

Charmaine Watkiss

The things we hold sacred

3 October 2026 – 11 April 2027



The New Art Gallery Walsall is delighted to present *The things we hold sacred*, a major solo exhibition by British artist, Charmaine Watkiss.

Alongside a wide selection of drawings, the exhibition includes specially commissioned sculptures and the artist's most significant sculptural installation to date.

These works have been created with the Gallery's architecture in mind and give a much broader view of the artist's oeuvre and concerns.

Charmaine is known for her research-based drawing practice which focuses on plant knowledge handed down through generations of Caribbean families, tracing its lineage to Africa through the transatlantic slave trade. She is particularly interested in healing traditions passed down the maternal line, reflected in her work through constructed narratives around women. Expanding from this body of drawings, Charmaine explores the spiritual and mystical nature of plants, specifically the sacred rituals, traditions and symbolic practices associated with individual plants and herbs.

The exhibition presents drawings created between 2021 and 2026, including *The Matriarch I*, 2021 a seminal work honouring cross-generational wisdom and female resilience that appeared in the artist's first institutional solo exhibition at Leeds Art Gallery, *The Wisdom Tree*. Many of the works on paper are drawn from the artist's celebrated Plant Warrior series. Each of these intricately detailed drawings allude to the properties of specific plants but also to their associated histories and spiritual significance. For example, *The warrior enforces the healing forms of the divine*, 2024 honours the Annatto plant (*Bixa Orellana*), 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 Irish naturalist Hans Sloane noted in his 18th century study on the natural history of Jamaica. It is also alluded to in the design of the warrior's dress, which maps the tract. The figure she holds is a deity of the Santeria religion, which emerged from the slave trade in Cuba, wearing the seeds of the plant around its neck. Implicit within the Plant Warrior works is an affirmation of women's relationship to the land and nature and an acknowledgement of the interconnectivity of ancestry, botany and cosmology.



Charmaine Watkiss,
*The warrior embodies
the healing forces of
the divine*, 2024,
coffee, watercolour,
pencil, colour pencil,
ink and graphite
on paper. © 2026
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The intrinsic relationship between plants and the cosmos is also manifest in other drawings in the exhibition such as *The Seed Sowers' Almanack*, 2022, a deeply symbolic work that refers to the ancient practice of growing plants to the phases of the moon.

This exhibition marks a step change in Charmaine's practice, with the introduction of ambitious sculptural works which utilise a broad range of materials, including clay, porcelain, papier mâché, brass, copper, cotton, wood and crystals. This expansion into sculptural practice is not altogether surprising. The artist once worked as a shoemaker and looking at the Plant Warrior series, there is a strong sense of the sculptural in the neckpieces worn by the Warriors and the objects represented

such as boats, jewellery and small votive sculptures. Charmaine's desire to extend the sculptural dimension of her practice has been facilitated by a rewarding partnership with Coventry University. During her residency at the School of Arts and Creative Industries in the Delia Derbyshire Building, Charmaine has benefited from space, facilities and expertise, working closely with staff and students to explore, materials, processes and new possibilities for making.

The new sculptural work builds on Charmaine's commission for Liverpool Biennial 2023, *Witness*, where the artist included sculptural elements for the first time in an installation composed of a central clay figure wearing a cloak of beaten metal and surrounded by found clay pipes and three large drawings. A new sculptural installation, *Still waters*, revisits and extends the form and material language of *Witness*, this time with a focus on a river goddess. This female spirit or deity connects to concentric circles of aquamarine crystals, bells and wooden boats via knitted strands.

Significantly, a brand-new, sculptural installation, *The lineage of plants*, 2026 has been commissioned jointly with Coventry University and developed with support from Jerwood Art Fund Commissions. This work can be seen as a three-dimensional embodiment of the artist's ongoing Plant Warrior series. Here, the elaborate neckpieces worn by Charmaine's warriors are transformed into sculptural forms, using a wide range of materials. Each acknowledges the aesthetic, medicinal and spiritual properties of particular plants and seeds and the women who developed and shared their extensive knowledge without recognition. The plants represented here are Okra, Annatto, Cerasee, Kola Nut and Peacock Flower. Three of the neckpieces are

accompanied by floating crinoline skirts, suggesting both the presence and absence of the warrior protagonists.

Charmaine's materials are carefully considered. Her use of papier mâché is influenced by 19th century botanical models produced by Brendel & Sons which were used for scientific enquiry. Porcelain alludes to tea and sugar, the consumption of which was dependent on plantation economies and enslaved labour. Watercolour and gouache bind the drawings and the sculpture together. *The lineage of plants* is now part of Walsall's Permanent Collection and can be studied and enjoyed for generations to come.

The materials and visual motifs that appear throughout the exhibition carry rich historical, spiritual and symbolic associations, contributing to wider narratives around colonialism, trade, botany and diasporic memory.

Selected events

Saturday 13 March, 2pm

Join artist Charmaine Watkiss in conversation with Dr Indie Choudhury.

Saturday 21 November, 2pm

Join Deaf artist Olivier Jamin for a BSL-led tour of the exhibition. An interpreter will be present for hearing audiences.

Saturday 13 February 2027, 2pm

Join co-curators Deborah Robinson and Zoë Lippett for a tour of the exhibition.

Free. Please book via Eventbrite.

Resources

A publication accompanies the exhibition with essays by Isabel Seligman and Cindy Sissokho. It is available in the Gallery Shop from December 2026.

A filmed interview with the artist is available in our Resource Area and online from November 2026.

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Cover: Charmaine Watkiss, *The warrior exercises the right to dissent II*, 2026, coffee, water soluble graphite, watercolour, pencil, colour pencil and ink on paper.
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