



THE ART NEWSPAPER

Modern Art Oxford gallery gets a £2m revamp

The new space's inaugural show is dedicated to the pioneering Cuban artist Belkis Ayón

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Architect's rendered view of the gallery's new entrance space
Courtesy of Modern Art Oxford

Modern Art Oxford, UK, is due to re-open this week (2 November) following a five-month, £2m revamp. The ground and lower-ground public areas of the contemporary art space, located at the heart of the university city, have been overhauled as part of the redesign by David Kohn Architects. The building, housed in a former Victorian brewery, had been “stretched to its limits”, said a gallery fundraising statement.

The renovated venue now incorporates a new gallery “celebrating Oxford’s creative community”, says a project statement. The new ground-floor space will feature the works of local artists and groups, launching with the annual Platform Graduate Award (2 November-1 December) featuring works by

graduates from the Ruskin School of Art and Oxford Brookes University. Next month, works made by a local group of Muslim parents and children in collaboration with the artist Farwa Moledina will go on show.

A new creative learning studio plus a new basement café designed by the UK artist Emma Hart also form part of the redevelopment. Paul Hobson, the director of Modern Art Oxford, said that enlarging and refurbishing the education space means the gallery can accommodate “rapidly growing participation work”.

Crucially, the redesign will “significantly improve the environmental performance of the building”, the gallery adds. According to an online environmental responsibility statement, the gallery aims to reduce carbon emissions and landfill annually by 5% each, resulting in a 20% reduction by mid 2027. It has also pledged to be carbon neutral by 2040, in line with Oxford City Council’s environmental charter.

The main funders of the £2m overhaul are Arts Council England, the CHK Foundation, the Charina Endowment Fund, and the Garfield Weston Foundation. Individual donors include the Canadian patron Dasha Shenkman.



Belkis Ayón, *El señor del secreto* (*The Gentleman of the Secret*), 1988
© Belkis Ayón Estate. Courtesy of the Belkis Ayón Estate and David Castillo

The inaugural show is dedicated to the late Cuban artist Belkis Ayón, comprising 50 works belonging to the Ayón estate based in Havana (*Sikán Illuminations*, 2 November-9 February 2025). The works displayed, which focus on the Afro-Cuban religious group known as the Abakuá, were made using a printing process called collography.

Ayón, who died in 1999, has been institutionally overlooked but is currently undergoing something of a renaissance; she was the subject of a retrospective at the Museo Reina Sofia in Madrid in 2022 which “delves deep into her short but prolific career, framing it inside the artistic and sociocultural context of 1990s Cuba”.

According to *The Guardian*, “over the course of a short but brilliant life whose final years were profoundly marked by the chaos that the collapse of the Soviet Union visited on her native Cuba, Ayón established herself as an artist whose technical skills were matched only by the haunted and hallucinatory intensity of her imagination”.

Modern Art Oxford launched in 1965, moving to its current home on Pembroke Street late 1966, and has hosted exhibitions by Robert Mapplethorpe, Yayoi Kusama, Yoko Ono, Tracey Emin, and Jenny Saville. Former directors include Nicholas Serota, the current chair of Arts Council England, and Michael Stanley who died in 2012. “Tickets to most of our exhibitions are free. Every 12-18 months we charge for a show,” says the gallery website.