# Hamad Butt's Apprehensions exhibition at Whitechapel Gallery redefines Young British Artists legacy



Flies crawl languidly within triptych glass-fronted cabinets, while another installation subtly reveals its peril: delicate bottles containing poisonous gas, lethal to humans. This visceral juxtaposition is just one element of Hamad Butt's retrospective exhibition, "Apprehensions," currently running at the Whitechapel Gallery until 7 September 2025. Butt, often characterised as the 'Young British Artist who got away,' offers an arresting exploration of identity through art steeped in personal and collective history, which resonates with contemporary conversations about trauma and perception.

Butt’s oeuvre is a fascinating blend of beauty and danger, encapsulated in his three-part installation, "Familiars." Suspended glass vessels—each filled with a mustard-coloured gas reminiscent of mustard gas—dangle from the ceiling, presenting a curious yet menacing aesthetic. This chilling reminder of chemical warfare evokes not only the terrors of the First World War but also a broader commentary on mortality. Critics note that standing mere inches from such artworks elicits a complex thrill, rendering the experience sublime. Each part of "Familiars" communicates a different facet of peril, with its glowing gas and evocative titles, fostering a space where art, science, and human fragility converge.

While some may attempt to detach Butt's legacy from his contemporaries, given his lack of mainstream acclaim during his lifetime, his work undeniably interacts with the cultural milieu of the 1990s Young British Artists movement, particularly through its elements of appropriation and experimentation. In a nod to this context, the installation "Transmission" features a glowing circle of open books—engraved with imagery of the carnivorous flora from John Wyndham’s "The Day of the Triffids." The animated video presented alongside it offers a whimsical yet unsettling portrayal of the Triffid, serving as a metaphor for larger societal anxieties, including the HIV crisis that affected Butt's community profoundly.

Curated by Dominic Johnson, a Professor of Performance and Visual Culture at Queen Mary University of London, the exhibition has garnered acclaim not only for its artistic audacity but also for its curatorial depth. The retrospective is the first of its kind, allowing audiences to engage with Butt’s lesser-known early works, including paintings created during his time at Goldsmiths alongside the likes of Damien Hirst and Sarah Lucas. Through this lens, Butt's artistic evolution becomes clear—his early canvases reflect a significant influence from Picasso and Matisse, which Butt candidly acknowledges in a video interview recorded during his last months.

However, the curatorial approach runs the risk of isolating Butt's work from the broader narratives of British art history. This concern heightens in light of the impact of his tragic early death from AIDS-related complications at just 32 years old. Critics argue that while the exhibition brilliantly displays Butt's artwork, it is essential to remember the sociopolitical contexts from which these pieces arose, allowing for a more holistic understanding of his contributions to the art world.

The opening phase of the exhibition has also rekindled interest in Butt’s legacy beyond Britain. The recent showcase at the Irish Museum of Modern Art prior to its London debut highlighted this renewed appreciation, celebrating Butt’s innovative approaches to art and science. His installations like "Familiars" and "Transmission" offer richly complex narratives that comprise experiences of beauty tinged with dread—a duality that resonates loudly today, as society grapples with ongoing crises and the ephemeral nature of existence.

Ultimately, "Apprehensions" serves as a poignant reminder of Hamad Butt’s enduring relevance in contemporary art discourse. By merging visceral aesthetics with deeper reflections on identity, mortality, and societal fears, Butt's work continues to challenge viewers and provoke critical dialogue—ensuring he remains a vital voice amid the landscape of contemporary art.

### 📌 Reference Map:

* Paragraph 1 – [[1]](https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2025/jun/04/hamad-butt-apprehensions-review-whitechapel-gallery-london-yba), [[4]](https://imma.ie/whats-on/hamad-butt-apprehensions/)
* Paragraph 2 – [[1]](https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2025/jun/04/hamad-butt-apprehensions-review-whitechapel-gallery-london-yba), [[2]](https://www.irishtimes.com/culture/art/review/2024/12/17/hamad-butt-apprehensions-review-a-prophet-of-dread-wielding-precise-precarious-instruments/), [[5]](https://www.whitechapelgallery.org/exhibitions/hamad-butt-apprehensions/)
* Paragraph 3 – [[3]](https://www.whitechapelgallery.org/about/press/hamad-butt-apprehensions/), [[6]](https://www.atrasouthasia.com/fieldnotes/hamad-butt)
* Paragraph 4 – [[1]](https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2025/jun/04/hamad-butt-apprehensions-review-whitechapel-gallery-london-yba), [[2]](https://www.irishtimes.com/culture/art/review/2024/12/17/hamad-butt-apprehensions-review-a-prophet-of-dread-wielding-precise-precarious-instruments/), [[7]](https://imma.ie/about/press-centre/imma-is-delighted-to-present-the-first-retrospective-exhibition-of-the-work-of-ground-breaking-artist-hamad-butt-1962-1994/)
* Paragraph 5 – [[4]](https://imma.ie/whats-on/hamad-butt-apprehensions/), [[6]](https://www.atrasouthasia.com/fieldnotes/hamad-butt)
* Paragraph 6 – [[1]](https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2025/jun/04/hamad-butt-apprehensions-review-whitechapel-gallery-london-yba), [[3]](https://www.whitechapelgallery.org/about/press/hamad-butt-apprehensions/), [[4]](https://imma.ie/whats-on/hamad-butt-apprehensions/)

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## Bibliography

1. <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2025/jun/04/hamad-butt-apprehensions-review-whitechapel-gallery-london-yba> - Please view link - unable to able to access data
2. <https://www.irishtimes.com/culture/art/review/2024/12/17/hamad-butt-apprehensions-review-a-prophet-of-dread-wielding-precise-precarious-instruments/> - This review discusses Hamad Butt's exhibition 'Apprehensions' at the Irish Museum of Modern Art (IMMA) in Dublin. The exhibition showcases Butt's early artistic experiments, including impressive paintings completed during his time at Goldsmiths. It also features his first installation, 'Transmission', which includes an animated video of a triffid, works on paper, and a display case containing live flies. The exhibition also presents 'Familiars', a three-part work involving the delicate containment of pure halogen, highlighting Butt's innovative approach to art and science.
3. <https://www.whitechapelgallery.org/about/press/hamad-butt-apprehensions/> - This press release from the Whitechapel Gallery announces the exhibition 'Hamad Butt: Apprehensions', running from 4 June to 7 September 2025. The exhibition is curated by Dominic Johnson, Professor of Performance and Visual Culture at Queen Mary University of London, and co-curated with Seán Kissane and Gilane Tawadros. It is presented in partnership with the Irish Museum of Modern Art (IMMA) and was on display from 6 December 2024 to 5 May 2025.
4. <https://imma.ie/whats-on/hamad-butt-apprehensions/> - This page provides information about the exhibition 'Hamad Butt: Apprehensions' at the Irish Museum of Modern Art (IMMA). The exhibition is the first retrospective of Hamad Butt's work, showcasing his paintings, drawings, and installations. It is curated by Dominic Johnson, Professor of Performance and Visual Culture at Queen Mary University of London, and co-curated by Gilane Tawadros and Seán Kissane. The exhibition was on display from 6 December 2024 to 5 May 2025.
5. <https://www.whitechapelgallery.org/exhibitions/hamad-butt-apprehensions/> - This page details the exhibition 'Hamad Butt: Apprehensions' at the Whitechapel Gallery, running from 4 June to 7 September 2025. The exhibition is the first major survey of Hamad Butt's work, featuring his paintings, drawings, and installations. It is curated by Dominic Johnson, Professor of Performance and Visual Culture at Queen Mary University of London, and co-curated by Gilane Tawadros and Seán Kissane. The exhibition is presented in partnership with the Irish Museum of Modern Art (IMMA).
6. <https://www.atrasouthasia.com/fieldnotes/hamad-butt> - This article discusses the upcoming retrospective exhibition of Hamad Butt's work, titled 'Apprehensions', opening at the Irish Museum of Modern Art (IMMA) in December 2024. The exhibition will travel to the Whitechapel Art Gallery in London in June 2025. The title of the exhibition is taken from Butt's essay of the same name, first published in the posthumous artist's book 'Familiars'. The exhibition is curated by Dominic Johnson, Professor of Performance and Visual Culture at Queen Mary University of London, and co-curated by Gilane Tawadros and Seán Kissane.
7. <https://imma.ie/about/press-centre/imma-is-delighted-to-present-the-first-retrospective-exhibition-of-the-work-of-ground-breaking-artist-hamad-butt-1962-1994/> - This press release from the Irish Museum of Modern Art (IMMA) announces the exhibition 'Hamad Butt: Apprehensions', the first retrospective of the work of pioneering artist Hamad Butt. The exhibition is curated by Dominic Johnson, Professor of Performance and Visual Culture at Queen Mary University of London, and co-curated by Gilane Tawadros and Seán Kissane. It is presented in partnership with the Whitechapel Gallery, London, and was on display at IMMA from 6 December 2024 to 5 May 2025.