

## GAGOSIAN

*A Magazine Curated By...*

**Social Works II, London**  
*Antwaun Sargent in conversation with Albert Shyong*

Albert Shyong



*Tyler Mitchell, Georgia Hillside (Redlining), 2021*

A culmination of histories tied to the turbulent crossings of the Atlantic, the exhibition series *Social Works* explores the notion of space through the lens of the African diaspora. Presented by the newly-appointed Gagosian director Antwaun Sargent, the first iteration was conceived in New York this June as *Social Works I*, before travelling to London as *Social Works II*.

Shifting discourse across the pond, *Social Works II* occupies a position in geographical space that not only confronts the implications of British colonialism, but examines the communities produced as a result. Sargent contextualises different conceptions of space, ranging from physical to psychic, through identities born within the African diaspora. It becomes the genesis of a speculative approach that both recounts the past and puts forward a vision of the Black Atlantic, similarly to Grace Wales Bonner, the curator of *A#22*, whose work is featured in the

exhibition. Drawing on Joseph Beuys' 'social structure', *Social Works* demonstrates a system in which space goes beyond artistic practice and reaches further to engage with the community.

**Albert Shyong: *Social Works II* recently opened at Grosvenor Hill, rooted in the exploration of African diaspora and their relationship with different conceptions of space. I'm curious about your first awareness of spatial implications. How has that informed the creation of this exhibition?**

Antwaun Sargent: This show is really about location. Location as history. Location as material. Location as space and place. I think this idea is present in different aspects of my life, which is why I wanted to do the show. I wanted to make sure that we were thinking about history and identity and the ways in which those things collide with notions of community and notions of location.



*Social Works II, Installation view, 2021*

**I find it quite intriguing that along with physical, public and institutional space, you make it a point to explore psychic space as well. What is the significance of psychic space that exists in tandem with physical space?**

The idea of psychic space, psychological space or spiritual space – it's something that is very important to us all. Most of how we live is in our heads, in our minds, in our bodies. I think that space is often overlooked. From Manuel Mathieu's canvases to Grace Wales Bonner's sculptural installation, you have a conjuring of the psychological, the psychic, the spiritual. I think that's an important space that folks occupy and that we don't necessarily always think about. We've been so hyper-focused on the body as space, or on the literal ground, which is obviously explored in *Social Works*. But I also think that the added dimensionality of the psychic or the spiritual is equally important to who we are and how we navigate and negotiate space.

**You mentioned Grace Wales Bonner and her installation *Darkness and Light*, which I'd love to hear more about. It speaks to connecting with cultural roots and it's comprised of speakers, books, and so-called 'spiritual items', such as a carnation or a conch shell. Could you contextualise some of these artefacts?**

Grace's practice as an artist and as a designer has always been about exploring through material and through intellect on the Black Atlantic. The installation is about conjuring histories and figures through these cultural items and the sonic components. They're personal and they're connected to a larger history, as she's collected these items on her travels in the African diaspora. Her practice, including the way she makes clothing, is rooted in these black and brown communities.



*Grace Wales Bonner, Darkness and Light, 2021*

**In *Social Works II*, only one of the curated artists, Rick Lowe, is represented by Gagolian, if I'm not mistaken. That's even less than in New York, where Titus Kaphar and Theaster Gates were both represented. You've really been given carte blanche to transform Grosvenor's Hill. I'm curious about the spatial notion of exhibiting these works at a recognised institution like Gagolian, and geographically in Mayfair.**

Both shows were responsive to the literal space that they were presented in, which was one gallery in Chelsea, New York and one gallery in Mayfair, London. I also think both shows respond to the national context in which they are being shown. *Social Works I* presented American artists primarily thinking about America, like David Adjaye literally using New York subsoil – limestone was what made up his sculpture.

This show being in London, the British capital, thinks about how we've come to have the histories that have produced an African diaspora. Britain plays a large, problematic, and violent role in producing that identity. But from that, there has been an unbelievable production of community and identity that have come out of those circumstances of colonialism and imperialism. Keeping those histories very much at the forefront of my mind, I wanted to create a show that was international in scope, across the African diaspora. You have all of these dual identities from a lot of the artists, and having it presented here in London really contends with the histories that have produced what we now have come to call the African diaspora.

**Witnessing this evolution from *Social Works I* in New York and travelling to *Social Works II* in London, how have you drawn on the unique history of each city? For example, the**

**Harlem Renaissance or the British colonialism that we've just talked about. How do you utilise this geographical history within time and space?**

I mean, that's how the artists are utilising it, right? You have David Adjaye's *Asaase II* sculpture that contemplates the passage of time. Isaac Julien's film *Lessons of the Hour* examines the voyage of Frederick Douglass from America to Scotland, and highlights his famous speeches on photography that really resonate today. There's a play with not only material, but also with the way that we're thinking about figures throughout history and how they still reverberate today. Lubaina Himid's work, a study for *A Fashionable Marriage* from the 1980s, brings up some of the very issues that we're still talking about, which tell us that these concerns or questions, and the way that artists organise themselves into communities, isn't new. It's about the sweep of histories and making sure that whenever I do an exhibition, I'm always thinking about the present and the way that the past orders the present.



*David Adjaye, Asaase II, 2021*

**I was living on the Lower East Side last year at the outbreak of the pandemic and I remember the city essentially shutting down. It felt like what really reanimated New York over the summer were the protests, and the sense of community that stemmed from everyone coming together, whether it was giving out water bottles or sharing bail relief funds. How does this community-based mutual aid translate into artwork?**

Last year was really profound in so many ways, and the way that folks came together during the protests and the pandemic has really left an impact on what I think is possible personally and in my work professionally. But one of the things that I wanted to do is make sure that we were having these conversations in context.

Long before 2020, there were artists working in the community to provide relief and opportunities to folks that they lived alongside. Someone like Rick Loeb in 1993 started *Project Rowhouses* in Houston, which is a series of 22 shotgun row houses that provided artist

residencies, after-school programmes for kids and also housing for single mothers. That was 1993. You have this moment that was profound and it was totally amazing, but I also think that this is ongoing, something to which the protests and pandemic really spoke. As painful as all of that stuff still is, and we're still dealing with and experiencing it, it's part of a larger history for some people. And I think that's important for us to understand.

**From your perspective, especially now as a director of Gagosian, what separates performativity from systemic change? Particularly in relation to some of the virtue signalling that was coming from certain art institutions.**

Good question. The work is the work. You can't substitute the work and you have to be committed to the work. Maybe this is a moment of profound change, maybe it's not. I just don't spend my time thinking about that, you know, no one has a crystal ball. You have to get out there and do the work each and every day.

**What is work to you? Is it engaging? Is it investing in visibility?**

It's engaging with the artists and ideas that I have been engaging with for the last 10 years, and I'm going to continue that engagement. Sometimes that shows up as exhibitions, sometimes that shows up as books and sometimes that shows up as sitting in artists' studios for three hours and having conversations about the work. It's about being engaged in the community.



*Kahilil Robert Irvinng, Dreams in the line and memories (/whipped), 2021*

***Social Works II*, in one sense, is very grounded in its curation of projects based in community. On the other hand, the exhibition also takes on a speculative approach in re-imagining history and discourse. What does that mean for the future – utopian or not?**

My mission is to really let artists reveal those things for us. I think for me, it's about continuing to just do this work and allowing artists and their artwork to speak to us. Because it's changed my life, it can maybe change some other lives as well. What I'm just hyper-focused on at the moment is doing the work that allows artists to speak.



*Sumayya Vally, Prompts for a City: Whitechapel, minaret/pew and podium/market table, 2021*



*Sumayya Vally, Counterspace*



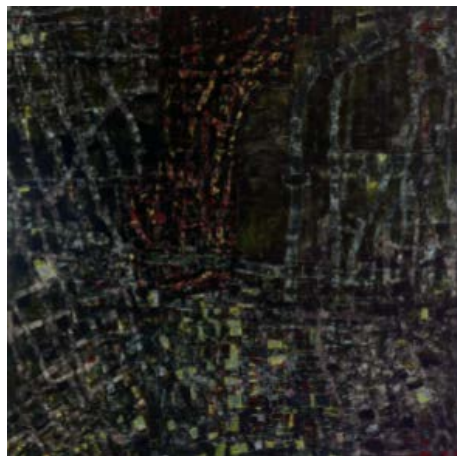
*Amanda Williams, What blak is this yours ay? – Although rarely recognized as such, ‘The Candy Laday’ and her ‘Candy Store’ provided one of your earliest examples of black enterprise, cooperative economics, black women CEOs and good customer service” – black (07.24.20), 2021*



*Isaac Julien, To See Ourselves as Others See Us (Lessons of the Hour), 2021*



*Lubaina Himid, A Fashionable Marriage: The Art Critic, 1986*



*Rick Lowe, Black Wall Street Journey #17 (Greenwood), 2021*



*Alexandra Smith, set adrift on Memory's bliss, 2021*



*Mnauel Mathieu, toofarfromhome, 2021*