



Digital native

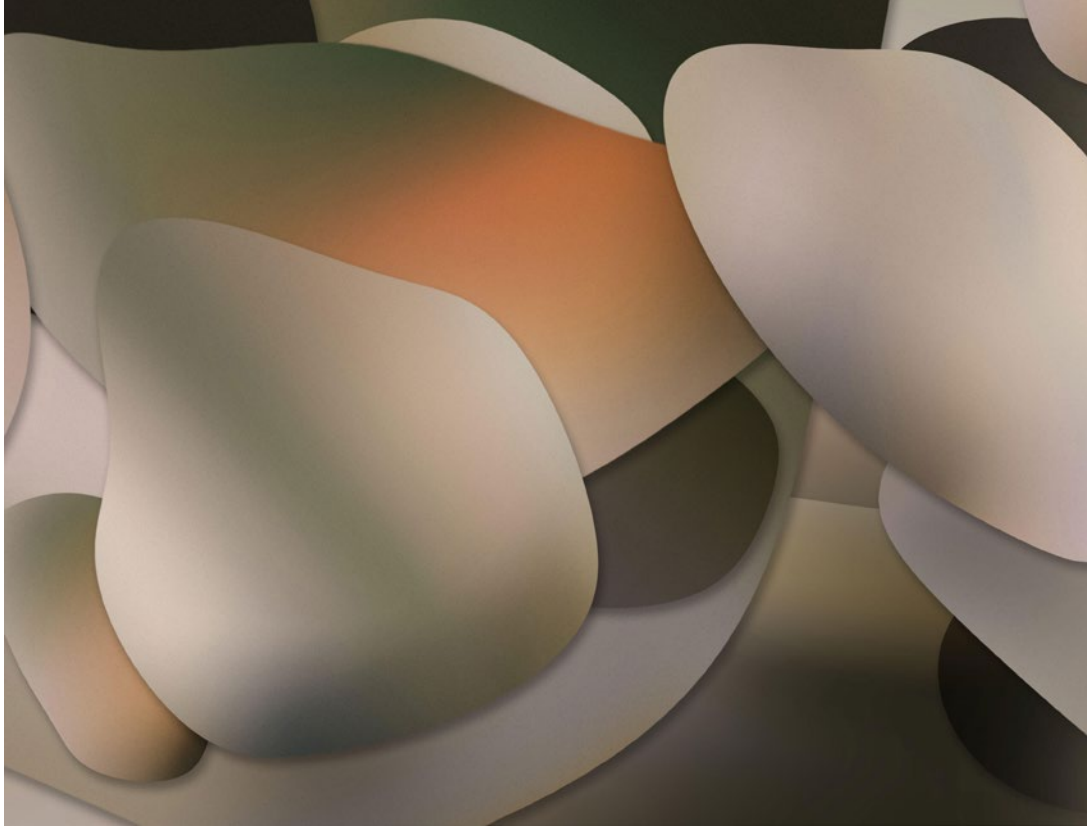
Incepted in one world, born into another, online gallery AORA carves out a space for connection and calm where we need it the most

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IMAGES BY: AORA SPACE



AORA's virtual exhibition rooms offer a familiar space, displaying each piece of art within its own virtual alcove



In the heart of ancient Rome lies a palace buried beneath the ground, an incomplete architectural feat built by Emperor Nero that was stripped of its jewels, marble and ivory veneers not long after his death. Filled with earth, the Domus Aurea remained hidden until the 15th century, where at the birth of the Renaissance it was rediscovered, becoming a site of study for artists like Raphael and Michelangelo. This recovery, this wellspring of cultural production, was an important source of inspiration for these painters and sculptors, and nearly 600 years later it remains so for the digital pioneers behind AORA.

Founded by curator Jenn Ellis and architect Benni Allan, AORA is an online gallery and interactive platform designed to bring together art, architecture and music to further a sense of calm and wellbeing, a need

institutions have been desperately trying to cater to since the outbreak of Covid-19.

Years in the making, the idea for the space came from the realisation that while hospitals are often filled with artwork, rarely is it displayed in patient rooms, instead found in hallways and waiting areas. Ample research suggests that exposure to visual art and music has the capacity to reduce the length of a patient's hospitalisation, with one Oxford study finding they can decrease levels of depression and curtail perceptions of pain.

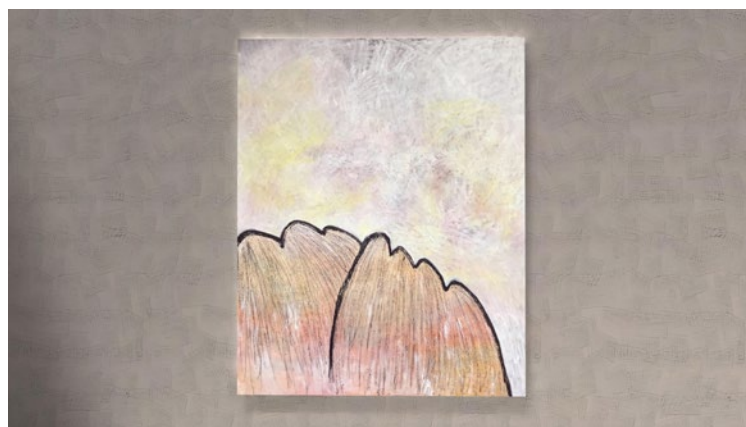
With this in mind, AORA has been a slow-cooking labour of love for the long-time collaborators who found that as the UK and Europe began to slow down in March it was time for them to ramp up for their release. In mid-June, they launched their first exhibition showcasing 14 artists from around the world, each room accompanied by a piece of



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↑ Nitrous Flame, by Mark Corfield-Moore (2019), uses ikat textile in an echo of 17th century firework prints

→ At The Foot of the Mountain, by Gabriela Giroletti (2018)



music selected for the show, accessible to anyone with an internet connection.

“This idea of breaking down barriers is really important,” Allen explains when discussing the genesis of the gallery. “We’re really passionate about making this a world that is going to be seen and experienced by a lot more people and hopefully improve people’s lives through using it.”

The three exhibition rooms themselves are disorienting yet familiar, each work within a perfectly lit alcove that creates an intimacy with the art no museum invigilator would allow for. Drawing inspiration from famous sites like the Domus Aurea and artists like James Turrell, it takes elements of well-known and varied architectural forms to complete something completely new, a digitally native invention derived from, and for, the world we live in.

Information about each piece and the artist are available with a simple click, but the choice to read or simply experience is yours to make. “We don’t want anyone to feel intimidated,” Ellis reiterates, emphasising the importance of discovery and decision-making for visitors.

In a world where many of us have been forced to connect with loved ones and the workplace through a screen, we may be feeling the digital drain that comes with moving life online.

But what AORA is doing feels different in practice and effect. Its monthly Exchange events include Zoom panels with artists, cooking classes with professional chefs inspired by the work on view and movement courses modelled after pieces in the exhibition. In a ‘room’ full of strangers, the gallery and its programming offer a sense of connection you might not find in a major museum or commercial gallery, in a world designed for wellbeing found at the intersection of art and architecture. ▣