

Tanya Leighton

Observer critics'
review of 2021
Art and design



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Laura Cumming's best art of 2021

This was the year of the great exhibition – in spite of the plague. Galleries offered online shows when they couldn't open and riches when they could, no matter the havoc of cancelled loans, insurance hikes and unreliable transport. Schedules were dextrously shifted and blockbusters extended, so judiciously that Tate shows ran longer and the Royal Academy's magnificent Late Constable continues straight through until next year. Still, one curator confided, 2021 was like playing poker while also juggling eggs.

Terrific surveys of female artists continued apace, though still not fast enough to make up for lost time. The wild and stirring genius of the Scottish painter Joan Eardley was celebrated in multiple centenary shows across Scotland. Swiss modernist Sophie Taeuber-Arp's graphic wit and versatility of needle, pen and paintbrush dazzled at Tate Modern. There were lifetime commemorations of Barbara Hepworth in Wakefield, Eileen Agar at the Whitechapel, Laura Knight at Milton Keynes ([still on, until 20 Feb](#)) and US abstract expressionist Helen Frankenthaler at Dulwich – her visions diaphanous as mist, frequently vast, yet miraculously achieved through hard-line woodcut.

By general consent, Yinka Shonibare brought the Royal Academy Summer Exhibition to exhilarating new life with outstanding works by black artists. And 2021 felt at least fractionally more diverse, with riveting solo shows from [Charles Gaines](#), Michael Armitage and Samson Kambalu, Joy Labinjo and Sonia Boyce in public spaces, Carrie Mae Weems in Cardiff, whose photographs could be seen outdoors during lockdown, and every single one of the 40 and more contributors to [Life Between Islands](#), seven decades of British Caribbean art at Tate Britain, so mind-altering I will never forget it. This was the show of the year for me.

Painting soared, and was everywhere. People muttered that it was safer than installation or event art, say, during a pandemic (though that didn't stop Yayoi Kusama's mirror-upon-mirror [Infinity Rooms](#) from selling out at Tate Modern). Ralph Rugoff's [Mixing It Up: Painting Today](#) offered an enthralling overview of what he called "one of the three best painting scenes in the world right now" – namely ours. His Hayward Gallery show offered an astounding range of UK-based artists – Lisa Brice, Matthew Krishanu, Vivien Zhang, rising stars Mohammed Sami and Kudzanai-Violet Hwami – almost all of them born elsewhere. Yet another irreducible argument, were it necessary, for freedom of movement.

Many venerable artists died in 2021. There will be no more work from [Christian Boltanski](#), [Chuck Close](#), [Lawrence Weiner](#) or the Lebanese painter and poet [Etel Adnan](#), who died at the age of 96. Her life lesson was radiantly simple: "When I paint, I am happy." The tragic death of Tate Modern's internationally admired head of exhibitions, [Achim Borchardt-Hume](#), whose shows included the incomparable [Picasso: 1932](#), was announced last month. He was 56. Memories of his acclaimed shows survive him.

The [Courtauld Gallery](#) reopened after several years – clarified, beautified, masterpieces newly cleaned, the staging a sequence of surprises. So did Edinburgh's [Fruitmarket Gallery](#), expanding to incorporate a whole double-height warehouse. The south-west acquired a new museum with [the Box](#) in Plymouth, opening with a show of Australian art. Bournemouth got the art gallery [Giant](#), where Debenhams once stood. You can now see the YBAs beside the seaside.

Art can take you anywhere – and this year it did. To the Middle East in the V&A's [Epic Iran](#), to [Australia](#) at Tate Modern (until Autumn 2022), and to [Peru](#) (until 22 Feb), [Nero's Ancient Rome](#) and Hokusai's Japan in the wondrous [The Great Picture Book of Everything](#) (ends 30 Jan), all at the British Museum. Art – international, intimate – embraced us into the world again this year, when that world felt remote. For this, and all else, I am so grateful.

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