

Sophie Barber:

Mackerel sky, mackerel sky, never long wet, never long dry

27 September 2025 – 15 March 2026



A new exhibition of Sophie Barber's work, the first in her hometown of Hastings

Hastings Contemporary presents *Mackerel sky, mackerel sky, never long wet, never long dry*, a solo exhibition by British artist Sophie Barber (b.1996) in the town where she lives and works.

With intimate three-dimensional 'cushion' canvas paintings and large-scale works, Barber's approach mixes humour and popular culture with folklore and the surreal, playing with the possibilities of scale, reference and materiality.

The exhibition will feature brand new works, alongside recent critically acclaimed work. Rooted in the landscape around her, Barber's works are less depictions of her native Sussex coast than distillations of the impression it leaves. Her visual world is filled with echoes of her environment: bird shelters, tents, beaches, and the region's ever-shifting skies. A childhood birdwatcher and carer for birds, avian life plays a central role in her imagery, connecting personal memory with environmental and cultural narratives.

In the new work made for this exhibition at Hastings Contemporary, Barber also returns to her long-held interest in the stories and structures of art history, and how this relates to her deep connection to the Sussex coastline. By referencing artists she admires, including Claes Oldenburg, Georgia O’Keeffe, David Hockney and Vincent van Gogh, Barber opens a dialogue between her own practice and theirs.

Sunflowers, a subject with a significant place in the history of painting, are a recurring motif in Barber’s new work in the exhibition. Alongside Van Gogh’s bold, emotional blooms, O’Keeffe’s studied, sculptural forms, and Hockney’s later, more reflective still lifes, Barber’s paintings explore the beauty and mortality that sunflowers have come to symbolise, adding her own take, shaped by the light and colour of Sussex.

As Barber has described: ‘It’s about singing from the same song sheet, but mine are a bit out of tune. I like the saying painting from life, isn’t it all painting from life, whether I’m painting someone else’s flowers they’ve painted from life or someone’s sculpture that already exists in the world, it still found me somehow and ended up in my life, otherwise I wouldn’t bother painting it.’

This exhibition marks the first in Barber’s hometown of Hastings. *Mackerel sky, mackerel sky, never long wet, never long dry* brings together the local and the legendary, the past and the present, showcasing her experimental practice which uses painting as a way of getting close – to place, history, and the things that matter.

The exhibition will be accompanied by the first monograph of Barber’s work.

A graduate of University of Brighton at Sussex Coast College Hastings, Barber has exhibited widely, with solo shows at Goldsmiths CCA (2020) and her two-person *Painting Sculpture* with Franz West at the Austrian Cultural Forum, London (2025). Barber’s work has been included in exhibitions at Green Family Art Foundation, Dallas, Texas (2024); Kasteel Wijnre Estate, Wijnre, Netherlands (2023); Lismore Castle Arts, Co. Wexford, Ireland (2022); La Maison de Rendez-vous, Brussels, Belgium (2020). Her work is on view in *Sussex Modernism* at Towner Eastbourne from May to September 2025.

Hastings Contemporary Director, Kathleen Soriano, says: ‘Hastings Contemporary has a history of showcasing exciting artists, such as Sophie Barber, at pivotal moments in their careers. In this exhibition, Barber’s work is strangely familiar in its lifting of motifs from famous artists and well-known paintings yet shocks us into the present day with her assertive use of colour and very personal additions of text.’

NOTES TO EDITORS

[IMAGES FOR MEDIA USE CAN BE DOWNLOADED HERE](#)

- Sophie Barber, *It Must Be Love*, 2025, oil on canvas. Courtesy Alison Jacques © Sophie Barber; photo: Michael Brzezinski

FOR MEDIA ENQUIRIES

Tracy Jones, Brera PR – tracy@brera-london.com / 01702 216658 / 07887 514984

Nicola Jeffs – nj@nicolajeffs.com / 07794 694 754

Hastings Contemporary is a pioneering arts charity in the heart of Hastings Old Town. Through bold exhibitions, partnerships and events, the gallery brings world-class art to Hastings for the benefit of everyone. With a programme anchored in marine ecology, ocean futures and sustainable cultures, Hastings Contemporary brings together artists, scientists, fishing communities, and the public to explore new creative frontiers – all within an award-winning building on the town’s historic fishing beach.

Visiting the gallery

Open Wednesday to Sunday and bank holidays, 11am-5pm. Under 18s visit for free. Hastings and Rother residents can visit for half price, from just £5. Become a member for unlimited free visits, special invitations, discounts, and more, from just £32 a year.

Hastings Contemporary

Rock-a-Nore Road, Hastings, TN34 3DW
01424 728377 | hastingscontemporary.org

Sophie Barber (b. 1996, Hastings, UK) is a painter who draws directly from the world around her, reproducing natural and manmade fragments in an attempt to preserve and process their forms. Depicting tents, bird hides and word games on monumental block-colour canvases, Barber creates surreal, folk-like compositions that are less depictions of her native Sussex coast than distillations of the impression it leaves.

Barber works in Hastings, East Sussex. Upon graduating from University of Brighton at Sussex Coast College Hastings in 2017, she was awarded the CVAN South East Platform Graduate Award, which is run in partnership between Aspex, De La Warr Pavilion, MK Gallery, Modern Art Oxford and Turner Contemporary.

‘I’m interested in the weight of things’, Barber has noted, ‘heaviness and things collapsing’. This is an allusion to both the material qualities of her work, the way in which her unstretched canvases crease and slump like oversized clothes on shoulders, and the way she collapses the very images she paints. Rarely is this process of playful reduction as evident as in the miniature works that Barber paints on tightly wrapped offcuts of recycled canvas. Barber operates at the extremes of scale; the middle, that which is easily controlled, is uninteresting to her.