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## British Artists Now

### A look at UK artists from across the Atlantic



Mark Leckey, *Dream English Kid, 1964 - 1999 AD*, still (2015). Courtesy of the artist © Mark Leckey

By  Jonathan Griffin

writer and critic

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Facing blank stares when asking for “worter” in restaurants; feeling a bit awkward on 4 July; being asked to explain Brexit: being an expat Brit in America comes with its fair share of daily trials and tribulations. After almost a decade living in the United States, the differences between the two cultures are more apparent to me than their historically vaunted affinities.

As the UK tumbles towards [the deadline](#), at the end of this month, when it is set to leave the European Union, now seems an apt moment to look at British art's standing on a global stage—and specifically how it fares in the US, a country with which Britain has long been said to enjoy a “special relationship”. America is, of course, undergoing parallel ruptures and implosions but it is, I am convinced, a starkly different cultural and social context.



One of the original YBAs, Sarah Lucas is now being reconsidered. Above, her work *Self-Portrait with Fried Eggs* (1996). Courtesy the artist; Sadie Coles HQ, London; and Gladstone Gallery, New York and Brussels

This summer Los Angeles was invited to grapple with the slang, puns and working-class vernacular of British artist Sarah Lucas in a survey at the Hammer Museum (“[Sarah Lucas: Au Nature!](#)”) had travelled from the [New Museum](#), New York. Lucas is an artist indelibly associated with that period in the 1990s when it felt like the entire world was clamoring for Britain’s cocky, swaggering brand of cultural exports.

Much of the work of the so-called [Young British Artists](#) now looks increasingly problematic, tied as it was to the political ascent of [Tony Blair](#)’s New Labour party, national pride that verged on jingoism and—despite its appropriation of popular culture—the increasing separation between the so-called metropolitan elites and the working class. The country is still contending with the fallout.

By contrast, a significant number of Britain’s leading millennial artists—including [Patrick Staff](#) (whose solo exhibition “[On](#)

*Venus*” opens at the Serpentine, London, on 8 November), [Ed Atkins](#) (whose solo exhibition opens at [Gavin Brown’s Enterprise](#), New York, on 15 November), [Hannah Black](#), [Danielle Dean](#) and [James Richards](#)—are now based outside of the country. Staff, who now lives in Los Angeles, suggests that their work and that of many of their peers “has a certain placelessness, a certain dislocation, that is the product of the interconnectedness of a post-internet generation”.

The right to work in the rest of the EU now enjoyed by British artists could be dramatically curtailed after 31 October if Britain leaves the bloc. It could also reduce the number of non-UK citizens working in London’s art institutions. Is British art about to become more parochial again, as a result? It is not easy securing a residency visa in the US either, but it is possible that this country will see an influx of British creatives as opportunities disappear in mainland Europe.

## What defines a British artist, anyway?



Lubaina Himid lived in England most of her life but maintains a global perspective. Here, a painting from “Lubaina Himid: Work from Underneath”. Exhibition view: New Museum, New York. Photo: Dario Lasagni

Partly as a consequence of its colonial past, multiculturalism has long been a prominent feature of British society. However, for a long time this diversity was not reflected within the mainstream contemporary art world, and only in recent years have many non-white artists started to be given their due.

[Lubaina Himid](#), who won the [2017 Turner Prize](#), is the subject of a [solo show](#) currently at the New Museum, New York. Born in the Sultanate of Zanzibar (now part of Tanzania) in 1954, Himid has lived in England for most of her life, but her work as an artist and curator has upheld a global perspective, celebrating the cultural contributions of the African diaspora while satirizing the British political system.

[Danielle Dean](#) was born in 1982 to an English mother and a Nigerian father in Huntsville, Alabama, but was raised mainly in Hemel Hempstead, just north of London. Though she has lived in California since 2010 she still identifies as a British artist. She insists, however, that her work is defined by its “globality, not just about being American or English”.



The English artist Nathaniel Mellors represented Germany in 2009 with Erkkka Nissinen. Above is a photo of their collaborative work, *The Aalto Natives (Floored version)* (2017) in "Bad Mantras" at The Box LA

London-based [Rosalind Nashashibi](#), who was nominated for the Turner Prize in 2017, is half-Northern Irish and half-Palestinian, though she grew up in England. She says that, like most artists, she is "not very loyal to nationalities, or to identifying with large groups". She has lived in Italy and had residencies in the US, and exhibits abroad more often than at home. "Most of my friends are not necessarily in the UK anymore. The way that an artist's life is, you meet people through very intense experiences that you have when you're working somewhere else."

National or international events such as the Turner Prize and the [Venice Biennale](#) have, over recent years, loosened their qualifying criteria: just as several non-British artists have been nominated for the Turner Prize, British artists have represented other countries in Venice. In 2017, the English-born, Los Angeles-based artist [Nathaniel Mellors](#) represented Finland, in a collaboration with [Erkkka Nissinen](#), just as [Liam Gillick](#), now based in New York, represented Germany in 2009.

## "Sod you gits"



In *Dream English Kid, 1964 - 1999 AD*, Mark Leckey reconstructed a motorway from his childhood. Courtesy of the artist © Mark Leckey

The US and the UK may share a common language, but when artists show work abroad that draws on specific cultural or linguistic references, subtleties of meaning can suffer. In Sarah Lucas's recent survey the cultural significance of kebabs, the *Sunday Sport* newspaper, snooker, Carling lager, fried eggs and the phrase "sod you gits" were left largely unexplained, although the title of the show, "Au naturel", was thought to require translation.

The exhibition's co-curator [Massimiliano Gioni](#) says that codification does not preclude access. He quotes Marcel Proust: "Beautiful books are always written in a sort of foreign language." He continues: "I think that's also ultimately the greatness of art—to be tacky and sentimental—that you have this experience both of recognition and distance."

Mellors belongs to a younger generation than Lucas. His narrative films, installations, sculptures, photographs and paintings are nevertheless also "underpinned by a class consciousness", as he puts it. His approach is Surrealist and often laugh-out-loud funny (it has been compared to *Monty Python*) but, he says, "the dynamics are always about class and power and ownership"—issues that are as relevant in the US as they are in Europe. "I think it's about extracting something that's universally relatable from the local," he says. "The work I think of as great art is, a lot of the time, on one level, incredibly local, and on another, totally transcendent."

In the past, Nashashibi has tended not to use verbal language in her 16mm films and paintings. "I am less an idea person than an experience person," she says. However, in her most recent two-part film, *Parts 1 and 2* (2018-9), which is included in the group show "[A Story Forms](#)" at Bel Ami, Los Angeles (until 23 November), translation and cultural difference is discussed by the British, Lithuanian and Italian protagonists—all friends of the artist.

She contrasts her approach with that of [Mark Leckey](#), whose work is dense with cultural references—particularly that of the youth culture of the northwest of England, where he grew up. Leckey, she notes, nevertheless "goes down well in America".

## Speaking American English



Martin Creed performing “Words and Music” at the Control Club, Bucharest, Romania in February 2019. “It’s funny that we speak—approximately—the same language,” he says of the US, “but in many ways it’s much more different than going to Europe, where they do actually speak different languages.” Photographer: Andrei Gindac

Artist and musician [Martin Creed](#) is currently in the middle of a solo concert tour of museums, art spaces and universities in the US. “It’s funny that we speak—approximately—the same language,” he says, “but in many ways it’s much more different than going to Europe, where they do actually speak different languages.”

Nashashibi says that she is often conscious of feeling “exoticized”, as a Brit in the US, just as, early in her career, she sometimes felt similarly as a Palestinian in the UK. On the other hand, in New York she met for the first time someone who shared her Northern Irish-Palestinian heritage. She says that while in the US she feels more freedom “to express myself and be who I am, and to meet likeminded people”, under the current administration she also feels less safe.

There is also no doubt that, while race is a major topic of cultural conversations in both the US and the UK, the contexts are distinctly different. Dean says that, although she is black, “there is no single black culture or subjectivity, even though there is a shared ongoing history of geopolitical violence that produces ‘blackness’. In my case, I am half-Nigerian.”

## **Where support comes from**



Few artists are so directly concerned with the British condition—with its imperial past and its multicultural present—as Hew Locke. Here, a work from “Hew Locke: Here’s the Thing” at Hales Gallery, London. © Hew Locke. Design and Artists Copyright Society (DACs), London / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York, 2019. Photo: E.G. Schempf

Few artists are so directly concerned with the British condition—with its imperial past and its multicultural present—as [Hew Locke](#). Statues of kings and queens, coats of arms, flotillas of naval warships and architectural Victoriana have all featured in the Scottish-Guyanese artist’s work. Which is why it is surprising, perhaps, that his exhibition “[Hew Locke: Here’s the Thing](#)” has travelled from the Ikon gallery in Birmingham, England, to Kansas City’s Kemper Museum of Contemporary Art (until 19 January 2020).

[Erin Dziedzic](#), the Kemper’s director of curatorial affairs, says that while some maps and other educational material had to be made available in the gallery, as with most contemporary art museums with a global focus, the Kemper’s audience is “very comfortable learning about people from different cultural backgrounds”.

The Kemper already owned two of Locke’s works when it planned the show, and Dziedzic had also seen his installation *For Those In Peril on the Sea* (2011) in the collection of the [Pérez Art Museum Miami](#), in 2018.

Many other of the artists I spoke to admitted to receiving more support from institutions in the US than from private collectors. The Art Institute of Chicago acquired Nashashibi’s film *Vivian’s Garden* (2017) after it was included in [Documenta 14](#) in 2017. Staff’s video *Weed Killer* (2017) was commissioned by [the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles](#), and was in the collection of MoMA in New York before it was also acquired this month by the [Frieze Tate Fund](#) for the British national collection.

Institutions have been slower to include more senior, previously overlooked British artists. MoMA, for example, owns nothing by Himid, [Claudette Johnson](#), [Donald Rodney](#) or [Sonia Boyce](#)—all artists associated in the 1980s with the [British Black Arts Movement](#)—and only one work each by [Rasheed Araeen](#) and [John Akomfrah](#).

## Escaping class systems



Patrick Staff's video *Weed Killer* (2017) was commissioned by the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, and was in the collection of MoMA in New York before it was also acquired this month by the Frieze Tate Fund for the British national collection. Courtesy of the artist and Commonwealth and Council, Los Angeles

Dean and Staff have both been inspired by the communities of protest and activism that they have found in the US. "I'm just trying to find connections to people around the world who are fighting for a better future," Dean says. Staff says that Los Angeles has a more robust queer and trans community than London. Both artists work with the [Commonwealth and Council](#) gallery in Los Angeles. Staff describes the gallery as "something that I could get in LA that I wasn't having access to in London, which is maybe a set of discourses, a set of ideals that are more actively engaged with a de-colonizing process or a decolonial desire".

Staff concedes that "British people are rather more interested with looking to the US than vice versa. In my experience, in the US there's a sense that British culture and history cultivates a sense of anxiety." That anxiety—related, in part, to the painful consequences of a now collapsed empire and an archaic class system—is likely only to increase in the wake of Brexit.

It was incredibly freeing, says Dean, to leave the British class system behind when she relocated to the US. "The American Dream is complete bullshit, and is an illusion," she says. "But what I like about that aspect of America is that it has a sense of possibility for everyone—there is still a sense of hope that anyone can make it big here."