

PRESS RELEASE

Date: Wednesday 27 March 2024

John Lyons: Carnavalesque

Friday 10 May – Sunday 25 August 2024

- An exhibition surveying 60 years of John Lyons' work celebrating the folklore and legends of Trinidad and Tobago in paint and poetry.
- Many of the works on display will be shown for the first time in decades.



The Whitworth presents *John Lyons: Carnavalesque*, the first major retrospective of the work of artist and poet John Lyons (b.1933, Trinidad). Surveying six decades of Lyons' contribution to British art, literature and art education, the exhibition centres on his exploration of Trinidadian folklore and mythology through painting and poetry.

Bringing together over 80 works, made between 1964 and 2024 with many not seen in decades, the exhibition illuminates Lyons' rich practice at a timely moment in his long career. Positioning his work in context, the exhibition underlines Lyons' art historical legacy whilst offering fresh insight into the region's creative scene through the work of an artist who spent four decades immersed in it.

the Whitworth

For Lyons, painting is a dynamic, expressive language that can reach deep into the psyche. In his work, enigmatic figures from Trinidad carnival and folklore mingle with motifs from Lyons' personal artistic symbolism. Conjuring dramatic scenes laden with visual allure yet laced with uncertainty, Lyons invites the viewer to step into his inner world - and embark on their own imaginative journey. Showcasing Lyons' paintings, drawings and woodcuts alongside his poems, sketchbooks and archival material, the exhibition offers a unique insight into his intuitive creative process.

The exhibition opens with a vivid celebration of Lyons's central preoccupation: Carnival. *Before Ash Wednesday in Trinidad* (1988), Lyons' largest surviving work, forms the magnetic centre of this section. The show then looks back to trace Lyons' artistic development since arriving at art school in London in 1959, following his thought process as he defined his unique artistic expression and symbolic language whilst living and working in Manchester from 1967 until the late 1990s. Studies such as *Marie Louise* (1968) illustrate Lyons' foundational investigations into abstraction, structure and form, whilst lush large-scale oils such as *Self Portrait with Jumbie Bird and Alter Ego* (1990) showcase the flourishing of his singular style and vision. The exhibition culminates with a journey into the mythology and folklore of Trinidad as it relates to the shaping of Lyons' sense of self, reflecting on spiritual connections to the natural world and the meshing of belief systems in the Caribbean. Playing out in dramatic sequence, paintings such as *Soucouyant Visitation* (1986) mesmerize in a blaze of colour, whilst delicate pastels and watercolours such as *Dreamscape* (2004) convey Lyons' intuitive creative process.

Throughout his practice, Lyons invites us to enter into a shared 'creative continuum' with him, discovering and negotiating meaning in his work through the lens of our own lives and experiences. In this spirit, Lyons has written a new poem 'Mutability' (2024) especially for the exhibition, which unites two small assemblages *Sacrificial Continuum I and II* (2000-2010) in an imagined dialogue with each other and with the viewer. Archival elements in the exhibition explore his dedication to nurturing the creativity of others and supporting community arts through endeavours such as Hourglass Studio Gallery in Hebden Bridge during the 2000s.

Artist, John Lyons, said: "I am greatly honoured as a painter and poet in my 90th year for this opportunity to present my work at the Whitworth in Manchester, sharing my journey of continuing creative discovery."

Olivia Heron, Curator at the Whitworth, said: "It is invigorating to work in dialogue with John Lyons, a truly dedicated artist, poet, and educator whose creative spirit knows no bounds. I hope this exhibition inspires new appreciation and critical reflections on his practice, and recognition of his contribution to Manchester's vibrant art scene."

-ENDS-

Notes to Editors

For all press information, images and interview requests please contact, Melissa McFarlane, Communications Manager at whitworthpress@manchester.ac.uk

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Image credit

John Lyons. *Before Ash Wednesday in Trinidad*, 1988. Oil on canvas, 1590 x 2030 mm. Courtesy the artist © John C.M. Lyons. Photography by Anne-Katrin Purkiss.

Listings information

10 May – 25 August 2024
the Whitworth, The University of Manchester
Free entry

Related publications

The exhibition will be accompanied by a fully illustrated publication serving as the artist's first monograph, published by the Whitworth.

Related events

An extensive learning and engagement programme, funded by Arts Council England, will be delivered in partnership with Manchester Poetry Library and Creative Manchester. This includes a new poetry commission responding to works in the exhibition.

In addition, on Sunday 9 June, the Whitworth presents The Carnival, a day of activities celebrating art, culture and our vibrant community. This one-day programme of live art performances and workshops in the art gallery and its gardens, takes inspiration from the exhibition to mark The University of Manchester's Bicentenary year.

During August, PLAYTIME, our school summer holidays programme for children will have a carnival theme inspired by the exhibition. PLAYTIME activity sessions are kindly supported by Pentagon Play – The UK's No.1 Playground Company.

Limited edition

John Lyons has produced a new limited edition print, *A Trinidad Folklore Bacchanal* (2024) to mark the occasion of the show. This will be available to purchase in the Whitworth shop.

Credits

The exhibition is curated by Olivia Heron (Curator, the Whitworth) in close conversation with the artist and Alnoor Mitha, Curatorial Advisor and long-term friend of John Lyons, who initiated the idea of the exhibition at the Whitworth.

The exhibition is generously supported by Friends of the Whitworth.

With thanks to our official paint sponsor Little Greene.

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About the artist

John Lyons was born and brought up in Trinidad and Tobago. He came to the UK to study art at the age of twenty-five, gaining a National Diploma in Design from Goldsmiths College, London (1959-64) and an Art Teacher's Diploma from the University of Newcastle Upon Tyne (1964-65).

In 1967 he moved to Manchester, where he worked as a secondary school art teacher for 9 years, and then as an FE art lecturer for 17 years. Developing his painting practice alongside teaching full time, he has exhibited regularly in solo and group shows since 1979. He is also a prize-winning poet with eight published volumes. Lyons is an enthusiastic supporter of the arts scene who has selected for exhibitions, served on boards, judging panels, and as an external purchaser for the Arts Council Collection (1987-89). From 1998-2004 he ran Hourglass Studio Gallery in Hebden Bridge with his partner Jean Rees, and from 2004-2012 he was a trustee of Hourglass Educational Arts Development Services. In 2003 he received the Windrush Arts Achiever Award. He lives and works in Cambridgeshire.

Lyons was featured in *Life Between Islands: Caribbean-British Art 1950-Now* at Tate Britain in 2021, and in *Paint Like the Swallow Sings Calypso* at Kettle's Yard, Cambridge in 2022, alongside Paul Dash and Errol Lloyd. His work is held in the Arts Council Collection, Victoria and Albert Museum, Kirklees Museums and Galleries and Touchstones Rochdale. He is represented by [Felix & Spear Gallery](#).

About the Whitworth

The Whitworth is proudly part of The University of Manchester, operating as a convening space between the University and the people of the city. Founded in 1889 for "the perpetual gratification of the people of Manchester" it continues this mission today in new contexts. The gallery, its park and gardens are home to the collection of over 60,000 works of art, textiles, sculptures and wallpapers and provides a platform for artists from around the world. The Whitworth is driven by a vision to actively seek and manifest connections between art, creativity, and their role in developing a more resilient and caring society through its exhibitions and award-winning civic engagement programme.

Gallery opening times: Tuesday to Sunday 10am-5pm, Thursday late opening until 9pm

www.manchester.ac.uk/whitworth