



MIDNIGHT

Sarah
Cunningham

09.10.26–
10.01.27

SUN

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Sarah Cunningham (1993 – 2024) was a prolific and celebrated artist, regarded as one of the UK's most distinctive painters of her generation. Born and raised in Nottingham, she lived close to Wollaton Park and grew up nurturing a deep love of animals, forests and the wilderness. This laid the groundwork for a rich and in-depth painterly practice fuelled by her passionate, adventurous and vivacious spirit, that sought to explore the coexistence of humans and the natural world - its ancient and otherworldly landscapes, complex botanical life and unseen mysteries.

In 2015 Sarah completed her BFA at Loughborough University, honing a practice that drew from the micro and macrocosms of nature through techniques of collaging and layering different materials and colours that were formative in her later approach to painting. Following undergraduate studies, her practice began to shift following a profound experience during a research residency in 2018 with La Wayaka Current where she lived and worked in the Panamanian jungle alongside the Kuna community. This experience enriched her understanding of the interconnectedness of all living entities and of hidden dream worlds, and she became fascinated by ancestral connections to the forest and Indigenous knowledge of psychological spaces, land and ecology that are in opposition to Western binaries of nature verses culture. During this time literary influences and references permeated her practice. She was inspired by sci-fi writers Ursula K. Le Guin and J. G. Ballard and artists such as the radical feminist occultist painter Ithell Colquhoun, British filmmaker Tacita Dean and Spanish artist Daniel Steegmann Mangrané, whose exhibition *The Word for World is Forest* was presented at Nottingham Contemporary when Sarah worked as a Gallery Assistant in 2019.

Sarah joined the internationally renowned studio-based MA Painting programme at the Royal College of Art (London) in 2019, where she explored working large scale, laying her canvases on the floor and immersing herself within them, painting with brushes attached to long sticks to extend her reach. She would often create in the darkness of night, working layer upon layer of thick oil paint through sweeping gestures with brush, hand and body. Working and re-working canvases over long periods of time was the norm, and she would push and pull paint in a dance that was intuitive and not predetermined - or preordained – as she would reach a space of synergy that drew from internal spiritual and subconscious dimensions.

Sarah moved back to Nottingham during the COVID-19 pandemic and spent long nights in her studio at artist-led organisation and studio provider Backlit. She painted amongst the trees of Wollaton Park, creating a forest studio that would influence the way she continued to understand her work as 'representative, not representational'¹ of a landscape or environment. She blended abstracted landscape views, mountain peaks and forest canopies into one canvas, blurring the real with the imaginary. To Sarah, her paintings were fictional, world-building tools – portals – to imagine new subjectivities and ways of living differently with nature.

In her MA thesis *The Living Forest*, Sarah wrote:

'To think of images as a manifestation of worlds is not only thinking around the ontology of the image. It is important to see images as representatives and not representations. Technologies can highlight the ways human and non-human beings' lives are entangled, and in doing so, highlight the impossibilities of representation.'²

In this sense, Sarah was 'thinking with forests'³ rather than working as a separate entity or sole creator; painting en plein air and using abstraction, bodily movements and gestures to learn with her work. The exhibition explores the interplay of pace, the rhythm of night turning into day, and an understanding of Sarah's image-making as a process of becoming.

The exhibition and accompanying publication are dedicated in honour of Sarah and all those who were touched by her talent, warmth and vitality. She will be an inspiration for generations of artists after her, energised by her formidable approach and style, who will continue to conjure yet-to-be discovered Midnight Suns.

¹Sarah Cunningham, *The Living Forest*, (unpublished MA thesis, RCA), 2020, p36.

²Ibid, p36.

³Ibid, p8.

This exhibition was made possible thanks to the support of Headline Supporter: Lisson, and The Sarah Cunningham Exhibition Circle: The Nixon Collection, Tilman Kriesel, Timo Miettinen, ABCollection, Art of Palm and those who wish to remain anonymous.

Exhibition graphics by Waste Studio.

We would like to extend our deepest thanks to Sarah's family, Eddie, Sue and Anthony and to Kay Dawson for their huge generosity and support in the realisation of this exhibition. Special thanks to Max Bossier, Elissa Goldstone, Victoria Mitchell, Andrew Price and Ruya Worthy at Lisson and to all the lenders who have supported us in bringing together this selection of Sarah Cunningham's works; to the contributors to the accompanying publication and live programme, whose ideas and research will offer new viewpoints into Cunningham's practice: Hettie Judah, John Newling, Niall Ó Faircheallaigh, Martin Clarkson, Dr. Adam Searle, Jason Redwood, Millie Quick, Dr. Lara Pucci, Irina Razumovskaya and Matthew Chesney; and to Daniel Chehade for realising the publication design.

And finally, a very special thanks to the entire team at Nottingham Contemporary.

Nottingham Contemporary is a registered charity and dependent on the generosity of our visitors, partners and supporters.

If you would like to use any alternative forms of interpretation, we have a range of accessible versions on our Access Wall beside Reception or alongside the wall text in the exhibition.

RELATED EVENTS

WALKTHROUGHS

Wed 21 Oct, 1pm

Curators' Walkthrough

Join Nottingham Contemporary's curators for a tour of our autumn exhibitions.

Wed 4 Nov, 1pm

With Martin Clarkson, fine art painter and friend.

Wed 18 Nov, 1pm

With Dr. Adam Searle, Assistant Professor in Human Geography, University of Nottingham.

Sat 28 Nov, 1pm

BSL Exhibition Tour

With Jason Redwood, BSL tour guide for the Turner Contemporary & British Museum, BSL teacher & presenter.

12.30 Talks

12.30pm every Tue, Thu, Sat, and Sun, starting Tue 20 Oct

Join one of our friendly Gallery Assistants for a short exploration of one of our current exhibitions.

WORKSHOPS

Sat 31 Oct, 2pm

Workshop on speculative design histories by Pina and Biblioteka

An interdisciplinary workshop exploring the design histories of exhibitions and libraries as worldview machines.

Sun 25 Oct & Sun 29 Nov, 2pm

Grow your own planet: Learn, play and keep a worldbuilding game with artist and gallery assistant Millie Quick. Inspired by science fiction, we will craft maps surrounded by Sarah Cunningham's vivid naturescapes in Gallery 3. Suitable for artists, writers, GameMasters and anyone curious (Age 14+).

PERFORMANCES

Fri 13, Sat 14 & Sun 15 Nov, 12pm – 2pm & 3pm – 5pm

Bar Tango by Beni Bosetto

Join us for this new production exploring the corporeality of love through stage objects and a surreal choreography in which tango dancers inhabit costumes inspired by animals, plants, and minerals.

CONTEMPORARY X ART HISTORIES

A collaborative strand of programming between the University of Nottingham and Nottingham Contemporary.

Wed 25 Nov, 3pm

Ways of Seeing, Learning and Making: With art historian, Dr. Lara Pucci (University of Nottingham), in conversation with ceramic sculptor, Irina Razumovskaya (Royal College of Art).

Wed 9 Dec, 3pm

Ways of Seeing, Learning and Making: With Backlit Gallery Co-Director, Matthew Chesney.

For more information about the exhibition, related events and learning programmes, visit nottinghamcontemporary.org or scan here:



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