

SAINSBURY CENTRE

Living Art Sharing Stories

Press Release

The Sainsbury Centre presents ***Eyewitness***, examining cross-cultural relationships with the dramatisation of killing



Toyohara Kunichika, Ichikawa Sadanji I as Jirozaemon and Nakamura Fukusuke IV as Yatsunashi in *Kagotsurube sato no eizame*, 1888, colour woodblock print. Courtesy of Paul Griffith Collection

20 September 2025 – 15 February 2026
Sainsbury Centre, Norwich

The Sainsbury Centre presents *Eyewitness*, a new exhibition asking why people across the world are so fascinated by the dramatisation of killing. From the bickering violence of *Punch and Judy* shows to paintings which revisit the tragedies of Shakespeare's *Othello* and *Hamlet*; from shadow puppets enacting Hindu epic poems to a contemporary appropriation of Alfred Hitchcock's seminal thriller, *Psycho* (1960): the staging and re-staging of violence in art raises questions about our society and its viewing habits, as well as cultural constructions of virtue, justice, and vengeance.

Eyewitness pairs historical artefacts and artworks with contemporary works to explore depictions of extreme violence on stage, on screen and in art, reflecting a society fascinated with the dramatisation of homicide, as part of the Sainsbury Centre's *Can We Stop Killing Each Other?* season of exhibitions. From hand-operated glove puppets, to large productions that coordinate stage, music, lighting, costumes and props, the exhibition showcases the

material culture of performances all over the world to encourage reflection on how people establish their frameworks of justice and ethics.

The spectacle of violence is central to visual art and performance traditions across the world, and drama – now and in the past – provides a powerful device for communicating the dynamics of human agency, manipulation and control.

On display in *Eyewitness* are a range of historical glove, string and shadow-puppets. These include large and semi-translucent *tholu bommalata* puppets from southern India, inspired by the Sanskrit epic poem *the Ramayana*, which speak to puppetry's ability to awaken empathy and self-awareness, accompanied by colorful lithographs representing battle scenes. Punch and Judy glove puppets – used in performances descended from the Italian tradition of *Comedia Dell'arte* – highlight the petty injustices, mean jokes and escalating violent interactions of puppet shows enjoyed by generations of British children.

Within the genre of Kabuki theatre – a classical form of Japanese theatre which mixes dramatic performance with traditional dance – Buddhist and Confucian moral values give shape to plots of passion, honour and intrigue which range from historical epics to myths, and serve as the vehicles for religious beliefs, social satire and political commentary. The exhibition includes a collection of theatre woodcuts, popular during the Edo period in Japanese history (1603–1868), depicting actors in well-liked Kabuki plays. Capturing dramatic poses, costumes and makeup, they served as souvenirs and a marketing tool for theatres, allowing audiences to connect with their favourite performers and plays.

The exhibition includes a wide range of prints and paintings representing dramatic narratives in some of the most widely read British literature and playwriting, from Charles Dickens' *Oliver Twist*, which exposes the cruel treatment of the poor in Victorian England, to oil paintings depicting tragic scenes from Shakespeare's *Hamlet* and *Othello*. These popular plots provide a rich source of artistic inspiration, while their treatment in visual art has in turn shaped cultural understanding of these same stories – as in depictions of Shakespeare's Ophelia, the heroine of *Hamlet*, common in paintings of the Victorian period.

In the late-1980s, Susan Hiller's conceptual, psychologically-charged painting practice explored the liminality of certain phenomena, including near-death experiences. *Eyewitness* traces the dramatic treatment of homicide to the present day through a presentation of contemporary video works which appropriate Hollywood films to comment on violence and voyeurism within modern society. Christian Marclay's *Crossfire* (2007) and Douglas Gordon's *24-hour Psycho* (1993) confront audiences with violent imagery from popular culture to make us question our societal values.

Vanessa Tothill, exhibition curator and Sainsbury Centre's Curator of Transhistorical Narratives, said: “*Eyewitness* considers the violent and fantastical myths, legends and dramas we regularly consume as entertainment, from *Macbeth* to *Oliver Twist*. Showing artworks that capture the spectacular visual language of theatre and film, this exhibition asks whether art can help us to make sense of the chaotic world around us.”

Jago Cooper, Director of the Sainsbury Centre, said: “Can art help us stop killing each other? This show explores cross-cultural obsessions with watching violence from around the world and throughout time. In doing so it questions whether this portrayal of violence encourages it in real life or conversely helps people decide what is right and wrong – and what rules we should be in place to stop people killing each other in the future.”

Eyewitness is one of five concurrent exhibitions: *Tiaki Ora ∞ Protecting Life: Anton Forde; Eyewitness; Roots of Resilience: Tesfaye Urgessa: The National Gallery Masterpiece Tour: Reflections on Peace*; and *Seeds of Hate and Hope*. This programme explores the fundamental question *Can We Stop Killing Each Other?*, which brings together artworks to address critical contemporary issues around humanity’s relationship with violence.

Can We Stop Killing Each Other? is the latest in an innovative series of investigative exhibitions by the Sainsbury Centre following its radical relaunch in 2023, when it became the first museum in the world to formally recognise the living lifeforce of art, enabling people to build relationships with living art across its dynamic museum landscape in order to help them address the most important questions they have in their lives.

The season is accompanied by a book, published by Kulturalis in September 2025, which features a new text on the exhibition by curator Vanessa Tothill, and contributions by Jago Cooper, Tania Moore (Head of Exhibitions at the Sainsbury Centre), and Elizabeth Elliott (Creative Coordinator at the Sainsbury Centre). There are also contributions from Joanna Bourke (Professor Emerita of History at Birkbeck, University of London, a Fellow of the British Academy and OBE), and Michael Steedman (Deputy Pro Vice-Chancellor Māori | Kaiaarataki at Waipapa Taumata Rau/University of Auckland). The book includes a conversation between John Kenneth Paranada (Curator of Art and Climate Change at the Sainsbury Centre) and Tesfaye Urgessa.

NOTES TO EDITORS

For more information, interviews and images:

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Exhibition details

Eyewitness

20 September 2025 – 15 February 2026

Sainsbury Centre

University of East Anglia

Norfolk Road

Norwich

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The Sainsbury Centre continues its innovative series of investigative exhibitions in 2025 with a new programme that examines the fundamental question of why humans are led to kill, and how art, film, TV and culture have grappled with, or even aggravated, our proximity to violence.

Five concurrent exhibitions ask *Can We Stop Killing Each Other?*: if creative thinkers, and the art they produce, can use empathy to create change, and if humanity can choose hope over violence.

Featured exhibitions:

- Tiaki Ora ∞ Protecting Life: Anton Forde, 2 August 2025 – 19 April 2026
- Eyewitness, 20 September 2025 – 15 February 2026
- Roots of Resilience: Tesfaye Urgessa, 20 September 2025 – 15 February 2026
- The National Gallery Masterpiece Tour: Reflections on Peace, 20 September 2025 – 11 January 2026
- Seeds of Hate and Hope, 28 November 2025 – 17 May 2026

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Opening times

Tuesday – Friday 9am-6pm (exhibitions open 9.30am)

Saturday – Sunday 10am-5pm

Closed Mondays, including bank holidays

Entry

Tickets operate on a 'Pay Only If and What You Want' basis, so you can choose the price from free through to full membership. A Universal Ticket grants access to the permanent collection, Lower and Mezzanine Galleries, and Sculpture Park.

The Sainsbury Centre is a world-class art museum with a unique perspective on how art can foster cultural dialogue and exchange. Following a radical relaunch in 2023 the Sainsbury Centre is the first museum in the world to formally recognise the living lifeforce of art, enabling people to build relationships across an arts landscape.

The art of the Sainsbury Centre can help reframe and answer the most important questions people have in their lives. It is not a museum to only learn more about artists, cultures or movements like Francis Bacon, the Tang Dynasty or Modernism, it is a place of experience, where collections are animate, and visitors are emotionally connected.

One of the first museums in the world to display art from all around the globe and from all time periods equally and collectively, Sir Robert and Lady Lisa Sainsbury created one of the most sought after yet non-conformist art collections. In 1973 they donated their collection, which transcended traditional barriers between art, architecture, archaeology and anthropology, to the University of East Anglia, and created an entirely new type of museum.

Housed in Sir Norman Foster's revolutionary first ever public building, the space aimed for an interactive relationship between people, object and landscape, where art was placed within an open yet intimate 'living area'.

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