

# ART

Monthly

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## Spaces of Memory

Otobong Nkanga interviewed  
by Ellen Mara De Wachter

## Against Nostalgia

Bob Dickinson

## A New Deal?

Susan Jones

## Tiffany Sia

Profile by Mimi Howard



## Glasgow International

various venues, 7 to 23 June

The programme for this year's Glasgow International (GI) is vast and curatorially diverse – there is no overarching theme to weigh it down – and is dispersed across the city. The previous iteration was scheduled to open during the national lockdown, with only several exhibitions partly reopening during a momentary reprieve in the spread of the virus, so this year felt like a moment to try to regenerate cultural awareness of this important event in the Scottish art calendar.

At the Gallery of Modern Art (GoMA) is Amy Lien and Enzo Camacho's *Offerings for Escalante, 2023*, which brings together the duo's research into the history of the Philippine island of Negros, with which Camacho has a familial connection. The central video projection draws attention to the island's long history of plantations, and closely observes the practices of mourning led by the community. The moving, experimental documentary, which repeatedly includes icons of the island's cultures and decorated handmade papers, highlights the difficulties in preserving histories under colonial rule. Pointedly here, the centre of this history revolves around a Glasgow-based company that imported Scottish textiles to the area and exported cheap sugar. The siting of this work in the former Royal Exchange of Glasgow – now the city's modern art gallery – draws a tight circle around the profits extracted from enslaved people's labour.

The title of the exhibition refers to the Escalante Massacre of 1985, in which farm workers protesting against Ferdinand Marcos's regime were killed. The artists view their exhibition 'as a source for collaboration and alliance-building across global land and labour struggles', as well as a critique of the continued colonial acts in the present day, namely Israel's attacks on Palestine that have led to charges of genocide. Despite the horrific stories that unfold in the work, however, there is some hope: chiefly the ability of communities to come together and rebuild, remember and resist.

Similar reflections were offered by Cameron Rowland's *Obstruction, 2024*, in which the artist locked the gates of nearby Ramshorn Cemetery, a burial plot favoured by the merchant class of Glasgow during the 18th and 19th centuries, of which many members were slave traders. This simple act by Rowland draws attention not only to the history of the cemetery, but also to the continued revenue drawn from tourism today to sites built on the funds of slavery; Rowland views the unauthorised locking of the gates as 'black antagonism of this heritage'.

Josie KO and Kialy Tihngang's collaborative work at 5 Florence Street is titled '*fir gorma*', an Old Irish phrase that translates as 'blue men'. It is a term found in ancient chronicles that are thought by historians to refer to the North African people enslaved by Vikings in the ninth century and who were brought to Ireland and the Scottish Hebrides. The duo's resultant large-scale



Alexis Kyle Mitchell, *The Treasury of Human Inheritance, 2024*, film

effigy of a black woman puting is wrapped in blue fabric and displays a sash that reads 'from the river to the sea'. By declaring solidarity with the Palestinian people, the artists invite us to fight against current colonial massacres and reflect on how legacies of slavery and the voices of the oppressed are reflected in them.

Also at 5 Florence Street is Owain Train MacGilvary and Bobbi Cameron's collaborative work *I'm attended as a portal myself*, which exemplifies the shared working ethos common to many Glasgow-based artists. MacGilvary's work bathes the room in shades of red while queer, working-class and Welsh language references flash on the screen and high-decibel dance music lends a club-like atmosphere to the enclosed space. The red-washed room and vibrations envelop the viewer with an unexpected intensity. Across the hall of the old School building – we're in the 'boys' building' – we are met with a sense of calm and control. Cameron's work, in stark contrast, is blue and bright; ambient music, sonorous and soothing, ripples around the room, mimicking the rippling waters, steady landscapes and Cameron's flowing movements on screen, dancing on the edge of a cliff. It served as a much-needed pause among the bustle of the GI opening programme.

Upstairs was an exhibition of the historically overlooked photographer and community worker Sandra George. For many, this was the first time to see a body of work that explored her experiences as a black woman living in Edinburgh from the 1980s to the late 2000s. We see her engagement with children at the Royal Blind School, witness as they acquire Braille, learn to play a musical instrument or buy food. We also see her intensely close relation to the community in which she lived, from those stripped of welfare rights to the numerous disenfranchised groups she worked with, and the complexity of motherhood.

Picking up on political agendas of how information is disseminated is the exhibition by the collective School of Mutants at the CCA. Guest curated by Thomas Abercromby, the exhibition connects Dakar to Glasgow across numerous formats – videos, drawings,



### Voyage

Jake Grewal, Savannah Marie Harris, Caspar Heinemann, Merlin James, Sanya Kantarovsky, Alastair Mackinven, Mike Silva, Frank Walter (with lunar images selected by Nathaniel Lee-Jones)

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Sandra George, *Self Portrait, Bread Street, May 1993*, 1993

objects and a library – as if to challenge neatly held methodological approaches to research. The three-channel video installation *We are the Ambassadors of the Blurred Mirages of Lands that Never Fully Materialised*, 2020, reads like a French-language Western. Dark and moody, the video compares present-day life and speculative futures in which two characters debate how to find sanctuary against a backdrop of architectural ruins. Their despair and anxiety collapses any purposeful dialogue into conflict and further doubt.

Another complex but ultimately more accessible presentation is Alexis Kyle Mitchell's film *The Treasury of Human Inheritance*, 2024, which deals with the effects of living with an inherited disease and its slow, defining hold on daily life. Mitchell provides clarifying insight into living with the anticipation of an ultimately lethal illness, most poignantly in an unguarded Zoom conversation with the artist's sister when they both reflect on their mother's death in different time zones and locations. The film also shifts into esoteric territories, such as talking to a tarot card reader about the future, as if one might deduce greater meaning in alternative systems of interpretation over the medical and scientific reasonings, or the odd ways in which film stock might be processed with urine. Accompanying the film is Ima-Abasi Okon's work of a vacuum-packed bag of oxtail soup pinned to a framed board. The comforting meal is made utilitarian, as if packed for a long journey. After all, the road to and through grief is long and often lonely. Okon's reflections on care, knowledge production (the recipe inherited and repeated like genetic patterns) and 'individual and collective nourishment' are, then, an antidote to grief.

As with many other works in this year's Glasgow International, community, collectivity and collaboration is at its heart. In these complex and sometimes hopeless times, there is much to be learned from these careful, mindful and collaborative practices.

**Cole Collins** is a lecturer in modern and contemporary art history at Edinburgh College of Art.

## Soumya Sankar Bose: Braiding Dusk and Dawn

Delfina Foundation, London, 15 May to 7 July

My heart hurts. In the days that have passed since visiting this exhibition, I cannot shake its harrowing stories – of loss, and of the consequences of cruel political, personal and sexual violence. 'Braiding dusk and dawn' centres on Soumya Sankar Bose's family history during political crises in West Bengal in the 1960s and 1970s. It focuses on the life of the artist's mother, who at the age of nine disappeared, returning almost three years later with little memory of what had happened in the interim.

The newly commissioned three-channel film *Things We Lost Last Night*, 2024, is a hazy patchwork of memories. While it is primarily about the artist's mother looking back on her disappearance in the late 1960s, several other stories are also interspersed, including from Manik-Da, an escaped resistance fighter, and a one-eyed woman who describes the harrowing violence she experienced in this turbulent period. More quotidian scenes recur too, with archival footage from the period playing on a television set or heard over a radio – inclusions that serve as ever-present reminders of the wider political context. Bose spent much of his 2022 Delfina Foundation Residency searching various archives, including in the British Library, to piece together what life might have been like in the historically communist-leaning state of West Bengal in the 1960s and 1970s. One formative detail for Bose came in 1967, when the peasant movement against landlords and the Indian state catalysed the formation of the violent Naxalite movement (a militant communist separatist group). Bose's family history was inextricably bound up in the leftist struggles of that era.

It is not only this salient political context, though, that makes *Things We Lost Last Night* so compelling, but also the way in which Bose choreographs the



Soumya Sankar Bose, 'A Discreet Exit Through Darkness', 2020–



### Cover

Cameron Rowland  
*Obstruction*, 2024

During the 18th and 19th centuries, owning a burial plot at the Ramshorn Cemetery was a status signifier amongst the merchant class. The plots were intended to function as monuments to the wealth of those who could afford them. Many of the merchants who purchased plots there traded principally in goods produced by slaves. Many of the merchants buried there were slave owners. Many of these merchants also served on Glasgow's city council. The cemetery is now administered by the city council. When the cemetery is open, it operates as a public site of historical tourism and sustains the continued veneration of Scottish families who built Glasgow through their pivotal roles in the slave economy and the colonisation of Maryland, Virginia, and Jamaica. Its unauthorised closure is a black antagonism of this 'heritage'.

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