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There's No Such Thing as British Art, Richard Johns

# There's No Such Thing as British Art

Richard Johns



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Introduction by

**Richard Johns**, Senior Lecturer in History of Art at the University of York

**“The paradox of British art becomes apparent every time a work of art, or collection of works, is made, looked upon, or labelled as such.”**

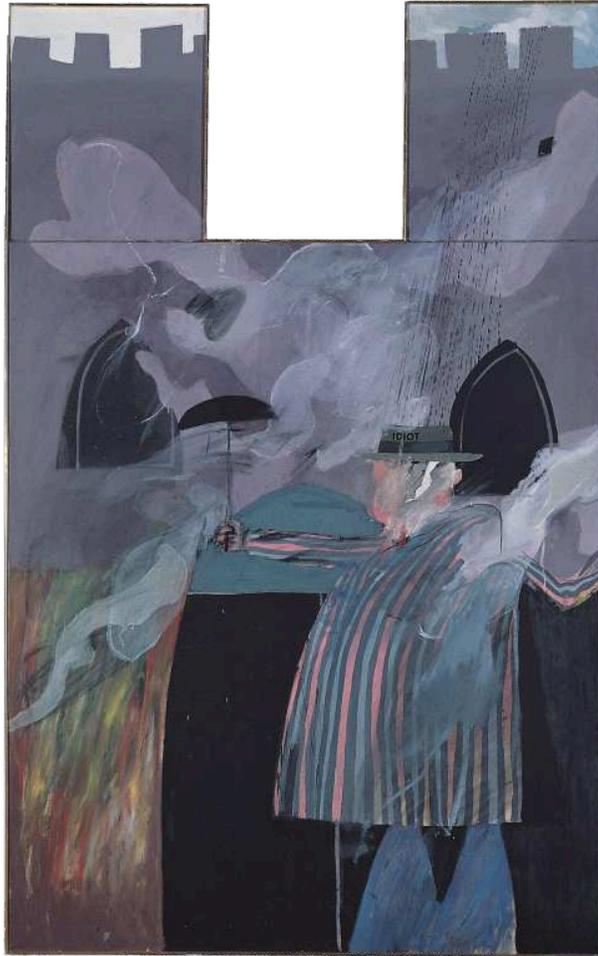
For the six million and more annual visitors to the National Gallery in London, Britain’s most popular museum of historical painting, “British art” is represented by a selection of work by just ten artists—mostly English, all white men, and all born within eighty years of one another. Is it any wonder that British art can sometimes seem like an exclusive club with prohibitive requirements for entry?

The immaculate, beautifully conserved array of painting from Hogarth to Turner in the Sackler and adjacent rooms is a consequence of a legal separation, decreed by the National Gallery and Tate Gallery Act 1954. It comprises a few select paintings which, for the most part, were judged worthy of inclusion alongside the prevailing canon of Western European art, while the majority of the national collection of British painting became the charge of the newly independent Tate. British art at the National Gallery is thus a wholly modern, establishment vision of a presumed Golden Age: a paragon of nineteenth-century taste, distilled by twentieth-century cultural policy and inflected by twenty-first-century curatorial practice. The handful of subsequent acquisitions—Mr and Mrs Andrews by Thomas Gainsborough in 1960, Whistlejacket by George Stubbs in 1997 (fig. 1)—only reconfirm the exclusionary nature of the canon of British art.

The same postwar decade that shaped the presence of British art in Trafalgar Square also witnessed the broadcast in 1955 and subsequent publication of Nikolaus Pevsner’s affectionate reflections on the Englishness of English Art. Around the same time, a new generation of artists emerged whose work disturbed the sentimentality of what Pevsner famously termed the “geography of art”. David Hockney’s painting Man Stood in Front of his House with Rain Descending (1962; fig. 2), also known as The Idiot, does this by presenting a catalogue of clichés of Britishness: its architecture, dress codes, habits. In its content, its painterly figuration, in the droll textual framing of its title, and even its size—it occupies the same wall space as a full-length portrait by Joshua Reynolds or Gainsborough—it is at once quintessentially, undeniably British (or should that be English?) *and* contemptuous of the patriarchal confines of its own, rain-soaked national mythology.



**Figure 1.**  
George Stubbs, *Whistlejacket*, 1762, Oil on canvas, 292 × 246.4 cm,  
National Gallery London Digital image courtesy of National Gallery,  
London (CC BY-NC-ND 4.0)



**Figure 2.**

David Hockney, *Man stood in front of his house with rain descending (The Idiot)*, 1962, oil on canvas, 243 × 152.5 cm. S.M.A.K., Belgium Digital image courtesy of S.M.A.K.

*The Idiot* was completed a few months before Hockney quit the British Isles for the sun and swimming pools of California. By the end of the decade the painting itself had been relocated abroad, and is now one of the highlights of a major international collection of modern and contemporary art at the Stedelijk Museum voor Actuele Kunst in Ghent. Within this richly mobile context, the Britishness of Hockney's painting has been magnified, and refracted, for a largely non-British audience: it is at once compelling and absurd.

The paradox of British art that plays out so explicitly in Hockney's work of the early sixties (and in different ways on the walls of the National Gallery) becomes apparent every time a work of art, or collection of works, is made, looked upon, or labelled as such. Consider, for example, the gilt-edged

collection of British art endowed to Yale University by [Paul Mellon](#); or the globally dispersed holdings of the UK [Government Art Collection](#); or the more recent integration of British painting as a permanent feature at the Louvre. Each one is a construction of British art shaped over time by private interest and public ambition; each, in its own way, revealing of the illusive character of British art.

We continue to think about, and assign value to, art in national categories for many good reasons, but how do such labels enable or interfere with an understanding of the mobility of art, artists, and ideas over time; with established notions of chronology, style and influence; or with critical issues of race, class, and gender that have done so much to enliven modern academic and curatorial practice? Is there still any purpose in identifying works of art made in (or of, or on behalf of) the British Isles as “British” first and foremost?

On the one hand, it might seem necessary, natural even, to acknowledge the physical and political geographies in which works of art become meaningful, and to explore the patterns that emerge over time as a result of institutional, linguistic, and other cultural localities. On the other, to invoke a “British School” can seem antiquated and inward looking—of little value other than as a sale room shorthand for placing works of uncertain authorship. We must also question whether such a concept is capable of registering the constitutive role of the visual arts in Britain’s long imperial history (including the tumultuous politics of regional and national identity within the British Isles).

In short, if we are to continue to associate with, argue over, and invest in this most basic of taxonomies, it seems appropriate every so often to reflect upon the multiple challenges that the category of “British art” raises by imagining, if only for a moment, that there may be no such thing at all.

The diverse responses to that proposition, published here, emerged from a symposium held under the aegis of the British Art Research School at the University of York on 22 May 2014. That event coincided with a European parliamentary election that was characterized by a significant rise in the influence and profile of nationalist parties across the European Union, as well as by a growing critique of the EU’s supranational programme from the political left. It was also a time when media attention began to turn in earnest towards the then forthcoming referendum on Scottish independence, during which the politics of Britishness was subject to different (and ongoing) kinds of pressure.

These contemporary reminders of the fractured and contested complexion of Britishness were rarely far from view as those gathered in York collectively put British art to the test, calling on works of art and makers from the most

recent to the very distant past. In preparation for that event, there was no call for papers, no abstracts submitted, no individual titles put forward—just one proposition, or provocation, to which each participant was invited to reply in whichever way they saw fit. The concise responses that resulted, and the wide-ranging discussion that ensued, have provided the inspiration for this, the inaugural “Conversation Piece” of *British Art Studies*.

In the same spirit of experiment, and play, the interventions that appear on these pages will contribute to a broader and ongoing exchange involving the readers of the journal. The first three responses—from Liz Pettejohn, John Munns, and Richard Wentworth—have been published with the launch of the first issue of *BAS*. They will be followed over the coming weeks by three further “waves”, each foregrounding the ideas of other artists, art historians, and curators. Throughout this time, the journal’s comment page will remain open, for all those with an interest in British art (past, present, or future) to join the debate. The aim is to take on a big issue with a light touch, without agenda, and it is a conversation to which every reader is warmly invited to contribute.

Response by

**Elizabeth Prettejohn**, Professor, History of Art, University of York

**“We need to look much more seriously at a far wider range of works whose value is genuinely uncertain.”**

There certainly was no such thing as British art at Harvard University when I was an undergraduate there in the early 1980s, despite the fact that the Fogg Museum has one of the finest collections of British art in the United States. British pictures were confined to the back stairs, or propped on blocks in the corridor. We occasionally bumped into them with our book bags, but they did not feature in the teaching programme.

More strangely, there was no such thing as British art at the Courtauld Institute in London, either, when I arrived there as an MA student in 1985. There was some study of British architecture, but not painting or sculpture. I'm not sure there's any parallel for this: we would think it bizarre not to find the study of French art thriving in a leading French art-historical institution, ditto for Italian, or Dutch, Russian, Hungarian, or Chinese.

That was thirty years ago, and a lot has changed. However, after a period of zeal in the 1990s, I do wonder whether we have backtracked in confidence about the value of studying British art. As an expression of British national identity, or Britain's imperial project, British art remains a perfectly respectable field of historical enquiry, but such emphases have allowed us to evade potentially uncomfortable questions about aesthetic value: or, to put it bluntly, to ask whether British art is any *good*.

And yet, more or less secretly, even guiltily, people actually love British art as *art*—as something wonderful to look at and think about in complex ways. For the millions who consume British art (in galleries or virtually) around the world, that love is relatively uncomplicated. But it produces a distinctly odd result in much scholarship, where the note of moral disapproval about the nationalistic or imperialistic character, on the “British” side, assorts strangely with the claims made on the “art” side. In the US context, I'd conjecture, the “British” side doesn't seem very important, and the “art” side remains unproven, or positively problematical; and that may be true in the global context too.

Consider, for example, the recent work by the Korean artist [Bae Joonsung](#), which features paintings by John William Waterhouse and Lawrence Alma-Tadema in a complex composition involving lenticular technology. Should we

be pleased that British nineteenth-century art is so conspicuous in the international contemporary art world; or should we worry about whether its role in this context is to represent “kitsch”?

I think we still need to tackle the “art” side—then we can get beyond the stock examples and the knee-jerk connotations they invoke. We need to look much more seriously at a far wider range of works whose value is genuinely uncertain. Forget they are “British”, for the moment, and ask whether they’re worth looking at as “art”—and by that I don’t mean mere visual delight (though I am much in favour of visual delight), I mean do they make us think more creatively, and look more intelligently?

The argument is best made visually, with a selection of paintings from the period I study ([figs. 3-9](#))—works that so far have evaded serious scholarly attention, and which remain on the “back stairs” of art history.



**Figure 3.**

Marianne Stokes, *St Elizabeth of Hungary Spinning for the Poor*, 1895, oil on canvas, 96.5 × 61 cm, Private Collection Digital image courtesy of Private Collection via Wikimedia Commons, photograph belonging to and uploaded to the public domain by Rlbberlin on 18th November 2006



**Figure 4.**

Robert Bateman, *The Pool of Bethesda*, 1877, oil on canvas, 50.8 × 73.7 cm, Yale Center for British Art Digital image courtesy of Yale Center for British Art, Paul Mellon Collection





**Figure 6.**

Rosa Brett, *The Hay Loft*, 1858, oil on canvas, 26.5 × 34.7 cm, Private Collection Digital image courtesy of The Athenaeum



**Figure 7.**  
Kate Elizabeth Bunce, *The Keepsake*,  
1898-1901, Tempura on canvas, 495 × 813 mm,  
Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery Digital  
image courtesy of Birmingham Museums Trust

Response by

**Richard Wentworth**, Artist

**“I think the weather test, or rather the fall of light, is mightily powerful, pretty much political.”**

It’s hard to see art and not know its provenance. There’s probably a short, sanctified period in childhood when one might encounter things which don’t fit into tidy cultural categories and, slowly learning that they might be art, not exactly locate them.

For a twentieth-century child growing up in southern England and speaking English as their first language, it won’t have taken me long to have understood that there were other adjacencies—the Welsh, the Scots, the Irish, and the French. At a time when cars were distinct objects and carried “nationhood” about their form it was common practice, as much as collecting stamps, to notice differences and describe different origins. The French built cars, as did the Swedish, the Germans, the Italians, even the Dutch and the Spanish, but not the Irish. The time it took for those identities to dissolve into a general world of Japanese and American components assembled into assorted amalgams runs parallel to my most focused questioning of cultural identity.

Anybody who travels notices different dispositions, usually climatically driven though often architecturally described. Nobody is going to confuse walking down a street in Havana with a stroll in Hove.

If you know even a little bit about the European story in relation to the historic East and the new West you already have a lot to consider. It seems impossible to live in these islands without understanding religious histories and orthodoxies, the monarchy, and the overall sense of a mercantile middle class peaking and troughing. It would also be hard not to have internalized that it is not a federated structure, even though there are powerful national distinctions harboured within the ugly umbrella of “UK” (a relatively recent device to evade saying Britain or Great Britain).

The impulse towards art making seems to have numerous sources, and in Britain something to do with trades and crafts never seems very far away. There is always a strong sense, rather like much of our food and material well-being, that things and ideas are being imported and adapted and sometimes re-exported. The Mississippi/Liverpool connection, say, fuelled pop music in much the same way as the railways encouraged the entente cordiale.

The multiple forms of cultural expression from film to television, clothing to music, games to cuisine, wrapping around codes of sexuality, marriage, and death, are beyond elaborate.



**Figure 8.**

Richard Wentworth, *Look Both Ways*, Digital image courtesy of Richard Wentworth

It's rare for me to see artistic activity and not nominate its bloodline. I think it's part of my critical apparatus and I often ascribe passport as well as gender. I'm not always right. I think of the greater part of British art production as being in a conversation with Europe as much as its implication in the transatlantic drift, largely fudged by the pity that few British people speak more than their own language. I'm not being judgmental, but I am suggesting that there are long lines of interest and engagement in any work of art. It's true that there is something that can be mistaken for anti-intellectualism in British art which is often extruded through the aperture marked humorous, or baulked up with a sometimes visible philosophical force field.

There are questions of scale which come directly from perceptions of landscape and the politics of space—a row of brownstones never feels in any way like a British street. Everybody knows that the sea can never be more than seventy miles away and an island mentality is a distinct condition. Ours comes with eight weather systems and the possibility of four types of weather in a single day. There is never consistent strong sun so there are never black shadows, so Goya wasn't going to live here. I think the weather test, or rather the fall of light, is mightily powerful, pretty much political.

As a metropolitan, it's probably Walter Sickert who I think best represents the conundrum of British art. A bit German, partial to the French, knocking around in North London with a graphical awareness, a big appetite, and a

strong sense for “a bit of rough”. I think any examination of the music hall would take you on a line out through the history of television, pop music, and British art.

Response by

**John Munns**, University of Cambridge

**“In the majority of ways in which the term might be understood more recently, ‘British art’ makes no sense in the high medieval context.”**

In the High Middle Ages not only was there no such thing as British art, there was no such thing as “British” and no such thing as “art”, at least not in the senses in which they might be used today. It’s not that “British” and “art” mean nothing in the medieval context, but they don’t mean the same as they do in the modern world.

Having said that, some of the problems with regard to “British” (if not to “art”) are surprisingly similar. Take, for example, Peter Paul Rubens’s ceiling in the Banqueting House at Whitehall. The central canvas depicts *The Apotheosis of King James I*, one of Rubens’s sketches for which lives at Tate Britain. The [blurb](#) that accompanied an exhibition of that sketch in 2008–9 describes it as “a unique treasure in the history of British art.” The Tate, reasonably and matter-of-factly, states it to be a work of British art. In fairness, the sketch probably was produced in Britain, but the finished painting was not. The *Apotheosis* may be British in some senses (commissioned by a British patron, for a British destination, and with a peculiarly British subject matter), but it also is the work of a Flemish artist, painted in Flanders, in a Flemish Baroque style.

Rubens’s friend Anthony van Dyck was also from the Low Countries, but surely nobody would exclude his portraits of Charles I from the canon of British art? Unlike Rubens, Van Dyck moved to Britain, lived here, and died here. His portraits of King Charles were made here. Whilst here, his style developed into something that would lead to a long and rather distinctive tradition of British portraiture.

In 1984 there was an exhibition at the Hayward Gallery entitled *English Romanesque Art*. “English”, in this case, not “British”, but never mind, for the sake of the argument it might as well have been. Ask any group of medieval art historians which objects such an exhibition should contain and they would come up with pretty similar lists. They would certainly all include the Bury Bible. If only it wasn’t fixed down they would probably all want the Winchester Cathedral font. Now, the Bury Bible was made in Bury St Edmunds, but the man who made it, Master Hugo, was almost certainly not from Britain. In all probability the Winchester font was not even made in Britain, let alone by British craftsmen.



**Figure 9.**

*The Warwick Ciborium*, ca. 1150-1175, copper alloy; gold; enamel, 11.7 × 19.7 cm, V&A, London Digital image courtesy of Victoria and Albert Museum, London

The Warwick ciborium ([fig. 9](#)) is the work of a Mosan craftsman. Its typological schema, however, probably derives from Worcester, and before that from Canterbury.<sup>1</sup> So the schema could be “British”, but the figure style is Mosan. It may have been produced here, or in the Meuse Valley. It might represent the work of an artist from modern-day Belgium, working in the local style, but on a distinctively British subject matter, probably for a British patron and for use in Britain. This man, I think, would be our twelfth-century Rubens.

Two other ciboria exist that are almost identical to the Warwick ciborium, the main difference being their figure style. Their closest stylistic corollaries are to be found in English manuscript illumination. They were made either by Mosan craftsmen who moved to Britain and went native, or British craftsmen trained by a Mosan master. Whichever way, let these be our twelfth-century Anthony van Dycks.

The point is this. In order for the category of “British art” to mean something across the centuries from the twelfth to the twenty-first, it can be little more closely defined than “art that pertains in some way to the island of Great Britain”, and this makes it a very inclusive category indeed. In the majority of ways in which the term might be understood more recently, “British art”

makes no sense in the high medieval context. On the other hand, if we were to mount an exhibition called, say, "British Romanesque Art", we probably all know what would be in it. Everything would pertain in some way to Britain; little if any of it would pertain to Britain exclusively. Perhaps the question, then, is not so much whether there is such a thing as British Art, but in what sense, if any, is it a useful category?

Response by

**Cora Gilroy-Ware**, Associate Professor, History of Art, University of Oxford

**“James Barry’s demise and Benjamin Haydon’s suicide serve as only the most infamous case studies of the British historical painter’s premature proximity to his own mortality.”**

“The Historical Painter, whatever be his talent . . . is considered half cracked or completely mad.”<sup>2</sup>

From the founding of the Royal Academy in 1768, historical painting possessed a ghostly authority. Joshua Reynolds praised it but did not devote his practice to it; Benjamin West’s exclusive appointment as “Historical Painter to the King” ended in suspicion and ill feeling. No other genre better indicates the gulf between the taste of patrons, connoisseurs, and the exhibition-going public, and the ambitions of the emergent professional artist in the Academy’s orbit. Over the course of the long eighteenth century, many were sceptical that there was—or ever could be—(a viable) historical painting in Britain.

In September 1855, the *Art Journal*’s monthly column, “British Artists: Their Style and Character”, begins with a fable designed to sum up the perils of attempting to earn a living as a historical painter in Britain.<sup>3</sup> The story is of an artist who “finding little or no patronage” and burdened with a studio full of unsold objects leaves town after informing a trustworthy friend of his plan to fake his own death. The friend is instructed to close the artist’s house not long after his departure and to disseminate the message that he had “died suddenly”. The paintings are then to be sold by auction. They sell well, and the artist returns home, content with his newfound status.

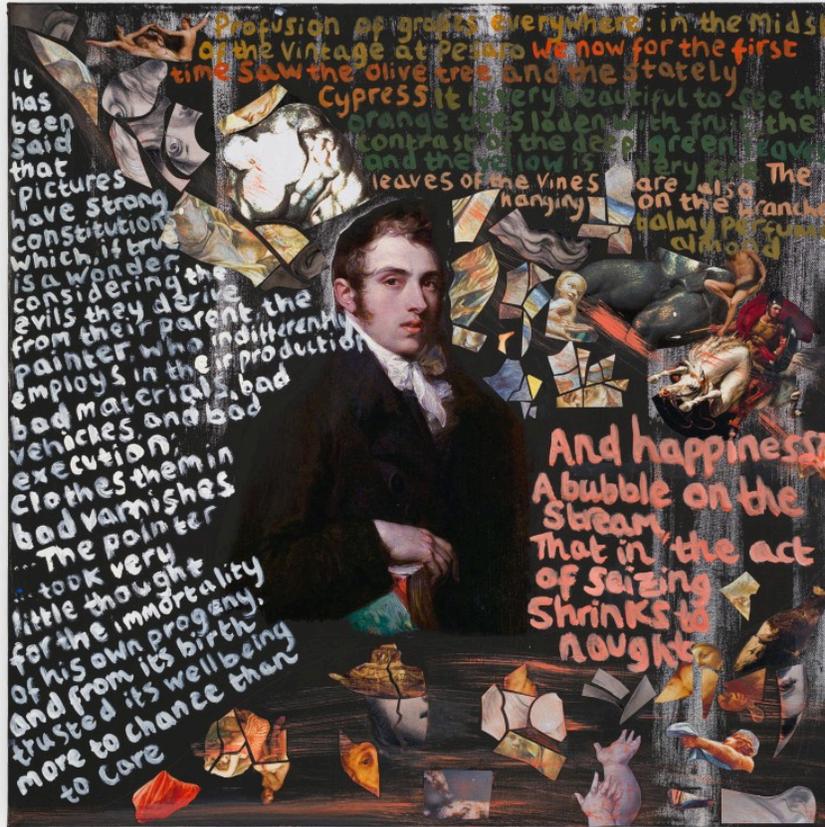
While the term “social death” carries with it implications of racial, religious, and other forms of terror, it can be said that for this allegorical British artist, a kind of “social suicide” is preferable to financial ruin and critical neglect. Indeed, during the period, this particular strain of artistic practice was marked by precarity. James Barry’s demise and Benjamin Haydon’s suicide serve as only the most infamous case studies of the British historical painter’s premature proximity to his own mortality.

It is the lesser-known William Hilton (1786–1839) whose biography is introduced by the fable. No self-conscious martyr, Hilton’s career was nonetheless informed by the spectre of death. With industrial capitalism flourishing during his lifetime, the risk—moreover the life-threatening

danger—of attempting to earn a living painting grand-scale historical subjects was at this point almost a cliché. To follow this path was to disavow bravely the increasing commodification of artists and artworks. Furthermore, in common with his generation, Hilton's access to canonical ancient sculptures and old-master paintings was defined by the French Revolutionary and Napoleonic wars and their outcome. The artist was finally able to visit the Continent in 1814; in the Louvre he sketched looted works, some of which were imminently to be packed up and reinstated.

Precarity becomes visible through the artist's use of materials. In pursuit of dazzling effects that could quickly call to mind the aura of old-master works, many academic painters followed Joshua Reynolds's example by mixing an array of additives to their pigments and oil-binding mediums. Yet in certain works Hilton exceeded all others with this approach. He employed harmful substances such as megilp and bitumen in abundance. Late works such as his *Sir Calepine Rescuing Serena* (exhibited 1831) and *Editha and the Monks Searching for the Body of Harold* (exhibited 1834) were painted at a time when the discourse surrounding the damage caused by these materials would have been unavoidable for a Royal Academician, let alone Keeper of the Academy: a post Hilton held from 1827.

As such, these works can be seen to anticipate the Auto-destructive art developed by Gustav Metzger in 1959. Conceived as "a form of public art for industrial societies" that "demonstrates man's power to accelerate disintegrative processes of nature", the concept was Metzger's response to the ravages of war and an attack on capitalist values.<sup>4</sup> The precarious position of Hilton's paintings within the history of British art, and the extent of their ongoing deterioration, suggest that Hilton was aware of their eventual decay. The humanist values that formerly sustained historical painting were declining simultaneously. Paintings by Hilton materialize such moral decay.



**Figure 10.**

Cora Gilroy-Ware, *Untitled (visual aid #3)*, 2015, oil and collage on canvas, 700 x 700 mm Digital image courtesy of Cora Gilroy-Ware

The accompanying image (fig. 10) is a visual aid that uses Hilton to open up British art, its style, and its character. Painted in oils, text is symbolic rather than pertaining to narrative, emphasizing the dominance of the written word in relation to high-artistic practice. The quote in white is lifted from the *A Century of British Painters* (1866) by Richard and Samuel Redgrave, who consistently denigrate Hilton's material practice. At the top are extracts from the artist's letters from Italy in 1825. Some lines from John Clare's poem "What is Life?", published at the time Hilton met Clare and was commissioned to paint his portrait of 1820, match the sense of *vanitas* conveyed in the materiality of the artist's works. Streams of collage evoke the fragmentation of the classical tradition and the variety of emulation associated with historical painting. Composed of pieces of paintings by Titian, Peter Paul Rubens, and Correggio, drawings by Hilton, and details from works by Barry and Haydon, they conjure the *craquelure* of paint. At the centre is Hilton's self-portrait. Freed from obscurity and the stigmas that cloud his art, we confront him head-on.

Response by

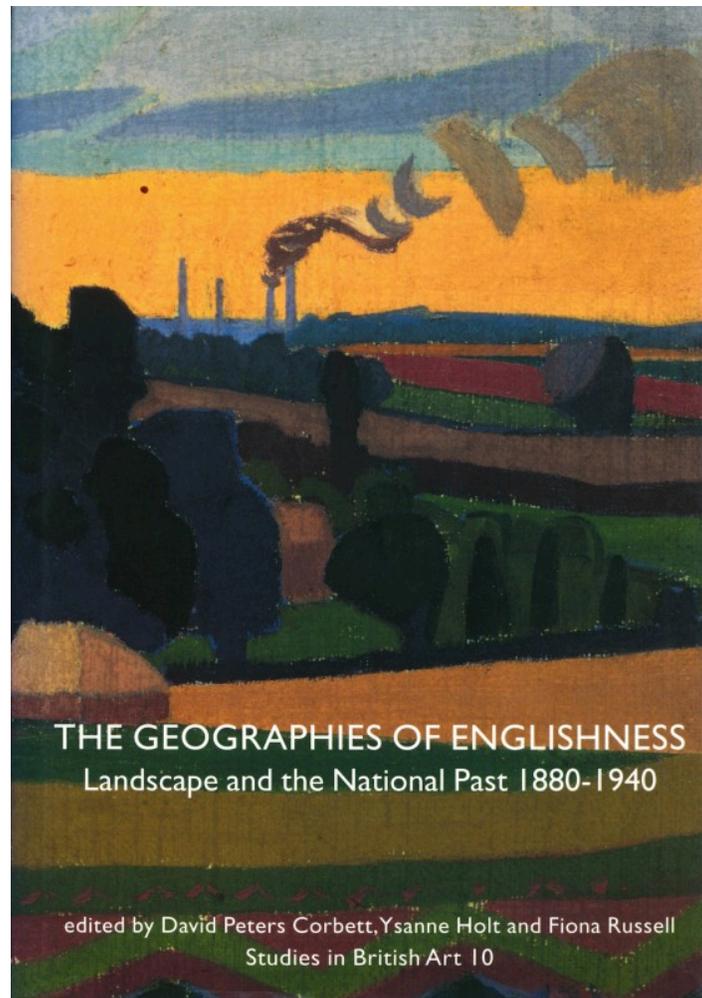
**David Peters Corbett**, University of East Anglia

**“The words ‘British art’ were never more than a flag of convenience . . . a means of getting attention to where it was required.”**

I have never been very keen on exam questions, and “There’s no such thing as British art” is horribly like one. “Discuss.” Its ability to unnerve is surely to do with its similarity to questions of the “Have you stopped defrauding the Revenue?” type— “Answer yes or no.” So I don’t think it’s irrelevant of me to say at the start that I am not at all sure that the demand to know whether British art exists is the right question. More germane is what it is for. Many objections can be levelled at the idea of British art—political, definitional, and conceptual—but I want to say that its advantages are also substantial, if pragmatic.

When, in the mid-1980s, I wrote a PhD thesis in a Department of English Literature, I think it is true to say that there was little or no anxiety about whether there was an “English Literature” or not. The term was taken unproblematically to mean literature written in the English language. This had the enormous advantage that it was not necessarily national. It was not so much that “English” seemed a natural category—even then that wouldn’t have stood a moment’s real thought—but that the category was sufficiently flexible—or sufficiently fudgeable, if you like—to serve its necessary purpose of defining a field of enquiry.

When I moved by various stages to work as an art historian, one of the many things that seemed culturally unfamiliar about my new discipline was that the conceptual cake was cut very differently. Among the assumptions that seemed to be taken for granted was that modern art before 1945 meant French art. Modern art in England in the period I was interested in was—as everyone apparently knew quite well—inevitably derivative, and if you could even bring a question like “Was Vorticism a native modernism?” into meaningful focus, you were bound to find that it was not. This state of affairs was compounded rather than improved by the appearance of innovative methodologies during the 1970s and 1980s. The potency of the social history of art was communicated through studies of Impressionism, or Van Gogh, or the Parisian art world, and it was generally assumed in the discipline—or so it seemed to me—that this was inevitable and right.



**Figure 11.**

Cover of *Geographies of Englishness: Landscape and the National Past, 1880-1940*, ed. Ysanne Holt, David Peters Corbett, and Fiona Russell (London: Yale University Press, 2002) Digital image courtesy of Paul Mellon Centre, 2015

There were in fact many historians of British art at work in the 1980s, some doing inspirational work, and I owe deep debts to a number of them. My point is that this work was done against a general background in which the conceptual action seemed from the start to be located largely elsewhere. The organization of art history, the literature that then existed, the routine assumptions, and the sheer weight of attention and traditions of scrutiny, all combined to make “British art” something that needed to be argued for. I do not mean by this that the key thing was to argue for the category, rather the opposite. The category—“British art”—needed to emerge in order to sustain what was truly important: studies of artists and, in the widest sense, their historical contexts, that acknowledged their particularities and specifics and which were not beholden to a more or less distorted version of concepts developed to deal with other subjects.

It seemed to me, living through the growth of British art studies in the nineties and after, that the words “British art” were never more than a flag of convenience. That term was a means of getting attention to where it was required. If the origins of the idea of a “national school” as a tool of enquiry and organization were largely lost for art historians, the concept nevertheless continued to provide a major criterion of organization within the discipline and its adjuncts (publishers for instance, or libraries). In that context, it was important to find a recognizable focus through which the communal effort of scrutiny and understanding could take place.

One way of putting this would be to say that the term “British art” eases communication. It makes it possible for publishers’ catalogues, advertisements for university jobs, and new journals to hail their likely audiences and to occupy clear positions in a complex series of institutional contexts. I am suggesting that it is this pragmatic presence that provides one of the major strengths of “British art” as an idea. We should refer our criteria to that presence rather than to the more abstract question of its existence: what best builds a context in which we might study (or indeed think it important or feasible to study) the work of artists who lived and worked on this island, for instance, or the modernism of artists in London before and immediately after the First World War? Thirty years ago it was not the case that such things were self-evidently available for study, nor that there was an intellectual context capable of dealing with them. That things are now different is one major gain for the idea of “British art”, however wayward it might be in other ways.

I also think that its very indeterminacy and lack of boundaries makes the category flexible in a productive way. This does not mean that we are unable either to define it at moments, or to adjust the category within which we make and promulgate knowledge. For some time now it’s been the case that “British art” has been responding to the interest in the global, the transatlantic, or the postcolonial in ways that inflect and open up the nature of the field. What is important is that we have a conceptual category in which to focus work and through which to communicate it. We can adjust that category as we need to.

Response by

**Cliff Lauson**, Hayward Gallery

**“Contemporary British art may be wavering in its definition, but the nation’s geo-political boundaries are as strong as ever.”**

The exhibition *History Is Now: 7 Artists Take On Britain* was staged at the Hayward Gallery, London, in the run-up to the 2015 general election. Within this context of debate and decision-making, our aim was to provide a space for the public to reflect on the nation’s recent past, with a view to illuminating the future. The show was also conceived as an experiment. By asking artists to take on the role of curator, we hoped to open up and challenge traditional ideas of British history, art, and culture in unexpected ways.

After wide-ranging preliminary discussions, I invited seven artists from a variety of backgrounds and artistic positions to each curate a section of the exhibition: John Akomfrah, Roger Hiorns, Simon Fujiwara, Hannah Starkey, Richard Wentworth, and, working together, Jane and Louise Wilson. Behind the decision to enrol the artist as curator was a belief, and trust, in the creative ways that artists engage with the world, as well as a recognition of the intellectual freedoms assumed by (and expected of) them—freedoms that supersede the usual institutional responsibilities of an in-house curatorial team.

At the heart of the project was the idea that the artist-curators should focus on British history, although what that meant in practice was open to interpretation, and would indeed be challenged through the inclusion and foregrounding of forgotten, conflicted, and unusual histories. The artists’ interests were spread thematically and chronologically across seven decades of postwar British history, and there were no prescriptions as to the content or curatorial approach. As a result, six distinctive positions emerged.

The artists embraced the challenge of creating an exhibition about British history in a gallery of contemporary art in ways that echoed the variety and complexity of the nation’s history itself. Works of art were placed alongside archive material, photographs, and other everyday objects in ways that leaned towards a social history of art, and away from the familiar canon of British art and movements. Numerous and sometimes unexpected themes came to the fore, from the defence of the British coast during the Cold War to the BSE epidemic, or “mad cow disease”, to the post-Thatcher dematerialization of labour. Moreover, these issues were not raised as explicit political critique, or posited as necessarily revisionist, but were representative of the multiple forgotten, alternate, and personal histories

usually missed in mainstream recountings of history. From a Pye V4 television of 1953, on which many Britons watched the Queen's coronation, to Christine Voge's photographs of 1978 of the first women's shelter in London, the exhibition as a whole served as a powerful reminder that the grand narratives of history are comprised of intimate stories.

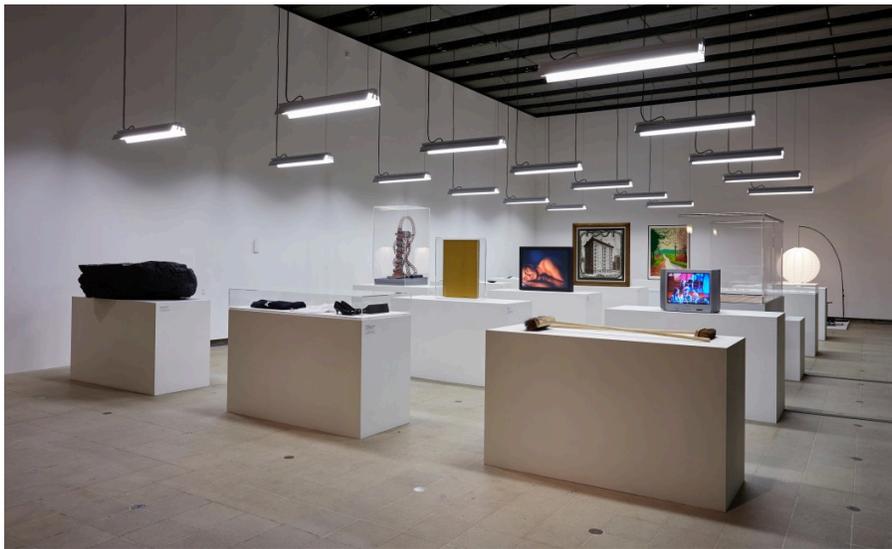
On the outdoor terrace we installed a newly restored Bristol Bloodhound surface-to-air missile and launcher, selected by Richard Wentworth and borrowed from the RAF Air Defence Radar Museum in Norfolk (fig. 15). Installed by the dozen along the eastern seaboard from the late 1950s, this Cold War weapon was the last line of defence against inbound Russian nuclear bombers. At over eight metres long and gleaming white, overlooking Waterloo Bridge and the River Thames, this was the first time in recent history that such weaponry had been on display in central London. It was not a weapon masquerading as art, but a military artefact evidencing its own historical moment. It recalled, tangibly, the anxiety of a bygone era, while invoking the more recent memory of the Rapier missiles (the current equivalent of the Bristol Bloodhound), which had been controversially installed by the British army on East London rooftops during the 2012 Olympics.

In the week before the exhibition opened, as we were applying the finishing touches inside the galleries, the BBC reported that Russian Bear bombers carrying nuclear payloads had crossed into British airspace. RAF fighters had been scrambled to intercept the bombers and escort them back to neutral airspace. A quarter of a century after the end of the Cold War, both sides continue to test and provoke one another with reciprocal shows of military strength. Contemporary British art may be wavering in its definition, but the nation's geo-political boundaries are, it seems, as strong as ever. If we are to consider art as inextricably linked to history, then perhaps it too must accept some national resolve.



**Figure 12.**

Courtesy Hayward Gallery / Photo by Roger Wooldridge, Installation view of John Akomfrah's section, *History Is Now: 7 Artists Take On Britain*, Hayward Gallery, London, 10 February - 26 April 2015



**Figure 13.**

Courtesy Hayward Gallery / Photo by Roger Wooldridge, Installation view of Simon Fujiwara's section, *History Is Now: 7 Artists Take On Britain*, Hayward Gallery, London, 10 February - 26 April 2015



**Figure 14.**

Courtesy Hayward Gallery / Photo by Roger Wooldridge, Installation view of Roger Hiorns's section, *History Is Now: 7 Artists Take On Britain*, Hayward Gallery, London, 10 February - 26 April 2015



**Figure 15.**

Courtesy Hayward Gallery / Photo by Roger Wooldridge, Installation view of Richard Wentworth's section, *History Is Now: 7 Artists Take On Britain*, Installation view of Ferranti International plc, British Aircraft Corporation Bloodhound Mark 2 Surface-to-Air Missile and Launcher, Guided Missile, Type 202, circa 1965-66. Missile: aluminium, magnesium alloy, stainless steel, wood, resin embossed fabric; launcher: steel. RAF Air Defence Radar Museum. Hayward Gallery, London, 10 February - 26 April 2015



**Figure 16.**

Courtesy Hayward Gallery / Photo by Roger Wooldridge, Installation view of Hannah Starkey's section, *History Is Now: 7 Artists Take On Britain*, Hayward Gallery, London, 10 February - 26 April 2015



**Figure 17.**

Courtesy Hayward Gallery / Photo by Roger Wooldridge, Installation view of Richard Wentworth's section, *History Is Now: 7 Artists Take On Britain*, Hayward Gallery, London, 10 February - 26 April 2015



**Figure 18.**

Courtesy Hayward Gallery / Photo by Roger Wooldridge, Installation view, Jane & Louise Wilsons' section, *History Is Now: 7 Artists Take On Britain*, Hayward Gallery, London, 10 February - 26 April 2015

Response by

**Sarah Victoria Turner**, Director

**“Discussions about Britain’s imperial past and postcolonial present have put pressure on the historiography of British art.”**



**Figure 19.**

Eric Ravilious, Front cover of '*British Art BBC talks pamphlet*', designed by Eric Ravilious,

In 1934 the BBC announced its broadcast of six talks on British art given by Reginald Gleadowe, the Slade Professor of Fine Art at Oxford University between 1928 and 1933, with a striking pamphlet designed by Eric Ravilious ([fig. 19](#)) and printed by the Kynoch Press, which was noted for its progressive and lively artist-designed typographic collection. No artists are present in the image and, apart from the glimpse of a framed image of a tree in the background, neither are any works of art. Enclosed within a patterned oval are tubes of paint, set squares, a mallet, a compass, a mahlstick, a fanned

array of brushes, pencils, and a palette and knife. Here, Ravilious puts the tools of the artist and designer's trade right at the very centre of British art. There is no hint of the "big names" of British art that one might expect—no Joshua Reynolds, John Constable, or J.M.W. Turner. Painting is referenced, but as part of a larger and connected world of art, design, and craft. Throughout his career, which has recently been the subject of a hugely popular exhibition at Dulwich Picture Gallery (closed August 2015), Ravilious sought to break down divisions between the artist and the designer, as well as image and text (brought together in this image through pattern and the overlapping composition). His is a vision of British art in which craft, making, and production are given central attention.

Ravilious's cover prompts me to think about what kind of image would adorn the front cover of a promotional booklet, or website, for a series of talks on British art broadcast in 2015. Would craft, making, and tools get such a prominent look-in? Probably not. How would an artist or designer go about responding to such a brief today? If there *is* indeed "no such thing as British art", perhaps a blank page would do! An infinitely more interesting task would be to commission a cover that in some way tried to capture the diverse, complicated, hybrid nature of British art and British art studies today.

When some of the contributors to this Conversation first met to discuss the provocation, "There's no such thing as British art", it was the day of a European election—an event that undoubtedly cast a prescient shadow over our conversations about a nation-bounded terminology for the study of art. The boundaries and definitions of British art have undoubtedly been redrawn in recent years as historians and curators in this field have reflected seriously on the implications of national categorizations in relation to the organization of works of art, artists, and histories of art. Discussions about Britain's imperial past and postcolonial present have put pressure on the historiography of British art, opening up routes in and routes out of what was once perceived to be, by some, a fairly restricted, closed-off and rarefied field of studies. "British art" is no longer an island within the discipline of the history of art. As a result, "British art" has, in my opinion, become a considerably more expansive, connected, and interesting area in which to work. In some ways I accept that there is no such thing as British art—by which I mean that there certainly isn't one version or officially sanctioned definition of what it is or is not. And that, to my mind at least, is very much a good thing. What there is, however, is a lively and ever-growing community of researchers, artists, curators, and students all of whom are working with—and sometimes against—British art. In my job as Deputy Director for Research at a centre devoted to the study of British art, I don't feel the need to defend the concept, but rather to facilitate and indeed champion the brilliant, considered, and varied work carried out in the field of British art studies today.

Response by

**Jane Hawkes**, University of York

**“In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries the ‘Celtic’ art of the Britons was invoked as an art of resistance to ‘British’ imperialism.”**

If we take the term “British art” at face value, if we understand the term to pertain to the land-mass incorporated by the Acts of Union between England and Scotland of 1706 and 1707 (as an historian of the early medieval art produced in Britain and Ireland might be inclined to do), there might well be “arts” that could be considered “British”. However, the ways in which the term has been used to construct and underpin the institutions, museums, collections, and university departments devoted financially and publicly to the study and promotion of what is currently deemed to be “British Art” suggest that, in practice, the term is perhaps not as inclusive as might be hoped.

To demonstrate this it is worth considering, briefly, two arts that might variously be considered “British”, but which are not generally included in the so-called canon of “British art”. The first is the art produced by the Britons—those peoples who lived in mainland Britain between the third century BCE and the fourth century CE—who were, ethnically speaking, a Celtic peoples. Their art can be characterized as one favouring textured reflective surfaces, shifting shapes, and linear patterns constructed from motifs that are arranged to appear simultaneously as both figure and ground. However, while such a distinctive artistic tradition might be identified lexically as “British”, to anyone from the modern countries of Ireland, Scotland, or Wales this would be anathema, as it is, of course, generally defined as “Celtic” art, largely as a result of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century movements for cultural and political independence from England. The “Celtic” art of the Britons is thus generally identified with nation states other than England, and in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries was indeed invoked as an art of resistance to “British” imperialism. Yet, it remains the case that the peoples living in mainland Britain were known collectively as the Britons, and indeed still are (academically). Used in this context, “British art” is something of a troubled term—both for suggesting an art that is largely devoted to what today might be termed “decorative”, “minor”, or “applied” (rather than the fine arts of painting and sculpture), and for describing an art form that was common to the peoples making up Britain and Ireland at the time it was produced.



**Figure 20.**

*The Desborough Mirror*, ca. 50BC - 50 AD, Bronze, 350 x 258 mm, British Museum Digital image courtesy of British Museum, London (CC BY-NC-SA 4.0) license

Leaving this to one side, the second example that might be considered is the art produced across these islands in the early historical period from the sixth to the eleventh or twelfth centuries—an art which involves painting (albeit in manuscripts, on sculpture, walls, and glass) and sculpture in diverse monumental forms and varying scales, in both stone and ivory. This is an art that not only utilized the various media of the so-called fine arts, but which was also one capable of great abstraction, sophisticated visual ambiguity, and paradox (involving what Mary Carruthers has termed the “polyfocal perspective”<sup>5</sup>), as well as remarkable naturalism. This example of “British art” is of course that which is notionally referred to by art historians as “Insular art”, as a means of avoiding the tricky (post-1924) term “British”. For, in the sixth to eighth centuries CE the Britons lived in south-west Scotland, Wales, and Cornwall; the Scots lived in north-west Scotland and Ireland; and various Germanic tribes, comprising collectively the Anglo-

Saxons, lived in the area now covered by England, but which at times extended to the Firth of Forth and into Dumfries and Galloway. Modern geopolitical terms invoked to denote art or any other cultural phenomenon in this period, verge on the nonsensical.

So, when considering the arts produced in the early medieval period it would seem that *if* “British art” is to continue being promoted institutionally, and *if* that term is to be deemed lexically relevant to denote the visual arts produced by peoples from the islands of Britain and Ireland, or working elsewhere within its traditions, it is perhaps time to be pro-actively more inclusive in what is denoted by the term. It is perhaps time to actively include and promote the work produced by those from across the entire region of Britain and Ireland, across a wider history (that extends the current working boundaries of the eighteenth through to the early twentieth centuries), and across all media. We are surely well beyond the point in time when it is acceptable to promote as British, art (largely painting and sculpture) primarily produced by the English, wherever they worked—or those from elsewhere working in England—by which “London” is generally understood.

This said, using the term “British” in a postcolonial context does, of course, raise significant issues which the examples cited here have demonstrated. For medievalists, with Ireland and Wales being the oldest of the English colonies, and part of Ireland still being subsumed into that colonial power which is euphemistically referred to as Great Britain, it is difficult indeed to refer to any art produced in the region as “British”.

Response by

**Amy Tobin**, Goldsmiths College

**“The question of British or American art is not so much about the national as the translocal; not identity, but identification and misidentification.”**

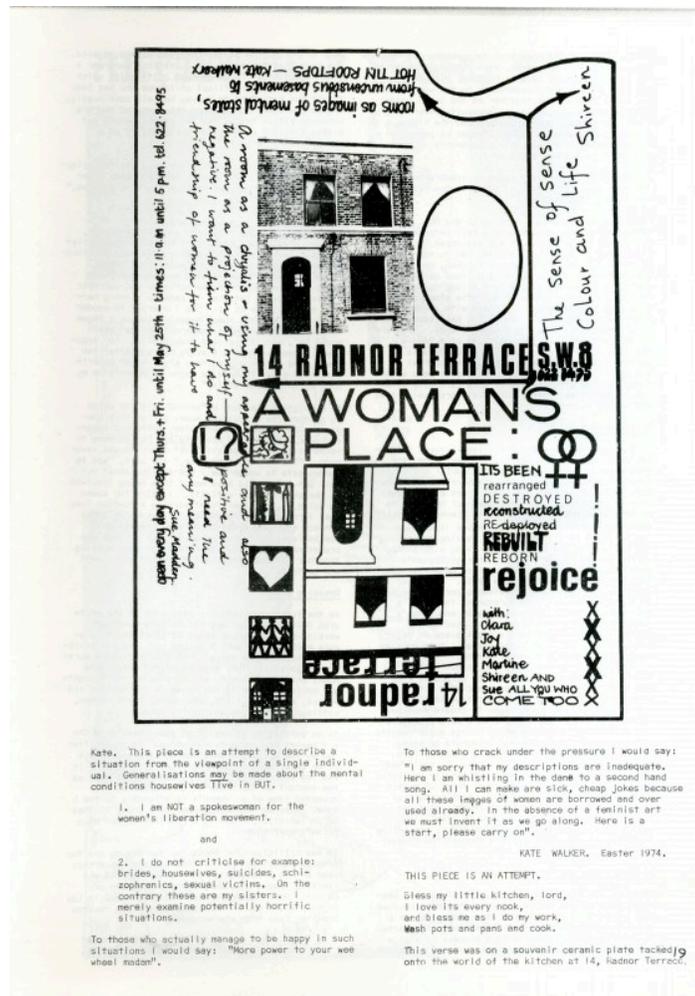
The question of whether or not there is such a thing as British art, for me, is a question of context. For instance, it hardly seems useful to look for and trace particular national characteristics or tastes, especially in an age of increasing opportunities for physical and technological connection. I am more interested in thinking about national contexts as shifting entities, imbued with complex power relations. This includes looking at how national identities are constituted through art and in cultural institutions, as well as looking at how those identities function ideologically, how they are challenged and broken down. In Britain in the 1970s feminist politics was a vital part of this dynamic field of cultural activity.

The characterization of Britain in the histories of art and feminism in the 1970s is often limited to Mary Kelly’s six-part installation *Post-Partum Document* (1973–79), Susan Hiller’s *paraconceptualism*, and Margaret Harrison’s *crafted image-text works*, as well as the influential art-historical work of Griselda Pollock, Lisa Tickner, and Rosemary Betterton. But in recent years knowledge and analysis of this field has begun to expand, with many more books, exhibitions, and PhD research projects charting women artists’ work in Britain since the seventies. The practices are diverse, ranging from *photography* to *performance*, *painting* to *film*, and so too are the artists’ approaches to feminism. But a question that remains to be asked about this complex art history is its relationship to Britain and Britishness.

In the late 1980s Britain was characterized as the site for the development of a more theoretical feminism, with Pollock, Tickner, and Kelly all publishing important texts espousing theoretical methodologies. However, this categorization, formed in response to attempts at recuperation associated with artists and writers in the United States, has resulted in a problematic “progress narrative”—pithily summed up by Pollock as a genealogy of “American foremothers and British daughters”.<sup>6</sup> But if this narrative obscures the diversity of feminist work in Britain, more recent thematic methodologies risk erasing this context altogether. For instance, Helen Molesworth’s article “*House Work and Art Work*” (2000) counters the divisions between “essentialist” artworks (like Judy Chicago’s *The Dinner Party*, 1974–79) and “theoretical” work (like Kelly’s *Post-Partum Document*). But in deconstructing the “progress” narrative, she leaves geographic difference by the wayside. And in fact, she erases the problem completely by

repatriating Mary Kelly, an American who worked in Britain in the 1970s, into a coterie of American artists. And although histories of second-wave feminism are often critiqued for an Anglo-American focus, it is a far more America-centric history.

Despite its problems (over-identification, lacunae) transatlantic antagonism was an important part of the women's art movement. Women artists, critics, and writers exchanged materials and ideas in print, through reproductions and touring exhibitions. The context of this intercontinental interaction means that the national borders we might draw are diffused and disrupted. This is further complicated by the decentralized organizations that structured the Women's Liberation Movement in the seventies, which extended from micro-level, grass-roots groups to macro-level exchanges across distance. Through these networks of material exchange coherent national identities were splintered. So just as it is important and timely to look again at feminist-influenced art made in Britain, I would dispute that this could really be called British art, and likewise that work produced in the United States could be thought of as definably American. Many of these practices are the product of competing forces, including socio-economic and cultural context, the artist's or group's particular brand of feminism, as well as their relationship (antagonistic or celebratory) to other works of art or practices, historical or contemporaneous.



**Figure 21.** Unattributed poster for *A Woman's Place*, 1974, printed in *Mama-Women Artists*, Women's Art Library Digital image courtesy of Women's Art Library

Perhaps this is best illustrated in relation to two installations: *Womanhouse* and *A Woman's Place*. The first, *Womanhouse*, opened in Los Angeles in 1972; the second, *A Woman's Place*, in South London in 1974 (fig. 21). The later work was conceived as a version of the earlier; it sought to mimic the collaborative enterprise of *Womanhouse*, in which its women participants found, converted, and made art within a domestic setting. Both projects subverted women's traditional "place" through incisive feminist critique of the home and domestic labour. But unlike the clean surfaces and bright colours of *Womanhouse*, made in the context of Judy Chicago's feminist art programme, *A Woman's Place* was tatty, run-down, and knee-deep in rubbish, to paraphrase Tickner's description of the work in *Studio International*.

The stale materiality of the London work seemed to play out the trajectory of its transatlantic journey, entropically transforming pristine surfaces into a crumbling mess. But this difference is not a metaphor for British art's belatedness. And neither can we say that *Womanhouse* or *A Woman's Place* stand for "American" or "British" art more broadly. Instead if we take the conversation between the two works as our subject, difference becomes a matter of context: Walt Disney-funded Californian art school versus South London squat; young students versus working mothers without commercial or Arts Council support. The local context of each work, then, opens out onto national issues such as the West/East Coast divide in America or the economic downturn in Britain in the 1970s.

By focusing on the relationship between these works, we can begin to get a sense of the conversations flowing between women nationally and internationally, while also seeing when this communication fails to translate, as very similar projects play out very differently. So across this dense field of interaction and exchange—comprised of hold-ups, hitches, and miscommunications—the question of British or American art is not so much about the national as the translocal; not identity, but identification and misidentification; and more about distance than difference. In the context of second-wave feminism, British art came under the same pressure as other fine art definitions and classifications. Focus shifted from particular aesthetics, associated with types and stereotypes, to a diverse field of experiment and exchange. So there may be no definably British Feminist Art but, crucially, we are yet to map how this political vitality impacted on art, cultural production, and institutions in the United Kingdom.

Response by

**Grace Brockington**, University of Bristol

**“The seam of material and contexts that coalesce around the idea of British art is rich, and there remains much to mine and to re-evaluate.”**



**Figure 22.**

Jacob Epstein, *Lilies*, 1936, gouache, 58.4cm X 45.7cm, Carrick Hill, Australia Digital image courtesy of Collection of the Carrick Hill Trust, Hayward Collection, 1983

There is a fine Jacob Epstein in the British art collection at Carrick Hill near Adelaide, Australia, the home created in the 1930s by Edward and Ursula Hayward, and now open to the public as a country-house museum. It is not the sort of Epstein that one might expect to find: not a bronze bust of Lady Hayward, or even one of the artist's experiments in direct carving. Instead, the Haywards acquired a painting entitled *Lilies* (1936; [fig. 22](#)), one of four hundred-odd flower studies that Epstein made in one of his occasional orgies

of painting. It was a moment of defiant departure from his sculptural practice, and it suits the collection at Carrick Hill because the house is set in beautiful gardens, and because Ursula Hayward loved lilies.

If an aim of the present debate is to develop a paradigm, or to evaluate a canon, of British art, then Epstein's *Lilies* is not a good example. But its location at Carrick Hill points to the expansiveness of the category of British art, and to its rich variety and unpredictability: its mobility across the British Empire, which has left Australia with some of the best collections of British art in the world; its absorption of that empire's resources, which stocked institutions such as the British Museum, where Epstein learned so much about non-European art; its significance for anglophile creations such as Carrick Hill, with its Jacobethan manor house overlooking Adelaide and the great expanses of the Australian bush; and its inclusiveness of artists such as Epstein, an American Jew of East European origin, who arrived in London as a young man, and ended his days a central figure in British art and a knight of the realm. If British art is anything, it is many things, in many different places. Its traditions and genealogies must constantly adjust to accommodate the news from everywhere and nowhere, and the shifting boundaries, and hence definitions, of Britishness.

The seam of material and contexts that coalesce around the idea of British art is rich, and there remains much to mine and to re-evaluate. So why do I sense a degree of anxiety behind the motion that *there's no such thing as British art*? Does it suggest a research community that has talked itself into a corner of self-doubt? That after several decades of ground-breaking research, and strategic challenges to disciplinary prejudice against the very idea of British art, we fear a loss of momentum, a shifting of attention, even an obsolescence of the questions and discoveries that have so energized the field? If this is the case, then I am not sure that arguing the point all over again is the right way forward. British art matters. The case has been made. The problem surely has to do with the larger one of academic specialization, the absence of a general conversation across isolated fields of enquiry, and the limitations of a traditional model of national schools in a curriculum that is moving towards a global history of art. The challenge becomes one of connection, and of finding a place in that global dialogue, in its radical sense as a mapping of transnational contacts and networks, rather than as a compilation of local case studies. In such a forum, values adjust. The qualities that can make British art seem so nebulous—so provisional, contingent, peripheral, even derivative—become the most interesting thing about it. Maybe it has indeed become redundant. Or maybe our motion is less a provocation to British art studies, than a blueprint for its future direction.

Response by

**Martin Hammer**, Professor of Art History, University of Kent

**“Interesting art tends to be invested in a more complex sense of identity than the simplistic ‘them and us’ polarities that prevail elsewhere.”**

In the discourse around British Modernism, my own patch, reference to Englishness, Britishness, or Scottishness has featured in commentary on many leading artistic figures (John Duncan Fergusson, Paul Nash, Stanley Spencer, Henry Moore, Peter Lanyon, David Hockney, Richard Long, Gilbert & George, to name a diverse few). The categorization sometimes mattered to the artists themselves. In broader terms, it crops up too in the writing of key critics of the period, including Roger Fry, Herbert Read, Kenneth Clark, and Nikolaus Pevsner. The conceptions of “Britishness” invoked by these artists and writers are as diverse as the work they produced and discussed, but might include reference to native precursors (Romantic landscape painting, for example); perceived predispositions (linearity, a love of nature, eccentricity, emotional reticence, and so on); or implied contrasts with the stereotypical characteristics of other cultures (the boldness of American art, for example). Talk about national identity—whether in relation to art, literature, cooking, or politics—tends to involve a cocktail of affirmation and differentiation: it expresses tribal loyalty, and the need for self-esteem and self-realization, in tandem with a sense of difference, fear, and inferiority/superiority in relation to some “other”.

Concepts of nationality can function as both stick and carrot. A negatively tinged example comes from David Sylvester’s review of a Walter Sickert centenary show in 1960: “The tragic flaw in English painting is compromise, unwillingness to be committed to a point of view, a desire to have the best of two or more worlds (especially, in our time, a present and a past world).”<sup>7</sup> More affirmatively, a defensive emphasis on national identity could serve as an antidote to a perceived excess of “influence” from abroad, just as asserting an internationalist ethos could work against parochialism, or an oppressive nationalism. In relation to the latter, a helpful reflection comes from the leading painter Graham Sutherland in a letter of 25 January 1947 to the *New Statesman* about Benedict Nicolson’s survey of “the changes which have taken place during the last thirty years”:

During the course of his argument—that English painting has gained by the enforced insularity of the war—Mr. Nicolson writes of myself (and others) as *having turned their backs on Paris to seek inspiration in the English romantic movement of the early*

*nineteenth century*. I cannot let this pass. Current art criticism is peculiarly absolutist; and here is yet another example of the habit of art historians to oversimplify—to label and to pigeonhole. I do not deny that I received great adolescent stimulus from Palmer and Blake; but that does not mean I turn my back on Paris. The question of influences is not as easy as that, and is surely a more complex and subtle matter than can be covered by such snap judgements. Painters are affected by things which come to them from all over the place; from many kinds of painting and many things. One absorbs what one needs at a given time.

Palmer was actually much more than an “adolescent stimulus”, rather an ongoing point of reference, which demonstrates that attitudes in this terrain are usually rooted in polemic and propaganda. Sutherland’s approach to imagery, technique, and style in a work such as *Black Landscape* (1940; [fig. 23](#)), for example, owed as much to Palmer’s *A Cornfield by Moonlight, with the Evening Star*, then in Kenneth Clark’s collection, as it did to the remote west Pembrokeshire landscape, or to what one contemporary critic called “spiritual agony [and] suffering of a society at war”. But to generalize from Sutherland’s point, we might assert that significant artists (British or otherwise) are always rooted in their own immediate environment and its traditions, in conscious and unconscious ways, but also responsive to wider, international stimuli, whether or not because of an émigré background. Sylvester’s observation about compromise seems a crude caricature. Interesting art tends to be invested in a more complex sense of identity than the simplistic “them and us” polarities that prevail elsewhere (for example, politics). And in relation to the individual we often need to allow for the possibility of at least “dual nationality”: an artist’s perceived personal and artistic roots might be both British and English/Scottish/Cornish/Jewish/West Indian/Romanian (Home Counties Sutherland gets claimed as Welsh for his reliance on Pembrokeshire motifs).



**Figure 23.**

Graham Sutherland, *Black Landscape*, 1939-40, oil paint and sand on canvas, 81 × 132.1 cm, Tate Digital image courtesy of Tate, 2015, CC-BY-NC-ND 3.0 licence (Unported)

Following Gombrich's remark about art in general, we might say there is no such thing as (quintessentially) British art; there are only "British" (in whatever qualified sense) artists who, in the production of their work, draw upon a cluster of self-identifications (positive and negative), and respond to a complex array of points of reference, influences, and determinants (cultural, social, educational, genetic), both long- and short-term. We are left with one all-purpose question: how, where (if anywhere), and why did some particular sense of British identity or tradition enter into the making or reception of specific works of art? For British, one could substitute all sorts of other things, which might or might not be more interesting in specific cases. Artists are indeed affected by things which come to them from all over the place. They absorb what they need at a given time. The devil, as always, is in the detail.

Response by

**Adrian George**, Curator, Government Art Collection, UK

Adrian George, Deputy Director and Senior Curator of the Government Art Collection, joins the debate with a filmed response that reflects on his own position as a curator and draws on varied works from the Collection.



[Watch Video](#)

**Figure 24.**

Response by Adrian George, Deputy Director & Senior Curator, Government Art Collection.,

Response by

**Margarita Cappock**, Head of Collections, Dublin City Gallery The Hugh Lane

**“The history of the Hugh Lane Gallery neatly encapsulates the conundrum of Ireland’s relationship with Britain.”**

In the course of my writing this conversation piece, a controversy erupted concerning the use of the term “British” in an Irish context. It concerned the appropriation, by Sky journalist Richard Suchet, of Irish actress Saoirse Ronan as British, and reference that she was “one of our own” because she was from “the British Isles”—a claim, Suchet went on to suggest, that should be taken as “a compliment”. The ensuing furore both in printed and social media aptly demonstrates how the use of the word “British”, in an Irish context, can be both a maligned and loaded term. It demonstrates how Anglo-Irish relations can still be marked by a sense of condescension (albeit benign), and resultant indignation. As one of the oldest historical territories of Britain, Ireland’s relationship with its neighbour is complex. British rule had drastic effects on Ireland’s language, ethnicity, faith and class system. Whilst in the past, British colonialists insisted on the absolute and hierarchical difference between themselves and the Native Irish, the idea that today, when it concerns successful Irish people, they can be neatly subsumed into British identity is anathema to many Irish people and provokes a visceral response.

When it comes to the question of British art, and of who can be classified as a British artist, from an Irish perspective this is controversial. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, British art was dominated by successful foreigners. But from the 1730s Hogarth flourished and became a dominant figure, followed by Gainsborough, Reynolds, Turner, Constable and Blake—each of whom ranks among the most original geniuses of British art. However, if we go solely by nationality, two of the great British history painters, James Barry and Daniel Maclise, were both Irish-born. The three towering figures of twentieth-century British figurative painting, Lucian Freud, Frank Auerbach and Francis Bacon, were all born outside Britain. Yet all these artists fall within the category of British art. In an era of globalisation and multiculturalism, is the use of the label “British art” anachronistic? Does it promulgate a sense of exclusivity rather than inclusivity? Undoubtedly, the question prompts a contentious debate, but can it not also be a progressive one that encourages us to explore the contemporary importance of national boundaries and identities in terms of art? One important and positive step is the acknowledgement of a nation’s complex history, and open debate and discussion in forums such as this are to be welcomed.



**Figure 25.**

Photograph of Dublin City Gallery The Hugh Lane, Dublin, Digital image courtesy of Dublin City Gallery The Hugh Lane, Dublin

The history of the Hugh Lane Gallery, Dublin, neatly encapsulates the conundrum of Ireland's relationship with Britain. And given the current arrangement of the 39 Lane paintings shared with the National Gallery, London, it is one that still resonates. The founder, Hugh Lane (1875–1915) was born in Ireland, brought up in Britain and lived in London, where he became a highly successful art dealer and collector. Lane embarked on a mission to provide access for the Irish public to international art and to promote a distinctive school of Irish art. In late 1904, he offered his art collection to the city of Dublin and garnered the support of an eclectic group of individuals, including nationalists, unionists, artists, poets, journalists and scientists, to assist in the foundation of a gallery of modern art. Lane received a knighthood in the King's Birthday Honours in 1909 for his services to Irish art. When the gallery opened in temporary premises in 1908, it was grouped by school—Room I was “Irish Painters (by birth or descent)” and Room II “British School”. This arrangement was significant given that it predated Ireland becoming an independent state in 1922.

One of the most significant acquisitions of recent times is the studio of the Dublin-born artist Francis Bacon. It has inevitably raised the question of whether Bacon is an Irish or British artist. Since 2006 the gallery has also had a permanent display of paintings by Sean Scully. He was also born in Dublin, but left Ireland at the age of four when his family emigrated for financial reasons. Whilst Scully spent his formative years in England, he strongly

asserts his Irish identity. Conversely, the collection also includes British artists who have settled in Ireland, such as Nick Miller, Hughie O'Donoghue and Barrie Cooke.



**Figure 26.**

John Singer Sargent, Hugh Lane, 1906, oil on canvas, 74.3 × 62.2 cm, Dublin City Gallery The Hugh Lane, Dublin. Digital image courtesy of Dublin City Gallery The Hugh Lane

A recent exhibition of the work of the father of British Pop Art, Richard Hamilton, and his partner, Rita Donagh, at the Hugh Lane Gallery highlights the independence of thought of some artists, regardless of nationality. "Civil Rights etc." was to be Hamilton's final exhibition. Both artists tackled the difficult subject of Northern Ireland, but whilst Donagh has Irish roots, Hamilton was an English artist looking at Ireland from outside. His iconic work The Citizen (1981-83, Tate Collection) is based on an image of a prisoner on a 'dirty protest' in the Maze (Long Kesh) prison in Northern Ireland. In this case, the artist's emotional response to a situation overrides neat categorisation.

It is tempting to subscribe to Whistler's statement, "There is no such thing as English art. You might as well talk of English mathematics! Art is art and mathematics is mathematics." To my mind, it is more interesting to question and debate the character of British art, rather than come to narrow definitions. It can be explorative rather than definitive, inclusive rather than exclusive in scope.

Response by

**Lubaina Himid,**

**“To understand British art as an artist, learn to know your place.”**

There is certainly such a thing as British art; it is contained and restrained, boxed and categorised but not fixed; still fluid.

To understand British art as an artist, learn to know your place. It is certainly fashioned on the British class system but is not an exact model. There are artist equivalents of self-assured aristocrats, military men, visiting diplomats, society women, all of whom seem to know each other and who can often be seen gently, easily moving to and fro, encouraging and reassuring each other.

There are thousands of busy and eager-to-please strivers, making marvellous work of quality but who must earn their living supporting the intricate infrastructures hidden in the corridors of power.

Then there are the artist equivalents of the desperate, the homeless and the poorly educated, who have never been taught that all is not what it seems. They do not know that critics, curators and collectors are human beings who form friendships with artists; who sometimes go on holiday together, have dinner together and live in the same streets in the same cities.

British art is fully able and happy to be critical of the questionable political structures and falsely constructed art histories which underpin it. At the same time it rewards and seeks to celebrate an entitlement of belonging. An acceptable art work may demonstrate a sophisticated awareness of both the inevitable magnificence and unavoidable hysteria of work made anywhere else.

British Art is slightly flawed, casually disciplined, still and patient, hard-working with plenty of sweat and dirt, grey and brown. Greys: warm and light infused with yellow, or dark and icy with blue running through. Browns: laced with burgundy, or verging on green or leaning softly on the edge of orange.

British Art speaks English well and acknowledges the importance of English literature and history, the Scottish and Welsh landscape, German classical music, French food and wine, Italian ice cream and architecture, Spanish painters, Brazilian heat, American men and Irish hospitality.

There is within it, a few of us think, some potential room for manoeuvre.

## Footnotes

- 1 See T. A. Heslop, "St Anselm and the Visual Arts at Canterbury Cathedral, 1093-1109", in *Medieval Art, Architecture & Archaeology at Canterbury*, ed. A. Bovey (Leeds: Maney Publishing, 2013), 204-16.
- 2 The Diary of Benjamin Robert Haydon, 6 September 1828.
- 3 "British Artists: Their Style and Character", *Art Journal* 1 (Sept. 1855): 253-55.
- 4 Gustav Metzger, "Auto-Destructive Art", London, 4 Nov. 1959, in *Auto-Destructive Art: Metzger at AA* (London: Destruction/Creation, 1965).
- 5 See, for example, Mary Carruthers, *The Experience of Beauty in the Middle Ages* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2013).
- 6 Griselda Pollock, "The Politics of Theory", in *Generations and Geographies in the Visual Arts: Feminist Readings*, ed. Pollock (London and New York: Routledge, 1996), 12.
- 7 David Sylvester, "Sickert", *New Statesman*, 4 June 1960; reprinted in *About Modern Art: Critical Essays, 1948-2000* (London: Pimlico, 2002), 152-57.

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