

Inside the Summer Exhibition at Royal Academy of Arts

Top Lists, Exhibition Reviews

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Headlined as *"the world's most joyful art exhibition,"* **Summer Exhibition at the Royal Academy of Art (RA)** brings **1300 works** by established artists and new talents in 2021, selected by coordinator **Yinka Shonibare** and a panel of artists. For the first time, the selection also includes the works by the members of the public.

Reclaiming Magic is its official title, and besides hinting at magical content hiding behind the Royal Academy walls, there is also a political engagement in the act of reclamation. Shonibare and his colleagues decided to test the British art canon and go beyond the Eurocentric ideas in making the **253rd edition** of the Summer Exhibition. As Shonibare explains, he wants to *"give people possibilities and expand their field of vision."*

That included inviting **over 50 artists of color** to participate and reaching out to charities working with marginalized groups of artists to encourage them to submit. *"I'm diversifying the exhibition,"* says Shonibare, *"society has changed since the RA was founded."*

The RA founding happened in 1768, the year when the British Empire was in the middle of the most profitable **transatlantic slave trade period**. The show touches upon this ugly history by staging a self-taught artist born into slavery in 1853, Bill Traylor, as the central figure of the exhibition. The exploration and references to the past and the heritage of slavery are evident also in other works, such as, for example, geometric textiles by the **Gee's Bend quiltmakers**. The group members are women descendants from the slaves of Pettway plantation in Alabama; their work is also disruptive of the 1770 rule that no needlework or crafts are to be exhibited at RA. Reclaiming the art of those who have been excluded from the dominant art narrative defines the **refreshing and original** Summer Exhibition at the RA. This year, among the names, are Njideka Akunyili Crosby, Michael Armitage, Jade Montserrat, Hew Locke, Rita Keegan, Alvaro Barrington, Phyllida Barlow, William Kentridge, and the self-taught artists Frantz Lamothe, Bärbel Lange, and Marie-Rose Lortet, among others. The exhibition is accompanied by a sound program and an Architecture Room, curated by David Adjaye.

Reclaiming Magic is what we all need after long months of isolation, and the title of the show promises just that. Main Galleries are filled with fascinating paintings, sculptures, photography, film, architectural works, and more, and the sale of the art is on, so the visitors can take home the

pieces they like. The proceeds support various RA's charitable activities and the exhibiting artists.

The Summer Exhibition at the Royal Academy of Arts in London will be on view **until January 2nd, 2022**.

Check out the highlights from the show not to be missed.



Whitfield Lovell - Kin XLVII (Rimshot), 2011

Whitfield Lovell is renowned for his internationally acclaimed installations of Conte **crayon portraits of African Americans** taken from vintage photography. He pairs them with found objects, creating images resembling personal and familial treasures from the collective past.

Kin XLVII (Rimshot) arrives from the **Kin series**, another group of Crayon drawings that replicates vintage portraits but with the addition of ropes, cards, flags, jewelry, and vessels. The combination of images and objects has a **narrative quality**, from which the viewer can imagine personal stories and individuals behind them.

Although fictional, the works stress "*the importance of home, family, ancestry,*" that, as Lovell explains, feed his work entirely.

African Americans were generally not aware of who their ancestors were... Any time I pick up one of these old vintage photographs, I have the feeling that this could be one of my ancestors.

Featured image: Whitfield Lovell - *Kin XLVII (Rimshot)*, 2011 © Whitfield Lovell