

Critics' choice

Life&Arts

Visual Arts Jackie Wullschlager

French Portrait Drawings from Clouet to Courbet

British Museum, London

Highlights from the Museum's seldom displayed, superb collection: François Clouet's informal depictions of 16th-century court life commissioned by Catherine de Medici; Pierre Dumonstier's "portrait" of artist Artemisia Gentileschi's hand; Jean-Michel Moreau le Jeune's intimate, naturalistic chalk sketch of his infant daughter; Henri Fantin-Latour's self-portrait from the back, faceless; Toulouse-Lautrec's record of the fin-de-siècle demi-monde. britishmuseum.org, 020 7323 8181, September 8-January 29

Giuseppe Penone

Marlan Goodman Gallery, London

Penone made a cast of his hand in bronze, attaching it to a growing tree in 1968. He returned six, eight, and 12 years later to cast the tree on site. "Trattenere 6,8, 12 anni di crescita" forms a record of the symbiosis between human hand, metallic touch and the enveloping tree. Other works from the Italian

tree-poet here include a forest of marble and bronze tree sculptures, and a wall installation of caged laurel leaves perfuming the gallery. mariangoodman.com 020 7099 0088, September 8-October 22

Facing the World: Self-portraits from Rembrandt to Ai Weiwei
Scottish National Portrait Gallery, Edinburgh

Why and how six centuries of artists have adopted different strategies to portray themselves, from self-promotion to challenging stereotypes: Watteau, Courbet, Munch, Matisse, Klee, Mapplethorpe, Warhol wiggled and made up, Ai Weiwei's Instagram selfies. nationalgalleries.org, 0131 624 6200, to October 16

Wilhelmina Barns-Graham

Leyden Gallery, London

Art First, London

"My theme is celebration of life, joy, the importance of colour, form, space and texture. Brushstrokes that can be happy, risky, thin, fat, fluid . . ." was how



'Faded Hydrangeas' (2013) by Nick Miller

Nick Miller

Vessels: Nature Morte

Art Space Gallery, London

The vessels in this ravishing suite of paintings are metaphors for human clay, emptiness, absence and also individuality, with implications too of stores for memory, solid forms holding shifting recollections fluid as water. Exquisitely delineated, Miller's series of vases and pots – glass, ceramic, simple, ornate, opaque, reflective – denote those which, one by one, the artist removed to his studio from his mother's collection when he visited her during her last illness from 2014-2015.

According to the seasons, he filled each with flowers, weeds, lichens, branches – ash blossom, hips, white rose, blackthorn berries, catkins – and depicted them rapidly against already prepared patterned grounds, loosely based on studio set-ups of easels, canvases and textiles.

The results are urgent, expressive, subtly abstracted representations, vibrant on fragile linen, which muse on life's fullness and transience.

Chromatic harmonies and contrasts of daffodils against deep blue ceramic, abundant yellow gorse and black earthenware, deep-veined rhubarb leaves rising from ribbed green glass, silk tassel drooping from a tall, slim jug, pink hydrangeas fading within a rich glazed purple vessel, are varied, bold, and suggest menace as well as beauty.

Still life is always about holding time, but Miller's swiftly executed paintings also convey growth to decay, almost surreally speeded up: flowers bloom, glisten, wilt within each rapid painterly performance.

Miller is battling nature's rhythms against the psychodrama of awaiting/willing death, tenacity and letting go. This undertone is drawn out in Colm Tóibín's marvellous short story entitled "Electra in the Garden", inspired by the series and published in the catalogue: "I imagine her bright blood against the green growth, her desperate efforts to turn and sit up and then the dull groans as the life flows out of her."

artspacegallery.co.uk, 020 7359 7002, September 6-October 15

Barns-Graham described her outlook in her extremely productive final decade. Leyden focuses on her innovative late print abstractions; Art First explores her collages, built into dynamic patterns by punchy paper dots and strips.

leydengallery.com, 020 7655 4825, September 7-October 8; artfirst.co.uk, 020 7734 0386, September 6-October 7

Rana Begum: The Space Between

Parasol Unit, London

A walk-in steel mesh maze, painted aluminium bars whose colours and forms seem to shift as we pass, bright folded metal sculptures as ethereal as paper: Begum's work turns on the dichotomy between robust industrial material and fragility, and between references to urban life, constructivist/minimalist traditions, and geometric patterns of Islamic art encountered in her native Bangladesh. Final fortnight. parasol-unit.org, 020 7490 7373, to September 18