

# THE ART OF BRISTOL BEACON

By Louisa Buck



# ART IN THE BUILDING

## THEN

Bristol Beacon is a building with a complex past. Formerly known as Colston Hall it opened in 1867, designed by local architects Foster & Wood in an elaborate Italianate style known as Bristol Byzantine. The new building occupied the site of a charitable school founded by the slave trader and merchant Edward Colston in the early 18th century, which in turn replaced a refinery built to refine sugar brought in from the Caribbean to Bristol.

However, the money to fund this new "commodious and accessible hall" as it was described at the time, came not from the Colston family but from a group of local Liberal businessmen, many of whom were supporters of the Temperance Progressionist Movement, but it still bore the family name in acknowledgement of Colston's long association with the site and his enduring 19th century status as a city benefactor. In September 2020 Colston Hall became Bristol Beacon, after a longstanding campaign to change its tainted name was precipitated by the anti-racism protests in Bristol and across the UK and US that had taken place in the summer of that year.

Right from its foundation nearly a century and a half ago Colston Hall became known both for concerts as well as for civic and political gatherings, and a wide range of other activities. It opened with a 3,400 strong meeting of the London Missionary Society and in its early years hosted performances by the now long defunct Bristol Symphony Orchestra, the Bristol Choral Society which still endures, as well as appearances by soloists ranging from Sergei Rachmaninoff to Paul Robeson and Ella Fitzgerald. It also housed wrestling matches, temperance meetings, Trade Union congresses and many theatrical productions. A meeting calling for women's suffrage was held in what is now Lantern Hall in 1880 and in 1909 two suffragettes hid overnight in the Beacon Hall organ so that they could interrupt a local MP's speech.

Other notable events include the hall being twice burnt out and rebuilt, once in 1898 and then again in 1945 when, having survived the German bombardment of Bristol, the interior was again gutted, this time due to a stray cigarette. The second half of the twentieth century marked another evolution into one of the major rock venues in the country with acts ranging from

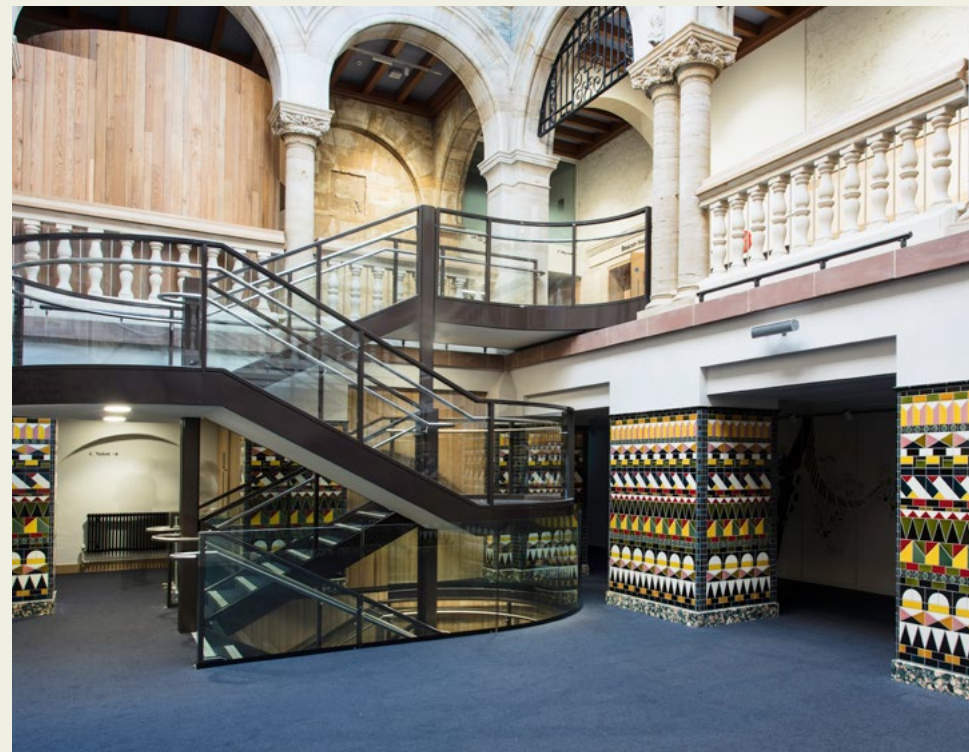
Buddy Holly to The Beatles, The Rolling Stones, Ike and Tina Turner, David Bowie, Jimi Hendrix, The Supremes, Bob Dylan, Pink Floyd, Queen and The Who, amongst many others. At the same time as Colston Hall was showcasing the legends of rock, another revenue generator from the 1950's was the staging of weekly wrestling matches, with the last bout staged in 2004.

## NOW

Since 2009 the original 19th century Bristol Byzantine building has been conjoined with a striking new copper-clad foyer building, designed by Levitt Bernstein. Then finally, after another period of extensive refurbishment, the entire complex reopened as Bristol Beacon on 30 November 2023. Now managed by a charitable trust, the building remains owned by Bristol Council and in its current incarnation Bristol Beacon serves the city and beyond as a two-theatre performance venue, with the 2,100 capacity Beacon Hall, and the smaller Lantern Hall, with an audience capacity of 350-500. There is also a new subterranean performance space, the Weston Stage, which, along with a state-of-the-art education centre, has been converted from the cavernous basement bonded warehouse that from the 19th century provided an additional income stream for the hall.

## ART

At the heart of the recent rejuvenation of this historic building lies a series of public art commissions by four acclaimed contemporary British artists: Rana Begum, Linda Brothwell, Giles Round and Libita Sibungu. These artists come from a variety of disciplines and backgrounds and were selected by an advisory panel with curatorial overview from Field Arts Projects, led by its Bristol-based founder Theresa Bergne. In very different ways each of these bespoke works explore a particular aspect of the Bristol Beacon building, whilst also offering new and contemporary perspectives on its past, present and future. At the same time the programming of these public artworks was initially guided - but not ruled - by two central overarching ideas which, with the lightest of touch, act to knit the individual commissions together.



The first was to consider the artform at the centre of Bristol Beacon's activity, namely the making of music. Theresa Bergne invited each of the four artists to consider sound in all its forms, and in particular to explore the physicality of sound through the materials of the works themselves. Connected to this was the notion of music as an all-consuming, shared communal art form and how a contemporary artist's response might endeavour to produce a similar experience.

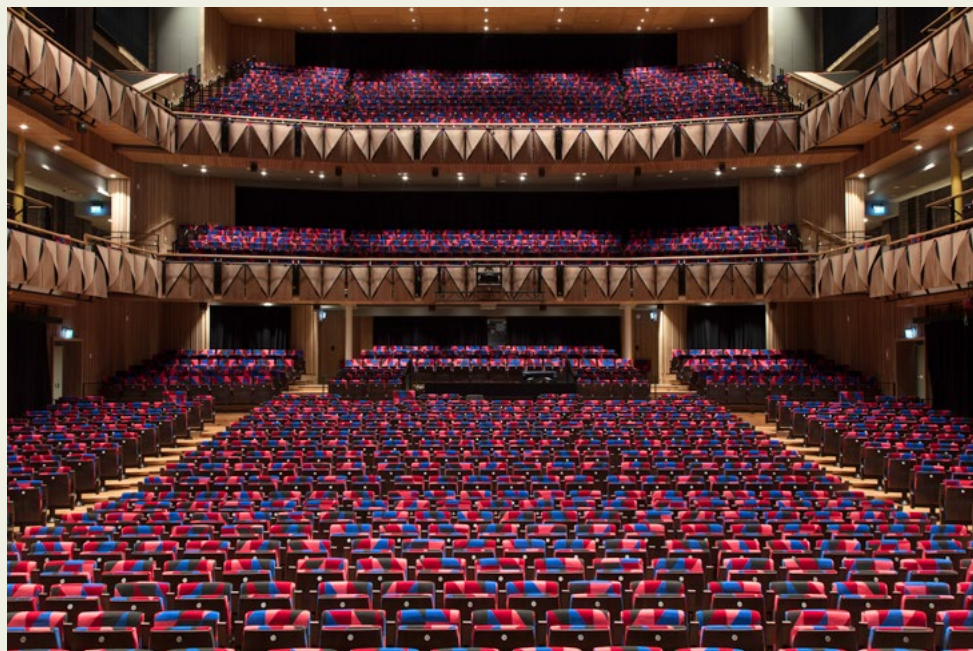
The second principle was for the artists to bear in mind the close social and cultural connection of Bristol Beacon to the trading and manufacturing past of the city, whether the businessmen who were its founders and benefactors or the bonded warehouse cellars that literally underpinned its activities and even its Bristol Byzantine architectural style which recalls the two great historical trading cities of Istanbul and Venice. But this was not to be an exercise in nostalgia. Instead, the artists were also encouraged to view this past through the present mercantile ingenuity of the city as reflected in such endeavours as the Bristol Textile Quarter or creative digital technology as nurtured by the Pervasive Media Studios along with the Bristol artist studio network

supported at Spike Island and elsewhere in and around the city.

The result is a collection of innovative works in textile, metal, ceramic and sound that enhances the richness of the building both inside and out, whilst in each case offering a response to the unique history of Bristol Beacon that is also utterly contemporary. Bristol City Council has a strong history of commissioning artists to be involved in site-specific projects right from the earliest development stages; and arguably Bristol has one of the best in situ 'collections' of public art in the country, including works that act to extend current thinking around commissioning public art. Bristol Beacon's commissions all sit firmly within this pioneering tradition.

The care, thought, inventiveness and sheer originality with which Rana Begum, Linda Brothwell, Giles Round and Libita Sibungu have each conceived and realised their individual projects is demonstrated in their individual interviews.

# RANA BEGUM



## No 1218 Textile 2022

Wool Jacquard Woven Moquette Fabric

## No 1219 Textile 2022

Wool Jacquard Woven Moquette Fabric

## No 1226 Textile, 2022

Wool Jacquard Woven Rib Fabric

**Rana Begum RA** (born Bangladesh, 1977) is known for merging painting, sculpture and architecture. Her work focuses on the interplay between light and colour and regularly draws on repetition and geometry. Rana often works with pre-existing materials ranging from baskets, bicycle and car reflectors to fishing nets and unfired tiles, which she repurposes in her works.

Rana currently lives and works in London.

*Key works/shows/milestones include:*

2023: Desert X, Palm Springs; Dhaka Art Summit, Bangladesh; Whitechapel Gallery; 2022: Pitzhanger Manor, UK; Mead Gallery, Coventry; 2021: Folkestone Triennial; 2020: Elected a Royal Academician; 2018: Tate St Ives, Cornwall; Kettles Yard, Cambridge; Djanogly Gallery, Nottingham, 2017: Sainsbury Centre, Norwich; 2016: 11th Gwangu Biennial, Korea; Parasol Unit, London.

Rana's commission for Bristol Beacon consists of a series of bespoke tapestry/curtains and seat upholstery for the Lantern and the Beacon auditoriums. It is the first time she has worked with textiles and she has collaborated with Bristol-based fabric designers and textile trend consultants Dash & Miller to create a unique type of fabric in order to fulfil her vision.

## In what ways did you respond to Bristol Beacon, the building and its history?

When I did the first site visit I knew there wasn't going to be much left of the original interior. Pretty much the only thing left was the facade so I used the colours and geometry as my starting point. It was also important to think about the function of the building, the purpose of the spaces and all the people who would be using them, the performers and the audience, as well as the people doing the day-to-day setup. In Beacon Hall I got to see the site before it was demolished, which had a lot of wood, this brought a feeling of warmth to the space, so I wanted to echo that.

*What guided your choice of form and colour of the seats in the Beacon Hall?*

I am interested in the relationship between form, colour and repetition and how they can be used to transform space and explore the idea of the infinite. The patterns and colours for the chairs repeat, but it is important there is variation within the repetition. It is important that the space feels complete and encompassing so I used a fractal geometry to bring the space together. For example the pattern appears pixelated when seen from the stage, but when you open up a seat individually you are struck by a bold colour and geometric pattern. This concept aligned with the breaking down of hard-edged geometry that I was exploring in the studio at the time.

*The red is very intense!*

I wanted to push the limits of the palette and have this pop of colour that could bring the deeper shades to life and invigorate the space.

*The curtains in the Lantern Hall have a very different palette.*

My first proposal for the curtains had much lighter, contrasting colours but we changed to a darker palette, because we did not want the contrast to be too imposing and had to consider the amount they would be handled. I'm really glad we did, because working with these darker, more moody, dramatic colours made me think about things in a different way. There were also other functional details we had to work out. Because the space has to host both acoustic and amplified performances the drapes needed to serve an acoustic function. This was quite a challenge, because acoustic curtains weighed more. However these functional needs made us consider how the design aligned with the properties of a tapestry, which changed how I developed the design. Through their rich colours I wanted them to feel grand and ceremonial.

*How did these considerations play into their design?*

The smaller you go with the geometry, the more complex and intricate it can become; however I took a more bold approach and scaled up the geometry which heightens the overall impact. I loved that we were able to make the composition on each of the eleven curtains unique, even though it was a lot more work and challenged the budget. The other serious consideration was how to minimise waste, and the impact that that would have on the process and design concept.

*The texture is also very rich, they are almost three dimensional.*

I wanted the tapestries to have an element of three dimensionality and movement in the geometry. After a lot of exploration, with Dash & Miller we thought about creating ridges so that the textile appears to be different colours when seen from different angles. It's not only the colour palette but also the composition that changes, so there is a different kind of rhythm happening on both sides. There's also some metal thread in the seat fabric because I wanted a little bit of bling. I knew the lighting was going to change all the time and with the changeover of light I wanted there to be a little bit of shimmer or movement in another way.

**Music is the art form at the core of Bristol Beacon's activity; in your commission, how did you consider either the physical properties of sound and/or the role of music as an immersive, shared, experience?**

In my practice I use physical elements like light, colour and form to evoke a sensory experience of the work which echoes that of the immersive and shared experiences enjoyed through sound. Through the choice of colours and heavy materials I wanted to create a space of intimacy where sound could be enjoyed and therefore enhance the activities happening within the space.

**Can you talk about the importance of collaboration in bringing about your commission?**

I hadn't worked with textiles before, so I was really excited about working with Dash & Miller, who are based in Bristol. A lot of technical things needed to be addressed, and Dash & Miller had that expertise. By spending time in their studio I was able to see how they work, how they think about pattern and how fabric is constructed. I wanted a way to embody movement, change and rhythm and it was through our discussions that we chose to use jacquard as a technique, because it allowed us to weave these ideas into the structure of the fabric. It was an exciting collaboration between architects, textile designers, artists and musicians. Lots of different conversations made this work happen.

**How do you feel your commission functions as a public art work?**

With public art you have to accommodate so many different things, people and views. So my choices centred around how people would use the space. I wanted to make space for dialogue, conversation and for other things to happen.

**Has your Bristol Beacon commission informed your work moving forwards?**

It has had a lot of impact. Working for the first time with textiles allowed me to push my own work in a different medium. I would love to do more work with textiles and it's definitely made me think more about sound. For Bristol Beacon I worked with a darker palette, this informed some of the paintings I did for 'Dappled Light' my solo exhibition that toured the UK throughout 2022-3. The experience of Bristol Beacon is now interwoven with my work, and continues to feed through.



# LINDA BROTHWELL



**Motion Efficiency Study 2023**

Bronze

**Linda Brothwell** (born Nottingham 1981) trained in goldsmithing, silversmithing, metalwork and jewellery. In the past ten years she has been exploring the significance of British crafts, skills and tools and their value to economic, social and cultural development. The origins of each work are predominantly research based and site specific, and Linda is especially interested in heritage, place-making and how people look after and care for their surroundings.

Linda currently lives and works in Derbyshire.

*Key works/shows/milestones include:*

2019: Awarded Churchill Fellowship 2018: Sutton House, London; 2017: Cheongju Craft Biennial; BBC 4 Documentary; Hull Library; 2015: Palais de Tokyo, Paris 2013: Jerwood Makers Open, London 2009: Experimenta Design Biennial, Lisbon.

For Bristol Beacon Linda has made a work in patinated bronze for the façade of the building. This takes as its starting point the original balustrade of the Lantern to explore how this seemingly static object can twist and flow in response to and reflect the key sounds and events that have occurred around it. This contemporary response to the history of Bristol Beacon is her largest work to date to be made from a single element.

## **In what ways did you respond to Bristol Beacon, the building and its history?**

In my work I think about care and I think about the life of objects. And I like to work through buildings and through objects. So Bristol Beacon and the heritage of the building was a partner for me, and this work is to a great extent a blend of me telling what I already see to be there. The building already has those conversations it's just that you can't see them. The piece also has its own story but it brings to life the history of the building, the colours of the building, the shapes that are already within the building. And some of what has taken place inside it. It is a tool to see that building in a different way.

*What dictated the form of Motion Efficiency Study?*

The profile of the piece came from the building. The exact profile of the section on the far right - the black bit that then goes blue - already exists on the building, above the balustrade. It's not quite literal, I've interpreted it slightly, but that line already exists. Because I didn't want to invent a form, I wanted to take a form from the building and then have fun with it. So I took it, and I manipulated it and twisted it and turned it. Then it went into an oval profile, and the colours changed. Then it did the looping and all that sort of stuff. But the building started it all off, and in all the information, the building was my partner. The history is always within the building because objects hold their histories. So whether you can see it, or whether you can't see it, it is there.

*How and why does the form change?*

It flips around the building, and then it starts moving, and that also comes from the building, the building is a partner in that as well. I appreciate it's not visually possible to see, but it's based on the energy of the balustrade coming up against events. So it's coming up against the sound where people are shouting and waving Our Boys off to World War II, and it has to move over that sound. It passes a person who's waiting to go into the theatre on that external door high up on the façade which is where the performers used to wait outside, it has to flip over that. Ella Fitzgerald playing, it does a movement under that, and then with Votes for Women, when two suffragettes hid overnight in the organ to disrupt a political meeting, it responds and has to twist and turn and skip around that sound interference. So even though it wants to carry on straight, because it's a balustrade and it's formal and it has a function, the intensity of the history of that building means that it has to twist and turn and respond. So that's why the form is the form - it comes directly out of this close partnership with the building. I appreciate that it's heavily interpreted by me as the artist, but the starting points all come directly from the building.

*The colour changes as well.*

The gradient of colour reflects and reinforces the movement of the piece. I wanted the colours to come pretty much from the building. So by having that there, it gives you more information about the building, and it helps you see the building differently. And there's also this idea of warmth and coolness. Not just in colour, but in terms of objects. For me, a warm object is something that you care for, is something that has history, whereas colder objects are more mass produced. So on the far right hand side the function of the balustrade comes from the building and is cold and black. As it warms up, it goes to an electric blue, to a light blue, to a lavender, then it goes to a rust, and then to a red, and then to a gold as it flips around the building. That process is about the energy and about the movement, and also about trying to get a colour gradient. It is not paint, it's not pigment: it's chemicals and is a true patina that comes from within the bronze. It's a lot brighter than you'd think: because of how high up it is, it has to be dialled up because a lot of people will see it either from a bus or from the ground level.

## **Music is the art form at the core of Bristol Beacon's activity: in your commission, how did you consider either the physical properties of sound and/or the role of music as an immersive, shared, experience?**

I was less interested in music and more interested in sound as an expression of community and of all the happenings that have taken place in the building, beyond musical performances. Because as well as a music venue Bristol Beacon has been all sorts of things - it's had wrestling, it's been a conscription office, theatre, a Temperance Hall. So music is part of that but for me it doesn't have any greater weight than anything else. So looking at all of those things, I knew I wanted the balustrade to have to shift around all of this. So I started mapping all of these things, like the Te Deum which was the first official piece of sound in that building, or the scar on the building high up where there was a metal staircase and a landing outside.

## **Can you talk about the importance of collaboration in bringing about your commission?**

I am a metal worker, metal is my natural material, I've worked with it since I was 16. I hand make everything obsessively and part of the work has always been about that time consuming labour and about the body. But because of the scale of this work I had to work with Pangolin Foundry and collaborating has been very interesting because for the first time it takes a lot of the making out of my hands.

So Pangolin and I worked together to do stuff that neither party could do alone. It was a true collaboration in that we were both bringing knowledge to the party. For example, I had brought back the colours from working in Japan but I'd only worked with them in copper, so we were working together to hit those colours in bronze: it was a true collaborative process.

*And you also collaborated with the dancer and choreographer Laila D'Lialo.*

I wanted to work with Laila because I wanted someone else to communicate with, to interpret things with me and to push ideas further than I could get on my own. Laila is an absolute expert and an incredible choreographer and dancer. She's very well versed in different bodies, different sounds, different responses, in a way that I'm not. I'm good at objects. I'm not good at people and movement, which is what she does. So I mapped out different happenings, and each time she would create a piece of movement to respond as a line of energy. So I've got loads of videos of Laila in my studio in Spike Island, doing these 10 metre movements from one side to the other, enacting how a line might move and respond to, say Ella Fitzgerald singing or to a Suffragette hiding in an organ then bursting out. I might look at her hip, I might watch her hand, or her shoulder - I needed her movements to add as ingredients. Then we kept moving all these elements around, thinking what works best, and selecting what forms and movements were most interesting, and also what stories of the building that I felt were the most important. Her contribution was essential.

## **How do you feel your commission functions as a public art work?**

Publicly sited artwork is a big part of what I do and what I prefer to do. When I work for galleries and exhibitions, I always try and site something in a public space outside of the gallery to communicate with people who are separate from the gallery and wouldn't necessarily walk in. So publicly sited artworks I know well, but public art, as in putting a great big piece of bronze on the front of a building, is quite new to me. Even when I work on a large scale it tends to be in small elements and multiples and Bristol Beacon was the first time I'd worked at this scale for a permanent artwork in the UK. The piece has its own story but it brings to life the building, its colours, shapes and history. It's about sharing these stories and bringing to life something that potentially makes you think and see something in a slightly different way. I'm sharing what I see and how I understand this building and that communication can be very simple, with people going to work, people queuing up for something or going and getting a coffee or the workmen and women who are still on site.

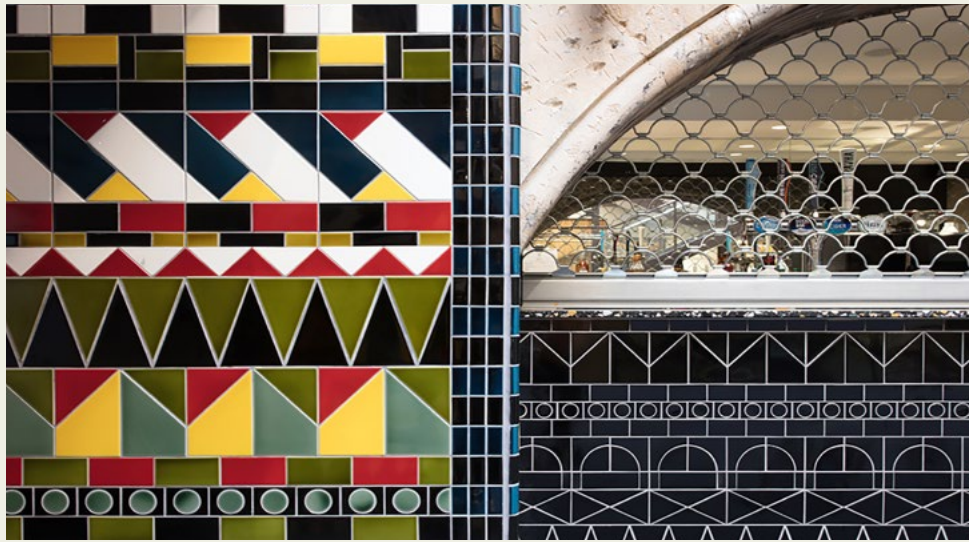
These are the kind of one-to-one interactions that I'm really interested in: people coming across the work and saying, what on earth is this?

## **Has your Bristol Beacon commission informed your work moving forwards?**

Collaborating with Pangolin gave me a huge amount, but because a lot of my work is about tools and bodies and labour it has also brought up some quite uncomfortable questions for me. Like, how much unnecessary toil do I put in my work? And how much does that still serve me? And is the work any better for it? So despite the piece being massive there's a lightness in it for me, because, unlike in the past, I didn't have my hands on all of it. I led it and it was my vision, but I wasn't in there in hobnail boots and full visor actually casting it. And if the work still expresses what I want it to express - which I think it does - then actually moving forward into my 40's, maybe the toil no longer necessarily needs to be part of the work. I can now bring metal to life without breaking my own back in the process.



# GILES ROUND



## The reticence of warehouses and the opulence of banks. An interior after the Byzantine-influenced Italian Gothic manner of the Bristol Byzantine. (2023)

St Bees Sandstone, polished plaster, glazed tiles, terrazzo, carpet.

**Giles Round** (born London, 1976) operates across disciplines spanning architecture, design and ceramics, as well as print and typography, creating frameworks that interrogate the role of the artist. At times he has produced organisations and companies as artworks. Giles' work is characterised by a deep historical knowledge and appreciation of arts and crafts and a re-use of time-honoured manufacturing and design techniques.

Giles currently lives and works in London and St Leonards.

### Key works/shows/milestones include:

2023: Commission for Psychological and Mental Health Services Great Ormond St Hospital, London; 2021: Commission for Brent Cross West Mainline Station, London; Quench, Margate; 2020: Brighton CCA; 2019: Hepworth Wakefield, Yorkshire; 2018: Foyer Curtain, Queen Elizabeth Hall, Southbank Centre; 2017 Spike Island, Bristol

Giles's commission for Bristol Beacon demonstrates his appreciation of the historic nature of the building. It combines both art and architecture and uses ceramics, plaster, terrazzo and sandstone to transform the newly reconfigured Lantern atrium space and to create what he considers to be in part a portrait of the building itself.

## In what ways did you respond to Bristol Beacon, the building and its history?

The beginning was a piece of research into a local architectural style, which is known as many things, including neo-Gothic, in particular the Bristol Byzantine. Around the 1880's, in places which were making money, many private and civic buildings - including Bristol Beacon - were built in a heavily ornate, Italianate style. For me there was this connection between the style of the city and the style of Bristol Beacon and seeing how I could act within that. How could I inhabit a space and also bring my work to embellish a space? With my work in the Lantern Atrium I'm not only bringing the outside in, but there's also this idea of making a portrait of the building itself. Bristol Beacon has a polychromatic stone façade - from the street it's hard to see just how decorated it is - and I'm replicating the image of this façade and bringing it inside the building. To do that, I've flattened Bristol Beacon's three dimensional external geometry into a two dimensional image. It is possible to see this in the black tiles in the work, they are depictions of shadow.

*Although the tiles are the most conspicuous element, the work is actually the entire structure of this new atrium area.*

The initial idea was to suspend something in the overhead void, but with the glass roof, anything hanging from it would have to be impossibly light. So two other locations were identified: one was the new staircase, and the other was the new architectural insert, which is situated where a wall originally was and where the new piers that form a short colonnade have been created. The structural addition was necessary to make that space function. I was much more interested in this as the work could become part of the building. The work not only exists on this new structure, the work is the new structure. The architects and I worked really closely to redraw the 'colonnade' to work with the graphic geometry that I'd laid out. The work starts at the bottom with a layer of terrazzo, then you have the tiles and then polished plaster and finally at the very top, the end of my work, is a band of pink sandstone. So it is a new architectural, structural sculpture, which uses the decorative tilework to become part of the three dimensional experience. This isn't an artwork that can be taken away and relocated, it is part of the building, it is literally made to be there. Not site specific as such, it is the site.

*Did the building inspire the colours as well as the shapes of the tilework?*

Yes. It's a combination of looking both at the specific architecture of this building, but also of Bristol itself. In both, the three main colours that are used within the façades, are yellow, red and black.

But with the yellow and red, the palette is a bit off, they are not that extreme, quite earthy. On the façade of Bristol Beacon there are also these decorative bits of green, and other little details which I think are actually blue. They're small details which you hardly notice looking up, but if you really zoom in you can begin to find them. So for me, it was how do we take something from the 1860's and then make it for now? Even though I think that might look unfashionable at this moment in time, I also don't think that this colour palette is in any way undesirable. I hope that it will hold its own for a good while.

*You were also very particular about how the tiles were actually glazed.*

You can industrially produce almost any colour you desire in glaze nowadays. With the exception of the yellow, we used traditional glazes, not synthetic materials. This means they have an earthier feel. We adjusted the yellow a few times eventually resulting in something that was warm enough and that would sit well with the pink. As well as the colours, I also did research into glazing and glaze techniques. We deliberately chose to produce the tiles by hand and as opposed to cutting by water-jet. This was to avoid the slight edge where you would have seen the white of the tile next to the glaze. Instead all these tiles were handmade specifically to the geometries of the work and in turn, each one was hand glazed. Being individually glazed, dipped by hand, also means that every tile has tiny variations which adds to their interest.

*Why did you choose terrazzo for the bottom?*

The terrazzo has a very utilitarian function, which is to be a sort of skirting board. It also serves to demarcate the work from the floor. The work is comprised of stripes, a bit like the wall on the floor above that is striped in bands of stone. The terrazzo is both decorative and utilitarian. There's also the idea of bringing this material from Italy to be in conversation with the English sandstone at the top. So I'm introducing into the Italianate style of the Bristol Byzantine a material that is directly associated with Italy.

*People also might not realise that the top band of pink stone is part of the artwork.*

Embedded into the wall above my work are original lines of different alternating coloured stone. The band of pink sandstone comes from a desire to replicate that and to give another nod to the building's original history. I also wanted to create a boundary between the new part and the historic part of the building. It's as much an end as a beginning. It also appears like it could be holding up the floor above. The pink at the top balances the pink and green terrazzo at the bottom.

*Between the band of pink stone and the tiling is also a band of polished plaster.*

It's something you would barely notice - if you really look you can see that it's an ever so slightly greyish off white. With all of these things - the details in the stone, the texture of this plaster, the inconsistencies or the cracks in the hand glazing, and the terrazzo - the closer you get, the more complex and interesting it becomes.

*By contrast the tiles of the bar, which is also part of your work, are monochrome and as such offer a more graphic experience. The same forms are being used, it's the same design, but all the tiles are black. It's almost like you have drawn in their shapes in the pale grout.*

The bar exists within two historic arches uncovered during the building's restoration process. The new bar has been constructed between historic arches. Here the work continues in tiling and terrazzo, but in monochrome, just black. The intention of this was that the bar would not distract from the tiled piers and to separate it from the rest. It's the same colour grout throughout, but within the black it all of a sudden appears, so here you notice the geometry. It's more like a drawing that hasn't been coloured in. The bar surface is black terrazzo.

**Music is the artform at the core of Bristol Beacon's activity: in your commission how did you consider either the physical properties of sound and/or the role of music as an immersive, shared, experience?**

I love music. I'm always listening to music and going to see live music is one of my favourite things to do. You look at the history of who has played here and it's everyone from David Bowie to Ella Fitzgerald. From the beginning there was the intention that Beacon would be a home for all forms of music, to be experienced by everyone. I was quite struck by this democratic idea. With the work I'm happy if people just enjoy its colour, its repetition, its rhythm - and it's no coincidence that these words also come from music. When we were laying out with the tilers, I was talking to them about rhythm and keepin in time. And in a way the blue and black border tiles act like a sort of metronome to keep the design in time, otherwise the geometry starts to collapse in on itself. Although the piece is not a direct illustration of any form of music, mathematics and rhythm are built into it.

**Can you talk about the importance of collaboration in bringing about your commission?**

We looked at a number of specialist tiling companies but chose Craven Dunnill Jackfield, from Ironbridge. I've worked with them on other projects - they produce different forms of historic tiles for clients including the Houses of Parliament and London Underground - and they're good at working with specific kinds of briefs and respecting historical integrity.

**How do you feel your commission functions as a public artwork?**

The idea that the concert hall would contain every form of music and that it would be for everyone is important. For me, it doesn't matter whether or not a visitor understands that what I have done is art. What matters to me is that you have a drink leaning against the bar, and that there's something there that makes it more enjoyable, even if you don't understand it. With other works I make, I might be trying to communicate something to the viewer, but here the important part is that you live your life in front of it. It is the same scale as the architecture and you are experiencing it one to one, as the background to everyday life. Emotional, heightened moments of existence can happen in those spaces.

**Has your Bristol Beacon commission informed your work moving forwards?**

There's a large amount of absolutely wonderful architecture which can be camp, preposterous and grotesque. It should be celebrated. That of course includes Bristol Beacon. I've recently been working on eight public rooms for NN Contemporary in Northampton. This is a new work, a new space, which will in turn form its own institution within an institution. For this project I have been working in what can only be described as the Northampton style. This is a combination of aesthetics taken from the Gothic Revival style of architecture of the city but also early 20th century Northampton, including 78 Derngate - the only interior designed by Charles Rennie Mackintosh outside of Scotland. So for now, I've entered my Postmodern, Modern Style, Neo-Gothic phase.

# LIBITA SIBUNGU

**Undercurrents (2023)**  
Audio

**Libita Sibungu** (born 1987; Cornwall) draws on her British-Namibian heritage to make discursive works that explore personal histories and colonial legacies inscribed in both the body and the land. She's known for collaging together performance and sound - and often other elements including print and text, stone and soil into poetic installations, which are also informed by wide ranging research. Her process frequently involves organising workshops and discursive events developed in partnership with DIY organisations, broadcasters and publishers.

Libita currently lives and works in Penzance.

*Key works/shows/milestones include:*

2020: Paul Hamlyn Award; 2019: Gasworks, London; 2018: 4717, RCA/LUX, Dyson Gallery, Royal College of Art, London; Memento Mori, Kalashnikovv 3.0, Johannesburg; Arnolfini, Bristol; 2017: South London Gallery/Iniva, London; Diaspora Pavilion, 57th Venice Biennale.

For Bristol Beacon's art programme Libita has developed a sonic poem, created collaboratively through a series of workshops with Black artists, writers and historians who have a connection to Bristol. This audio work delves into the relationship between mapping and storytelling and takes its inspiration from collective memory, wayfinding and deep listening in resonance with African diasporic experiences and waterbodies, to propose a space for healing.

**In what ways did you respond to Bristol Beacon, the building and its history?**

I was thinking about Bristol Beacon, formerly known as Colston Hall, and the changes that it has witnessed. Not as a static thing but as this living building that has absorbed and amplified and bounced back over all these years. As a witness it has testimony - so how can it speak and what does that sound like, what is it holding? Then I started to think about its history and how maybe it didn't want to be there? Colston Hall got burnt down a couple of times, and I was thinking about this destruction as maybe a necessary falling apart before being preserved and then built back up again. I was also thinking about what's underneath

the building, all the waterways that the city was built around, and their role in the industrial revolution and transatlantic slave trade. Before the water got pushed further back and hemmed more and more into the harbour, goods would originally have been delivered right up into the Bristol Beacon building through the basement and into the bonded warehouse under what is now the theatre.

**Water is at the heart of this work, was that an early decision?**

In his work 'Arcadia' John Akomfrah talks about how the Trade Winds were a key player and character in the Western Passage and that became a jumping off point to my thinking about water as a character in my piece. On 7 June 2020 when the Colston statue was thrown into the harbour I was at home, it was lockdown and I had just given birth. With that statue being physically thrown into the water I just felt like this seismic change had happened which changed the frequency forever. And if we're thinking about museums and memories, what is that body of water holding as this living archive? And how do we play that back? How do I play that sound back? And what the hell does it sound like? So having been initially reluctant to make a work that spoke to the transatlantic slave trade, what happened 7 June 2020 meant that I felt called to make this work. So I started to research and think about different perspectives on the Atlantic and of water, of playing back and of resonance. And of the livingness of the dead. I read the book *Zong* by M. NourbeSe Philip, and felt the need to speak to that which can't be spoken, and to imagine with the Orishas, the deities of the West African Yoruba religion, who were also stowed away in the ships in the Middle Passage. Yemaja the protective mother and water spirit kept calling me.



**Music is the artform at the core of Bristol Beacon's activity: in your commission how did you consider either the physical properties of sound and/or the role of music as an immersive, shared, experience?**

Music brings everyone together. We can all access it and respond to it and have a memory to it. And certainly as an artist I draw on live performances, and the moment you have when you experience these performances is the thing that I'm aspiring to create. I hadn't thought about this work so much in musical terms, but I was thinking about Bristol Beacon's history as a music venue and the way the building holds or doesn't hold sound, and how this was a possible point of resistance and of opening, of entry and of exit. I was then thinking about Massive Attack and how they always refused to play in the building because of its history. And the deep resonance and the noise and the sound that makes up the city. So much of this noise happens outside, on the street and from sound systems. I was also thinking about the impossibility of containing sound, its abundance, its movement and the rupture of any colonial intention to contain, which then extends back to Massive Attack, to sound systems, and the Orishas stowing away with people in the slave ships. Sound travels differently in water, it travels at a different speed.

**Can you talk about the importance of collaboration in bringing about your commission?**

As an artist who became a mother during the pandemic, in the period between being commissioned to make the work in 2020 and it being broadcast in 2024, it began as a slow and at times very difficult process. So I realised that to get a flow again I needed to create energy with other people and to bring in Black artists that have a connection to Bristol. I've called this part of my practice Generative Research, and it involved bringing people into a space of conversation with me and my research in order for the work to become itself. So for three days we took over a room in Bristol Beacon and we also went out and took to the city's water in canoes. We did dousing, we went to a sacred well. It was abundant, improvised and at times very unruly.

*And with water as the central element.*

It was all in line with water, thinking about going from floating to submerging, being on the surface and then going under. On day three we did a guided meditation and towards the end I then invited everyone to go away and to write for an hour and a half, from their perspective and in their voice. To create their own version of a Routier, which was originally a 15th century verbal navigating tool for sailors who couldn't read or write. Then I got everyone to record a few sentences of these provocations on their phones

and to WhatsApp them to me. When everybody sent their voice notes to us, I got the music producer Felix Taylor, who was my collaborator on the sound work, to input that into some software with the hydrophone recordings of the water to make this live soundscape of our voices coalescing with the water. Then we all listened to it in a dark room together. And it was so emotional, so deep, so live and so unexpected and so powerful. At that moment I thought, well, this polyphony of voices is the beginning of the work.

**How do you feel your commission functions as a public art work?**

I needed the commission to have autonomy and agency and its own space. So it has its own web domain. For now it's ultimately accessible, but this will dissolve. I want it to be itself for a year and then to become a fragment of itself, to have a temporary lifespan. This is about agency: I want the work to exist on its own terms, and also to be able to transform and to die on its own terms. I'm interested that it's a public artwork which resists this containment and control but also which is ultimately accessible, you can listen to it anywhere. I'm also hoping that the Guided Meditation can live on and become an actionable resource.

**Has your Bristol Beacon commission informed your work moving forwards?**

The commission was a chance for me to test this ongoing process of Generative Research and it has been an important step forward for me in understanding my process and my way of working. Also in embracing and adapting to being a mother, working with sound and writing and not having a studio. The workshops offered a moment for us to come together and to open up discourse and conversation about themes and elements of things that I was researching whilst recording everything that we were doing. Now this material, this repository of our collective energy and dialogue, is my own archive and I'm using it to create performance scores, perhaps for me, or perhaps for others to perform and read. Writing is an important part of my practice, but the thing that really interests me is when it gets spoken and performed and becomes sound. I've been walking along the beach down here in Penzance where I now live, singing and recording voice notes with the ocean. This archive of me recording and singing and being with the water is also in the final sound work. The Bristol Beacon commission is a trace of my journey in process and the ongoingness of that.



# LOUISA BUCK

Louisa Buck is a writer and broadcaster on contemporary art. She is a Contributing Editor and London Contemporary Art Correspondent for The Art Newspaper and a regular reviewer and commentator on BBC radio and TV.

Her articles have appeared in publications ranging from the Guardian and Vogue to Frieze and Artforum.

She is the author of a number of catalogue essays for institutions including Tate, Whitechapel Gallery, ICA London, MCA Australia and the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam.

Her books include *Moving Targets 2: A User's Guide to British Art Now* (Tate 2000); *Market Matters: The Dynamics of the Contemporary Art Market* (Arts Council England 2004) and *Owning Art: The Contemporary Art Collector's Handbook* (co-authored with Judith Greer) (Cultureshock Media 2006). *Commissioning Contemporary Art: A Handbook for Curators, Collectors and Artists* was published by Thames & Hudson in October 2012 and in 2016 she authored 'The Going Public Report' commissioned by Museums Sheffield.

Louisa was a judge for the 2005 Turner Prize and is a founding member of The Gallery Climate Coalition.

The artist commissioning process for Bristol Beacon's Transformation project was led by Theresa Bergne of Field Art Projects. Based in Bristol, Theresa Bergne is a curator and producer who develops and delivers creative led regeneration strategies and artist commissions across the UK and abroad.

In the South West she has delivered permanent artworks for Southmead Hospital, the Universities of Bristol and the West of England, for North Somerset Council in Weston-super-Mare, as well as programmes led through community engagement in Hengrove and Barton Hill.

*Photography by Tim Crocker, Jamie Woodley & Prince Taylor*



**The artworks were commissioned by  
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