

Earthbound

15 November 2024 — 8 June 2025

Jodie Carey, General Public with Grace Emily Manning and Mud Club, Tania Kovats, Otobong Nkanga, Sally Payen, Yinka Shonibare CBE, Charmaine Watkiss, Laura White



Exhibition guide

In a time of increased anxiety about the state of the planet, this major group exhibition presents existing and newly commissioned artworks by nine artists and community makers that highlight our connection with the earth and our potential to return to a more healthy and harmonious existence with the natural world.

The exhibition emerges from the argument that, over time, natural and human histories have become so disconnected that we have forgotten how intimately tied we are to the natural environment.

Through sculpture, drawing, painting and installation, the artists address earthbound themes that connect us with wildlife, soil, plants, seeds, fungi and trees, and the histories, cultures and knowledge surrounding these.

The artworks in *Earthbound* embody notions of care, community and connection, conveying a sense of hope and looking towards a future where, through a collective and deeper engagement with the planet, we can still effect positive change on our environment at both local and global levels.

Yinka Shonibare CBE



Yinka Shonibare CBE, *Planets in my head (Young Ornithologist)*, 2020, fibreglass sculpture, Dutch wax printed cotton, birdcage, artificial bird, globe and brass. Private Collection. © Yinka Shonibare CBE: Courtesy of Stephen Friedman Gallery

Yinka Shonibare CBE's sculptural work *Planets in my Head (Young Ornithologist)* is part of a larger series representing different spheres of knowledge. In this work, a young girl holds an open cage with a swallow about to take flight. Swallows are known to migrate up to 8,000 miles from Southern Africa to Europe twice annually, covering an average of 200 miles per day. The bird can be seen as a powerful metaphor for the movement of people and global interconnectivity over time. It could also be seen as a desire to escape from a world faced with economic challenges and potential climate catastrophe.

As with all the works in this series, the head of the child is replaced with a globe. In this case, the globe represents an astrological map with the names of constellations replaced with species of endangered birds. The child's Victorian costume is a reminder of Britain's colonial past. The use of brightly coloured Dutch wax batik fabric is characteristic of much of Shonibare's work. These textiles were designed in Indonesia and then mass-produced by the Dutch and sold to colonies in West Africa. In the 1960s, the material became a signifier of African identity and independence; "*the perfect metaphor for multi-layered identities*".

Charmaine Watkiss



Charmaine Watkiss, *The warrior embodies the healing forces of the divine*, 2024, coffee, watercolour, pencil, colour pencil, ink and graphite on paper. Courtesy the artist

Charmaine Watkiss's *Plant Warrior* series pays tribute to plant knowledge that has been handed down through generations in the Caribbean and can be traced ultimately to their source in Africa. Watkiss was born in London to Jamaican parents and remembers being treated with different plants as a child to heal or soothe different ailments.

Each of her intricately detailed drawings are underpinned by rigorous research and allude to the properties of specific plants but also to associated histories and their wider connection with the Earth and the universe. Across the six works, three are from Jamaica and three are threatened with extinction, so these warriors carry pouches on their arms carrying the seeds to protect them for the future.

The Annatto plant (*Bixa orellana*), for example, is also known as the lipstick plant due to its vibrant red colour. It is often used for food dyes and cosmetics but also has medicinal qualities related to healing the urinary tract, a property that was noted in Hans Sloane's *Natural History of Jamaica Volume 2* and is alluded to in the design of her dress. The figure she holds is a deity of the Santerian religion, which emerged from the slave trade in Cuba. It wears the seeds of the plant around its neck. The warrior wears two rings: a moon and a star.

Watkiss draws on her own likeness, not as a self-portrait, but rather as a vehicle to convey collective experiences. Implicit within these works is an affirmation of women's relationship to the land and nature and an acknowledgement of the interconnectivity of ancestry, botany and cosmology.

Otobong Nkanga



Otobong Nkanga, *We Come from Fire and Return to Fire*, 2024, hand tufted carpet, glazed and smoked raku ceramic, obsidian, shungite, tourmaline, labradorite, handmade rope, metal connectors, Murano glass with black palm kernel oil and palm oil
© Otobong Nkanga; Courtesy of Lisson Gallery

Otobong Nkanga explores the land and the environment in relation to our bodies and the cultures and histories that mould and define them.

We Come from Fire and Return to Fire, 2024 evokes a natural landscape blackened and parched through fire. However, any suggestion of destruction is countered with the possibility of hope and renewal. A heavy hand braided rope threaded with large ceramic vessels descends from the ceiling and snakes around precious stones on a carpet like the roots of a tree. The carpet's design, with its psychedelic swirls of deep red and purple, is based on minerals and stones valued for their restorative and protective qualities: pyrargyrite (a rare mineral named after the Greek words *Pyr* for fire and *Argyros* for silver, renowned for its deep red to nearly black colouration caused by a high silver content and its healing qualities) and actual samples of shungite (a carbon-rich metallic black stone, known to block electromagnetic radiation and purify water) and tourmaline (a crystalline gemstone valued for its detoxifying properties and health benefits).

The work could be seen as a talisman or cleanser for both bodily and worldly ailments and references frequent themes within Nkanga's work of global warming, personal self-care and the interconnectedness of all things.

Tania Kovats



Tania Kovats, *Last of My Summer Blooms*, 2021-24, Dahlia flowers on paper. Courtesy the artist.

Tania Kovats' work explores our experience and understanding of the natural world. *Last of My Summer Blooms* is an ongoing series of drawings made from Dahlia flowers from the artist's garden, which she has been making annually since 2021. The flower heads are collected, preserved in the studio and memorialised by placing them on paper, soaking them in water and compressing the blooms into the paper, a tending process that Kovats has described as akin to that of a gardener.

The drawings in this exhibition include a selection of flowers from the artist's 2021-2023 blooms as well as new drawings created from her 2024 summer harvest. In their linear presentation, the drawings allude to the passing of time, to the inevitable decay in nature and the passing of the seasons, but also to the passing of Kovats' own fertility. She says:

"The natural dyes of the blooms are released and stain the paper, while the petals merge with the fibres of the paper. As they dry, they are fixed as these beautiful ghost flowers, quiet memorials to the sweet joys and melancholy of late summer. I started to make these works as I became postmenopausal. The works mark the end of my body's fertility and my menstrual cycle stopping; a clock that has been keeping time since I was ten years old."

Through this series, Kovats reminds us of the interconnectedness of our bodies with nature and its cycles.

Jodie Carey



Jodie Carey, *Guard*, 2024 (installation view, Edel Assanti, London, 2024), jesmonite, earth, steel, wire.
© Jodie Carey. Courtesy Edel Assanti and Jodie Carey. Photo: Tom Carter.

Jodie Carey's installation *Guard*, 2024 consists of over 100 free-standing and wall-based sculptures. Each of these delicate and slender works are made from a process called earth-casting. The artist carefully wraps different plants with cloth and thread. These are then pressed into the earth's surface to form a rudimentary mould. The wrapped plants are then removed and jesmonite is poured into the imprint left in the soil. The resulting sculptures reveal a remarkable level of detail with evidence of fabric, stones, leaves and roots. Carey regards soil as the skin of the earth, embodying ideas of life, death, decay and cyclical regeneration.

Flowers and plants have consistently featured in Carey's practice. Poppies, carnations and forget-me-nots, for example, are commonly associated with conflict and remembrance. The artist says, "*We infill plants with meaning for many reasons, they remind us of people we have loved or times in our lives. Guard seeks to remind us of the stubbornness of life, the human ability to evolve and ultimately our desire to survive*".

Exploring notions of ritual and mortality, the tall and elegant works evoke the timelessness of standing stone monuments, silently registering the passage of time.

General Public



General Public, *The Sanctum of the One-Eyed Toad (@ other Spirit Animals of Walsall)*, 2024, work in progress. Courtesy the artist. Commissioned by The New Art Gallery Walsall. Supported by the West Midlands Combined Authority and HM Government's Commonwealth Games Legacy Fund.

General Public's epic installation, *The Sanctum of the One-Eyed Toad (@ other Spirit Animals of Walsall)*, 2024 has been developed during a long-term residency at the Gallery, during which artist Chris Poolman explored natural building techniques to create these specially commissioned sculptures. The central sculptural work is inspired by the earthwork architecture of Britzer Garten, Berlin, which houses a clay village created by children and their families, and a project by former playworker Dave Swingle who worked in Highgate Berrington Walk, Birmingham, creating large animal sculptures with local children from concrete and rubble. Working with the Tuesday Women's Group from Caldmore Community Garden (**Mud Club**), clay relief panels were co-produced, celebrating animals, both real and mythical, that have particular significance for individuals and groups from the local community.

The title and subject of the sculpture refers to a short story in Walsall Archives about a one-eyed toad in Darlaston. The structure is largely made from locally



Creating clay relief panels with the Women's Group from Caldmore Community Garden (Mud Club), Courtesy the artist. Photo: Stuart James/Emotive Eye.

sourced wood and cob (a combination of sand, clay, straw and water) but also involves a wide range of other natural and reclaimed materials, from bullrush fluff and artichoke heads to bottles and wattle and daub that reference the vernacular of the natural building movement. To build the toad, the artist utilised a 'palletable cobin' technique whereby wooden pallets are used to create the internal skeleton of cob structures. The sculptural form is decorated with panels celebrating other spirit animals of Walsall, both real and mythical, that have a particular resonance with local people, places and folklore.

Further clay animals associated with Walsall's history surround the giant toad, including a donkey made with hair from local Akos Turkish Barbers. These ancient creatures act as spiritual guardians of the toad, creating a temple-like atmosphere honouring the plentiful gifts of the Earth.



General Public, *The Sanctum of the One-Eyed Toad (@ other Spirit Animals of Walsall)*, 2024, work in progress. Courtesy the artist. Photos: Chris Poolman

Grace Emily Manning



Grace Emily Manning, work in progress for fabric banners for *The Sanctum of the One-Eyed Toad*. © Grace Emily Manning
Top left - Birmingham clay, top right and bottom left - dying the fabric, bottom right - the final banner in the workshop

Grace Emily Manning's practice is environmentally driven and ethics-led, originating from a place of eco-activism and care. She often works site specifically, responding to the history, folklore and ecology of a landscape. Her work involves the laborious process of developing natural pigments from plants harvested from sites particular to her place of making. The pigments are then used to dye the organic fabrics involved in her work, a physical and immersive process that often sees the artist sitting in a bath to soak and tend the cloths. For this project, Manning has worked in collaboration with General Public to create two fabric banners or temple cloths that hang alongside *The Sanctum of the One-Eyed Toad* and a further banner for the Gallery's street-facing Window Box.

The temple cloths are hand dyed using the plant, buddleia, also known as the butterfly bush, which has been harvested only metres away from the Gallery, encouraging us to notice the nature on our very doorsteps. The motif Manning has chosen to use is a drawing of a camel, which was created by Mud Club participant Tammy Hawkins. The camel can be seen as symbolic of resilience and endurance within the context of troubling times and changing climates.

Sally Payen



Sally Payen, *Core Sampling with Mountain View*, 2024, watercolour on Arches watercolour paper. Photo: Jaime Jackson

Herefordshire-based artist **Sally Payen** is represented by a series of new watercolour paintings. Payen's working process is to gather up images and texts about a particular theme, which she names the *ideas-scape*. She lets this lie and brew until, in the painting process, a spontaneous drawing emerges from the well of the mind – a new configuration and visual illumination, loosely inspired by the theme. This intuitive making process has been influenced by her decades of practicing daily meditation.

For these works, Payen was inspired by Suzanne Simard, a leading forest ecologist and author of *Finding the Mother Tree* which has arguably changed our perception of trees and the ways in which they communicate with each other as well as with other living things. Simard can be seen to represent many women scientists who bear witness, research, and report on issues around climate change. She is also personally respectful of ancestral knowledge, an area of interest shared with Payen.

Here, Simard becomes 'everywoman', protecting and nurturing the Earth and becoming as one with it. Ideas around nurturing and protection are also embodied in her work *Homage to Braque* in which a bird tends to its eggs.

Activism is an important element of the artist's work. In the past, she has produced a significant body of work referencing Greenham Common Women's Peace Camp in Berkshire. She also works with Jaime Jackson as Salt Road, producing project-led visual art journeys, exploring climate and the ecology crisis.

Laura White



Laura White, *Spate 3*, 2022, silicone rubber. Photo: Laura White

London-based artist **Laura White** grew up in rural Worcestershire and her relationship to the natural environment remains important to her practice, which involves a direct engagement with her surroundings as a way of understanding the world. White's sculptures bring into focus trees and fungi and their connectivity through mycelium, the network of fungal threads often found underground. The sculptures respond visually and scientifically to the ways trees and fungi grow, for example how fungi adapt and change in relation to their environment as opposed to a fixed plan.

The largest sculpture, *Pollute Volute: Rise 1*, 2021 is formed from layers of coloured silicone rubber separated by tissue paper, hand built from the bottom up relying on the artist's use of her body. Mirroring the adaptability found in nature, each layer responds to the layer below, leading the sculptures to rise, bend and twist in a relational way. Elsewhere, smaller works such as *Spurtive 1*, 2022, also reveal traces of the artist's body, this time through the finger and thumb impressions used to build the sculpture's form.

Silicone rubber, the flexible and heat-resistant plastic material used to make these works, reflects our polluted and industrialised world. It is a non-biodegradable material found in many familiar household objects, which is difficult to recycle and contributes to environmental pollution. The material was donated to the artist due it being past its shelf date and therefore of no use, commercially. Rather than see the material go to waste, the artist explored its material properties, repurposing it into art that connects us with the natural world.

SELECTED EVENTS

Artist and Curator tour

Saturday 22 March 2025, 11am-12pm. Free.
Booking essential as spaces are limited.

Join co-curator, Zoë Lippett and exhibiting artist Sally Payen for a tour of the exhibition to coincide with the annual Earth Hour campaign from WWF. This tour will focus on works in the exhibition that connect us with soil, seeds, flowers and plants.

Greening Your Art Practice Artist Day

Saturday 17 May 2025, 11am-3pm

An event for artists who are interested in environment-themed and sustainable practices.

Please book through [Eventbrite](#) or at the Gallery Reception.

Further details can be found on our website.



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