

LISSON GALLERY

Press Release

Finding My Blue Sky

Lawrence Abu Hamdan | Souad Abdelrassoul | Sonia Balassanian | Huguette Caland | Saloua Raouda Choucair | Sarah Cunningham | Monir Shahroudy Farmanfarmaian | Simone Fattal | Hugh Hayden | Celia Hempton | Paul Heyer | Susan Hiller | Lubaina Himid | Leiko Ikemura | Anuar Khalifi | John Latham | Haroon Mirza | Otobong Nkanga | Luísa Correia Pereira | Laure Prouvost | Michael Rakowitz | Chelenge van Rampelberg | Hrair Sarkissian | Sean Scully | Gor Soudan | Magda Stawarska | Liliane Tomasko | Miko Veldkamp | Barbara Walker

30 May – 26 July 2025

27 Bell Street & 67 Lisson Street, London

Opening: 29 May, 6 – 8pm

*“The show is my love-letter to London, a city that I have continually returned to over the last four decades. It is a journey of retreat and surrender that will be familiar to millions in search of a sense of longing and belonging — of home, of sacred space. *Finding My Blue Sky* invites spectators to indulge in the sensuous curve of artistic endeavors that exist in their own culturally situated space of dreaming—one that allows us to sketch myriad possible routes to modernity, and with this, new ways of looking altogether.”* – Omar Kholeif

Finding My Blue Sky is an exhibition conceived as a constellation, at once epic and polyglot, personal and searchingly political. Curated by Dr. Omar Kholeif, this ambitious group show at Lisson Gallery features over twenty artists from diverse nationalities and eras, including several making their London debut, alongside twelve new commissions. The show elides biographical and cultural difference in overlapping personal narratives: it is at one level a self-reflexive statement, akin to a diary or memoir, evolving out of Kholeif’s formative interactions and new encounters with artists, and his own diasporic heritage (as the son of Egyptian and Sudanese parents). At another, it invites viewers to participate in the creation of meaning – to dream of their own aesthetic politics. Accordingly, the parallel title in Arabic has a distinct inflection: “What is the World that you Dream of?”

Spanning both London spaces, as well as its courtyards, windows, and adjacent street corners, *Finding My Blue Sky* builds into a chorus of voices and histories. Its starting point was a series of conversations between Kholeif and **Lubaina Himid** (b. Zanzibar, 1954), in which Himid recounted her childhood in 1960s England: daily journeys to school by bus, and the experience of accompanying her mother, a textile designer, to colonial ‘independence’ ceremonies at the embassies of African nations. On the walls outside 27 Bell Street is a set of murals by Himid – emblematic enlargements of her *Freedom Kanga* paintings, inspired by East African kanga garments. In one mural, the phrase “There could be an endless ocean” appears beneath a pair of crimson lungs. The text, also a textile of a kind, has an aptly double resonance, channeling the show’s intimation of infinitude – its appeal to visitors’ boundless imaginations – while voicing a darker hypothesis concerning the climate emergency.

As a garment, the kanga begins with a simple piece of fabric, woven with text, that loops and repeats to assume the shape of a body. The exhibition unfolds in a similar fashion to establish formal and thematic patterns, encompassing paintings, drawings, sculptures, and other media. Inside the galleries, Polish-born British artist **Magda Stawarska** (b. 1976) presents her most ambitious work to date. A multi-paneled piece that ascends up the gallery walls as if to the sky. It is a dreamscape on copper and aluminium—a spectral gathering of portals developed through an intensive process of silk screen-printing, painting and sculpting by the artist. These scenes are developed from Stawarska’s intimate process of ‘inner listening’—a practice devised by traversing cityscapes much akin to a flaneur. Nearby, the photographic work, *Air Conditioning* (2022) by Lebanese British artist **Lawrence Abu Hamdan** (b. 1985) suggests an expansive

Turneresque sky. The image was in fact aggregated from open-source data from the United Nations Digital Library, recording the violations of Lebanese airspace by military aircrafts: political realities lurking inside the picturesque.

The paintings and drawings of Lebanese French American artist **Huguette Caland** (1931-2019), who lived variously in Beirut, Paris and Los Angeles, prefigure Himid's *Kangas*, among other works in the show, through their interplay of corporeal and abstract elements. The centrifugal design of the woodcarving *Spiral Rhythm* (1985-87) by Lebanese painter and sculptor **Saloua Raouda Choucair** (1916-2017) finds a counterpart, meanwhile, in *Wave Under the Sky* (2024), a new ceramic work by Syrian-Lebanese-American sculptor **Simone Fattal** (b. 1942), depicting a coiled wave.

The exhibition acts as a frame for several artists who remained under-appreciated during their lives, including the Portuguese painter and poet **Luísa Correia Pereira** (1945-2009) – whose watercolours and paintings sublimated a queer sensibility into hard-edged colour and fluid gesture. Pereira lived in Paris in the 1970s, at the same time as Caland, where both figures explored their interests – reflective of a larger feminist ethos – in deconstructing and transfiguring the body. These pioneering women are seen in dialogue with French artist **Laure Prouvost** (b. 1978), who also revels in transgressive transformations in her distinctive, playful-heroic register in *Becoming You*, 2023.

Finding My Blue Sky is characterised by many such bridging moments – by works of art that contract and conjoin the exhibition's themes of translation, origin, memory and history (both individual and collective). *Soft Ending* (1969), an early work by **Sean Scully** (b. Dublin, 1945), stems from a transformative trip to Morocco and reminiscences of fabric dripping from, in and around Marrakech and the Atlas Mountains. It is coupled in the exhibition with a newly created work by Scully, *Rabat Blue* (2024), that constitutes what Kholeif describes as “a return to his propensity for constant interpolation and experimentation. It's Matisse, Picasso, but also Morocco. It is also, in my view, me and him, and London, it is one pure distillation of Scully's emotional abstraction.”

A similar confluence of formalist construction and emotional subcurrent is discernible in the works of **Monir Shahroudy Farmanfarmaian** (1922-2019), an Iranian artist who emigrated to New York in 1944 and whose collection of folk artefacts profoundly shaped her practice. Drawings from the 1970s through to the 1990s – populated by ornate, fractal-like motifs – anticipate the iconic wall sculpture *Four Seasons* (2011), in which the artist blended cut-glass mosaic techniques with the languages of geometric abstraction and minimalism.

Kholeif has conceptualised the 67 Lisson Street gallery as a ‘church,’ its displays suggesting a playful take on religious iconography and ritual. A new triptych by Spanish Moroccan painter **Anuar Khalifi** (b. 1977) restages the Holy Trinity. The interplay of Christian and Islamic traditions is extended through various other allusions, whether to the chequerboard floors of northern European painting, or the shadowless designs of Arabesque miniatures. In an equivalent bridging of histories and genres, the photographic diptych *La Peau* (2003-23) by **Hrair Sarkissian** (b. Damascus, 1973) casts the body as a desert landscape.

Swiss Hungarian painter **Liliane Tomasko** (b. 1967) makes a striking cameo with a new work, *Shapeshifter (Chilled to the Bone)* (2024), which Kholeif has noted – in terms that extend to the overall project – “serve as a seat of multiple desires that are stitched together, unstitched, and re-stitched.” In reflection of this plurality, the exhibition will be followed by a new publication and active public programme, which engages with heterogeneous social histories and ways of looking. Kholeif took Lisson Gallery's neighbourhood as a key site of focus—a place marked concurrently by gentrification and deprivation, a subject explored in a suite of ambitious commissioned ‘Demolition’ paintings by **Celia Hempton** (b. Stroud, 1982), who also presents new paintings from her ‘Kidney’ and ‘Surveillance’ series.

Finding My Blue Sky invites each viewer to contemplate or cross the boundary between thought and feeling, combining a critical response with the urgings of memory and history. For Kholeif, the cumulative effect could be: “An exhibition as pure expression of feeling. I have done this the only way that I know how – by invoking the voices of the artists that I have journeyed with, or vicariously through, over the years.”

About Omar Kholeif

Professor Omar Kholeif, PhD is an award-winning author of prose and poetry; an artist of lyric and performance; a curator in the physical and the virtual spheres; a cultural historian of the academy and its peripheries; and a broadcaster who explores the public's understanding of the technology and its relationship to art, culture, and social justice. They are the founder and principal of artPost21, a not-for-profit cultural agency, publishing house, and collection that explores art

and culture at the margins of society. Since 2018, they have served as the director of collections and senior curator, Sharjah Art Foundation, UAE.

They previously served as Manilow senior curator and director of global initiatives at the MCA Chicago; curator at Whitechapel Gallery, London; senior curator of Cornerhouse, Manchester and FACT, Liverpool. A longtime trustee, and former programme director of SPACE, London they are ambassador for Mental Health Research UK and visiting research professor at the school of arts and the creative industries at MIMA Research Institute, Teesside University, UK. Kholeif's writing, filmmaking and curatorial practice often tackle issues that eschew official records or history, reflecting on matters such as the aesthetics of mental health, the contours of gender, and the politics of code-switching. Forthcoming books include biographies of Huguette Caland and Lubaina Himid CBE RA.

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, including many it continues to represent such as Art & Language, Daniel Buren, Dan Graham, John Latham, and Richard Long, alongside other iconic figures notably Carmen Herrera, Lee Ufan and the 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, Hiroshi Sugimoto 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, Otobong Nkanga, Laure Prouvost, Pedro Reyes and Wael Shawky.

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