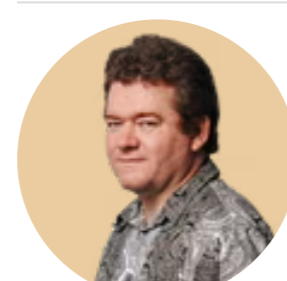


Art



Jonathan Jones

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Review

Soulsapes review - glimpses of greatness get lost in the lush, tropical overgrowth

★★★★☆



A record of place and a vehicle of feeling ... Hurvin Anderson, Limestone Wall, 2020. Photograph: Richard Ivey/© Hurvin Anderson. Courtesy the artist and Thomas Dane Gallery.

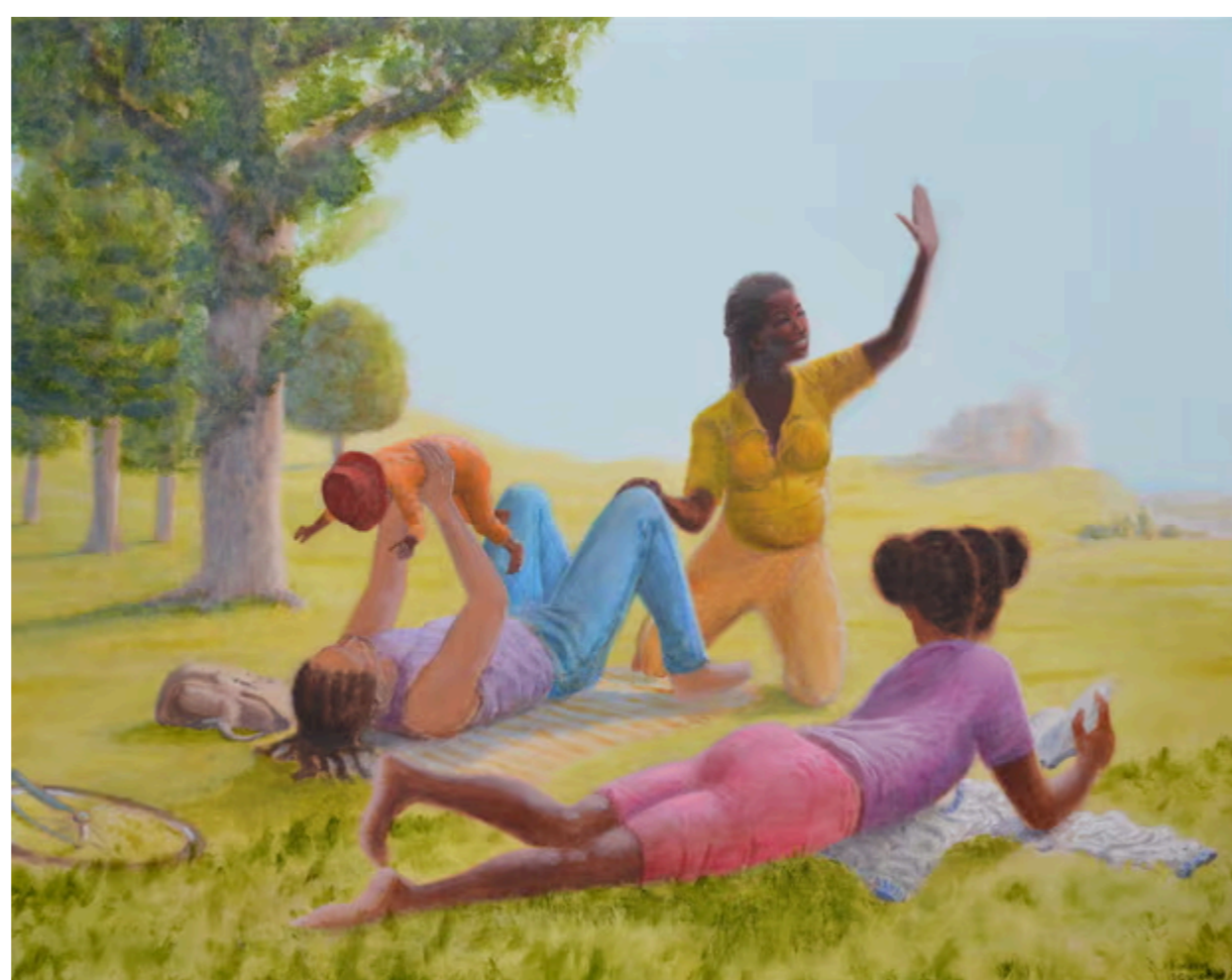
Dulwich Picture Gallery, London

This exhibition exploring race and landscape art has some fabulous moments but its desire to remain tasteful veers towards kitsch

Whenever I encounter Ingrid Pollard's conceptual photography, I feel, as a white British male, as if I have had my landscape ripped out from under me. When Pollard looks at the English landscape, she sees the enslaving past in every hill and dale. A day on the beach for her is ruined by the fact that slaving ships once crossed that sea.

If only she were included in Dulwich Picture Gallery's gentle, slightly aimless survey of Black landscape art now. She would certainly make it a more pointed and contrary experience. On the other hand, perhaps the show should simply have made room for more works by Scottish-Barbadian artist Alberta Whittle. She has three paintings in Soulsapes: surreal circular tropical island scenes that make you smile. Yet in Whittle's artistic output these are just playful moments in a much more serious and expansive project. She maps the long shadow of enslavement in installations of sunken houses and impromptu altars, videos and performances - a battery of approaches to history and geography. Can you even call her work landscape art?

Yes - but in the way that artists have been doing it since the 1960s, with expanded, multifarious, unrecognisable means, from Richard Long walking the earth to Veronica Ryan spacing out seed pods. To be fair, there isn't room in Dulwich Picture Gallery's narrow sliver of an exhibition space for that kind of creativity; by the time you installed one upended tree, that would be a third of the room gone.



Kimathi Donkor, On Episode Seven, 2020. Photograph: Courtesy of the Artist and Niru Ratnam, London. Photo: Kimathi Donkor

But there are imaginative as well as physical constraints on this show. It is politically radical, yet aesthetically conservative. And as a result, it isn't that politically radical either. Soulsapes is dominated by painting. Even the photography and video works have a pictorial beauty. I'm all for painting but making it fresh and urgent is not easy.

Hurvin Anderson achieves this. In his painting Limestone Wall, a mysterious, decaying architectural creation is glimpsed through lush plants and trees that overgrow it. As nature swarms the human fabric, Anderson invites you to lose yourself in its seducing, overpowering colours. You are drawn into a mist of emerald pigment spattered on the paint surface in a moist autonomous riff. It is a dreamy painting that crosses a border between landscape art as a record of place and as a vehicle of feeling: a soulscape if ever there was one.

Yet the quality of other paintings here doesn't quite match it. That's not a surprise. Painting is just so hard. One work can look good for a minute or two, then start to fall apart in your mind until it's just dried gunk on a wall. A big abstraction by Michaela Yearwood-Dan is too busy and hyperbolic to be moving or memorable. A dappled woodland by Alain Joséphine is relaxing to look at, but completely bland, far too close to something submitted by a Sunday painter to the Royal Academy Summer Exhibition.



Kimathi Mafafo, Unforeseen Journey of Self-Discovery, 2020. Photograph: Image courtesy of the artist / Kristin Hjellegjerde Gallery.

Ah yes, the RA. That august institution is currently eviscerating its own history with its exhibition Entangled Pasts, in which the inevitable links to enslavement of an institution founded in 1768 are disclosed. Dulwich Picture Gallery is almost as old, its collection assembled in the age when Britain's industrial revolution was being fuelled by slave-worked plantations and colonial commerce. Is that something that Dulwich should tear itself to pieces over? Well, it might at least have explored the ramifications, in a show about race and landscape art.

The political history of landscape painting is explored in the catalogue of Soulsapes, but the works on the wall don't challenge or subvert the classic examples in the main collection. One of those is Canaletto's 1754 masterpiece A View of Walton Bridge which teems with bewigged little figures, all of them white as far as I can see, fishing, boating, travelling. It's a view of this green and pleasant land that screams to be parodied and

pastiched.

Yet Soulsapes barely deals with British landscapes at all. Instead, it dreams its time away in lush tropical escapes. The effect is ultimately soporific. In an age of recycled images, pictorial art can so easily tumble into cliché. A landscape by Ravelle Pillay, with its equatorial forest empty of people and reflected in creepily still waters, exerts a sinister force. But then I started to see after-images of the jungle at the start of Apocalypse Now and even hear the helicopters whirring. Was I responding to the painting or to a pool of familiar imagery we all share? Worse, the way the water is painted began to remind me of Peter Doig's pastoral art. That really got me. Doig's elusive, suggestive scenes haunt this show: his weird images are apparently inescapable in contemporary approaches to painting landscape.

Too much here is hackneyed or sentimental, including a whole section called Joy. By being excessively tasteful, Soulsapes opens its arms to kitsch.

● Soulsapes is at Dulwich Picture Gallery, London, from 14 February until 2 June

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