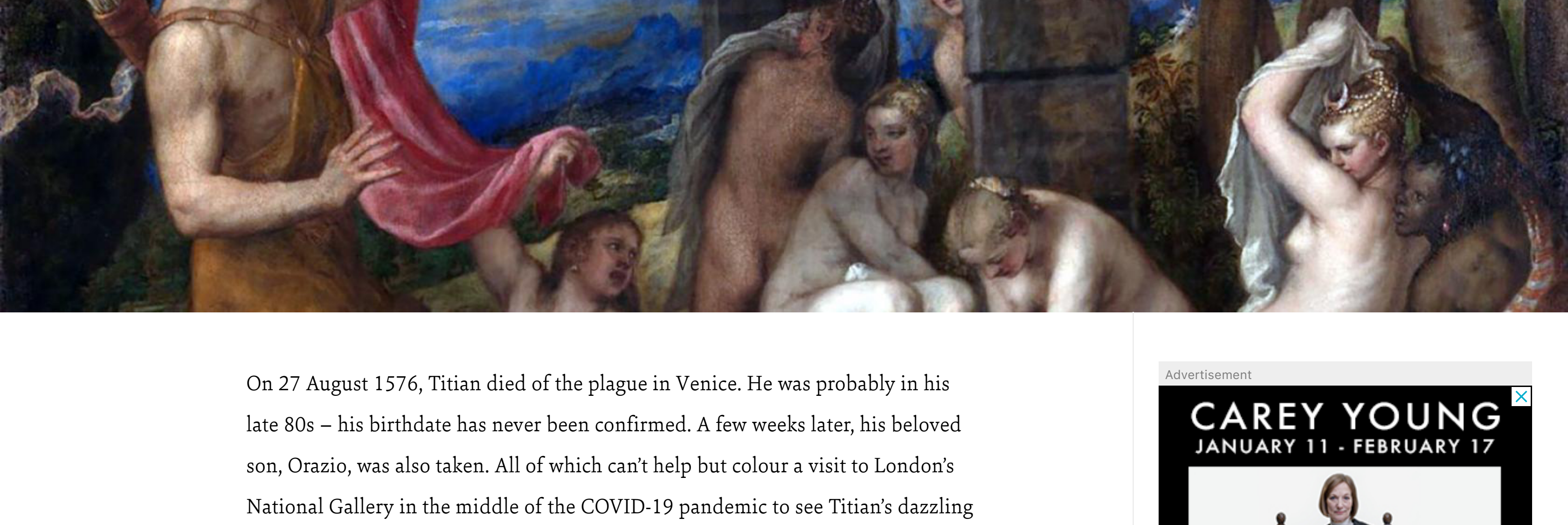




Gender and Power in Titian’s Greatest Paintings

'Love, Desire, Death' at the National Gallery, London, brings together six late works that pose questions about our current world

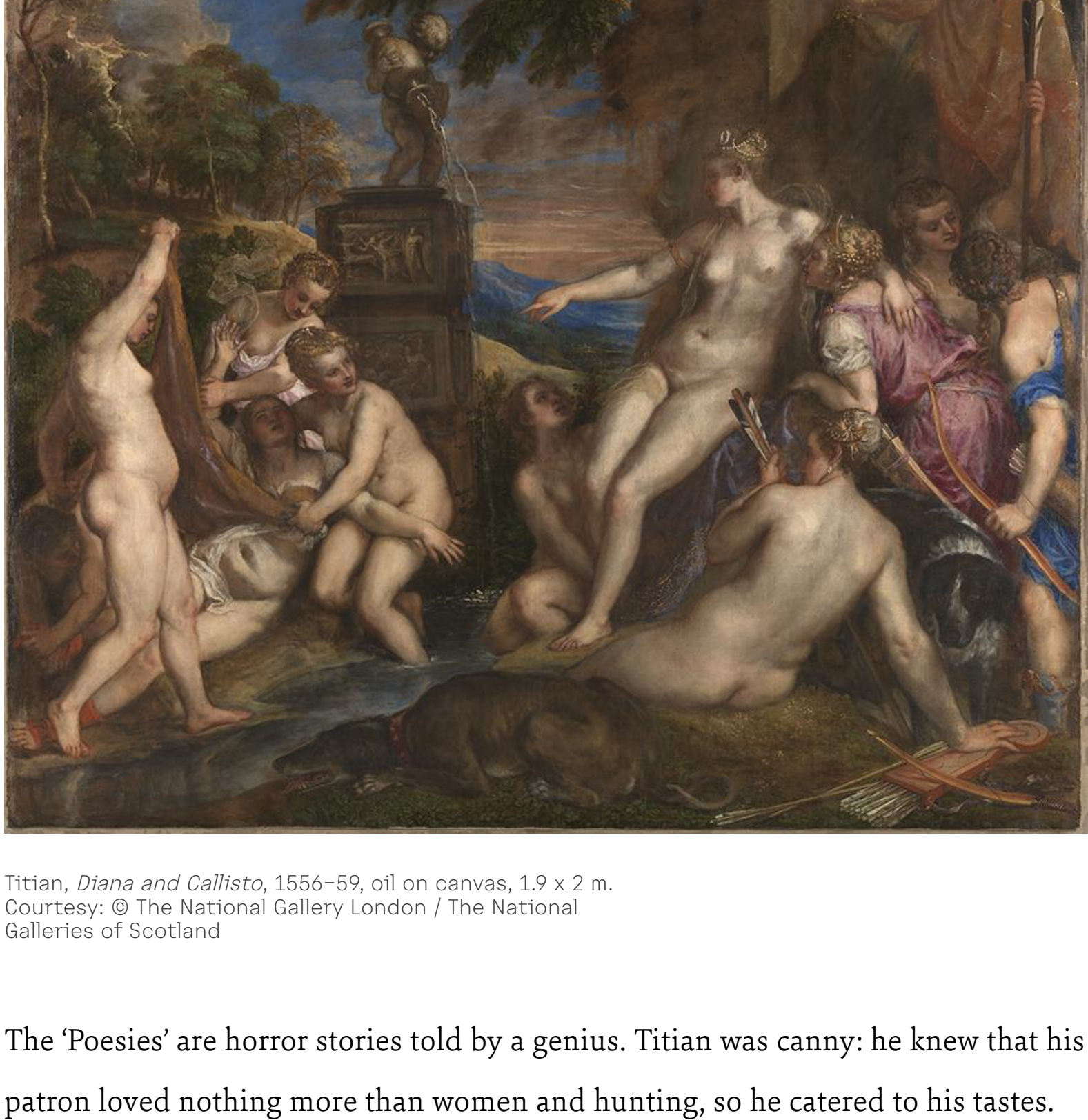
BY JENNIFER HIGGIE IN REVIEWS | 06 AUG 20



On 27 August 1576, Titian died of the plague in Venice. He was probably in his late 80s – his birthdate has never been confirmed. A few weeks later, his beloved son, Orazio, was also taken. All of which can't help but colour a visit to London's National Gallery in the middle of the COVID-19 pandemic to see Titian's dazzling and disturbing cycle of six paintings, the 'Poesie' (c.1551–62). Inspired by Ovid's first-century epic narrative poem *Metamorphoses* – which chronicles the mythological transformations of the world, from its creation to Roman times – the series was commissioned by the 21-year-old Philip II of Spain. He gave Titian, who was the most famous artist in Europe at the time, free rein to interpret the subject. Curated by Matthias Wivel, 'Titian: Love, Desire, Death' is the first time the pictures have hung together in 440 years – only two remained in Spain. For centuries, they've gone their separate ways across Europe, the UK and the US. Titian himself never saw them united.



There are terrible things here: rape, murder, deception, abduction. In *Danaë* (c.1554–56), the naked daughter of King Acrisius of Argos, who has been locked up by her father, is impregnated by Jupiter, the king of the gods, manifested as a shower of gold. In *Venus and Adonis* (1554), the goddess beseeches her beautiful lover not to go hunting, knowing he will die. He impatiently moves away from her; later, he will be gored to death by a wild boar. In *Diana and Actaeon* (1556–59), another young hunter has unwittingly stumbled across the goddess who, assisted by six nymphs, is bathing. Diana returns his gaze like a thunderbolt made flesh. Actaeon raises his arm, as if to fend off the terror of his punishment: she will turn him into a stag and he will be torn apart by his own hounds. (A painting of his gruesome end, *The Death of Actaeon*, is also included in the exhibition; although Titian worked on it for years, it's assumed to be unfinished.) In *Diana and Callisto* (1556–59), Diana's wrath is once again invoked: the nymph Callisto has been raped by Jupiter, who had assumed the form of the goddess. As a result, she is pregnant, something which Diana has forbade among her followers. In *Perseus and Andromeda* (c.1554–56), Andromeda is chained to a cliff, about to be devoured by a sea monster conjured by Neptune but saved by Perseus – the son of Danaë. In *The Rape of Europa* (1560–62), Jupiter shape-shifts into a deceptively gentle bull in order to seduce, abduct and rape Europa.

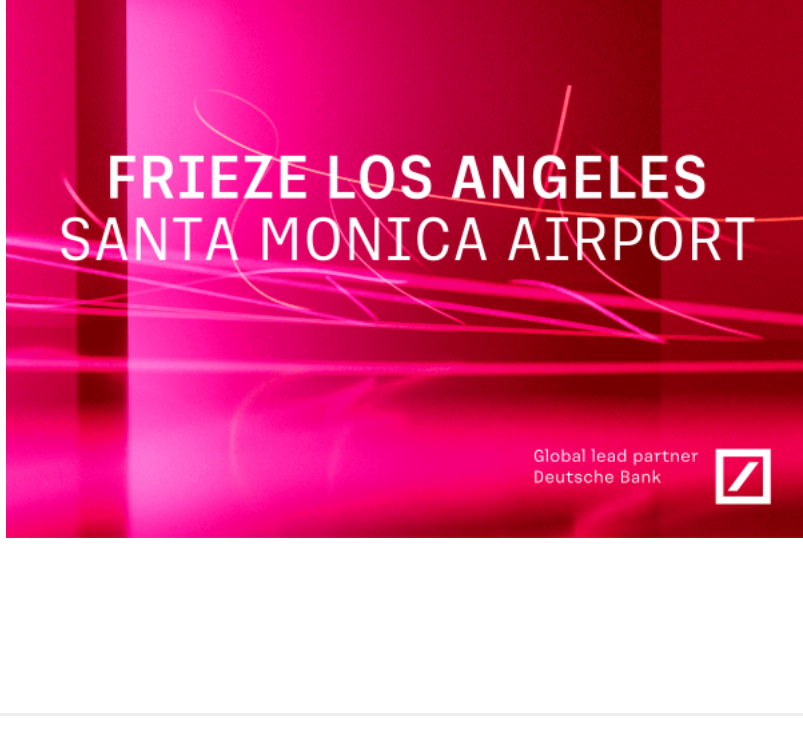


The 'Poesies' are horror stories told by a genius. Titian was canny: he knew that his patron loved nothing more than women and hunting, so he catered to his tastes. But there is so much more here: mortals and deities alike are revealed to be flawed and contradictory beings. Hunters are hunted, gods are morally bankrupt, lovers don't listen, fathers imprison their daughters, and women betray each other. Rendered in swift, at times almost violent brushstrokes, electric skies, silver water and dreamy landscapes form a backdrop to more than 30 characters in myriad poses – running, flying, splayed, reposing, bathing – that display the Venetian master's brilliance as a portraitist. The models were most likely local sex workers: eroticism here mingles with a kind of knowing exhaustion.



The first line of *Metamorphoses* is: 'My mind is bent to tell of bodies changed into new forms'. It's an understatement. Not only do bodies change but so do seasons, centuries and states of minds; ideas and objects. The animated, emotionally complex world of the 'Poesie' is one of flux and translation. These centuries-old paintings also prompt a host of very contemporary questions: namely, who is allowed to look at whom? If we are not always who we appear to be, how is authenticity to be gauged? If what we see isn't the whole story, how can we comprehend anything? Who should we trust? Should our designated leaders – in this case, gods and kings – also be our moral guides? (Going by Jupiter's behaviour, I'd say the answer to that one is a clear no.) And yet, all of this – the big questions, the sweeping stories – is tempered by Titian's boundless delight in the physical world: the tenderness with which he paints the shimmer of an earring, a tendril of blonde hair caught in a breeze, a woman's dimpled thigh or restless dogs, longing for the chase. I imagine the old man on his deathbed in plague-ravaged Venice, facing eternity, observing the motes of dust dancing in the light.

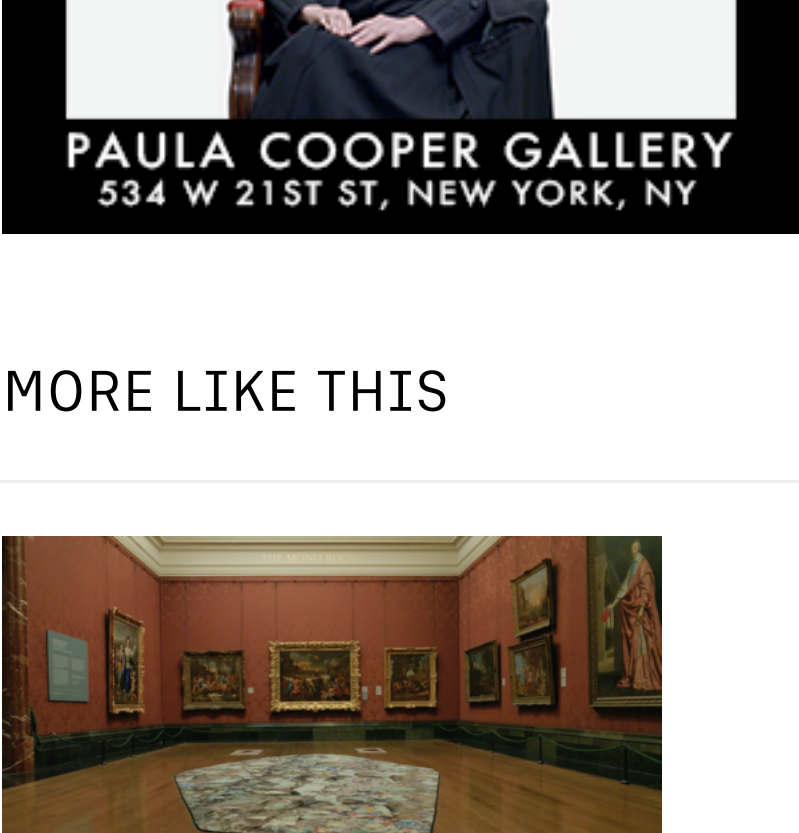
Main image: Titian, *Diana and Actaeon (detail)*, 1556–59, oil on canvas, 1.9 x 2 m. Courtesy: © The National Gallery, London



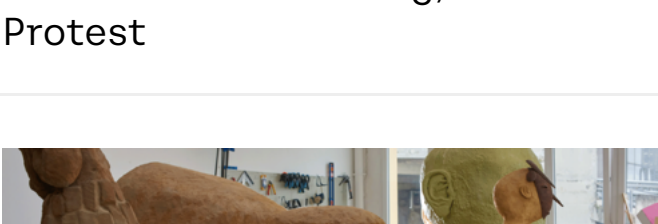
JENNIFER HIGGIE
Jennifer Higgie is a writer who lives in London. Her book *The Mirror and the Palette – Rebellion, Revolution and Resilience: 500 Years of Women's Self-Portraits* is published by Weidenfeld & Nicolson, and she is currently working on another – about women, art and the spirit world.

TAGS
[Jennifer Higgie](#), [Titian](#), [National Gallery](#), [Gender](#)

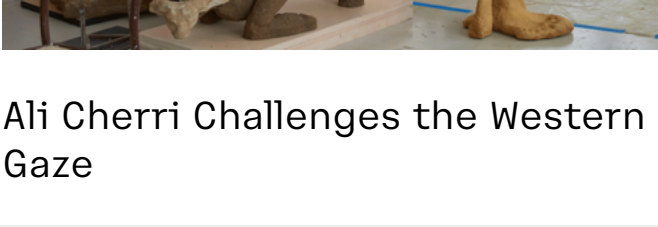
SHARE THIS



MORE LIKE THIS



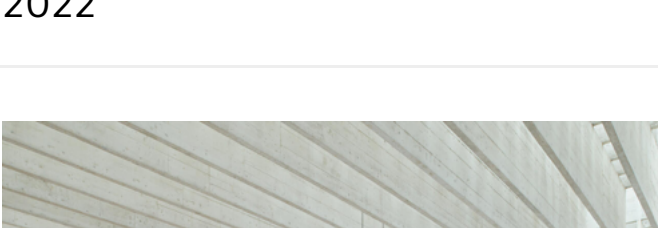
The National Gallery's Artist in Residence on Painting, Power and Protest



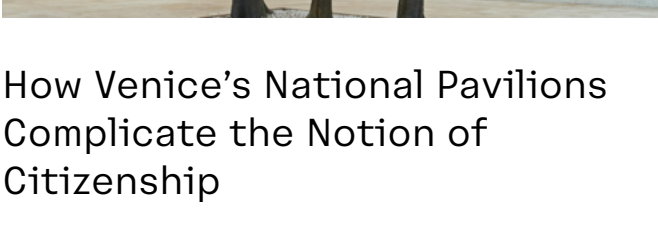
Ali Cherri Challenges the Western Gaze



Bursaries for Art Fund Curators Programme at Frieze Masters 2022



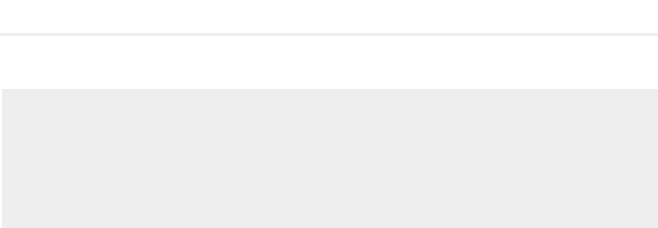
How Venice's National Pavilions Complicate the Notion of Citizenship



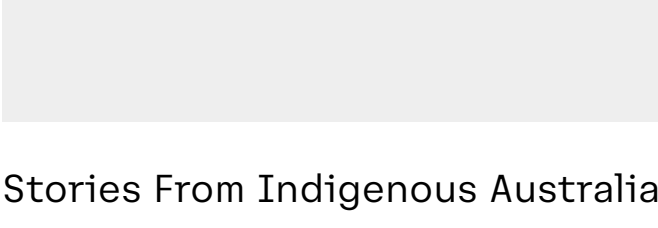
The 7 Best Shows to See this January



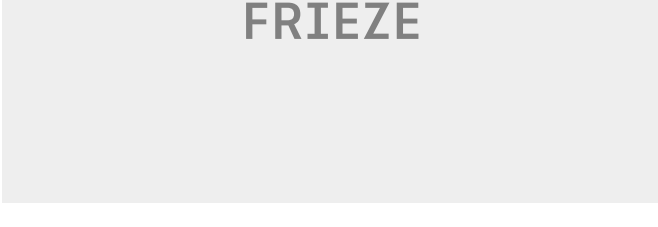
Stories From Indigenous Australia



Pornhub's Failed Attempt to Enter the Art World



The Box: Discovering the Art and History of Britain's Ocean City



Women Artists and the Looking Glass

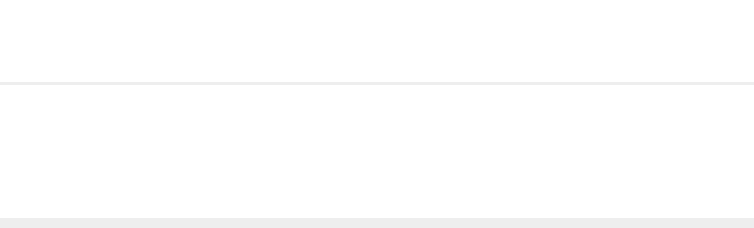


Stories We Missed in 2020: Rio Tinto's Destruction of the Juukan Gorge Proved (Again) Nothing Is Sacred Except Profit

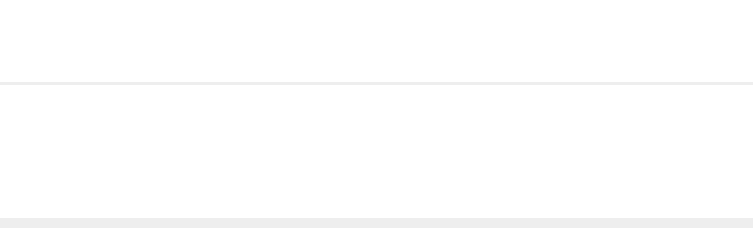
MORE LIKE THIS



The 35th Ljubljana Biennale Restores Faith in 'Research Art'



The Unsettling Assemblages of Michael E. Smith



Revisiting Rainer Werner Fassbinder, German Dionysus



The Minimalist Remodeling of 'A Doll's House'

