



Shani Rhys James THE GOLDEN ECHO



SHANI RHYS JAMES MBE

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10 May - 8 June 2025

CELF GALLERY

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Photography by Dewi Tannatt Lloyd

Shani Rhys James is rightly celebrated as one of the most talented artists working in the UK today. Her paintings are uncompromising, her huge canvases full of life and colour.

This exhibition includes both new and now timeless Rhys James pieces. ‘Black Chandelier’, for example, is very much in the mould of the feminist work created by Rhys James over the last decade, while the containment of women through clothes and costume has also been an abiding interest for her since she first watched her mother take to the stage (‘Inner Room’). The visual representation of costume in James’s work depicts the serious constraints still experienced by women the world over, while ‘Black Chandelier’ calls to mind Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s short story ‘The Yellow Wallpaper’. Shani’s painting on this theme has certainly stood the test of time. As for her rich cultural heritage, Rhys James frequently emphasises her Australian as well as her Welsh roots, and the complex influences which have hovered over her from both sides of the family. A central moment in Shani’s life and work remains her removal by her mother from Australia to London, an exile which would never be reversed.

Very often, she says when we meet to discuss her work, the faces that she paints come from nowhere. They could be her children, or her grandchildren, or her late mother, even, who was such a strong influence on her talented daughter. It’s also worth remembering how often Shani makes significant changes to a painting. Strong, imaginative elements are painted in and then painted out, all in turn: parents, babies, elderly family members. ‘They all go’, she says quite simply. ‘Just as they came.’

Words too have always fed into Shani’s work, and for the purposes of this exhibition she has drawn on the poetry of Gerard Manley Hopkins: *Give beauty back, beauty, beauty, beauty, beauty, back to God, beauty’s giver, beauty’s self and beauty’s giver*. While Manley Hopkins’ poetry denotes a withering of beauty and power with age, Rhys James’s paintings re-assert these aspects. This exhibition sees James bring flowers to canvas in her most adventurous mode yet, featuring drooping stalks made by what looks like the artist’s finger running green lines through the painting. Shani’s flowers are absolutely wild, especially in the way in which they explode across the canvas, dominating everything else – plates, jugs, heads. They cannot be contained.

Finally, one of the strongest symbols in the paintings exhibited here is the re-occurrence of the nitrile glove. When we meet to talk about the exhibition, Shani highlights the neediness of everything and everyone who surrounds a woman artist – how one’s hands are constantly fully occupied, with children, with art, with life outside the studio. The gloves referenced here are both the nitrile gloves used for painting, and the kid gloves worn by the characters played by Shani’s mother during her theatrical career – Nora in Ibsen’s ‘A Doll’s House’, for example.

Some of the paintings here are easier to ‘read’ than others. It’s not always straightforward to identify at which stage of life Rhys James’s characters find themselves as they peep through the foliage curtain between painter and viewer, and that’s a good thing, in my opinion. It makes it more difficult for us to label them, when they are not meant to be labelled.

Even at this later stage in her career, Rhys James is continually dealing with recurring themes, unafraid of revealing a mixture of strength and extreme vulnerability. In ‘Afternoon House II,’ for example, her mother is reduced to mere costume. This isn’t actually so very different from Shani’s treatment of the stylized flowers and gloves appliqued to a dress in ‘Nitrile Gloves II’. The female characters are powerless, there for the taking: are they going to be devoured by male desire?

On the canvases of other artists, yellow is just a colour. On the canvases of Shani Rhys James, however, yellow is actively alive, almost a character in its own right. Different kinds of yellow represent new beginnings. Through it all runs the ‘golden echo’ of Indian yellow, and indeed many other yellows, until we reach a self-portrait in which Rhys James reigns supreme over her painted self, with her black paintbrushes standing tall in a jar just next to her: ‘Figure Against Yellow’.

In previous shows, Shani has shown herself to be completely fearless. Now, in this latest exhibition of work both old and new, she adds passion, power and her own ‘golden echo’ to what promises to be an unforgettable series of paintings.

Francesca Rhydderch
April 2025



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Spare!

There is one, yes I have one (Hush there!);

Only not within seeing of the sun,

Not within the singeing of the strong sun,

Tall sun's tingeing, or treacherous the tainting of the earth's air,

Somewhere elsewhere there is ah well where! one,

Oné. Yes I can tell such a key, I do know such a place,

Where whatever's prized and passes of us, everything that 's fresh and fast flying of us,

seems to us sweet of us and swiftly away with, done away with, undone,

Undone, done with, soon done with, and yet dearly and dangerously sweet

Of us, the wimpled-water-dimpled, not-by-morning-matchèd face,

The flower of beauty, fleece of beauty, too too apt to, ah! to fleet,

Never fleets móre, fastened with the tenderest truth

To its own best being and its loveliness of youth: it is an everlastingness of, O it is an all youth!

Come then, your ways and airs and looks, locks, maiden gear, gallantry and gaiety and grace,

Winning ways, airs innocent, maiden manners, sweet looks, loose locks, long locks, lovelocks,
gaygear, going gallant, girlgrace—

Resign them, sign them, seal them, send them, motion them with breath,

And with sighs soaring, soaring síghs deliver

Them; beauty-in-the-ghost, deliver it, early now, long before death

Give beauty back, beauty, beauty, beauty, back to God, beauty's self and beauty's giver.

See; not a hair is, not an eyelash, not the least lash lost; every hair

Is, hair of the head, numbered.

Nay, what we had lighthanded left in surly the mere mould

Will have waked and have waxed and have walked with the wind what while we slept,

This side, that side hurling a heavyheaded hundredfold

What while we, while we slumbered.

O then, weary then why When the thing we freely fórfeit is kept with fonder a care,

Fonder a care kept than we could have kept it, kept

Far with fonder a care (and we, we should have lost it) finer, fonder

A care kept.—Where kept? Do but tell us where kept, where.—

Yonder.—What high as that! We follow, now we follow.—Yonder, yes yonder, yonder,

Yonder.

Gerard Manley Hopkins



Nitrile Gloves II, 2025
oil on linen, 152 x 152 cm
(detail left)



Verbenas and Indian Yellow, 2024
oil on linen 90 x 90 cm
(detail right)





Daffodils and Glove, 2018
oil on gesso, 30 x 30 cm



Flowers in the Studio, 2023
oil on gesso, 60 x 50 cm



The Afternoon House I, 2024
oil on linen 90 x 90 cm
(detail left)



The Afternoon House II, 2024
oil on linen, 152 x 152 cm
(detail left)



Glass Vase I, 2024
oil on linen, 102 x 76cm
(detail right)



Black Chandelier, 2012
oil on linen, 183 x 317 cm



Glass Vase II, 2024
oil on linen, 76 x 102cm
(detail above)



Platter on a Red Table, 2023 - 2025
oil on linen, 120 x 150 cm



The Crow Mug, 2023 - 2025
oil on linen, 115 x 81 cm
(detail above)





Chrysanthemums and Gerberas, 2023
oil on linen, 165 x 165 cm



Head against Zigzags, 2021
oil on gesso, 50 x 50 cm



Spring Flowers, 2024
oil on gesso, 46 x 46 cm
(detail left)

Figure against Yellow, 2018
oil on gesso, 45 x 45 cm





Little Head at Night, 2018
oil on gesso, 25 X 25 cm



Head, 2016
oil on gesso, 30.5 x 30.5 cm



Dragon Handled Jug, 2024
oil on linen, 90 x 90 cm
(detail right)





Inner Room, 1999
oil on linen, 183 x 213 cm



Open Lilies, 2024
oil on linen, 90 x 90 cm
(detail left)

Born 1953

Education

- 1972-73 Loughborough Collage of Art, Foundation Course
- 1973-76 St Martin’s School of Art, BA Hons Degree in Painiting

Works in collections

- Arts Council England
 - London Borough of Tower Hamlets
 - BBC Wales
 - MOMA Machynlleth
 - Birmigham Museum & Art Gallery
 - National Museum Cardiff
 - Carlow Art Collection, Carlow
 - National Libraray of Wales, Aberystwyth
 - Columbia University, New York
 - CASW: Contemporary Art Society for Wales
 - Newport Museum and Art Gallery
 - Gallery of Modern Art, Glasgow
 - Pallant House Gallery, Chichester
 - Glyn Vivian Museum and Art Gallery, Swansea
 - Wolverhampton Art Gallery
 - Jerwood Foundation
 - The Women’s Art Collection, Murray Edwards College, Cambridge
 - Victoria Art Gallery, Bath
- Private Collections in Britain, Ireland, France, Belgium, USA, New Zealand and Australia.

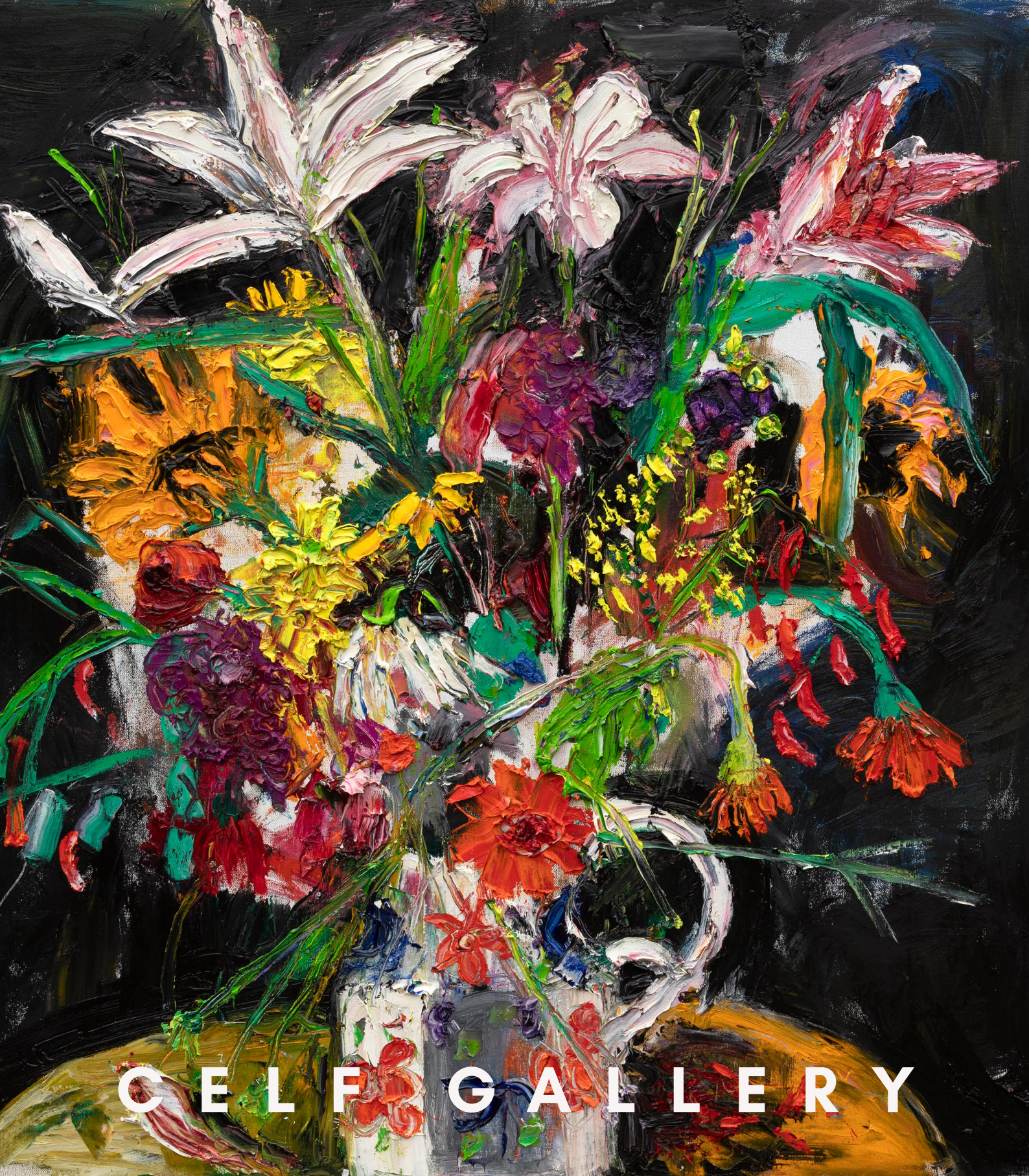
Prizes and Awards

- 2018 Winner of Best in Visual Arts 2018, Wales Art Review with
This Inconstant State
- 2017 Honorary Fellowship Wrexham Glyndŵr University
- 2008 Honorary Fellowship, Hereford College of Art
- 2007 Owain Glyndŵr Award
Honorary Fellowship UWIC
- 2006 Awarded MBE
Creative Wales Award, Arts Council of Wales
- 2003 Winner of the Jerwood Painting Prize
Woman in Culture, Welsh Women of the Year Award
- 1993 First Prize, Hunting / Observer Art Prize
- 1992 Gold Medal for Fine Art, National Eisteddfod
Second Prize, BP National Portrait Award
Winner of the BBC Wales Visual Art Award
- 1991 First Prize, Mostyn Open, Oriel Mostyn, Llandudno

Documentaries

- 2022 Art That Made Us, BBC 2
- 2021 The Story of Welsh Art, BBC 4
- 2013 What Do Artists Do All Day; Shani Rhys James, BBC 4
- 1993 Blood Ties, BBC Wales





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