

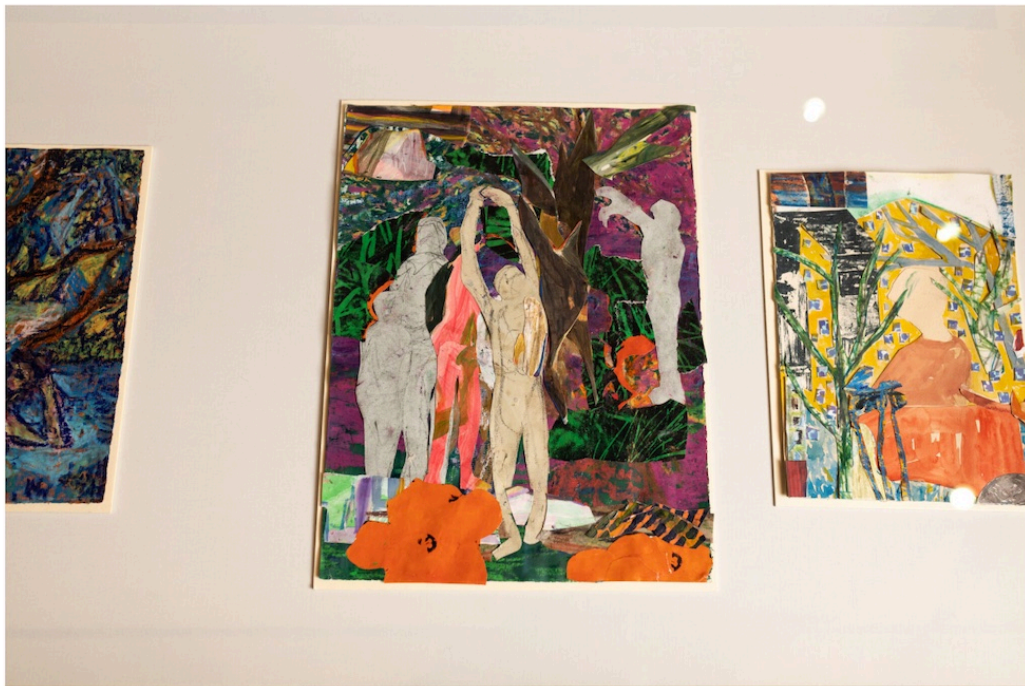
*Beth Holmes reviews two new shows at Liverpool's Walker Art Gallery: Under a Hot Sun – the first solo show by Kathryn Maple, winner of the 2020 John Moores Painting Prize – and New Works at the Walker, which showcases artworks the gallery has acquired over the last ten years. Beth spoke to Jessie Petheram, Assistant Curator of Fine Art at National Museums Liverpool, about demystifying the gallery's acquisition process and how institutions can support contemporary artists.*

Kathryn Maple spent 2022 making daily drawings of landscapes while on walks in her South London neighbourhood. Upon returning to her studio, she would reimagine these encounters, collaging them and compiling new connections within the spaces she visited. The resulting drawings, oil paintings and mixed-media pieces comprise her first solo show, *Under a Hot Sun*. The works – several over two metres tall that tower over the viewer – revolve around extreme environmental changes and investigate human figures and their relationship between urban and rural spaces.

When I meet Maple at the Walker's press view, she is open, approachable and thrilled to be showing her recently finished paintings. Studio and sketchbook drawings illuminate her process, and an accompanying book features the 365 drawings made over 2022 that informed the works in *Under a Hot Sun*. The show is a result of Maple winning the John Moores Painting Prize, which saw her join the company of important British artists such as Peter Doig, Rose Wylie and David Hockney. The Walker acquires the winning painting of every iteration of the John Moores Prize – part of the reason why the gallery has such a renowned collection of contemporary and twentieth-century art. As such, Maple's prize-winning painting, the two-metre square 'The Common' (2020), now appears on permanent display at the Walker.

Mark-making is at the heart of Maple's practice: exacting shapes and lines contrast with areas which have been lightly worked. Her colour palette is vivid – forest greens, rich indigos and deep magentas. A foliage motif lends an ethereal and mysterious atmosphere to her dense compositions, but recognisable references such as the swoosh of a Nike logo on a pair of trainers, and a yellow Nivea crest on a bottle of sun cream, set the works firmly in the contemporary moment.

Maple is a covert observer of transitional spaces within cities – the places where pathways, people and nature intermingle. She describes the paintings on display as being 'inhabited by figures that synchronise with nature's deep rhythms', and these figures and their surroundings appear to blend into one another, nodding to their reciprocal relationship. In 'Arms Wide Open' (2022) she distorts scale – an elongated figure is the same height as the tree rooted next to it, suggesting shared characteristics between the human and the botanical world. 'Long Grass' (2022), on the other hand, is playful and tactile. Influenced by Van Gogh's ink drawings, Maple uses thick layers of paint, emphatic gestures and clear lines.



Installation view of *Under a Hot Sun* by Kathryn Maple at Walker Art Gallery Liverpool. Image by Robin Clewley.

While Maple depicts areas of sought-after tranquillity in cities, such as parks and graveyards, she is also keenly aware of the sociality of humans. Her use of collage in 'The Late Bus' (2022) nods to the multiplicity of crowds and moments of connection shared by strangers. I left the show feeling encouraged by the idiosyncrasies of humans and nature and reminded of the dual qualities of living in cities – the promise of crowds and chance encounters in contrast to loneliness, which can then swing to claustrophobia. The link to climate change mentioned in the press release, however, seemed tenuous, and I struggled to see evidence of this in the works themselves.



In an adjoining room is *New Works at the Walker*, a corresponding display. Together, the shows demonstrate 'two strands of an ongoing commitment to contemporary collecting and supporting newer artists', according to Jessie Petheram, Assistant Curator of Fine Art at National Museums Liverpool. The most striking thing about this display of new works is its breadth. Elegant, delicate examples of decorative art by local crafters include 'Magic Mushrooms' (2022) by north Wales-based glass artist Verity Pulford, for which the artist used the 'pâte-de-verre' technique of firing glass grains in the kiln to make a flat shape, and 'Beech Leaf caddy spoon' (2022), an enamel-on-silver spoon with a veined leaf by Ruth Ball, who is based in Southport. To the left is a dramatic glazed stoneware vase made in 2022 by Attila Olah, who started Altar Pottery in Toxteth in 2018. These items were made through a bequest by the family of Peter Urquhart with the support of the Bluecoat Display Centre, where Urquhart was the Chairman from 2001–18, and demonstrate the work of contemporary crafters.

These decorative art pieces are displayed alongside a bright, labyrinthine series of paintings and drawings from John Walter's series, *Alien Sex Club* (2015), in which the British artist examines changing attitudes to HIV. Meanwhile, a corner of photographs by Zanele Muholi, Catherine Opie and Wolfgang Tillmans explores conventions of beauty, LGBTQI+ subcultures and activism. Muholi stands tall in their self-portraits 'Miss Lesbian VII (Amsterdam)' and 'Miss Lesbian I (Amsterdam)' (both 2009) – celebrating their tattoos and the hairs visible on their legs and bikini line. In 'The Gang' (1990), a black-and-white photo of her friends in male drag, Opie captures a moment of closeness amid the AIDS crisis. Tillmans' portrait 'Cameron' (2007) highlights the economic precarity that artists face – Cameron, surrounded by vegetables on his market stall, looks almost caught-off guard, his quizzical gaze meeting the viewer.

Petheram explains the process behind choosing which works to show. The curators drew from a list of seventy artworks that the gallery had acquired in the last ten years. They prioritised works that had not yet been exhibited – in some cases, five or six years had passed since their acquisition:

'We don't have much space in the galleries where you can rotate smaller displays quickly. We also work far in advance, so we may have overlooked prioritising contemporary works for a few years. And we decided it was time to have that look back... There's no point in us acquiring things if we're not going to display them.'



'Alien Sex Club' (2015) by John Walter and 'Reinvesting The Wheel' (2015-2016) by Tony Carter on display at Walker Art Gallery Liverpool. Image by Robin Clewley.

Works that sit well together were another organising principle. The photographs mentioned previously found one natural grouping, and painterly works another, including 'I Don't Know the Name of this Flower' (1968), a gentle depiction of a flower by Winifred Nicholson, 'The Propellers' (1953), a dockyard scene by Harry Hoodless, and 'Hotel Pindaros, Greece' (1981), a gestural study of the human form by Dom McKinley.

The Walker has recently been trying to acquire more video work and installation art, and showing newly acquired works in these mediums was another driver in putting the show together. Videos by Sadé Mica and Evan Ifekoya are highlights, both acquired in the last four years. Mica's 'Ulpha', 'Moston' and 'Southport' (2019–20), which are looped and amount to just over three-and-a-half minutes in total, are powerful. The artist's body bends against a backdrop of countryside landscapes in what they describe as a political act: 'You don't see black, fat, queer bodies in the countryside.' Ifekoya's video 'Ojulowo' (2014) combines the visual tropes of pop music videos with a DIY aesthetic and sound. 'Ojulowo' is a Yoruba phrase meaning 'authentic' – here, Ifekoya playfully explores societal expectations of Black people.

While acquiring historic art remains necessary, focusing on contemporary art in this display (the works range from 1958–2022, and the majority were created after 2010) shows that the Walker’s collection is growing in a way that reflects the present. It also shows how acquiring work by contemporary artists from marginalised backgrounds is an active decision. The drives behind collecting have changed considerably over the gallery’s history – where pieces by artists of marginalised identities had systemically been overlooked, work is now being undertaken to address these oversights. Therefore the interpretation panels consider how, why and what the Walker collects. According to Petheram, the ‘why’ is most significant: addressing the gaps in work made by LGBTQI+ artists, Black artists and artists living with disabilities. While the Walker is not unique in these oversights, it is keen to demonstrate that it is undertaking work to address them.

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Nonetheless, in both the cultural industries and the wider art world, there has been a proliferation of empty words around decolonising museums and queering collections, particularly in the wake of 2020’s Black Lives Matter protests. Can exhibitions such as *New Works at the Walker* play a part in moving away from vague promises? Petheram believes that acquiring and collecting is an essential part of concrete action:

‘At the Walker there’s been a decent history of LGBTQI+ art – for example the *Coming Out* exhibition in 2017. But that was temporary, whereas this shows permanent additions. These artworks are in the collection along with works people know the Walker for, such as the Pre-Raphaelites. We’re putting our money where our mouth is – literally sometimes – when we’re buying work to add to the collection, to show we rate it as important as historical works.’

She adds that it is crucial to be transparent, even if it invites criticism, because institutions must be able to criticise themselves. ‘This is a step towards that. There are a lot of empty words, and I hope these aren’t empty words, because what’s on the walls does speak for itself.’





'Miss Lesbian VII' (2009) by Zanele Muholi on display at the Walker Art Gallery Liverpool. Image by Robin Clewley.

More generally, *New Works at the Walker* attempts to demystify the gallery's acquisition process. 'A lot of what happens in galleries is hidden', says Petheram. 'But the collection doesn't just appear. There is a process to how and why things get into the gallery. We want to show that we are actively collecting.' This active process is driven by varied voices. 'These decisions are made by curators and conservators talking together. We all have biases and interests, but as a rule, we look out for work and have an idea of what we want to collect. And that is driven by the Collecting Policy.'

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The Walker reviews its policy every four or five years; if works come up for purchase or auction that fit the areas addressed, the team undertakes research to justify why they should come into the collection. 'Much of the process is to do with relationships and figuring out whether something meets the needs of the collection and our audiences, trying to listen to what they think and where there are gaps that need filling. It is never one person deciding.'

Priorities can change, and the gallery might remove things from the policy after making a fitting acquisition, whereas other areas will stay if they remain unfulfilled. Budget cuts could mean they no longer have the resource for something they had hoped to acquire, and the availability of space is an ever-present consideration too. Petheram gives an example: ‘if the policy said, “We will try and acquire a Holman Hunt painting, and we will improve our holdings of Black British women artists” and we didn’t have the money for both, I believe our priority would be towards the Black British women artists because Holman Hunt is well-represented.’

Direct community input into acquisition-making is not part of the process, but it is something ‘interesting and positive’ that Petheram ‘would love to see in the future’. The Walker had input from LGBTQI+ groups as part of the aforementioned *Coming Out* exhibition, and the Sandbach Research and Display Project – a steering group of seven local young people from marginalised communities – has been reinterpreting the Walker’s sculpture gallery in relation to Liverpool’s colonial history, particularly the Sandbach family’s links to both slavery and art collection. But whether the gallery would incorporate such collaboration in their collecting process remains an open question. ‘That would be great’, Petheram says. ‘The appetite is there, and generally galleries are heading that way.’ She notes that the Walker held a similar exhibition to *New Works at the Walker* about ten years ago, and they are now considering showing new acquisitions each decade. But in the face of substantial government cuts to the arts, they will have to wait and see. Nonetheless, she remains hopeful: ‘we are an actively collecting institution, and we want to continue.’

While I was able to dig into the process with a curator, the ‘why’, ‘what’ and ‘how’ of acquiring might still be hazy for the general visitor – with only three short interpretation panels explaining what is a complicated, layered process. Yet, the show does feel like a small step in the right direction, and there is an array of work from a diverse range of artists. In a context where empty words around decolonising and queering collections proliferate, and access to capital fuels the success of many new artists, it is promising to witness a pledge to more open processes and concrete support of contemporary artists. One example is the temporary solo show, such as Maple’s, which is beneficial to both the artist and the gallery. But galleries must also acquire works by historically marginalised artists for their permanent collections and commit to displaying them – and work towards incorporating direct community-based methods of acquisition to ensure further voices are heard.

Under a Hot Sun and *New Works at the Walker*, Walker Art Gallery, 11 February – 30 April 2023.

*Beth Holmes is a writer and editor from Merseyside.*

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