

Through Holes in the Clouds: Artists and the Postcolonial Imagination

17 March – 5 September 2027

Galleries 1, 2 & 3 - Ticketed

Galleries 4, 5 & Assembly Room - Free

For Spring/Summer 2027, Whitechapel Gallery presents a landmark group exhibition, ***Through Holes in the Clouds: Artists and the Postcolonial Imagination***. Running for six months and taking over all the Gallery's public spaces, this ambitious presentation explores the reverberations of British colonialism and its after-lives through the lens of two generations of artists from across the globe. These include **Frank Bowling, Ibrahim El-Salahi, Richard Hamilton, Mona Hatoum, Runa Islam, Mohammed Joha, Nasreen Mohamedi, Sam Ntiro, Mohammed Sami, Larissa Sansour, Yinka Shonibare, F.N. Souza and Ala Younis**.

In a year that marks the 80th anniversary of the partition of British India and the creation of India and Pakistan, this exhibition provides a timely moment to reflect not just on the historical and political legacy of the British Empire, but on the complex effects of rupture, re-membling and reimagining. Through the prism of modern and contemporary art and across generations, geographies and practices, ***Through Holes in the Clouds*** explores the break in regimes of visual and political representation provoked by the struggles for independence, while exploring how the aftermath of empire continues to shape the world we inhabit today.

Importantly, the exhibition focuses on the artistic, poetic and creative strategies harnessed by artists in the wake of rupture from British imperialism to make sense of changing identities and new world order. The title of the exhibition, ***Through Holes in the Clouds***, is taken from a poem by the Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish and foregrounds a poetic response as a framework for understanding how the postcolonial condition has shaped both individual and collective imaginations, alternating between hope and disappointment, transparency and opacity.

The years following the end of WWII saw a rapid wave of decolonisation as nations across Africa, Asia and the Caribbean gained independence from the British Empire. Between 1945 and 1965, the number of people under British rule outside the UK, fell from a staggering 700 million to 5 million, of which 3 million resided in Hong Kong. The twentieth century concluded with the return of Hong Kong to Chinese sovereignty in 1997. Far from being a managed, orderly retreat from empire, the aftermath of colonialism was precipitous, often chaotic and frequently violent. Within a few years, the imperial map that once served to differentiate Britain's colonial territories from those of France, Spain or Portugal dissolved. In its place emerged a new global landscape of independent nations, each seeking to define distinct and autonomous identities beyond the control of distant imperial rule.

Through Holes in the Clouds features over 80 paintings, drawings, sculptures, films, photographs and installations and explores the ongoing and far-reaching impact of British imperialism through the work of a range of artists with specific links to, or perspectives on, the British Empire and its after-lives. Whether forged in the colonial or post-colonial periods, their works variously reflect on the volatility of transition from dependence to independence, the struggle for self-determination and freedom from British rule, and the often traumatic shift from colonised state to autonomous nation. The exhibition also considers the ongoing consequences of colonialism, in particular the journeys made when economic opportunities and political crises propel communities to seek home and sanctuary in Britain.

Rather than following chronological or geographic demarcations, the exhibition intentionally presents the postcolonial experience as fluid, uneven and multifarious. Exhilarated by their newly found freedom from British rule, a number of artists in Africa and Asia in the postwar period shaped new imaginaries, experimenting with different aesthetic strategies and approaches. Whether figuration (**Sam Ntiro, Ibrahim El-Salahi**), abstraction (**Anwar Jalal Shemza, F.N. Souza**) or minimalism (**Somnath Hore, Nasreen Mohammedi**), these artists were searching for a visual language that could better express the possibilities of this pivotal moment in history.

Contemporary artists such as **Sobnath Hura, Rita Duffy, Mohammed Joha, Moonis Shah** and **Taysir Batniji** are represented by works that reflect on the darker after-effects of British colonialism which have divided and destroyed communities marked by ongoing military conflict, surveillance and violence. **Bani Abidi**'s work recalls the arbitrary partition of the map of British India and its traumatic outcomes, while works by **Mona Hatoum, Frank Bowling** and **Rita Donagh** challenge western conventions of cartography to create maps that dissolve borders and shatter accepted geographies. Works by **Mohammed Sami, Idris Khan** and **Zarina Bhimji** conjure situations and landscapes which are difficult to pin down to specific places or times but evoke sensations of foreboding and loss about what has happened in the past. Moving image works include films by **Larissa Sansour** and **Lawrence Lek** anticipating postcolonies of the future; Sansour draws from the language of cinema and science fiction to imagine Bethlehem in the aftermath of an eco-disaster, while Lek imagines a futuristic Singaporean postcolony where the world has become a techno industrial complex run by post-human intelligence.

An important component of the exhibition is the number of works borrowed from regional collections across the UK from Birmingham to Argyll, Bristol and Sheffield. Their inclusion accentuates how embedded these artists are in the story of the British Isles and in our national collections.

Through Holes in the Clouds: Artists and the Postcolonial Imagination illustrates how artists can help us understand, challenge and reframe the uneven legacies of Empire and

continues Whitechapel Gallery's historic and ongoing commitment to staging bold thematic exhibitions that invite new perspectives, and expands discourse around key global cultural, social and political moments.

A substantial publication will accompany the exhibition, focusing on the exhibiting artists and examining how artistic practice has operated as a form of political testimony during and after the dismantling of the British Empire. Leading global scholars Kate Cowcher, Priyamvada Gopal and Hou Hanru will each contribute new writing alongside a critical essay on the artists and themes of the exhibition by Whitechapel Gallery Director, and lead exhibition curator, Gilane Tawadros.

Participating Artists:

Bani Abidi (b.1971, Pakistan); **Dia al-Azzawi** (b.1939, Iraq); **Bashar Alhroub** (b.1978, Jerusalem); **Taysir Batniji** (b.1966, Palestine); **Zarina Bhimji** (b.1963, Uganda); **Frank Bowling** (b.1934, French Guiana); **Clifford Charles** (b.1965, South Africa); **Avtarjeet Dhanjal** (b.1940, India); **Rita Donagh** (b.1939, England); **Rita Duffy** (b.1959, Ireland); **Ibrahim El-Salahi** (b.1930, Sudan); **Catherine Katonoko Gombe** (Uganda); **Richard Hamilton** (b.1922, England; d.2011, England); **Mona Hatoum** (b.1952, Lebanon); **Somnath Hore** (b.1921, Bangladesh; d.2006, India); **Sohrab Hura** (b.1981, India); **Runa Islam** (b.1970, Dhaka); **Idris Khan** (b.1978, England); **Moshekwa Langa** (b.1975, South Africa); **Louis Mbughuni** (b.1938, Tanzania); **Nasreen Mohamedi** (b.1937, Pakistan; d.1990, India); **Mohammed Joha** (b.1978, Palestine); **Lucy Skaer** (b.1975, England) and **Rosalind Nashashibi** (b.1973, England); **Sam Joseph Ntiro** (b.1923, Tanzania; d.1993); **Huang Yong Ping** (b.1954, China; d.2019; France); **Tracey Rose** (b.1974, South Africa); **Mohammed Sami** (b.1984, Iraq); **Larissa Sansour** (b.1973, Jerusalem); **Moonis Ahmad Shah** (b.1992, Kashmir); **Anwar Jalal Shemza** (b.1928, India; d.1985, England); **Yinka Shonibare** (b.1962, England); **Lucky Sibiya** (b.1942, South Africa; d.1999, South Africa); **F. N. Souza** (b.1924, India; d.2002, India); **Michaela Yearwood-Dan** (b.1994, England); **Ala Younis** (b.1974, Kuwait).

Notes to Editors

- *Through Holes in the Clouds: Artists and the Postcolonial Imagination* runs 17 March – 5 September 2027.
- *Through Holes in the Clouds: Artists and the Postcolonial Imagination* is curated by Gilane Tawadros, Cameron Foote and Hannah Healey.

Press Contacts

For more information, interviews and images, contact:

Megan Miller, Rees & Co | megan.miller@reesandco.com | +44 (0)20 3137 8776 / +44 (0)77 4303 6449

Yulia Ivanova, Whitechapel Gallery | press@whitechapelgallery.org | +44 (0)207 539 7880

Listing Information

Through Holes in the Clouds: Artists and the Postcolonial Imagination

17 March – 5 September 2027

Galleries 1, 2 & 3 - Ticketed

Galleries 4, 5 & Assembly Room - Free

Visitor Information

General Gallery admission: Free

Ticketed shows: £16.50 (Standard ticket) / £9.50 (Concessions)

Opening times: Tuesday – Sunday, 11am – 6pm; Thursdays, 11am – 9pm

Whitechapel Gallery, 77 – 82 Whitechapel High Street, London E1 7QX

T + 44 (0) 20 7522 7888 | E infodesk@whitechapelgallery.org | W whitechapelgallery.org

About the artists

Artist biographies available on request.

About Whitechapel Gallery

2026 marks Whitechapel Gallery's 125th Anniversary, providing a unique opportunity to celebrate the Gallery's groundbreaking history and set a bold agenda for the future.

Founded in 1901 with the aim to bring 'the finest art of the world to the people of East London' the Gallery has been responsible for bringing some of the most radical, innovative and influential artists of our times to its East End home. From the outset it pushed the boundaries of what a locally embedded cultural institution could do: giving voice and platform to local, national and international artists at all stages of their careers; presenting diverse practices, forms and ideas; exemplifying sector-leading learning and community outreach programmes; and being at the forefront of the global cultural scene.

From ground-breaking solo shows from artists as diverse as **Barbara Hepworth (1954)**, **Jackson Pollock (1958)**, **Helio Oiticica (1969)**, **Gilbert & George (1971)**, **Eva Hesse (1979)**, **Frida Kahlo (1982)**, **Sonia Boyce DBE RA (1988)**, **Sophie Calle (2010)**, **Zarina Bhimji (2012)**, **Emily Jacir (2015)**, **William Kentridge (2016)**, **Theaster Gates (2021)**,

Nicole Eisenman (2023), Zineb Sedira (2024), Gavin Jantjes (2024), Peter Kennard (2024), Lygia Clark (2024), Donald Rodney (2025), Hamad Butt (2025), Joy Gregory (2025), Veronica Ryan (2026) and Cecilia Vicuña (2026) to thought-provoking group and thematic exhibitions, such as the inaugural Backyard Biennial: East (2026), the Gallery's focus on bringing artists, ideas and audiences together, while proposing new models for community collaboration and cultural infrastructure, remains as important today as it did over a century ago and ensures that London's East End continues to be regarded as one of the world's most exciting and diverse cultural quarters.

The programme for our anniversary year continues to give space to a range of perspectives from the local to the global, with priority given to those systemically under-represented, especially women-identifying artists and artists of colour. Our mission is to ensure that Whitechapel Gallery continues to claim a distinctive and radical position in the wider social and cultural landscape, building on its pioneering history while translating and animating it for our time.



Supported using public funding by

**ARTS COUNCIL
ENGLAND**

Whitechapel Gallery is a registered charity No. 312162