. After a long period of induced dreaming, I found myself able to read again. It was circa 2018. I read Andrew Solomon's *The Noonday Demon* (2001), a nearly 600-page cultural history of depression, from cover to cover. My takeaway from this was that manic depression could be conceived as a liminal state. This dovetails with the artist's references to Murray Stein's *'In Midlife'* (2014), from where the title is borrowed. Here one finds themselves in an experience, to quote Piotrowska – in a moment of "liminality".