

National Portrait Gallery director unveils his Michael Jackson show—and unleashes his inner moonwalker

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London's National Portrait Gallery (NPG) director Nicholas Cullinan has a long association with Michael Jackson. The first music he remembers hearing as a toddler was his older sisters repeatedly playing of Off the Wall, and later on his first pop concert was Jackson performing in Leeds on his 1992 Dangerous tour. So his current Michael Jackson extravaganza On the Wall (until 21 October) has been a long time coming. And with a little help from the sponsors Hugo Boss, he made sure that this dazzling array of works by 48 artists—from Andy Warhol to Isa Genzken, inspired by the Prince of Pop—was launched with a bang. Or was that a squeal?

BREAKING! Here's [@NPGLondon](#) Director Nick Cullinan teaching [@DCMS](#) Secretary [@MattHancock](#) to moonwalk at tonight's opening of the super cool Michael Jackson exhibition, [#MJOnTheWall](#).

Please RT for the world to see. pic.twitter.com/fcv3j1simg

— Jonathan Badyal ([@JonathanBadyal](#)) [June 26, 2018](#)

On Tuesday night (26 June) the NPG rocked to the sounds of DJ Mark Ronson playing medleys of Jackson hits while "Smooth Criminal" cocktails were served by waiters sporting single white sparkling gloves. Many of the exhibiting artists were in attendance—including Kehinde Wiley, whose heroic equestrian painting of Jackson opens the show and was the final portrait to be commissioned by the singer, and Maggi Hambling who painted the forlorn singer looking as she put it, "so vulnerable and so alone" just before his 2005 trial for child molestation, which ultimately reached a verdict of not guilty.

The veteran conceptual artist Lorraine O'Grady explained that she made her four diptychs juxtaposing images of Jackson with Charles Baudelaire because "they were so alike: Charles was both the first of the modernists and the last of the romantics and Michael was the last of the modernists but also the first of the post modernists—and both had an exalted idea of the work of the artist." Candice Breitz was also in attendance, with her sixteen screen video installation of German and Austrian fans giving a track by track rendition of Thriller rivalling Mr Ronson's sounds.

However, the general consensus was that one of the evening's high points was Dr Cullinan—after some persuasion—giving the UK culture secretary Matt Hancock a lesson in moonwalking in the first room of the show, overlooked by images from Dara Birnbaum and Keith Haring. The general consensus was that, while the NPG director was a natural, the Right Honourable Member for West Suffolk should not give up the day job. Unfortunately, fellow

guest and aspiring snapper Brooklyn Beckham did not manage to catch the moves on camera, although Cullinan's moves were later repeated with a vengeance on a proper dance floor at the Dover Street after party. From now on, just call him Dr Disco.