

A Very Special Place: Ikon in the 1990s 18 June - 30 August 2021



Mark Wallinger, *Self Portrait as Emily Davison* (1993).
Colour photograph on aluminium. Courtesy of the British Council Collection.
Photo: ©The British Council

Ikon presents *A Very Special Place: Ikon in the 1990s* (18 June - 30 August 2021), an exhibition featuring 40 artists from the gallery's 1990s programme. It comprises work by those who featured in exhibitions at our venue on John Bright Street during 1990 - 1997, and at Ikon's current premises in Brindleyplace until 1999. The title *A Very Special Place* is from a visioning document produced at the time, imagining Ikon's future.

With Elizabeth Macgregor as Director, Ikon's outlook was increasingly international with a particular emphasis on the Americas and Australia. Concerning the representation of British artists, she resisted the fashion for 'Young British Artists' in favour of an eclecticism ranging from painters such as Basil Beattie and Lisa Milroy to the more overtly experimental practices of Georgina Starr and Mark Wallinger. Ikon's 90s programme also featured a number of local artists associated with diaspora communities, including Permindar Kaur, Keith Piper and Donald Rodney.

In 1990 Ikon organised *Transcontinental*, an exhibition curated by the late Guy Brett, featuring nine contemporary artists from Latin America, including Juan Davila, Eugenio Dittborn,

Victor Grippo and Cildo Meireles. Other thematic group exhibitions followed, focusing on current affairs and issues that brought racial and sexual politics to the fore. *Mothers* (1990), curated by Angela Kingston, considered representations of parenting and the female body by artists including Felicity Allen; two related exhibitions *Clean* and *Dirty* (1994) offered perspectives on notions of purity, with reference to HIV/AIDS; and *Self Evident* (1995), showcased photography by Black artists including Birmingham-born Maxine Walker (whose exhibition *UNTITLED* runs concurrently at mac Birmingham, 24 May - 5 September 2021). Ikon shows works from such exhibitions with renewed relevance in the face of recent societal changes brought about by movements such as #BlackLivesMatter and #MeToo, alongside global debates around health, poverty and gender/age inequality impacted by the Covid-19 pandemic.

Keith Piper was one of the founding members of the Blk Art Group, an association of Black British art students from the Midlands, that continued to show at Ikon following the group's major exhibition *The Pan-African Connection* in 1982. *Ikon in the 1990s* features Piper's *Four Corners, a Contest of Opposites* (1995) plus a newly commissioned film by the artist, made in response to his installation *A Ship Called Jesus* shown at Ikon in 1991. Funded by the Paul Mellon Centre, the commission is accompanied by a major digital symposium as part of *The Migrant Festival* (19 - 22 August), focusing on the influence of the Christian church on the Blk Art Group, then and now. Ikon also shows *In the House of My Father* (1997), by Birmingham-born artist Donald Rodney, made shortly before his tragic death from complications arising from sickle cell anaemia.

Ikon's eclectic programme included Antony Gormley's popular exhibition *Field for the British Isles* (1995), a floor-based installation of forty thousand small clay figures. Mark Wallinger focused on sport and its relationship to class, for instance his photographic work *Self Portrait as Emily Davison* (1993). Installation works include *Falling* (1995) by Permindar Kaur, who had her first solo show at Ikon, setting up a tension between the routine and the unfamiliar, the comforting and the alienating. Audiences are also encouraged to visit Shelagh Wakely's *Rug for CBSO Centre*, in situ at the centre on Berkley Street.

During the 1990s Ikon continued to champion photography, film and video. *Fragments* (1990) is a deeply personal work by Vong Phaophanit, an artist from Laos, involving a slide projection of his family photographs presented over a wall filled with electric fans. By contrast, Graham Gussin's series of black and white photographs titled *Surrendering 1, 2 and 3* (1994 - 5), show the artist's solo figure standing with hands raised in multiple landscapes. Besides solo shows by Basil Beattie and Lisa Milroy, there were many exhibitions of painting during this decade: Suzanne Treister was drawn to the virtual worlds of video games and Amikam Toren's ongoing series of *Armchair Paintings* involve him cutting words into found paintings. Callum Innes was one of a number of artists whose work signalled a revival of interest in abstraction.

By the 1990s the limitations of the John Bright Street venue were evident, and the search for a more suitable venue became a major preoccupation, leading to the gallery's fifth and current location, Brindleyplace. The dilapidated Grade II former Oozells Street School building (built 1877), standing in an inner-city wasteland, was converted with funds from the first lottery grant in the UK, and Ikon opened its doors again on 20 March 1998. The architectural team included artist Tania Kovats who positioned the building on a black slate "plinth", acting as a foil for the Victorian red brick

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work of the original architects, Chamberlain and Martin. It was significant perhaps that a number of other artists featuring in Ikon's programme, such as Edward Allington and Siah Armajani, conveyed a preoccupation with architecture and the built environment.

The new building opened with exhibitions by Georgina Starr and acclaimed American artist Nancy Spero. Following on were solo shows by Martha Rosler, whose works highlighted social injustices including sexism, racial discrimination and homelessness, and Yinka Shonibare CBE, whose 1999 exhibition included two panels from *Diary of a Victorian Dandy* (1998), a photographic series based on Hogarth paintings and depicting Shonibare as a nineteenth century gentleman. Ikon's exhibition was seminal and over twenty years later the gallery now shows one of these works again.

After ten years as Director, Elizabeth Macgregor moved to Australia to lead the Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney. In a recent interview with her successor and Ikon's current Director, Jonathan Watkins, she said:

Looking back on it, I think what I was most proud of in that decade was how Ikon reflected the changes in the art world - the recognition that we needed to be more inclusive in an art world which had been rather elitist, only paying attention to certain kinds of work.

List of artists: Felicity Allen, Siah Armajani, Edward Allington, Basil Beattie, Gordon Bennett, Zarina Bhimji, Ansuya Blom, Adam Chodzko, Juan Davila, Mark Dion and Jason Simon, Eugenio Dittborn, Rose Finn-Kelcey, Ellen Gallagher, Antony Gormley, Víctor Grippo, Graham Gussin, Callum Innes, Permendar Kaur, Tania Kovats, Cildo Meireles, Lisa Milroy, Antoni Miralda, Avis Newman, Lucia Nogueira, Vong Phaophanit, Adrian Piper, Keith Piper, Donald Rodney, Martha Rosler, Yinka Shonibare, Nancy Spero, Georgina Starr, Suzanne Treister, Amikam Toren, Alison Turnbull, Shelagh Wakely*, Maxine Walker*, Mark Wallinger, John Yeadon. (*presented off-site)

A Very Special Place: Ikon in the 1990s is supported by Elonex, The Grimmitt Trust, Paul Mellon Centre and The Owen Family Trust.

Visiting Ikon: Entry is free. To book a ticket or for more information on current opening times and visiting guidelines please visit ikon-gallery.org

For more information, high-res images and to request interviews please contact Rebecca Small or Laura Jaunzems on 0121 248 0708 or email r.small@ikon-gallery.org or l.jaunzems@ikon-gallery.org

Social Media - Instagram, Twitter and Facebook: @ikongallery #IkonGallery
Links: ikon-gallery.org

Note to Editors:

1. The exhibition will be accompanied a catalogue, including texts by Elizabeth McGregor and Jonathan Watkins, and a programme of events including artists' talks, a symposium and family workshops.
2. *The Migrant Festival (19 - 22 August 2021)* – a four day programme mixing visual art, music, film and performance, it celebrates the contribution made by refugees and migrants to Birmingham and the UK, whilst bearing witness to the hardships and sacrifices involved. The 2021 festival will comprise digital and live events including performances by musicians curated by Celebrating Sanctuary; our annual Soapbox event featuring quick-fire presentations from individuals and groups supporting migrants in the Midlands; and a day long symposium about the Blk Art Group and religion.
3. *A Very Special Place: Ikon in the 1990s* is Ikon's 4th group survey exhibition, looking back at the gallery's history (previously: *As Exciting As We Can Make It: Ikon in the 1980s* (2 July - 31 August 2014); *This Could Happen To You: Ikon in the 1970s* (20 July - 5 September 2010); and *Some of the Best Things in Life Happen Accidentally: Ikon in the 1960s* (28 July - 12 September 2004).
4. Ikon is an internationally acclaimed contemporary art venue situated in central Birmingham. Established in 1964 by a group of artists, Ikon is an educational charity and works to encourage public engagement with contemporary art through exhibiting new work in a context of debate and participation. The gallery programme features artists from around the world and a variety of media is represented, including sound, film, mixed media, photography, painting, sculpture and installation. Ikon's off-site programme develops dynamic relationships between art, artists and audiences outside the gallery. Projects vary enormously in scale, duration and location, challenging expectations of where art can be seen and by whom. Education is at the heart of Ikon's activities, stimulating public interest in and understanding of contemporary visual art. Through a variety of talks, tours, workshops and seminars, Ikon's Learning Team aims to build dynamic relationships with audiences, enabling visitors to engage with, discuss and reflect on contemporary art. ikon-gallery.org
5. Ikon Gallery is supported using public funding from Arts Council England and Birmingham City Council.
6. Arts Council England is the national development body for arts and culture across England, working to enrich people's lives. ACE support a range of activities across the arts, museums and libraries – from theatre to visual art, reading to dance, music to literature, and crafts to collections. Great art and culture inspires us, brings us together and teaches us about ourselves and the world around us. In short, it makes life better. Between 2018 and 2022, ACE will invest £1.45 billion of public money from government and an estimated £860

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million from the National Lottery to help create these experiences for as many people as possible across the country. artscouncil.org.uk



Donald Rodney, *In the House of My Father* (1997).
Photographic print on aluminium. Photograph taken by Andra Nelki.
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Left: Suzanne Treister, *Picassoids Video Game* (1989). Oil on canvas.

Courtesy the artist, Annely Juda Fine Art, London and P.P.O.W Gallery, New York. © Suzanne Treister.

Right: Graham Gussin, *Surrendering 3* (1994 - 95). Archival digital print. © Graham Gussin.