



Yan Pei-Ming,
Wanted in London,
2025, oil on canvas,
59 × 86 3/4".

entrance and smallest in a sequence of progressively larger paintings, it established both a physical and conceptual point of departure for what could appear to be a search. But the subsequent paintings, each based on an image of Bacon at a different stage of his life, taken from a different angle, and installed without chronological order, troubled the idea of a linear reading. Together, the ten paintings multiplying Bacon's image appeared like shadows, not just tonally, but in their flickering instability. His appearance and expression shifted from canvas to canvas, at times confronting the viewer with a direct stare, at others averting his gaze; his head turned, tilted, lifted; his lips parted or sealed. But in all of the paintings he looks haunted, as if caught between presence and retreat, the ghostly effect of each image only amplified by repetition.

In the exhibition's final work, its largest, which has a horizontal format, Freud enters the frame as a subject alongside Bacon. This painting was drawn from an iconic photograph of the two men standing side by side on a rainy London street. Yet each man, hands in pockets, also seems enclosed within his own world. Though it presented itself as a culmination, the painting offered no closure, only a refusal of what the exhibition's structure around pursuit might have seemed to promise: possession, likeness, resolution. But in bringing Bacon and Freud into the same frame, the work also gestured toward friendship and place despite emotional distance.

Yan does not restore the missing portrait any more than he offers a straightforward representation or fills the void between the two men. Instead, by circling the missing portrait, he evokes a sense of longing and reminds us how emptiness invites projection: What we have lost grows larger in its absence. The image of Bacon functioned here as much more than a nod to the exhibition's local London context. Bacon, whose work is often read through his own struggle with loss and desire, is not a subject but a cipher: a way for Yan to explore that which is always out of reach.

By staging this drama of absence and desire under the title "Wanted," Yan could be seen to reflect more broadly on the cultural logic of possession and individualism. Evoking pursuit and the lone figures of hero and outlaw, the title encapsulates the drive to own, to fix, to immortalize an image, a person, or a past. Rather than follow this impulse, Yan offers a more contemplative model, not of possession, but of proximity

and relation. His art does not seek to capture what is unattainable, but to attend to what persists.

—Elisa Schaar

BRISTOL, ENGLAND

Donald Locke Spike Island

A more resonant show could have emerged from "Resistant Forms," Spike Island's survey of Donald Locke's work. That version of "Resistant Forms" might have begun with a piece that seemed marginalized by its placement here: the sculpture *Pomona Blue*, 1985–86, a headless and armless figure evocative of Sarah Baartman. Baartman (ca. 1789–1815), dubbed the Hottentot Venus, was exhibited in nineteenth-century Europe as a curiosity until her posthumous return to South Africa in 2002. Technically, the brilliance of *Pomona Blue*'s rounded form is undeniable. Locke's virtuosity is clear in the figure's generous yet substantial anatomy, the form's coherence and polished surface. It is a profound act of reclamation by Locke (1930–2010), a Guyanese artist who worked in Britain and the United States. He created a new lineage for her beyond transatlantic slavery, addressing Greco-Roman sculpture and ancient archetypes. What if this sculpture had instead been the show's centerpiece, its centrifugal force with energy spiraling outward?

View of "Donald
Locke: Resistant
Forms," 2025.
Photo: Rob Harris.



As it was, Locke's technical mastery was evident throughout the show. Following its debut in Bristol, it is on view at the Ikon Gallery, Birmingham, through February 2026 and will later be staged at Camden Art Centre, London. The curators, led by Robert Leckie, presented more than eighty works spanning five decades and ranging from ceramics and black paintings to large-scale mixed-media compositions incorporating found photographs. Locke's early ceramics are particularly impressive. His "twin forms and biomorphic structures" from the 1960s through the '80s demonstrate exceptional technical command: significant hand-building skills to achieve contours and smooth transitions, precise moisture control and firing expertise to manage scale and avoid shrinkage, and knowledge of ceramic chemistry to render his signature jet-black color. The works were clinically displayed on white

pedestals, their geometric shapes striking a simple asymmetry with the rounded, dark curvatures of the ceramics. They share this arrangement with *Trophies of Empire*, 1972–74, a cabinet of cylinders—some slender, some stout—reminiscent of bullets and organic, plantlike forms. The shed blood and cost of Western expansionism are critiqued through the deceptive aesthetic pleasures afforded by the works' curves, smoothness, and asymmetrical cross sections in dark shades of beige, black, and rust brown.

Physically, the exhibition's centerpiece was Locke's *Celebration of the 24th of May*, 1990, a mixed-media work incorporating glass, paint, metal, wood, and black-and-white images of people and of *Pomona Blue*. The collaged Baartman-esque image conjures Greco-Roman as well as Egyptian sculpture. Juxtaposed photographic fragments show how similar presentations of the female body can be simultaneously coded as fashionable, inappropriate, traditional or primitive, depending on cultural context and the viewer's assumptions about respectability, yet it is the *Pomona Blue* figure that continues to preside over and illuminate this interplay. The curators' apparent reluctance to engage with the work's centrality recalls Édouard Glissant's concept of opacity: "not enclosure within an impenetrable autarchy but subsistence within an irreducible singularity." In *Pomona Blue*, by reconstituting classical and colonial references, Locke resisted reduction to a single narrative. The press release states that, above all, Locke wanted to "give form and visibility to the unique and hybrid contributions of Black culture to modernity." Displaying such a key work in a peripheral gallery space was a misstep that contradicted the artist's core ambition. "I am an artist," Locke stated in 1989, "and I want my work to have maximum artistic force." The Baartman-esque figure isn't addressed sufficiently in the show, and the questions it raises about reclamation, representation, history, and artistic obsession are vital to understanding the depth of Locke's resistant forms.

—Sabo Kpade

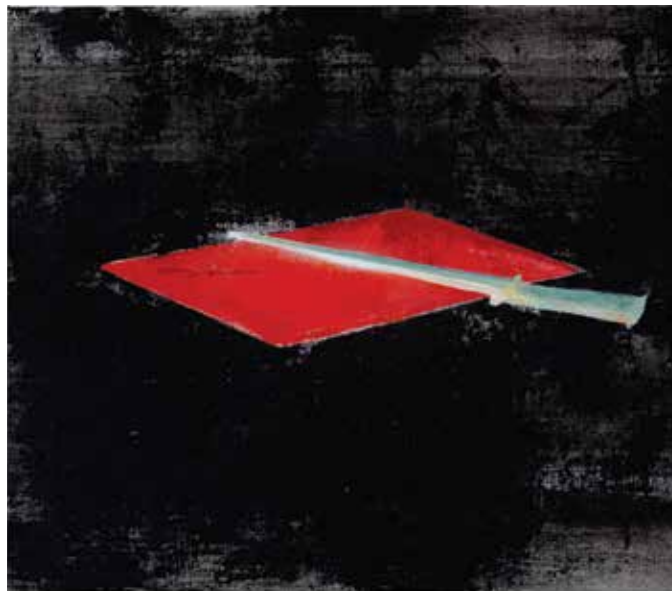
DUBLIN

Mohammed Sami

The Douglas Hyde Gallery

Mohammed Sami's paintings have solemn wall power. Each piece holds its space in the gallery, an assured stand-alone presence, but also puts up a wall of its own, giving little away. Several of the eight paintings presented in his exhibition "To Whom It May Concern" seemed designed to shut us out. Despite its title, the nearly ten-foot-tall *Law Books*, 2023, resembles a towering brick barrier that appears to be crumbling or not yet complete. It represents a hard, flat dead end, even if modulations in the pale-orange to clay-red palette soften and nuance the matter-of-fact tessellations, like rays of evening sun striking a backyard wall. Sami's subject is nonetheless another type of bulwark: His bricks are tightly packed legal tomes, volume upon volume of principles and procedures, regulations and rights. The law is envisioned, for good or bad, as a boundary, a solid defense, or a formidable impediment. Which side of the divide we're on seems immaterial, but in painting these books, this wall, Sami emphasizes obscurity and obstruction, a barrier to seeing or understanding.

This focus on concealment was recurrent in the show. (Even the formal salutation of the title signals a presumed lack of revelation, an appeal to anonymous officialdom, with little expectation of reply.) Sami's background may inform the work's guarded outlook. As a promising young artist in Baghdad in the 1990s, he was recruited by Ba'ath Party propagandists to paint public portraits of Saddam Hussein,



Mohammed Sami,
Royal Mail, 2024,
acrylic on linen,
21 7/8 × 25 3/4".

developing his talent while compelled to serve the Iraqi despot's demand for cultural omnipresence. Sami left the country in the convulsive aftermath of the US-led intervention in 2003. No wonder, then, that during his subsequent artistic training—in Belfast and London—resistance to didactic messaging emerged as an implicit code. Memories of life in Iraq remain foundational to Sami's art. But with each measured allusion to Saddam-era tyranny or regime-change turmoil, we detect an anxious impulse to withhold, mask, or deflect.

Some of the paintings dwell on imagery indicative of arrested communication. *Aborted Calls*, 2024—about half the size of *Law Books*—spotlights a disorderly bundle of small, slim, bloodred rectangles in the foreground of a gloomy shuttered room: a mysterious stockpile of cell phones, discarded, seized, or otherwise out of commission. In the smaller acrylic *Royal Mail*, 2024—closely color-matched to the stark black-red, night-vision tones of *Aborted Calls*—a sleek letter opener rests on an unopened envelope. The painting is an austere still life, but, as with Chekhov's proverbial gun, the desktop blade appears charged with dramatic consequence or violent potential. Here, of course, the scene stays in permanent suspension: the knife unused, the content of the letter undisclosed. (Notably, for the Douglas Hyde's touchstone program in which its featured artists are also invited to present a work by someone else, Sami chose Bas Jan Ader's *I'm Too Sad to Tell You*, 1971, a filmed self-portrait showing an unexplained moment of tearful sorrow.)

One effect of this concentration on inaccessible information is heightened attention to surface. Conscious that these taciturn compositions keep much of the artist's remembered world suppressed, we seek clues to history or autobiography in the spare, enigmatic content. But we also look for clues in the variegated facture of each canvas, attributing semantic significance to understated variations in texture and technique. The apparently abstract expanse of *Permanent Night*, 2023, shows, in fact, a chipboard-covered window, with Sami's painstaking brushwork intricately mimicking the crisscrossed substance of the protective panel. Softer passages of glimpsed yellow and adjacent bronze, faintly inscribed with fragments of Sumerian script, glow between blunt, defensive, brown-black planes, hinting, perhaps, at hidden light betokening human presence behind the barricading facade. Even so, Sami remains disinclined to show and tell—committed to a painting style that is technically adept but temperamentally indrawn, forever held at the impassable border between his world and ours.

—Declan Long