

Press release

Umi Ishihara: *Nocturnal Melody*



Umi Ishihara, *Nocturnal Melody*, 2026. Digital still. Courtesy of the artist.

10 October 2026 – 17 January 2027
esea contemporary, Manchester

Preview: 9 October 2026, 6–8 PM

esea contemporary presents *Nocturnal Melody*, a solo exhibition by London and Tokyo-based artist Umi Ishihara. Originally commissioned and produced by Gasworks, this is the first time the work has been displayed outside London.

Nocturnal Melody unfolds within the transformative space of the night, where women come to life after dark: eyes glowing, claws extended, climbing high.

Upon entering the space, strange, dissonant animal calls reverberate through the room interwoven with distorted fragments of club music, immediately positioning the visitor within a space of rupture and not-belonging.

Shown in the main gallery, the film *Nocturnal Melody* follows the experiences of Eri and Catalina, two dancers based in Tokyo whose lives are fuelled by music, nightlife and desire. They share their stories of childhood, growing up, dreams and politics as we join them in dressing rooms, dancing on stage and in the club, all under a cloak of darkness.

In this world, orthodox rules and societal expectations loosen their hold; performance, labour, intimacy and sociality become intertwined in everyday life. As the film shifts amongst different registers, including documentary footage, interviews-to-camera, night vision shots and saturated glimpses of Tokyo at night, we're offered fleeting insight into the complexity of their lives and the roles they occupy.

Ishihara's participation in the alternative worlds of *Nocturnal Melody* has precedent in her upbringing. Growing up with parents involved in the free rave scene in Japan in the 1990s, she was immersed from a young age in a world populated by people pushed to the margins of society. As the film's narrator, Ishihara accompanies Eri, Catalina and their friends, her voiceover bridging stories of pleasure and vulnerability in spaces that come alive after dark.

Shot on-location in Tokyo, and at Madam Woo's gentleman's club in the Shibuya district where Eri and Catalina work, *Nocturnal Melody* is interspersed with dream-like sequences of Ishihara's stylised nocturnal animals roaming the streets, licking and clambering over each other. With their night vision and proclivity for climbing, these creatures have adapted to move through the city with ease, navigating and reshaping the contours of their surroundings.

Across the gallery, in *Nocturnal Breath*, these animals take over. Bathed in blue light, we see them grind, bump and slide over surfaces, playing with themselves, each other, and with stacks of fake money. Dressed in pearlescent skinsuits, these uncanny creatures appear at once otherworldly and untamed — only within this space, beyond the constraint of dominant social structures, are they able to exist freely.

Xiaowen Zhu, Director of esea contemporary said: 'This exhibition reflects our ongoing commitment to presenting ambitious contemporary practices that explore questions of identity, belonging, and cultural exchange. *Nocturnal Melody* offers a powerful meditation on the spaces, communities, and relationships that exist beyond conventional boundaries. We are delighted to bring this important work by Umi Ishihara to audiences in Manchester for the first time.'

Rosa Tyhurst, Curator at Gasworks, said: 'Umi is one of the most exciting artists working in the UK today. *Nocturnal Melody* was a hugely popular exhibition at Gasworks earlier this year, and we're delighted to be collaborating with esea contemporary to bring the work to new audiences. Manchester's long history of nightlife and alternative culture makes it a particularly resonant setting — and one that's sure to leave a lasting impression on visitors.'

The exhibition is supported by Japan House London Trust, Great Britain Sasakawa Foundation, Matsuura Arts Foundation, the Kumagai Masatoshi Culture Foundation, the Yoshino Gypsum Art Foundation, Yutaka Kikutake Gallery, Arts Council England and Greater Manchester Combined Authority.

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Notes to Editors

Press Contact

For press enquiries, high-resolution images, or interview requests, please contact:

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Exhibition Details

Title: Umi Ishihara: *Nocturnal Melody*

Dates: 10 October 2026 – 17 January 2027

Preview: 9 October 2026, 6–8 PM

Venue: esea contemporary, 13 Thomas Street, Manchester, M4 1EU, United Kingdom

Admission: Free

Curator: Rosa Tyhurst

Associate Curator: Julia Jiang

Curatorial Assistant: Lauren Rees

Opening Hours: Tuesday – Saturday, 10 AM – 5 PM | Sunday, 12 – 5 PM | Closed Mondays and Bank Holidays

Umi Ishihara (b. 1993, Tokyo, Japan) is based in London and Tokyo. She gained an MA in Artist's Film & Moving Image from Goldsmiths, London in 2024, and a BA in Fine Arts (Inter Media Art) from Tokyo University of the Arts, Japan in 2018. Recent solo exhibitions include *Thundergod*, Gallery Butaiura, Tokyo (2024); *Gravity and Radiance*, Shiseido Gallery, Tokyo (2021); *Mire of Dickhead Demon*, TAV Gallery, Tokyo (2017). Recent group exhibitions include *Home Sweet Home*, Marugame Genichiro-Inokuma Museum of Contemporary Art, Kagawa; *Struggle*, Fukuoka Art Museum (both 2024); *Home Sweet Home*, The National Museum of Art, Osaka (2023); *Coming of Age*, Fondation Louis Vuitton, Paris (2022); *Bloomberg New Contemporaries*, South London

Gallery (2019). Ishihara's works have been screened internationally at venues including Centre Pompidou, ICA London, BFI Southbank, Locarno Film Festival, International Film Festival Rotterdam, CPH:DOC. In 2024 she was awarded a GQ Global Creativity Award. She is a participating artist at the 2026 Busan Biennale and new work will be featured in 2027's Yebisu International Festival for Art & Alternative Visions at the Tokyo Photographic Art Museum.

esea contemporary is the UK's only non-profit art centre specialising in presenting and platforming artists and art practices that identify with and are informed by East and Southeast Asian (ESEA) cultural backgrounds. Situated in an award-winning building in the heart of Manchester, home to one of the largest East Asian populations in the UK, esea contemporary has been a hub for cross-cultural exchange since its inauguration as a community-oriented visual arts festival in 1986. esea contemporary aims to increase the visibility of contemporary art practices from the East and Southeast Asian communities and their diasporas. It is a site for forward-thinking art programmes that, beyond exhibitions, also include commissions, research, residencies, publishing, and a wide range of vibrant public events. esea contemporary values creativity, compassion, interconnectedness, and collectivity in implementing its mission.

Gasworks is a leading non-profit arts organisation based in south London. Working at the intersection of UK and international contemporary art, they have supported more than 750 artists from over 100 countries since their founding in 1994.

They commission and produce exhibitions by emerging and underrepresented artists, and host residencies that enable artists from all over the world to research and develop new work. They also provide studios for London-based artists and develop participation projects for local children, young people and families together with community partners.

Above all, Gasworks is a home for artists. They are committed to building long-term relationships with all the artists they work with. Thanks to their award-winning history, they have developed an unparalleled reputation for cultivating new artistic talent.