

Kendrew Barn Gallery, St Johns College Oxford
20th January – 2nd February 2026

Story Painters, Picture Writers

Work by Julian Bell, Nick Bush, Jane Griffiths, Gala Hills, Jamie McKendrick, Kate Montgomery

Painting has its own complex language independent of words and literature but there are areas of image-making that are contiguous or close to language. History painting or illustration could serve as examples.

These artists, in distinct and individual ways, all explore certain areas of proximity between image and language, picture and narrative, while being fully aware of painting's autonomy.

Julian Bell was born in 1952. He read English Literature at Oxford before embarking on a career as a self-employed painter, taking on many types of commission. England Road, the most recent London exhibition of his work, is a successor to Genesis (2015), a biblical sequence of panels, and to a 2019 novel-on-canvas about contemporary London, When the City is Built. Over the past thirty years Bell has also published books including What is Painting? (2nd edn 2017) and Natural Light: The Art of Adam Elsheimer and the Dawn of Modern Science (2023). He teaches at the Royal Drawing School.

I'm a painter to whom poetry matters, and I've listened willingly to all those statements of how the poet's art and my own are akin. Yet the more I attend to poems in particular, and how you might relate the experiences of listening and reading to those of looking, the more I'm puzzled.

I've been thinking about the Chaurapanchasika - 'The Thief's Fifty Verses'. A poem written around the year 1070 by Bilhana. Various writers have tried to grapple it from Sanskrit (a language I do not possess) into English. Their efforts tantalize, and what I have been painting is that incompleteness.

The 'theft' mentioned in the poem's title is of a princess's love. In flashes and fragments, the now imprisoned poet tries to bring to mind the nights he spent with her, as he awaits execution following discovery of their affair:-

Still now
I think of her and golden flowers unfurl
she sleeps, hair tousled, or she wakes
limbs tremble as the surge runs through
traces I snatch, they slip my grasp
wisdoms fade, dissolving ink

I am not an abstractionist. My painting has to proceed from experiences.

Representation by Natasha O'Kane Sussex Contemporary Art.
<https://julianbell.co.uk/>



Julian Bell *Crumpled Poem* 2025

Nick Bush (b. 1987) is a British landscape painter based in East Sussex. He studied Fine Art (Painting & Printmaking) at the Glasgow School of Art, graduating in 2010, and then completed the Drawing Year at the Royal Drawing School in 2011.

Bush's practice is rooted in direct observation of landscape, often working outdoors on small panels to capture immediate impressions of light, weather, and mood. These plein-air works inform larger studio pieces in which he sometimes incorporates imagined or memory-inflected fragments to enrich the sense of place.

'I don't tell overt, word-driven stories in my work, but my landscapes are rich in suggestion, mood, and referential detail. The narrative remains partial and open-ended, leaving space for the viewer's imagination to enter. For me, painting can approach language or narrative without slipping into illustration, remaining autonomous while still being suggestive.'

The Good Shepherd takes as its starting point Wharram Percy, the deserted medieval village in the Yorkshire Wolds. In this painting, Nick translates the atmosphere of the site into an image that combines architectural remnants, landscape, and suggestion of human presence. The title invokes pastoral and religious associations, aligning the work with themes of care, guidance, and tradition. Executed in oil on canvas, the painting balances observed detail with imaginative reconstruction, creating a composition that is both grounded in a specific location and resonant with wider narrative possibilities.

Representation by Natasha O'Kane Sussex Contemporary Art.
<https://www.nicholasbush.co.uk/>



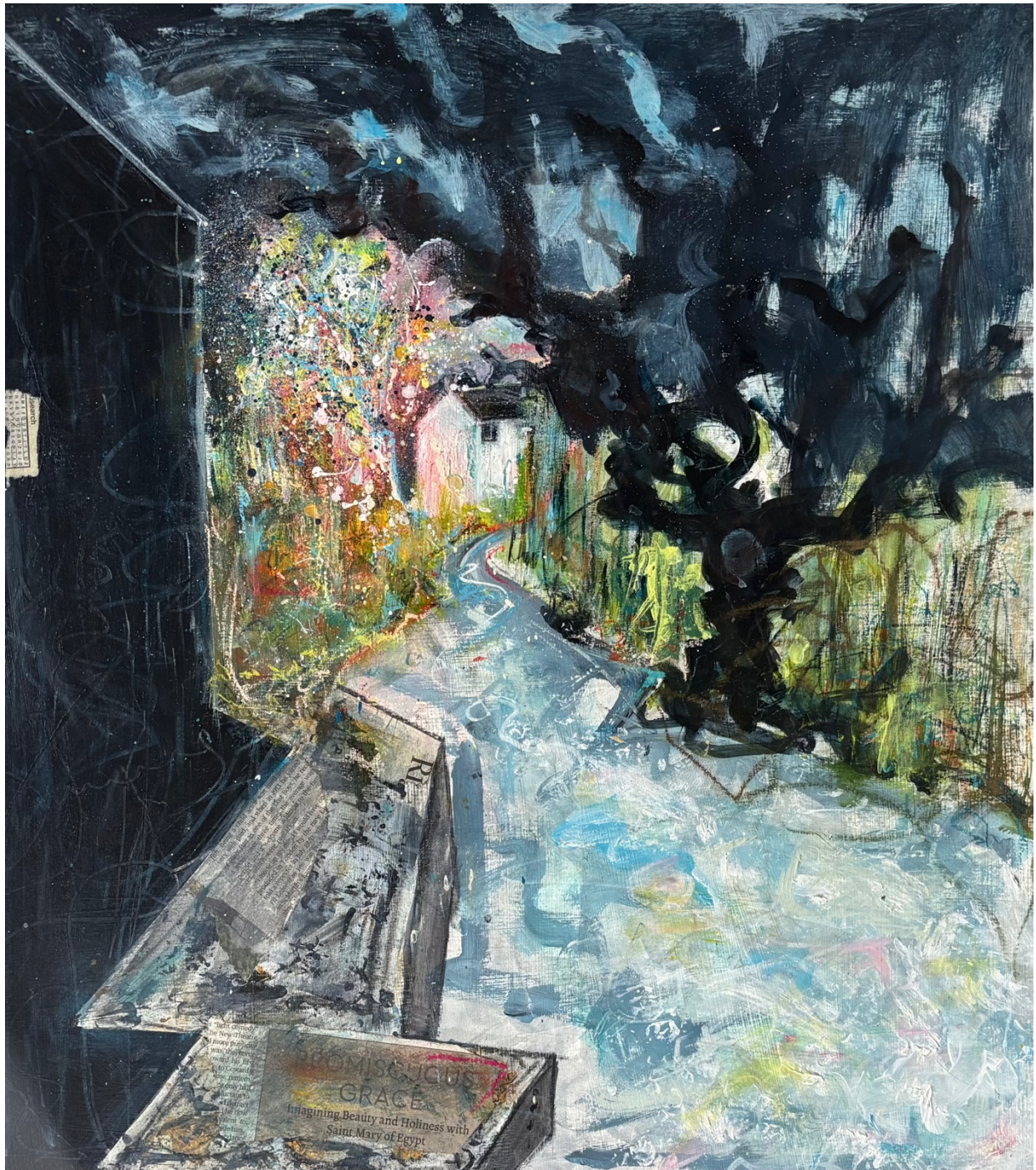
Nicholas Bush *The Good Shepherd* 2025

Jane Griffiths was a poet before she was a painter, with six collections published by Bloodaxe Books. She always had a strong interest in the visual arts, training as a bookbinder at the London College of Printing in the 1990s, and later working as a jewellery-maker alongside an academic career; more recently, she has returned to an early interest in painting.

A recurrent subject in both poetry and painting was her childhood home in Devon, first lost on emigration and lost again, more recently, when it was demolished. The work in this exhibition explores houses in landscape more widely, including those fleetingly glimpsed from a train as well as the familiar cottages of the Cot Valley in West Penwith. A number of the paintings take their titles from Jane's poetry, revisiting a familiar subject in a new medium.

Jane has work in the Jane Adams Gallery in St Just, and has had paintings included at The House of Smalls (formerly in Chipping Campden, now in Edinburgh) and the Fronteer Gallery in Sheffield. She regularly participates in Oxfordshire Artweeks.

<https://poetandcat.design/>



Jane Griffiths *Promiscuous Grace* 2025

Gala Hills (b,2001) is a multidisciplinary artist. She has studied painting and fine art at the Ruskin and at the Slade, seeking an intimate collaboration between academic research and anarchistic creativity. She has shown with various galleries in London, including a recent solo exhibition with the Bomb Factory in Holborn.

During my time studying in London, I learnt to reappraise growing up in rural Dartmoor. I felt a lacking of things I had taken for granted, the stories you'd learn or make up about the landscape, the rocks and forests. These imaginative stories seemed so every day to me, learning of Victorian spinsters reassembling the local Neolithic standing stones or the giants who formed the cliffs down in Cornwall, mixing history, geology and myth. The yearning for these narratives formed my painting practice.

Being dyslexic and autistic, my parents decided to home educate me, and I kept my curiosity alive this way. We travelled around, learning constantly. This freedom to keep moving and exploring presents itself in my newly re-found love of the rural landscapes. My current direction is derived from paintings I made on a beach on the Lizard in Cornwall. With rain pouring down and a dark grey sea, I used sea and rainwater to paint watercolour on paper. In a kind of automatic drawing process, I began making human animal hybrids, evoking in me the ancient Welsh Mabinogion, tales of owl women and talking fish, remembering mythologies I had learnt in my childhood. Landscape directly informed my process, and symbolically drove a new direction in my thinking.

I completed my BFA at the Ruskin School of Art in 2023, and my Masters in Painting at the Slade in 2025, my practice fuses imagination and intense research, drawing inspiration from mythological texts, folk music and traditions cross culturally, and outsider female figures from throughout history. Growing up home educated, I had no formal boundaries between subjects, enabling me to seek knowledge holistically, through experience and practice, learning through documentary, reading and conversations with academics and artists. Subsequently my research cross pollinates between subjects, combining history, mythology, literature, chemistry, zoology and theology to generate new themes and visual story telling methods.

<https://www.ucl.ac.uk/slade/events/shows/2025-degree-show/ma-mfa/gala-hills/>



Gala Hills Storytelling part 3 2025

Jamie McKendrick, a poet and translator, was born in Liverpool in 1955. He has published eight collections of poetry and two Selected Poems with Faber.

He edited The Faber Book of 20th-Century Italian Poems and has translated the six books of Giorgio Bassani's The Novel of Ferrara for Penguin and Norton. Among his other translations are a verse play by Pier Paolo Pasolini and the poems of Valerio Magrelli, The Embrace, and of Antonella Anedda, Archipelago.

His writings on art and poetry over some thirty years have been gathered in The Foreign Connection, 2020. In the same year, his self-illustrated chapbook of poems, The Years, was published and won the Michael Marks Illustration Award.

'Prior to the illustrated poems, and apart from some book covers, I'd rather rigidly kept poetry and artwork separate, and yet have begun to see that, however differently produced, the two activities share crucial elements - scale, rhythm, detail, texture, tone, and line leading to line. The one thing left out of this list of correspondences is colour: a fundamental of painting and one that poetry can only envy.

The medium is mostly Chinese inkstick, India ink and watercolour. As well as animal, botanical and geological motifs, my pictures frequently employ landscape and cityscape features, invented rather than observed, though each one has to evolve its own means. The figurative can move towards the abstract, and vice versa. The largely unplanned way my pictures come about leaves many unfit for salvage - watercolour being an unforgiving medium - but also leaves the door open for the liberating interventions of chance.

The same goes for poems, though they can seem easier to repair.'

<https://www.faber.co.uk/journal/drypoint-page-and-image-jamie-mckendrick-on-poetry-and-art/>



Jamie McKendrick *Vesuvius Dormiens* 2025

Kate Montgomery is a British painter born in 1965. She graduated from The Ruskin School of Drawing & Fine Art, University of Oxford in 1988 and from The Royal College of Art in 1992.

Sources for her drawings and paintings are found on the Sussex Downs and coast alongside interiors, gardens and parks in Brighton. Kate's language of paint and image is informed by the visual culture of the Middle Ages, French and Flemish Books of Hours and Cloisonné work in particular. Kate also has an abiding interest in European Symbolist painting, Art Nouveau and The Arts and Crafts Movement.

Kate has had numerous solo exhibitions in London and is regularly shown in Europe, Asia and USA. Her work is often selected for opens including The Royal Academy Summer Exhibition and ING Discerning Eye. In 2008 she was artist in residence at Glyndebourne. Kate teaches at The Royal Drawing School.

This group of paintings are small scale and worked in casein, a traditional milk based medium similar to egg tempera. Colour, tone and spliced patterning are primary concerns ; narrative elements occur but are treated with reticence .

Fairy tales with lost or bargained for children such as Madame d'Alnoy's 'The White Cat' overlay themes of parenting with creative life and cloaked family narratives.

Another painting echoes Jean Cooke's 1969 work 'Toujours en Fête' adopting its ironic title and message, to continue commenting on the realities of painting and childcare.

'Stilte/Silence' commemorates the name of a now lost tram terminus in the Brussels suburb of Uccle. The image suggests a gesture of silence and the temporal consolation of saying nothing.

Representation: Long & Ryle Gallery London & Natasha O'Kane Sussex Art
<https://www.katemontgomery.co.uk/>



Kate Montgomery *Stilte/Silence* 2025