

Edinburgh Art Festival

various venues, 14–30 August

Where else to start but at the top of Calton Hill? Here, Emii Alrai's major public sculpture *Guardian*, 2025, keeps watch over the Edinburgh cityscape for the duration of this year's Art Festival. I have been fascinated by Alrai's practice since encountering her show 'A Core of Scar' at the Hepworth Wakefield in 2022 (Reviews *AM*547). This public sculpture, a new iteration of work first commissioned for Bold Tendencies last year, doesn't disappoint.

At a time of febrile debate about the relationship between British museological display and colonial plunder, the Scottish-Iraqi artist's ruin-like constructions, often made from cheap modern materials such as air-dry clay and polystyrene, make their point with a lithe wit that obviates dense explanation. Yes, this is art about extraction, displacement, genocide and counterfeit, but it is also intriguing, elegant, funny and open-ended. Faced with this huge boat – or is it a horse, pig or Nessie-like creature? – loosely based on the Mesopotamian *Lamassu*, a protective deity, pieced together from plates of Jesmonite on steel armatures, the response of the audience milling around outside the old observatory is something more immediate than earnest anti-colonial sentiment.

If anything, we are reminded of those long days being dragged round museums and galleries as children or attempts at worthy family trips and date nights as adults, gazing at big lumps of stuff, of ambiguous provenance, behind velvet ropes and sheets of glass. What is it all? Where did it come from? How did it get here? Would anyone notice if these talismans of British imperium had been subbed out for Alrai's counterfeit guardians with their auratic blue patina? This reading, however, doesn't do full justice to what is also a beautiful and politically astute work, magnificently sited by Collective Gallery, but you get the idea.



Sandra George, *Black Theatre Co-op*, 1983

Across town at Edinburgh Printmakers, Jamie Fitzpatrick's 'Monuments to Sausage Politics', which is equally compelling in its own way, forms a more overtly satirical counterpart to Alrai's weathered statuary. Returning to his home city of Edinburgh after a time away, the Southport-born artist was struck by the sheer proliferation of neoclassical statuary across the town centre: men on horseback or standing to attention in full military regalia, their identities lost on almost all of us, but their vexatious presence as symbols of social and imperial hierarchy registered on a near-unconscious basis.

Fitzpatrick's irked response takes the form of several, towering piles of concrete cast from clay, sloppy and garishly coloured, from which periwigged heads, busts and limbs emerge. The spirit of Jean Dubuffet's brutalism is alive and well in this lampooning of Enlightenment aesthetics and ideology. It also includes, suitably enough given the venue, several similarly anarchic prints.

By way of delayed introduction, this year's Edinburgh Art Festival, under the directorship of Kim McAleese, is the first to base itself at Leith, and attempts to establish connections with the city's culture beyond the tourist-thronged and photogenic Old and New Towns. Sadly, a fire put out the tram links down to the festival's new HQ, but those who made the trip were rewarded with a display of photography by American artist Del LaGrace Volcano: an exhibition documenting the artist's time in the UK and Scotland in the 1980s and 1990s, and a window on an emergent queer community and London's BDSM nightlife.

The mood of these images is as tender as it is erotically charged; the title of the show, 'Love Bites Back', reflects a certain nostalgic patina to the black-and-white shots. Here is the artist's Scottish lover Sylvia in a shiny latex overcoat and sunglasses posing with a cross in Greyfriars Kirkyard; here a geodesic dome containing sapling trunks is being constructed by two butch lesbians outside a white-harled Highland cottage. What is poignant at this distance is partly the sense of a world enduring in spite of a mainstream social hostility that eventually seemed to fade, only to rear its head with a vengeance through current anti-trans rhetoric.

Though the festival's curation is in keeping with a trend of avoiding named themes, photography is perhaps the predominant medium. At the City Art Centre there is 'Start From the Level', a retrospective of Sandra George's work that offers an expansive and moving overview of the Edinburgh-based artist and community organiser who died in 2013. Settling as a student in the city in 1980, the British-Jamaican artist amassed an archive of over 80,000 photographs that record the communities of Craigmillar, Wester Hailes and beyond, all while she worked as a respected social organiser and teacher.

Never exhibited during her lifetime, George's archive appears now as a veritable treasure trove or time capsule, transporting us to 1980s anti-racism demos, cramped suburban front rooms, charity drives, schools for the disabled, Asian-owned shopfronts attacked by neo-Nazis, and the artist's own inner emotional world. A sequence depicting the early life of George's prematurely born son, Tyler, from his first days to attitude-laden teenage years, offers a particularly profound sweetness and is worth the visit alone.

Up Cockburn Street at Stills, meanwhile, are more affecting works of documentary photography. As an unofficial artist to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, which held perpetrators of Apartheid to account after 1994, South African photographer Jillian Edelstein captured the psychological effects of losing loved ones to extrajudicial kidnapping, murder and

torture. Many of her subjects seem to stare down the barrel of the lens with the same look: a kind of famished intensity. In one shot, Archbishop Desmond Tutu, who oversaw the commission, buries his face in his hands on a table-top, recreating the state of emotional and physical exhaustion in which the testimony had left him.

A word, too, on Frank Walter and his cohort of admirers at Ingleby in New Town. The Antiguan polymath (1926–2009) was introduced to the British art world posthumously, through a show held at Ingleby 13 years ago titled ‘Songs of Innocence and Experience’. The Blakean proposition is revived here, though ‘Songs of Innocence & Experience Part II’ consists of a 23-strong group show, brought together for Walter’s centenary and featuring several painters familiar from the gallery’s roster, such as Andrew Cranston, Aubrey Levinthal and more.

A visionary and otherworldly character whose life’s work consisted of thousands of paintings, drawings and typed pages of writing, Walter excelled in a kind of Henri Rousseau-esque paradisiacal atmospherics, grounded in an outsider cosmology and investment in interactions between the spiritual and physical realms. Seascapes, portraiture and flowers are among his recurring subjects, all in evidence here through works on board and paper such as *Out of the Sea*, *Lady Love* and *Antiguan Gentleman* and *Tulip*. This last work forms a direct conversation with Rose Wylie’s adjacent painting *Young Tulips*, 2023, and with Hayley Barker’s mesmerising circular canvas *Taryn’s Sunflower*, 2026, on the opposite wall.

How to sum up? A note from McAleese, the curator Eleanor Taylor and civic curator Elle Haswell attached to this year’s festival literature states: ‘We try not to be defined by theme, but instead by the current climate in which the festival takes place.’ They go on to mention ‘alternative queer images, global and community-held stories’. One central aspect of the festival, however, is the concept of masculinities: how they are assigned, acquired, performed or erotically interrogated.

As well as Volcano’s life-affirming explorations of intersex and butch identity, one finds further exhibitions that reconsider the place of masculinities in Sadeo Hasegawa’s multispecies, erotically complex drawings of Asian men in states of delirium and often same-sex sexual abandon, while an archive of ephemera compiled by Trans Masc Studies examines the rather tellingly slim amount of popular depictions of women who code masculine or ‘butch’ in history. This refreshing set of exhibitions reminds us of the richness of work that remains hidden – and continues to thrum, visible or not.

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Vienna Round-up

Galerie Krinzinger • VIN VIN • EXILE • Lombardi-Kargl • Galerie Kandlhofer • Crone Wien

‘The Army of Love basically wants to create an army of people whose job is to give love to others,’ explains a woman’s voice-over against footage of embracing couples, threesomes and groups. ‘So, when there’s no one who loves you, there’s going to be this army that’s going to love you.’ In their film *Oceano de Amor*, 2019, Alexa Karolinski and Ingo Niermann interview a

diverse range of Cuban citizens, offering their thoughts on desire, loneliness and on how, in an increasingly automated society, the need for physical contact could necessitate a new collective spirit of unconditional love. The participants converge on a radiant sandy beach, immerse themselves in water, and gently caress and hold each other. It could so easily be cloying or saccharine, but instead the pervasive atmosphere of mutual support gradually envelops the viewer, recruiting them to the cause.

The film is the centrepiece of the group exhibition ‘My Whole Being is a Dark Verse’, curated by Chus Martinez at Galerie Krinzinger, and is somewhat indicative of the series of exhibitions opening in September under the rubric ‘curated by’. Comprising 24 galleries across Vienna, the festival asks each venue to invite an external curator to develop an exhibition around a designated – albeit generally quite broad – theme. Love, then, is the prevailing topic for the 2026 edition and, while such a sentiment might seem incongruously earnest in our current political climate, it proves pleasingly robust, encompassing ideas of devotion, care, sacrifice, heartache and obsession. There is a curatorial attentiveness throughout which, if not quite an act of love, is certainly affectionate.

‘I’m Very Into You’, curated by Marta Papini for VIN VIN, borrows its title and approach from the 1995 email exchange between writers Kathy Acker and McKenzie Wark. In their place, she proposes a different cross-generational correspondence: the abstracted, amorphous forms of the late Lydia Silvestri (1929–2018) sit alongside the eerily disconcerting paintings of Cecilia De Nisco. Their practices jostle each other, the disjointed appendages and narrow cleavages of Silvestri’s compositions finding an intriguing counterpart in De Nisco’s depictions of intertwined limbs, elongated torsos and adjacent bodies. In Silvestri’s *Ex Voto: for a Lost and Found Love*, 1965, a marble ovoid bulges and recedes, revealing an underlying aperture, like a hidden, hollowed recess, while her drawings portray isolated hips, breasts and buttocks as they nestle and fold into unfamiliar shapes. This tension between proximity and distance is similarly evoked in De Nisco’s intimate canvases; nude figures lie supine with their legs splayed open, eyes look up and lock from between bare thighs, bodies languidly stretch side by side. There is an erotic charge even when the activity is left uncertain – or maybe *because* it is.

A frisson of desire also permeates ‘Matelot, Matelot’ at EXILE, which presents several of David Medalla’s recently rediscovered printmaking blocks from the late 1950s. Curated by Francesca Gavin and Adam Nankervis (the late artist’s partner and collaborator), the small zinc plates are displayed on angled shelves, like icons or offerings. They have been etched with delicate renderings of contemplative young men and, given that the blocks were never printed, infer a concealed, covert sexuality. Medalla’s subjects are distant, absorbed in their own inner thoughts and, in turn, so are the objects themselves: one lingers on the fluid contours and fine details of the figures, and sees the world reflected as a reverse-image.

At Lombardi-Kargl, João Laia has curated ‘Threesome (magnetic fields)’, a two-person exhibition by Joana de Conceição and Joana Escoval. Their respective works – vividly hallucinatory paintings of recursive patterns and repeated motifs, austere arrangements of polished brass and coiling wire – tentatively navigate their surroundings and ‘feel’ each