

Nottingham Contemporary Teacher / Group Leader Notes

Julia Isídrez: *Mud is everything* - Gallery 1

Sarah Cunningham: *Midnight Sun* - Galleries 2 & 3

9 Oct 2026 – 10 Jan 2027

Featuring: Paintings and sculpture

For our Autumn season, we present two artists who work with nature, value Indigenous knowledge and imagination and immerse us in fantastical, natural worlds.



Isidrez's ceramic smoking process, 2025.
Courtesy Gomide&Co. Photo: Baro
Brizuela and Juana Barreto.

In Galleries 2 and 3, we present the work of Nottingham-born and raised artist Sarah Cunningham. Sarah's deep love of forests and wilderness inspired her work. Sarah spent time in the Panamanian jungle alongside the Kuna community, where she became fascinated by Indigenous understanding of the interconnectedness of all living things and ancestral connections to the forests. Painting amongst the trees at Wollaton Park, at night and in dreamlike states, her imaginary landscapes act as portals to other worlds.

Curriculum and themes:

Art/Design: Colour, painting, art education and collaborative art practices

Citizenship: Community and collaboration, political and ecological activism, colonialism and Indigenous rights and culture

English: Mythology and folklore, storytelling and creative writing

PSHE: Creative imagination, philosophical perspectives of the world

History: South American Indigenous clay processes and culture

Science: Habitats, clay-making processes

Julia Isídrez - Gallery 1

The techniques Julia uses to create her pieces have been used by generations of Guaraní women. Recognised by UNESCO as part of the Guaraní cultural heritage, the Ñai'ũpo method involves shaping each ceramic by hand, without the use of a wheel. Traditionally, this was to create functional vessels to carry and store water and food; however, with the rise in popularity of metal, plastic and glass, the use of clay for functional objects diminished, opening a world of possibilities for design.



Julia Isidrez shaping a ceramic work at Casa Museo Arte en Barro. Julia Isidrez and Juana Marta Rodas. Itá, Paraguay, 2025. Courtesy Gomide&Co. Photo: Baro Brizuela and Juana Barreto.

Julia's mother, Juana Marta Rodas, began shaping her vessels into mythical beings, animals and plants, burning mango leaves to create the distinctive black sheen when firing. This knowledge was passed to Julia, who has continued to innovate and build on traditions. Julia creates pieces drawn from the natural world, her imagination and folklore. Works include birds, armadillos, seven-headed serpents, dinosaur-like dorsal plates on spherical forms and wide-open mouths perfectly balanced on squat legs.



Julia Isídrez, *Serpente con escamas*, 2024. Photo: Estúdio em Obra. Courtesy of the artist, Gomide&Co, Jessica Silverman & Olney Gleason.

Within this understanding, ceramics are not isolated works, but a way of knowing the world through production and expressions of relationships continually renewed. The clay remains connected to the earth or mud from which it came, which in turn holds the memories, knowledge and lives it sustains.



Photo of Sarah Cunningham in her studio. Photo by George Darrell, courtesy Lisson.

Sarah Cunningham - Galleries 2 and 3

Sarah created her paintings outdoors and at night. Working at scale, she would lay her canvases on the ground, working into them with brushes attached to long sticks to extend her reach, adding layers of thick oil paint through big gestural brushstrokes and movements. Immersed within the space of the canvas and within the act of painting, Sarah would work and rework the canvas over time and through the night to conjure a spiritual, dreamlike state.



Sarah Cunningham, *Starshine and Clay*, 2022. © Sarah Cunnningham; courtesy of Lisson.

Sarah's work speaks to the connection of humans to nature. She understands 'the forest' to be a constantly changing community of lifeforms that shapes and is shaped by all within it. Sarah was clear that her paintings were not representations of the forest and the natural world, but art that emerged from it.

Midnight Sun is Sarah Cunningham's first institutional solo exhibition. This exhibition and associated publication are dedicated in honour of Sarah and all those who knew and loved her so dearly.