

Tanya Leighton



## Life Is More Important than Art at Whitechapel Gallery



This free summer exhibition at the Whitechapel Gallery takes inspiration from James Baldwin's words: "Life is more important than art... and yet that is why art is important." It is a mixture of works that explore the relationship between art and everyday life. Art at its best is a distillation of life, intertwined inextricably with it.

Janette Parris, who co-created the exhibition with the gallery's new director, Gilane Tawadros, shows work for her forthcoming book *This Is Not a Memoir* for the first time. The digital drawings depict graphic images of buildings in the east and south London of the artist's personal history, accompanied by text of conversational vignettes attached to the location. A stint working night shifts at Mount Pleasant sorting office precipitated a brief psychotic episode (as disrupted sleep patterns are wont to do), we are told matter-of-factly. A misguided walk out of *2001: A Space Odyssey* at 16 has meant a lifetime of sitting through bad films for fear of walking out on genius again. The stories feel immediate and remind that a city is both a shared experience and an entirely personal one. No one else will have walked quite the city Parris has.

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Susan Hiller's *J Street Project* (2002-2005) is the work of three years during which she catalogued every German street, lane, alley and avenue with the prefix *Juden* (Jews) in its name. Its meticulousness only makes it more haunting. John Smith's *Citadel* was filmed from his flat during lockdown and features the clear-as-mud announcement made by then prime minister Boris Johnson on the rules of lockdown. It's jarring to be reminded of the cynical befuddlement that was deployed. Smith also presents the fascinating *The Girl Chewing Gum*, a 12- minute film made in Dalston in 1976.

The show goes in a multitude of directions with its expansive brief, and some things don't feel essential or from-the-heart. However, the highlight is Matthew Krishanu's *In Sickness and in Health* (2007-2022), a depiction of the life he shared with his late wife, Uschi Gatward. In these delicately devoted portraits, we see her through his eyes: after they have just met, after they have married, the baby they made. On the adjacent wall, we then see her through his eyes as she is treated for cancer: here she is reading her book, waiting for treatment; here she sits with her legs swung over the side of an enormous hospital bed. Her beauty still radiates but there is now uncertainty and sadness in her gaze, as one would expect. The last painting is just heartbreaking. Krishanu's series has perhaps a simple premise, but so simple that it's not something that's been done in the same way before. It is very moving. In an exhibition full of sound, film and large installations, it's these, with all their tender honesty, that linger in the memory. *Life Is More Important than Art* is worth seeing just for this painted love story.

***Jessica Wall***