

[On entering the gallery, move past the first two paintings on your right towards the wall text]

Who decides what the museum collects? What do our collections say about our communities?

The Collections & Acquisitions Committee came together in April 2024 to bring new perspectives to Towner's collection-building processes. As a group of under-30s with ties to Sussex, we were drawn by the opportunity to have our voices heard and to help shape what Towner stands for.

Gathered Around The Sun is the culmination of this two-year collaboration, which has provided us with a rich inside view of the inner workings of the gallery. It has allowed us to participate in all aspects of realising an

acquisition and delivering an exhibition, while honing our own skills and developing professionally by working alongside Towner's staff.

Together the Committee selected Sophie Barber's work as the potential new addition to Towner's Collection. This was followed by 'berry-picking' in the Art Store, choosing works to accompany the new arrival in this exhibition. The result is a collaborative curatorial vision in a space in which we were invited to make all the decisions.

Thank you to everyone at Towner for opening the door to us and for your support along the way. Special thanks to Sara Cooper, Hollie Douglas, Liis Painting, Liz Corkhill, Mariana Elsesser, and Adam Spain.

The Collections & Acquisitions Committee are:

Connie Ashford (she/her): a curator and technician from Hastings now living and working in London, organising exhibitions.

Flavia Cahn (she/her): works in the crossover between decolonial collections research and public engagement, currently based at the Imperial War Museum.

Serena Cobbinah (she/her): a Law student with an interest in the intersection between community, advocacy, and creation.

Ben Coleman (he/him): an artist and curator, running a nomadic gallery - Fresh Salad, which supports emerging artists with exhibitions and residencies.

Maddie Lock (they/them): a BAFTA and BFI-supported filmmaker and programmer from Eastbourne, interested in queer seaside heritage.

Luka Shaxson (she/her): Events Coordinator at Towner, with a personal artistic practice spanning songwriting to floral design.

Elva Webb (she/her): a recent Fine Art graduate and part of a lesbian art collective named 'C U Next Tuesday'.

Sophie Wright (she/her): a multi-disciplinary & Socially Engaged Eastbourne Artist. Project lead for meditationpods.uk funded by ACE and ESCC.

Gathered Around The Sun is a celebration of a new work by Sussex-based artist Sophie Barber, selected by Towner's Collections & Acquisitions Committee. Taking the entanglement between domesticity and wildness as their curatorial framework, the Committee have chosen several existing works from Towner's collection to accompany Barber's large-scale painting in conversation with this shared theme.

From familiar local landscapes and floral still lifes, to warped portraits and ghostly sculptures, these works collectively reflect the diversity of environments - interior and exterior, domestic and wild - in which organisms experience both aliveness and demise. Illuminated by the celestial beams of Barber's sun, natural life-forms are repeatedly brought into contact with the man-made: the

vessels that contain them, the cultures that shape them, and the materials that replace them.

While some of the collection works echo Barber's connection to the seas and skies of Sussex, others reflect the playfulness with which she approaches imagery, text, and scale.

Rooted in paradox and duality, this exhibition brings newly-acquired works, including Jodie Carey's *Guard*, into dialogue with historical pieces, and lesser-known artists together with widely-celebrated names. In doing so, the Committee are reimagining the value of public art collections and leaning into a critically informed approach to contemporary acquisition.

[Turn left and move towards artwork]

The vastness of this piece reflects Barber's tendency to work at the extremes of scale. Her large, unstretched canvases are often deliberately tainted before use: laid on the studio floor, they collect footprints, dust, and stray paint splashes before becoming artistic material. Her attraction to layering colour and texture sometimes leads her to work over existing paintings, which remain as semi-visible backdrops for new ideas. In *Meet me there*, where the sun goes down and the moon comes up, the canvas's past life lingers in ghostly pale blues seeping through the black.

Text accompanies Barber's imagery as an equal partner.

Reminiscent of folk songs or nursery rhymes, her evocative phrases act as subtitles. Here, the imperative

“Meet Me There” gently commands connection and summons a sense of hope.

After researching an array of contemporary artists for acquisition, the committee felt that Barber’s work epitomised their key aims: to acquire an artwork that serves to diversify the existing collection, while still aligning with Towner’s collecting priorities.

Her distinctive style in depicting familiar and locally inspired subject matter — as well as her status as a young female artist from a working class background — were leading factors in the committee’s choice.

Following a committee visit to her studio in July 2025, Barber made this work specifically for our exhibition and potential acquisition. The work is on loan while the purchase process is under way, with applications to the

Art Fund and the ACE/V&A Purchase Grant Fund in progress. If successful, Towner will be the first public collection to acquire Barber's work.

Sophie Barber (b.1996)

Meet me there, where the sun goes down and the moon comes up, 2025

Oil on canvas

Courtesy Alison Jacques4

[Move leftwards along the wall to next artwork]

Clemence Dane (1888-1965)

View of Midhurst, West Sussex, 1950

Oil on canvas

Presented by the Contemporary Art Society. Acquired
1954, EASTG1368

Tiny and delicate, this piece with the orange sun just on the horizon above the trees, shone out to me, even before I knew about Sophie Barber's Sun painting.

Eastbourne is known as the sunshine coast, and even though this sun is depicted elsewhere, the sun motif represents our local pride and cultural identity. The small and huge suns invite a potentially playful introspective in the collection. Barber's practice plays with scale, from huge oils to tiny pebble paintings. Often, huge old oil

paintings are presented in museum settings, rather than intimate ones like Dane's.

Having female Sussex artists represented (alongside Jodie Carey's recent acquisition) contributes to reaching Towner's goals to represent local women artists, historically and contemporary, and benefits the community experiencing this.

Response from Sophie Wright, Collections & Acquisitions Committee Member

[Move through Jodie Carey's installation on your right towards the back corner of the gallery]

Gerald Reitlinger (1900-1978)

Still Life with Prawns, 1934

Oil on canvas

The Sylvia Gosse Gift. Acquired 1955, EASTG1225

Wildness and domesticity blur together here as animal life is displaced and tamed into a commodity for human consumption. This transformation is illustrated with unexpected gentleness and dignity in soft mustard yellows and tranquil blues; shades that echo recurrently around the exhibition.

The geometry of the gingham tablecloth contrasts with the organic curvature of the prawns' bodies and the porcelain's flowing botanical motif, which was likely inspired by the artist's fascination with Islamic pottery and

East Asian ceramics. Reitlinger spent his later years in the village of Beckley, East Sussex, adding a layer of local relevance to this elegant painting.

In the close frame of this composition, I feel particularly drawn to what is sensed but not seen. Despite the absence of people, human activity and agency remains deeply palpable.

Response from Luka Shaxson, Collections & Acquisitions
Committee Member

[Continue to move along wall leftwards]

Frances Hodgkins (1869-1947)

Still Life, c. 1929

Oil on canvas

The Lucy Wertheim Bequest. Acquired 1971, EASTG1260

Jodie Carey (b.1981)

Guard, 2024

Jesmonite and steel

Presented by the Contemporary Art Society with support
of the artist. Acquired 2025, TT2025.28

Wrapping plants with cloth and thread before pressing
them into earth, Carey forms rudimentary moulds from
which these sculptures emerge. Noticing the details and

traces of the earth-casting technique gives these sculptures a skeletal quality, and in their quiet, monument-like presence, I think of time passing and what remains.

Carey's sculptures were selected for their distinctive form, shaped through physical processes that parallel Barber's practice, where canvases are re-worked with layers of paint, touch and pressure, which is sculptural in its own way. Carey and Barber connect to the landscapes that surround them in different ways, but with both works, we can observe surfaces that carry a past life. Carey's sculptures stand as still companions to Barber's radiant sun, which I imagine shining over them as protection.

Response from Connie Ashford, Collections &
Acquisitions Committee Member

Kerstin Erics (dates unknown)

Flower, 1950

Oil on canvas

Towner Collection. Acquired 1962, EASTG1360

Christine Parsons (dates unknown)

Three Jars, 1977

Oil on canvas

Towner Collection. Acquired 1979, EASTG1202

Eric Ravilious (1903-1942)

Curtain, undated

Pencil drawing on paper

On long loan to Towner from a private collection.

EASTGL1584.36

Eric Ravilious (1903-1942)

Untitled: Design for Wedgwood teapot, undated

Pencil drawing, applied paper cut-out

On long loan to Towner from a private collection.

EASTGL105.134

Anneliese Holles (b.1963)

Recollections: Mirror, 1997

Oil and acrylic on canvas

Towner Collection. Acquired 1997, SEA193

Roy Oxlade (1929-2014)

Blue Flowers, 1994

Oil on canvas

Towner Collection. Acquired 1994, SEA181

Harold Mockford (1932-2023)

Cars at Birling Gap, 1969

Oil on hardboard

Towner Collection. Acquired 1988, EASTG2062

Gary Goodman (b. 1959)

Double Portrait of Teresa with Tilda and Tintin, 1994

Acrylic on card

Towner Collection. Acquired 1995, SEA186

This work is representative of many of the ideas that drew us to Sophie Barber's work. The specks of yellow in the background suggest the presence of sunlight. The alliterative names in the title evoke the playful subtitles included in much of Barber's work. It is a frank portrait of womanhood, represented especially by the figure on the left. This exhibition comes in the wake of Barber welcoming her first child, which we wanted to reflect in what we chose to accompany Barber's piece.

The facial features of the figures may seem crudely rendered, but there is a tenderness in the details of the hands, the domesticity of the setting, and the familiarity of the expressions.

Response from Serena Cobbinah, Collections &
Acquisitions Committee Member

[Keep moving leftwards past the double doors to view final two artworks]

Bryan Lumsden (b.1947)

Interior with Plant, 1975

Oil on canvas

Towner Collection. Acquired 1976, EASTG1235

Harold Mockford (1932-2023)

Halfway House, 1994

Oil on hardboard

Towner Collection. Acquired 2016, TT2016.05

[Turn back to your right and move through double doors to
exit gallery]