

'Horror in the Modernist Block': an artistic inquiry of horror in modern architecture

The exhibition at Ikon Gallery unravels the relation of horror and modern architecture through works by 20 contemporary artists from across the world.

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Rather unexpectedly, the architectural elements that defined the horror genre seem to have shifted from traditional to modern aesthetics. While the horror visuals of the past decade framed physical entities of Victorian, medieval and gothic architecture, the current world seems to be attracted towards modern elements. Contrasting the general association of horror to the stained white walls, decorative ceilings with chandelier lightings and the loneliness of abandoned grand structures, the new frames capture the same eerie loneliness through minimalism of the contemporary world. Diving into this shift and presenting artistic glimpses of it, Ikon Gallery in Birmingham will be exhibiting *Horror in the Modernist Block*, an art exhibition that will bring forth recent works by 20 UK-based and international contemporary artists, exploring the relationship between architectural modernism and horror.



Slow Violence (2019) by Kihlberg & Henry in HD video, colour, stereo sound, film still
Image: Courtesy of Kihlberg & Henry

A reflection of the statement by the gallery, "In fiction and film, high-rise towers, concrete estates and glass pavilions form the backdrop to terrifying stories of dystopias," the exhibition will commence its inception in the brutalist city of Birmingham. Merging the brutalist architecture of the city, it will reveal the troubled histories and legacies of modernist buildings through film, photography, sculpture, installation, painting, drawing, and printmaking. "Artworks in the exhibition link horror tropes (suspense, darkness, fear) with qualities of modernist design, and the real violence and trauma of its construction and destruction. Configured in dialogue with the architecture of Ikon's galleries and neo-gothic building, the exhibition takes viewers on a journey that highlights how the design and features of a building can shape not only our movement and perception but also our deepest fears," states the art gallery in an official release.



Mies 421 (2010) by Maria Taniguchi in single-channel video, black and white, sound 4:06 minutes
Image: Courtesy of Maria Taniguchi and carlier | gebauer

A film zone at Ikon's first-floor galleries will introduce visitors to the exhibition. A dark room projecting the films, will immerse the viewers into the world of horror with its thrills, curiosities and suspense. Presented in a sequence, four films representing the modernist perspectives of horror will be screened, these include— Maria Taniguchi's *Mies 421* (2010), a film showing various viewpoints of Mies van der Rohe's Barcelona Pavilion, followed by a new version of *Slow Violence* (2018/22) by Kihlberg & Henry. Shot around the modernist estates of Druids Heath and Aston New Town in Birmingham, *BRUTAL* (2022), a film by NT, will be followed by *The Cloud of Unknowing* (2011) by Ho Tzu Nyen, an epic tableau of a housing block in Singapore engulfed by a mysterious cloud.

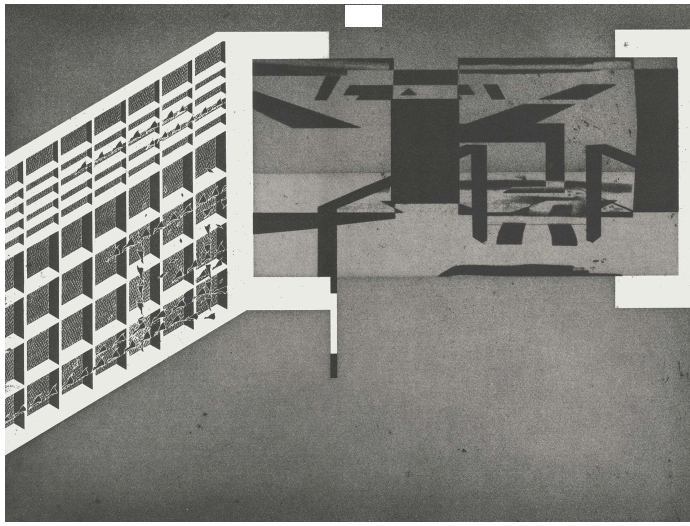
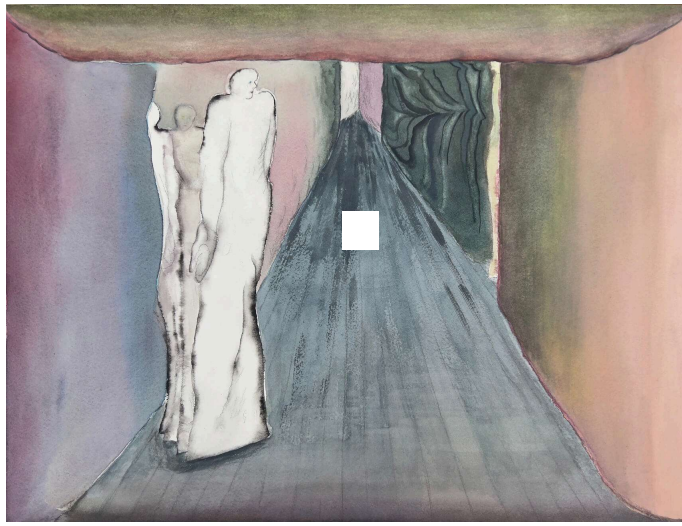


PHOTO COURTESY OF THE CURATOR, DR. ANITA K. SINGH

Moving ahead, visitors will enter light-filled spaces where photographs on the theme are being displayed. In the space is Karim Kal's *Entourage*(2017) and *Sol* (2021), presenting walkways of housing estates in Paris and Lyon as sites of transgression and control by capturing the debris, graffiti, and concrete ballasts present on the site. Displaying how the materiality and politics of modernist relics haunt the present is a suspended mobile work by Richard Hughes, *Lithobolia Happy Meal* (2022), and Shezad Dawood's tapestry *The Directorate* (2019) which depicts an eerie, vacant view of the modernist pool adjoining the former US Consulate in Karachi, Pakistan. Furthermore, exploring modernist perspectives with their reference to Le Corbusier's Unité d'Habitation are Seher Shah's etchings, *Unit Object (sculpture garden)*, *Unit Object (gate)* and *Unit Object (landscape view)* (2014). Architecture will be further explored through a display of images selected by the 20 exhibiting artists, and catalogue contributor and artist Stuart Whipps.



Union (2022) by Firenze Lai in watercolour and gouache on paper, 31 × 41 cm
Image: Courtesy of Firenze Lai and Vitamin Creative Space

Responding to the fire that took place at Grenfell Tower, London in 2017, killing 72 people, at the heart of the exhibition will be Abbas Zahedi's *Exit Sign* (2022) and works presented in Ikon's glass stairwell. Zahedi, who lost her friend and fellow artist, Khadija Saye to the fire, intervenes with the gallery's architecture and manipulates health and safety signages. Her exploration seeks to "turn the transitional area into a space of pause, reflection, and communal mourning."



Carus (2020) in powder-coated mild steel, chemiwood, MDF, resin, velvet, magnets, 133 x 43 x 64cm and *Soja* (2019) in ink, pro-marker and graphite on paper, 21 x 14.8cm by Amba Sayal-Bennett

Image: Amba Sayal-Bennett

In the second-floor galleries, five women artists will unveil their adaptation of modern architecture in horror. Pairing abstract evocations of architecture in New Delhi, India, with texts recalling histories and memories of violence and erasure is Seher Shah's screen prints *Notes from a City Unknown* (2021). Recollecting the destruction of indigenous settlements in Khartoum, Sudan, under British colonial rule, and the way it accelerated Soviet-inspired architecture in the city is the sculpture *An Early Road Before a Modern One* (2022) and video *The Line That Follows* (2022) by Ola Hassanain. *Énergie contrôlée* (2022) translated as 'vanquished space' or 'controlled energy' by Laëtitia Badaut Haussmann transforms a 6-metre-wide niche into a 'para-architecture'. The artwork is reminiscent of modernist sets in horror films, where female characters frequently fall victim to patriarchal violence. Amba-Sayal Bennett extends her

sculptures and drawings from architectural maquettes and masterplans finding a combination of digital and analogues techniques. Said to evoke the alienating social consequences of concrete urbanism in cities like Hong Kong, Firenze Lai's drawings and paintings take shape in cocooned and corralled figures.



Installation still of *The Line That Follows* (2022) and *An Early Road Before a Modern One* (2022) by Ola Hassanain from Hassanain's studio at the Rijksakademie 4k video with archival footage montage

Image: Sander van Wettum; Courtesy of Ola Hassanain

At the apex of the exhibition will be large-scale works aiming to "conjure the striking yet brutal nature of modernist constructions". In the collection are Ismael Monticelli's *Spaghetti Junction* (2022) which brings together the legacies of brutalism in Birmingham and Oscar Niemeyer's Brasília. Furthermore, the exhibition aims to vocalise Polish artist Monika Sosnowska's sculptures made from construction materials and works by Simon & Tom Bloor which doubles as seating for the audience and explores "modernist street furniture cobbled together from the scraps of urban ruins". Ikon's tower room will become home for Ruth Claxton's

new work consisting of sculptural forms coated in light-reflective paint aiming to create a dramatic contrast between the audience and enclosed architecture. Diego Marcon's award-winning short film *Monelle* (2017), which combines techniques of structural cinema, CGI animation and the backdrop of the Casa del Fascio in Como, Italy will be an addition, scheduled to be screened at Midlands Art Centre on April 2, 2023.



The Directorate (2019) by Shezad Dawood in tapestry in teak artist's frame, wallpaper, frame: 159 x 116 cm
Image: Courtesy of Sharjah Art Foundation, Shezad Dawood, Jhaveri Contemporary, Mumbai and Timothy Taylor, London

With the exhibition *Horror in the Modernist Block*, the contemporary art venue in central Birmingham hopes to initiate a thought-provoking narrative of how architecture can instigate all kinds of human emotions, especially fear. While in the course of design, architecture doesn't particularly aim to establish spaces that aid horror; dialogue between the various works at the exhibition, might initiate a conversation on the

important role of architecture, particularly modern and brutalist architecture, in shaping spaces that create varying emotions. Throughout the exhibition, the displays not only hope to enclose the dynamicity of architecture but create a prose on how different spaces are engraved in human minds differently.

The exhibition *Horror in the Modernist Block* will be on display at the Ikon Gallery in Birmingham from November 25, 2022 to May 1, 2023.