

DAN

GUTHRIE

AT

CHISENHOLE

Dan Guthrie

Empty Alcove / Rotting Figure

6 June – 17 August 2025

Chisenhale Gallery presents *Empty Alcove / Rotting Figure*, a major new commission and first institutional exhibition in London by artist Dan Guthrie. Working primarily with moving image, Guthrie's practice explores representations and mis-representations of Black Britishness. By deliberately experimenting with form and language, Guthrie probes the limits of visual representation – questioning not only what is shown, but what remains unseen or unsayable on screen. This exploration encompasses the politics of visibility itself, asking how race, memory, and subjectivity are shaped by the act of looking.

This new commission continues Guthrie's long-standing engagement with the Blackboy Clock, an object of contested heritage publicly displayed in his hometown of Stroud, Gloucestershire. The clock, which incorporates a wooden blackamoor figure in its design, was originally assembled by a local watchmaker in 1774, during the height of the transatlantic slave trade. Relocated to a specially constructed alcove on the front of a former schoolhouse in 1844, the clock was restored in 1977 and 2004, and has remained a constant presence in Stroud throughout Guthrie's life.

Empty Alcove / Rotting Figure presents two videos that put forward the 'radical un-conservation' of the clock – a new theoretical concept proposed by Guthrie to describe the strategic acquisition of an object in order to destroy it. Across both videos, audio description and captions reject standardised, impersonal modes of description in favour of poetic interpretation and emotionally resonant dialogue – embedding access deeply into the aesthetic and political fabric of Guthrie's commission.

Central to this body of work are questions about what society chooses to memorialise and its methods for doing so. Alongside this exhibition, Guthrie has developed a new online platform documenting the clock's timeline – from its historical origins to current debates over its future. Explore this digital archive using the tablets provided or in your own time at www.earf.info.

Biography

Dan Guthrie lives and works in the UK. Selected exhibitions and screenings include: *Absent Forces*, Open City Documentary Film Festival, 2024; *Two Films*, VOLT, Devonshire Collective, Eastbourne, 2023; *Spirit Messages touring programme*, aemi, 2023–2024; *Selected 13 touring programme*, FLAMIN and videoclub, 2023; *wave 4*, Prismatic Ground, New York, 2023; Forum Expanded, Berlinale, Berlin, 2023; *Right of Way*, LUX, London, 2023; and Short Film Programme, Whitstable Biennale, Whitstable, 2022.

List of Works

Empty Alcove

Single channel video, stereo
sound

5 minutes

Artist: Dan Guthrie
Camera Operator: Holly Antrum
Sound Recordist and
Sound Designer: Felix Taylor
Colourist: Nielsan Bohl
Producers: Olivia Aherne and
Carmen Juliá
Assistant Producer: Oscar Abdulla
Captions: Carefuffle Collective
Audio Description: SoundScribe

Rotting Figure

Single channel video, stereo
sound

5 minutes

Artist: Dan Guthrie
CG Designer and Animator:
Salvi De Sena
Sound Recordist and
Sound Designer: Felix Taylor
Producers: Olivia Aherne and
Carmen Juliá
Assistant Producer: Oscar Abdulla
Captions: Carefuffle Collective
Audio Description: SoundScribe

earfinfo

Online platform

Artist: Dan Guthrie
Editors: Olivia Aherne and
Carmen Juliá
Assistant Editors:
Rachel Be-Yun Wang and
Zhejun Gao
Editorial Support: Phoebe Cripps
Research Assistants: Holly Antrum
and Tommy Madison
Web Development & Design:
An Endless Supply

All works 2025

Exhibition Events

As part of the commissioning process, a programme of talks and events has been devised in collaboration with Dan Guthrie, spanning the duration of the exhibition.

Walkthrough

Saturday 14 June, 11am–12pm

A walkthrough of *Empty Alcove / Rotting Figure* led by artist Dan Guthrie and Assistant Curator Oscar Abdulla, exploring themes of race, memory and subjectivity within the exhibition.

Conversation

Wednesday 25 June,
7–8:30pm

An in-depth conversation between artist Dan Guthrie and writer Olamiju Fajemisin exploring the themes, process, and influences behind Guthrie's newly commissioned work.

Sound

Thursday 7 August, 7–8pm

An evening of sound with artist Tati au Miel, blending experimentation, abstraction, storytelling, and ritual in response to Guthrie's new commission.

All events are free to attend, but booking is essential.
Please visit chisenhale.org.uk

Chisenhale Interviews:

Dan Guthrie

Olivia Aherne: Your new commission explores the Blackboy Clock, an object of contested heritage publicly displayed in your hometown of Stroud, Gloucestershire. Do you remember when you first encountered this object and how you became involved in local conversations around its future?

Dan Guthrie: The Blackboy Clock has been present for as long as I've been in Stroud. It's next door to my old primary school, and I used to walk past it on the way to secondary school as well. I must have noticed it at some point as a kid, but I only properly saw the clock for what it was when I was back home during the start of the pandemic. During those months, when everyone was trying to find ways to pass the time, I would walk around Stroud without an agenda, looking at the streets in ways that I might not have when I had other things to do. That's when I first properly noticed it.

At the time, there was a plaque on the side of the building that said something along the lines of, 'The Blackboy Clock was made in 1774 and restored in 2004 by a horology expert.' There was no other context. This set off a train of thought: how has this object always been here, yet not really been questioned? Stroud is seemingly a very liberal place with a long history of protest – how has this slipped through the gaps? I went away and looked up the object online. At that time, there was scant information available, not even a Wikipedia page. And so my research began.

OA: How did your early investigations develop into a town-wide dialogue and regular consultations with Stroud council?

DG: When the Edward Colston statue in Bristol was toppled during the Black Lives Matter movement of June 2020, it seemed like there was this moment of reckoning for statues everywhere. I didn't make a statement or start a petition about the Blackboy Clock at the time, because I didn't have a thorough enough understanding of the object to speak on it then. Quite honestly, it was also a time of intense burnout for me, and I just didn't feel like I was in the right state of mind to start a social media campaign about the object amidst the popularity of superficial allyship statements, such as the mass posting of black squares on Blackout Tuesday.

I'd seen what had happened with Colston and the backlash towards others contesting statues. I knew how much energy I would need to start a public dialogue, and I just didn't have it at the time. From that moment on, though, I set about acting in other ways. I wrote to my local councillors and MP to formally object to the Blackboy Clock. This prompted the local council to make a vague statement that didn't name the clock, but referred to consulting with the community at some point in the future on local items of statuary 'that may be considered offensive'.

I deepened my research and kept in touch with the council. Then, in June 2021, the council and a review panel (of which I was a part) launched a public consultation on the Blackboy Clock and its future. By that point, I'd built up a historical timeline that encompassed its various restorations and relocations. In the consultation we asked for, amongst other things, people's opinions about the clock. We received 1,600 responses, which is significantly more than the average council consultation typically receives, and the consultation soon became part of a wider culture war, or ongoing debate, around contested statues in the UK.

The process was quickly covered by the local newspaper, *Stroud News and Journal*, which began running a number of opinion pieces by experts and the general public. Then my local MP – at that time the former Conservative politician Siobhan Baillie – offered her very right-wing, dog-whistle views on the matter, which elevated the story to a national level when it started being covered by the *Guardian*, *The Times*, the *Telegraph*, and others. When the consultation closed in September 2021, we spent a good few months going through all the responses in order to make the final recommendation. 79% of respondents said they wanted the Blackboy Clock removed, so the recommendation was for the council to pursue this with the aim of relocating it to a local museum. When that recommendation was made in April 2022, it hit the national news again. This time, right-wing media outlets like *GB News* and the *Daily Mail* got involved, and it caught the attention of groups like Britain First, who spam-emailed the council with over 400 complaints overnight.

After that, everything went a bit quiet. I worked with local residents to make a new plaque for the object, a process that took two years from start to finish. It went up in December 2024, and tells a short history of the object and the more recent consultation debate, alongside a map showing the clock's location in relation to the Anti-Slavery Arch on the other side of Stroud – the arch is the UK's oldest memorial to the abolition of slavery.

OA: Simultaneous to your involvement in local debate, consultation, and action, you were invited to develop a new commission for Chisenhale Gallery and Spike Island, Bristol. What prompted you to consider the Blackboy Clock as the subject for this new commission? What was unresolved for you?

DG: I recently looked back through my calendar to the day of our first online meeting, and I realised I had actually been in a council meeting about the clock about an hour before.

We were in a stalemate position at the time, where the council was committed to removing the object following the consultation, but the owners were not responding. The consultation also revealed that 20% of respondents in favour of the clock's removal also wanted to see it destroyed. We seriously debated that scenario whilst considering all the possible recommendations, but arrived at a dead end as the object isn't owned by the council. Yet that possibility was slowly taking over my imagination; 'What if we just destroyed it?' Having spent so much time working within slow bureaucratic systems, I was constantly wondering, 'What if we just cut through all of this faff and cut to the chase – destroy it?'

OA: So artistic production presented you with an opportunity to speculate more deeply?

DG: Exactly. The space of speculation, where one can imagine what is otherwise impossible, felt like it opened up alternative avenues for me. Having spent so much time listening to other people's opinions – throughout the consultation, within bureaucratic systems, and in the comment sections of online articles – I thought, 'What if I were to just cut through the noise and do this radical act, and then work with the aftermath?'

Developing a new commission for Spike Island and Chisenhale Gallery, as opposed to producing an officially sanctioned artistic 'response' to the clock via a local authority, allowed me to take a more radical approach. In recent years, artists of colour have often been invited to respond to and reckon with the colonial legacies of institutions, while having to operate within those same institutions that continue to be shaped by those legacies. Due to persistent forms of institutional hierarchy, power, and control, new commissions are often only able to critique a historical position – the original makers and collectors of what is now considered offensive – rather than the present-day commissioners who maintain the offensive items as part of their collecting principles.

Without having to satisfy these stakeholders, I felt able to express myself in an unfiltered manner and develop the work unbound by restrictions.

OA: The exhibition includes two new videos that put forward the 'radical un-conservation' of the clock – a new theoretical concept that you coined to describe the act of acquiring an object with the intention of destroying it. Can you speak about how this notion challenges traditional conservation practices and what it seeks to achieve, in both the context of your work and wider discourses surrounding contested heritage?

DG: 'Radical un-conservation' is a term that means taking custody of an object to destroy it for a wider benefit. We know that destruction is a political process driven by emotion and intention, and the same is true for conservation. If this object ends up in a museum, it will continue to be cared for. It will be cleaned, checked for woodworm, and preserved indefinitely in a climate-controlled store or glass display case.

This feels like the antithesis of what we should be doing with racist historical objects, especially with the associated financial cost, labour and the narrative space it takes up in a museum's display. So for me, 'radical un-conservation' is a way of instead telling a story through the object's destruction.

The two video works in the show, *Empty Alcove* and *Rotting Figure*, both do what they say on the tin. *Empty Alcove* imagines the gap left behind if the object is removed, and how that could serve as a sort of anti-memorial. This idea was inspired by the empty Colston plinth in Bristol. The fact that the vacant plinth remains as a reminder of what was there; there's such a power in that. It's beautifully mundane. *Empty Alcove* is a five-minute snapshot of the everyday, of ordinary life going by. It's almost beautiful in how boring it is. In contrast, *Rotting Figure* imagines the destruction of the Blackboy

Clock's figure by an unknown force. It was intentional to make the method of destruction abstract and not get bogged down in the specifics. I'm calling this collapse a 'rot' because this has happened to the object before. It was rotting in the 1970s, it was rotting in the early 2000s, and is likely rotting again today due to the corrosive nature of the bird poo it's currently covered in.

It's the act of witnessing the destruction that is important, and considering what it means to be a spectator in that. Some people have described *Empty Alcove* as peaceful, but *Rotting Figure* is designed to be uncomfortable. If you feel discomfort, it prompts you to question why. Are you feeling uncomfortable because the object is being destroyed? Is that because you feel it shouldn't be destroyed? It raises all these questions.

OA: I'm wondering about this notion of confrontation – whether that be confronting the presence or absence of something – and what it means to confront an image of an object, an image that is also abstracted or obfuscated. What informs these different strategies in your work?

DG: In the last four or five years the number of images of the Blackboy Clock in the public domain have increased significantly. If you search 'Blackboy Clock' in Google Images today, you can find loads of photographs of it taken from different angles, which have featured in various news reports. The visibility of this object – which has seemingly been hiding in plain sight – has allowed people to talk about it, but without a greater awareness of what it means to circulate this type of imagery. It didn't make sense for me to replicate an image of something offensive that I don't want to see on public display in order to critique it.

I kept coming back to Christina Sharpe's *Ordinary Notes*. In the book, Sharpe discusses her encounters with plantations, memorials, and museums that attempt to respond to the horrors of the transatlantic slave trade through spectacle, and she questions who the intended

audience of that work is. There's a phrase that she uses – 'For whom? To whom? And from whom?' – which I had on a post-it note above my desk as a reminder that in this situation, I have control over the relationship between image, artist, and audience. In this instance, I can decide what to include or exclude from the work for our collective benefit and remove the potential element of distress. *Empty Alcove* intentionally removes the figure from view, and in *Rotting Figure*, it's covered by a bin bag. You can still sense the object's outlines, its silhouette. You know what's under there, even if you can't see it, so the feelings that come with seeing it destroyed still surface.

The exhibition creates an intentional, head-on viewing of both video works. In *Empty Alcove*, the alcove is at the top of the building, so I brought it down to eye level in the gallery. People often tell me that they've walked past the building many times but never really looked at the clock. It is true that you have to look up to see it, but once you've seen it, you can't really unsee it. Being able to present its absence at eye level as a potential future and to show people how aesthetically inconsequential the removal of the figure would be to daily life in Stroud is a core part of this work.

Rotting Figure is presented inside a large-scale black box screening room. I wanted the experience inside of the room to feel like you're encountering this object festering away in the bowels of an archive somewhere. The representation of the clock's figure on screen is designed to be life-size, allowing viewers to confront the object head-on and approach it as closely as they want. The only people who have been able to look at the real-world figure in this way have been those who have restored it, so I wanted to bring this perspective to a wider audience. The screening room is open-ended, so when you enter the gallery and encounter *Empty Alcove*, you can also hear the creaks of *Rotting Figure* coming from the other side of the gallery, and there's this large, unknown object looming behind you that adds a sense of drama to the exhibition

proceedings. I wanted it to occupy the gallery space in a way that gave it the gravitas of a monument, whilst simultaneously housing this anti-monument work. Visitors have to journey all the way around the room, which builds tension to heighten the uncomfortable sensation until they finally encounter the object. By going into this vacuum, you're disoriented a little bit. By going on that journey, you become an active spectator of the work.

OA: In contrast, *Empty Alcove* is presented in the gallery, outside of a dedicated screening space with the sounds of the street washing over you – birds, cars, schoolchildren.

DG: Exactly. I deliberately allowed the sound to bleed between the two video works so that the other one's always in the back of your mind. When you're watching the object collapse, you should know that its absence on the street is considered mundane, and when you're confronting its potential absence, you're also aware of the object's demise. Additionally, there's space for sound to travel into the space from the school opposite Chisenhale Gallery. The commission is speculative, yet deeply rooted in the here and now.

OA: While your practice has always orbited moving images, this new commission marks a considerable shift methodologically and aesthetically: you worked with a CGI modeller, commissioned original sound design and foley, and narrative isn't foregrounded. Can you say what interested you about exploring these other ways of making?

DG: My previous works were much more narrative-driven, made to be watched from start to finish, and often viewed in cinemas as part of screening programmes or film festivals. With this new commission, I wanted to lean into making work for viewing in a gallery. Visitors can drift in and out of the space and between works, rather than replicating a cinema-like environment and duration inside the gallery.

The videos are both short, looping static shots, so it's about focusing on one particular visual and sitting with that image for longer, thinking about the power and affect that a single image can hold. *Rotting Figure* is about trying to visualise something that can't exist, so working with Salvi De Sena to use CGI as the language was inevitable. I was fascinated to explore the idea of rendering something that you know is impossible. I worked with Felix Taylor on the sound. My reference points for him were horror movie creaks and cracks, really embracing those tropes of discomfort as much as possible. Much of my previous work has explored subjects through a creative nonfiction lens, reflecting on the past, whereas these two videos operate in a forward-looking speculative way.

OA: Access is deeply embedded into the aesthetic and political fabric of this commission. Why was it important to you to work this way, and how have captions and audio description become sites of artistic production?

DG: Within the moving image world, an increasing number of artists have been experimenting with and embedding captions and audio description as a core part of their production, rather than considering them as an afterthought. One of the key questions at the forefront of this project is how to describe an object without actually showing it, so captions and audio description seemed like an exciting way to play with this conundrum.

What interests me about access materials is that they incorporate someone else's perspective in their interpretative process, which resonates with all the different perspectives that had been present in the debates about the clock. During the public consultation process, we received so many emotive responses from all sides of the debate and had to distil them into something neutral. This neutrality often comes across in the 'afterthought' approach to access materials, something I wanted to counter in this body of work. As a result, I incorporated both objective and subjective perspectives into the audio

description and captions, exploring the tension that comes with the presence of differing perspectives. The captions, made in collaboration with the disabled and queer-led working group Carefuffle, alternate between describing what is heard and what's felt emotionally as a result of the sounds playing throughout the works.

The audio description, made with global majority collective Soundscribe, details both what is seen and what is unseen, drawing attention to the nuances of presence and absence in the work. Elaine plays the role of the aggressively neutral audio describer and I counter and challenge her description, which includes none of the context or history surrounding the clock. I am grateful for having collaborators willing to go on that journey to explore the limits of image-making and make the access materials both creative and functional at heart.

OA: *earf.info* – the online counterpart to the commission – serves as an interactive timeline documenting the Blackboy Clock's history. How does this digital platform complement the physical exhibition, and what role does it play in public engagement with the Blackboy Clock?

DG: The website holds a timeline of the clock's history: its relocations, renovations, and debates. It also has a timeline of my family history in Stroud, as my grandparents moved from Jamaica to Stroud as part of the Windrush migration. An overview of the public consultation and subsequent recommendations in Stroud is featured alongside, as well as information about the developments that preceded it and the culture war around contested heritage that has been going on since 2020. I wanted to create a thoroughly researched resource that is freely accessible and exists beyond the confines of an exhibition. Because this story is very much ongoing and developments have begun to emerge as a result of the commission, it didn't make sense to create a printed publication – we'd be making endless addenda.

Alongside the timeline, the platform stores all the various access materials for the work, which also function as a means to document it. I've thought a lot about how moving image is typically documented. With paintings and sculptures, you can take a series of very high-resolution photographs from different angles that go some way to capturing the artwork, whereas with moving image, you often just get a short synopsis and a few stills. With that in mind, I wanted to make other resources available for people to engage with the work outside of the context of the show itself.

earfinfo also has a Journal, a home for newly commissioned writing by invited authors. Tendai Mutambu has written an amazing essay about the history of Black automatons, while Lola Olufemi wrote a fantastic stream-of-consciousness text about *Empty Alcove*. Still to come, Tatenda Shamiso has written a haunting monologue from the perspective of the titular rotting figure, and Vanessa Onwuemezi will write a text to close out this iteration of the show.

OA: The timeline documents a debate that is still very much in motion. Since the project began, there has been a shift in government, with the Labour Party coming into power last year. How has this shift in the political landscape affected the project?

DG: The 'retain and explain' policy, designed to keep public memorials such as statues, monuments and commemorations in place by including an explanation of their historical context, was legislated in October 2023 when the Tories were on their way out, and it hasn't been refuted by the new Labour government. We're speaking now in the aftermath of the current Prime Minister, Keir Starmer, making an Enoch Powell-esque speech that referred to the UK as an 'island of strangers'. We're living in a time where there's an ongoing genocide in Palestine, shameful reductions to PIP, and a violent rollback of trans rights in the US and UK. Given the abysmal ways they've

approached these issues, I don't feel confident that the new Labour government will overturn any previous ruling on public memorials. At a local level, though, we have had some governmental engagement with the clock. The new MP for Stroud, Simon Opher, is a Labour MP in favour of having the clock removed. We were able to get a statement out of him for a *Guardian* feature on the show at Spike Island, which would not have been possible had this work not been commissioned. Using the show to enact change is something that I'm actively trying to do.

OA: Your own journalistic reflections on the commission, its development, and the process of making it public are published between each of the commissioned written responses on *earfinfo*. Why did you feel it was important to include these personal recordings, which often describe the realities of being an artist practising today?

DG: I think the desire to do that came from my experience of being the 'poster boy' of the consultations. My experience of the clock was used by the *Guardian* as a way in for their demographic to engage with the story. Once other news outlets started rewording the *Guardian*'s story with their own political intentions, I became a character for those in the right-leaning comment sections to dissect and direct their opinions towards. I am always thinking about the consequences of making work that's so inextricably tied to identity. What does it mean to make that kind of work public, and how does that shape how you're viewed as an individual? As much as we talk about separating art from the artist, I'm tied to this show in the same way that I'm tied to the clock at this point. My reflective texts on the website are a way of bringing three-dimensionality back into the character of Dan – the artist slash activist – as someone who exists beyond this commission and subject matter.

OA: The opening weekend of the Chisenhale Gallery exhibition coincides with the fifth anniversary of the toppling of Colston's statue. Where are conversations around contested heritage right now?

DG: Personally, I don't think the story of Colston's statue ended with it being moved to the M Shed museum. The conversations surrounding it in Bristol are still very much ongoing, as are the conversations around the Blackboy Clock in Stroud, and many objects like them across the UK. Reckoning with these sites of contested heritage wasn't just a pandemic moment. We're still attempting to untangle ourselves from these histories, the legacies of which are woven into our day-to-day lives.

Interviewed by Olivia Aherne, Curator, Chisenhale Gallery, on Tuesday 20 May 2025.

Reading List

This reading list has been compiled by Dan Guthrie to accompany his new commission *Empty Alcove / Rotting Figure* at Chisenhale Gallery. The selection includes essays, exhibitions, artworks, and heritage sites that inform Guthrie's practice. Erin Thompson's op-ed on the rise and fall of America's public monuments sits alongside video footage of the demolition of tower blocks in Blackpool, while Bryan Robertson's art historical writing on British sculpture enters into dialogue with contemporary artworks by Sondra Perry, Mark Leckey, and Ingrid Pollard. Christina Sharpe's theoretical reflection on Black life is listed alongside documents relating to anti-racist work in Stroud and a range of wellbeing resources. This list charts a complex terrain where memory and monumentality intersect, and conservation and destruction are negotiated.

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TOWER HAMLETS

Spike Island



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