

The background of the page is a detailed painting of an ancient Egyptian temple interior. Two massive, seated female statues (sistrionesses) are the central focus, flanking a dark, recessed doorway. The statues are adorned with intricate headdresses and have hieroglyphs carved into their chests. The walls above and around the statues are covered in hieroglyphs and colorful friezes. In the foreground, several smaller figures are engaged in various activities: some are seated on the floor, while others stand or move about, providing a sense of scale and daily life within the temple. The lighting is dramatic, highlighting the textures of the stone and the vibrant colors of the wall decorations.

# BRITISH ART NEWS

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## Nela Milic

What is British art? Is it art about Britain? Is it art that resides in Britain? Is it created in Britain? What exactly would be “made in the UK” anyway - the artist, the artefact, the exhibition space or?

The UK prides itself on a diverse population. Upon witnessing the customs officers at the airport, employees of the public transport, shop, café and other public service attendants or NHS staff, one would assume that we are an inclusive nation. However, the visibility of various cultures is not representative of those in positions of power where a monocultural, privileged few influence government policies, provide access to employment and regulate social life. As arts enters and spills over all these areas, it is also affected by their constellation - an arts practitioner has to respect their rules in order to survive or thrive in the society. Those norms can be acceptable, understandable and accessible to many who are born and bred in the UK, but for us who are migrants, asylum seekers and refugees, they can be a challenge. Even the sheer context of the arts industry often deters us from joining and participating in it. Extensive art market, largely reliant on capitalism is very different to some of us who worked in the political milieu unlike British democracy.

However much I appreciate paintings of the English landscape, it is foreign to me, so the beauty of Constable’s countryside or Turner’s seashore does not easily translate into my own geographical register. I feel similarly about portraiture as I have no idea who might these English people be. Even if they are as important as kings and queens, I didn’t go to school in the UK and did not choose to study history to know them. Furthermore, I grew up in socialism that despised monarchies like the one reflected in the British arts tradition. We were not religious, did not go to church or read the Bible even though one might think that as white Europeans, we are Christian with old colonial aspirations. Instead, we were colonised by Ottoman and Habsburg empires for five centuries and so, find affinity with communities that have an experience of slavery. Those experiences of oppression are not the same and we must not equate human tragedies, but these mutual circumstances place us together on the opposing side of the UK’s imperialism. Those on its side still hold the political power and dictate how our artistic production is positioned within that history. In the report published by Centrala, the authors Sara Jones and Jakub Ceglarz concluded that Arts Council England (ACE) diversity measures

“fail to capture Central and East European artists as cultural and ethnic minorities and exclude them from opportunities created for ‘diverse communities’.” (<http://centrala-space.org.uk/research>) This dynamic between the CEE artists and arts institutions is entangled in the East and West relationship, which often sees CEE communities as menial workers whose heritage still inhabits Western imaginary - Slavs were empires’ slaves.



Jobeda, *Wedding Bellas* project @Nela Milic

The labour around breaking down of such conditioning drives my curatorship, artistic and scholarly practice. I engage with artworks and artists that are not interested in promoting their folk, national and cultural traditions by presenting them as expected by the Western agents, auction houses and gallerists. I am more interested in pushing the West back from the mighty of the East provided by its mainly female artists – Vlatka Horvat, Goshka Macuga, Jasmina Cibic, Lina Lapalyte, Larisa Blazic and curators like Ana Sladojevic or Marta Marsicka, Ewelina Warner, Vija Skangale who I have the privilege to supervise in their doctoral endeavour. I am coming across many more as the Co-Chair of Arts and Memory Working Group at Memory Studies Association (MSA): Dimitra Gkitsa, Margaret Tali, Irena Rehorova, Mia David, Irina Troconis, Assel Kadyrkhanova, Magda Schmukalla, Adela Goldbard, Jana Dolecki, Branislava Kuburovic, Tijana Miskovic, Maria Zirra... The work of these women

is one of the reasons why Eastern European artists are on the rise at UK auctions – they make small advances, but there are many and they work together... Living in Britain allows me to encounter such rich work and I am grateful for it. Still, the UK has some length to go to recognise artists and their outputs beyond nationalities we were born into.

**[Nela Milic](#) is an artist and Senior Lecturer at LCC, UAL. She has delivered projects for ROH, Barbican, ACE, John Lewis, Al Jazeera, Oxo Tower, LIFT, London Film Festival etc.**

***Wedding Bellas* opens at Belgrade Cultural Centre on 15 July 2022**

## **Shreya Sharma**

My practice stems from the question, what really constitutes British Art? Being an oral historian, my research focuses on the Partition of 1947, which carved up British India roughly on religious and political lines and uprooted more than ten Million people. My curatorial practice reflects these lived experiences and translates to narratives that mirror them in the cultural spaces. In my opinion, these lived individual experiences are more than just voices, they have the power to decolonize and offer cultural justice. I have worked with various cultural institutions and organisations, joining them in their journey of being more inclusive and bringing forward narratives and experiences that were probably dismissed or unheard. I try to incorporate my lens of decolonization and diversity in my work.

One question I always encountered was how such traumatic events were interpreted in British Art? Although we find many examples of art from Asian Artists that tried to visually exhibit the trauma, we never find such works being included in the category of “British Art”. What is the criteria to constitute British Art? Does a traumatic and life-altering phenomena propagated by the British Empire that changed the lives of millions of people not qualify to be a part of the story of British Art?

We rarely find British artists trying to set their work around such events. Maybe these life-altering events were not important enough for artists to portray in their work?