

ARTLYST
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Madge Gill, Untitled, 1952, ink on card; The Gallery of Everything at Frieze

Madge Gill is currently riding high on the fashion wave of collection, with the whole of The Gallery of Everything at Frieze dedicated to Gill, run by the insightful James Brett, who has championed and collected Madge and her Theosophical gang for decades. Ms Gill, for let us give this prodigious Walthamstow lady some respect, has been dead as long as I have been alive, and her work was first brought to the public's attention in 1918. Yes, finally, 64 years after her death and 107 years after being in the paper, The Tate and The National Portrait Gallery, with their public purses, buy a picture each for their collections. I hope her grandchildren have kept a few back, but I fear they all went into the 1980s Christie's sale that Henry Bower got his intelligent claws on in an investment that has been a long game of being proven right. Art is cultural gambling, and you can spend your whole life backing the wrong horses, but at least if you love the work, there are more than 'bookies' stubs to hang on your wall. Madge Gill's work is so in demand that Tate announced the purchase of one as part of three new acquisitions made possible through the 2025 Frieze Tate Fund, supported this year by £150,000 in philanthropic contributions.

I love Madge Gill as much for her story (www.MadgeGill.com) as for why she made art, and the art itself, frenetic ink drawings with elegantly attired ladies floating within abstracted landscapes or intensely colourful embroidery. But the story of how she came to be part of the spiritual life of Upton Park after escaping domestic servitude in Canada, she was sent by Dr Barnardo's as an illegitimate child into service, as part of this government's idea of peopling its Commonwealth with the British, without the consent of either child or her mother. And yet she made it back to London aged 20, to hold seances, have visions and make incredible work, thousands of pieces, be a mother and be the servant of her spiritual guide, Myrminerest, whose name she signed her work with. Yet it has still taken 64 years after her death to be recognised. Is this because she's a woman, or because she refused to take part in the art game other than to show at The Whitechapel Gallery as an amateur, she wouldn't sell her work, or because Newham Borough Council has the most extensive collection? Whatever the reason, now she's got her foot in the door. Hooray, she's part of British art history.