

Danielle Dean
Frieze London

October 9–13, 2024

At Frieze London 2024 Danielle Dean showcases a new series of watercolours reflecting on her experience growing up as one of the few Black children in 1980's Hemel Hempstead, a Postwar British "new town," amid her white working-class family and absent Nigerian father.

Delving into the visual archives of the town across its long history—first as a medieval village, then as a shining modernist monument of postwar social housing—Dean constructs a series of parallels between the promises and delusions of historical change, from the nostalgias of small-town pride and modern renewal, to the hauntings of colonialism, racism, and the devastating detritus of post-Brexit austerity, plagued by underinvestment and neglect.

The town of Hemel Hempstead had existed in the English Midlands as far back as the 8th century and underwent a radical transformation in the 1940s. At the time, despite resistance from locals, the government constructed a New Town extension to Hemel Hempstead for people displaced from London after the Blitz bombings of World War II. The development corporation built factories, education and leisure facilities, and new housing stock in Modernist style guided by the ideals of the New Towns Act of 1946.

The works are displayed in a literal showroom that is part-antiquarian shop, part-thrift store, and part-mid twentieth century staged spec-house, inviting the viewer to a fraught game of mixing and matching diverse historical realities with the seemingly staid options of futures' past. Bringing together historical archives, crafts, interior design, architecture, urbanism, and landscape, Dean asks us to rethink Britain's collective dreams amid old and new hopes and fears—particularly the ongoing vitality of the migrant worker and the racialized other amid the ruins of British modernism.

Dean's watercolours present Hemel's identity as an age-old site for the picturesque, a comfortable retreat from the city, an archetypal pastoral idyll of the non-modern, implicitly coded as racially white.

Against this homogenous, fictional bucolic past, Dean overlays a series of tensions in the form of marbled hurricanes that sweep across the town—a menacing shadow that holds potential of both destruction and reconstruction. Horse-drawn carriages make their way through cobbled streets with artisans and servants, seemingly unaware of the ominous clouds forming above them; the industrial pollution and poverty lying ahead.

Reproducing images from Hemel's postwar housing catalogues that beckoned a new modern life in the countryside for hundreds of thousands of young white working families, the foreboding upheavals of racial, economic, and technological change loom within the gridded windows, newly-laid lawns, and cascading logistical warehouses across the landscape. The drawings thematize the postwar town's design around new industrial factories, linking this past to the present growth of Amazon warehouses, where contemporary migrant workers toil amid the robots that will soon replace them.

Embedded in the marbled clouds are anonymous Black faces, echoes of Britain's pioneering role in the horrors of the Middle Passage, and of Britain's inextricable entanglement with both modern capitalism and racism. They appear to haunt Hemel, but also suggest vibrancy and possibility—snapshots of radical historical transformations etching their way enigmatically into homes, shops, and streets. This type of marbling, Turkish "ebru," was originally developed in China and spread through Medieval Turkey, eventually becoming part of the proto-industrial commerce network of early modern England in the 17th century. As such, its history is tied to trade, the birth of capitalism and the contact between diverse cultures.

Dean links this history with that of her own grandmother as a working-class seamstress in the tradition of domestic arts and crafts. The marbling points to the ironies of attempting to control a process that is inherently fluid and unpredictable, in contrast to the precision embedded in other traditional arts and crafts processes where predictability and pattern are predetermined. This tension between precision and fluidity echoes other broader contrasts Dean confronted growing up, such as the sense of collective female autonomy and solidarity amid patriarchal norms. The works both celebrate and denounce the tangled relations of class, xenophobia, race, and gender that fuelled Dean's own creativity and interest in art.

Dean's works at Frieze London are part of a larger body of work and research toward her new short film, *Hemel*, which premiered at the NY Film Festival on October 5, 2024, and is due to be shown at the British Film Institute Film Festival on October 19, 2024. The film is a portrait of Hemel Hempstead, where she was raised, and unfolds as a personal essay on the town's history as a planned community under the New Towns Act of 1946. Titled *Hemel*, the work partly reenacts the 1957 sci-fi horror B-movie, *Quatermass 2*, shot in the town, which featured. *Quatermass 2*'s storyline narrated the arrival of a non-human alien entity that infiltrates the minds of residents and endangers life with a toxic black slime. Playing a composite character based on herself and the movie's detective protagonist, Dean brings together real and imagined worlds, both past and present. *Hemel* blurs fiction and documentary to expand a critical reading of the colonial overtones in the original movie, while recasting its visual language to consider the race, class, and labour dynamics of a small English town in the post-Brexit context.