

DIARY

OPEN SEASON

June 13, 2021 • London • Gilda Williams at the first London Gallery Weekend



A performance at Pace Gallery of Jean Dubuffet's *Fragments - Cooouu Bazar*, first staged at New York's Guggenheim Museum in 1973. All photos by author.

THE HARDEST PART of the first-ever London Gallery Weekend wasn't attempting to visit the 130 official galleries, plus dozens of unlisted events, in a city about twice the area of Berlin or New York. The real challenge was recognizing people you'd not seen in a year only from their eyes, peering above face masks. Resocializing after a year spent cocooned in one's tiny domestic bubble—relearning to chat with humans unable to finish your every sentence, for example—proved a newfound struggle. And is it safe to hug hello? Or must we perform that weird elbow rub, with its masonic secret-handshake feel? Each encounter offered a fresh social dilemma in this cautious post-hibernation return to the galleries, transformed overnight into a marathon. "It's like we're trying to see all the art we missed in a year in just three days," remarked artist Oswaldo Maciá (whose sound work *Something Going On Above My Head*, 1999, is currently on view at Tate Modern), whom I met at Michael Landy's twenty-year anniversary return to *Break Down* at Thomas Dane. Back in 2001 the artist had, memorably, publicly destroyed his every possession. Today, after a year spent trapped at home with our tiresome piles of stuff, the prospect of grinding everything up and starting afresh suddenly looked rather appealing.

Topping the menu at this art banquet was painting, which cynics whispered was a widely adopted collector-friendly move to feed the galleries some much-needed cash. Notables were Ellen Gallagher's explorations of Drexciya, the underwater Afrofuturist-inspired civilization, at Hauser & Wirth; Chantal Joffe's intimate paintings centering on a tribute to mother Daryll, whose constancy in the artist's psyche contrasts with her changing, aging body, at Victoria Miro; Christopher Hartmann's bright, sensual portraits and still-lives at Hannah Barry; and Kate Dunn's light-fantastic, trippy painting installation at T.J. Boulting. Unmissables included Tala Madani at Pilar Corrias, especially the animated film of one of her signature "shit moms" inhabiting the flawless photographed interiors in glossy magazines. Madani's brown smeary character systematically fouled each color-coordinated room with her unstoppable skids—a besmirching sometimes accomplished with glee, sometimes with shame. (A second Madani exhibition will inaugurate Corrias's new gallery, opening in July on Savile Row.) Sadie Coles whooped happily when I informed her that word on the street strongly recommended her Kati Heck show as an absolute must-see. There, the historical male-gender associations with horses were impressively inverted, in monumental paintings downstairs and exquisite drawings upstairs. For me however, the unbeatable contestant in the Weekend's *de facto* painting tournament was the indefatigable Bridget Riley, recently turned ninety and at the top of her game since before many visitors to David Zwirner were even born. Her "Measure for Measure" series is "not to be taken for granted," as curator Andrew Renton rightly tweeted, and displayed an artistic clarity and commitment that took my breath away.



Work by Afra Al Dhaheeri at Cromwell Place.

Though rarer, the Weekend's offerings in sculpture and installation provided still more standouts. Ghislaine Leung's enigmatic installation at Cabinet of a Victorian rickshaw carriage—insect-like in its hard, many-limbed black body, giving a whole new meaning to the term "buggy"—set upon a toddler's bright pink-and-blue soft foam flooring, with nursery black-out curtains, was perfectly mystifying. Is Leung equating the distant historical past with the deep time of early infancy? Who knows, but boy it looked spectacular. Deep in the East End, Nicoletti presented promising young sculptor Hugo Servanin's boxy sculptures of warped porn imagery, partially concealed in steam-filled glass containers. These ambiguously figurative sculptures seemed to combine Hans Haacke's *Condensation Cube*, 1965, with the prudish fig leaves painted over Masaccio's naked Adam and Eve from the early Renaissance—two artists I'd have never imagined grouped in the same sentence. On the other side of town, the new super-slick multigallery complex Cromwell Place looked depressingly like a property developer's notion of a contemporary art gallery. Shame, because hidden amidst all the polished wood and oversized radiators was actually some good art. Hind Mezaina's engrossing commissioned video *A Performance of Valour*, 2020, inspired by the 1980 inclusion of a UAE contestant in the World Disco Dancing Championship and featuring found images of Arab men disco-dancing, was basically installed in a walk-in closet. I'd like to see again Afra Al Dhaheeri's elaborate, massive roped sculpture—pouring from the ceiling, like Rapunzel's shed locks gone gray—without the invasive wall texts (two, on facing walls) and silly spotlighting.



Alvero Berrington with work outside Emelin Gallery.

If I were a member of the Tate acquisitions committee, the work I'd have shoved beneath colleague's noses come Monday morning was Alvaro Barrington's *Street dreams are made of basketball*, 2021, at Emalin. It's a study in restrained power—the dead weight of the concrete sarcophagus-like base; the sturdy pull of the thick dropped chain down the center; the frenetic multidirectional stitching on the canvas; and the potential energy of the ball and plastic crate suspended above. I arrived too early to partake in Sunday's still-igniting gallery barbeque, but caught the artist cheerfully painting an external wall, and could congratulate him on an enviably productive lockdown.

Charlie Fellowes at Edel Assanti described the weekend as a welcome “shot of adrenaline” to London's recuperating gallery scene, and guessed that a few hundred new visitors came by to see his exhibition of Vinca Petersen's dreamy photographs of Britain's beloved illegal rave scene, 1990–2004. A host of attentively curated exhibitions—among them Francesco Bonami's “Lost in Italy” at Luxembourg & Co., which included a splendid pair of Arte Povera artist Pino Pascali's rarely seen *Trofei di Caccia* [Hunting Trophies, 1966]; and Kate Wong's “homeplace” at V.O Curations, with Larry Achiampong's animated video *Reliquary 2*, 2020, a moving letter to his children written during the pandemic—proved that LGW could offer so much more than the cluttered booths at an art fair.

Before signing off on that merry note, allow me briefly to gripe about LGW's app. I can forgive a few glitches—crazy “suggested routes” that doubled back on themselves—but no gallery addresses, really? The thing leapt around like a flea on caffeine, never standing still long enough to provide a usable map. Room for improvement then, for a hoped-for second edition next year, perhaps the happy legacy to London's long and painful art famine of 2020.

— Gilda Williams



Polly Staple and Mark Godfrey outside Kapwani Kiwanga's exhibition at Goodman Gallery.



Antonie Marsh of Soft Opening Gallery with work by Shannon Cartier Luoy.



Curator Fatog Östek with work by Frank Bowling, Hauser & Wirth.



Jeremy Deller at Bridget Riley's show at David Zwirner.



Leopold Thun of Emalin Gallery and designer Gabriel Chioșerfeld in front of Avaro Berrington's Street dreams are made of basketball.



Daniel Hooper of Fashion gallery with his Hugo Boss shirt.



Paul Bailey senior advisor from Vodafone and a partner from user Dorothea Hagemann-Davies-Zeitl.



Sahni Jui, founder of Tezuk Kasa Gallery (Singapore)