

DENE LEIGH

KINGS & QUEENS, 4 OCTOBER - 26 OCTOBER 2024

Opening reception

Friday 4 October 6 PM - 8 PM

The Gallery, 26 Lillie Road, London SW6 1TS

London-based artist Dene Leigh, recognised for his evocative exploration of time, memory, decay, and identity, presents his latest body of work in the solo exhibition *Kings & Queens*, produced during his residency with the Earls Court Development Company (ECDC). This exhibition marks Leigh's evolution as a multidisciplinary artist, featuring painting, sculpture and his inaugural film.

Kings & Queens expands Leigh's ongoing investigation into the transient nature of memory and time. His past solo exhibitions at Baert Gallery, Los Angeles, examined trauma and the impermanence of memory. Now, Leigh integrates reflections on his Jewish identity and its intersections with other cultural narratives. At the heart of this exhibition is the legendary meeting and cross-cultural love story between King Solomon and Queen Sheba, a narrative celebrated across Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. This legend, rich with history and multiple interpretations, forms the thematic backbone of the exhibition.

The exhibition was sparked by a conversation Leigh had with Mimi, a key figure in the ECDC community, who shared about her Ethiopian heritage as a member of the Amhara people. With roots tracing back to the Solomonic dynasty, Mimi spoke of the encounter between Ethiopian Queen Sheba and Jewish King Solomon, which led to the birth of Menelik I, progenitor of the Ethiopian royal line. This love story struck a profound chord with Leigh, inspiring his exploration of the historical and spiritual intersections between Ethiopian traditions and his Jewish heritage.

One of the central works in the show is a trompe l'oeil painting of Mimi, reimagined as the regal Queen Sheba, alongside a depiction of King Solomon. Attached to the frame is a carefully crafted sculpture made from found wooden items, hinting at the legendary exchange of gifts between them and merging the sacred with the everyday. Leigh also draws inspiration from the Ark of the Covenant, a symbol revered in both Ethiopian Orthodox Christianity and Jewish history, believed to have carried the stone tablets inscribed with the Ten Commandments.

Through sculpture, Leigh revisits the Ark's mystery and symbolic resonance, presenting a wooden box containing silver inside. Suspended mid-air above the box is a threaded object, alluding to the tenuous connection between the divine and the earthly, the visible and the unseen. The suspended thread suggests the fragility of memory, the passage of time, and the delicate nature of identity, balancing between the past and present.

Leigh's work on paper incorporates aged red thread that metaphorically stitches together a found shell, gilded in gold leaf, elevating the mundane to the sacred. These intricate details evoke the wings of the Ark of the Covenant, reflecting a reverence for history's fragility and the ephemeral nature of cultural memory. The past, much like the thread, both binds and unravels over time. In another piece, two wooden-handle ink stamps and gold leaf obscure a Yemeni printed stamp depicting Queen Sheba and King Solomon. By obscuring the imagery, Leigh underscores the selective nature of history and the fluidity of cultural narratives, pointing to the different versions of Sheba's origins- some tracing her to Ethiopia, others to Yemen.

Leigh's inaugural film transforms the static imagery from the exhibition into a fluid exploration of memory. Incorporating serene footage of water, the film symbolises the passage of time. Traditional Ethiopian ceremonies are intertwined with elements from Jewish rituals—such as the sound of the ram's horn, a shared symbol of renewal and the New Year, rooted in the Old Testament. This meditative piece, which includes an interview with the artist and Mimi, weaves together sound and imagery into a sensory narrative, bridging cultures and eras. Mimi, drawing from her lived experience and a profound sense of resonance, interprets Queen Sheba's story, offering a deeply personal perspective on the ancient legend, as she reflects on the queen's journey to meet King Solomon.

Kings & Queens is a meditation on the interplay between identity, love, history, and memory. While variations of the legend exist across cultures, Leigh's work invites viewers to engage with these themes on both a personal and collective level, reflecting on how ancient narratives shape our understanding of ourselves today. Ultimately, the exhibition serves as a reminder that despite cultural differences, we share stories and memories that transcend time.

About the artist

Dene Leigh is a British artist, born in 1989, who lives and works in London, UK. He studied at Wimbledon College of Arts, London. His work has been featured in *Art Maze Magazine*, *Hi-Fructose Magazine*, and *Daily Serving*. Leigh won the SPACE Artist Awards in 2021 and was shortlisted for prestigious prizes, including The Brewers Towner International 2022, The Ruth Borchard Self-Portrait Prize 2021, The Young Masters Art Prize 2014, and The Clyde & Co Awards 2012. Leigh has held solo exhibitions at Baert Gallery in Los Angeles and participated in group exhibitions at various notable galleries, including The Royal Academy of Art, London; Canterbury Museums; Gallery Rosenfeld, London; Towner Eastbourne; and MK Gallery. In 2022-2023, he was commissioned to create a painting for the *Mirror Mirror* exhibition at The Beane House of Art & Knowledge, Canterbury, in partnership with The National Portrait Gallery, London. This painting is now part of the permanent public collection at Canterbury Museums & Galleries.

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Opening hours Wednesday - Saturday, from 12 PM - 5 PM