

Bethany Williams: This Wild, Achingly Beautiful Place

Bethlem Gallery, 11 October 2025 – 24 January 2026



Bethlem
Gallery

This exhibition features works made by Bethany Williams in close collaboration with a range of artists and fabricators: Spencer Martin, Karen Kewley, Mandy Maker, Jamps Studio, Matta Siregar and Melissa Kitty Jarrah.

The exhibition is supported by Arts Council Isle of Man, Maudsley Charity and South London and Maudsley NHS Foundation Trust. The artist and Bethlem Gallery would like to extend many thanks to all who have made this exhibition possible.

This booklet is published by Bethlem Gallery

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The body as an extension of the self © Dr Sula Windgassen

All artworks featured by Bethany Williams.

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Bethany Williams, Held, 2025

Introduction

Sophie Leighton, Bethlem Gallery Director

Over the past few years, Bethany Williams has retraced and reformed her practice. She took a break from the fashion practice she'd established and spent some time back in the Isle of Man, where she grew up. This exhibition – her first solo art show – marks a re-evaluation and a reset of her approach. Bethlem Gallery feels a well-fitting incubator for this body of work that Williams presents here: on the edges of London and set in the 250-acre grounds of a psychiatric hospital, its focus is on art and health.

In preparing for this exhibition, Williams has been working with materials new to her, including clay. She has been exploring natural dyes, and cajoling materials to behave in unexpected ways: porcelain to appear almost as fabric, textiles to form hardened sculptures. She has been working with collaborators to expand her practice in new ways.

Alongside this, Williams has been avidly researching and experiencing different models of being with a focus on invisible illness, women's health, and the mind-body connection. She has poured over archival material in the archives of the Bethlem Museum of the Mind, researching how chronic illness in women was approached a century ago. She has liaised with and read academics, finding particular resonances with the work of Dr Sula Windgassen, whose essay is in this booklet.

In this exhibition the body is key – sculptural works and textile hangings demand that our bodies experience them. We interpret them psychologically and navigate them physically. Bodies feature in the textile designs and the torso-shaped porcelain.

The title of the exhibition, 'This Wild, Achingly Beautiful Place', refers not only to the natural environment, to our world, to the Isle of Man with its very specific island history and beauty, but also, for Williams, to the bodies we inhabit: wild and unpredictable, painful, exquisite: all we have. The line comes from a poem, included in this booklet, written by Williams' friend and collaborator, Eno Mfon. Mfon was commissioned to write this as part of a previous project Williams led with young people, commissioned by Bethlem Gallery on behalf of South London and Maudsley NHS Foundation Trust, coproducing a new artwork for a new children and young people's centre opening in 2026.

Working with light for these series of works was important for Williams – and a big breakthrough in her own recovery. Not only is light a metaphor signifying new understandings and joy: in a practical sense it can also cause or exacerbate pain. Williams wanted to acknowledge the pain that light and sound can cause. Because of this the exhibition features low, subtle lighting, as Williams experiments with ways of making galleries safer and more inviting places to be for people experiencing chronic pain.

Our natural environment is also a serious theme in Williams' work – in the sustainable fabrics and dye, in thoughtful processes, and in William's references to the natural world in her work. In this exhibition Williams issues an invitation to explore – and connect to – 'This wild, achingly beautiful place' which is at once a description of Williams' painful but ultimately joyful recovery journey, her home environment of the Isle of Man, and the natural world we all connect to.

Bethany Williams says:

'This Wild, Achingly Beautiful Place is my most personal work to date – an exploration of illness, healing, identity, and the quiet, powerful process of rebuilding when everything falls apart. A love letter to the land that held me. The pain that changed me. And the version of myself I never expected to meet.

To everyone who walked beside me – even when I couldn't see a way forward: Your love made all the difference. You showed me the way through. And to anyone moving through pain – visible or invisible – I see you. I believe you. I'm walking beside you. Healing isn't linear, but it is completely possible.'

Series of works in the exhibition

Fabric Light Sculptures:

The Pain That Changed Me; The Land That Held Me; I Found Myself Among the Stones

Naturally dyed muslin, eco resin, lights, 2025

These huge, delicate and luminous vessels feature designs that depict specific stages of recovery as experienced by Williams. The first, with a figure crouched forward and a tree gnarled by wind, for Williams represents not being able to see a way forward and being consumed by pain. The brown vessel features a figure standing slightly more upright and a setting sun, conveying a sense of self returning and the importance of the connection between mind and body. The final work in the series is the yellow vessel, showing figures touching for the first time, standing next to standing stones, a reference to the Celtic history of the Isle of Man. For Williams, this work is about recognising one's authentic self, paying attention to processes of support and recovery, and acknowledging a new way of being, living and seeing.

It was important for Williams that the works are made of fabric but look solid, their forms recalling ceramic vessels. The fabric is sustainably sourced and dyed using plants and natural materials on the Isle of Man: for example she used wild blaeberrries ('wild flower' in Manx Gaelic) to make purple; and gorse, marigold and tumeric for the yellow.

Porcelain Light Vessels:

Held; In the Holding, We Heal; Inheritance of Light; What Is Left Is Only Light

Porcelain, steel, lights, 2025

These four sculptures reference family connections that are very meaningful for the artist, and frame the importance of a sense of belonging in experiencing recovery. One of the vase-shaped works is based on a work made by Williams' brother, and the other on a vase once owned by her grandmother. The torso shapes are of Williams' own body and her mother's.

Williams is using fragile porcelain and careful lighting to convey these precious connections. She is also exploring how fragile we

are even though we might look strong, and vice versa. Williams is, in her words, 'trying to capture the ghostly feeling of having something invisible but also losing yourself before finding yourself again'.

'I chose ceramics because I felt there was too much pressure working with textiles. I later returned to textiles, but because of my work with clay I had been able to unlock the '3D' part of my brain, and I felt that clay was a better medium for conveying emotion, which is what I was exploring with this body of work.

In these porcelain works, I was trying to explore the experience of having something invisible and ghostly, or 'not from this world' and light was an important aspect. Part of my recovery journey included being extremely light sensitive. I also wanted to make something that was extremely fragile (as I had been myself), but it was important to acknowledge that the essence of being breakable was part of the work ('If it breaks, it breaks'). I used fabric and porcelain to make moulds.

With these works I wanted to get across a ghostly feeling, of losing yourself and slowly filling your cup back up, so I used 'empty' vessels to convey this.'

Screen:

All Our Parts

Plywood, muslin, glass from the beach, 2025

The screen is formed of five shapes of figures, or different versions of the self. These are cut from the fabric used to make the banners hung in the orchard which is near to the gallery in the hospital grounds. In designing this, Williams was thinking about accepting all versions of ourselves as part of a recovery experience. The process and techniques stem from her fashion and design work, for example avoiding waste in manufacturing by using all parts of materials.

Paintings:

Shaped by the Wind; I'm Walking Beside You; I Found Myself Among the Stones

Oil painting on paper, 2025

The paintings in this exhibition were part of a series made by Williams on the Isle of Man. They convey the colours, plants and



landscapes of the place she grew up in and returned to in making the works for this exhibition. These works have been instrumental in rekindling a drawing and painting practice, and reference Williams' colour palette and commitment to working with the natural environment. She drew them outside and finished painting them indoors.

Williams wanted to replicate the haunted ghostly feeling also conveyed in her other series of works – she chose to paint the eerie but beautiful, wild and barren highlands with trees shaped by the winds and Celtic stones. These are the places where Williams foraged the plants she used as dyes. The style and themes also acknowledge the legacy of Archibald Knox, a well known Manx arts and crafts designer.

More from this series of works are on display at the ORTUS centre in Denmark Hill, London.

Banners

Naturally dyed muslin, 2025

Out in the orchard, a five minute walk from the gallery, Williams has hung five naturally dyed banners that you are invited to walk through. Williams intended these to represent versions of the self. As we walk through the centre of the alley of trees and of the banners, we are walking through different shapes and versions of parts of ourselves.

'It's been good to create site-specific works, researching the history and natural elements of the space. It was important to put the fabric banners outside so that people viewing them could physically walk through and experience being in nature.'

'In This Mind' by Eno Mfon

In this mind,

a garden grows, untamed and restless,
where dreams take root beside doubt,
where hope pushes through cracked earth,
and fear weaves its way through the undergrowth.

And love lingers in the shade,
beside the memory of pain,
sometimes hand in hand.

In this body,
a history is etched—
every ache, every scar,
every breath that once felt too heavy to take.
Familiar faces press into the soil like fossils,
laughter drifts like pollen on the wind,
and love, untouched, gathers dust,
waiting for the courage to bloom.
In this mind, in this body,
so full, so weathered,
every beautiful and terrifying thing thrives.
No wonder the branches bow under their weight,
the riverbanks crumble with time,
the bones ache, the chest tightens,
the earth splits in places unseen.

I wonder—

can wanderers and passing strangers tell
that this land is not what it used to be?
Will they map new roads to erase the ruins,
pretend nothing has shifted but the wind,
or will they tread softly and see—

Me.
This mind.
This body.
Where a garden still grows.
Through every crack,
sunflowers lift their golden faces to the sky.

Maybe this ground is strong enough.

Maybe it can hold both love and loss.
Maybe fallen trees will rise again.
And even when the green fades,
when the sunflowers bow their heads,
even then,

with hands in the soil, tending the roots,
honouring the shifting seasons,
tracing the land as it bends, breaks, and breathes,

Maybe then,
we will stand in awe of this wild,
achingly beautiful place.

Eno was commissioned by Bethany Williams as part of the art commission for the Pears Maudsley Children and Young People's Centre, commissioned by Bethlem Gallery for South London and Maudsley NHS Foundation Trust.



(Top) Bethany Williams portrait on the occasion of her solo exhibition at Bethlem Gallery, 2025, (Bottom) Bethany Williams, Banners in the Orchard at Bethlem Royal Hospital, 2025



(Top) Bethany Williams Porcelain and Light Sculptures, 2025, (Bottom) Bethany Williams, All Our Parts (detail)

‘The body as an extension of the self’ by Dr Sula Windgassen

An essay in response to Bethany Williams’ exhibition, October 2025

Our lives unfold through a mixture of circumstance and willing. Environments, political landscapes, familial cultures and implicit societal messaging shape beliefs and intentions. Many in the West live without question in the pursuit of achievement. A pursuit which promises safety; financial stability, social acceptance and inclusion – even freedom. This pursuit is compelling and powerful, often bestowing such treasures or at least enough promise of them, obscuring the perils of the pursuit. Perils that can include a separation from oneself. A detachment so vast that the effect on the body is undetectable right up until it is not. The body viewed as mere appendage to get what needs to be done, done.

It is said that in the 17th Century where the Catholic church claimed authority over the soul, philosopher René Descartes was intrigued by the mechanics of the body. He sought to satiate his curiosity through experimentations on reflexes and ultimately through the dissections of animals and cadavers. In the religious and political climate, Descartes could not be seen to stray into the territory of the church: into matters of the soul. The philosophy he argued for, Cartesian dualism (that the mind -soul- was distinct from the physical body) was a strategically pragmatic one, allowing the Church to maintain authority over the minds of men.

The legacy of this is a Western medical system that devalues the subjective experience of illness as anything other than incidental to the experiencing of illness. Strict biomedical frameworks prize the observation of ‘structural’ causes for physical ill-health with the implicit assumption that without being able to see anything wrong, there cannot be anything truly wrong and therefore there can be no treatment.

This is a systemic philosophy that perpetuates the suffering of millions. Even with the advances of medical equipment, with more sensitive methods of detection of bodily processes like brain activity and metabolic shifts, the dogma of mind-body separation prevails. Research has by now shown how psychological burden

accrues actual physical burden in the body – a concept referred to as allostatic load. This research demonstrates how too much psychological burden for too long denigrates.

core regulatory bodily systems which can have a multitude of impacts on health. Functional brain scans have shown how the brain of those who have experienced extreme stress and trauma fundamentally change, with shrunken regions responsible for the storing and retrieving of long-term memory and emotional processing. The research is clear, our bodies respond to our experiences, our thoughts and our feelings.

The bind many find themselves in is that they know this to be true intuitively, they can experience it, but they exist in a system which predominantly ignores this interaction. This takes away choice and agency. If you are not supported to work with this mind body connection, you are rudderless in an open ocean with infinite directions and daunting uncertainty. There is another insidious side effect of a system that obscures the importance of the connection between mind and body. The stigma.

“It’s all in your head”. Expressed in words or silent stares. Scribbled doctor’s notes as “highly distressed” is underlined, passed from practitioner to practitioner as a silent code. The patient, highly distressed, seeks relief and receives responsibility. “You need to manage your stress”. “Have you tried yoga?” “Get some more sleep”. Although not without legitimacy, these words fall hollow on the depleted shoulders of those experiencing excruciating pain, for whom accessing the breath, let alone any sort of movement in those moments is wholly out of the question. Or for those who have to press on during a working day because their financial circumstances don’t allow them to take sick leave and yet the fatigue sandbags their every movement. Adding to that weight is the expectation of others: Get yourself better.

You see, if there is no ‘observable’ cause to physical suffering, in a system that obfuscates the mind body connection, the natural recourse is to double down on personal responsibility – something Western individualistic societies celebrate often to the detriment of community and individual wellbeing. Your pain, your fault. Your stress, your fault.

And how does the body, already depleted, receive that extra responsibility? Every brain has something called ‘mirror neurons’, so called because they were first discovered as activating both when individuals performed an action and when they witnessed someone else perform that action. Mirror neurons account for how a yawn can spread through a room of people with varying levels of energy. Scientists believe that mirror neurons may well account for social attunement. That ability to sense when someone is upset without a word being uttered or a tear being spilt. You don’t need to explicitly be told ‘we don’t believe your problem is worth investigating further’ to know it to be the case. You don’t need to have the words uttered ‘it’s all in your head’ to know that is the belief held by others viewing your invisible illness. This implicit knowledge from mirror neurons, activate areas of the brain that process social rejection and hostility, the anterior cingulate cortex and the anterior insula. These areas also process physical pain. Your brain is processing two types of pain that automatically alert the networks in your body that deal with threat: the salience network in the brain, the autonomic nervous system, the sympathetic -adrenal-medullary system and the hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal axis. These intersecting and interacting networks activate an already depleted body. The effect is an exacerbation of symptoms and worsening of health.

The body responds and yet a big part of the individual experiencing this, a part that dwells in the ‘thinking mind’, has been told that the body is not to be trusted. That this experience shouldn’t constitute as real or something to be believed. And yet the pain is so big. This confusing cocktail of information splits body and mind further. The sense of self fused with a mind that distrusts the body. The body screaming out to be cared for by a hostile mind that has learnt the body is creating inconveniences that lacks validity.

But what if the body was an extension of self? What if you saw your ailing body as part of you asking for nurture and your role was not to have all the definitive answers and alleviating tonics right away, but instead to have patience and compassion? What would change?

Decades of research into compassion and psychological interventions that focus on the development of compassionate, non-vigilant bodily awareness (interoception), shows that this change in relationship, physically changes the body. When the focus becomes less about ‘fixing’ and more about nourishing, connecting and open discovery, recovery tends to happen. This change in relationship

manifests in the natural savouring of sunsets, connection to nature, coming back to the basic elements that replenish – a thirst quenched, a warming fire, a soundless landscape offering serenity. It manifests in the seeking of authentic heart-to-heart connection with the diminishment of the importance of approval from dysfunctional systems. When you learn to listen to your body, it helps you to listen with it.

Dr Sula Windgassen PhD MSc is a leading health psychologist who has dedicated her career to understanding the intersection between physical and mental health. An internationally recognised researcher with over 30 published academic papers, she regularly collaborates with institutions worldwide. Her debut book “It’s All In Your Body” published by Pan Macmillan is due for release in February 2026.

She has been published in Women’s Health, Psychologies magazine, Red magazine, The Guardian, The Independent, The Telegraph and the BBC. She is also a Trustee of the Endometriosis Foundation, a visiting lecturer at UCL and is currently undertaking research work at both King’s College London and University College London. Sula holds five degrees and has a growing online community on Instagram and through her newsletter.



About Bethlem Gallery

Bethlem Gallery Bethlem Gallery is a visual arts organisation in south-east London. Established in 1997 at Bethlem Royal Hospital, London, and working across South London and the UK, we support the professional development and socially engaged practice of the artists we work with. We bridge communities, aiming to make art an everyday practice and mental health an everyday conversation. bethlemgallery.com

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BETHANY WILLIAMS LONDON

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