

- the 'rat race' indeed - underpins the narrative. Hedonism becomes both a bid for transcendence and a means of survival under late-capitalism, wherein productivity is rebranded as play.

Inside the ballroom, the four pairs of rats waltz in competitive duration. A metronome keeps time with the performers' 'tra-la-la of pumping blood'. A message flashes: 'We congregated because we all craved the same thing: escape.' Queer culture has long celebrated the dancefloor as a kind of liberation: a utopia that exists in the space of a night. The images blur into hyper-speed, as if mimicking a chemical rush. A joke-shop gun pops: 'BANG!'

Throughout the film, a constant, low-level sense of menace bubbles. A surreal weather report announces alligators in the hotel's sewer system. There's a deadlock between the 'floor referees' who keep the competitors moving along and the 'P.A.I.N Nurses', dressed as alien brides, who advise rest and give smothering hugs. Pleasure edges towards self-obliteration: 'Our bodies were less solid containers than networks, blurs.' The phrase 'Surrender Grace' is ominously burned into the hotel ceiling with matches.

How group identity is formed (and deformed) is one of *Surrender*'s central themes. We see the rats - reviled outsiders shadowing human society - engage in what might be considered communal activities such as 'marathon hand-holding' and wilderness survival. We watch them assemble the giant red inflatable innards of the entrance but, in turn, become 'just tangled limbs' brutalised by blasts of techno. (These scenes bear the influence of Gaspar Noe's 2018 film *Climax*: a dance-off descending into a series of overlapping panic attacks.)

The rituals of wider society are inverted. There is even a 'mass jilting' - an anti-wedding with bells - before the dancers gorge on one last meal together, taking fistfuls of trophy-shaped cake. A final SOS pleads: 'Knowing it was nearly the end, I whispered to you: don't use up your lifeline before we meet again.' The rats, slumped and unconscious, are sealed into cryogenic suits by the nurses. The empty dancefloor now contains only a bed. Grace burrows inside, drool and feathers flying.

Tunnelling back, the main protagonist exits through the giant rat's head. Two bouncers fire confetti cannons. Ouroboros-like, we've returned to the start. What does it mean to win? Is there 'no happier place than a loser's' after all? Grace receives an engraved gold plaque for 'sincere and concerted' effort. Then - finally, fittingly - collapses.

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'Horror in the Modernist Block', installation view

Horror in the Modernist Block

Ikon Gallery, Birmingham, 25 November to 1 May

Birmingham has a somewhat beleaguered relationship with architecture. The city's industrial might made it a target during the Second World War; the heavy bombing of the city between 1940 and 1943 by the Luftwaffe became known as the Birmingham blitz. In the aftermath, Herbert Manzoni, who was appointed by Birmingham City Council as the city engineer and surveyor of Birmingham from 1935 until 1963, was tasked with redesigning the city for the future. Paradise Circus, the city's answer to London's Barbican, was never fully completed and much of it is now demolished. English architect John Madin's brutalist Central Library similarly divided opinion, the then Prince Charles describing it at the time as 'a place for burning books, rather than keeping them'. The city seems an apt location to explore these troubled histories and 'Horror in the Modernist Block' goes further in order to assess the broader impact of international modernist architecture on the lives it shelters.

The 'less is more' philosophies taught to students of the Bauhaus have, perhaps unexpectedly, become associated with the interior design tastes of villains and the occasional horror film; it seems that serial killers love clean surfaces. This connection stretches back to William Castle's iconic 1959 horror film *House on Haunted Hill*, which features US architect Frank Lloyd Wright's Ennis House. Another memorable example is Robert De Niro's cold-blooded character Neil McCauley, who, in Michael Mann's *Heat*, 1995, resides in an unfurnished modernist Malibu beach house. These locations create moments that are seemingly devoid of human empathy, a language of coldness that echoes modern existence, yet this exhibition is concerned with how experiences in these environments play out in the mess of real life.

The psychological and emotional impact of the movement's design principles are central to the exhibition. Abbas Zahedi's *Exit Sign*, 2022, and works in Ikon's glass stairwell form a sobering response to the Grenfell Tower tragedy that killed 72 people, including

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Zahedi's friend, the artist Khadija Saye. Zahedi's reinterpretation of health and safety signage disrupts the gallery's architecture and makes reference to Jacob Rees-Mogg's remark that the Grenfell victims lacked common sense and should have ignored official 'stay-put policy' guidance and instead followed exit signs. Zahedi seeks to turn this transitional area into a space of pause, reflection and communal mourning.

Located nearby in Ikon's foyer is Birmingham-born Richard Hughes's *If Socks Aren't Pulled Up Heads Will Roll*, 2009, a rusting lamp post with a sunken-eyed football bearing a tongue where the lamp should be. On close inspection the work has been entirely fabricated to appear as if a ready-made object, playfully reconsidering the value of deteriorating urban infrastructure. Upstairs, the question as to whether horror is found in the building or the people who live in them is explored in several works presented on timed projections that create walls and corridors through the gallery spaces. Singaporean artist Ho Tzu Nyen's film *The Cloud of Unknowing*, 2011, presents eight protagonists who act out their daily lives in a public housing facility in Singapore, a country caught between a mindset of Eastern collectivism and global neoliberalism. The individuals live isolated in their apartments until an ominous, supernatural cloud appears and connects them. Working off a tension between the need for urban solitude but also togetherness, the film's cloud appears as both transcendental illumination and individualised hallucination. The effect of living with noise in urban environments is considered in Khilberg & Henry's *Slow Violence*, 2018-22, a work that was originally commissioned for the Whitstable Biennale. The video's narrative follows four young people whose script is determined by the metronomic clunking slides of a carousel projector. The sounds seem to steer their actions and help them recognise the way in which the sounds of construction and destruction can influence our bodies and minds.

Laëtitia Badaut Haussmann's *Vanquished space, Controlled energy*, 2022, uses the heights offered by Ikon's neo-gothic building to transform a six-metre-wide niche into a kind of modernist horror film set, similar to the interiors of Richard Neutra's desert houses in Palm Springs. Pakistani-American artist Seher Shah has created geometric architectural reliefs accompanied by texts that reveal the city of New Delhi as a backdrop for sectarian violence. Further works by Amba Sayal-Bennet, Ismael Monticelli and Monika Sosnowska speak to the layered tactics employed by authoritarian regimes and their choice of buildings, spanning the constructivist era in Poland to Oscar Niemeyer's Brasilia.

Warped figures out of joint with their surroundings are encountered in Firenze Lai's paintings of surreally long corridors typically found in high-rise buildings. Karim Kal's photographs reveal the social housing projects in Lyon and Noisy-le-Sec as isolated islands totally adrift from their surroundings. These stark images have been smartly paired with benches made by Birmingham-based artists Simon & Tom Bloor, who have used aesthetics associated with Modernism to inspire their designs – there are even concrete casts of rubbish beneath them.

The exhibition, however, crescendos with *Here I am, waiting*, 2014-22 by Ruth Claxton. Installed in Ikon's tower room gallery, it requires visitors to use their phone's camera flash to illuminate sculptural forms which are coated in light-reflective paint, such as the

kind found on labourer's jackets or street signs. These momentary flashes in the dark remind us that the modernist architect's utopian dreams have – through chronic underfunding by local councils, unfinished or absent transport links and a genuine sense of indifference to those who live there – become complex postwar legacies left to ruin.

Thomas Ellmer is the exhibitions curator at the Mead Gallery, Warwick Arts Centre.

Zadie Xa: House Gods, Animal Guides and Five Ways 2 Forgiveness

Whitechapel Gallery, London
20 September to 30 April

In the Korean shamanic myth of Bari Gongju, the king and queen abandon their seventh daughter, disappointed by their repeated failure to produce a son. Years later they fall critically ill and, after their accepted offspring refuse the task, they seek help from their estranged daughter. Bari travels to the underworld in search of the potion and flowers that will save her parents, but when she finally returns she is informed that it is too late; the royal funeral is underway. Now able to traverse the realms of the living and the dead, Bari brings the king and queen back from death and thus an abandoned princess becomes a deity: the guardian of the underworld who steers the souls of the recently deceased from one territory to the other.

Bari Gongju is also the guide to Korean-Canadian artist Zadie Xa's solo exhibition 'House Gods, Animal Guides and Five Ways 2 Forgiveness'. Arguably, the princess could even be understood as a guardian of Xa's practice more widely, both for her recurrence in recent projects, such as *Moon Poetics 4 Courageous Art Critters and Dangerous Day Dreamers* at Leeds Art Gallery, 2021, and as the embodiment of Xa's overarching interests: Korean mythology, liminal states and the navigation of diasporic and hybrid identities. Here, at the entrance of the gallery, Bari is manifested in the form of an embellished cape, which is suspended from the ceiling with its arms outstretched and hood drooped like a bowed head. It is constructed from strips of hand-dyed linen and the perforated, synthetic fabric of sportswear. Symbols that are now familiar from Xa's visual language are stitched into and across the surface: knives,



Zadie Xa, 'House Gods, Animal Guides and Five Ways 2 Forgiveness', 2022, installation view

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