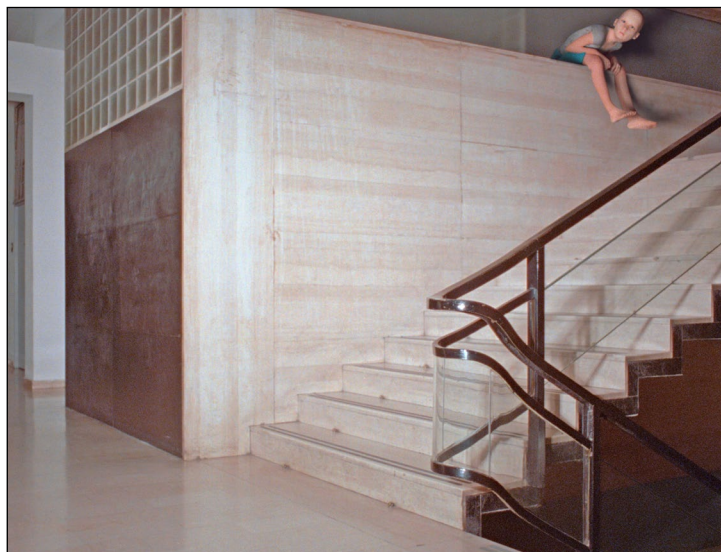


## Exhibition of the week **Horror in the Modernist Block**

*Ikon Gallery, Birmingham (0121-248 0708, ikon-gallery.org). Until 1 May. Free entry*

Modernist architects were inspired by the “utilitarian dream” of building “machines for living”, said Skye Sherwin in *The Guardian*. But their buildings would become the stuff of nightmares. By the 1970s, tower blocks and modernist housing schemes had become bleak symbols of “social breakdown”, used as settings for dystopian novels and horror films. In many other countries, meanwhile, modernism became a favoured style of authoritarian regimes. This exhibition in Birmingham brings together the work of 20 contemporary artists who explore how modernist buildings became “emblems of horror” in the collective imagination. It takes the postwar reconstruction of heavily bombed Birmingham itself as a starting point: in *Brutal*, a film by the artist NT, ominous music plays over night-time footage of the city’s postwar housing blocks. The show features a mix of video, sculpture, conceptual art and photography: Karim Kal’s photos, for instance, capture social housing on the outskirts of Lyon at night.

There’s “much to recommend” this exhibition, said Will Wiles in *Apollo*. Highlights include *Mies 421* (2010), a video by Maria Taniguchi that leads viewers around the dark and desolate spaces of Mies van der Rohe’s landmark 1929 Barcelona Pavilion. Birmingham artist Richard Hughes contributes a giant sculpture resembling “a Calder-esque mobile”, decorated with “lumps of broken concrete” and “a deflated space hopper”; it projects



*A still from Diego Marcon's Monelle (2017), set in an Italian modernist block*

“an uneasy air of both pleasure and neglect”. Equally interesting is Sudanese-born artist Ola Hassanain’s video work examining British and Soviet modernist influences on post-independence Khartoum. Closer to home, Ismael Monticelli fields an “absorbing” sculpture “decked with arcane symbols”, in which Birmingham’s notorious Spaghetti Junction interchange leads directly into Brasília, Brazil’s “showpiece modernist capital”. Yet while the show is “often stimulating”, its “cumulative effect never convinces”. Its scope of reference is “too broad” and its arguments never really add up. Above all, it is curiously lacking in “atmosphere” – a prerequisite for an exhibition about horror.

Nevertheless, this is a “thought-provoking” show, said Alastair Sooke in *The Daily Telegraph*. Roaming the world, it explores the dark underbelly of 20th century hopes and dreams: Shezad Dawood’s “eerie” tapestry depicts an abandoned modernist US embassy in Karachi, while a sculpture by Poland’s Monika Sosnowska resembles a “smashed-up fairground ride” – a “stark, frightening symbol of urban desolation”. Abbas Zahedi provides a small but “distressingly powerful” piece – a “charred” and “inverted” exit sign that refers to the Grenfell Tower catastrophe. *Horror in the Modernist Block* may lack “cheap thrills”, but this is an engaging exhibition full of “insidiously unsettling” moments.

## Where to buy...

*The Week reviews an exhibition in a private gallery*

### Arthur Timothy

*at Gallery 1957*

Since independence in 1961, Sierra Leone has had more than its fair share of tragedies, including a devastating civil war from 1991 to 2002, and a horrendous death toll during the Ebola epidemic. Many of the paintings in *Postcards from a Promised Land*, this show by Sierra Leonean-Ghanaian artist Arthur Timothy (b.1957), are based on family holiday snaps taken there long before these catastrophes befell the country, which carries with it a sad implicit irony. Timothy is best known for his portraiture, exemplified by many striking works here: *People Pekin* (2022) sees two children gazing up at us, warily; *Harriet* (2022) pictures an altogether more confident girl, hair braided, smiling back at us mischievously. Equally impressive are Timothy’s landscapes, from a panorama



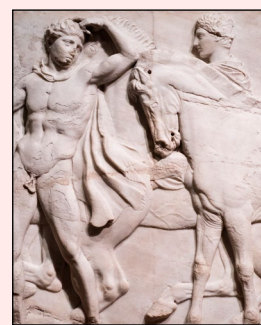
*The Way of the Cross (2022)*

of mountains seen across a lake, to busy urban scenes, which capture Sierra Leone’s unique nature and repurposed colonial architecture. These seem to suggest that the show’s titular “promised land” may not be such an ironic label after all. Prices on request.

*1 Hyde Park Gate, London W1. Until 28 January.*

## Returning the Elgin Marbles

The British Museum confirmed last week that “constructive discussions” are taking place over the possible return of the Elgin Marbles to Greece after 200 years, said Craig Simpson in *The Daily Telegraph*. George Osborne, chairman of the British Museum, is



understood to be in advanced talks with Greek officials over a loan agreement allowing the long-contested Parthenon Marbles, taken from the Acropolis by Lord Elgin in the early 19th century, to return to Athens in a “cultural exchange”. The arrangement could see famous Greek art works being loaned to the UK, including *Jockey of Artemision*, a bronze sculpture depicting a small boy riding a horse, and *Mask of Agamemnon*, a golden funeral mask named for the Greek king in *The Iliad*. The proposed exchange deal is unlikely to end the row over the issue, however, as Greece will continue to campaign for a full transfer of legal ownership of the Marbles, which the British Museum cannot now offer under UK law.