



Alexis Soul-Gray in the Studio

By Annabel Downes | Los Angeles, 20 July 2023

Among the strong cohort of painters graduating from London's Royal College of Art (RCA) this year, Alexis Soul-Gray was one to watch.

Now, Bel Ami in Los Angeles is host to *Immutable Fragments* (22 July–9 September 2023), her first solo exhibition in the U.S., showcasing a mix of paintings and collages created while a student at the RCA. Ahead of the opening, Soul-Gray discusses her latest works, studying art later in life, and her plans going forward.



Alexis Soul-Gray, *But It Was Not Snowing* (2023). Oil and bleach on canvas. 100 x 80 cm. Courtesy the artist.

You graduated from Camberwell College of Arts in 2003, and Royal College of Art in 2023, almost 20 years later. What benefits did you see pursuing an MA later in life?

At RCA, you're surrounded by people in their 20s rising to stardom very fast, which must be very exciting. But at the same time you're still so young; you've got a life to live and navigate complex questions about who you are and what you want your art to reflect.

Having two decades of thinking, researching, getting things wrong, and being invisible does something to who you are as an artist.

For this reason, I'm glad that I'm coming at it as a mature student with a little more confidence under my belt. It's allowed me to create balance and grounding in my practice, which for me is necessary.

What did going back to study at RCA teach you?

I remember my first tutorial with sculptor Steven Claydon, who's with Sadie Coles HQ.

I had apologised to him about how my work would look in one moment, and completely different the next. He said, 'No, that's the real strength in this practice.'

Now I realise these different, polyvocal ways of working is me working through trauma in a sort of post-traumatic stress disorder kind of way.

I had this compost heap of references—things I've watched, read, and been interested in over the years. However, I'd never attempted to bring them together.

I'd also never written anything academic before. If someone had asked me to write an artist statement, I would have completely frozen. Now, I can talk about my work in a way that feels natural and really genuine. That's probably my biggest takeaway.



Alexis Soul-Gray, *Chinese Whispers* (2023). Oil and bleach on canvas. 50 x 60 cm. Courtesy the artist.



Alexis Soul-Gray, *Put In a Finger and Pull Out a Plum* (2022-2023). Collage and oil and paper. 22.5 x 28 cm. Courtesy the artist.

What got you back into painting?

After I graduated, I had a spate of solo exhibitions in and around London and continued to paint. However, it all really changed over Covid-19.

I had just enrolled in a Master's degree at Arts University Plymouth, not far from my family home in Devon, South West England. But when schools closed during the pandemic, I had to drop out to homeschool my children.

Like so many of us, I became frustrated and desperate, but it was exactly these emotions that began to come through in my work. I started using materials in a more lyrical and meaningful way. That period gave me an energy and sense of urgency to claw back time and find that person from my 20s that I felt I'd lost.

I was grabbing sandpaper and kitchen fluids and literally attacking these images of women that I'd found in knitting books and 20th century British magazines, reworking them as a way to find alternative narratives through them.

Like a fairytale, I was trying to find a new story for myself in these tiny moments.

Much of your work is based on found images. What appeals to you about using them?

I really enjoy finding potential images that might not be digitised anywhere. That moment of almost obliteration, when you source an image in a charity shop, dump, or recycling centre—somehow, I've got hold of it and have permission to find these lost women.

The Weavers (2023), for example, came from an image capturing a group of women making Panama hats that I found in an old children's encyclopaedia. By delving into this analogue world, I am able to revisit and mourn an experience I've had.



Alexis Soul-Gray, *The Weavers* (2023). Oil on linen 200 x 160cm. Courtesy the artist.

Can you tell us about the works in your exhibition at Bel Ami in Los Angeles?

The show's title, Immutable Fragments, refers to the pieces that are broken and floating and won't be quiet. Memories are lost through trauma and grief, but there are those that stick and play on repeat.

There's a heavy use of blue throughout the show. For example, *The Christmas Pudding* (2023) is a fairly large blue abstract painting, while a number of smaller works, *Chinese Whispers*, *The Swimming Baths*,



Alexis Soul-Gray, *The Walled Garden* (2023). Oil on linen. 30 x 20 cm. Courtesy the artist.

and *The Walled Garden* (all 2023), feature this blue wash or veil over the figures.

I came across this brilliant book, *Bluets* (2009) by Maggie Nelson in which she writes in tiny paragraphs about her love affair with the colour blue, while doing my own research into how the colour references water, particularly oncoming waves as an analogy of grief.

Like so many of us, I became frustrated and desperate, but it was exactly these emotions that began to come through in my work. I started using materials in a more lyrical and meaningful way.

I began covering my figures in this thin veil of blue to symbolise loss, but also its seductive qualities as a colour, and the possibility of love.

What's next for you?

After this show, I will work on a series of collages before a group show in January at Bo Lee and Workman in Bruton, Somerset.