

Autumn 2026 The Magic of Mushrooms Jasleen Kaur Fine Art Photography Aphrodite

ArtQuarterly



With an exhibition on art and fungi opening at RAMM in Exeter, Paul McQueen finds out why these life forms have fascinated artists, past and present



Left: Mordecai Cubitt Cooke, *Agaricus strobiliformis*, 1878; facing page: Seana Gavin, *Untitled Mushroom Chimney*, 2017

The magic of mushrooms



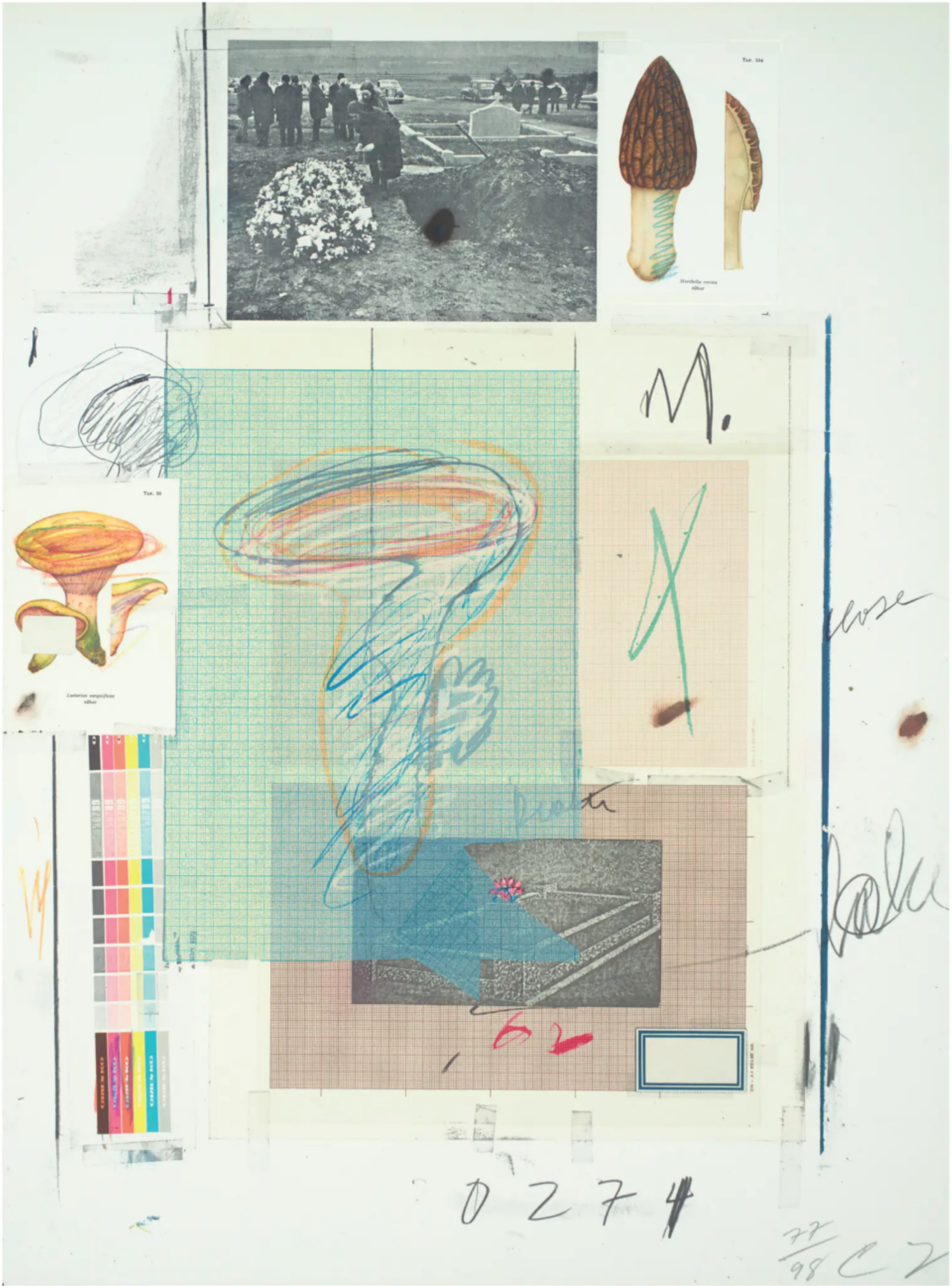
Fungi have long fascinated artists for their mercurial qualities and association with ideas of cooperation as well as collaboration

First, some mycology. Wander into any British woodland this autumn, or even your back garden or local park, and you'll likely encounter one or more varieties of the 15,000-plus species of fungi native to the UK in the easily recognisable, if not immediately identifiable, form of mushrooms. Turkey tails. Stinkhorns. Wood ears. Dead men's fingers. Puffballs. And, of course, the fly agaric, with its unmistakable apple-red cap and white scales and stipe, familiar from childhood tales of fairies and goblins and elves. But these fleshy, spore-bearing fruits, spectacularly diverse in colour and shape, appearing overnight and vanishing just as quickly as they arrive, represent only part of the complex picture of fungal life. The far greater part of the fungus resides beneath the soil or within the rotting wood of fallen trees, hidden from sight. Here, its mycelium, composed of individual fungal strands, or hyphae, busily breaks down dead organic matter and even living organisms, providing nourishment for the fungus and the plants, microbes and animals it lives alongside. Indeed, mycelia are capable of joining with the root systems of plants, including trees, to form mycorrhizal networks, mutually beneficial cross-kingdom partnerships that also perform the potentially planet-saving ecosystem function of removing excess carbon from the atmosphere.

Fungi have long held an interest for artists, and books such as mycologist Merlin Sheldrake's best-selling *Entangled Life* (2020) have brought that fascination to a wider public, highlighting their mercurial qualities and metaphorical potency as exemplars of cooperation and collaboration. 'Fungi can't be fixed – in terms of gender or size or shape or colour – and there's something about the uncertainty and indeterminacy of them that appeals to artists,' says Lara Goodband, contemporary art curator at Exeter's Royal Albert Memorial Museum & Art Gallery (RAMM), where the new exhibition 'Living Labyrinths: Art and Fungi' opens in October. 'At a time when everything seems to be up in the air, that way of being, as a natural phenomenon, offers something to consider.'

The idea for 'Living Labyrinths' has been growing in Goodband's mind almost since she arrived at RAMM nearly eight years ago, and she has been curating environmentally focused exhibitions for twice as long, often bringing together specialists and artists to expand their thinking about the subjects that interest them. 'I read the hardback of Sheldrake's book and thought, "Wow!";' she says. 'We always work from our collections when planning exhibitions, and the more I looked, the more fungi-related items I found.' Her discoveries range from numerous dried specimens, about which little was known, as

Above: Conrad Theodore Green, *Hygrophorus psittacinus* (lantern slide), 1933; facing page: Cy Twombly, *Natural History, Part I, Mushrooms, No. VII*, 1974



well as those suspended in liquid by a former curator, to watercolours collected by Richard Cresswell (1815-82), a local reverend, and plates made for the mycological publications of Mordecai Cubitt Cooke (1825-1914). To this array of unearthed treasures, she has added major loans from national collections, two new commissions by locally based artists and work in a variety of media by eight other contemporary artists, many of whom also live and work in Devon and the Southwest, to create a showcase of the diversity of thinking around fungi and the different ways in which they are helping artists to reimagine our place in the natural world.

For Goodband, the exhibition couldn't exist without American artist Cy Twombly's (1928-2011) mixed-media print series *Natural History, Part I, Mushrooms, Nos. I-X* (1974), on loan from Tate, which will fill an entire wall in the second gallery. Each of the 10 works features illustrations of mushrooms that are accompanied by collaged elements and Twombly's signature energetic, expressive drawing. 'Science needs to categorise and measure and collect data, but artists are really good at exploding that and asking questions about the classification and control that it places on nature,' says Goodband. 'Maybe the fungi are telling us we can't know everything.' Twombly made this work during the early days of the modern environmental movement – just four years after the first Earth Day on 22 April 1970, when 20 million people took to the streets across the US to protest the destruction of our planet. Today, its fate – and ours – is looking worse than ever, with governments everywhere falling short or rolling back completely on their commitments to reduce greenhouse-gas emissions. 'We're in it now,' says Goodband, 'it's not climate change any more, it's actually breaking down, and

Artists can't solve the climate crisis, but they can remind us of the beauty of the natural world, and help us to connect emotionally with it

much more rapidly than many predicted.' It's not the role of artists to solve the climate crisis, and scientists can often do little more than explain what will happen if the global average temperature rises by 1.5 or 2C above pre-industrial levels, but Goodband believes that art can have an impact. 'What artists can do is remind people of the beauty of the world, and enable us to emotionally connect with it,' she says. This is certainly the intention with one of the two new commissions, sound artist Jason Singh's installation *The Intelligence Below* (2026). Using specialist recording equipment, he has collected and sensitively translated biodata produced by the electrical activity of mycelial networks in locations across Devon. This he has layered with field recordings of birdsong and running water and other ambient forest sounds, to take visitors out of the gallery and into the precise environments where fungi are doing their vital work, all the while silently communicating with one another and the world around them. 'It just takes you somewhere else,' says Goodband. 'And when you leave the museum, that feeling is going to stay with you.'

For her commission, artist and academic Gemma Anderson-Tempini has worked closely with the MRC Centre for Medical Mycology at the University of Exeter to create the first artistic body map of the human mycobiome – the community of fungi that can live on and within our bodies – bringing together fragmented areas of scientific knowledge into a single image. Made using pigments ground from Devon geology, including red sandstone from Exmouth and volcanic and Permian-Triassic soils from the Killerton estate near Exeter, *Myco-Mother* (2026), a large-scale drawing, is also a self-portrait, depicting Anderson-Tempini cross-legged and breastfeeding.

Below: Jo Pearl, *In Balance*, 2025-26; bottom: Hilde Hauan Johnsen, *Fungi dyed silks*, 2021, installation view, Tromsø Center for Contemporary Art, 2025



Above: Gemma Anderson-Tempini, *Myco-Mother*, 2026; right: Chantal Powell, *As a God Might Be*, 2024



Among the other contemporary artists who will be featured in the exhibition is Chantal Powell, whose work in ceramics, glass, textiles, metal casting and painting is informed by ideas of the unconscious, inner alchemy and transformation. 'With Powell's work, it was more about what to leave out,' says Goodband. In the end, she chose to include three glass sculptures that speak to the transforming, hybrid nature of fungal life. 'Scientific literature about fungi and mycorrhizal networks describes them as being always in a change of state,' Goodband says. 'Powell's works [in their use of glass] were liquid at one point and feel like they're on the verge of becoming liquid again. They've just been caught.'

Poet and artist Lucy Mercer's four *Glass Poems* (all 2026), clear panes with words and phrases, are inspired by *Graphis scripta*, a species of lichen – a fungi-algae hybrid – whose wriggly growth patterns resemble writing. For Mercer, their suggestive forms and, to her, impenetrable Latin names combine to make the outside world seem like a slightly unreadable text. 'Basically, it can never be fully decoded,' says Goodband.

Goodband met Sámi textile artist Hilde Hauan Johnsen on a research trip to Sápmi territory in northern Norway, for which Goodband was supported by a Jonathan Ruffer curatorial grant from Art Fund. Johnsen's work in sculpture and installation explores borders, both visible and invisible, and employs dyes extracted from plants. She used fungi and plant material gathered along the Norwegian-Russian border, a site of extreme geopolitical tension, to create the dyes for her multicoloured, curtain-like installation *Fungi dyed silks* (2021). 'It's a beautiful work, but also politically resonant,' says Goodband. 'If you're flying up to north Norway, you'll find yourself on a plane with

The hallucinatory properties of some fungi are, perhaps unsurprisingly, touched on by a number of contemporary artists in the exhibition



young men conscripted to train to fight Russia.' Johnsen will be travelling to RAMM during the autumn to deliver fungi-dyeing workshops, part of a series of events related to the exhibition that will also include mushroom meditations led by Jason Singh and guided walks across the city.

Jo Pearl's revolving kinetic sculpture *In Balance* (2025-26) highlights the fragile nature of the work fungi perform, and features ceramic elements based on the extinct fungus *Pottermyces asteroxylicola*, discovered in the fossil collection of the Natural History Museum in London and named after writer and illustrator Beatrix Potter (1866-1943), in honour of her contribution to mycology. Throughout her life, Potter produced more than 350 watercolour illustrations of fungi, including detailed studies of spores made using a microscope, and also submitted a paper, *On the Germination of the Spores of Agaricineae*, to the Linnean Society in 1897. For many years, Potter collaborated with the Scottish self-taught mycologist Charles McIntosh (1839-1922), who supplied her with samples to draw. A handful of her watercolours, on loan from the V&A, will be shown alongside a selection of Victorian lantern slides – photographic images on glass, originally projected using a 'magic lantern', that portray fungi in intense colours. Also on display will be a copy of Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865), showing John Tenniel's illustration of the moment Alice encounters the blue hookah-smoking caterpillar, seated atop a mushroom, who advises that a bite of the cap will make her taller, the stalk, shorter.

The hallucinatory properties of fungi, perhaps unsurprisingly, are touched on by

a number of the contemporary artists in the exhibition. Combining hand-cut collage and photography, Seana Gavin, also known for her documentation of 1990s rave culture, creates images of surreal worlds in which mushrooms feature as architectural or anthropomorphic entities, referencing art history as well as science fiction. 'They're immediately unnerving and funny,' says Goodband, 'and really seem to have caught the zeitgeist.' Sian Bonnell, meanwhile, photographs ordinary domestic plastic items in the landscape, creating the blurry illusion of fungal forms. And Andy Harper's complex oil paintings, which often feature organic and vegetal forms, three of which will be included at RAMM, have, as Goodband describes, 'something of the atmosphere of psilocybin' (the naturally occurring psychedelic compound found in more than 200 species of mushroom). 'The show will close with this overwhelming hit of colour, and maybe you'll leave in a kind of altered state of mind,' she adds.

On a more sober note, Goodband also hopes that visitors will take away from the exhibition some of the lessons that mushrooms have to teach us human beings about living better together, with other forms of life and the planet that sustains us all. 'Their lives depend on partnership and reciprocity,' she says. 'In this sense, fungi might offer a model for how life can be understood and lived now.'

● 'Living Labyrinths: Art and Fungi', RAMM, Exeter, 3 October to 21 February 2027. rammuseum.org.uk, 50% off exhibitions and 10% off in shop and café with National Art Pass



Above: Lucy Mercer, *Glass Poem 1*, 2026;
top: Sian Bonnell, *Glowing #50*, 2003-04;
facing page: Andy Harper, *Threefold*, 2018

