

Embrace of Indigenous artists reaches London thanks to influence of Venice Biennale

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📍 Glicéria Tupinambá, right, with her niece, Jessica, at Glicéria's installation at the 2024 Venice Biennale. Photograph: David Levene/The Guardian

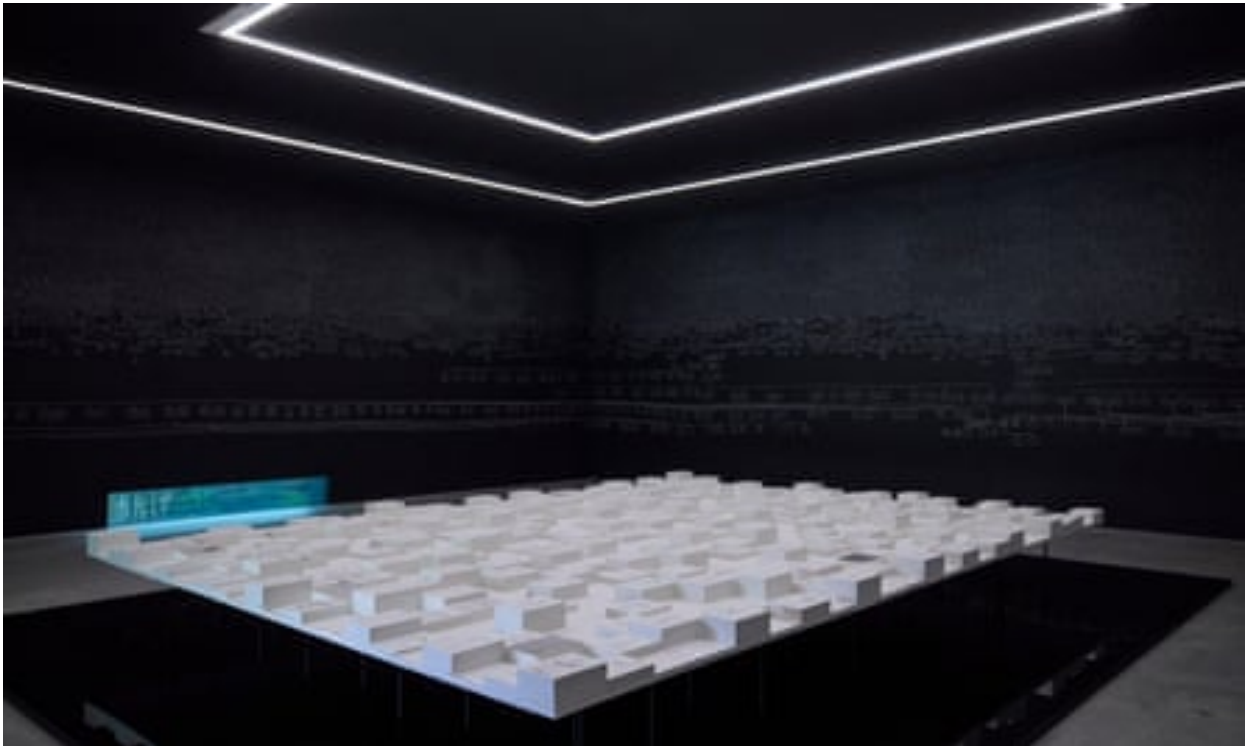
Curators and artists say this is a time of overdue recognition but others are cautious about the longevity of the moment

At last year's Venice Biennale, the pavilions were packed with Indigenous art from around the world.

Artists from the Tupinambá community in Brazil sat alongside work by the late Rosa Elena Curruchich, who made pieces about Indigenous women in Guatemala. The Amazonian artist Aycoobo was celebrated, as were carvings by the Māori artist Fred Graham. The eventual winner of the Golden Lion – the event's highest accolade – was the Indigenous Australian artist Archie Moore.

The biennale's curator, Adriano Pedrosa, said the event's theme of Strangers Everywhere included "the Indigenous artist, frequently treated as a foreigner in their own land". Now Indigenous artists had seemingly taken over.

The influence of Venice is reaching these shores. After the event, Tate launched a fund aimed at increasing the representation of Indigenous works in its collection. This year it will host a retrospective of the Indigenous Australian artist Emily Kam Kngwarray, while Ames Yavuz gallery, a specialist in Indigenous Australian art, is to open a London outpost this spring.



📷Kith and Kin by Archie Moore at the Venice Biennale. Moore, an Indigenous Australian artist, won the Golden Lion – the event’s highest accolade. Photograph: David Levene/The Guardian

Curators and artists have spoken about this being a time of overdue recognition, while others are cautious about the longevity of this moment. “It’s definitely the zeitgeist at the moment,” said Dianne Tanzer of the Australian gallery This Is No Fantasy, which is exhibiting the Indigenous artist Johnathon World Peace Bush at Frieze Cork Street in central London from 27 February.

“At some stage who knows when it becomes unfashionable ... it’s like everything in life, it’s not going to be forever but we hope we get the best of it while it lasts,” she added.

“It’s not a bubble,” said Pippy Houldsworth, whose gallery is showing the Indigenous American artist Mario Martinez’s first UK show. “Look at the huge excitement about black artists over the last few years. That hasn’t come and gone by any means, it’s just brought greater recognition to a greater number of people who have been sidelined in the past.”

Since Venice, a backlash has emerged. In December 2024, Harper’s Magazine ran a cover feature by the Spike magazine critic Dean Kissick. He observed that all the major biennales he had visited in recent years had embraced “overlooked artists from the 20th century and exhibited recycled junk, traditional craft, and folk art”.



📷 Emily Kam Ngwarray's work at the National Gallery of Australia. Her work will be shown at the Tate this year. Photograph: © Emily Kam Ngwarray/Copyright Agency. Licensed by DACS 2025

The art world's worthy fixation on all things "identity" had, he said, replaced the "spectacle and innovation" of work from a decade ago.

Kelli Cole, a curator at the National Gallery of Australia, said in the context of a new Trump presidency and a political shift to the right, Indigenous shows could face further criticism. "Trump is in now and people are being accused of being too politically correct. Are we going to get questions at the Tate: has the gallery become politically correct because it's showing a black woman from Australia rather than a 'key' male artist?"

For Indigenous artists such as Martinez, there's an expectation that they will create a certain type of art. His practice is focused on abstract paintings, some of which allude to his heritage as a member of the Pascua Yaqui Tribe of Arizona.

“Indigenous artists have always had abstraction, whether it’s through spirituality or art,” said Martinez, who had a solo show at Smithsonian Institution’s National Museum of the American Indian. “But people are often surprised by my work, even native curators.”



📷 Mario Martinez’s work. The Indigenous American artist will have his first UK show this year. Photograph: courtesy the artist, Pippy Houldsworth Gallery, London, and Garth Greenan Gallery, New York. © Mario Martinez 2025.

But far from being a flash in the pan “moment”, curators and artists say the recognition of Indigenous artists around the world and a greater understanding of their work has been built up over the last two decades.

Tanzer and Nicola Stein of This Is No Fantasy said they first took artists, including Michael Cook in 2015, to satellite events at the Venice Biennale rather than the main event, slowly attracting audiences and buyers.

“It feels like it’s pivoted quickly but it’s actually been a very slow burn,” said Stein, who praised Judith Ryan, a curator and academic, for collecting and writing about Indigenous art years before it hit the mainstream. “It’s taken time for it to be celebrated and for it to find its place within the contemporary art world.”

Johnathon World Peace Bush is at Frieze No.9 Cork Street from 27 February to 15 March; Mario Martinez is at Pippy Houldsworth Gallery from 21 February to 22 March; Emily Kam Kngwarray is at Tate Modern from 10 July to 11 January 2026.

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