

## Esteban Jefferson: *British Museum*

9 October – 28 November 2026

Herald St presents *British Museum*, our first solo exhibition with Esteban Jefferson, which follows his inclusion in *A Gauzy Flame* at our East London premises (2023) and his recent participation in *Greater New York* at MoMA PS1 (2026).

Jefferson's research-led practice centres on the legacies of colonialism as encoded in urban space, often through public monuments and museums. Bringing together new paintings, photographs and a sound installation, this exhibition focuses on contested artefacts within the collection of the British Museum, situated moments away from the gallery's Museum St premises.

During a visit to the Acropolis Museum in Athens, Jefferson observed that the new Parthenon Gallery had been architecturally designed to incorporate blank spaces openly reserved for sculptures that are currently held in the British Museum, including one of the six original marble maidens, or Caryatids, from the Erechtheion temple. Photographs by Jefferson of these blank spaces, and gaps in the surviving ancient marble frieze, where white plaster casts have been used to represent missing sections, are on view in the exhibition.

Jefferson began taking regular trips to the British Museum, where he photographed fragments of the frieze as it is installed in London, alongside other contested objects on display, documenting how they are visually contextualised within their ambient surroundings during the museum's opening hours. He noticed that, unlike the refurbished museum in Athens, the British Museum's galleries were occupied by elements of visual clutter designed to regulate climate conditions and slow ageing of works on display, including industrial machinery, space heaters, fans and temperature monitors. Jefferson spotlights how these devices are a patchwork solution to regulate the museum's climate, as there is not an adequate permanent system in the building. He translates these observations into paintings that deliberately juxtapose the ancient artworks with modern devices.

The works continue Jefferson's signature style, in which parts of his paintings, characterised by greys and rust tones and derived from evidential photography, are intentionally left to appear unfinished. Technically rendered complex areas are combined with washed swathes of colour or exposed linen, deliberately drawing the viewer's attention to specific components of the paintings.

An accompanying sound installation, emanating from a period-style heat vent in the wall, incorporates field recordings made at the British Museum, including alarms and the sounds of visitors. Sneakers squeaking, conversations, guards telling visitors not to touch the objects, alarms sounding are isolated and brought to the foreground. Jefferson indicates the pure ideal of a museum experience as a totally peaceful, contemplative environment, is often not the lived reality.

The exhibition does not focus solely on the Parthenon Frieze, but also includes paintings of an Assyrian wall relief in *Northwest Palace Wall Relief (King Ashurnasirpal II, Nimrud)* / *Andrews Sykes Electric Heater* (2026) and *Roman Busts in Bust of Aphrodite (Praxiteles, Rome)* / *Industrial Fan* (2026). Here, Jefferson suggests that the conversation extends to many other contested artefacts, such as the Benin Bronzes, as well as objects subject to lesser public debate, including those whose restitution involves countries with fewer economic resources or those affected by ongoing conflicts. The exhibition connects the Parthenon Frieze and Assyrian wall reliefs to broader debates surrounding colonial power, ownership, stewardship, hypocrisy and the symbolic legacy of the British Empire, asking how museums can ethically present global histories while addressing contested ownership. More pertinently, it asks whether the British Museum will meaningfully respond to restitution claims, or whether institutional and governmental resistance will continue.

Jefferson adds: "Historically, the British argument against repatriation has hinged on the British Museum's role as caretaker for a variety of artifacts around the globe. The presence of these industrial fans and space heaters visually alludes to the museum's inability to properly maintain its climate, and thus its inability to properly preserve artefacts that rely on specific climate conditions. In reality, many of the objects in the British Museum's collection have degraded over the decades they have been in the stewardship of the British Museum, or have gone missing entirely."

### About Esteban Jefferson

Esteban Jefferson (b.1989, New York, US; lives and works in New York, US) received his BA and MFA from Columbia University. Esteban Jefferson's practice focuses on issues of race, identity, and the legacies of colonialism. His works are journalistic in nature; they reflect on the way in which society perceives discomfiting histories, and act as a gateway to examining the past.

Recent institutional exhibitions include *Greater New York*, MoMA PS1, New York, US (2026); *Spray and Stitch*, Centraal Museum, Utrecht, NE (2024); *May 25th, 2020*, Goldsmiths CCA, London, UK (2023, solo); *Fire Figure Fantasy*, ICA, Miami, US (2022); and *Petit Palais*, White Columns, New York, US (2019, solo). Jefferson's practice has been featured in titles including *The New York Times*, *Art Monthly*, *Artforum*, *The Brooklyn Rail*, *Art in America* and *ArtReview*. Works by Jefferson are held in prominent public collections including The Hessel Museum of Art, NY; Institute of Contemporary Art, Miami, FL; The Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, Quebec; and the Speed Art Museum, Louisville, KY (all US).

– Text by Laurie Barron