

Sarah Cunningham: *Midnight Sun* at Nottingham Contemporary

Fri 9 Oct 2026 – Sun 10 Jan 2027

Private View: Thu 8 Oct



Sarah Cunningham, *Via Lucis*, 2023, Oil on canvas. Courtesy Private Collection.

Nottingham Contemporary is proud to present the first UK institutional solo exhibition of the late British artist Sarah Cunningham (1993-2024, UK).

The exhibition marks a deeply meaningful homecoming: the return of the artist's work to the city where she was born and raised.

Cunningham sought out the essential and the alive through her imaginary wildernesses and fluid forestscapes, taking inspiration from the speculative landscapes of science fiction literature, art history, ecology and personal references.

Her paintings journey through multiple worlds; they are representative, not representational, of a landscape or environment. They are fictional, world-building tools to imagine new subjectivities and ways of living differently. Her influences ranged from literary figures and sci-fi writers Ursula K Le Guin and J G Ballard to the radical feminist occultist painter Ithell Colquhoun, British filmmaker Tacita Dean and Spanish artist Daniel Steegmann Mangrané.

Whilst working as a Gallery Assistant at Nottingham Contemporary in 2019, Cunningham was immersed in Steegmann Mangrané's solo exhibition *The Word for World is Forest*, a title that echoes Ursula K. Le Guin's influential novel of the same name. Cunningham's engagement with both the exhibition and the novel proved pivotal to her understanding of her painterly practice, which had begun to shift in 2018 following a profound experience during the La Wayaka Current research residency. Living and working in the Panamanian jungle alongside the Kuna community, this experience marked a significant turning point in the development of her artistic approach. Her understanding of the interconnectedness of all living entities was enriched, and she became fascinated by ancestral connections to the forests and Indigenous knowledge of ecology and nature that are in opposition to Western binaries of nature verses culture.

During the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, Sarah returned to Nottingham, living close to Wollaton Park which she would regularly visit to paint – in a forest studio - among the trees, fauna and flora. During this time, she was completing her MA in Painting at the Royal College of Art and access to the wild open spaces around her informed and shaped her practice of world-building on canvas. Part abstract experimentation, part spiritual journey, every painting at some level represents the intuitive and unspoken connection between nature and humankind. Her unusual, nocturnal practice estranged her limbs and thoughts from systematic, painterly movements, resulting in works that briefly dwell in darkness only to culminate in the arrival of the dawn chorus. Through her sweeping expressionistic gestures, Cunningham built layers of paint that she shaped into fluid motion, creating landscapes not just as we know them, but as scenes of possibility and portals into other worlds.

The exhibition *Midnight Sun* at Nottingham Contemporary explores Cunningham's interplay of pace, rhythm, night and day. As a curatorial thread that traverses both the exhibition and accompanying publication, specific paintings will act as guides, beginning inside *The World It Softly Lulls* (2021); a dark, nocturnal, mythical forest-scape that is in a process of becoming; moving through *Via Lucis [Way of Light]* (2023) as a nod to the transition from night into day; and ending in the clearing of *Starshine and Clay* (2022), a bold, vibrant and eruptive new beginning - a dawn chorus charged with Sarah's own dynamic force and energy.

This exhibition will be the largest exhibition to date of Cunningham's works, bringing together earlier paintings and never-before-seen bodies of work from her studio. The exhibition will seek to not just present Cunningham's work in a fixed state but will rather attempt to open the portals held by the painting's edge, allowing the colour, motion and sounds of these other worlds to bleed out into an immersive viewing experience.

Sarah Cunningham was born in Nottingham, UK in 1993 and received an MA in Painting from Royal College of Art, London in 2022. In addition to her solo shows, *Flight Paths*, Lisson Gallery, Los Angeles, USA (2024); *The Crystal Forest*, Lisson Gallery, London, UK (2023) and *In Its Daybreak, Rising*, Almine Rech, New York, USA (2022), her work was included in numerous group exhibitions in Aspen, Berlin, Nottingham, Seoul and Vancouver. She was a resident of La Wayaka Current's Tropic 08N in 2018, as well as the recipient of the Ali H. Alkazzi Scholarship Award (2019) and the Djanogly Art Award (2019).

For more information about Sarah Cunningham and other exhibitions at Nottingham Contemporary, please visit [our website](#).

Sarah Cunningham: *Midnight Sun* is curated by Katie Simpson, Niall Ó Faircheallaigh and Klara Szafrńska.

This exhibition was made possible thanks to the generous support of:

Lisson Gallery and The Nixon Collection.

The Nottingham Contemporary Commissioning Circle: Nissreen Darawish, Gabriela Galcerán, Il Posto, Rafik&Najoua, Hamza Serafi and Mercedes Vilardell

The exhibition will be accompanied by the first publication on Sarah Cunningham, designed to offer new perspectives on the artist's work with contributions from Katie Simpson, Hettie Judah and Niall Ó Faircheallaigh.

Notes to Editors:

Currently showing (until Sun 13 Sep 2026): [Chico da Silva: *And the soul is for the birds*](#) and [Augustas Serapinas: *Physical Culture*](#).

[Sarah Cunningham: *Midnight Sun*](#) is showing alongside [Julia Isídrez: *Mud is everything*](#).

For more information and images please contact:

Pickles PR

Gair Burton

Email: gair@picklespr.com

Phoebe Heins

Email: phoebe@picklespr.com

Nottingham Contemporary

Press@nottinghamcontemporary.org

Catherine Masters

Email: cmasters@nottinghamcontemporary.org

Phone: 0115 948 9750

About Nottingham Contemporary

Nottingham Contemporary is one of the leading centres of contemporary art in Europe. Since opening in 2009, we have welcomed over 2.5 million visitors – with free admission for all – to our highly ambitious programme that has featured hundreds of artists and cultural practitioners from across the globe.

Our programme champions international art and artists who invite us to imagine the world in new ways, and empower different perspectives into the most pressing cultural, social, and political questions of today. We support artists at different stages of their careers – from first-time solo shows in the UK to surveys of renowned or overlooked figures – and regularly present significant thematic exhibitions and major artist-curated projects. Nottingham Contemporary was shortlisted for Art Fund Museum of the Year 2019. Nottingham Contemporary is supported using public funding by Arts Council England.