

Lubaina Himid: Invisible Strategies; Tschabalala Self review – history and mystery

Modern Art Oxford; Parasol Unit, London Zanzibar is never far away in the rich, dynamic work of British artist Lubaina Himid, while New York's Tschabalala Self cuts to the chase



Le Rodeur: Exchange, 2016 by Lubaina Himid. Photograph: Courtesy the artist & Hollybush Gardens

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Anyone who thinks black artists have long been stunted in this country, or that our museums cling to the same few names – Chris Ofili, Steve McQueen, Yinka Shonibare – might take heart this year. The tides appear to be changing. Next month, the ICA has a retrospective of the multimedia artist Sonia Boyce and Nottingham Contemporary opens a survey of black artists of the 1980s, including Donald Rodney, Maud Sulter, Vanley Burke and the great John Akomfrah. Ofili has a National Gallery exhibition in

April and Tate Modern presents *Soul of a Nation: Art in the Age of Black Power* in July.

But the year gets under way with two image-makers whose work is dramatically and even jubilantly concerned with being black.

Lubaina Himid's show at Modern Art Oxford is rich, provocative and haunting. Born in Zanzibar in 1954, the artist came to London with her Lancastrian mother after the early death of her father. She was both member and champion of the 80s movement, and has since become a professor of art history. Her work is tinged with memories of her own lost country - sea-encircled, filled with vivid pattern and light - and with a lost black history running back to 17th-century slavery.

One gallery at Oxford is hung with painted variations on the fabric kangas worn by Tanzanian women, the decorative cloth becoming a flag or backdrop for inspiring exhortations: "Have Courage in the Crisis, Set Yourself Free", "Shelter in the Shade of Deep Friendship". Another gallery is transformed into a museum of English bone china.



Swallow Hard: The Lancaster Dinner Service (detail), 2007 by Lubaina Himid. Photograph: Courtesy the artist & Hollybush Gardens

Or so it seems at first. In fact these willow pattern dishes and sprigged dinner plates have been overpainted with portraits of slaves, scenes of slave markets and cartoons inspired by James Gillray, on the supposed perils of the abolition movement. The china has changed colour, bursting into high-chrome glory. The word bone suddenly acquires new meaning, and so does the idea of a head on a plate. Himid caps the series with a typically mordant title - *Swallow Hard: The Lancaster Dinner Service*.

Himid describes herself as more "a political strategist using visual language" than "a painter in the strictest sense". But there is painting in everything she does. There are many kinds of work on show at Modern Art Oxford - sculptures, prints, customised newspapers, appliqués, conventional canvases and the free-standing board cutouts for which she is perhaps best known; none are achieved without brushwork.

The cutouts are generally lifesize figures carrying on some kind of private business of their own when we come upon them - dancing, playing musical instruments, getting down to work. Occasionally they appear in throngs. Spike Island in Bristol is recreating a previous installation involving 100 figures depicting the African slaves forced to work as dog trainers, dancers, toy-makers, herbalists and ceramicists at the royal courts of 18th-century Bristol.

But at Oxford the figures are solo.

The merry silhouette of a woman, who might be ancient or modern, leaps by as blue waves undulate beneath her toes. She is a fisherwoman, and carrying the tools of her trade. But so alluring is her spirit - and Himid's lithe expression of it - that the fish are diving straight into her pockets.

This dynamism is very much the artist's own trait. The show opens with a work called *Freedom and Change*, in which Picasso's monumental bathers thundering along the beach are reprised as two black women in drapes fashioned out of airmail envelopes; instead of a canvas, they are surging across a pink bed sheet. If there's anything autobiographical here, from the sea to the foreign mail and the women's strong faces, it's mirthfully subsumed in this skit on art history.



Freedom and Change, 1984 by Lubaina Himid. Photograph: Courtesy the artist & Hollybush Gardens

For some years, Himid has been applying paint to pages of the *Guardian* to isolate photographs of black people, obscuring the rest of the news to draw attention to the media's way of making black faces both visible and yet also invisible through racial stereotyping (rappers, victims, athletes and so on). This is basic consciousness-raising. Far more potent, and less didactic, are the mysterious paintings of black subjects that fill the main gallery.

Himid plays games with scale - tiny heads, elongated bodies - and with perspective. Objects are flattened, as if drawn by a child. Scenes appear to be so simple and direct and yet they are irreducibly strange. Who is the bird woman comforting a dejected man? Why is there an open arch giving on to the sea behind him? Who are the two powerful women seated at a table they appear about to overturn, why does one have a plate of stars and stripes in the form of bacon rashers? It seems these two women are black artists.

And what they're discussing, according to Himid, is a new way of painting, perhaps what you see here in Oxford. A theatre of strange legends - schoolrooms where the ceiling rises terrifyingly high, anterooms where travellers wait for ever, cabins lapped by waves. It is a world halfway between safety and peril, between land and sea, in which black characters appear and then vanish as if tossed in the ocean of history.

Ironically, since she has done so much to promote her peers, Himid's own work has been

unjustly overlooked. The shows at Oxford and Bristol (later touring to Colchester and Preston, where she teaches) should help, along with her inclusion at Nottingham Contemporary.

The young New Yorker **Tschabalala Self**, on the other hand, is only 26 but already an American star. It is not hard to see why, in this first UK show, for Self is a born image-maker. Her subjects are young black women, usually alone, sometimes partnered with raunchy lovers, holding their own on brilliantly coloured backgrounds. These figures are not exactly portraits and not precisely characters; Self calls them avatars for her own personality.



For the Gods, 2015 by Tschabalala Self: 'a born image-maker'.
Photograph: Photograph by Thomas Nelford/Courtesy of Irena Hochman Fine Art Ltd.

They sway, squat, shimmer, dance and recline like modern odalisques. Hair flies, legs scissor in overlapping sequence, knees, nipples and buttocks appear in gorgeously shaped silhouettes. Self's look is instantly recognisable, a blend of printmaking, painting and collaged fabric, all pinned together with machine stitching as nimble as finely drawn ink.

The allusions are all visible - black art, quilt-making, Josephine Baker, hip-hop and so on - but Self turns every visual cliché to advantage. She has the graphic zip of Picabia, and a close study of Matisse, perhaps, has given her cutting and composition a sinuous energy that makes even the most static figure pullulate on the surface.

Best of all is *Floor Dance*, in which the dancer has four arms and is performing the splits with superhuman athleticism. Scraps of cloth and faux fur, oil pastels, vinyl and an unapologetic sexuality give the image so much lift it appears to be taking off from this world - like the artist herself, not so much dancing as flying.

. Lubaina Himid: *Invisible Strategies* is at Modern Art Oxford until 30 April. Tschabalala Self is at Parasol Unit, London until 12 March

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