

JA Projects designs *Entangled Pasts* at the Royal Academy

Exhibition sets the scene for conversation, contemplation and confrontation



Reinvented by JA Projects, the Royal Academy's Central Hall makes a statement starting point for the exhibition. Photo by Thomas Adank

- *Entangled Pasts 1768 – Now: Arts, Colonialism and Change* (3 February – 28 April 2024) will see the Royal Academy of Arts explore its own role in shaping the narratives of colonialism
- More than 100 major historic and contemporary artworks in multiple media come together in conversation about empire, enslavement, resistance and abolition
- Design and architecture practice JA Projects has created a bold yet nuanced exhibition design that gives the artworks space to speak – for themselves and to each other

Running from 3 February 2024, the Royal Academy of Arts' *Entangled Pasts 1768 – Now: Arts, Colonialism and Change* is an important, complex and soul-searching exhibition in which the institution uses its own collection, international loans and its network of contemporary artists to offer an open-ended interrogation of the relationship between art, slavery and colonialism – and its own role in forging these histories.

Taking on the challenge of framing a wide-ranging, era-hopping exhibition that frankly and fairly confronts the RA's own relationship with – and institutional culpability for – slavery is architectural studio JA Projects. Led by architect Jayden Ali, the JA Projects team have transformed 11 of the RA's main galleries into an immersive – sometimes subversive – journey into painting, sculpture, installation, film and poetry, sensitively deploying texture, light and scale to choreograph the experience, guiding visitors through the exhibition and making space for each artwork to speak.

JA Projects' set forms the backdrop to more than 100 artworks, spanning over 250 years of history from the Royal Academy's foundation in 1768 to the present day. Historic artists including the likes of Joshua Reynolds, Thomas Gainsborough, John Singleton Copley and JMW Turner are put into dialogue with modern-day artists such as Frank Bowling, Sonia Boyce, Lubaina Himid, Isaac Julien, Hew Locke, Yinka Shonibare and Kara Walker. Creating connections across time and place, *Entangled Pasts* sets out to explore how art is intractably entangled with colonial histories and lifts the curtain on the international underpinnings of what we think of as 'British' art.

"In support of the RA's brave investigation of its colonial past, we drew upon our ongoing enquiry into the entangled histories of the Black and Brown people in the West. For us, it was about helping to deliver an exhibition that challenged the historic optics of power that have done so much to shape the narratives, ideas and beliefs that supported enslavement and empire. And so, our design frames a forthright yet delicate conversation with the building, the people and the art that make up the Academy to honestly process the past, celebrate the pioneering Academicians of today and honour our collective tomorrow."

– Jayden Ali, director, JA Projects

Working in close collaboration with the Royal Academy's extended curatorial team and the featured contemporary artists themselves, JA Projects has developed a

design approach that supports the often-challenging themes of power, representation and history behind the exhibition.

Reframing history, rebalancing power

JA Projects' intent to unflinchingly confront the RA's relationship to the past is apparent from the exhibition's first moments. Setting the scene for what is to come, the starting point of the exhibition is the Royal Academy's Central Hall, an octagonal chamber where eight canonical giants of Western art history – the likes of Da Vinci, Titian, Wren and Reynolds – have presided in bust form for centuries, not merely displayed but woven into the very fabric of the building. JA Projects has consciously set out to subvert this paradigm.

Dim lighting, punctuated by spots accentuating the artworks, brings a portentous sense of drama to the moment of entry. Portraits of Black figures line the walls, surrounding the central artwork centre Francis Harwood's anonymous sculpture of 1758 *Bust of a Man*. Positioned on a specially designed eight-sided plinth that echoes the shape of the hall, the bust is elevated by angled mirrors that cover four of the hall's historic busts, dramatically subverting the balance of power in the space by placing the Black figure – and the visitors passing through – on equal plane with the revered white artists of the Western tradition.

The Harwood bust's plinth is finished with burr timber, which, as well as lending a beautiful texture to the plinth, has an allegorical resonance. A burr is formed when the grain of the wood grows around a foreign object or infection – a demonstration of resilience in response to externally inflicted trauma that has a clear parallel with the exhibition's subject and Britain's historic impact overseas.



Bust of a Man by Francis Harwood. Image courtesy of J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles.

From the Central Hall, the path through the exhibition leads visitors into three distinct sections – Sites of Power, Beauty and Difference, and Crossing Waters – each of which has been subtly and sensitively designed by JA Projects to allow the artworks to stand out, while tonally responding to the exhibition’s curatorial themes and creating a sense of rhythm, progression and exploration.

Throughout, a contrasting interplay of brightness and shadow emphasises the individual works and cultivates a sense of drama, while referencing the duality and interdependence of light and dark, freedom and slavery. This is particularly

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pronounced in the brightly lit sculpture halls, where sharply delineated silhouettes accentuate the bodily experience of sharing space.

Reflecting the seriousness of *Entangled Pasts*' aims and content, JA Projects have opted for a sombre colour palette dominated by dark greys, reflective and semi-reflective metals, deep reds and blues. A dark, richly textured, indigo-derived oceanic shade evokes the churning depths of the sea, responding to the seascapes and installations of the Crossing Waters galleries, notably John Akomfrah's three-screen video installation *Vertigo Sea*.

The overall result is a sense of depth and movement, a supportive design that helps visitors navigate a thematic journey through the galleries and across eras, while encouraging emotional responses, changes of pace and moments of reflection. As they journey through *Entangled Pasts*, visitors make connections between different works, explore alternative narratives to conventional Western perspectives on history, and untangle past from present. By the time they emerge from the exhibition into the light, the visitor has become not just a viewer but a participant, encouraged and empowered to challenge age-old assumptions, and to consider their role in shaping a shared future.



JA_P team portrait by Rick Pushinsky

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“From the beginning, JA Projects understood what we were aiming for in terms of drawing out thematic and visual connections between artworks from the present and historic past. The result is a highly poetic and moving sequence of spaces that gently guide the visitor to think in new ways about the entanglement of art and colonial power.”

– Dr Cora Gilroy-Ware, co-curator of *Entangled Pasts* and Associate Professor in the History of Art, University of Oxford

To explore the themes of *Entangled Pasts*, Jayden Ali and the JA Projects team will host a special event on Thursday 21 March, 6.30–8.30pm, examining the intersection between people, place and time through a combination of film, audio, installation and conversation. Tickets are available from royalacademy.org.uk/event/ja-projects-and-friends.

For images and more information about *Entangled Pasts* and JA Projects’ design approach, contact JAProjects@zetteler.co.uk.

Note for editors

Entangled Pasts 1768 – Now: Arts, Colonialism and Change is at the Royal Academy of Arts from 3 February to 28 April 2024.

Hours: 10am – 6pm Tuesday to Sunday
10am – 9pm Friday

Press view: Tuesday 30 January 2024, 10am-2pm

royalacademy.org.uk/exhibition/entangled-pasts

JA Projects

Founded by architect Jayden Ali, JA Projects is a multidisciplinary practice working at the intersection of architecture, urban strategy, art and performance. Aiming to enrich public spaces and inspire the communities that use them, the practice's recent and ongoing projects include a series of interventions on London's Low Line, a walking route connecting Bankside's historic railway architecture; leading a team transforming key areas of Camberwell Station Road on behalf of Southwark Council; and working on the £8 billion Thamesmead Waterfront development. Alongside its work on the urban landscape, the studio pursues its interest in the performative and cultural life of cities through the design and curation of experiences and exhibitions – including *Fashioning Masculinities* at the V&A in 2022, and *Dancing Before the Moon*, the British Pavilion at this year's Venice Biennale.

ja-projects.com

Royal Academy of Arts

The Royal Academy of Arts was founded by King George III in 1768. It has a unique position in being an independent, privately funded institution led by eminent artists and architects whose purpose is to be a clear, strong voice for art and artists. Its public programme promotes the creation, enjoyment and appreciation of the visual arts through exhibitions, education and debate.

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