

Painting in Britain: Meet the artists giving a new lease of life to this enduringly popular art form

A roll call of exciting artists are breathing a new lease of life into brushwork, mixing together genres, traditions and styles

By Ben Luke | 01 September 2021



Matthew Krishanu / Photo: Peter Mallet

It only happens once in a while. And Ralph Rugoff, director of the Hayward Gallery, reckons it's happening now. Britain is in an artistic hot streak. And it's all about painting. Next week, Rugoff opens Mixing It Up at the Hayward, a show featuring 31 painters, all working in Britain, many in London. "The UK has, I don't know, one of the three best painting scenes in the world right now," Rugoff says. "It's really in a leading place internationally."

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And looking at the roll call of artists—from senior figures like Peter Doig and Lubaina Himid, to artists who've been working away for decades but only now gaining deserved acclaim like Caroline Coon and Denzil Forrester, to exciting young voices like Vivien Zhang and Kudzanai-Violet Hwami—it's hard to disagree. Perhaps the best indication of its strength is the wealth of great painters that aren't included – including Michael Armitage, who had a brilliant recent Royal Academy show, and Lynette Yiadom-Boakye, whose Tate Britain show was one of last year's best.

This autumn is something of a painting fest in London. Prominent shows of international painters open in numerous galleries in the next couple of weeks: the German artist Florian Krewer is at Michael Werner gallery, the Brooklyn-based painter Doron Langberg and Zimbabwean Kudzanai-Violet Hwami, who also features in Mixing It Up, are at Victoria Miro. The hugely influential late Dutch painter René Daniëls is at Modern Art; the Greek artist Sofia Mitsola at Pilar Corrias. Lots more painting shows open around the Frieze art fair in October.

The artists Mixing It Up aren't part of any movement or group, but they all exploit "painting's amazing multiplicity or heterogeneousness", Rugoff explains, creating rich collisions and fusions of genres, traditions and painting styles. The canvas is a space "for speculative thinking, almost like the way fiction mirrors the lives we lead", he says. "Painting is not about depiction, it's about generating these kinds of associations and chains of reference that allow you to think and speculate yourself."

That productive ambiguity is at the heart of the beautiful yet unsettling works of Matthew Krishanu. His Two Boys series features atmospheric scenes loosely based on photos of Krishanu and his brother in Bangladesh, where they grew up (Krishanu has lived in the UK since he was 12). But those images are only part of it, alongside the two other "planks" of his work, memory and art history. "I'm not interested in making closed pictures that have a single definitive reading that can be

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defined by, say, autobiographical memory – that’s not the intention,” he says. “The intention is to set up a charge within the painting.” Among several paintings Krishanu is showing at the Hayward is *Weapons*, where the boys, one of whom carries a bow and arrow, are together with a “Bengali or Indian-looking man with a machete”, he says. “And they’re in a face-off.” It’s both charming and disquieting.

While there’s a seamlessness about Krishanu’s paintings, other artists have a more fractured approach to bringing images together. Vivien Zhang’s paintings teem with fragments of digital imagery, objects with CGI sheen and pixellated gaming glitches, amid painterly ribbons and washes of high colour. Like many of the artists, Zhang’s paintings are evocative of collage. “There’s so much more, in terms of just the process, that artists use today,” she says. As well as having access to an unprecedented breadth of images, artists are also, crucially, “composed of different contexts ourselves”, she says.

Zhang was born in Beijing but then moved to Nairobi and Bangkok before coming to art school in the UK. “So I’m bringing my heritage to my practice, obviously, either consciously or subconsciously.” Zhang says she is “sourcing things from different contexts because I’m still trying to understand my relationship to them. I’m trying to work out how, as an artist, I have the authority to claim these things. And I’m trying to work out how they can coexist.”

Kudzanai-Violet Hwami is another artist who grapples with identity through paint. Born in Gutu, Zimbabwe in 1993, she later lived in South Africa before coming to the UK. Her paintings, rich in colour, sometimes feature self-portraits or depict family members, set within complex spaces, often with fragments of interiors, abstract passages and repeated silkscreen images.

“As an artist, you have to allow yourself to experience what it is you’re doing, which is, for me, putting paint on the surface, or using colour – the basic elements and forms,” she says. “Sometimes, I have felt that I forgot that a little bit; I’m focusing too much on wanting to be an artist

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who is saying a particular thing, wanting to maybe deal with a political subject, how the work is framed – for example the work being about displacement or some parts having to do with being queer. Those things are important, because they are part of me.”

She recalls that the American abstract painter Helen Frankenthaler was asked what it’s like to be a woman painter. Her answer: “The first thing I’m dealing with is just being a painter.” Hwami adds: “You can’t escape identity, class and race: I don’t know what it’s like to be a Black painter, I’m just a person who exists who is Black and has these experiences that maybe other people don’t have. But I’m dealing with painting. It’s something I’m trying to understand myself.”

The sheer diversity of the backgrounds of UK-based painters is one explanation for the scene’s abundant health, as Rugoff points out. But there’s a lack of dogma apparent in artists’ work, too. Krishanu remembers that “making work about memory, personal identity” was “really frowned upon” when he studied painting in the late 1990s. Painting had to be more coldly conceptual. There wasn’t, as Krishanu says, “very much painterly painting”. But, he says, “it feels like a real explosion in the last 10 years”.

Doig is crucial to this in his loose, poetic painting style and, Rugoff says, in his subtly complex allusions. Doig has also taught numerous artists, in London and Düsseldorf, promoted his students’ work and supported artists with long careers who have been undeservedly overlooked, like Denzil Forrester. Doig “really has given me the leg up”, Forrester says – after admiring him for decades, Doig put on a show at his gallery, Tramp’s, in 2016, that finally drew the interest and acclaim Forrester deserved. It’s puzzling now, seeing Forrester’s vibrant canvases featuring reggae nightclubs, Lovers Rock house parties and carnivals, among other things, to think he was ever in the wilderness.

Born in Grenada in 1956, he came to London in 1967. He now says he feels lucky not to have achieved instant success after leaving art college in the 1980s. Doig was among the painters that were successful

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during that period, but Forrester says of the 1990s Young British Artists era that “a lot of it wasn’t actually to do with painting; a lot of it wasn’t to do with making art, either”. Many painters “didn’t get a look in” at that time, he argues.



Weapons by Matthew Krishanu, 2021, oil on canvas, 45x60cm / Courtesy of the artist and Jhaveri Contemporary. Photo: Peter Mallet

Still, the paintings and particularly drawings he made in his early years influence his current work. He would make dozens of drawings in Hackney clubs, at carnivals and parties, that he still uses in compositions today, alongside more recent sketches. Drawing “gives you your flexibility, your looseness, your springiness, your bounce”, he says. Recent sketches made in Jamaican clubs in 2019 inspired several powerful paintings in the Hayward show.

But there’s also a painting, Brixton Blue (2018), which riffs on the composition of Three Wicked Men, a 1982 work of his in the Tate collection. “It’s basically a dread and two police guys on the street at

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night,” he says. As well as the three protagonists, both the original and the recent painting include allusions to club sound systems and dancers, even the Grenadan countryside Forrester experienced as a child. But that title, *Three Wicked Men*, prompts inevitable associations with police brutality, something Forrester had horrific personal experience with when his friend Winston Rose, a mentally ill Black man, died in police custody in 1981.

Brixton Blue “is the fifth version” of *Three Wicked Men*, he says. “If you have an interesting painting with good subject matter, just like a good record, you could make so many versions of it... This is when ‘mixing it up’ becomes very interesting, because you can take it and run with it – turn it into something else.”

That moment of running with a painting, that adrenaline burst or epiphany, keeps artists returning to this ancient medium. “I see it as a spiritual experience, of connecting my mind, my body, my arm, and creating something,” Kudzanai-Violet Hwami says. “I’ve not yet come to a rational explanation for why I feel the way I feel when I’m making a painting.”

Mixing It Up: Painting Today runs at the Hayward Gallery from September 9 to December 12; southbankcentre.co.uk/whats-on/art-exhibitions/mixing-it-painting-today