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An affiliate society of the College Art Association (CAA) in North America, HBA promotes scholarship and other professional endeavors related to British art and architecture, broadly conceived in terms of place and time.
I am writing to you from Venice, attending the 2019 Biennale *May You Live In Interesting Times*. There are two British artists here—Cathy Wilkes and John Akomfrah, CBE—who examine our connection to all things in the Anthropocene.

Wilkes’s exhibition in the British pavilion comprises sparse arrangements of odd objects including free-standing humanoids with swollen bellies and “bean-shaped heads,” rags on the floor, dried and plastic plants, pictures on the wall, and crockery.¹ (Fig. 1) There is also a large, semitransparent box or bed that Curator Zoé Whitley calls a “sepulchral form.”² (Fig. 2) As a whole, the installation is described to explore “inchoate visions of interiors and places of loss” and “the disappearance and dematerialisation of life.” What really caught my attention, however, were the first few lines of the artist’s introductory text in the exhibition booklet:

The smallest particle of suffering is the object, and I, the subject who acts upon the object, am every atom unfolding from the womb. An atom here among us and another atom in a far away galaxy are inseparable epitomes of the same.

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What Wilkes suggests here are astonishing and yet relevant to our “Interesting Times.” Objects we encounter form units of knowledge, impossibly interconnected transcending the limits of time and space—as in quantum entanglement. Objects are capable of suffering even when they are small, thus showing signs of something akin to consciousness. The subject that has the power to exert influence on its physical surrounding is also only the “smallest particle.” We are “every atom” born of the human but from the galaxy—as in “we are all stardust.” The cosmic communion seems to be the core of Wilkes’s domestic drama. Drawing on Bruno Latour’s concept of actants, Jane Bennett points out: “A lot happens to the concept of agency once nonhuman things are figured less as social constructions and more as actors, and once human themselves are assessed not as autonoms but as vital materialities.”

Wilkes’s idea of interconnectedness of the human and non-human is shared by Akomfrah, showing Four Nocturnes in Ghana’s pavilion. (Fig. 3) In this three-channel video installation, the artist creates a planetary analogy between endangered species and migrants. Elephants are shown to track across a barren land in search of food and shelter as men and women carrying bags seek refuge and livelihood across a desert. In one critical scene, Akomfrah stills the camera on a migrant in a pink polo shirt, who wears an elephant mask staring back at the viewer. (Fig. 4) Our destruction of small and large components of the planet—be they human or non-human—cause universal “suffering.”

In recent years or months, many of us went through—and are still going through—a self-reflexive process of reassessing what we do. About a year ago, The Chronicle of Higher Education carried an article titled "There Is No Case for the Humanities." More recently, The Atlantic ran an article titled "The Humanities Are in Crisis." It doesn’t stop there, however. The world is in disarray. One artist calls our time an "era of planetary civil war." A U.N. report released about a month ago states that the extinction of one million

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plant and animal species is imminent. At this critical junction of newly destabilizing human and natural histories, we’re thinking about our discipline at large, our field of expertise, our own research and writing, what we teach in our classrooms, and what we curate in museums and galleries.

During our CAA session “Climate Change and British Art” earlier this year, five scholars and an artist examined current debates about art and the politics of ecology, representations of ecological vulnerability and resilience, and contemporary visuality responding to climate change and the global economy. (Fig. 5) Nicholas Robbins, Kate Flint, Ian Bourland, Kimberly Rhodes, and Nadja Verena Marcin helped us think about the history of British art in relation to London’s landscape and atmosphere, Victorian lichen, horticultural climate control, the ocean in the Anthropocene, and an Atlantic hurricane of 2017. Following the session, HBA members, Mary Roberts, Timothy Barringer, Julie Codell, and Imogen Hart, held a special panel discussion entitled “State of Research: History of British Art Now,” to examine increasingly volatile social, political reality of our time and its impact on our scholarship. (Fig. 6)

This is my last letter to you as President of the Historians of British Art. It has been truly an honor to serve this organization and facilitate critical dialogs. Keren Hammerschlag will be our new President and I will join the Board of Directors for the next four years. As I am closing this letter, please allow me to express my sincere gratitude to your support and participation. You are a vital part of our organization’s success today.

- Jongwoo Jeremy Kim
  Associate Professor of Critical Studies / Art History & Theory
  The School of Art
  Carnegie Mellon University
  http://www.art.cmu.edu/people/jongwoo-jeremy-kim/

HBA 2019 Book Prize Longlist:
Books Published in the Field of British Art in 2018

The Historians of British Art annually awards prizes to outstanding books on the history of British art, architecture and visual culture. The members of the Book Prize Committee are pleased to present this longlist of nominations for books published in 2018. This list has room to grow; anyone may nominate a book by emailing the committee chair, and self-nominations are accepted. There is no limit on the number of books from a single publisher that may be considered in each category. Winners will be announced in January 2020, in advance of the annual meeting of the College Art Association in February, so that publishers can market prize-winners there.

HBA considers books in four categories: (1) Single Author, Pre-1600; (2) Single Author, 1600-1800; (3) Single Author, Post-1800; and (4) Multi-authored Volume.

A list of previous winners can be found on the HBA website: https://historiansofbritishart.org/hba-book-prizes/

Feel free to contact committee chair Matthew Reeve (reevem@queensu.ca) with any questions or to nominate a book.

**Single Author, Pre-1600**


Steven Brindle. *Windsor Castle.* London: Royal Collections Trust.


Laura Slater. *Art and Political Thought in Medieval England.* Woodbridge: Boydell and Brewer.

**Single Author, 1600-1800**


**Single Author, Post-1800**


Renate Domen, *Empire and Art: British India*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.


Single Author, Post-1800, continued


Multi-Authored Volume


Multi-Authored Volume, continued


Multi-Authored Volume, continued


Missing a favorite new book? If you wish to nominate a book published in 2018—including self-nominations—please contact Matthew Reeve (reevem@queensu.ca), Book Prize Committee chair. Winners will be announced in January 2020.

HBA 2019 Publication and Travel Grant Awardees

Each year HBA awards two grants: a $600 award to offset publication costs for a book manuscript or peer-reviewed journal article in the field of British art or visual culture that has been accepted for publication, and a $750 travel grant designated for a graduate student member of HBA who will be presenting a paper on British art or visual culture at an academic conference. Applicants must be current members of HBA who can demonstrate that an HBA grant will replace their out-of-pocket costs.

This year’s grants have been awarded as follows:

The Publication Grant is awarded to David Lewis, Assistant Professor at the University of Notre Dame. This grant supports publication costs for his book A.W.N. Pugin, which will be published by Historic England and the Victorian Society (UK).

Travel Grant: This year the travel grant was awarded to two graduate students: Katherine Jackson, PhD candidate at the University of British Columbia, and Avigail Moss, PhD candidate at the University of Southern California.

Applications for the next round of Publication and Travel grants will be due January 15, 2020. For details on how to apply, please consult the HBA website. All applications should be directed to the Grants Committee Chair, Kimberly Rhodes, at krhodes@drew.edu.

Membership & Renewal

Fee Structure:
• Student $15
• Professional $25*
• Benefactor $50
• Institutional $100

For inquiries about HBA Membership please contact Courtney S. Long at treasurer.hba@gmail.com.

* Note: Professional level members can renew their membership for three years at the reduced rate of $20 by making a one-time payment of $60.
British Art Exhibitions: Summer 2019

**Oliver Beer: Vessel Orchestra**
Met Breuer (New York City)
Through August 11, 2019

[https://www.metmuseum.org/events/programs/met-live-arts/oliver-beer-landing](https://www.metmuseum.org/events/programs/met-live-arts/oliver-beer-landing)

**Frank Bowling**
Tate Britain (London)
Through August 26, 2019


**Deconstructed: The NSLM Sporting Screen**
National Sporting Library and Museum (Middleburg, VA)
Through September 19, 2019


**Get Up, Stand Up Now: Generations of Black Creative Pioneers**
Somerset House (London)
Through September 19, 2019

[https://www.somersethouse.org.uk/whats-on/get-up-stand-up-now](https://www.somersethouse.org.uk/whats-on/get-up-stand-up-now)
A Tea Journey: From the Mountains to the Table

Compton Verney Art Gallery (Compton Verney, UK)  
Through September 22, 2019  

Hogarth: Cruelty and Humor

The Morgan Library (New York City)  
Through September 22, 2019  
https://www.themorgan.org/exhibitions/hogarth

Bridget Riley

Scottish National Gallery (Edinburgh)  
Through September 22, 2019  
https://www.nationalgalleries.org/exhibition/bridget-riley

The Unseen World of Charles Altamont Doyle

Huntington Art Gallery (San Marino, CA)  
Through September 23, 2019  
https://www.huntington.org/unseen-doyle

Yorkshire Sculpture International

Yorkshire Sculpture Park and Hepworth Gallery (Wakefield, UK), Leeds Gallery of Art and Henry Moore Institute (Leeds)  
Through September 29, 2019  
https://yorkshire-sculpture.org/
Whistler in Watercolor

Freer|Sackler Galleries (Washington, DC)
Through October 1, 2019

https://www.freersackler.si.edu/exhibition/whistler-in-watercolor/

Lubaina Himid: Work from Underneath

New Museum (New York City)
Through October 6, 2019

https://www.newmuseum.org/exhibitions/view/lubaina-himid-work-from-underneath

The Invisible Man and the Masque of Blackness

Cantor Sculpture Garden, LACMA (Los Angeles)
Through November 3, 2019

https://www.lacma.org/art/exhibition/invisible-man-and-masque-blackness

Mary Quant

Victoria & Albert Museum (London)
Through February 16, 2020

https://www.vam.ac.uk/exhibitions/mary-quant
Events and Opportunities

Upcoming Events

Lecture: “Bridget Riley”
Scottish National Gallery (Edinburgh), July 31, 2019, 6:30–8:30pm
In this lecture accompanying the exhibition on Bridget Riley at the Scottish National Gallery, Lucy Askew, Chief Curator, Modern & Contemporary Art, National Galleries of Scotland, will explore Riley’s work, the origins of her practice and will trace pivotal moments across her acclaimed career. Tickets are required and cost £14.

Lecture: “Hogarth: Cruelty and Crime”
Morgan Library & Museum (New York, NY), September 12, 6:30pm
In this lecture, Meredith Gamer, Assistant Professor of Art History at Columbia University, will explore the origins, evolution, and multi-layered meanings of William Hogarth’s The Four Stages of Cruelty (1751). A tale of neglect and abuse, murder and punishment, the series was—by eighteenth-century standards—one of Hogarth’s “lowest” works. Paradoxically, however, it is also one of his most ambitious, for it aims to combat some of our most basic human frailties through the medium of art. Tickets are required: $15 general admission, $10 for Morgan members, free for students with valid ID.

Denver Art Museum (Denver, CO), September 16, 2019, 8:30am–6:00pm
The Denver Art Museum hosts a symposium on early British pictures in European and American art collections. Leading scholars will present the results of their recent research, including on the Berger Collection’s renowned group of early portraits. The symposium is ticketed, with a discount for DAM members.

The speakers for this event are as follows:

• Dr. Charlotte Bolland, Senior Curator, Research and 16th Century Collections, National Portrait Gallery, London, UK: “Mynour, the Inglis payntor’: Meynart Wewyck and the Anglo-Netherlandish Portrait at the Early Tudor Court”

• Dr. Tatiana String, Associate Professor of Art History, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill: “Masculine Identity in Three Portraits in the Berger Collection”

• Dr. Edward Town, Head of Collections Information and Access and Assistant Curator for Early Modern Art, Yale Center for British Art, New Haven, Connecticut: “Hans Eworth’s Portrait of Edward Fiennes, Lord Clinton and the Cultural Politics of 1550”

• Dr. Maurice Howard, Professor Emeritus of the History of Art, Centre for Early Modern and Medieval Studies, University of Sussex, Brighton, UK: “The Contexts for Paintings: Images of Wealth, Power, and Profession in Tudor England”

**Symposium:** “Yorkshire Sculpture International Symposium”
*Leeds Beckett University (Leeds, UK), September 20, 2019, 9:30am–4:00pm*

Held in conjunction with the Yorkshire Sculpture International, this symposium will critically reflect on the event with a day of talks by artists, curators, fabricators and educators. It brings speakers together to explore the work that goes on behind the scenes to develop large scale and public sculpture for international exhibitions. Tickets are required; prices vary, see website.

**Conference:** “Art for the Nation: John Ruskin, Art Education and Social Change”
*The National Gallery (London), September 20–21, 2019, 10:00am–5:30pm*

The National Gallery’s two-day conference will capitalize on new research on Ruskin and expand on it by looking specifically at Ruskin’s interactions with, influence on, and legacy for the museum world and art education, with talks structured around four themes: ‘Art Education and Museums’; ‘British Art and Photography’, ‘Language, Writings and Sources’ and ‘Ruskin Today.’ Tickets are required and cost £45 standard, £35 concessions, £30 members and patrons.

**Calls for Papers, Panels, Essays**

“*Hogarth’s Moral Geography*”
*Sir John Soane’s Museum (London), November 5, 2019*
Abstracts due by July 29, 2019

“*Eastern Questions: New Perspectives on British Orientalism*”
*Watts Gallery (Compton, Surrey) and Royal Holloway, University of London, October 16–17, 2019*
Submissions due by July 31, 2019

*Princeton University Society of Fellows Postgraduate Fellowships, 2020–2023*
Princeton, NJ, 2020-2023; five postdoctoral fellowships available to recent graduates (after 1/1/2018) in the humanities and social sciences
Applications due by August 6, 1919

“*Colonial Knowledges: Environment and Logistics in the Creation of Knowledge in British Colonies from 1750 to 1950*”
*University of Manchester, February 27–28, 2020*
Submissions due by August 23, 2019
“Art Historical Approaches to Medieval Environments” and more
International Center for Medieval Art Panel, International Congress on Medieval Studies (ICMI), West Michigan University (Kalamazoo, MI), May 7–10, 2020
Note: Several other panels at ICMI may be of interest; see conference website
Submissions due by September 10, 2019

51st Annual Meeting: American Society for Eighteenth-Century Studies
St. Louis, MO, March 19–21, 2020
Abstracts due by September 15, 2019

“The Salon and the Senses in the Long Eighteenth Century: Interdisciplinary Perspectives”
Rutgers University, New Brunswick, NJ, April 2–3, 2020
Abstracts due by September 15, 2019

“The GREEN Conference: Sustainability, Industrialization, and Environmental Knowledge”
INCS (Interdisciplinary Nineteenth Century Studies) Annual Conference
Los Angeles, CA, March 5–8, 2020
Proposals for papers, panels, roundtables due by September 15, 2019

“Art Historical Approaches to Medieval Environments”
International Center for Medieval Art Panel, International Congress on Medieval Studies (ICMI), West Michigan University (Kalamazoo, MI), May 7–10, 2020
Note: Several other panels at ICMI may be of interest; see conference website
Submissions due by September 10, 2019

“Vegetable Avatars: Plants, Identity, and Subjectivity in Literature and the Visual Arts” and more
Northeast Modern Literature Association (NeMLA), Boston, MA, March 5–8, 2020
Note: Several other panels at NeMLA may be of interest; see conference website & list of CFPs
Submissions due on various dates through September 30, 2019; Vegetable Avatars panel by August 15

“Imagining Social Virtues in Medieval and Early Modern England” and more
Renaissance Society of America (RSA), Philadelphia, PA, April 2–4, 2020
Note: Several other panels at RSA may be of interest; see conference website & list of CFPs
Submissions due by August 15

“Radicalism & Reform”
Nineteenth-Century Studies Association (NCSA) Annual Conference
Rochester, NY, March 18–20, 2020
Paper and panel proposals due by September 30, 2019

Huntington Library Quarterly Centennial Essay Prize
Promoting scholarship in British and American studies from the sixteenth through the long eighteenth centuries; essays need not be based on Huntington Library or Gallery collections.
Submissions due by October 1, 2019
Book Review


Review by Dr. Kasie Alt, Assistant Professor of Art History, Department of Art, Georgia Southern University

Editor’s Note: Kate Retford’s The Conversation Piece: Making Modern Art in 18th-Century Britain was co-awarded the 2019 HBA Book Award for single-authored book with a subject between 1600-1800.

In The Conversation Piece: Making Modern Art in Eighteenth-Century Britain, Kate Retford masterfully argues for a re-evaluation of this sub-genre of portraiture. The text begins with a historiography of the scholarship on the genre, beginning with art collector Sir Philip Sassoon’s 1930 exhibition of “English Conversation Pieces” in London. This exhibition established several scholarly assumptions that Retford seeks to re-evaluate: namely, the persistent attempts to define, limit, and categorize conversation pieces as primarily mimetic, rather than attend to their aesthetic and cultural significance. Offering a re-evaluation of this genre of painting, Retford’s text provides new structures for approaching and interpreting the conversation piece, and the relationship between Georgian society and its representation more broadly.

After introducing recent historiography on the conversation piece, Retford turns to the work of artist and critic George Vertue (1684–1756), who she credits with defining the conversation piece in the early eighteenth century. Retford considers conversation pieces that fall within the ‘core’ of qualities identified by Vertue: works that are small in scale, detailed, and contain complex and
lively narratives. Rather than limiting the genre, this definition identifies the sampling within which the author is working.

The text is divided into three sections. Section One establishes a variety of qualities common to conversation pieces and situates them in their social context. Retford begins by arguing for the modernity of the conversation piece. She notes that in the period, ‘conversation’ meant both talk and social conduct, drawing on the Latin root. The conversation piece was the ideal vehicle for expressing the highly-valued qualities of hospitality, conversation, and community in the eighteenth century. In this section, Retford also considers the materials and methods used to create these paintings, and their place in the larger consumer and art cultures.

One of the core traditions of conversation pieces was the delineation of *il costume*, the ‘modes and manners’ of the time and place. The paintings’ small size and aesthetic treatment, their fine finish and detailing, were especially well-suited to conveying *il costume*. This focus on the customs of contemporary life seems to contradict the emphasis on the general and the search for universal truth in art prescribed by Joshua Reynolds in his *Discourses*. Yet Retford deftly weaves her analysis of conversation pieces’ interest in particulars into the wider field of eighteenth-century aesthetic theory by establishing that Reynolds’s favored qualities existed on a scale, rather than as forces diametrically opposed, and that signifying customs, capturing the spirit of the age, was as important for the history painter as the portraitist.

Fig. 1. Arthur Devis, *The John Bacon Family*, 1742–43. Oil on canvas, 30 x 51 5/8 inches (76.2 x 131.1 cm). Yale Center for British Art, Paul Mellon Collection, B1981.25.274. Image courtesy Yale Center for British Art.

Considering conversation pieces in their contexts, Retford offers a convincing re-evaluation of one of the main critiques of the genre: the stiffness or awkwardness of these works, as identified
by recent scholars such as John Hayes and Peter De Bolla (for example, see Fig. 1). Rather than a failure of the artist or sitters, she argues, the formulaic quality of the paintings expressed the nature of polite society and the conversation as highly ritualized, aesthetic acts (Fig. 2). She suggests that social rules might become second nature, but our eyes see only the formula, belying the ‘ease’ seen by contemporary viewers. Above all, these works function as signifiers and actors within polite conversation, rather than authentic views of everyday life.

In Section Two, Retford attends to both exterior and interior spaces. Here, the slippage between portraiture, genre painting, landscape painting, and estate views comes to the fore. Again, the authenticity we search for as present-day viewers was not necessarily the point of the work. Rather than authentic documentation, these works display status and a certain savoir faire. As Retford argues, repetition and replication of standardized props and backdrops indicated the sitters’ understanding of and participation in good taste, and the repetitive nature of these elements would not have troubled the contemporary viewer. Retford notes that scholarship on the conversation piece has not yet fully acknowledged the social role of this apparent artificiality. Authenticity was signaled by conformation to a type, rather than by a unique defining quality.

Retford’s first extended analysis of a work depicting an authentic interior is one of the few points where her vast array of examples weakens the argument somewhat by founding it on a painting set in a no-longer-extant space, Wanstead House (Fig. 3). Her analysis does go on to demonstrate the use of works like William Hogarth’s Wanstead House in reconstructing our understanding of such lost spaces, and she gives ample support and leaves the reader with little room to deny that the picture is, indeed, ‘authentic’ and useful as documentation for a now-lost space. However, its placement in her argument, and the rhetoric required to argue this work’s veracity, weaken the thesis somewhat.

Building on the key concepts presented to this point, Section Three considers the sitters. Although commonly referred to as family pieces, that term does not today encompass the richness and diversity of relationships between the people depicted. These works depict moments in the fluid nature of these kinship relations, an emphasis on the momentary and particular in line with the core tradition of il costume. Retford argues that conversation pieces act
within kinship systems, representing as well as reinforcing these relationships through their patrons’ acts of sitting for, possessing, and displaying these works. This discussion ends by considering a group of works that seem, on the surface, to belie ‘correct’ social behavior. These works include, or even focus on, light and ludic moments including unruly children or pets, innuendos and japes, puns and pranks. By placing these artworks within eighteenth-century theories of humor, Retford suggests that they serve to lighten and enliven the works as an essential aspect of hospitality and correct behavior, while also drawing in the viewer to participate in the joke. More bawdy humor, specifically in depictions of solely male groups, further reinforces rather than contradicts the concept of polite society, showing the sitters’ awareness of what is appropriate, when, and in what company.


Throughout, it has been made clear that the conversation pieces Retford considers do not merely reflect the world, but rather act within it. It is this complexity that makes them as frustrating as they are fascinating. Retford concludes by once again emphasizing that her work is not intended
as a checklist to limit, categorize, or clarify exclusions. Rather, she identifies patterns, possibilities, and further implications within the conversation piece. Drawing all of these threads together, Retford places this sub-genre of painting in conversation with the wider debates regarding art of the period, specifically debates over the merits of mimetic paintings versus those in the ‘grand manner’ championed by Joshua Reynolds. It is exactly the offhanded disregard for the particular and mimetic that has caused scholars to gloss over and therefore miss out on what Retford has beautifully elucidated here: the conversation piece as a richly detailed, complex, and rewarding artifact of eighteenth-century British social exchange.

Call for Reviewers: Summer 2020

HBA has a reviewer scheduled for the Winter 2020 newsletter, but interested parties are encouraged to volunteer to review a recent book for the Summer 2020 newsletter. If you are interested, please contact HBA Newsletter Editor Caitlin Silberman at newsletter.hba@gmail.com. Graduate students and early career researchers are very welcome!

Edward Collier, A Trompe l’oeil of Newspapers, Letters and Writing Implements on a Wooden Board, c. 1699. Oil on canvas. Image courtesy Tate Britain.
HBA Travel and Publication Grants

**Applications due by 1/15/2020**

Each year HBA awards two grants: a $600 award to offset publication costs for a book manuscript or peer-reviewed journal article in the field of British art or visual culture that has been accepted for publication, and a $750 travel grant designated for a graduate student member of HBA who will be presenting a paper on British art or visual culture at an academic conference. Applicants must be current members of HBA who can demonstrate that an HBA grant will replace their out-of-pocket costs. Applications are not accepted from institutions. For details on how to apply, please consult the HBA website. All applications should be directed to the Grants Committee Chair, Kimberly Rhodes, at krhodes@drew.edu.

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