

Spike Island

PRESS RELEASE

SOPHIA AL-MARIA AND LYDIA OURAHMANE
GREY UNPLEASANT LAND
28 September 2024 to 19 January 2025



Spike Island presents *Grey Unpleasant Land*, a collaborative exhibition by artists Sophia Al-Maria and Lydia Ourahmane.

Grey Unpleasant Land examines the myth of England as a nation. Combining historical artefacts, speculative narratives, petitions to patrons and a deed of gift, Al-Maria and Ourahmane provide a unique lens through which to investigate the complex and often troubling nature of England's cultural and historical landscape.

Produced over the course of two years, Al-Maria and Ourahmane delve into the "grey areas" of England's narrative from their position as immigrants to the UK, critically re-examining the stories that have been told — and continue to be told — about origins and belonging.

Central to the exhibition are the works *Job Lot* (late 1700s/2024) and *Silver Service* (1774/2024), presented as a diptych. The two sets of found objects explore the notion of inheritance as represented through the possessions of two living members of very different English families. Graham Randles, the son of Liverpool pub owners, inherited 240 chamber pots, which were originally collected from auctions, markets and car boot sales to decorate the pub ceiling. These sit alongside Sir William Bellingham's inheritance of George III silver, a 250-year-old collection stored in heavy trunks and recently retrieved from the vault of a NatWest bank in Stockport. The diptych is set to go to auction in 2025.



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In *Birthright* (2024), a pallet of Scottish sandstone weighing over one tonne hailing from the same geological seam as the Stone of Scone – an ancient and historically significant symbol of Scottish and English monarchy – questions the legitimacy of those who are born to rule. Alongside it, *A Blessing and a Betrayal* (2024), a medieval stained-glass diptych, reimagines the biblical story of twin brothers Esau and Jacob. Depicting betrayal, sibling rivalry and territorial claims, the work reproduces an AI-generated text that offers an account of Esau's imaginary dream after his brother's betrayal.

Framing Device I showcases display fittings associated with a seminal icon of pre-Reformation England: the *Wilton Diptych* (c. 1395–1399). Created by an unknown artist and preserved by an unknown patron, the diptych is remarkable for its survival. The carrying frame, support frame and handling frame presented here, provided by the National Gallery—which acquired the work in 1929—have been instrumental in its preservation and display.

Themes of ownership and class are explored in the works *Fly Tip* (2024), a series of scavenged possessions illegally dumped in and around Bristol containing contaminants, vacuum-sealed in purpose-built aluminium bags and *Curtain* (2024), a drape retrieved from the bin outside 44 Kinnerton Street, Belgravia in 2020, as the mews house was undergoing estate clearance. With its imperial red velvet, the curtain serves as a witness to the moral decay of England's ruling classes.

Ahead of the exhibition, on 14th September 2024, Al-Maria and Ourahmane placed an advertisement (*Terra Nullius*, 2024) in *The Spectator* Magazine (Vol. 356, Issue 10, 229) seeking landed gentry. The title refers to “nobody's land” or a “territory without a master” – a term used in public international law to describe a space that can be inhabited but does not belong to any state. Through the advert, the artists wish to engage in conversation with landowners, encouraging them to gift symbolic amounts of land across the country – not to a body but to nobody. This endeavour introduces a legal conundrum, as there is currently no framework for the formal disowning of land.

Together through this ambitious exhibition, Al-Maria and Ourahmane address England's cultural narratives and social frameworks, inviting audiences to consider the malleability of national identity and the ongoing debates surrounding Britain's legacy as a nation.

Image credit: *Lionheart* (2016–2024). A heraldic, hand-painted lion rampant shattered in stained glass. Image courtesy the artists

– Ends –

For press enquiries please contact Alicia Lethbridge at alicia@sam-talbot.com.

NOTES FOR EDITORS

- The exhibition preview takes place on Friday 27 September 2024, 6—10pm.

ABOUT THE ARTISTS

- **SOPHIA AL-MARIA**
Sophia Al-Maria is a London-based artist. Al-Maria has had recent solo exhibitions at Henry Art Gallery, Seattle; Mathaf: Arab Museum of Modern Art, Doha; La Biennale di Venezia, Venice; LUMA Arles; Tate Britain, London, and numerous others. She is the author of three books: *Sad Sack* (Book Works, London, 2019 & 2023), *Virgin with a Memory* (Cornerhouse Publications, Manchester, 2014), and *The Girl Who Fell to Earth* (Harper Perennial, New York, 2012).
- **LYDIA OURAHMANE**
Lydia Ourahmane is an artist based in Barcelona, London and Algiers. Ourahmane has had recent solo exhibitions at MACBA, Barcelona, SculptureCentre, New York; rhizome, Algiers; Kunsthalle Basel, Switzerland; S.M.A.K Ghent; Portikus, Frankfurt; De Appel, Amsterdam; Wattis Institute for Contemporary Arts, San Francisco and Chisenhale Gallery, London, among others. Her work was included in the 60th La Biennale di Venezia, 15th Gwangju Biennale, 34th Bienal de Sao Pãulo, New Museum Triennale and Manifesta 12.

- **ABOUT SPIKE ISLAND**

Spike Island supports, produces and presents contemporary art and culture across an 80,000 square foot former industrial building in Bristol. Its diverse artistic programme includes free major exhibitions, events and engagement activities taking place on-site and online. Championing outstanding work by emerging and underrepresented local, national and international artists, the programme enhances access to contemporary art for audiences from all backgrounds.

Alongside its public offer, Spike Island directly supports artists through new commissions, over 70 subsidised studios, and sector-leading artist development opportunities that widen access to its programme and facilities. Its Exhibition Services business supports the bespoke production and installation of artists' film and video throughout the UK and internationally. Spike Island is home to a dynamic community of hundreds of artists and creative businesses, working in flexible, affordable workspaces, alongside UWE Bristol's Fine Art department, Spike Print Studio, and café bar Emmeline.
www.spikeisland.org.uk



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