

LISSON GALLERY

Press Release

Julian Opie

13 February – 19 April 2025
504 West 24th Street, New York
Opening: February 13, 6 – 8pm

“Each retina reads a flat image, but your body senses space, and that – combined with bifocal vision and movement – means that a picture with a carved depth creates a kind of animation, a sort of magic trick as your brain reads, with image and material competing in the same space.” Julian Opie, 2024

Lisson Gallery presents an exhibition of new and recent works by Julian Opie, united by the theme of the walking figure. Encompassing sculptures, animations and paintings, these extend the artistic vocabulary that he has developed over four decades – “a language of forms, of images, of people.”

Four sculptures, installed at staggered intervals on concrete plinths, derive from Opie’s *Busan Walkers* series of 2023. Rendered in high-gloss auto paint on aluminum, each depicts a figure in motion – a passerby originally photographed on the Busan seafront and subsequently translated into a drawing, which in turn served as templates for a series of twenty statues. A simplified profile view of a body has been enlarged – given volumetric depth – and yet the image remains studiously two-dimensional.

Red phone. (2023) and *Yellow phone.* (2023) portray people walking while holding their mobile devices. At once inhabiting the physical world and the virtual space, the figures express a quality – pervasive in Opie’s art – of demonstrative gesture and self-containment. Sleek externality belies a sense of the sealed interior. The man in *Black shorts.* (2023) swings his arms as he walks; the young woman of *Turquoise hair.* (2023) adopts a more extravagant posture, flinging out one arm behind her to merge with her hair.

In this way, Opie invests minor details, a transient stance or a piece of clothing, with emblematic force. In their dual flatness and heft, the *Busan Walkers* invoke a long history of free-standing and architectural sculpture, for instance classical Greek carvings that were originally designed to be viewed frontally, as adornments on buildings, and later reinterpreted as objects in the round; or the monumental bronze statuary of historical figures familiar in cities around the world, their stone plinths rendered here in the more urban language of cast concrete. Opie restates that tension between image and objecthood, conveying visual information through the barest essentials.

He has eliminated practically all individualizing details from his figures. And yet, contrary to the standardized signage that constituted an early inspiration, a sense of ‘real life’ persists. It is discernible in three new animations on LED screens, also deriving from a larger group, in which he depicts lines of schoolchildren in continuous motion. The imagery shares the declarative linearity and flatness of his work in general – the children’s faces and clothes are neutral, differentiated by basic facts of hairstyle, height, or clothing (the anomaly of a baseball cap, the shape of a dress).

These works mark a new development in that Opie hasn’t previously included children in his images of walking crowds, and while the animations are schematic – types who might almost have sprung from an instruction manual – they are also made individual. No two figures are alike. The cyclical movement, too, varies within each animation. As Opie has noted: “Each child walks at a slightly different speed, so the relationships between them change over time like four independent pendulums.”

In contrast to the monodirectional movement of the LED works, three paintings of children walking, made on gridded resin supports, show backward and forward positions. The image is hand painted and deeply engraved into the material, whose stone-like quality and monumental scale evokes imposing decorative friezes on the walls of ancient temples. The rhythm of the animations devolves into something more syncopated, suggestive of two-way motion. Each painting and animation depicts a particular year group: the artist began by making videos of classes in a school. Seen as a totality, the endlessly strolling children amass into a portrait of growing up.

About the artist

The work of Julian Opie is known throughout the world. With public commissions from New York to Seoul, London to Calgary, and an uninterrupted flow of international museum exhibitions, Opie's distinctive formal language is instantly recognizable and reflects his artistic preoccupation with the idea of representation and the means by which images are perceived and understood. "Everything you see is a trick of the light," Opie writes. "Light bouncing into your eye, light casting shadows, creating depth, shapes, colors. Turn off the light and it's all gone. We use vision as a means of survival and it's essential to take it for granted in order to function, but awareness allows us to look at looking and by extension look at ourselves and be aware of our presence. Drawing, drawing out the way that process feels and works brings the awareness into the present and into the real world, the exterior world." Always exploring different techniques both cutting edge and ancient, Opie plays with ways of seeing through reinterpreting the vocabulary of everyday life; his reductive style evokes both a visual and spatial experience of the world around us. Drawing influence from classical portraiture, Egyptian hieroglyphs and Japanese woodblock prints, as well as public signage, information boards and traffic signs, the artist connects the clean visual language of modern life, with the fundamentals of art history.

Julian Opie was born in London in 1958 and lives and works in London. He graduated from Goldsmith's School of Art, London in 1982. Exhibitions have been staged at La Llotja, Palma (2024); Galleri F15, Norway (2023); Mango Museum, Changsha, China (2023); He Art Museum, Shenzhen, China (2022); Berardo Museum, Lisbon, Portugal (2020); Tokyo Opera City Art Gallery, Japan (2019); The National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, Australia (2018); National Portrait Gallery, London, UK (2017); Suwon Ipark Museum of Art, Korea (2017); Kunsthalle Helsinki, Finland (2015); Museum of Contemporary Art Krakow (MoCAK), Poland (2014); and IVAM, Valencia, Spain (2010). Major group exhibitions include The National Art Centre, Tokyo, Japan (2023); National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, Australia (2021), 57th Venice Biennale, Venice, Italy (2017); the Victoria & Albert Museum, London, UK (2016); Barbican Art Gallery, London, UK (2014); Tate Britain, London, UK (2013); and the Shanghai Biennale (2006). Public projects include Porte de Clichy Metro Station, Paris (2024); World Trade Centre Lisbon (2022); City of Melbourne, Australia (2020); Pacific Place, Hong Kong (2020); Fosun Foundation, Shanghai (2019); Taipei, Taiwan and Tower 535, Hong Kong (2016); Heathrow Terminal 1 (1998); and the prison Wormwood Scrubs, London (1994). His design for the band Blur's album 'Best of Blur' (2000) was awarded the Music Week CADS for Best Illustration in 2001.

About Lisson Gallery

Lisson Gallery is one of the most influential and longest-running international contemporary art galleries in the world. Today the gallery supports and promotes the work of more than 60 international artists across spaces in London, New York, Los Angeles, Shanghai and Beijing. Established in 1967 by Nicholas Logsdail, Lisson Gallery pioneered the early careers of important Minimal and Conceptual artists, such as Art & Language, Carl Andre, Daniel Buren, Donald Judd, John Latham, Sol LeWitt, Richard Long and Robert Ryman among many others. It still works with many of these artists as well as others of that generation from Carmen Herrera to the renowned estate of Leon Polk Smith. In its second decade the gallery introduced significant British sculptors to the public for the first time, including Tony Cragg, Richard Deacon, Anish Kapoor, Shirazeh Houshiary and Julian Opie. Since 2000, the gallery has gone on to represent many more leading international artists such as Marina Abramović, Ai Weiwei, John Akomfrah, Susan Hiller, Tatsuo Miyajima and Sean Scully. It is also responsible for raising the international profile of a younger generation of artists led by Cory Arcangel, Ryan Gander, Van Hanos, Hugh Hayden, Haroon Mirza, Laure Prouvost, Pedro Reyes, Wael Shawky and Cheyney Thompson.

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