

**Dyslexia Friendly Exhibition Notes – Sarah  
Cunningham: *Midnight Sun*  
Sarah Cunningham**

***Midnight Sun***

**09.10.26 – 10.01.27**

**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**

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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

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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.

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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

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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 –

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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

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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**.

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(unpublished MA thesis, RCA), 2020, p36.

2 Ibid, p36.

3 Ibid, p8.

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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,  
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wish to remain anonymous.

Exhibition graphics by Waste Studio.

We would like to extend our deepest  
thanks to Sarah's family, Eddie, Sue and

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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,  
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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.**

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**RELATED EVENTS**

**WALKTHROUGHS**

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**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**

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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**

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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 naturoscapes 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**

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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).

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**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](http://nottinghamcontemporary.org) or scan here:

