

WE WON'T STAY SILENT ANY LONGER

Last week I introduced the current exhibition at the Talbot Rice Gallery, Edinburgh: 'The dead don't go until we do'.

From the exhibition booklet:

'As Rebecca Solnit has argued throughout her political writing, we live in an age where forgetting is everywhere.'

See Page 4

WHO IS INVITED TO THE CITY?



For the last two weeks I've been reflecting on the current exhibition at the Talbot Rice Gallery, Edinburgh: 'The dead don't go until we do'.

From the exhibition booklet:

'As Rebecca Solnit has argued throughout her political writing, we live in an age

See Page 7



Wanda Siwak, from the series Siukar Manusia. Matgorzata Mirga-Tas, 2022

THE DEAD DON'T GO UNTIL WE DO

The Talbot Rice Gallery is situated deep within the intestines of a lowering Victorian building at the top of an uphill cobbled street, to the left of the National Museum of Scotland. It's the centre of the city. The whole area is wild architecturally, as it's all built on a hill. A road bridge spans the street I started from, built between two multi-storied tenement buildings which still house residential flats.

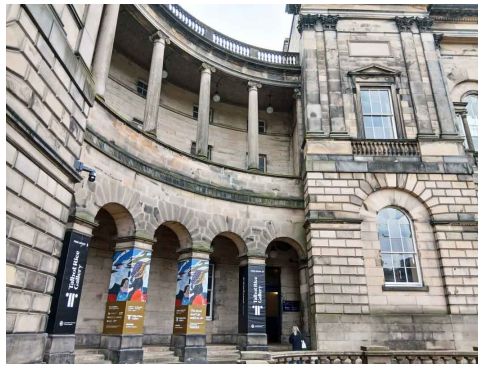
Continued on Page 2



On my way up the hill I passed the old swimming pool, now Dovecot Studios, which was somehow built into this steep incline.



Crossing over the road that's carried by the bridge, I turned left, under an archway supporting a room between two imposing buildings, up the cobbled hill, until I reached the entrance to Old College, part of the University, and the home of the gallery.



Old College, originally 'New College', is a late 18th century/early 19th century building designed by Robert Adam, and completed after his death by Henry Playfair. As well as being the public gallery of the University of Edinburgh, the Talbot Rice Gallery is also part of Edinburgh College of Art. Perhaps that's why I'd never visited it before, not being a great fan of the art associated with institutions. Hidden within a big chunk of University bricks and mortar, I'd never even noticed that it was there.

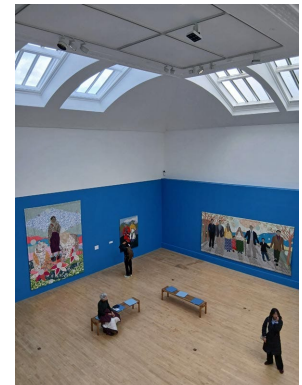


Stepping into a publicly-funded gallery always feels like entering a very specific world of art. In my mind I think of myself as entering into one of the *institutions* of contemporary art; the world of gatekeepers and wannabe history-makers, serious places that

don't need to be interested in what might sell, or where collectors might currently be focussing their attention. If it's a gallery showing contemporary art, my prejudices and limited experience unconsciously make me expect to be bamboozled by bad-quality paintings, or offended by shoddy drawings, or bored by an obscure arrangement of objects that I have to read a page of A4 about before I can begin to relate to what's in front of me.

I got a big surprise. The current exhibition at the Talbot Rice Gallery turned out to be a moving, unfolding exploration through four very different spaces, without a single bad drawing or confoundingly abstruse object in sight.

The first part of the gallery was a large, conventional white cube, but the walls were painted cobalt blue.



Then there were steep stairs leading to a darkened room, which meant that the second exhibit hit me on a visceral level before I could even take in what it was about.



Who is Invited to the City? Amol K Patil

The third space was contrastingly bright; a small, round room, lit from above by a glass cupola in the ceiling.



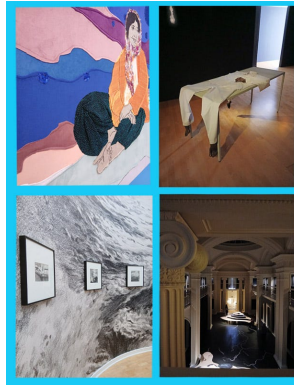
Untitled, 2026. Kang Seung Lee

Finally I walked through double doors into another dark space, this time large and disorienting; I was suspended in a gallery, looking down at an exhibit far below.



Mafolofolo, 2022-ongoing. MADEYOULOOK

The only way out was to walk down the length of the darkened gallery towards the light and the stairs at the end. As I did so, feeling slightly vertiginous, I was engulfed by a loud soundscape of alternating music, voice, and silence.



I deliberately didn't read the booklet before going round the exhibition, wanting to see how everything felt before filling myself up with ideas.

I did, however, know that its title, 'The dead don't go until we do', was based on a poem by Scottish Poet Jackie Kay, who wrote it as a tribute to a friend who had died.

...what I didn't know then was that she hadn't really gone. The dead don't go till you do, loved ones. The dead are still here holding our hands.

Jackie Kay

I knew that I was about to see something about loss, displacement and attempts at cultural erasure. 'As Rebecca Solnit has argued throughout her political writing, we live in an age where forgetting is everywhere. Contemporary politics operates on short timescales, obscuring the power of people and grassroots movements to effect change, which can take years or even decades. But where forgetting can lead to despair, remembering can lead to hope.

The dead don't go until we do brings together four artists who demonstrate how we stand hand in hand with those who came before us...

...In the background of each of these projects is a sense of nature and an awareness of how traditions and systems of knowledge that root communities have been broken. Without a nation, or stable and dignified place to call home, the stories carried from family to family, friend to friend, mean everything. Here, landscapes, plants and animals are also called to bear witness.

From the exhibition booklet

Puffed out from four flights of steep stairs, I stepped into the cobalt room.



Articles about the four artists to come.....

WE WON'T STAY SILENT ANY LONGER



Last week I introduced the current exhibition at the Talbot Rice Gallery, Edinburgh: 'The dead don't go until we do'.

From the exhibition booklet:
'As Rebecca Solnit has argued throughout her political writing, we live in an age where forgetting is everywhere. Contemporary politics operates on short timescales, obscuring the power of people and grassroots movements to effect change, which can

take years or even decades. But where forgetting can lead to despair, remembering can lead to hope.

The dead don't go until we do brings together four artists who demonstrate how we stand hand in hand with those who came before us...

...In the background of each of these projects is a sense of nature and an awareness of how traditions and systems of knowledge that root communities have been broken. Without a nation, or stable and dignified place to call home, the stories carried from family to family, friend to friend, mean everything. Here, landscapes, plants and animals are also called to bear witness'.

The exhibition is a physical journey through four different spaces. Four different installations, each one presenting a perspective on histories of marginalisation, struggle, suffering, and loss.

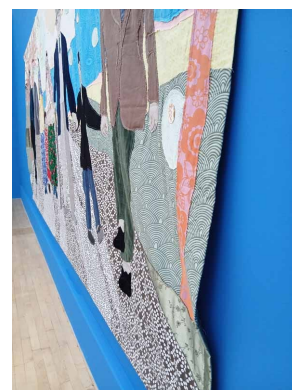
As usual, I hadn't researched anything before going, wanting to feel my own impressions and reactions before getting into explanations and context. On this occasion that led me into some tricky water, particularly with the first exhibit, the work of Roma artist Malgorzata Mirga-Tas.



Her work was the most conventionally presented, in the sense of being large flat images, hung on the walls of a familiar 'white cube' space. But the walls were a strong cobalt blue, which immediately shifted something in my experience. The images themselves were brightly coloured, and the blue walls seemed to lift them up towards me in a way that began to dissolve the sense of being in any kind of familiar art space.

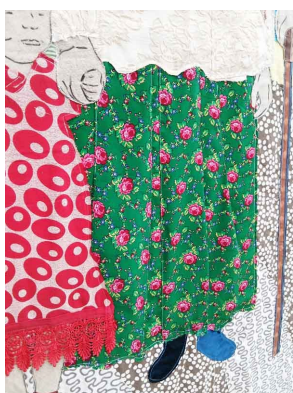


For a start, these were not paintings, but fabric collages.



I've been writing in recent weeks about art and beauty beyond galleries, looking at cushions and lampshades, pottery, clothing, curtains. And now here I was in a very serious art gallery, looking at large crafted rectangles of coloured fabric collage. The stitched shapes felt like a bridge between the broader ideas of art in the world that I had been exploring, and a new, different kind of presence in the 'proper art world', which I had never experienced before.

Colour. Fabric. Stitching. Raw edges. Witnesses to the handling of material; fine threads securing a fringe, a trimmed curve. Three-dimensional folds of stiff sparkling green, folded lace.

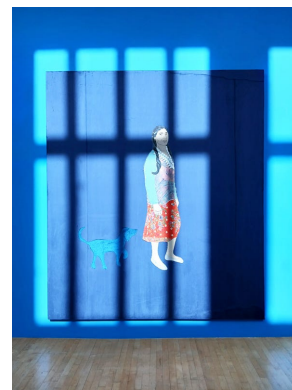


Vera Lackova with daughter, 2026

I didn't know how to respond. It reminded me of being in the Palestinian Museum in Edinburgh last year, when different parts of my mind struggled to reconcile my ideas about art, my visceral responses and personal preferences, with my fragments of knowledge about the situation in Gaza.

Here there were bright collages of family groups, portraits of women and children. They were aesthetically pleasant, not strikingly unusual. But then I read something about the fabrics being from the clothes of people the artist knew, and that the groups were often family and ancestors. I felt myself slowly beginning to shift from assessing the pieces from the perspective of whether or not they worked for me as visual art, to becoming curious about why they had been made, and what the

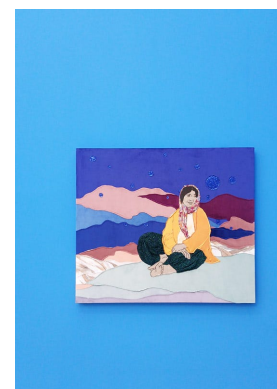
images meant to their maker. Less concerned with how I felt about them, and more interested in the story that they had been made to tell; the circumstances that had birthed them.



Wanda Siwak, from the series Siukar Manusia, 2022.

'Siukar manusia means 'wonderful people' and reminds us of the persecution of Roma people during the Holocaust. Wanda Siwak survived imprisonment in a concentration camp but was never able to find her daughter again after hiding her from the Nazis. On her deathbed she passed the search to her nephew, Edward Dunka, who eventually found her daughter's family living in Ukraine. The Nazis murdered an estimated 250,000 to 500,000 Roma people'.

Gallery information



Kovaciskri Chajori/The Blacksmith's Daughter, 2025

This fabric collage is taken from a stock photograph entitled, 'Antique travel photographs of Constantinople (Istanbul): Gypsy camp'. The work of a blacksmith would have supported their whole family. Here, Mirga-Tas focuses on one of the blacksmith's daughters, using a starry sky to represent ancestral connections. In Romani culture the blacksmith's forge (the furnace used for working metals) symbolises creativity. Blacksmiths are alchemists, poets and artists, who transform matter and bring new things into the world'.

Gallery information

The images were asking me to drop my limited ideas about art what might be, and instead listen to something new. I saw how so much of the way that I approach art is tied to making judgements. Does it move me? Do I feel something? Is it exciting? It began to dawn on me that I had no right to be judging what was here in relation to the perspectives of European art history, or the norms of the art world, or my own personal experiences and desire for aesthetic satisfaction. The only way to be in this exhibition was to switch into receiving mode. What was here; why, and what was the story it wanted to tell?



Jacques Callot. Camping place of the gypsies the preparation of the feast (1612-1635)



Out of Egypt, 2026

'The works in this series challenge some early stereotypes of Roma people. They come from a series of etchings by artist, Jacques Callot called *The Gypsies* or *Life of the Egyptians* (1621-1631). Roma people were mistakenly thought to have come from Egypt, but are originally from India. Callot engraved demeaning messages on his works ('poor beggars') and suggestions that Roma people were criminal ('You who take pleasure in their words, watch out for your coins'). His images make them look dirty, ragged and miserable. At the time, Roma people were seen as outsiders.

While the Roma have often had to flee persecution, most do not choose a 'nomadic life'. The Bergitka Roma - of which Mirga-Tas is a part - have been settled in Poland since the eighteenth century. Mirga-Tas reworks Callot's images to reflect Roma family life, hard work, and home-making. They show people together, caring for each other with dignity'.

Gallery information

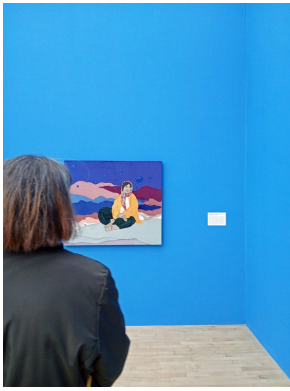
It was me who recently said that I was looking for stories in paintings.

Sometimes I can feel the story through my own experience of the world, as in the case of Samantha Clark's paintings. Other times I make my own story in response to images which may have a different story for someone else, or for the artist; I don't need to be told anything because my own life experiences create a narrative that makes sense to me. And sometimes, this exhibition said to me, you need to be told why a piece of art was made, and what its purpose is designed to be in the world.

In this case, the art matters because of who made it, what their intentions were, and the story it's designed to tell. Does this make it conceptual, or contextual, or political? I don't know and I don't care.



This work is designed to communicate with people outside of the world of its creators; to say, we are here, and this is what matters to us. The stories you have imposed upon us are not real. Please listen.



WHO IS INVITED TO THE CITY?



For the last two weeks I've been reflecting on the current exhibition at the Talbot Rice Gallery, Edinburgh: 'The dead don't go until we do'.

From the exhibition booklet: 'As Rebecca Solnit has argued throughout her political writing, we live in an age where forgetting is everywhere. Contemporary politics operates on short timescales, obscuring the power of people and grassroots movements to effect change, which can take years or even decades. But where

forgetting can lead to despair, remembering can lead to hope.

The dead don't go until we do brings together four artists who demonstrate how we stand hand in hand with those who came before us...

... In the background of each of these projects is a sense of nature and an awareness of how traditions and systems of knowledge that root communities have been broken. Without a nation, or stable and dignified place to call home, the stories carried from family to family, friend to friend, mean everything. Here, landscapes, plants and animals are also called to bear witness.

One of the most interesting things for me was the spatial layout of the exhibition, which leads the viewer through four very different rooms. Four different installations, each one presenting a perspective on histories of marginalisation, struggle, suffering, and loss.

As usual, I hadn't researched anything before going, wanting to feel my own impressions and reactions before getting into explanations and context. Amol Patil's work was quite a contrast to Malgorzata Mirga-Tas (who I wrote about last week). Her work was hung on the walls of a large gallery space painted cobalt blue, brightly lit by natural light from a high ceiling above. I left this by steep stairs that took me up to a door, which warned me that I was about to enter a dark space.

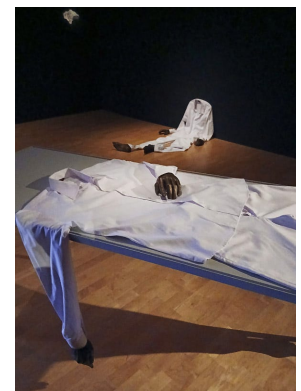
A small room, almost completely without light. On the left hand wall, a film, which seemed at first to be a

soundtrack with no visuals. Then, as I waited, ghostly images started to appear on the black wall; someone walking through a forest at night, feet crunching on branches which you could scarcely see.

'...to a pier
then by ship
to the wharf
to the sirens blaring
loud loud loud bazaars
with a bundle containing
all their belongings.
Wide eyed
from the sights and sounds
of the big city.
All barefoot.
There are neither flowers
nor leaves
Neither trees
nor birds.
Their eyes were shut
dreaming.'

Video text

In front of me, a table, and a white boiler suit, empty of form, hands and feet.



I turn around and, on the wall behind me, some more of the story.

'Amol K Patil's' father passed away when Patil was young, and his grandfather when he was in his twenties, leading him on a journey to understand their creative works. He was inspired by the boldness of their creative practices. As members of the Indian *Dalit* caste ... they used poetry and performance to challenge British colonial rule, the caste system and to give voice to the experiences of those living in poverty.

Who is invited to the city? continues this artistic family occupation. It shares the story of those who moved to Mumbai for a better life, only to end up living in the hardest, darkest of situations. The film - which lends its title to the installation - is partly based on the mythical story of Hanuman, a monkey god who was so hungry he mistook the sun for a fruit and burnt himself¹. It also refers to the difficulty of life in the *chawls* - crowded social housing built by the British for Indian factory workers in the 1900s. *Dalit* poets, like Namdeo Dhasal, who is quoted in the film, protested the living conditions assigned to them by their caste.

While Amol K Patil's drawings imagine looking back through cracks in the walls of the *chawls*, the sculptures remind us of the way lived experiences can leave their mark on bodies. Patil offers a poem on the balcony inspired by his father, representing the

experience of struggling with everyday hardships'.

This was a short version of the longer text in the exhibition booklet, which filled in details such as that the *chawls* built by the British often housed families of 10 in spaces as small as 10 x 12 feet.



and then what?
after all this where should I go?
the daily wages are not enough, is it
enough?
or my needs are off my limits?
at midnight when the dog barks echo in the
streets,
I can hear growling.
my wife lying beside me, I hear it's her.
she said she was full and gave out the last
bread to our son.
where should we go after the day winds up?
where can we rest for a while without our
stomach keeping us awake?
what will be enough?
I see her, her hands are tired but they are
resting now.
her skin is flushed against mine, she says
she can barely feel mine.
I had washed them before but the smell
doesn't go that often.

my colleague fell sick today at work,
we all panicked,
I rushed to get some water from the nearby
shop,
he gave me a bottle, an old one with all
kinds of dents.
I held it in front of him, but he said he did
not need it
we often sit together during the breaks and
have paan*, but water... I guess not
when will this be over?
I stared at the ceiling,
when I was a little boy,
I dreamed of a concrete one
I still do
but I feel... yes... I think I still feel
I still have sensations left in my fingertips,
but I feel tired nowadays
my limbs are weak, swollen up,
I embrace my baby girl; I realize how harsh
my skin has become

the city never slows down,
when I sleep I can still hear,
their voice, their dreams...
what will it cost to sleep well?
at least for a night.
my body will have to work again.
dress again,
walk again,
rush again,
run again,
starve again,
swell again,
harsh again,
breathe again,
at the end of the other night,
I feel it will dream again.

Amol K Patil,
inspired by one of his father's scripts
*Paan leaf is also called betel leaf. It is commonly eaten in In-
dia with tobacco and other things. Whilst labourers would take
paan in their breaks, they may hesitate to drink the water.

I've been sceptical about 'installations' for a very long time, never having seen anything that called itself this that made much sense to me. I think this is the first time I've understood what an installation can actually do.

I didn't need to read a long explanation before I was able to relate to any of it. There was impact the minute I walked into that darkened room and saw footsteps crunching over twigs at night, took in the ghostly boiler suit stretched out over the table with its bare hands and feet. The text on the wall that gave me the overview wasn't a small label beside an image, it was an element of the whole, as were the poems on the wall after I left the darkened room. Even the longer text in the exhibition booklet wasn't the usual conceptual obfuscation, but simply more detail of the story Patil wanted to tell.

'People like my father and grandfather would keep moving from one village to another, passing messages through their art form. In the last few years, I am just like them. I am taking all the conversations about my community and moving from one place to another. Sometimes, performing for a hundred days for new people who do not have any idea about caste politics. My job is to share and pass on the messages'.

Amol K Patil, NO NIIN Magazine, 2025

I've seen contemporary art about war or suffering before, but a lot of the time that work seemed to have been made for the purpose of creating a shock reaction, designed to pull its audience into aspects of the horror of the human condition for the sake of dramatic effect. This was the kind of work which stimulated me so often to think about the purpose of art in the world. Eventually I decided that, for me, art that 'challenges people' by (only) making them feel disturbed or

upset goes against my sense of the good that art can do.

It took me many days after seeing the exhibition to sort out what exactly it was that had been stirred by experiencing this work. How was I supposed to respond? Did I really want to see art that made me feel horrified and miserable, depressed by the recurring and oppressive horrors of the ways that human beings continue to treat other humans?

But this is not that. Mirga-Tas's and Amol K Patil's work is about surfacing hidden histories, bringing them into the light. Their work is an act of honouring and remembrance²; a celebration of survival against incredible odds.

Finally, I understood. I can't do anything about these injustices, this suffering, these unchangeable realities. My role is to be a witness. To not look away. To listen, and in listening, to stand firmly beside those who have to face this fire every day of their lives.

When I first started reading and writing on Substack, I read a long article about the history of art which ended with dismissive comments about the voices of people long invisible now being present in 'the art world'. I don't know anything about what was behind the writer taking this position, but I do know that this exhibition is the first time in a very long time, if ever, that I have stood within the walls of a contemporary art institution and felt that I understood what the art was trying to do.

Footnotes:

1. The exhibition booklet gives more information about this. 'Patil's film... is about the historic movement of people from villages to cities in India. It is a tale of a desperate search for light, illumination and a true wakeful state, partly derived from the mythological Hindu story of Hanuman. Hanuman was a monkey god who became so hungry he mistook the sun for a fruit and tried to eat it, which caused him suffering.

2. In the 1900s, many of those living in rural areas of India were struck by drought. This led many to believe in the promise of prosperity in the city and influenced them to sell their lands with the dream of being able to earn enough to one day buy them back. Many, however, found themselves cast into darkness. This included Patil's grandfather, who sold off lands gifted to him by a British officer in recognition of his theatrical performances, only to become a street sweeper.'

3. Thanks to Rogue Art Historian for the expression 'honouring and remembrance' which she used in a comment, helping me to find a way of expressing what I was grasping for.

Articles included in your edition of the Substack Print:

<https://tamsinhaggis.substack.com/p/he-dead-dont-go-until-we-do?r=1b6gdj>

<https://tamsinhaggis.substack.com/p/we-wont-stay-silent-any-longer?r=1b6gdj>

<https://tamsinhaggis.substack.com/p/who-is-invited-to-the-city?r=1b6gdj>

About Art Pilgrim

Follow the adventures of Art Pilgrim as she leaves art school perplexed, becomes a teacher, and journeys onwards to Italy, North India, and the distant mountains of a Tokyo skyline, before studying Indian art, philosophy, and Sanskrit. Dive with her into complexity theory as an approach to unpicking models of adult learning, then follow her out of academia and back into the world of colour and paint. Watch her struggle to reconnect to her art as she draws on biology, fractals, and the sculptures of ancient India as sources for her painting. Finally, arrive with her back into the Edinburgh present and see what happens next.



This is a Substack Newsletter published every week by Tamsin Haggis at tamsinhaggis.substack.com. Most recent newsletters have an audio version.

There are currently over seventy essays on Substack. The personal story (which, though personal, takes in Indian and Chinese art, complexity theory and teaching) runs from October, 2024 to June, 2025. After that, they cover a range of topics which are stimulated by visiting local galleries and reflecting on what I find there. There's a seven-part series, for example, on Context and Time, which arose after my first visit to the Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art. Check me out!