



NATIONAL PORTRAIT GALLERY

News release

Thursday 6 April 2023

Tapestry celebrating key workers by leading artist, Michael Armitage, to be displayed in new 'History Makers' space when the National Portrait Gallery reopens in June

Michael Armitage's tapestry depicts the portraits of four refuse collectors, working during the UK national lockdown in 2020.

The group portrait will join the likes of Stormzy, Jeanette Winterson and Andy Murray in a new gallery dedicated to today's 'History Makers,' named The National Lottery Heritage Fund Gallery.



NPG 7144. John Barry, O Kelly, Sonny and Richard Moore by Michael Armitage, 2022. Gifted by the artist and White Cube.

Today, the National Portrait Gallery announces its acquisition of John Barry, O Kelly, Sonny and Richard Moore (2022), a tapestry by leading artist, Michael Armitage, that depicts four refuse collectors at work during the UK's first national lockdown in 2020. The tapestry was made after Armitage's painting of the same name, created as part of a public commission in 2020 by the Southbank Centre to recognise the efforts of key workers during the Covid-19 pandemic. Acquired by the National Portrait Gallery, the work will be displayed in its tapestry form for the first time when its building reopens on 22 June 2023, hanging in the newly created The National Lottery Heritage Fund Gallery.



Situated on the ground floor of the refurbished building, The National Lottery Heritage Fund Gallery is a new space that will showcase some of the National Portrait Gallery's most recent acquisitions and commissions. A flexible gallery, the new space will display some of the country's most important 'History Makers,' bringing visitors face-to-face with people who are influential today. John Barry, O Kelly, Sonny and Richard Moore will be exhibited alongside portraits of grime artist, Stormzy; Olympian and Wimbledon Champion, Andy Murray; campaigner, Baroness Doreen Lawrence; and England footballer and Lioness, Lucy Bronze; as well as 130 inspirational women included in an eight metre-long mural, co-created by artists Jann Haworth and Liberty Blake with groups from colleges and communities across the UK.

While Michael Armitage is best known as a painter, John Barry, O Kelly, Sonny and Richard Moore builds on the theme of community creation in its adaptation to tapestry. Armitage worked with weavers and artists from West Dean College of Arts and Conservation to transform the mural-like qualities of his original painting into this new work. As is characteristic of Armitage's work, the painting straddles abstraction and figuration. The tapestry depicts four men working seamlessly together, a totem-like group at the centre of the tapestry's composition. On the left hand side, their names – which give the work its title – are visible against the road as a monument to men now honoured by their community; and to the right, a red vehicle receives the thrown refuse bags. In the background, a patient is stretched into an ambulance, and rainbows make further references to the 'everyday heroes' of the pandemic, contextualising the time during which the refuse collectors were working. Reflecting the artist's usual practice of drawing on current events, dramatic masks of comedy and tragedy can be viewed in the bottom corner of the tapestry, suggestive of the face-masks that have become such an emblem of the pandemic.

The acquisition will further enhance the Gallery's record of the pandemic, which was an extraordinary moment in living history. The Collection also includes the 100 photographs from the Hold Still project, a collective portrait of the first nationwide lockdown made up of images created by members of the public from across the UK, which depict everyday life during the period – from home haircuts and children's rainbow drawings, to key workers and NHS workers on the front line.

"The National Portrait Gallery celebrates the people who have shaped – and are continuing to shape – our nation, which is why I'm delighted that we have acquired this beautiful work by Michael Armitage, one of the most significant artists working today, which rightly applauds key workers, for our new gallery of 'History Makers'. Thank you to Michael and White Cube for this generous donation, and to The National Lottery Heritage Fund, and National Lottery players, for making this new space a reality."

Dr Nicholas Cullinan

Director, National Portrait Gallery

"I have been coming to the National Portrait Gallery for many years. The exhibitions and paintings in its Collection have been created by artists I look up to and have been influenced by. This tapestry is about community and the workers in the community that go largely unseen. It is a privilege to have this work be part of the National Portrait Gallery Collection and gives me great pleasure to know that these workers will be recognised in a public space in the heart of London."

Michael Armitage

Artist

"It's fantastic that this amazing piece by Michael Armitage will be part of the 'History Makers' collection. This is the space that will bring to life the stories and faces of the people shaping our society today - whether it's key workers during the pandemic or inspirational individuals who contribute to their communities right across the UK. Celebrating these figures and the important contribution they make is something we applaud. We look forward to seeing this space brought back to life when the Gallery reopens in June, supported by money raised by National Lottery players, and we are delighted that their contribution is recognised in this space, which bears the new name The National Lottery Heritage Fund Gallery."

Eilish McGuinness

Chief Executive, The National Lottery Heritage Fund

Kenyan born Michael Armitage is one of the most important artists working today. Working in rich colour, the visual iconography of East Africa lies at the heart of his practice. His paintings blend harsh realism with depictions of dream-like imagery, making reference to Kenya's politics, social inequalities, violence and extreme disparities in wealth. Armitage's work is represented in a number of important public collections, including in The Arts Council Collection, the Metropolitan Museum, New York and the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York. In 2021, the Royal Academy of Arts staged Michael Armitage: Paradise Edict, and in 2024, his work will feature in the National Portrait Gallery's exhibition, The Time is Always Now: Artists Reframe the Black Figure (22 February – 19 May 2024).

John Barry, O Kelly, Sonny and Richard Moore by Michael Armitage features in the new book, National Portrait Gallery: The Collection, published to coincide with the Gallery's reopening on 22 June 2023,



following its major transformational redevelopment project, Inspiring People. Inspiring People has been made possible by major grants from the Blavatnik Family Foundation and The National Lottery Heritage Fund, thanks to money raised by National Lottery players, as well as major donations from the Garfield Weston Foundation, the Ross Foundation, Mildred and Simon Palley, Julia and Hans Rausing, the David and Claudia Harding Foundation, Bjorn and Inger Saven, the Law Family Charitable Foundation, the Deborah Loeb Brice Foundation and Art Fund. The National Portrait Gallery is grateful to these visionary supporters, alongside others who are making the building project and its related activity possible.

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Notes to editors

National Portrait Gallery: The Collection, which features John Barry, O Kelly, Sonny and Richard Moore by Michael Armitage, is available to pre-order from the Gallery's online shop: npgshop.org.uk/products/national-portrait-gallery-the-collection-paperback-book

National Portrait Gallery

Founded in 1856, the National Portrait Gallery tells the story of Britain through portraits, using art to bring history to life and explore living today. From global icons, to unsung heroes, our Collection is filled with the stories that have shaped, and continue to shape a nation. We celebrate the power of portraiture and offer encounters with some of the world's greatest and most exciting new artists, promoting engagement with portraiture in all media to a wide-ranging public by conserving, growing and sharing the world's largest collection of portraits.

The Gallery in St Martin's Place, London is currently closed until 22 June 2023, while essential building works take place on the Inspiring People redevelopment project, which will transform the Gallery, including a complete refurbishment of the building and a new learning centre. During the closure period, we have continued to share our Collection digitally, as well as through a series of nationwide partnerships and collaborations. www.npg.org.uk

Collaborators on the Inspiring People project include Jamie Fobert Architects; conservation architects, Purcell; structural engineers, Price & Myers; services engineers, Max Fordham; project manager, Gardiner & Theobald; main contractor, Gilbert-Ash; and interpretation designers, Nissen Richards Studio.

The National Lottery Heritage Fund

Using money raised by the National Lottery, we Inspire, lead and resource the UK's heritage to create positive and lasting change for people and communities, now and in the future. www.heritagefund.org.uk

Follow @HeritageFundUK on [Twitter](#), [Facebook](#) and [Instagram](#) and use #NationalLotteryHeritageFund

Since The National Lottery began in 1994, National Lottery players have raised over £46 billion for projects and more than 670,000 grants have been awarded across the UK. More than £30 million raised each week goes to good causes across the UK.

The Blavatnik Family Foundation

The [Blavatnik Family Foundation](#) supports world-renowned educational, scientific, cultural, and charitable institutions in the United States, the United Kingdom, Israel, and across the globe. Led by Sir Leonard Blavatnik, founder and chairman of Access Industries, the Foundation advances and promotes innovation, discovery, and creativity to benefit the whole of society. Over the past decade, the Foundation has contributed more than \$1 billion to over 250 organizations.

The Garfield Weston Foundation

Established in 1958, the Garfield Weston Foundation is a family-founded charitable grant-making trust, which gives away around £90 million a year to charities across the UK.

Each year the Foundation gives away its income and donations have continued to grow. Since it was established, it has donated over £1.4 billion, of which over half has been given away in the past 10 years alone. In the most recent financial year, the Foundation gave away nearly £90 million to over 1,980 charities across the UK.

The Ross Foundation

The Ross Foundation was created in 2007 with a core mission to help children and young people discover their strengths by offering them a wide range of world-class educational opportunities. We support organisations that inspire young people and encourage them to take the chance to embrace new skills and passion.