

# Blue Shop Gallery

72 BRIXTON ROAD



Jess Allen

'Nobody's Watching'

November 2022

## SYNOPSIS

‘Nobody’s Watching’

Jess Allen

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In her images of empty seats in the home or in public spaces, and in her shadow figure paintings, Allen explores absence and presence, memory, and ideas around emptiness. Her large interiors are people-less, but they are imbued with a sense of those who have left, or should be there. Intimate home interiors, and empty chairs and sofas, with books on them, or shadows passing over them, suggest questions, and a sense of longing for a past moment in time. She says of the shadow figures, that they are like a visual echo, and also ‘like dust, the shadows remain’.

## SHOW TEXT

Blue Shop Gallery presents

'Nobody's watching'

A solo show by Jess Allen

November 2022

"The New Year began with an open book. It was an early morning in January and low winter sunlight reached across the room to the shelf where a book lay open, illuminating it. The pages, as they stood upright, cast a shadow onto the wall behind. It had the appearance of a bird taking flight. This shadow shape, so different from the inanimate objectness of a book, felt alive. I considered how appropriate, and specific this bird-like shadow was. This was a book of original linocuts gifted to us by the late artist Breon O'Casey, who was much known for his abstract bird in flight' images. The 'bird' shadow felt like it was symbolic of his presence, his artistic being. It also suggested to me how ideas, which we often find in books, can help us to metaphorically fly. It felt like a good omen. Was it a message from him, or was this just a flight of fancy?"

For me it was one of those moments of realization and inspiration. The potential of working about shadows, as my subject, was immediately apparent. I became a shadow hunter. I started to place books around the house wherever I found a pool of sunlight. Those moments were rare, it was January and sun was limited, and even more so in our cottage, but then this made these patches of light, even more special. My excitement grew when a shadow of a light on the window sill fell across a sofa. Suddenly the possibilities in my work were expanding, to furniture and interiors, via my new shadows theme. And subsequently a new series began.

Almost always in painting I find that one idea leads to another, and then another. Paintings of sofas in interior spaces, and the effect of light on them seemed to be the key to enlivening what might to some be a rather 'dull' subject. Apart from enjoying the challenge of painting this new object, and a different sort of space, my mind was also whirring away, and the empty sofa/ empty chair theme, suggested so much other meaning. Why were they so interesting to me? It was their emptiness. Seats without sitters. Who had sat in them, and why were they no longer there? Was there a significance in their vacancy? These ideas and questions gave this subject a poetry which I wished to explore. And I began to consider the concept of 'Presence through Absence'. Initially through the emptiness of a seat or sofa, and then additionally I used a book left behind, open or shut, to convey the absence of its owner.

Becoming intrigued by this new theme of absence, or past presence, I began a new series of shadow figures. Shadows felt to me like a remaining visual echo of someone once being there. I shifted from still life and the observation of form and object, to paintings of 'something' which physically does not exist. I started with a single shadow figure, 'The Shadow Man', his silhouette caught by the winter sunlight as it came through a window, onto the wall and bookshelf. Then came a series of paintings of couples together, in the light, as it fell across the settee. As well as being images about the physical presence of a couple just outside of the picture plane, their shadows also suggest a psychological scene and they act as a metaphor for a relationship. In paintings such as 'The Relationship', "The Conversation Continues" and 'The Space Between Us', there is a questioning of what are we witnessing? Are we party to a good moment, or a not so good moment? Are these figure shadows, on the sofa, happy or uncomfortable memories? Conversely 'A Moment Together' and 'We were together in the Light' are more clearly celebratory, of intimacy and love.

It has felt that for most of the year I have been exploring this concept of presence through absence. And recently this theme has continued in my paintings of large empty spaces. The empty auditoriums in 'Nobody's Watching' and 'There was Nobody There', could be seen to be crying out for the presence of people, asking us where are they, and why are they not there? The paintings are about the absence of those who should be present, and about the sense of their recent abandonment. In 'The Dictionary of Obscure Sorrows' by John Koenig, the word 'Kenopsia' has been invented to describe this 'eerie, forlorn atmosphere of a place that's usually bustling with people but is now abandoned and quiet..... an emotional afterimage that makes it seem not just empty but hyper-empty.' Perhaps it is strange to have become concerned with making artworks about this all too recent and uncomfortable emptiness of the pandemic and the lockdowns, but I feel it is a subject which can now be looked at more easily because it has become safely placed in our memory, instead of being loaded with a sense of foreboding, or a future Dystopia.

My primary interest in these empty space images is creating works which are about what is not there and what is absent, but paintings can have many different layers of meaning, for both the artist and the viewer. 'Nobody's Watching', is aptly titled because it is a painting of empty red theatre seats, but it is also a play on words which has a very personal meaning to me, because of my own experience as an artist working away in obscurity and feeling unseen and unwatched. Creating this painting and naming it, has been both cathartic and therapeutic.

It is interesting how creating art can be an exploration into ideas which inspire others but also primarily delve deep into one's own self. I find the combination of the exchange of ideas and the self discovery a compelling force in my work." - Jess Allen 2022

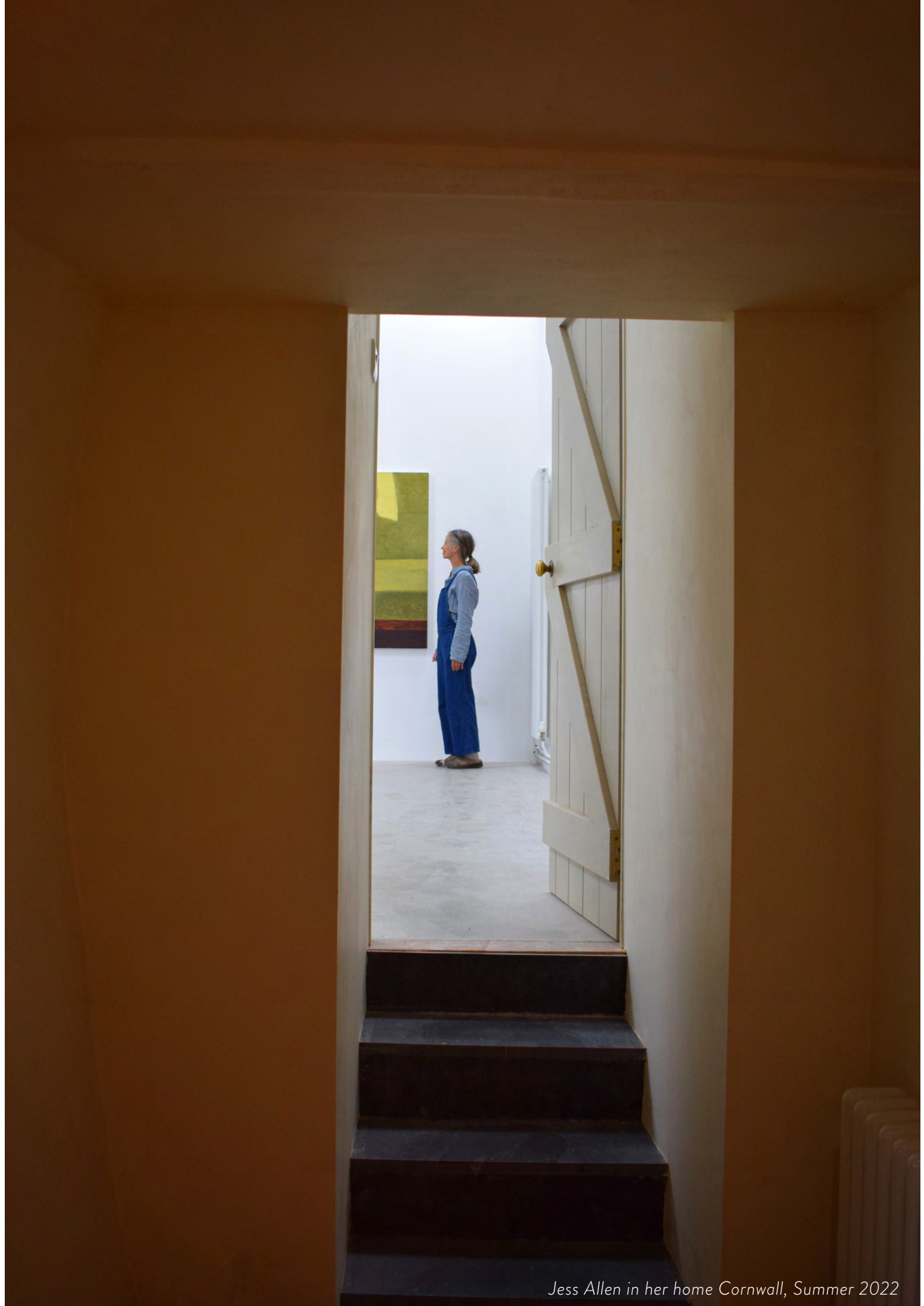
In Art Edit Magazine, Erin Irwin writes about Jess Allen's work:

**"Working from observation, the presence of light and shade feels inevitable," says Cornwall-based painter Jess Allen. "I like this visual game of presence and absence."**

Composing pared-back interior scenes featuring tableaux of silhouettes and shadow, the artist seeks to capture a moment in time without resorting to a conspicuous or distinct narrative. Natural light falls from above onto familiar domestic scenes, where closely cropped views of couches and stacks of books are overlaid with shadow figures – indeterminate and unnamed portraits that stand just out of view. Allen does not name these figures, instead hoping that the audience can impute their own experiences and desires on their indistinct forms. By using the interplay of light and shade, the artist elevates her subjects to an archetype or allegory, to be understood by her audience using their personal experiences. Her true subject then is not any one person, but time itself, defined by the angle of the sun and the tilt of the earth's axis. It is defined by omission, the length and distortion of shadows defining a particular instant which the artist has carefully and attentively recorded using her striking, muted style. Allen's paintings are quietly compelling, their composition making them feel intimate. By placing light and shade at the centre of her practice, and elevating the consideration of shadows to become the fundamental element of her works, Allen has beautifully personalised the universal experience of time.

This is Jess Allen's second solo show at Blue Shop. As well as having many UK Collectors, she is also building an International reputation with works in Collections in the US, Japan, Europe, Switzerland, China, Japan, Korea, Singapore, UAE, and Bahrain. She has also exhibited in the US, Sweden, and Japan, with forthcoming exhibitions in New York, Shanghai, and Hong Kong.

**Jess lives in Cornwall with her husband Sculptor Simon Allen.**



*Jess Allen in her home Cornwall, Summer 2022*



*Jess Allen in her studio Cornwall, Summer 2022*



*Jess Allen in her studio Cornwall, Summer 2022*

## PRESS RELEASE

Much of Jess Allen's new work explores the theme of 'Presence through Absence'. Subjects such as empty chairs and sofas, books left behind by an absent reader, and empty theatres and cinemas, suggest the past presence of a person or people. Their human absence asking the question of who were they, and where are they now, and why have they gone ?

The invented word 'Kenopsia' from The Dictionary of Obscure Sorrows' by John Koenig, springs to mind when viewing Allen's series of empty auditoriums. 'Kenopsia' is defined as 'the eerie, forlorn atmosphere of a place that's usually bustling with people but is now abandoned and quiet..... an emotional afterimage that makes it seem not just empty but hyper-empty'.

In her series of works, 'Nobody's Watching', and 'There was Nobody There' she explores this all too familiar and recent emptiness in public spaces. At the same time, she is also exploring a more personal subject, and In the title 'Nobody's Watching' there is an irony and a wordplay, which alludes to and reveals her own experience as an artist, of feeling ignored, and without an audience.

Additional to Allen's images of large empty spaces, in which there is the absence of the many, she will also be exhibiting new paintings of shadow figures at home, on the sofa, or on the wall. They are a more intimate and personal exploration of 'absent presence'. Allen describes these images as being akin to our very human desire and emotional need to retain a memory, of a moment, or of someone, often through recording, most commonly through photography. She says 'I keep thinking how, like dust, the shadows remain.'

In paintings such as 'The Relationship', and "The Conversation Continues' and 'The Space Between Us', there is a questioning of what are we witnessing ? Are we party to a good moment, or a not so good moment ? Are these figure shadows, on the sofa, happy or uncomfortable memories ? Conversely 'A Moment Together' and 'We were together in the Light', are of a private moment, which is more clearly celebratory, of intimacy and love.

Finally her paintings of single books left open or closed somewhere, on a chair or a table top, hint at the reader no longer there. In these seemingly simple images personal objects act as memory or metaphor, and as a trigger to our imagination.

Jess Allen's second solo show at Blue Shop Gallery will be in their new space in South London. Despite showing her work rarely, Allen is now quickly building up a considerable international collector base. She has exhibited in the States and Sweden, and will also be showing work with Chinese Gallery, Cubism Space, at the forthcoming West Bund Art Fair in Shanghai this Autumn, with further exhibitions planned next year with them as well as Hong Kong Sens Gallery. She lives in Cornwall with her husband sculptor Simon Allen.





ARTWORKS PREVIEW



Nobody's Watching 2

Jess Allen

2022

128 x 143 x 3.5cm

Oil on canvas

£7,500

ARTWORKS PREVIEW



**A Moment together 1**

Jess Allen

2022

94 x 125 x 3.5cm framed

Oil on canvas

SOLD

ARTWORKS PREVIEW



There was nobody there

Jess Allen

2022

112 x 122 x 3.5cm

Oil on canvas

£6,500

ARTWORKS PREVIEW



**Nobody's Watching', Study 4**

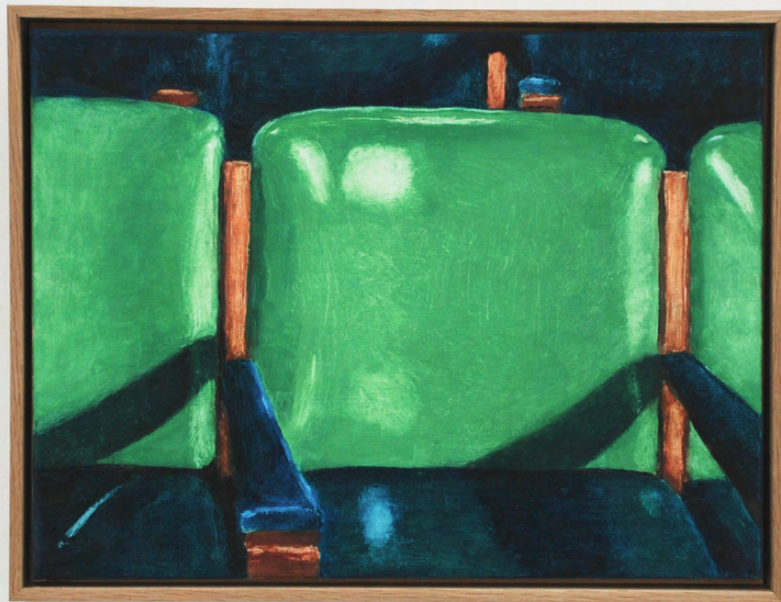
Oil on canvas/linen

35 x 45 cm - Canvas size

38 x 48 x 4 cm - Framed in oak

£1,550

ARTWORKS PREVIEW



**Nobody's Watching', Study 3**  
Oil on canvas/linen  
35 x 45 cm - Canvas size  
38 x 48 x 4 cm - Framed in oak  
£1,550

ARTWORKS PREVIEW



**Together**

Oil on linen

101.6 x 76.2 cm

Framed in oak

SOLD

ARTWORKS PREVIEW



There was just an old book lying open on the yellow chair

The light at the beginning, and the end

Oil on linen

30 x 40 cm - canvas size

33 x 43 x 4 cm - framed in oak

£1,200 each





## THE NEW GALLERY

Last week we collected keys for our brand new gallery space up the road in Oval/Kennington. Blue Shop Gallery is 1,150sq/ft set over two floors with 2 galleries, a kitchen, office and art storage room. Gallery 1 has 3.6m high walls with brand new solid oak floors and the highest spec track spot lighting and Gallery 2 has a more contemporary concrete floor perfect for framed works on paper.

Commercial leases are not for the faint hearted and the last 5 months, following our success at London Art Fair and Works On Paper 4, have been incredibly challenging. Since we opened our first show at our first Blue Shop space Blue Shop Cottage in spring 2018 this, and only this, has been the dream. To run an arts space that supports artists and collectors and brings people together. I have been fortunate enough to have unbridled support from my peers, artists, friends and family and in the words of Hannah Barry, when we sat down last month, "focus on the vision". We can't wait to welcome you all to the new space that will be open in November with Jess Allen's new solo show 'Nobody's Watching'.

72 BRIXTON ROAD | BLUE SHOP GALLERY



# Blue Shop Gallery

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For more information please contact the gallery on [hello@blueshopcottage.com](mailto:hello@blueshopcottage.com)