

SINCE 1925 • APRIL 2025 • 100 YEARS

# APOLLO

THE INTERNATIONAL ART MAGAZINE • £7.95



The Frick returns  
to Fifth Avenue

**The sonic visions  
of Oliver Beer**

How the Acropolis  
became modern



9 770003 653084

# MAKING WAVES

Oliver Beer's paintings, projections and installations explore the relationship between visual art, sound and the spaces we inhabit. The result is a feast for the senses

By Arjun Sajip  
Portrait by Toby Coulson



1. Oliver Beer photographed in his studio in south London in March 2025



2. *Resonance Painting (Anta Gata Doko Sa)*, 2024, Oliver Beer (b. 1985), pigment on canvas, 200 x 150cm

Writing about music, the saying goes, is like dancing about architecture – the implication being that dancing about architecture is an absurd and futile activity best left to the sensorily disturbed. But the musically generative powers of buildings haven't always been so tartly dismissed. Vitruvius, in the first century BC, understood architecture in musical terms: he believed that columns in a temple ought to be spaced apart with the same intervals as tones in a given scale. Doric, Ionic and Corinthian styles were not, to his eyes and ears, so unlike enharmonic, chromatic and diatonic scales. Nearly 1600 years later, the Renaissance master builder Andrea Palladio drew on musical theory to determine the dimensions of the rooms and buildings he designed, and his creations might loosely be thought of – given the proliferation of Palladian structures around the Western world over the following centuries – as a set of endlessly coverable tunes.

For the last 18 years – throughout his career, in other words – the British artist Oliver Beer has been highlighting the harmony between music and physical spaces. 'Any space that's empty and reflects sound has a musical resonance,' he tells me as we speak at his home in Lambeth. 'If you sing a particular note, you can tease out the resonance in such a way that you can no longer hear your own voice. It's very elemental and very simple. But what's crazy is that even though it's universal, and can be tried anywhere in the world, architects and engineers don't learn about

Beer may have broken rules and regulations in the name of resonance, but the refined nature of his work has made him an attractive prospect for museums and galleries. France seems to be especially receptive to his art: this month, he has two very different exhibitions on display in Paris. One of these, at Thaddaeus Ropac in the Marais, is 'Resonance Paintings: The Cave' – the apotheosis of his decades-long melding of art and music. It's part of a series begun in 2020, which entails Beer scattering pigments on a canvas that is stretched over a loudspeaker (Fig. 2). When Beer feeds music through the speaker, the soundwaves, by disturbing the air above the canvas, distribute the pigments in particular patterns, which he then carefully fixes to the canvas. Beer spent two years figuring out how to make the pigments stick, and is reluctant to give details. When I guess that it has something to do with magnets, he gives me a tight-lipped 'maybe'.

Unsurprisingly for art created using turbulent air, the paintings resemble swirling weather systems, but weather is chaotic and difficult to predict; these works, by contrast, are conjured with uncanny precision. 'At first, you're experimenting and there's a lot of chance. But being a musician and having this way of working, I've worked out exactly how a particular note at a particular volume will move the pigment in a particular way,' Beer explains. 'A lot of people think it's just the sound making the shapes, but it's more that the sound is a paintbrush.

## Anything from handheld vessels to corridors can create harmonies

it. They know the resonance frequency a bridge needs to stop it from breaking, but they aren't taught that every time they build a room, they're building a musical note or a series of musical notes.'

The sunny spring afternoon is slipping into dusk. We're sitting in Beer's living room; the white walls, white units, white furnishings bring out the greenery in the apartment – an amaryllis here, a mimosa there. I ask him what note this space vibrates at. 'If you stand right in the middle, you can hear a sort of faint B flat,' he says. 'But there's loads of shit in here, so it's hard to tell.' The room is full of objects that seem artfully placed to communicate aspects of his practice: a Broadwood baby grand, a 16mm film projector, a set of ceramic cats sourced from around the world, all of which he has used in very different ways to break down barriers between sound and visual art.

For Beer, the sound usually guides the vision. It isn't just rooms that have sonic potential; anything from handheld vessels to corridors can be marshalled to create harmonies. Since he began *The Resonance Project* (2007–), his polymorphous signature series, Beer has made recordings in all kinds of places, from the sewers of Brighton to the external wall-mounted tunnels of the Pompidou. He first made use of the latter in 2008 to orchestrate and film a choral performance that, despite being illicit, was warmly received by onlookers – so much so that the Pompidou invited him to do it again in 2014.

Sometimes I'll paint the same painting twice, just to remind myself that I'm perfectly in control of the colour and that it's not an accident.'

Beer has been making art in this way since the pandemic, and so far the music has been inspired by modest sources: pop songs, for example, or his 'Cat Orchestra' (Fig. 3). Remember those ceramic cats in the living room? Each has its own resonant frequency and, when mic'd up, emits a note that can be recorded, woven into a composition and used to create a painting. 'The Cave' makes particularly ambitious use of these principles, combining a sensibility verging on the grandiose with a simplicity and an arresting sense of intimacy. Beer hired eight singers from around the world – including the opera singer Michiko Takahashi, the Danish indie musician eee gee and the singer and composer Rufus Wainwright – and invited them to sing in one of the oldest-known sites of art history in the world: Font-de-Gaume, the cave in the Dordogne that contains hundreds of Palaeolithic paintings dating from around 17,000 BC.

'I sampled the resonances from the cave and the voices of my singers so I can deploy them however I want: whatever volume, whatever length,' says Beer. Whereas his *Resonance Paintings* until now have predominantly featured cerulean blue on white canvas, 'The Cave' compelled him to expand his palette into charcoal, manganese oxide and red ochre – the same pigments used by the Palaeolithic artists.



3. *Cat Orchestra*, 2024, Oliver Beer (b. 1985), 37 hollow cat vessels and sculptures, plinths, microphones, speakers, audio equipment, dimensions variable

Beer's 'cave' paintings frequently resemble the great gaseous bands of Jupiter, though most of them also carry a distinctly terranean mystery – perhaps because he hasn't abandoned the blue. Earthy browns sweep up the canvas and resolve into lighter colours toward the top. 'It reflects my own experience of going into this cave: you expect it to be dark and cold and black and red, but writing and making this music with these singers has taken us on this journey – sort of into ourselves, then beyond the cave and back out on to another plane,' Beer says. 'The paintings are responses not just to the physicality of the cave but also to the emotional experience of it.'

The cave resonates at an F, and has done for 19,000 years; remarkably, the Palaeolithic paintings seem to be clustered in spots where the space resonates most strongly. If this correlation proves true – Beer's findings have caught the attention of archaeologists in the region – it would suggest some level of musical understanding on the part of our prehistoric ancestors. Beer is trying to tap into early musical experience on an individual level, too: the songs he asked his singers to perform in the cave, using F as an anchor, were the first songs they remembered ever hearing. Wainwright chose a French folk song that his mother, the singer-songwriter Kate McGarrigle, used to sing to him; Takahashi opted for a traditional Japanese children's tune; the Canadian musician Mélissa Laveaux, who is of Haitian origin, sang a Vodou song. The idea was that the eight songs, despite coming from disparate musical traditions, would all be made compatible by the cave – a kind of statement of unity that also honoured specific cultural traditions.

As it turned out, this was a little quixotic. One of the vocalists was the Australian singer and multi-instrumentalist

Mo'Ju, who is of First Nation and Filipino heritage; their first musical memories were not representative of those cultures, but instead mostly comprised jazz, R&B and other forms of Western music. So Mo'Ju became the only one of the eight who sang a fragment of their own music: a song called 'Native Tongue', the first line of which is 'I don't speak my father's native tongue.' 'That was the biggest surprise,' says Beer. 'I had presumed that we'd all be able to draw on our earliest musical memories as indicative of our cultures. But that's not a given. Those [cultural inheritances] are precious and fragile, and can be lost very easily.'

To capture childhood musicality, you can also go straight to the source. The other Beer show in Paris is the second phase of *A Thousand Voices*, part of his *Reanimation Paintings* series (2014–), at the Musée d'Art Moderne (Fig. 4). The series so far has involved taking a clip from a given animated musical – examples include *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1937), *The Jungle Book* (1967) and *The Aristocats* (1970) – and getting hundreds, sometimes thousands of schoolchildren to copy each frame in their own hand; the drawings are then spliced together into a sequence projected at 12 frames per second. *A Thousand Voices* is similar, but instead of frames from a film, Beer has selected four music-related works from the museum in Paris for children to reinterpret. They include *Rythme* (1938), a colourful arrangement of discs, ovals and triangles by Sonia Delaunay, and *Stéréofigure* (1959) by Victor Brauner – a moon-faced harlequin-like creature with four arms and four legs, dancing to its own tune.

This time, Beer set up a recording studio next to the drawing studio, in one of the museum's permanent collection rooms. Each of the 3,600 French children has



4. Visualisation of 'Reanimation Paintings: A Thousand Voices' at the Musée d'Art Moderne, Paris, in 2025

been asked to record themselves either talking about the paintings or making music in response, using only their voice and sometimes percussion. 'It's incarnating this idea of art and music being fundamentally connected,' Beer tells me. 'There's a lot of music in that museum that is not recognised or celebrated.' Phase one of the project comprised the drawing and recording; phase two is the projection of the drawings on the gallery walls – each drawing is a frame, still projected at 12 frames per second – accompanied by a sound mix of the recordings.

Drawing frames from a movie scene evokes the ghost of the original sequence; giving static paintings the same treatment tells a different kind of story. 'The museum collection is preoccupied with the move from figuration to abstraction,' says Beer, 'but you see it in reverse with children: you see the abstraction drawn in childhood becoming ever more precise.' The method also unlocks a wider truth: 'There's a moment when they're around three or four years old where individually, the drawings or frames don't make sense – they're just scribbles and shapes – but when you project them at 12 frames per second, you can make out the source painting. Because together, communally, there is enough consciousness of form and colour and shape that the projection reveals the painting. It's beautiful and reassuring to see that level of communal intelligence – the fact that together we're able to express something we can't individually.'

Why is it that France in particular seems to embrace his practice? 'I started my career with a residency at the Palais de Tokyo, and I honestly think that where you start, you often continue,' he says. 'After that I was offered a residency with the Hermès Foundation, and the Louis

Vuitton Foundation commissioned me to make a performance work for the opening of their building in 2014. The French call it *enchaînement*: it was a kind of chain reaction.' But perhaps there are structural reasons too. 'I think France is an incredibly supportive place for the arts [...] It's becoming a more and more interesting place for artists to be. The French art scene is very energetic.'

France is far from the only country that has welcomed his work. I ask Beer about his favourite places of resonance; he cites the roof of the Sydney Opera House, the 16th-century Kiliç Ali Paşa bath house in Istanbul, the Whispering Gallery at Grand Central Terminal in New York. But there's no need to head so far afield. He walks me the short distance to Lambeth North tube station; we descend the stairs and arrive at a curving tunnel above the platforms. He bids me stand in the middle of the tunnel and hums an E flat. Though he does it quietly, it swells to fill the entire space. I try it myself: the modest burr amplifies itself around the tunnel until it rings in my ears. Not everyone will be able to make it to Paris to see Beer's shows, but anyone, children included, can find a reasonably empty space and thrill to his raw materials: good vibrations. **A**

**Arjun Sajip is a freelance writer based in London.**

**'Resonance Paintings: The Cave' is at Thaddaeus Ropac, Paris, until 19 April (ropac.net).**

**'Reanimation Paintings: A Thousand Voices' is at the Musée d'Art Moderne, Paris, from 4 April to 13 July (mam.paris.fr).**