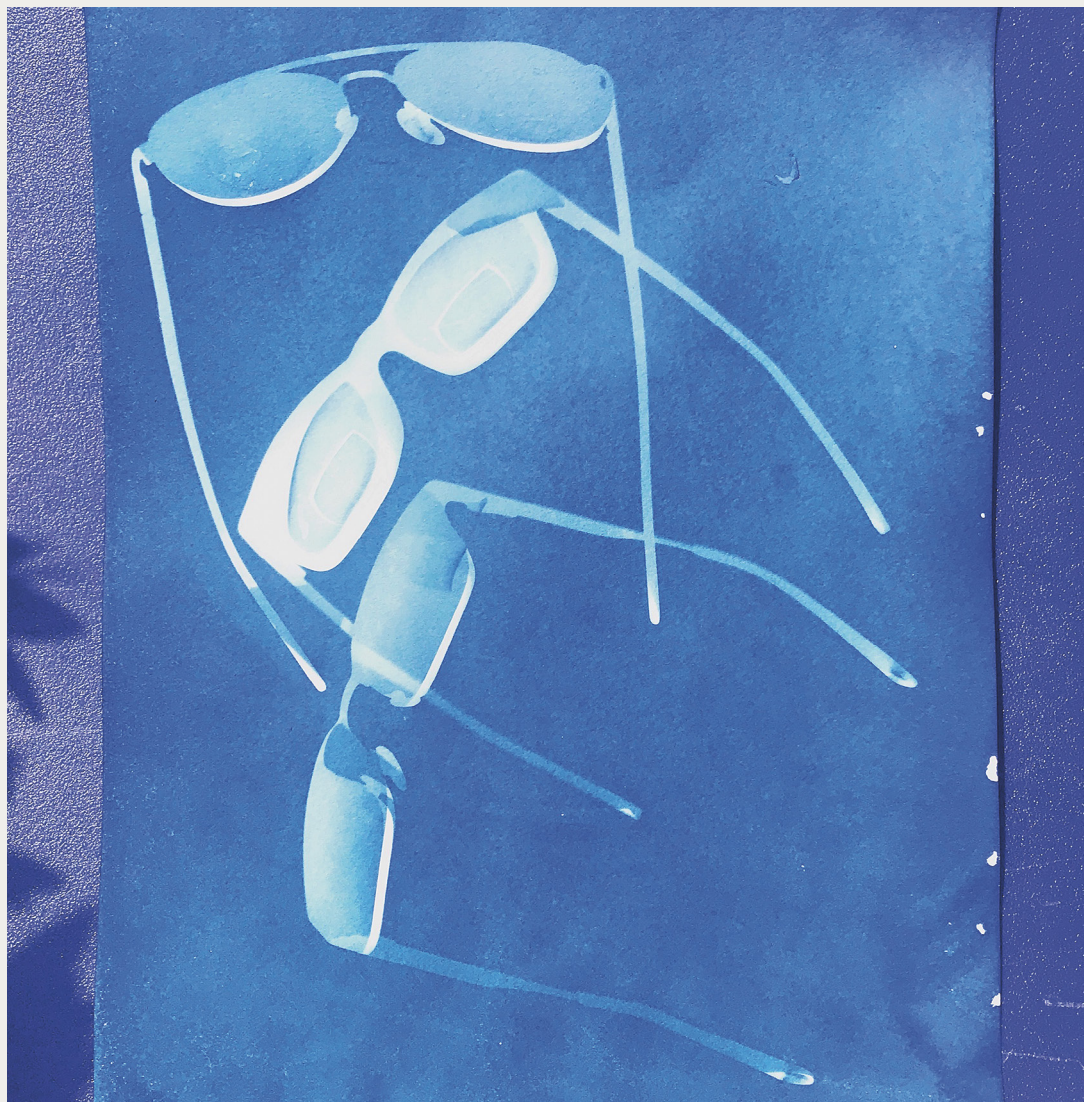


Beyond the white cube

As exhibitions are taken out of traditional gallery spaces and into inventive locations such as high streets, homes, and even hospitals, we speak to the photographers and curators finding new ways to connect with viewers. Words by Philippa Kelly



Artwork in the Bluebell ward psychiatric intensive care unit, Berkshire. Image by Steve Macleod. Commissioned by Hospital Rooms.

In the early part of 1858, London's Victoria and Albert Museum (now called the V&A) hosted a groundbreaking exhibition featuring more than 1000 photographs. Portraits, landscapes and architectural views were hung haphazardly, sometimes 50 to a wall, mere centimetres apart. Chairs and tables littered the densely packed space, which was illuminated only by natural light.

We know this because the display, titled *The Exhibition of the Photographic Society of London*, was the first of its kind to be photographed. Immortalised by the V&A's official photographer, Charles Thurston Thompson, the show bears little resemblance to the stereotypical image of galleries today – spaces where the sparsely hung and starkly lit white cube so often dominates. However, just as approaches to the display of photography have changed since the 1800s, there are signs that a new style of exhibition is emerging. Photography is being displayed outside traditional spaces, with shows moving into an array of locations, including shopping centres, high streets, hospitals, homes and more.

“Bringing photography to the street makes it accessible,” says Khaly Nguyen, marketing director at creative advertising agency, Build Hollywood. “It opens up new audiences, reaching people who may never have set foot in a gallery.” Alongside its commercial work, the London-based agency has been hosting the series *Your Space or Mine* for several years, displaying visual art on billboards across the UK.

“The idea is to give artists and creatives a platform to be seen on the street to a wider audience that they might not normally get access to, but it's also a way for us to push boundaries, using our street space to inspire and energise local neighbourhoods,” Nguyen continues. “It's about making art and culture accessible for all, outside gallery walls.”

Build Hollywood has seen success with this approach, both for established and up-and-coming photographers, including Jenny Lewis, Mick Rock and Lottie Nadeau. With each collaboration, Nguyen and the team ensure that the image-maker retains as much creative control as possible, challenging them to think about the street environment that

surrounds their work, and the local community that will be seeing it.

This exchange is a democratising one: photographers are able to display their images on a greater scale, local people are able to enjoy and engage with them free of charge, and Build Hollywood is able to brand-build in a meaningful way. “It’s really important to make space for these creative collaborations to sit alongside our commercial campaigns,” Nguyen explains. “The beauty is that they work in harmony, they help each other thrive.”

Displaying images in public spaces began as both an intentional and commercially minded project for Build Hollywood. For others, necessity played a part. Plans for Bristol Photo Festival’s first edition in spring 2021 were impacted by the Covid-19 pandemic the previous year, closing many of the city’s traditional photographic spaces. Ineligible for much of the emergency arts funding released around the time, festival director Alejandro Acin and his team were forced to think quite literally outside the box.

“One of our strategies was to design a modular set of steel frames; modernised so you could rearrange it in small spaces. We displayed one project in an allotment in a city farm,” Acin recalls, referring to Chris Hoare’s exploration of urban land cultivation in Bristol, *Growing Spaces*. “We placed the frames within the allotment and it was very nice.”

The team was similarly inventive when displaying work produced as part of the festival’s mentoring scheme, hanging six photographers’ series in a disused post office in a local shopping centre. Turning the space from a long-neglected shell into a welcoming gallery within a matter of months – and with a limited budget – the festival gave new life to a high street unit that had been empty for more than a decade.

It was not easy and, Acin stresses, compromises were needed, but this approach also offered audiences the element of surprise. “Doing these things creates this idea of interrupting continuity – just interrupting people’s lives for 20 minutes,” the director explains. “It was very busy because a lot

of people pass by, and the series included universal themes that anyone could relate to. The feedback and the interactions with visitors were brilliant.”

In fact, audiences engaged so well that in 2023 the festival will present public exhibitions along four of Bristol’s high streets, including works by Sebastián Bruno, Jade Carr-Daley and Lúa Ribeira. These photographers all have strong ties to Bristol and will present work about the city’s communities. “Hopefully the works are going to help people reimagine these places in a slightly new way,” Acin says. “And maybe to listen to the stories of people they’ve never talked to.”

Bringing it home

Elsewhere in Bristol, a very different space has already been thoroughly reimaged. Founded in 2021, SERCHIA gallery sprang from the pandemic musings of art director Christine Marie Serchia. “I was sitting in this empty house when it occurred to me, if it’s the proverbial end of the world, I’m going



Opposite left: Installation image of SERCHIA
© Matilda Hill-Jenkins. Courtesy of SERCHIA gallery.

Opposite right: Installation view of *O Carreg* by Rebecka Wolfe at the group exhibition *Afterword*. Installation image © Ciara Hillyer. Courtesy of SERCHIA gallery.

Left: Installation at Bristol Photo Festival 2021
© Catalyst exhibition curated by IC Visual Lab.

Page:168: Installation view of the series *One Hundred Years: Portraits of a Community Aged 0–100* by Jenny Lewis displayed in Hackney, London, as part of *Your Space or Mine*. Image courtesy of Build Hollywood.

Page 169: Installation view of Simon Roberts’ exhibition *How did we get here?/Where do we go now?* on display in a former clothes store in Chester, 2023.

to do what I’ve always wanted and start my own gallery,” she says.

Serchia’s friends laughed when she told them this gallery would be in two rooms in her hillside Victorian home, but today this space has hosted over 20 exhibitions, and even has an artist-in-residence programme. Serchia initially worried artists would have no interest in showing in the space, but she now receives daily enquiries from would-be exhibitors. “It’s incredible,” she says. “But I think photographers appreciate light, and the light and the space are beautiful.”

Serchia says visitors’ responses are striking too. By viewing in a private space, where visits are by appointment only, they are able to respond to the work with greater vulnerability. It is a safe, domestic setting in which difficult topics can be explored, and it has seen visitors moved to tears and artists giving particularly heartfelt talks.

The gallerist says many visitors return to SERCHIA again and again, helping her build a sense of community. However, this is not to say her set-up is without drawbacks. “One of the major complications is around bookings,” Serchia acknowledges. “Sometimes people don’t know that they need to make an appointment and there’ll be a knock at the door and I’ll have just gotten out of the shower with a towel around me!”

There is also the issue of funding because, despite SERCHIA’s success, it is not always easy financially for the free-to-visit, not-for-profit gallery. “There are so many artists in the UK, but there’s not enough funding, not enough space, and not enough opportunity to showcase all of their talent,” Serchia says. “I just have to do what I can in the time that I have, with what limited funding we can conjure up between the artists and myself.”

Despite these difficulties, Serchia says she loves her work, and is passionate about creating opportunities for emerging artists. With so many young photographers feeling the pressure to win awards or see their images published before being acknowledged by galleries, Serchia often mixes the work of established image-makers with that of newer artists. “I feel it’s important to show them what they’re capable of, because I think they’re



unaware,” she says. “It doesn’t have to be a white cube, you don’t have to apply, you don’t have to pay a huge exhibition fee, you can just do the best you can with what you have.”

From the photographer’s perspective, there is also much to be said for showing images in non-traditional spaces. Steve Macleod, for example, says it has been the greatest privilege of his career. The landscape photographer, lecturer and director of London-based art printers Metro Imaging, first began working with Hospital Rooms over five years ago. This organisation commissions artworks for in-patient mental health facilities, and it was a clear fit for the photographer, who explores themes of mental health through his work and has himself spent time in secure units.

“Artists often get known for a certain way of working – with photography in particular it’s easy to be stereotyped, and the expectation is that you produce work of a certain subject, in a certain way, in a certain medium, at a certain scale,” Macleod says.

“Hospital Rooms allow me the freedom to think differently, to think more expansively. Instead of putting an artwork on a wall, it makes me think about the whole space.”

This freedom has allowed Macleod to develop his practice in new ways, but he says it is the reactions of those who see his work that has truly impacted him. He recalls a young, usually uncommunicative patient who, after looking at the artist’s work for a number of hours, turned to a support worker and said, “This is shit”. The photographer smiles as he recounts the story, pleased his work was able to generate a strong reaction.

While producing such work for Hospital Rooms is fulfilling – and presents a valuable route to commissions – it does also need care. Not all objects or themes that would appear in a traditional gallery can be shown in such settings, and the possible responses of vulnerable individuals must be considered at all times. This is not, Macleod stresses, a negative, but an opportunity for artists to learn about themselves and their practice.

A landscape photographer of a different sort, Simon Roberts shares much – though not all – of Macleod’s enthusiasm for non-traditional exhibitions. Known for his large format images and in-depth studies of British society, Roberts’ exhibition *How did we get here?/Where do we go now?* was recently on display in Chester over two floors of a former H&M store.

“I entered the space and there were various elements of the shop that had been left there, a sold-out sign in the window and other elements that immediately made me think of it as a metaphor for where Britain is now,” Roberts recalls. Part of the reason the photographer had accepted the opportunity to exhibit in Chester, which has no traditional space for visual arts, was that the city perfectly mirrors the UK’s Brexit vote: 52 per cent Leave, 48 per cent Remain. In this instance, he explains, choosing a non-traditional exhibition setting made a thematic contribution to the work on display.

“I was interested in creating an open forum, in a space where maybe traditionally people wouldn’t enter a gallery,” Roberts says. “Could I create some dialogue with those people who voted to Leave, to see where they stood now?” Here the photographer references the ever-increasing cost of visiting museums and galleries, many of which are now hosting less exhibitions per year, are unable to respond quickly to emerging artists or narratives due to funding, and the prohibitive impact these factors can have on visitors.

By contrast, non-traditional spaces can be agile in their programming. Even so, this does not mean it is easy to attract new audiences. Roberts worked hard to curate a space without the intimidation that can surround traditional galleries, to show local people that the exhibition was a place for them. “The hope is that it’s those people who will then help create some form of debate, because it’s something that will maybe touch them in a way they’ve not thought about when looking at Britain,” he explains.

“It doesn’t have to be a white cube, you don’t have to apply, you don’t have to pay a huge exhibition fee, you can just do the best you can with what you have”
Christine Marie Serchia

Putting the exhibition together without a team of invigilators, a marketing budget, or carefully chosen lighting, proved challenging. Plus, Roberts says, there is nothing to make images sing like the pristine white walls of a traditional gallery. And yet, on a single day in June, the ex-retail store recorded over 350 visitors – people from all backgrounds, including one visitor who recognised his own home in an image. “There’s that kind of moment that can’t be scripted,” Roberts says.

Returning to Charles Thurston Thompson’s 1858 photograph of the V&A – complete with haphazard furniture and overflowing walls – it is easier to imagine such an unscripted, personal exchange happening there than in a brightly lit, scantily furnished white cube. Moving outside traditional spaces may bring challenges but there are also benefits for image-makers and audiences. **BJP**

buildhollywood.co.uk
bristolphotofestival.org
serchiagallery.square.site
stevemacleod.co.uk
simonroberts.com

