

Still eclectic after all these years – artists celebrate 100 years of the London Group

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It was Jacob Epstein who suggested the rather bland name and Walter Sickert who chaired the first meeting with the likes of Wyndham Lewis and Duncan Grant in attendance. All of those artists would, most likely, be surprised to see that 100 years on the London Group is still going.

And going strong, said Susan Haire, president of an artists' collective that was created in 1913 when the Camden Town Group and the English Vorticists came together in a rare moment of agreement, setting up a co-operative with the simple aim of advancing public awareness of contemporary art by staging exhibitions.

The group has staged shows through both world wars and hopes to continue for the next 100 years. "We are really strong at the moment," said Haire. "It is a very lively group and really a lot hasn't changed since the beginning, when it was very argumentative and very eclectic. Also, it was apolitical then and it's apolitical now."

Haire was speaking before the group's centenary exhibition, which opens to the public today: its 88 members showing at least one work in the beautiful Pitzhanger Manor in Ealing, once the home of Sir John Soane. There are 100 works in the show and they are as varied as you're likely to find anywhere. There are works by more established artists, such as Frank Bowling, who first joined in 1963, and Dame Paula

Rego, who joined in 1965, to younger, newer members, including the digital artists Genetic Moo, who joined in 2011.

Most are responding to the house, a place where Soane hung his prized Hogarth paintings of *A Rake's Progress*. Indeed, there are a number of artistic rakes in the show. "We are very proud that we have a very broad range in the work we do, everything from painting, drawing, printmaking to video and performance," said Haire. In that latter category is Lydia Julien, who will be performing naked on a bed.

The group's former members are like a roll-call of 20th-century British art, although some lasted longer than others. Lucien Pissarro resigned before the first group show because he objected to Sickert

and they both objected to the idea of being shown with Wyndham Lewis. Among the hundreds of members over the century are Henry Moore, Barbara Hepworth, Graham Sutherland, LS Lowry, Patrick Heron, Craigie Aitchison and David Hockney.

Getting in to the club is not straightforward. "An existing member has to nominate you and then a committee decides how seriously committed you are as an artist and whether you will be active. The group is going somewhere because it has really active members," said Haire.

In 2007 the group reinstated its Open show, an exhibition that this year takes place in May and June and is open to all artists. "It is really important to the group that we're not just an exhibiting society, that we're actually giving support and a platform to emerging and young artists."

Bowling recalled that when he was a student, the London group was the one he desperately aspired to join. "I admired the people who were involved with it, such as Claude Rogers, and I wanted to be part of their company. It is a very important group and the only one left: lots came and went, but the London Group still goes on."

For its 50th anniversary, the group held its show at the Tate gallery, but there were no invitations this time and Haire said that was fine. "We are quite happy to be independent of all of that. We're OK about not being caught up in the latest fashion." *The London Group Centenary Exhibition is at Pitzhanger Manor Gallery and House, Ealing, 23 January-9 March.*



Abstract artist Frank Bowling in front of his work *Collaboration X 3*

