



# Spike Island

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LYDIA OURAHMANE  
*GREY UNPLEASANT LAND*

28 SEPTEMBER 2024  
TO 19 JANUARY 2025

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*Grey Unpleasant Land*, a collaborative exhibition by artists Sophia Al-Maria and Lydia Ourahmane, examines the myth of England as a nation.

Combining a range of media—including 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, the exhibition addresses the elephant in the room. As immigrants to the UK, Al-Maria and Ourahmane delve into the "grey areas" of England's narrative, 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). In this diptych, the burden of inheritance is represented through the possessions of two living members of two very different English families. Graham Randles, the son of Liverpool pub owners, inherited 240 chamber pots. 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.

In *Birthright* (2024), a pallet of Scottish sandstone weighing over one tonne hails from the same geological seam as the Stone of Scone, questioning the legitimacy of those who are born to rule. Alongside, *A Blessing and a Betrayal* (2024), a medieval stained-glass diptych, reimagines the biblical story of twin brothers Esau and Jacob.

Admission to the gallery is free.  
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*Framing Device I* and *Framing Device II* showcase 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.

Elsewhere in the gallery, themes of ownership and class are explored through several works. *Fly Tip* (2024) presents a series of scavenged possessions illegally dumped in and around Bristol—containing contaminants, vacuum-sealed in purpose-built aluminium bags. Meanwhile, *Curtain* (2024) was 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 drawn curtain serves as a witness to the moral decay of England's ruling classes.

Finally, *Terra Nullius* (2024) is an advertisement seeking landed gentry, published in *The Spectator Magazine* on 14th September 2024 (Vol. 356, Issue 10, 229). Through the advert, the artists wish to engage in conversation with land-owners, encouraging some to gift symbolic amounts of land across the country—not to a body but to nobody.

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



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