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The Vital Young London Galleries in ‘Focus’ 2024

Participating in the section supported by Stone Island at Frieze London, the next generation of capital art spaces address communities and opportunities of the contemporary city

L BY LAURIE BARRON IN FRIEZE LONDON, FRIEZE WEEK MAGAZINE | 09 OCT 24



The landscape of London’s commercial art scene is always evolving. Spaces close, and new ones open. Galleries consolidate in glitzy or buzzy areas – see the resurgent Cork Street – while younger dealers look further afield for more accessible postcodes in which to begin their journeys. Once a defining East End gallery hub, Bethnal Green’s Vyner Street saw its remaining gallery resident move out earlier this year, when *Focus* exhibitor N1COLETT1 upped sticks for a space on Paul Street, in the heart of Shoreditch. Founded in 2018, N1COLETT1’s new space is a short walk from the likes of Emalin – who occupy two addresses on Shoreditch High Street, after taking over the historic Clerk’s House this year. Fellow *Focus* exhibitors share this orbit: a short drive or stroll west takes you to Public, in a brutalist former bakery, and the closely watched Ginny on Frederick, while east, towards Bethnal Green, are fellow *Focus* exhibitors Rose Easton and Soft Opening.



Liam Newnham and Rose Easton (Rose Easton)

Established by Antonia Marsh in 2018, Soft Opening originated as a small, vitrine-like gallery inside Piccadilly Circus tube station. It has presented projects by the likes of Ryan McGinley and Harley Weir, and developed a reputation for bringing experimental international artists to London, like Dean Sameshima. Sameshima is one of the stars of this year's Venice Biennale: his painting emblazoned with the words 'Anonymous Homosexual' appeared on the Instagram posts of countless curators. This spring, Marsh exhibited Sameshima's series of monochromatic images of punters sitting in Berlin porn cinemas. At Frieze London this year, Soft Opening is staging a solo presentation of Sameshima's ongoing 'Numbers' series – intricate paintings of join-the-dots puzzles that, if filled in, would create sexually explicit images. It is a provocative presentation, typical of the gallery's projects that often bring to the surface what is happening in the margins and undercurrents of society. Marsh explains, 'curating a fair booth in the same way that you would an exhibition is essential for the gallery because this might be the first time a collector is encountering the programme.'

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Marsh is building a global profile for the gallery, participating in international fairs and, this summer, opening a temporary outpost in Los Angeles, courtesy of Paul Soto. But the audience in London remains crucial and, as Marsh explained to me, participating in Frieze London's *Focus* 'allows Soft Opening to situate ourselves within various key communities for the first time: a local gallery community, our London audience and the emerging international gallery scene.'



Antonia Marsh (Soft Opening)

When Hot Wheels, the edgy Athens gallery founded in 2019, looked to London to open its second space, it alighted on Bloomsbury. A bookish district which is home to the British Museum and University College London, this area has become a new centre for emerging and expanding galleries. Sometimes dubbed 'The New Bloomsbury Group' – after the eponymous gang of intellectuals and creatives, including Vanessa Bell, Duncan Grant and Virginia Woolf, who called this neighbourhood home in the early 20th century – this hip coterie is made up of established names like Herald St (on Museum Street), Phillida Reid (on Grape Street) and Union Pacific (on West Central Street), alongside a younger set.



Julia Gardener (Hot Wheels)

It was while working at Union Pacific that Anna Eaves and Ted Targett began organizing independent off-site projects in venues like Fitzrovia Chapel. Last year, they set up as Brunette Coleman on Theobalds Road. ‘We were looking all over London for spaces, but the one in Bloomsbury was the most affordable,’ says Eaves about the property they found online, via a no-photo listing. ‘It was only after we moved in that we learnt the others were coming. We love our community in Bloomsbury; we feel lucky – it’s a really supportive network.’ The Bloomsbury galleries have a WhatsApp group to collaborate and coordinate openings.

Since opening, Brunette Coleman has presented international artists including Oscar Enberg, Anton Munar and Barbara Wesołowska. ‘People have really embraced us,’ says Targett, noting that Alexander Petalas, the collector and founder of the nearby nonprofit The Perimeter, ‘was very supportive early on about encouraging visitors to travel from his space to ours.’ (During Frieze Week, The Perimeter hosts the first UK public exhibition of Berlin-based British painter Lewis Hammond’s work.) Exhibitions at Brunette Coleman often respond to the building’s architecture, which sits somewhere between the domestic and the white-cube aesthetic. In their recent show with Nat Faulkner, the artist bisected the room with a pane of glass – teasingly preventing visitors from viewing the front of an archival painting mounted on it.



Anna Eaves and Ted Targett (Brunette Coleman)

The gallery's presentation at Frieze London will segue from this exhibition, pairing human-scale glass pieces with larger-than-life prints that continue Faulkner's interest in the intersection between analogue photography and controlled environments. Walk in a straight line for five minutes from Brunette Coleman and you'll reach fellow *Focus* exhibitor South Parade, in a quirky 19th-century building on Saffron Hill: once described by Charles Dickens as a slum, today part of the desirable Clerkenwell district, home to hot restaurants like Sessions Arts Club. Across the river, Deptford is an area seeing this kind of development in real time. Located on the south bank of the Thames between Bermondsey and Greenwich, the neighbourhood is 'a real mixing pot', says Ema O'Donovan, founder of the Deptford-based gallery Xxijra Hii. 'When I moved into Deptford it was a slightly weird zone. Now, it's becoming popular, akin to Peckham about ten years ago [...] You can't go to a cafe without bumping into someone that you know.' Indeed, the gallery is close to artists' studios like Collective Ending and APT, as well as Goldsmiths. 'Every part of the area has noise and sound: there are amazing music venues, you can always hear gospel choirs. It's exciting.'

Xxijra Hii 'spiralled out of control, but in a positive way', O'Donovan says. Opening the venue as an artist-run project space in 2020, she took no commission on sales, instead giving each artist a bursary to create a show. 'This got us noticed by people,' she says. 'I'd never worked in a gallery and I had no collectors so I didn't really feel like I could offer the artist the traditional 50/50 split.' The gallery moved to a commercial model in 2023 and now represents artists including Glen Pudvine, whose paintings of dinosaurs and phalluses probe at the state of contemporary masculinity. Two rising stars in its programme, Laila Majid and Louis Blue Newby, work collaboratively, often with materials and ephemera associated with fetish subcultures; they are soon to have their first institutional show at the nearby Goldsmiths Centre for Contemporary Art.

Continuing its reputation for championing artists with research-led practices and novel forms of technical fabrication, in *Focus* Xxijra Hii is showing alabaster carvings, steelwork, pewter casts, grogged clay, video and a soundscape by Hannah Morgan, who recently completed a year-long residency with Acme Studios. Working in Nottinghamshire in the East Midlands, Morgan's interdisciplinary work – exploring themes including myth, loss and birth – combines speculative ecological thinking and medieval research with investigations into her own family heritage and inner psyche. 'Focus is where I discovered a lot of galleries that influenced and inspired me,' says O'Donovan. 'So it's very affirming to now feel part of that. I'm a big proponent of south London: it's not often that we get lots of attention.'

In the city’s northwest, Harlesden High Street is a gallery making a distinctive mark in a similarly culturally undersung corner of London. When I speak to founder Jonny Tanna, he is busy planning a tribute to Joe Cool, a California-based artist from his programme, perhaps best-known for designing album art for Snoop Dogg. The tribute is timed to coincide with Notting Hill Carnival, which takes place not far from the gallery. Inspired by the communities found in the Paris *banlieues*, and the work of artists like Mohamed Bourouissa, Tanna is keen to engage the gallery’s largely diasporic neighbourhood: the programme exclusively presents artists of colour, often hosting events with food and music to promote dialogue and forge a sense of community.

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Jonny Tanna and Sophie Barrett-Pouleau (Harlesden High Street)

With the sometimes prohibitive ticket cost of museum exhibitions in mind, Tanna has borrowed works by major artists including Alvaro Barrington and Isaac Julien for shows at his gallery, and is working on potential projects with Rashid Johnson and David Hammons. ‘We’ve changed the structure of our programming since Frieze London last year,’ says Tanna, ‘to bring a more institutional model to the space. We now only present two commercial shows a year, while the rest are loans from museums and institutions.’ ‘Bringing art to the local community that its members are otherwise unlikely to see: that’s our new model,’ he says. ‘Our commercial exhibitions and the art fairs cover those costs.’

Tanna has also caught the attention of other, more established, galleries, too. The revered dealer Maureen Paley discovered young painter Savannah Marie Harris’s work in Harlesden High Street’s presentation at New York’s Independent Art Fair and invited the artist to participate in a summer group exhibition at Paley’s satellite space in Hove, Morena di Luna. For *Focus*, Tanna is presenting a solo stand of Harris’s abstract paintings that reference aspects of geology and the feel and colour of the earth.

‘Our style is raw, pure and unfiltered,’ Tanna says, describing his programme. ‘Many of our artists did not attend art school. Someone once said you should name our genre “Hood Futurism” and I said, “No, it’s not really about the hood, it’s about community coming together.”’ So, Tanna coined a genre: ‘Yard’, which, he says, ‘summarizes what we’re doing, because it’s like: “we’re all yard.”’ The gallery is for everybody: Irish, Jamaicans – whoever is here. This is our yard, where we are from. It’s from the soul: it’s real.’



Left to right, photographed at South Parade, London, 2024: Jonny Tanna (Harlesden High Street), Anna Eaves (Brunette Coleman), Isaac Simon (South Parade), Julia Gardener (Hot Wheels), Antonia Marsh (Soft Opening), Ted Targett (Brunette Coleman)

Despite the challenges and sheer unpredictability of opening a contemporary art gallery in uncertain times, these galleries prove London’s reputation as a key incubator of creative experimentation and risk-taking. ‘It’s a great time,’ says Targett. ‘There is a changing of the guard. This year, the *Focus* section of the fair is moving to a more prominent position and younger galleries will be more in the mix with established colleagues. It is a huge testament to Frieze embracing the new.’

This article first appeared in Frieze Week, London 2024 under the title ‘Coming Up’.

About the Focus Section

Focus returns to **Frieze London** 2024, showcasing emerging talent from the UK capital and around the world. Frieze’s longstanding section dedicated to fostering a community of young galleries is this year advised by Joumana Asseily (Founder, Marfa’), Piotr Drewko (Founder, Wschód), and Cédric Fauq (Chief Curator, CAPC musée d’art contemporain, Bordeaux).

Focus is presented in collaboration with Stone Island, whose bursaries further aid young galleries’ participation in the fair alongside Frieze’s existing support.

Main image: Left to right, photographed at Rose Easton, London, 2024: Liam Newnham (Rose Easton), Harry Dougall (Public), Oswaldo Nicoletti (NiCOLETTi), Rose Easton (Rose Easton), Nicole Estilo Kaiser (Public), Alex Harrison (Public), Camille Houzé (NiCOLETTi)

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