

Khalif Tahir Thompson: *Send in the Clowns*

Exhibition: 8 October–7 November 2026

16 Wharf Road, London N1 7RW



Khalif Tahir Thompson, *Two Brothers*, 2026
Oil, acrylic, handmade paper, and pleather on canvas
180 x 120 cm
70 7/8 x 47 1/4 in
© Khalif Tahir Thompson
Courtesy the artist and Victoria Miro

Victoria Miro is delighted to present *Send in the Clowns*, an exhibition of new paintings by Khalif Tahir Thompson. This is the gallery's first solo presentation of Thompson's work since announcing representation of the artist.

Born and based in Brooklyn, Khalif Tahir Thompson invites viewers into the everyday lives of his subjects through vibrant domestic scenes, full of texture and pattern that create an expansive form of portraiture, both individual and collective, weaving through time.

Send in the Clowns takes its title from the 1973 theatrical ballad written by Stephen Sondheim and famously sung by Jazz vocalist Sarah Vaughn. 'The phrase "send in the clowns" is a metaphor for bringing in comedic relief or distractions when a plan fails or a situation turns chaotic,' says Thompson. 'For me, it resonates deeply: it reflects the layered facets of my life and experiences, the ways we deploy humour to mask vulnerability, and it speaks to how I respond to tragedy.'

It was amidst the global COVID-19 pandemic that Thompson first began delving into his family archives, seeking inspiration. After his maternal grandmother Betty passed away in 2006, her boxes of family photo albums were placed into storage for sixteen years until Thompson's sister was able to make the road trip from New York to Florida to retrieve them. These images provided comfort and reprieve from the chaos and uncertainty of that time.

What started as a small group of paintings honouring his familial ancestry evolved into a series that probed his interest in storytelling and artistic languages found within art history.

In these new paintings, Thompson takes direct inspiration from Y2K Black American aesthetic, creating scenarios from his own childhood growing up in Brooklyn and today. The subjects range from his older siblings to unknown characters drawn from his family archive. By layering memory with imaginative elements, Thompson extends these narratives beyond personal history to explore the passage of time and nature of introspection.

Layered, too, is the painting surface – with collaged elements including paper and fabric, along with improvised arrangements of letters and numbers. As the curator Debbie Meniru noted, ‘As with the other collaged elements, they challenge the illusory space of the painting, making its physicality come to the fore. These symbols aren’t supposed to be deciphered. They force us to look beyond our desire to decode. To me, they seem like signs of life or perhaps an untold story, while Thompson has described them as “visual noise”. Like musical notes, they bring rhythm and sound to the paintings. Not a clear 4/4 beat but moments of syncopation, heady emotional swells and quiet refrains. They suggest more is at play than we are able to comprehend just by looking. Thompson asks us to imagine too.’

The artist states, ‘I believe painting can be a tool in considering the emotional and psychological complexity of an individual’s story and identity. Creating imagery that connects one to the realm of another, I alter perception and invoke empathy towards my subjects, depicting their reality across a visceral lens.’

About the artist

Khalif Tahir Thompson (born 1995) completed his BFA at Purchase College, New York, and MFA in Painting/Printmaking at Yale School of Art.

Solo exhibitions include Khalif Tahir Thompson: *Beautiful Land* at Zidoun-Bossuyt Gallery, Paris (on view until 18 July 2026), Zithe Harvey B. Gantt Center for African-American Arts + Culture, North Carolina, USA (2025), and Zidoun-Bossuyt Gallery, Luxembourg, Paris and Dubai (2022–2024).

Group exhibitions include *Bold: New Voices in Contemporary Art*, Indianapolis Museum of Art, Indiana (on view until 28 June 2026). The artist was featured in the three-person exhibition *The Stories We Tell: Tidawhiney Lek, Emil Sands, Khalif Tahir Thompson*, held at Victoria Miro, London (November 2025–January 2026).

Thompson was selected for Kehinde Wiley’s Black Rock Senegal residency, Senegal; the Yaddo Artist Residency, Saratoga Springs, New York; and AAF/Seebacher Fine Arts Prize, Salzburg, Austria.

His work is in collections including, among others, Rubell Museum Collection, Miami, Florida; Saint Louis Art Museum, Missouri; Pérez Art Museum Miami, Florida; Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, Kansas City, Missouri; Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, Texas; Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture, Washington, DC, USA; Indianapolis Museum of Art, Indiana; Kalamazoo Institute of Arts, Michigan; Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Richmond; Toledo Museum of Art, Ohio; Ulrich Museum of Art, Wichita State University, Kansas; and Société Générale, Paris, France.

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