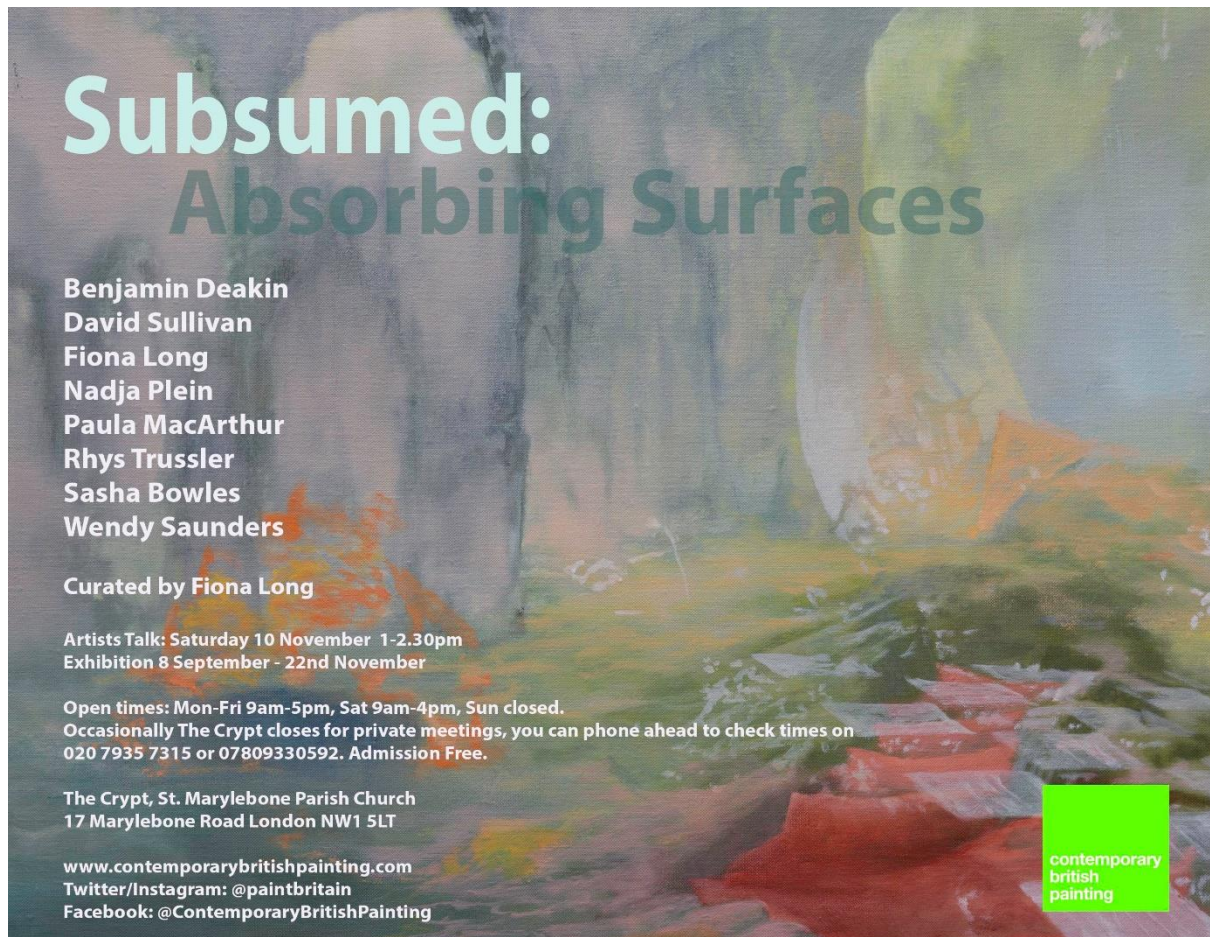


Subsumed: Absorbing Surfaces

Exhibition Catalogue by Fiona Long



Subsume

Verb

past tense: subsumed; past participle: subsumed

include or absorb (something) in something else

Introduction by Rhys Trussler

Each of the eight painters in this exhibition engage their practice with the experience of subsumption. Various this can be in the absorbing act of painting itself, experienced by the painter; in the creating of surfaces that have the capacity to engulf the viewer, in images that stir up powerful and consuming emotions or in dealing with themes such as assimilation and negation.

A painting is usually an essentially flat surface, yet it may present an intriguing depth in many ways, the illusion of trompe l'oeil, and perspective being two of the most obvious, but tempo of mark making, weight of composition and colour, may all lead viewers through the surface.

Visitors descending into the subterranean Crypt at St Marylebone, are also subsumed since the word literally means 'to absorb from below'. Here they are invited to consider how each individual work is absorbed into the whole curated body, even as they themselves may find individual works absorbing.

The history of caverns, grottos and crypts is deeply entrenched in the western psyche as a source of otherness, a space in which the normal codes of behaviour do not apply.¹ Descending into the crypt at Marylebone the visitor, whether they be spiritual or secular in temperament, is instantly transformed. The nature of such underground spaces recalls a primitive sense from whence early man first began to paint and, in this sense, it can be said that whilst it is the visitor that enters the crypt it is the crypt that subsumes the visitor.

A painting's facility to subsume the superficiality of image is concordant with the crypt's facility to absorb the visitor, to take them out of the every day. Both space and object offer the observer a sense of historical gravity, a context in an otherwise listless experience of continually vanishing and shifting images and propositions of identity.

Subsumed: Absorbing Surfaces presents an exploration of how surface, image, and material interplay to create a painting. The exhibition comprises a broad range of painting from figurative to abstract, and from traditional materials to the alien. What unites these works is a sense that they almost seem to want to absorb themselves. A visual language loop is formed where image, medium and surface interplay and, in a sense, positively cave in on themselves, drawing the viewer into the space that they create.

This exhibition explores the ontology of body-to-image relationships where the body viewing the image is different from a body occupying an image and the body creating the image.² ~**Rhys Trussler**

Many painters are driven to paint in order to explore a visual and material language more articulately expressed in paint than in words. The idiom "a picture is worth a thousand words" can be drawn upon to express this³. Each of the works in this show express a beguiling sense of claustrophilia⁴ where the sensuality of paint and sense of space unite in an intriguing way. They all have a sense that the artist is both revealing something about themselves whilst being simultaneously coy and keeping other things hidden.

Upon entering the gallery, visitors are first greeted by Rhys Trussler's "Shady Bruiser" which could call to mind the moral crux of Oscar Wilde's novel where a duplicitous or superficial image will inevitably cave in or birth a monster. Rhys Trussler's paintings appear to be the product of torturous deformity. In these artworks the subject is disfigured by their surrounding structure as much as they depend upon them. The intention to appear as one thing is consumed by the stark reality of being another, perhaps referencing Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Grey* in which corruption is itself an inexorable uprising.

1 E. Kuryluk *Salome and Judas in the Cave of Sex*, Northwestern University Press, 1987

2 Xárene Eskandar, *Aesthetics for a Philosophy of Scale*, In-progress Doctoral dissertation, Media Arts and Technology, UCSB

3 "Speakers Give Sound Advice". [Syracuse Post Standard](#), page 18. March 28, 1911.

4 Claustrophilia: an abnormal desire for confinement in an enclosed space, Marriam Webster dictionary



Rhys Trussler: 'Shady Bruiser' 122 x 96cm, oil and acrylic on canvas, 2017



Rhys Trussler: 'Happy Homunculus' 122 x 96cm, oil and acrylic on canvas, 2017

Trussler's subjects are frequently drawn from observation and animated or anthropomorphised through exaggeration to develop a sense of character. His primary concern is seated in a deep sense of 'otherness' or peculiarity as a lens through which the world is observed.

These paintings are part of a body of work collectively called 'grotesques'. The geometric framework enmeshes an organic form which in turn develops something of an anthropomorphised quality. Is nature being subsumed by the humanmade or the humanmade by nature? The relationship between the manufactured structure, the grid, and the organic form is simultaneously one of torture or incarceration and a living response to such conditions whereby individual characteristics become engendered. These works relate to Trussler's interest in the idea of perfection and its impossibility as a physically attainable reality.

Where Trussler's observations of arboreal forms are anthropomorphised, **Wendy Saunders** uses wood in her recent works to create an untraditional support for her paintings where human figuration is increasingly abstracted. Her series of predominantly abstracted heads experiments with and explores the formal aspects of painting.

Her latest series seeks out abstraction; partially stripping back figures to their underlying shapes, the paintings are a contrasting mix of strong forms and understated figuration.



Installation shot of Wendy Saunders (left to right): 'Impossible Woman' 30 x 30cm, oil on linen, 2016, 'Abstracted Head (series 2)' 26 x 23 x 6cm, mixed media on linen, 2018, & 'Untitled Head (in four colours)' 30 x 29 x 10cm, oil on linen, 2018 (Photo by Benjamin Deakin)

Presented here as a clustered trio, (a unique snapshot of her evolving practice comprising older and very new works) each abstracted individual is subsumed into the grouping, and their features subsumed by Saunders' evolved, abstracted representation of the human form; but are they portraits? Using a combination of surface and materials she attempts to evoke visual ideas of character, states of emotion or some form of human expression.

Saunders constructs these new painting supports specifically to act as carriers for a number of ideas relating to the reading of human countenance and emotion and makes the stretchers to represent a head shape.

They can activate a psychological reading merely with the addition of coloured paint which taps into our memory or acts as a trigger about a person or people more generally. She experiments with ways that the materials can be used to drive these anthropomorphic representations and where that can go in terms of representing either a state of mind, some form of behaviour or ideas about the human condition.

In her recent works Saunders plays with the physical traditions of painting, which can be boiled down conventionally to paint, surface (often canvas or linen), and support, by manipulating the supports. Whilst this gives them three dimensionality and therefore a sculptural quality, they are paintings which really examine the fundamentals of what painting is, and what portraiture can convey.

Fiona Long's paintings in this exhibition depart further still from the conventions of painting due to the unusual materials she employs. She grows the surface, a microbial cellulose, by fermenting tea. This resulting harvested mother-culture is then tattooed while thick, wet, and skin like, before being dried to a thin, transparent, amber-like membrane. Where most paintings have pigment applied to the surface, here the pigment is trapped within the surface itself. The thin cellulose layer is then subsumed by a coating of biodegradable plastic made with seaweed and household ingredients. In "Reverse Sublimation" the ink is real squid ink, the material relating to the subject.

In both of Long's paintings, the tattooed image depicts a writhing mass of octopus tentacles. Whilst the image is trapped within the surface, it illustrates cephalopod creatures whose unfurled limbs are poised to suck onto their imminent prey and pull them in to digest, absorb, and assimilate.



Fiona Long: 'Reverse Sublimation' 50 x 40x10cm, tattooed biofilm with squid ink in seaweed bioplastic, 2018 (photo by Benjamin Deakin)



Fiona Long: 'Sublimation' 50 x 40cm, tattooed biofilm in seaweed bioplastic, 2018 (photo by Benjamin Deakin)

Long's practice explores consumption, desire and sustainability. The octopus motif combines these themes and was inspired, in part, by the tradition of the subject from Hokusai to Picasso.⁵

Paula MacArthur has focused on three interrelated series of paintings over the last 10 years and both her paintings in this exhibition come from her "Garment" series. She sees all of her works as coming from the tradition of memento-mori, still lifes which aim to explore the idea of love and life. The subject is edited to isolate a small fragment of the structure and becomes suggestive of a human gesture, an emotional state, a moment in time.

⁵Bru, Ricard (2010). "Tentacles of love and death: from Hokusai to Picasso". *Secret Images. Picasso and the Japanese Erotic Print*, Thames & Hudson, London, pp. 50–77

Through this dissection the objects they become recognisable yet unfamiliar; the viewer can't be certain of what they are looking at. Coupled with the dripping paint these strange and beautiful objects conjure ephemerality, deterioration, and the fragility of the human condition.



Paula MacArthur: 'I will take care of you' 80 x 50cm, oil on linen, 2017



Paula MacArthur: 'Just how I feel' 80x 50cm, oil on linen, 2017

One could imagine human figures wrapped inside these depictions of bundled cloth. The body subsumed by the fabric.

From a distance the subject appears cohesive, even photographic, but as the viewer approaches each painting, the paint itself - the brush marks, layers and drips - come into focus, the illusion disappears and the viewer can experience the physicality of the process and is immersed in the expanse of luminous paint. The illusion of a mass of fabric becomes just paint on fabric; it both defines and denies the subject and this depiction decays in front of our eyes.

MacArthur's description of her painting process beautifully explains the way in which a painter's thoughts can be subsumed by the physicality of painting and the sensuality of the paint and vice versa in an oscillating journey of push and pull:

"The difference between making the painting and looking at the painting allows me to access different parts of myself; the physical and something more meditative. After much consideration, making the first mark is a release; when physically engaging with the paint I switch to a different mode of operation. I attack the painting process with energy, working with wet on wet layers, enjoying the automatic physicality of the gesture and the tactile qualities of the medium. I play with the paint pushing it to its thickest and thinnest limits, working with impasto beside oily pools and barely tinted turps washes. Stepping back, I watch each

mark seep, bleed, drip or repel its neighbour and entering a more consciously thoughtful, quieter state I consider the painting and ideas again, in quite a different way, deciding where and how to begin again.”
(Paula MacArthur 2017)

Depicted below, Long’s and MacArthur’s artworks, displayed side by side in the exhibition, have an interesting interplay. Whilst Long’s have a fabric-like quality to them, MacArthur’s depict a representation of fabric. Pale amber neighbours complementary deep purple. Bent form plays against the illustration of form, and translucent material juxtaposes the depiction of fabric where the translucency of the paint gives the subject a sense of solidity. And where Long’s subject threatens to subsume the viewer, MacArthur’s subject appears to be subsumed within the space of the painting and, in a sense, within the paint itself.



Install shot of Fiona Long’s “Reverse Sublimation” and Paula MacArthur’s “I will take care of you”
(Photo by Benjamin Deakin)

Sasha Bowles takes on the role of artist as collaborator, working in alliance with the past. Her work intervenes with and on printed reproductions of old master portraits; re-presenting and subverting their classical narratives’ she cloaks the figures to open up new interpretations.

“Not only are her paintings perplexing, absurd and even hilarious but thoroughly disturbing. Disturbing not because of some dramatic event or imminent disaster but because it isn’t immediately clear what she has done – or more correctly how she has done it. Let alone why. She makes paintings that seem to resist conventional notions of identity and authorship.” (Graham Crowley 2017)

Starting from Old Masters’ works, her process is an evolving loop. Through intervention on postcards and book pages, she re-presents and subverts classical narratives, cloaking the figures to open up new

possibilities. The identity of the original subjects is subsumed by Bowles' interventions, lovingly and puzzlingly smothered with paint to surreal effect. They are mischievously re-contextualised and continue the ongoing conversation between artists throughout art history; questioning both our relationship to the past and to the ownership of these images.

"...The artist as collaborator, working in alliance with the past. Sasha's role in the work is similar to that of a ventriloquist or dramatist - unobtrusive but influential. The apparent absence or anonymity is carefully contrived and multilayered. What is erased from, or added to these images is invariably self evident, but the ramifications of these interventions are significant. Our expectations are frustrated and our understanding contested but like disturbing images in general, it's often difficult to look away and even more difficult to ignore." (Graham Crowley 2017)



Sasha Bowles: 'Twin Orbs' 35 x 40cm, oil on book page, 2016



Sasha Bowles: 'Dandy Titfer' 35 x 40cm, oil on book page, 2016

In "Twin Orbs" not only has Bowles subsumed the identity of these figures, these girls also look poised to become absorbed by the soft red fabric cavern they inhabit.

"As if torn from a parallel universe, where Carl Faberge not only makes the exquisite geegaws and trinkets of the aristocracy-but the aristocracy too." (G Crowley 2017)

Rendered free of features, the sitter in "Dandy Titfer" is given a new and absurd guise, his individual persona subsumed by the artist's own authorial signature.

David Sullivan's paintings start from a range of found imagery in order to then discover the complex set of conditions and emergent phenomena, that make for successful painting - so that an individual work contains its own bounded poetry, its own world, and its own infinity.

His paintings have something to say about our condition of existence and have a connection with our lived existence through historical or contemporary social, psychological, or moral anxieties. He seeks to describe the fractured reality of humankind with the language of painting.



David Sullivan: 'Surgeons Face Cruel Facts' 36 x 61 cm, oil on canvas on board, 2017

Like Bowles' figures, the identity of the figures in Sullivan's 'Surgeons Face Cruel Facts' is obscured by facial coverings, but in this case, these masks and adorning apparatus depict their functionality in the subjects' position. In a formal sense, the figures and cloth in the painting form a green cavern-like space although the viewer is already so disarmingly close to the surgical scene they are positioned more like a fly on a window. However, a viewer the size of a fly could explore within that space but if they could, what would they discover underfoot that the artist is hiding from us? Perhaps a critically ill child whose fate is being dispassionately calculated and performed by the expertise and judgement of the surgeons surrounding them? This dispassion is a necessity of effectively performing a job generally motivated by a passion for helping people. If the real subject of the painting is the person being operated on then their presence has been subsumed by the figures looming over them and the importance of their endeavours to the patient's fate.



David Sullivan: 'Brave [the] New World' 30 x 25cm, oil on canvas, 2016

In Sullivan's 'Brave [the] New World' another cephalopod appears. This time the tentacular creature doesn't threaten to subsume and consume the viewer but is contained within its own vitrinous jail, and in turn the edges of the depicted surrounding space to the edges of the canvas.

Rather than the thriving species depicted in Long's works, perhaps this octopod specimen is a victim of the Anthropocene, preserved as an ostentatious, gilded, historical artefact, or perhaps the ornamental yet functional propagation of a food source no longer available to source in the nature of this depicted contained, dystopian world?

Nadja Gabriela Plein worked as an acclaimed composer with a doctorate in musical composition from the Royal College of Music in London before fully embarking on her painting career. Her musical compositions and synaesthesia feed into her painting practice, as does her practice of meditation. Like MacArthur, she beautifully describes how her painting practice can be an act of meditation:

"Meditation, in the tradition I practice, watches the arising and passing of things within one's present-moment experience. In this sense everything becomes an object to look at, the breath, the sounds, the sensations of the body, the thoughts, the memories, each an object that arises and passes within my experience. More than that, everything becomes a precious object, something to be watched with tenderness. This results in a blurring between art and life. The touch of my steps on the grass feels as much as art as the painting I am making."

I start with a surface, metal, wood, canvas, paper, or plastic. Then a thinned colour. I put it on and see what happens. How is this paint, right now, on this surface? Then I might pick up a pencil and draw it over the wet paint. I watch the groove, as I make it, I watch the wet paint fill it up or run over it. I might pick another

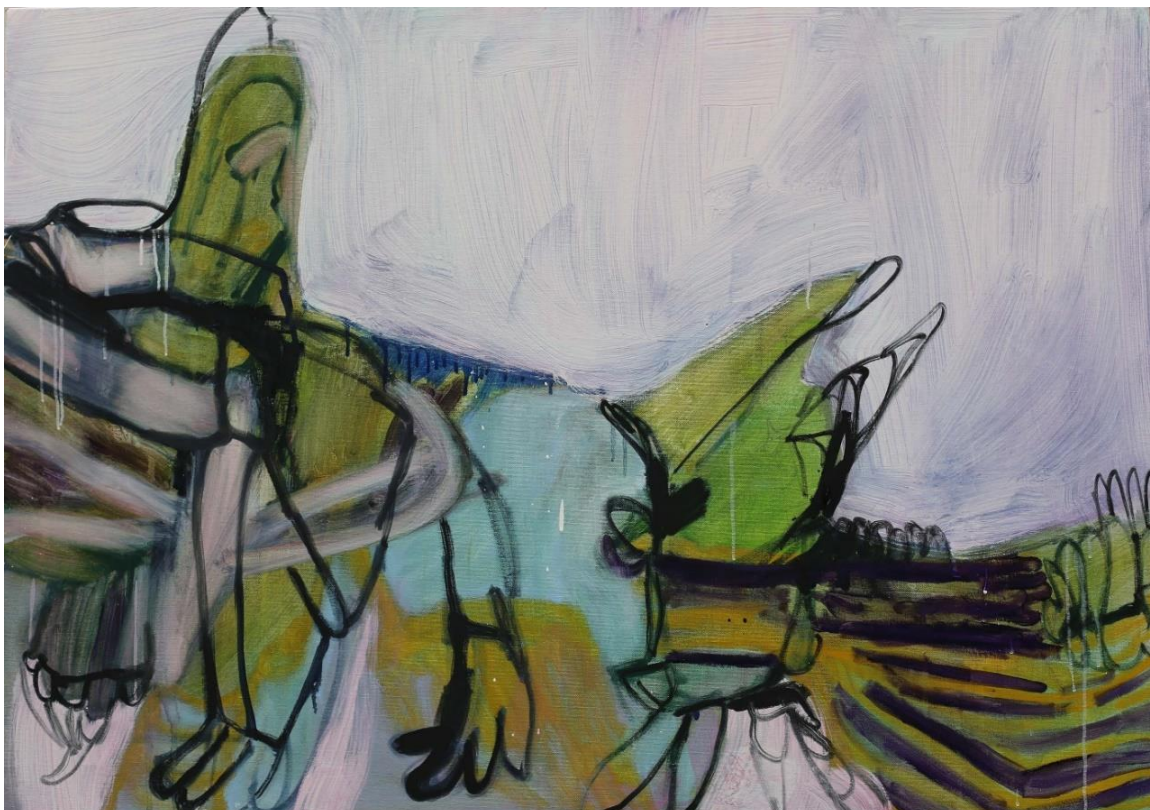
colour, thicker oil paint this time and watch how it interacts with the thin paint and the pencil marks. I watch. I might wipe it all away, again, leaving a mere smudge and work from that. I will sit down and watch: this aluminium grey with this green and this brown line.

I work with my fingers, with brushes, paper towels, silicon shapers, sand paper... I work with oil paint, pencils, colour pencils, crayons, oil sticks.” (Nadja Gabriela Plein 2018)

Plein’s art practice and indeed entire life is an interaction with the materiality around her, being a body in a place and being a body in contact with other materials and other bodies. It is all so interwoven and non-hierarchical, it is impossible to say what has subsumed what. To Plein, the painting process and object holds the same preciousness as the step on the grass.



Nadja Gabriela Plein: 'die Strömung der Lautfreude/ The stream of loud-joy' 50 x 100cm oil on aluminium, 2018



Nadja Gabriela Plein: 'die Verknüpfung knackt und schlängelt/ The linking cracks and slithers' 82 x 177cm, oil on aluminium, 2018

Benjamin Deakin's prevailing interest is the way in which landscape painting can be used to explore our physical and cultural relationships with the environment, both human and non-human. From the time that images of the landscape first began to be made, they have critiqued and questioned our perception of the world around us and what distinguishes the natural from the man-made. Whilst the version of the world our minds create for us is essential to our survival, Deakin believes that art can reveal ways in which we can disrupt these visual filters and lead us to a deeper understanding of how we function in and contribute to the natural systems of the world around us. The viewer may imagine themselves stepping into the scene and exploring, subsumed by the dreamlike, uncanny landscape.



Benjamin Deakin: 'Arbiter' 90 x 105cm, oil on Linen, 2018

Like Trussler's "grotesques", Deakin's landscapes present scenes where the relationship between the power of sublime nature and humankind's effect on the planet are in an unknown balance or battle. Whether utopian or dystopian scenes, Deakin uses geometric patterns and forms as signifiers of human presence and civilisations.

"Arbiter" began from Deakin's visit to the lava-fields of Iceland where the crust of newly formed lava had cracked dramatically apart. This was near the site that for centuries had been used by the Icelanders as a kind of outdoor parliament where disputes were settled and judgements meted out.

One could imagine that if entering the landscape in this painting, disorientation or absorption may disallow any escape from that world.



Benjamin Deakin: 'Migrator' 60 x 75cm, oil on canvas, 2018

Deakin grew up in Cumbria and glacial erratics have always fascinated him. These are rocks which have totally different geology to their surroundings, having been transported many miles by glaciers and deposited as the glaciers receded. On the Isle of Skye there are number of these rocks which are balanced on one another which inspired this painting. In "Migrator" the rock's physical properties are ambiguous, it appears to possibly be transparent, or to have a space contained within it.

Whilst astounding human endeavour created Neolithic monuments like Stonehenge, the existence of this obdurate yet perhaps demure geological monument serenely depicts the forces of nature that brought about its existence, and the power or nature that surround it.



Install shot of Nadja Gabriela Plein: 'die Verknüpfung knackt und schlängelt/ The linking cracks and slithers', Rhys Trussler: 'Happy Homunculus', and Benjamin Deakin: 'Migrator' (photo by Benjamin Deakin)

To be subsumed is to include or absorb something into something else. From each microscopic particle of pigment, to each brushstroke, each painting and what they represent in isolation and as a collection, the place of the gallery space within the church, in London, on this Earth, and even the Universe beyond, "Subsumed: Absorbing Surfaces" hopes that each of these paintings could provide a starting point for an imaginative journey of our own personal sense of scale, place and power within the spaces we inhabit.

Artists' websites

Benjamin Deakin - <http://bendeakin.co.uk/>

David Sullivan - <http://www.davidsullivanartist.co.uk/>

Fiona Long - <http://fionalongart.co.uk/>

Nadja Gabriela Plein - <http://www.nadja gabrielaplein.co.uk/>

Paula MacArthur - <https://www.paula-macarthur.com/>

Rhys Trussler - <http://www.rhystrussler.co.uk/>

Sasha Bowles - <https://www.sashabowles.co.uk/>

Wendy Saunders - <https://www.wendymsaunders.co.uk/>