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ARTS ENTERTAINMENT > VISUAL ARTS

Food for thought at Green Family Art Foundation: What makes British art 'British'?

"A Room Hung With Thoughts: British Painting Now" features 40 works by 40 artists.

By **Benjamin Lima**
Special Contributor

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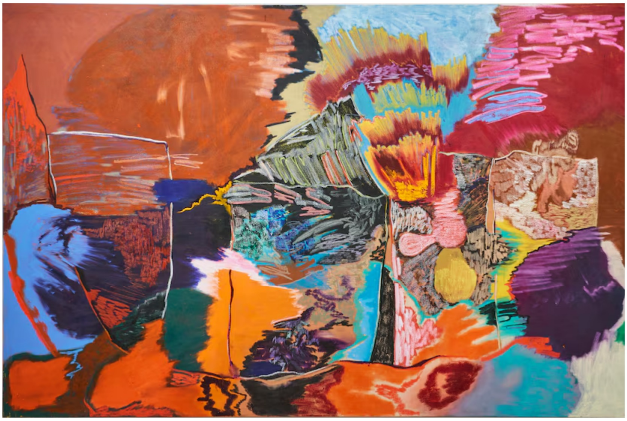


Rachel Jones' "SMIIILLLLEEEE," from 2021, is among the works featured in "A Room Hung With Thoughts: British Painting Now" at the Green Family Art Foundation in Dallas. (Chad Redmon / Courtesy of the artist and Thaddeus Ropac)

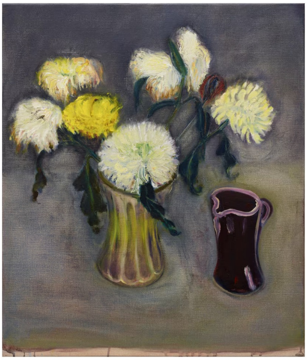
LISTEN

Short of hopping on a flight to London, there probably is no better way to take the pulse of that city's painting scene than to stop by the Green Family Art Foundation's handsome galleries in the heart of the Dallas Arts District.

"A Room Hung With Thoughts: British Painting Now," organized by British curator and author Tom Morton, brings together 40 paintings, one by each artist, with a roster ranging from the near-canonical (Tracey Emin and Cecily Brown) to the fresh-out-of-art-school (Annice Fell and Tommy Harrison).

Though some, such as Rachel Jones, will be familiar to art lovers here, most will be new discoveries — even those, such as Charles Avery and Rosalind Nashashibi, who are quite prominent on the international biennial circuit but not (yet) well-represented locally.

An attractive free full-color handbook, with thoughtful catalog entries for each artist by Morton, makes it easy to begin to grasp each artist's work. I left wanting to see more by each of them, which of course is a sign of the show's success.



Rosalind Nashashibi's 2024 oil painting "Remembering the chrysanthemums, Seeking the chrysanthemums, Planting the chrysanthemums, Admiring the chrysanthemums, Arranging the

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chrysanthemums, Celebrating the chrysanthemums, Painting the chrysanthemums, Questioning the chrysanthemums..." brings some color to the exhibition. (Jonathan de Waart / Courtesy of the artist and GRIMM (Amsterdam, London and New York))

Overall, despite my predilection for the figurative, I was most strongly taken by the abstract works. The gestural compositions by Pam Evelyn, Fell, Catherine Goodman and Mary Ramsden are similar to Brown's in their energetic vitality, while the semi-abstract landscapes by Gabriella Boyd, Michael Raedecker, Phoebe Unwin and Antonia Showering, and the almost-entirely abstract landscapes by Lewis Brander, Francesca Mollett and Tim Stoner, all have an invigorating glow about them.

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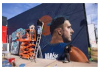

Luka Doncic trade devastated Mavs fans. Now, he's getting a new mural in Dallas

'Instead of a goodbye Luka, it's a thank you,' said Armando Aguirre, one of the artists who worked on the mural in the Tin District.

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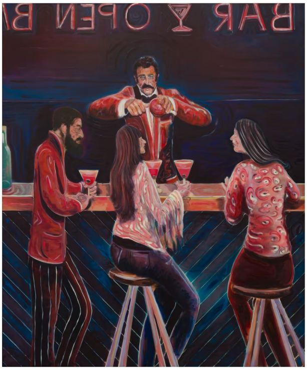
Home to the Dallas Museum of Art and AT&T Performing Arts Center, the Dallas Arts District earned top recognition for its vibrant and diverse arts scenes.

Mollett, incidentally, is the subject of a knockout show just up the Dallas North Tollway at the Warehouse Dallas Art Foundation, and Unwin's vibrant *Stack* is well-chosen as the featured image for the Green Family show's web page. The Slade School of Fine Art professor has shown her zesty, spirited work seemingly everywhere, and if any artist were the central node in a graph of the connections among those in the show, it would be her.

The conceptual sophistication of the floral works by Nashashibi and Alvaro Barrington makes them rewarding objects of study (in contrast with some of their more naive predecessors in the still-life genre), while the grisailles (gray-scale paintings) by Hurvin Anderson and Alex Dordoy recall Gerhard Richter's shrewd manipulation of photograph-based imagery, defining painting in relation to newer pictorial technologies.

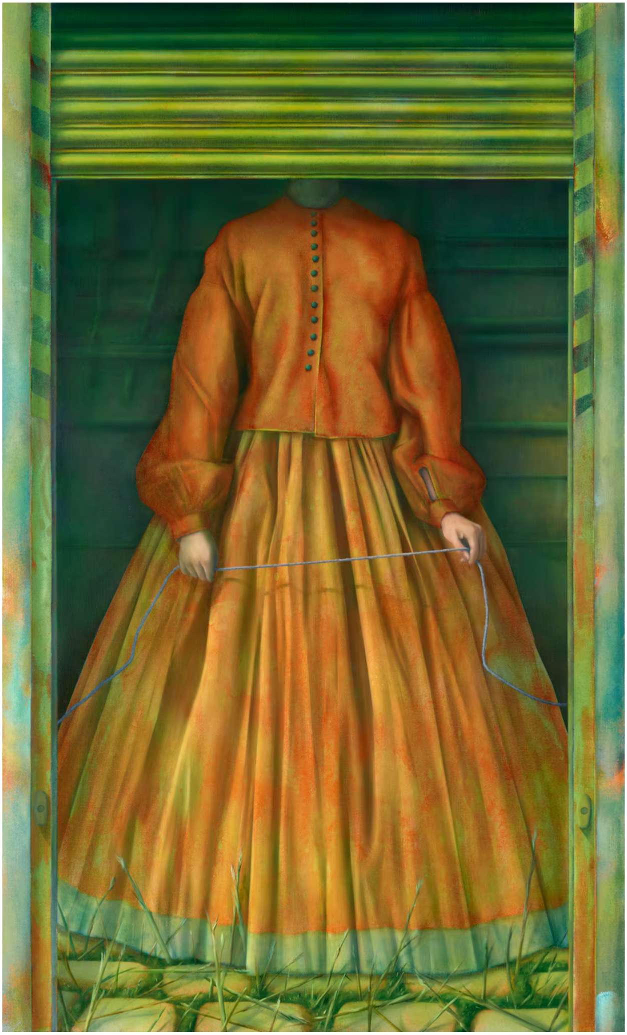
Also, the nightlife in London appears to be as swinging as ever, to judge by the bar scenes by Ryan Mosley and Caroline Walker (riffing on Manet's *A Bar at the Folies-Bergère*) and the love scenes by Jake Grewal and Kudzanai-Violet Hwami.



Ryan Mosley's 2023 painting "The Pomegranate" offers a glimpse of modern London nightlife. (Jules Lister / Courtesy of Josh Lilley Gallery)

The question of the "British" in "British painting" in the show's title is not so easy to grapple with, as acknowledged in Morton's brief catalog introduction. Since the leading British painters don't share any common style, subject matter, themes or artistic genealogy, what, if any, difference does their Britishness make to their work? (The issue isn't unique to Britain; the same questions apply to any global art hub. For comparison, look at the recent attempts by curators of the Whitney Biennial to wrestle with its inherited charge to showcase "American art.")

The stock answer given in the catalog, that the work is defined by its variety, its "multiple positions and vectors" and "diverse artistic visions," I find not quite satisfying, because, while that is all to the good, I wonder whether the word "British" still has any particular artistic significance, as it did in the days of Joshua Reynolds, the 18th-century painter and academician whose remark gave this show the first half of its title. I find it impossible to think about this question without connecting it to the endless, fraught debates about national identity that continue to convulse the political life of every Western country, including the United Kingdom and the United States.



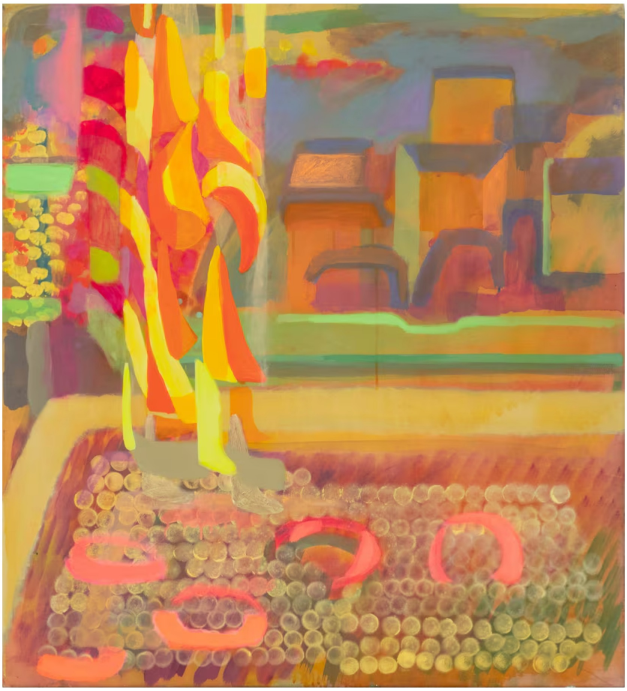
Sheffield painter Tommy Harrison's 2024 oil-on-linen work "String Game" offers some representation of the U.K. outside of London. (Damian Griffiths / Courtesy of the artist and GRIMM (Amsterdam, London and New York))

From a related angle: To what extent does “British Painting Now” just mean “London Painting Now”? A quick, unscientific scan of the artists’ bios yielded a count of 35, a full seven-eighths of the roster, who are based in the U.K. capital. (Shout-outs to Harrison and Louise Giovanelli of Manchester, Jonathan Wateridge of Norfolk, Ryan Mosley of Sheffield and Caroline Walker of Dunfermline, Scotland, who collectively represent the rest of Great Britain.)

Not at all intending a critique of the show’s curation, I understand very well that this simply reflects the reality that London dominates British cultural life, far more than New York or any city does for the U.S. However, the uneasy tensions between a glittering, prosperous capital and entire regions trying to keep up tend to map onto and reinforce the tensions about “Britishness” mentioned above.

What are the chances of a Liverpool- or Blackpool-based artist appearing in an international show of British painting? When was the last time you saw a West Virginia-based artist in the Whitney Biennial? If the answers here are “not much” or “not ever,” how likely is it that such international shows will meaningfully speak to the identities of those who live outside the metropolitan areas, and doesn’t this further complicate claims to represent a concept of “British” (or “American”) art?

The painters here don’t try to attack such questions head-on (which is perfectly fine with me), but from an analytical perspective, these questions do lurk somewhat ominously in the background. To judge by this impressive show, the prospects of “British painting” are in fine health with respect to painting. But with respect to the *British*, the situation is fast changing, and as the Chinese premier Zhou Enlai is purported to have said to Henry Kissinger about the impact of the French Revolution, perhaps it is too early to say how it’ll turn out.



Phoebe Unwin's vibrant 2024 acrylic-on-canvas work "Stack" is among the highlights of the show. (Courtesy of the artist and Amanda Wilkinson, London)

Details

"A Room Hung With Thoughts: British Painting Now" continues through May 11 at the Green Family Art Foundation, 2111 Flora St., Dallas. Admission is free. Open Wednesday through Friday from 11 a.m. to 5 p.m. and Saturday and Sunday from 11 a.m. to 6 p.m. 214-274-5656. greenfamilyartfoundation.org.

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By **Benjamin Lima**

Benjamin Lima is a Dallas-based art historian and the editor of Athenaeum Review, the University of Texas at Dallas journal of arts and ideas.

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