

Meera Shakti Osborne

Hold Me Close (the forest is full of police)

29 June – 31 August 2024

One cannot write poems about trees when the forest is full of police – Bertolt Brecht

Hold Me Close (the forest is full of police) is a newly commissioned exhibition comprising painting, sound, installation and zines from London-based artist Meera Shakti Osborne. The project is the artist's first major solo exhibition and marks the culmination of their time as Peer Ambassador Artist in Residence.

Osborne's practice interrogates the dynamics of collaboration and places emphasis on creating inclusive spaces of mutual respect. Over the course of their residency, Osborne worked closely with three different groups of Peer Ambassadors, made up of young people from Peer's local area. Informed by Osborne's experiences of their time with the Peer Ambassadors and their wider research and time spent as a youth worker, the exhibition explores how we navigate the city and questions who has access to safety and care.

With 8.4 million trees making up 21 percent of the city, London meets the criteria to be recognised as a forest. Taking this fact as a starting point, Osborne, together with the young people, used the metaphor of the forest to talk about ideas of resilience and spaces of refuge and retreat. Discussing how they feel in a city where plants are widespread yet often unseen, they tried to imagine an alternative landscape in which we can all feel more free.

In the exhibition, a series of provocations and prayers hold and welcome visitors as they enter. Free tea is offered to heal, sustain and protect. The first part of the exhibition is intended as an educational resource and space for learning and play. This area features a zine library, which explores themes of safeguarding, safety, policing, criminalisation, Palestine, youth work, gentrification and radical herbalism. A series of questions posed by the artist, which will change throughout the course of the exhibition, invites visitors to respond, using the material provided. Visitors can attach their responses to the window, adding to the exhibition over time.

As you move through the gallery, a series of five large-scale oil paintings on linen are suspended between the gallery walls, resembling a thicket of trees. Installed so they can be easily moved and reconfigured, they create the possibility of new sight lines and offer space to reflect, hide and take refuge. The three largest paintings respond to texts by young people, depicting imagery of plant flesh, subterranean fires and plant life

breaking through cracks in the pavement. At the front and rear of the gallery, paintings of a sun and moon act as grounding prayers and symbols, which mark the beginning and end of our days.

The paintings are accompanied by *Forest Floor*, an audio work that samples sounds from increasingly policed and criminalised music genres, such as grime, drill and garage, which defines London's youth culture past and present. Fragmented and fleeting melodies, bass lines and chorus riffs punctuate sounds of birdsong and rustling leaves, further complicating our understanding of the 'forest'.

Intending the exhibition as a space of refuge and rest, Osborne has carried out a series of rituals – some still visible and some not – which cleanse and protect the gallery, along with Peer's studio space and office. Throughout the exhibition, various elements can be moved, removed, borrowed and shared by anyone who comes to the space.

Hold Me Close (the forest is full of police) is in part, an act of centering youth work within arts organisations and highlights the processes that Osborne has been invested in over the course of their residency. This commission expands on Osborne's commitment to refocus where we place value and in turn, embrace where this leads.

As part of the exhibition, Osborne has asked all Peer staff to be trained in Radical Safeguarding and will be reviewing Peer's Safeguarding policies with the team to ensure long-term safety for young people within the organisation.

Linden blossoms for the tea have been foraged and blended by Randa Toko and Peer Ambassadors in Hackney Marshes.

The zine library features contributions from AHHA AHA, Latifa Akay, Raju Rage and Claudia Manchanda, Meera Shakti Osborne and the Peer Ambassadors with Tasmia/T.

A series of talks, events and workshops has been programmed in collaboration with the Peer Ambassadors and run throughout the exhibition. Osborne's exhibition is part of Peer's 2024 Programme, which also includes new commissions and exhibitions by artists Ed Webb-Ingall and Onyeka Igwe.

Thoughts on making Forest Floor

Text by buitumelo

My favourite thing about being in the forest is that, its lessons and patterns make themselves known when you take the time to notice.

Forests are fuelled by togetherness, it's always more than one set of systems operating in response and in accordance with one another to sustain and fortify itself, and its inhabitants.

Laced with memory and a sense of place - we sampled from genres that have been historically criminalised so as to infuse what safety can sound like in the gallery space. An idea developed by Meera through questioning ideas of safety, who gets to feel safe, and where.

Tome, this is what it sounds like when night slugs and black flies are recalled together to take care of their home. London is ours. Not theirs.

London makes it easy to forget you're whole and part of a whole. Sounds and music are navigation tools, our entrance points. London wants us to feel and hear it. We know bird song after the rave, we know to be shrill, to be empowered by resistance and not bound to it.

This piece is here to remind you that forests in London can and will guide you, the mystic and the concrete gave us dub, gave us grime... the genre is called Jungle

We were certain this piece wasn't a remix or an edit. We got to create our own psychoacoustic fictional space - it's fictional and real for us.

Forest floor audio by Alex, Bui & Meera

Talks, Events and Workshops:

Offsite Screening: This is So Solid

Saturday 13 July, 3pm

Atlas Cinema, Loughborough Junction, SW9 7FA

An offsite screening of *This is So Solid*, 2002. Originally aired on Channel 4 to tell So Solid Crew's story in their own words, this documentary is being screened within the wider programme *Another World* curated by Meera Shakti Osborne and Alex Sushon, as part of the Atlas Cinema Cooperative.

For further details and to book your tickets please visit <https://atlasmay.eventive.org/schedule>

Peer Ambassadors Takeover: Saplings Amongst Thorns

Saturday 20 July, 2pm–5pm

Join the Peer Ambassadors for an afternoon of drop-in workshops and activities for all ages including badge making, a children's patterns and plants workshop, an intuitive drawing exercise, and a collective mapping of comfort food spots in and around the city. As part of *Saplings Amongst Thorns*, visitors will also be invited to spend time reflecting in a sensory chill-out space, where they can take part in a short, calming exercise.

All activities are developed by the Peer Ambassadors, in collaboration with Meera Shakti Osborne and in direct response to the exhibition.

Community Coffee Morning and Curator-led tour of Meera Shakti Osborne's exhibition

Wednesday 21 August, 9.30am–11am

Join us for a coffee morning at Peer for the chance to meet others living and working in the local area and to see our latest exhibition by Meera Shakti Osborne.

Peer Ambassadors Public Sharing

Saturday 14 September, 3pm–6pm

A public sharing and celebration of a new series of work produced by our current Peer Ambassadors and Peer Ambassador Artist in Residence Meera Shakti Osborne.

Radical Safeguarding Workshop

As part of a process of reviewing the organisation's approach to safeguarding young people, Osborne has invited Peer's team to attend a Radical Safeguarding workshop.

List of works:

Gallery 1:

1. *Tea* (2024)
(Linden, Elder, Yarrow, Rose, Hibiscus)
Linden foraged by Randa Toko and Peer Ambassadors
2. *Wall Texts* (2024)
Graphite, gouache.
3. *Zine Library* (2023)

Meera Shakti Osborne, *Account of stop and searches at 3.40pm 01/03/24 Bethnal Green Tube*, (2024)

Meera Shakti Osborne, *Adult-men-in-bad-costumes-with-dogs harassing children* (2024)

Latifa Akay, *Becky Says BAME like BAM: Notes on reimagining safeguarding* (2024)

AHHAAHHA, *Coming From Dirt* (2019)

Peer Ambassadors, *Feelings from the Forest* (2024)

Meera Shakti Osborne, *Policing the Crisis after October 7th* (2024)

Raju Rage & Radical Herbalist Claudia Manchanda, *Extracts from: Radical Remedies* (2024)

Meera Shakti Osborne, *WHERE WILL YOU BE* (2024)

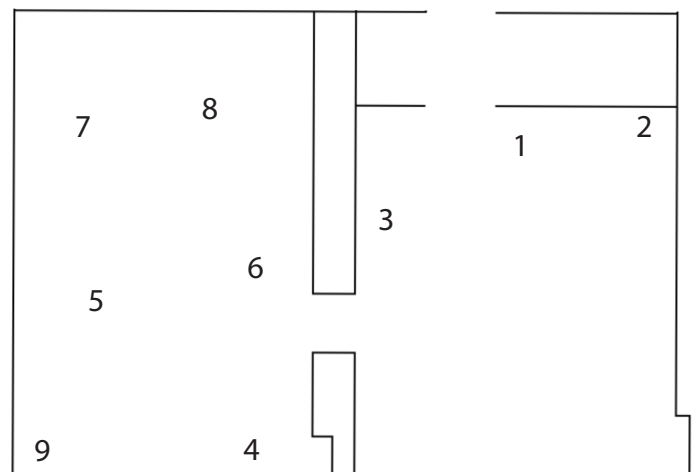
Gallery 2:

4. *The Sun Will Rise Over a Free Palestine* (2024)
Oil and Graphite on Linen.
5. *Spiralling to Keep You Alive* (2024)
Oil and Graphite on Linen.
Text by Tasia
6. *I Split Down the Middle* (2024)
Oil and Graphite on Linen.
Text by Jade
7. *With a Little Bit of Luck We Can Make It Through The Night*, (2024)
Oil, Acrylic and Graphite on Linen.
8. *Why Does No One Ever Get Close* (2024)
Oil, Acrylic and Graphite on Linen.
Texts by Kit Elash and Kuri Kern
9. *Forest Floor* (2024)
Audio 34 mins, 57 sec.
By Alex Sushon, buitumelo, and Meera Shakti Osborne

Forest Floor Tracklist:

COOLY G - Love dub [Cooly's adlibs; keys]
JME - Oh [oh! sample]
ILL BLUE - Routine Check 2.0 [808 bass]
SHOLAAMA-Imagine(ASYLUMREMIX)[acousticstrum]
M.I.C&NAMMYWAMS-TheOnlyPerfectPlaceOnEarth [M.I.C.'s adlibs]
GLAMMA KID - Taboo [guitars licks; Shola's hook]
LINTONKWESIJOHNSON-TwoSidesOfSilenceLinton[sax]
DIZZEE RASCAL - I Luv U [percs; bass fragments]
MHUNCHO-Warzone[horns sample; pitched adlibs; Headie's adlibs]
SADIE AMA - Fallin [Fluke's loops; Sadie's BVs]
SO SOLID CREW - Oh No [bassline]
Swindle - Forest Funk [guitar licks]
ILLBLUftUNKNOWNt&M24-Dumpa[Vybz'chucklesample]
FROSTY - County Lines [Mokuba's filtered loop]
BYRON MESSIA - Talibans [backing vocals; intro leads]
NAMMY WAMS - Fears [wet melody; subs]

Listen here:



Biography:

Meera Shakti Osborne is an art practitioner and youth worker from London. Osborne is currently a Studio Voltaire resident artist and Research Associate 2023/24 at Institute of International Visual Arts (iniva). They currently have a painting series at the inaugural exhibition *An Idea Of A Life* at the Women's Museum in Barking. Recent exhibitions include *department of Unruly histories*, Cubitt Gallery (2023). Osborne has worked with Nottingham Contemporary, iniva, Newbridge Project, Peckham Platform, Focal Point Gallery, The Gap Arts Project, The Drawing Room, Reprezent FM and is a visiting lecturer at UAL. Osborne graduated in Design at Central School of Speech and Drama in 2015 and Cairo Institute of Liberal Arts and Science in 2018.

Thank You:

Mariam Elnozahy, Abeera, AHHAHHA, Aroosa, Al, Ayo, Ba+sis, buitumelo, Chris, Duncan, Ellen, Eva, Idman, Jinan, John, Jordan, Lamya, Larena, Latifa, Lavendhri, Leena, Max, Natsayi, Nephertiti, Paulina, Priya, Raju+Claudia, Rabbits Road Press, Rosa, Rose, Tas

Peer Ambassadors:

Launched in 2017, Peer Ambassadors is a unique rolling six-month, creative programme designed for and led by, young people aged 17-25 from underrepresented and lower socio-economic backgrounds based in Peer's local area.

As Peer Ambassador Artist in Residence, Meera Shakti Osborne has worked with Aakifah, Amir, Arifah, Arin, Carina, Ebrar, Faaiza, Forhana, Ilya, Khadijah, Kimberly, Kit, Kuri, Luana, Mi'Amami, Orlando, Phosphene, Rebecca, Samiyyah and Tasia. *Hold Me Close (the forest is full of police)* is supported by Arts Council England and Headline Supporter, Mandy El Sayegh.

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