

CULTURE | EXHIBITIONS



Soulscapes at Dulwich Picture Gallery review: balm for the soul, food for the mind

This look at how artists from Africa and its diaspora are using landscape is a joy



HURVIN ANDERSON, LIMESTONE WALL, 2020

HURVIN ANDERSON. COURTESY THE ARTIST AND THOMAS DANE GALLERY. PHOTO: RICHARD IVEY

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1 DAY AGO

Review at a glance



Think back to those weird early days of the pandemic, a long [hot summer](#) we weren't really supposed to enjoy. When the whole city (bar those toiling in front line services) decanted cautiously into [London's parks](#), to walk, to sit, to doze, to breathe easy.

That's where the idea for this exhibition, curated by Lisa Anderson, director of the Black Cultural Archives, came from. A moment when everyone was forced outside into their local landscape and, in the main, found joy and solace there.

But look at most historic British landscape painting and you won't find everyone. We all know the Constables and Turners and Poussins of this world, their conjurings of Arcadia, their renderings of the sublime, their shepherds and haywains and milky-skinned milkmaids.

This beautifully installed show explores the genre among contemporary artists from Africa and its diaspora in Europe, North America and the Caribbean, and finds a reclamation of the natural world and – surprise! – the same kind of joy and solace we all take from it. It looks at our emotional connection with the world around us, and how that might be influenced by our identity and collective histories.

The show's four rooms are each themed – Belonging (an idea that resonates throughout, as the question of whom the British countryside belongs to can be a fraught one), Memory, Joy and Transformation.

I'm not sure the themes are strictly necessary, since most of the works here seem to explore at least three of these notions at any one time. But whatever, it makes it easy to navigate, and allows for lovely groupings that illustrate the many ways that these contemporary artists are approaching the subject, often (but not always) evoking the landscapes of their heritage. And, by the way, it's a delight.



KIMATHI MAFARO, UNFORESEEN JOURNEY OF SELF-DISCOVERY, 2020

KIMATHI MAFARO. IMAGE COURTESY OF THE ARTIST / KRISTIN HJELLEGERDE GALLERY

There are some fantastic works here. You can almost feel the shift in temperature between the cool of Alain Joséphine's lovely, gesturally painted Martinique forest and the heat pounding down from the blue sky visible through the trees in his work ST 131 (2020).

Kimathi Mafafo's glorious embroidered Unforeseen Journey of Self Discovery, (2020) is a stunning riot of intricate stitches and colours, depicting a woman emerging in wonder from a cocoon of white muslin into a lush and vivid landscape, while the Trinidadian artist Che Lovelace's exquisite, delineated canvases, depicting Black figures at ease in the natural places of his homeland, draw you in with their layered richness.

That ease is reflected in Phoebe Boswell's absorbing, restful film, I Dream of a Home I Cannot Know, 2023, which meditates on daily life as it unfolds on an African beach – men and boys run, play football, fiddle about with boats and stroll across the sands, comfortable in their habitat.

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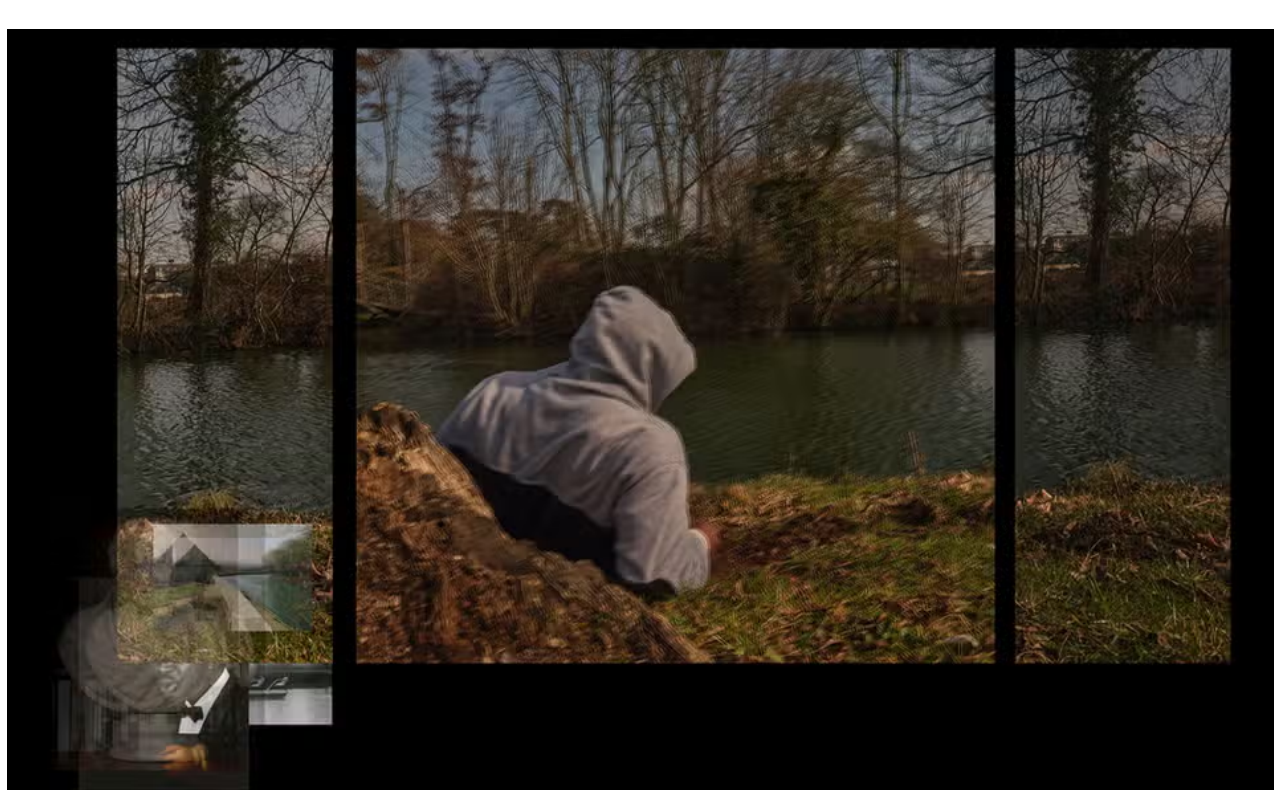


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Though the point isn't laboured, the possibility of discomfort, or exclusion from a landscape is referenced directly or obliquely throughout the show – most clearly perhaps in Jermaine Francis's photo-montage A Pleasant Land. J. Samuel Johnson and The Spectre of Unrecognised Black Figures, 2023, which places a Black male figure in a hoodie in a picturesque landscape to question our response – is he incongruous, and if so, why?



JERMAINE FRANCIS, A PLEASANT LAND J. SAMUEL JOHNSON, & THE SPECTRE OF UNRECOGNISED BLACK FIGURES, 2023

JERMAINE FRANCIS. COURTESY OF THE ARTIST

In Harold Offeh's witty but pointed 2019 film, Body, Landscape and Memory, Offeh and two other Black artists, Ebun Sodipo and Samra Mayanja, relax in a setting that evokes the historic ideal of the English landscape, accompanied by rousing music by the early 20th century Black British composer Samuel Coleridge Taylor. Kimathi Donkor's paintings also show Black figures having a palpably lovely time outside. Again, the question of to whom we believe these landscapes 'belong', and who belongs in them, is gently raised.

Overall though, this show is one that firmly sits on the side of joy. It is expressly stated that the works shown "provide fertile and creative routes towards developing a more contemplative and compassionate relationship with our environment", which is a noble goal, and one in which they seem to be succeeding. I certainly felt like taking myself off to while away an hour or so under a tree.

Dulwich Picture Gallery, from February 14 to June 2,

dulwichpicturegallery.org.uk

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