

## Alex Margo Arden: Safety Curtain review — recreating works targeted by protesters

Van Gogh's *The Sower* splashed with pea soup, cream cake on the *Mona Lisa* — these copies of assaulted canvases make for an enjoyable show at East London's Auto Italia



The glass on Diego Velázquez's *The Rokeby Venus* was smashed with safety hammers at the National Gallery in 2023

**'TONIGHT'S PERFORMANCE IS CANCELLED DUE TO CIRCUMSTANCES BEYOND OUR CONTROL,'** yell the stickers slapped over the *Les Misérables* posters outside the east London gallery Auto Italia. Not that there was a performance in the first place. Nothing here, in the emerging artist Alex Margo Arden's exhibition *Safety Curtain*, is as it seems.

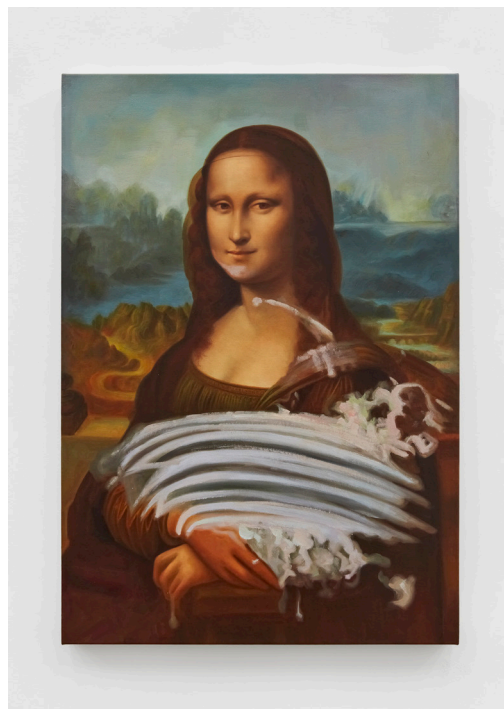
This piece, *Cancelled Performance*, is the first thing you see of a body of work that takes its inspiration from artworks targeted by protesters (a performance of *Les Mis* was stopped by Just Stop Oil in October 2023). Painted copies of celebrated canvases that have suffered this fate hang in the first gallery, with the evidence of their assault incorporated into the images.



Vincent van Gogh's *The Sower* was splashed with pea soup at the Palazzo Bonaparte in Rome in 2022

Van Gogh's *The Sower* bears the painted remains of the splash of pea soup hurled by the climate activist group *Ultima Generazione* (Last Generation) at the Palazzo Bonaparte in Rome in 2022; a triptych of *Mona Lisas* traces how protesters and then panicking security guards made a right mess with a cream cake that same year.

The London-based artist is interested in how these events, occurring to "iconic" works, become part of their story, their importance. They are fleeting — museums scurry to remove the work, in an attempt to minimise the damage and start emergency conservation. Arden's project of gathering evidence from multiple quickly-shot, blurry phone snaps and videos, and reproducing the moment as faithfully as possible, captures it for consideration.



Leonardo da Vinci's *The Mona Lisa* was attacked with cream cake at the Louvre in Paris in 2022

The show isn't actually about protest, at least not entirely. Instead, it brings together a range of Arden's interests, such as theatre, the idea of "behind the scenes", the backstage activities of museums, and the shifts that take place with each reproduction (the *Les Mis* posters are oil sketches based on the original, photographed, then turned into vinyls. The tiny changes that occur when the paintings are reproduced by hand indicate how hard it is to paint what you see).

When a work is conserved to bring it back to its original condition, she asks, does that erase its physical and political history? There are a lot of layers here, both physical and figurative, and Arden certainly doesn't take a moral standpoint. But it's highly enjoyable.



Claude Monet's *The Artist's Garden at Giverny* was vandalised with red paint in Stockholm in 2023

Also on show are a set of photographs of specially commissioned safety curtains depicting the *Les Mis* barricades, installed in various theatres, while six sculptures repurpose storage crates from the RA (where Arden studied) that once held plaster casts (vandalised during student protests in the 1960s), in which she has created delightful, intricate installations that evoke the work of conservation and preservation, in all its mess and care. Whatever your views on the targeting of artworks, this is quietly fascinating.



Nancy Durrant, Wednesday January 15 2025, 2.00pm, The Times