

Wallace Chan: The Alchemy of Other Worlds

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Wallace Chan, 'Vessels of Other Worlds', Chapel of Santa Maria della Pietà, Venice, Italy, 8 May – 18 October 2026, and Long Museum West Bund, Shanghai, China, 18 July – 25 October 2026, curated by James Putnam



Wallace Chan walking by his 7-metre high *Vessels of Other Worlds - Birth*, installation view, 'Vessels of Other Worlds', Long Museum West Bund, Shanghai, 2026, photo by JJYPHOTO

To fashion permanence from the fleeting is one of sculpture's oldest ambitions, and one of its more magnificent follies. A newborn infant's first breath, the pulse of blood, the slow procession of the seasons, the transformation of living tissue into the apparently inert matter of death: these are events in a universe whose seeming solidity conceals an unending turbulence of change. Wallace Chan has chosen titanium, a metal prized for its extraordinary strength in relation to its weight and its resistance to corrosion, to give material form to this condition of impermanence. The paradox is immediate. A metal engineered to resist the ravages of time is enlisted to represent the very processes by which time becomes visible. But permanence is an unreliable promise. Even titanium will not escape the slow chemical and physical reconfiguration of matter, and

the meanings invested in it are considerably less durable than the metal itself. The question is not whether Chan can arrest the passage of time, but whether his sculptures can make us experience it differently. Chan's 'Vessels of Other Worlds', presented simultaneously in Venice and Shanghai, is an ambitious attempt to address this question through an assemblage of monumental sculpture, optical illusion, religious symbolism and technological mediation. Three vast vessels at the Long Museum West Bund in Shanghai are echoed by smaller sculptures in the Chapel of Santa Maria della Pietà in Venice, the two installations connected through live video transmission. The project moves between the intimate and the monumental, between the sacred architecture of a Venetian chapel and the industrial-scale spaces of a contemporary Chinese museum, and between the material presence of an object and its disembodied image.

The exhibition also traverses a less easily negotiated territory: the passage from the exquisitely fashioned precious object, whose value is bound up with the virtuosity of its making, to monumental sculpture, which lays claim to a different sort of attention. Jewellery solicits intimacy. It approaches the body, requires proximity and rewards a gaze directed towards the minute. Monumental sculpture occupies and reorganises architectural space; it commands the spectator's body before it has secured the spectator's thought. Chan has not simply increased the dimensions of an existing practice. He has altered the terms of the encounter. What once appeared to contain a universe within a stone is now itself an environment into which we enter. But enlargement brings dangers as well as opportunities. Technical astonishment, which in the gemstone is inseparable from close looking, can become in the gallery an end in itself. The question is not whether Chan can make something immense, which he demonstrably can, but what that immensity enables us to understand.



Wallace Chan, *Vessels of Other Worlds - Vessels and Passage*, installation view, 'Vessels of Other Worlds', Long Museum West Bund, Shanghai, 2026, photo by JJYPHOTO

The gemstone is a curious site for this operation. Its monetary value is traditionally calibrated through rarity, clarity, colour and the controlled circulation of desire; Chan makes it behave instead like a small theatre of perceptual uncertainty. His monumental sculptures retain the jeweller's concern with lustrous surfaces, exacting detail, symmetry and the orchestration of light, but they also invite the viewer to move around, and occasionally into, their physical structures. The question, then, is not whether Chan has graduated from jewellery to sculpture, but whether the procedures of miniature optical invention can survive their enlargement without hardening into spectacle. Can a precious object become a world, or does the world of the sculpture merely become a very large precious object?

Shanghai: The Architecture of a Precious Object

At the Long Museum West Bund, three colossal titanium structures, approximately seven, eight and ten metres high, rise into the cavernous space like the remains of a civilisation which has not yet existed. Vessels, monuments, machines, reliquaries, fantastical organisms: their identities continually slide between categories. Human heads, infants, animals, flowers, circular discs, gears and transparent spheres inhabit their surfaces, an improbable taxonomy in which the mineral, the mechanical and the biological have entered into a glittering alliance. From a distance the sculptures present themselves as coherent, quasi-architectural forms; close to, they dissolve into innumerable constituent parts. The eye performs a kind of restless shuttle between the microscopic and the monumental, never quite settling upon a privileged scale. The experience is not unlike looking at Bosch's *Garden of Earthly Delights*, where the grand cosmological structure repeatedly gives way to small, autonomous theatres of appetite, absurdity and invention. Chan's imagery is grounded in different traditions, including Buddhist cosmology and Chinese folklore, but its crowded visual syntax encourages a comparable habit of wandering attention. There is, however, a danger in the comparison: where Bosch's images often disturb through their disconcerting conjunctions, Chan's creatures and mechanisms can sometimes appear too readily reconciled by the encompassing rhetoric of universal interconnectedness.

The circular gears suggest an imaginary mechanics of existence. In my conversation with Chan, their significance was associated not only with chronological time but with the apparently miraculous commencement of bodily processes: the infant's first breath, the internal machinery of life setting itself in motion. The analogy is both touching and strange. Breathing is not, of course, accomplished by clockwork, yet the mechanical image expresses the astonishment that so complex a living system can begin and continue without conscious instruction. Chan's gears are therefore less emblems of technological mastery than signs of our ignorance of the forces that sustain us. They turn, or appear ready to turn, within structures whose intricacy suggests an immense apparatus without disclosing what it might actually accomplish. In this respect the sculptures resemble impossible instruments: machines built to measure what cannot be measured, or to manufacture what cannot be manufactured, the experience of being alive.



Wallace Chan, *Vessels of Other Worlds - Growth*, installation view, 'Vessels of Other Worlds', Long Museum West Bund, Shanghai, 2026, photo by JJYPHOTO

At the base of the sculptures, transparent spheres contain an extraordinary miniature menagerie: a turtle, an otter, a bird, a sunflower, a hare and a creature resembling a dragon-like seahorse were among those I observed. They resemble small planets, self-contained habitats, or specimens preserved in the crystalline cabinets of a futuristic natural history museum. The imagery has a particular resonance at a time of ecological crisis, when the interdependence of species has become impossible to separate from the destructive consequences of extraction, industrial production and the commodification of the natural world. There is something tender in the desire to preserve these fragile creatures, but also something troubling in their enclosure. The specimen in its vitrine has been rescued from the turbulence of life only to become an object of classification and possession. The cabinets of curiosities assembled by European collectors performed a similarly ambiguous operation, placing shells, fossils, precious stones, instruments and objects taken from distant cultures within a single possessive taxonomy of the world. Chan's crystalline menagerie recalls both the encyclopaedic imagination of those collections and their uneasy relationship to the economies of ownership.

The ecological question cannot be answered merely by identifying the animals as symbols of biodiversity. The sculptures themselves are elaborate products of material fabrication, and their surfaces participate in the visual economy of rarity, technical refinement and costly production. Titanium is neither an innocent nor an immaterial substance. It must be extracted, processed and worked, and the industrial history concealed beneath its immaculate finish belongs to the

same material world as the creatures invoked by the miniature menagerie. There is a productive contradiction here, provided we resist the temptation to resolve it too easily. Chan's art can honour the precariousness of living things while remaining implicated in the processes through which the natural world is converted into valuable matter. The sculptures do not become ecological simply by representing animals; their more searching possibility lies in making us aware of the uneasy coexistence of reverence and possession.

Faces, Mirrors and the Disappearance of the Self

The human head, another recurring presence in Chan's practice, is elongated, compressed, repeated or encased in geometric structures, its features often serenely withdrawn from the surrounding agitation of the sculpture. In earlier work, titanium and iron set up a material dialogue between endurance and corrosion; the face became the site at which these different temporalities were given a semblance of human identity. In Shanghai, heads enclosed within angled reflective structures appear like the occupants of elaborate metallic sarcophagi, preserved and imprisoned, multiplied yet inaccessible. A sarcophagus ordinarily protects the singular identity of the dead; the mirror does the opposite, producing a plurality of images which changes as the observer moves. The face seems to withdraw at the very moment it proliferates. The result is less a portrait than an unstable proposition about the persistence of identity, a physical object generating a succession of immaterial doubles.

This is where the connection with 'the Wallace Cut' becomes more than an analogy. Within the gemstone, the reflected image creates an interior space apparently larger and stranger than the stone which contains it. In the central walk-in mirrored installation, the observer enters the apparatus of reflection and becomes part of its unstable visual economy. Ordinarily we circle a sculpture, testing its forms against the relatively secure co-ordinates of our own body; here those co-ordinates begin to dissolve. Reflections move, split, disappear and return, and the body which was supposed to be the fixed point of observation becomes another uncertain image. The work thus proposes a genuine reversal of the relationship between object and subject, exterior and interior, seeing and being seen. Its enlargement has altered the terms of experience rather than simply increasing the dimensions of an already familiar object. One thinks of those sculptural environments in which the spectator's movement is not an incidental means of viewing the work but the condition of its existence. Chan's installation has a comparable potential: the precious optical interior has become an inhabitable world, and the observer is no longer guaranteed the privilege of standing outside it.

Yet the mirror is a notoriously accommodating device. It will produce visual astonishment almost anywhere, and contemporary exhibition culture has made the immersive reflective environment something close to a genre. Chan's mirrored spaces must therefore be judged by a more demanding criterion than the production of an impressive optical effect. Do they merely multiply the spectator, flattering the appetite for self-recognition, or do they disturb the apparent



Wallace Chan, *Vessels of Other Worlds - Birth* (detail), 2026, photo by JJYPHOTO

security of that self? The distinction is crucial. In the former case the visitor encounters an infinitely reproducible image of personal presence; in the latter, the image becomes unstable, displaced, dispersed across surfaces which no longer permit the comforting fiction of a single coherent viewpoint. It is in those moments when looking ceases to be a form of possession that the work becomes most compelling.

The Precious and the Monumental

There is a peculiar reversal at work in Chan's movement between jewellery and sculpture. The gemstone can be held between finger and thumb while its reflected interior appears immeasurably large; the monumental titanium structure occupies a vast architectural volume while inviting the eye to lose itself in minute particulars. The small becomes imaginatively immense, the immense an accumulation of small things. This perpetual recalibration of scale is not incidental decoration but one of the most compelling operations of Chan's practice. In my essay on Won Ju Lim, the viewer became alternately a giant looking down upon a miniature city and a diminutive inhabitant moving through an impossible architecture; Chan effects a related disturbance, although with the additional seductions of precious materials and reflective light. Scale is not merely a matter of measurement. It is a condition of our relation to the world, and one which sculpture can unexpectedly overturn.

The precious object, however, is inseparable from the economic structures which confer value upon it. Chan's celebrated jewellery circulates within an international market of rarity, exclusivity



Wallace Chan, *Vessels of Other Worlds - Rebirth* (detail), 2026, photo by JJYPHOTO

and the symbolic accumulation of wealth, while monumental sculpture inhabits an artworld with its own elaborate economies of prestige, private patronage and spectacular display. The passage from one to the other is not necessarily an escape from commoditisation. The gleaming surfaces retain their affinity with the aesthetics of luxury, and the extraordinary labour invested in their making becomes part of their appeal. Yet it would be absurd to conclude that craftsmanship is therefore incompatible with serious art. The bronze caster, the goldsmith, the sculptor of devotional images and the maker of elaborate Baroque architectural illusions all demonstrate that material expertise may be inseparable from imaginative discovery. Equally, the difficulty of making an object is not a measure of the difficulty of thinking through it. A sculpture may be almost impossibly complex in construction and remarkably straightforward in its symbolic organisation.

The passage from the jeweller's bench to the museum floor also changes the status of the spectator. The person examining a gemstone must come close, moving the object or the eye through minute adjustments of angle and light. Before the monumental vessels the body itself becomes the moving instrument of perception, travelling around the structure, approaching and withdrawing, exchanging a view of the whole for a succession of fragments. The work is consequently never entirely available at once. One sees a detail and loses the totality; one steps back to recover the silhouette and forfeits the minute world within. This perpetual exchange between mastery and loss is perhaps more revealing than any of the sculptures' individual emblems. The gaze that seeks possession is obliged, repeatedly, to acknowledge its limits.

This is where Chan's work becomes most open to criticism. The infant signifies birth, the circular mechanism time, the flower renewal, the animal the diversity of life: the associations can

become so readily available that interpretation threatens to end almost as soon as it begins. Symbolism is not made profound by multiplication. An accumulation of recognisable signs may produce the impression of inexhaustible meaning while leaving each individual sign insufficiently transformed. Yet the sculptures also contain a resistance to this schematic reading. Their imagery is embedded in an extraordinarily intricate physical construction, where a face can be obscured by its reflection, an animal appears impossibly preserved within a transparent sphere, and the spectator's position changes the relationships between otherwise familiar forms. The work is strongest when the symbol ceases to function as a label and becomes a problem of perception. Chan's achievement lies less in telling us that life is mysterious than in constructing circumstances in which ordinary seeing momentarily fails.

Venice: Vessels of the Sacred

In Venice the scale contracts, but the historical and symbolic pressure exerted upon the sculptures intensifies. Three titanium vessels, approximately one and a half metres high, occupy the Chapel of Santa Maria della Pietà, where their forms enter into dialogue with the Catholic vessels used to contain sacred oils, the Olea Sancta. Such objects are not merely containers. In rites associated with baptism, confirmation and the anointing of the sick, their contents participate in acts through which material substance is invested with spiritual significance. The vessel, with its visible exterior and concealed interior, is therefore an especially suggestive form for Chan. It also recalls the reliquary, whose lavish exterior directs attention towards a fragment of bone, cloth or other sacred material which may remain unseen. Chan's vessels invert that arrangement: their symbolic imagery and intricate sculptural structures become the precious contents of a form which itself evokes a sacred container. But the chapel is not a neutral exhibition room. Its religious history is an active element of the encounter, one which may illuminate the work or confer upon it an aura of sanctity which the sculpture has not earned on its own terms.

The vessels are differentiated by yellow, red and blue, and by their association with stages in the cycle of life. The Venetian curatorial text describes birth, growth and death, while the Shanghai presentation emphasises birth, growth and rebirth. The distinction should not be silently erased. Death may mark a terminus within a linear narrative, while rebirth folds the end back into the beginning; Chan's circling infants and recurring biological forms seem especially responsive to the latter possibility. Suspended titanium forms resembling drops of sacred oil extend the imagery into the surrounding chapel. Here a fluid, ordinarily subject to gravity, has become an apparently weightless metallic body, held at an impossible moment between falling and remaining still. It is an alchemical gesture, a transformation of liquid into solid, duration into arrest, transience into the semblance of permanence. But the most compelling aspect of this suspension is not its promise of transcendence; it is the palpable contradiction between the metal we know to be solid and the drop we imagine continuing its fall.



Wallace Chan, *Vessels of other Worlds*, installation view, Chapel of Santa Maria della Pietà, Venice, 2026, photo by Federico Sutura



Wallace Chan, *Vessels of other Worlds* (detail), Chapel of Santa Maria della Pietà, Venice, 2026, photo by Federico Sutura

The conjunction of Catholic ritual and Buddhist-inflected conceptions of impermanence is fertile precisely because these traditions are not interchangeable. Christian resurrection, Buddhist rebirth and the secular language of cyclical renewal cannot be collapsed into a single universal spirituality without losing their historical and philosophical particularities. The Venetian setting risks encouraging precisely such a reconciliation, as though the mere proximity of sacred architecture and vessels associated with life were sufficient to produce transcendence. But it can also create a more difficult encounter: the church retains the memory of one religious system while the sculptures articulate another set of intuitions about matter, suffering, continuity and transformation. The resulting friction is more interesting than an uncomplicated harmony. These are not neutral containers for an agreed spiritual essence; they are objects whose meanings change according to the traditions, expectations and histories brought to bear upon them.

Between Venice and Shanghai

Three screens on the altar in Venice transmit images of the monumental vessels in Shanghai, establishing a curious traffic between material presence and electronic apparition. The sculptures remain in China, yet their images arrive in the chapel, visible and untouchable, as light. The transmission is not simply a reproduction of an absent object, for its apparent immediacy establishes a temporal relationship between two distant sites. The distinction between original and image becomes less useful than the question of where the artwork is understood to reside. Within the gemstone, a minute physical object appears to contain a vast virtual space; in Venice, a small electronic image refers to a colossal sculpture elsewhere. The movement between miniature and monumental is repeated, this time through the apparatus of technological transmission. What once occurred inside the polished interior of a jewel now takes place between two cities.

There is a historical resonance in the choice of Venice and Shanghai, cities shaped by maritime trade, the movement of commodities and the circulation of objects and ideas. The precious materials of one economy have been replaced by the nearly instantaneous movement of information in another, although the infrastructures of both remain stubbornly material. Chan's sculptures become immobile travellers, their images moving across a distance which the transmission appears to cancel but which it actually requires. The screens do not transcend geography; they make geographical separation the condition of their operation. There is a further irony in their placement upon a church altar, traditionally a site of ritual transformation. Here an object located thousands of kilometres away is converted into a flickering electronic presence, an apparition dependent not upon miracle but upon cameras, cables, networks and electricity. The language of transcendence returns, but with an unexpectedly technological body.

The question is whether this operation constitutes a necessary extension of the sculptures or a technically ingenious supplement to them. Watching remote images on screens is now one of the most ordinary conditions of contemporary life. The extraordinary scale and material complexity of the Shanghai structures are necessarily diminished when reduced to electronic transmission;

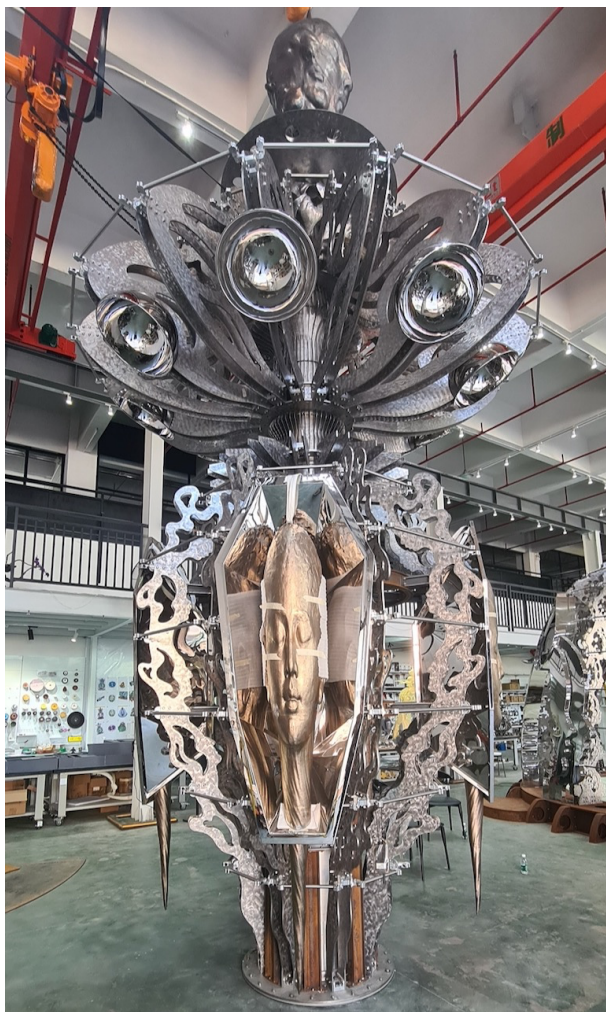
their weight becomes information, their surfaces become light. Yet that very impoverishment may be revealing. The screens expose the impossibility of transporting an encounter intact from one place to another. What Venice receives is not the Shanghai installation but a luminous trace of its existence elsewhere. In this respect the transmission becomes an unexpectedly exact metaphor for the limits of representation, and for the distance between knowing that something exists and standing bodily in its presence.

The Studio and the Problem of Making

My visit to Chan's vast, multi-storey studio in Shenzhen revealed another aspect of this conjunction of material invention and metaphysical ambition. The finished sculpture, installed and illuminated, tends to conceal the contingencies of its own making; in the studio the forms are still provisional, their components exposed as the products of experiment, adjustment, failure and renewed effort. My photographs record minute fantastical creatures, intricate metallic components, elongated human heads and large structural forms, not all of which should be assumed to have appeared in the final Venetian installation. The studio is

neither a neutral workshop nor simply the place in which an already completed idea is executed. It is a test site, a place where the resistance of material becomes a partner in thought. Titanium's strength, comparative lightness, resistance to corrosion and susceptibility to specialised surface treatments present a particular field of possibilities and constraints. The technical solution is not always the last step in the realisation of an idea; sometimes it is the event which allows an idea to occur.

The studio is not simply the place where an artist's ideas acquire physical form. It is a theatre of experiment, repetition, failure, invention and specialised labour, a place where the apparently effortless object is slowly wrested from resistant matter. At Shenzhen the scale of Chan's undertaking was unmistakable.



Inside Wallace Chan's studio, Shenzhen, China, November 2025, photo by Richard Dyer

Yet the sheer sophistication of the enterprise raised questions that the completed installations could not entirely answer. What becomes of the artist's hand when fabrication requires an elaborate organisation of people, machines and technical knowledge? How should we distinguish the invention of a process from its execution, or the virtuosity of making from the significance of what is made? These are not accusations disguised as questions. They are fundamental to understanding an artist whose reputation was established through the intimate precision of jewellery and whose ambitions now extend to the dimensions of architecture.



Wallace Chan's studio, Shenzhen, China, November 2025, photo by Richard Dyer

Matter, Time and the Limits of Transcendence

Chan's choice of titanium suggests a desire to give the fragile passage of life an enduring physical form, but endurance is never the same as escape from time. Objects survive their makers only to enter new systems of meaning. Religious monuments become ruins, archaeological specimens, tourist destinations or contested political symbols; the apparent permanence of their substance merely makes their changing interpretations more visible. Chan's vessels will likewise outlast some of the technological and institutional frameworks through which they are presently understood. The metal may remain while the ideas it was meant to secure are transformed beyond recognition. There is nevertheless something affecting about this attempt to preserve the fleeting in the resistant body of sculpture. The ambition belongs to the long history of funerary monuments and devotional objects, but in Chan's work it is pursued through an almost extravagant accumulation of visual and technical invention.

The sculptures also demand time from the spectator. Their intricate surfaces resist a single comprehensive glance, requiring the eye to return, retrace, discover and reconsider. Yet their abundance can produce an uneasy equivalence, every detail competing with every other until none quite establishes the force to organise the whole. The viewer is fascinated, sometimes exhausted, by a cosmology which seems determined to include everything. A work of art, however, need not contain the entire universe to open a universe of thought. The miniature creatures, circling infants, meditative faces and mechanical structures are most affecting when their associations remain unsettled, when the image is allowed to resist the explanation prepared for it. This is why the mirrored environments seem particularly consequential. They replace the accumulation of recognisable symbols with an unstable encounter between body, image and space. The observer becomes part of the work's visual construction, and the technical intelligence of the sculpture begins to produce an experience rather than merely illustrate an idea.



Wallace Chan, *Vessels of Other Worlds - Birth*, outdoor installation view, Shanghai, photo by Tian Fangfang

Other Worlds

The 'other worlds' of Chan's title are not necessarily remote spiritual territories. They may be the invisible operations of ordinary existence: the circulation of blood, the life of microscopic organisms, the reflection which makes our own body suddenly strange, the immense temporal distances compressed into a moment of birth. Chan brings these territories into contact through a language of astonishing material abundance, and the results are not always equally convincing. The dazzling surfaces can turn difficult questions about mortality and interdependence into an almost irresistible spectacle of preciousness; at other moments the work moves beyond

illustration and makes the instability of perception a physical experience. The distinction is crucial. The artist's formidable craftsmanship is not in dispute, but neither should it exempt the sculptures from criticism. The challenge is to discover where material virtuosity produces imaginative transformation, and where it merely amplifies an already familiar proposition.

Perhaps the most important development in Chan's practice is not the enlargement of the gemstone into a titanium monument, nor even the transmission of that monument as an electronic image. It is the attempt to make different orders of experience collide: the intimate and the colossal, the organic and the mechanical, the sacred and the commercial, the momentary and the enduring. Those collisions do not always resolve themselves into persuasive art. At times the sheer profusion of imagery threatens to overwhelm its own conceptual foundations; at others, the splendour of the object comes perilously close to substituting for the complexity of an idea. Yet when the surfaces refuse to settle into spectacle, when reflection dislocates rather than merely dazzles, and when the labour of making becomes inseparable from the mystery of what has been made, Chan opens a genuinely unfamiliar territory. The other world is not somewhere beyond this one. It is this world rendered strange enough for us to see it again.

Richard Dyer is Editor-in-Chief of *Third Text*. He is a widely published art critic, reviewer, poet, fiction writer, and a practising artist. His critical writing has appeared in *Third Text*, *Frieze*, *Flash Art*, *Art Review*, *Art Press*, *The Independent*, *The Guardian*, *The Evening Standard*, *Time Out*, *Citizen K*, and many other publications and catalogues, including monographs on Tina Kean, Keith Coventry, Mark Francis, Zineb Sedira, and Wolfe von Lenkiewicz. He was a curator on the major exhibition at the Whitechapel Gallery in London, 'A Century of the Artist's Studio: 1920–2020' (24 February – 5 June 2022), and consultant curator for the Jerwood gallery at London's Natural History Museum, 2023/2024.