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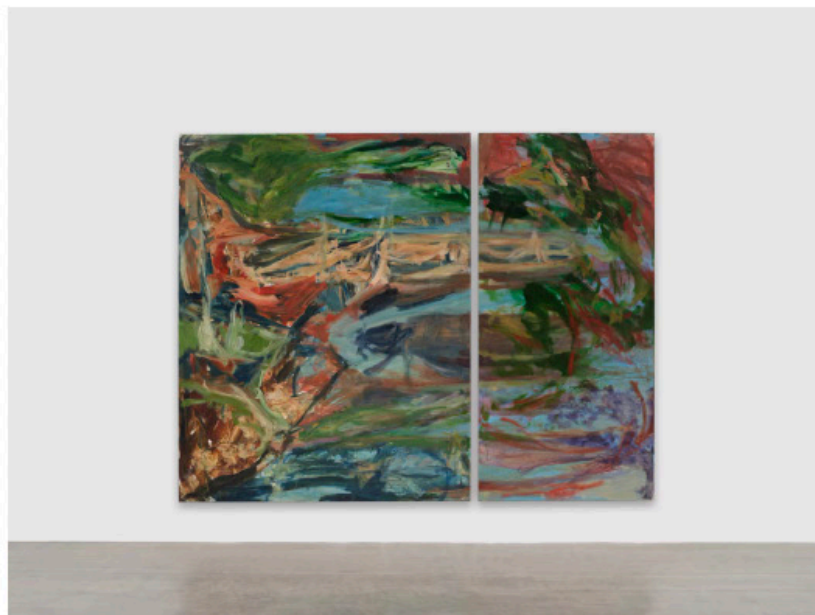
Exhibitions // News

Late UK artist Sarah Cunningham honoured with Nottingham Contemporary show

Exhibition next autumn marks return of the artist's work to the city where she was born

Gareth Harris

22 December 2025



Sarah Cunningham, *Flight Path*, 2024
credit: Sarah Cunningham. Courtesy Lisson Gallery

The UK gallery Nottingham Contemporary has announced plans for the first institutional solo exhibition

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year. The show, the largest presentation of her work to date, is due to open next autumn (dates to be confirmed).

“This is a particularly significant and moving moment because it marks a deeply meaningful homecoming: the return of the artist’s work to the city where she was born and raised,” says Lisson Gallery which announced representation of the artist in July 2023. Cunningham worked at Nottingham Contemporary as a gallery assistant.

Cunningham died in November 2024 aged 31; she was hit by a northbound Northern line train after stepping on to the track and walking down a tunnel at Chalk Farm station in north London. According to [the BBC](#) a coroner ruled that her death was accidental.

She graduated with a Masters from the Royal College of Art (RCA) in 2022 and held her first solo exhibition, *The Crystal Forest*, at Lisson Gallery in London in 2023.

Originally from the Wollaton area of Nottingham, a city in the centre of England, Cunningham created a significant body of work after leaving the RCA. Her practice developed from her fascination with the natural world, both the urban jungle and especially the jungles of Central America.

Her [distinctive, abstract style](#), with fleeting figurative imagery, was recognisable by exaggerated brushwork often made with an extended brush fashioned from scraps of wood by Cunningham. She frequently painted through the night, a habit formed when she held down jobs at two galleries—including the Nottingham Contemporary stint—as well as a delivery driver, often working a late or early-hours shift.

She eschewed the use of preparatory sketches “or any sense of a formal roadmap” and told the interviewer Lee Gordon that she often started a painting “by working on the floor with rags and brushes”. She added: “I treat the

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surface of the painting as a palette, the paint is pushed and pulled.”

Cunningham also exhibited in Aspen, Berlin, Los Angeles and Canada and had a longstanding relationship with the Bomb Factory Art Foundation in London.



Sarah Cunningham
courtesy: Lisson Gallery

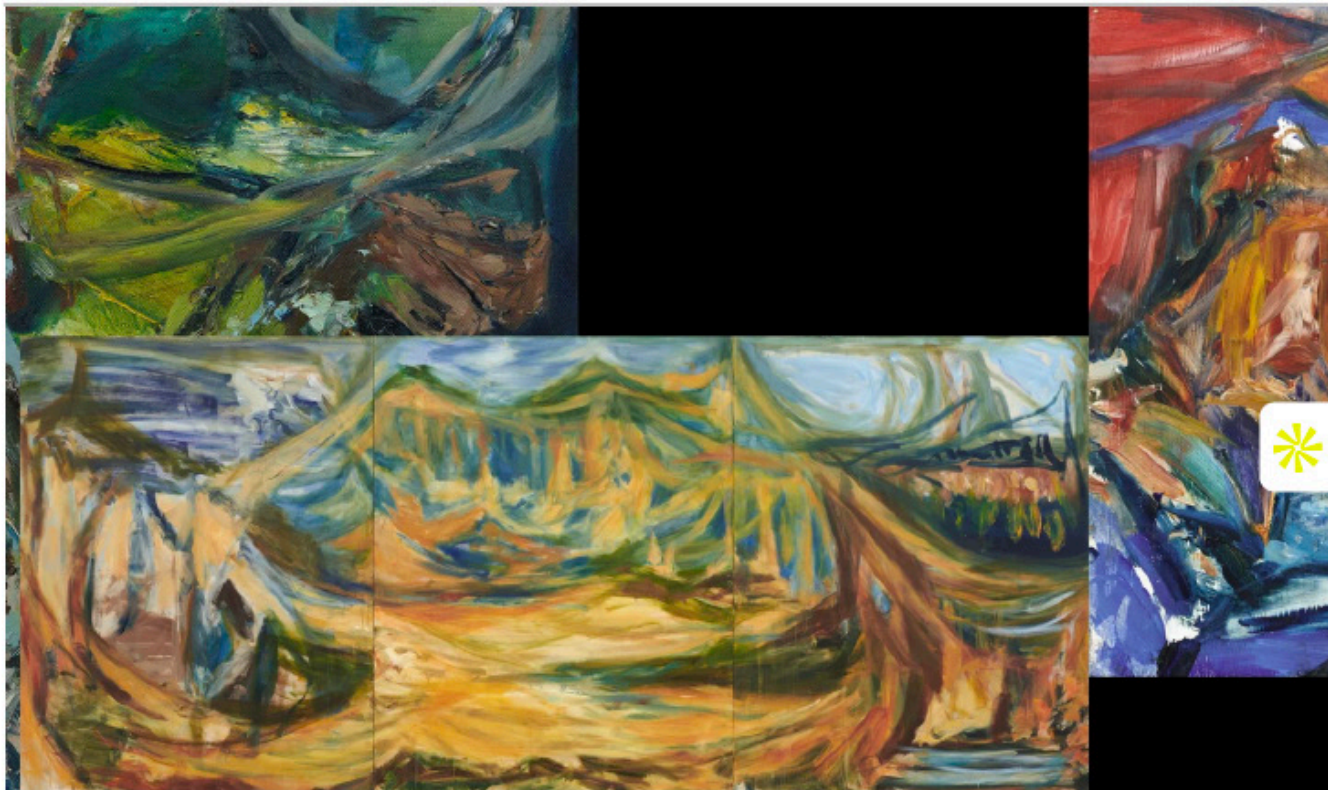
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Art

The Artsy Vanguard 2023–2024: Sarah Cunningham

Gabrielle Schwarz

Nov 6, 2023 1:27PM. Updated Jan 31, 2024 2:26AM.



It's difficult to describe precisely what Sarah Cunningham's paintings depict. She works in oil, sometimes on large linen or cotton canvases, and other times on small pieces of board. The images that emerge from the thick, gestural strokes and washes of green, red, yellow, white, or black—give a sense of landscape. There's the peak of a mountain, a canopy of leaves, a

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dissolve into abstraction.

This is all by design. “I am interested in creating this sense of place only to tear it down—and then build it up again,” Cunningham said in an interview. “I’m dealing with representation and I’m trying to rethink what we mean it to be.”



Portrait of Sarah Cunningham in her studio. © Sarah Cunningham. Photo by George Darrell. Courtesy of Lisson Gallery.



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The Wick List

Viewing Sarah Cunningham: The Crystal Forest

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Above Sarah Cunningham: The Crystal Forest, Exhibition view. 67 Lisson Street, London. 12 July – 26 August, 2023. © Sarah Cunningham, Courtesy Lisson Gallery

12 July – 26 August 2023

www.lissongallery.com/exhibitions/sara-cunningham-the-crystal-forest

Connecting art and nature, Sarah Cunningham: The Crystal Forest has arrived at Lisson Gallery. In her first solo exhibition with the gallery, Cunningham presents a new body of work exploring psychological spaces through landscapes that, with layers, adapts and takes on a new character. Taking inspiration from JG Ballard's science-fiction novel, *The Crystal World*, the



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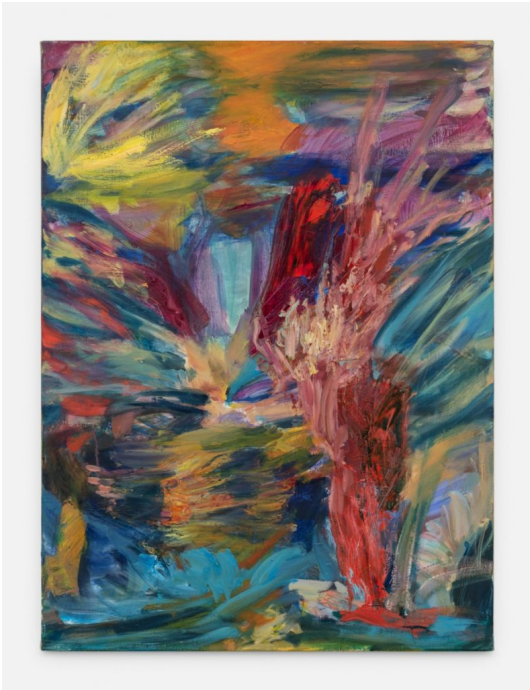
viewer beyond the surface and into new worlds and forest landscapes.

Expressing herself through mark marking, Cunningham's paintings take on a new life. Adding elements of nature, such as tree branches to the end of her paintbrushes, each brush stroke combines the sway of a branch in the wind with her gestural movements. Stretching her whole body across the canvas, the sun incarnates the work. Often working through the darkness of the night, the dawn feels richer as the sun rises, bringing a sensual feeling to the work of a cold night to the warmth from the dappling rays of the sun as it starts to rise. Immerse yourself in the kaleidoscopic forests of Sarah Cunningham this weekend and head to Lisson Gallery.

Artnet News

Editors' Picks: 12 Events for Your Art Calendar This Week

By Artnet News, March 3, 2022



Sarah Cunningham, *In Its Daybreak, Rising*.
Photo courtesy of Almine Rech, New York.

4. "Sarah Cunningham: In Its Daybreak, Rising" at Almine Rech, New York

British painter Sarah Cunningham gets her first U.S. solo show, featuring her nature-inspired canvases, which straddle the line between landscape and abstraction. The artist often works late into the night, sometimes through to the sunrise, drawing inspiration from Old Master night scenes by the likes of Peter Paul Rubens and El Greco, as well as the liminal state at the boundary of sleep and wakefulness, in the in-between time from one day to the next.

—Sarah Cascone

Cultured Painter Sarah Cunningham Does Her Best Work at Night

By Alexis Schwartz, March 3, 2022



Sarah Cunningham in her studio in Nottingham, UK.
Photography by Fabula Images.

It's 2:00 AM in Nottingham, England and painter Sarah Cunningham is just beginning her workday. In her studio, the abstractionist is surrounded by current works in progress—massive, somewhat erratic, and chaotic bursts of color inspired by lagoons, fauna, and dreams, the latter only inhabiting the young artist's mind in her brief moments of slumber. Instead, Cunningham, 28, prefers to stretch consciousness to the brink, sometimes forcing herself to stay awake for 40 hours, tapping into another dimension before painting. It's in these moments of fragmented reality that she prefers to exist, but the journey here has been less than straightforward.

After earning her BFA at Loughborough University, Cunningham's art practice was relegated to a nocturnal schedule. "During the day, I would drive a van carrying smoothie-making bikes all over the UK, a new city every day, to and from Nottingham. I was on the road all the time, often sleeping in service station car parks on the side of the motorway" she says. Though the gig was less than ideal, it did allow her to daydream. "It is so repetitive because you're just staring at the same road for so many hours a week: all I could think about was painting." Working up to three jobs during the day, Cunningham would moonlight as an artist, painting literal moonlight punctuating figments of branches. Sometimes, she would spend up to three years on a single piece, staring at it, contemplating it during her drives, flipping it over and over until deciding it was done.

Cultured
Painter Sarah Cunningham Does Her
Best Work at Night

By Alexis Schwartz
March 3, 2022

It wasn't until a chance opportunity arose did Cunningham take the plunge into a full-time art career. In 2018, after coming across the La Wayaka Current Artist Residency in Armila—a remote city in Panama's Guna Yala province—she found her path. However, she was blissfully unaware of how drastically her future was about to change.

Ahead of her journey to Armila, Sarah Cunningham lost her baggage. She had nothing she needed as she headed into the rainforest on a rickety plane. Yet, upon arrival, the indigenous community there gifted her clothing, food, shelter, and art supplies. She spent her days locked in the entangled forests, painting and attending dream ceremonies with locals. "They'd have meetings where they'd discuss their dreams together as a community," she explains, "The way they interpreted their dreams was so informative for me. I don't have a dream then make a painting based on that, but I've noticed there is a dream somewhere in the painting, often halfway through or towards the end of my process." Once her residency ended, Cunningham decided to pursue painting professionally, attempting to convey the rainforest's emotional stamp that had consumed her thoughts.

Though they lack any literal representation of tropical fauna, Cunningham's paintings evoke the same organized pandemonium of nature's strata. "There's always a struggle when you think about the forest," she explains. "You'd initially believe everything is working together, but all the plants are fighting to survive, fighting to get light." Her use of light and often violent brushstrokes do mirror the chaos of natural ecosystems, and yet, cleverly positioned moments of space allow the eye to breathe. It's an intelligent decision reflected in various uses of scale and color—each piece somehow terrifying and optimistic.

In her first United States solo show, "In Its Daybreak, Rising," on view through March 12 at Almine Rech Gallery's New York outpost, Cunningham delivers a reverent performance for a young artist, even more astounding as her current studies at the Royal College of Art have yet to conclude. In a market overwhelmed with large-scale work, Cunningham plays with size. Her show is the debut of her largest piece to date, a hypnotizing three-panel painting titled *A Wounded World Still Holds Us* (2022), while the smallest piece, *Echo Chamber* (2021), can be held in your hands. "I love the smaller pieces, they're a microscopic view of the forest," Cunningham explains, and they often take her the longest time to paint. It's a thoughtful play on abstraction, a little moody, a lot colorful. With the show selling out before its first weekend, it seems the dawn of Sarah Cunningham is just on the horizon.