

**CARTE DE VISITE**

**curated by**

**LUBAINA HIMID**

**with**

**HELEN CAMMOCK**

**CLAUDETTE JOHNSON**

**INGRID POLLARD**



# CARTE DE VISITE

Lubaina Himid

A year ago in a cafe in Gwangju South Korea, Hollybush Gardens asked me whether I would like to propose a project for the gallery. I knew immediately that I wanted to make an exhibition through which we could discuss what happens when artists talk to each other, over time, about their ideas, processes, materials and begin to exchange intangible visual moments.

I have known Claudette Johnson and Ingrid Pollard for thirty years, and having recently encountered the work of Helen Cammock felt that the conversations these artists would have with each other could develop into an interwoven narrative between artists who are not afraid to experiment with the disruption of space or time and who dare to undo the threads of how work comes together.

What frightens them and what makes them laugh.

We talked about spiders and snakes, fast cars and plane crashes, Jackie Kay's teenage diaries, eclipses, Copernican Orreries, Octavia Butler, independent film and the Camera Obscura.

Strategies for keeping and collecting images.

Chance encounters between a partly forgotten past, a rapidly changing present and a potentially serendipitous future.

Not completely lost or entirely found.

Glimpses of men interrupted, slightly disappointed; printing, posing, painting, carrying and pushing, in command of the space and their work.

What to keep and what to throw away; what remains private whilst being on public display.

We talk about what the show is trying to do – can it be a place to which artists bring exactly what they want to make and are determined to display, without the restrictions of past expectations?

The 'found slide' has block print patterns I recognise and so lend her some books; the African pattern, the Picton and the *Toile de Jouy* – the contents persistently overlap.

Co-coordinating elements is part of the process. Gentle portraits of people working in Picardy and East Lancashire. Gather and collect then confidently carefully edit.

Fragments of the travellers archive – Heat and light.

A drawing of a woman stares at us, deeply assured but intimate and close; chalk marks on the wooden floor show where she stood. Can things emerge and meander? Sons emerge, lines meander. The room is warm and soft, bathed in September light.

They all sit on the sofa, she is the centre of attention but has never seen it.

Status is not an issue. She talked about singing, walking in the woods, driving to the coast, gardening under instruction, blue grey and yellow grey, torn paper. Bowls and animals, jugs and mugs gathered for display?

Some of what we hear ourselves say to each other in the places where our ideas shift and fix is significant. Our parents; fathers forgetting and inventing, the clothes and shoes our mothers wore, complicated bank accounts, stolen knitwear, new homes, old dreams.

Months pass and images appear brushed with the dust of those quiet conversations.

Conversations in public places Hollybush Gardens, The V&A, The ICA, The Wellcome Foundation, Friends Meeting House, BFI Southbank, The Tetley, Rivington Place, Olive Press, Pizza Express, Chateau de Sacy, In Situ, Making Histories Visible Archive and ArtLab Print studios at UCLan. Next perhaps Hepworth's studio in St Ives or the dark landscape near Hexham.

There was a day when Zanele Muholi, Lerato Dumse and Noo Saro Wiwa were speaking at the University of Central Lancashire that Ingrid Pollard, Helen Cammock, Christine Eyene and Evan Ifekoya were all in Preston at the same time and were able to meet and speak to each other.

All three Carte de Visite artists worked, on separate occasions, with another set of artists who are totally committed to sharing their expertise and their equipment; new work inevitably emerged and this collaborative approach may enrich many creative conversations and help to introduce another phase.

Magda Stawarska – Beavan and Tracy Hill ensure that during the easy, calm, quiet and efficient days spent in the Print Room at UCLan, Lino texts, yards of wallpaper, crumpled pillows, family portraits and speculative experiments are produced; the photographic archive in black and white informs the double red and the blue greys. Ingrid and Claudette separately remember Lenthal road Print workshop.

Ingredients for sustaining communication across continents,  
add or subtract as required –

Lemon Verbena tea  
Sloe Gin and tonic  
Fresh Milk  
School milk  
Earl Grey tea with milk  
Peppermint tea  
Cucumber sandwiches  
Quiche  
Hummus  
White wine  
Apple and pork sausage rolls  
Danish pastries  
Macaroons  
Italian beer  
Bread sticks  
Falafels  
Jamaica Ginger cake

It has been deeply intriguing to observe what happened when each artist encountered questions about the past and how this will impact upon what they hope may subsequently develop in years to come. I now have a better understanding of how these artists work between and beyond an exhibition; they navigate the silences between our histories, either by pinning coloured markers to a three dimensional map or by leaving exquisite cards on a silver tray.

Claudette Johnson

“Got to fight hard and all the time with the scripts and the people.  
Cause they’ll trap you in a fiction.”

Tony Cade Bambara, *Witchbird*

Although I don’t believe that there is an essential truth that artists can convey through representation, I do believe that the fiction of ‘blackness’ that is the legacy of colonialism, can be interrupted by an encounter with the stories that we have to tell about ourselves.

In making the works included in this show, I hope to facilitate this encounter.

As an art student, in the early eighties, I was inspired by the work of a generation of black American writers, including, Toni Cade Bambara, Toni Morrison, James Baldwin and Alice Walker; work that continues to resonate with me today. Their work opened up worlds of experience that had been deliberately ‘unseen’. Furthermore, the language, and the aesthetic created through that language, showed me that art forms such as jazz music could meld with written language to delineate the fragmenting experience of the survivors of the diasporic journey. The broken lines and shifting forms in some of my work are a direct response to the work of these writers. I like to think that these works share the syncopated rhythms of Bebop era jazz music. It seemed to me that their writing allowed their characters to exist and even thrive outside of the predetermined frames offered by the host societies. It led the way for me to allow the figures in my drawings to resist and try to exist outside of the four walls created by the perimeters of the paper.

For me, there is still a lot of pleasure to be had from pushing pigments around on heavy paper. I remain fascinated by black people – our physiognomies, our histories our presence/present. (In saying that, it occurs to me how strange that might sound were I not a person of colour. Race is fore grounded in a way that is impossible to replicate in a community that has not faced near annihilation.) Thus I have continued to use pastels and water-based paints for the immediacy, even urgency that they can lend to the work.

Pushing the pastels around on oversized sheets forces me to build the forms in a physical process that is almost at the limits of my capacity. Being slightly out of control of the process, through working on the wall rather than on an easel, having the sitter behind rather than in front of me, helps to keep an element of struggle in the drawings. Which is where I want to be.

In my work, everything happens in the individual work. The planning, the structure, the decisions about colour harmonies or tonal shifts all take place within the work. There are few or no preliminary drawings, no sketches no underlying skeletal framework mapped out in pencil. There is only what happens within the piece. The distortions and revisions that inevitably occur are all part of the process for me.

And distortion has a place. The colonial experiment has created a lens that continues to distort the ways that we perceive ourselves and are perceived. As an approach, distortion also offers a route out of the morass of glib representation. Francis Bacon said, "If you want to convey fact, this can only ever be done through a form of distortion." I'm not sure that 'facts' are what I want to convey but I do think that, for some of us, to approach any kind of truth we have to work with the distortions that (for better or worse) have shaped us.

"Are you sure, sweetheart, that you want to be well? ... Just so's you're sure, sweetheart, and ready to be healed, cause wholeness is no trifling matter. A lot of weight when you're well."

Toni Cade Bambara, *The Salt Eaters*

I'd like to think that the characters in these pieces have some weight. You can't escape them. They're here to stay.

# CATALOGUE

Helen Cammock

I don't normally travel on buses  
They are hotbeds of tension

But I was late

–

You pushed in front of him

Maybe all he saw was your red beard, glasses and pea green parka

Or maybe all he saw was a white man

–

It started a slow rage bubbling as he flashed eyes, then arms

You had already gone up the stairs

Unaware of the tempest you had begun to blow

–

He sat staring, talking to himself, flashing eyes  
One hand in his ear the other on the phone

–

The bus stopped, you climbed on

Tall, older, well spoken, expensive satchel, open face

Loudly appreciative that the driver stopped for you

–

You sat in front of him

–

He recoiled, shifted, swore

–

You didn't notice

–

He took his umbrella, folded and compact

–

He jabbed it once, then twice, then three times simulating a stab  
All the time still holding a phone to his ear

"I learned about culture, first as something which is deeply subjective and personal, and at the same moment, as a structure you live...  
...I could never understand why people thought these structural questions were not connected with the psychic – with emotions and identifications and feelings because, for me, those structures are something you live. I don't just mean they are personal; they are, but they are also institutional, they have real structural properties, they break you, they destroy you."\*

\*David Morley and Kuan Hsing Chen (eds.), *Stuart Hall: Critical Dialogues in Cultural Studies*, 'The formation of a diasporic intellectual: an interview with Stuart Hall by Kuan-Hsing Chen', 1996, Routledge, p. 490.

Creating interrelationships between moving image, photography and text I'm interested in how individual and collective experiences embody the consequences of structural inequality, by exploring the societal dissonance that I find across systems of representation. This sometimes feels like a complex undertaking and means that I have had to think about different mechanisms to open this up, so I can 'get in' and do something with this.

Writing in different forms has released a range of temporalities and modes, through both simultaneous and dislocated events and I have become increasingly absorbed by the interplay between historical and contemporary references – overlapping and dislocated modernisms.

Moving image enables me to create stories in which I weave different contexts and forms together, where relationships between text and image can interrupt the construction of durational conversations.

I aim to understand my position both structurally and experientially when making and thinking, and often this means using archival material alongside historical points/events. In constructing narratives that in general pivot around historical or contemporary events, you might recognise particular dates, events and speeches, but they are woven into a narrated if fragmented story.

I'm absorbed by an interplay that can be created by using a range of address – the back and forth and weaving of poem, political speech, fictional narrative alongside fragments of my own writing; to offer both context and an element of lyricism. The sometimes contradictory form of these narrative fragments, is intended to engage with the diversity of experience of the viewer and to ask something of them in making their own connections between references.

I want to really think about the photographic image and how it can be interrupted, its meaning dislocated and further constructed through the use of video, installation, text and so on. I want something to happen in the process of looking, which requires an image to have energy –

so as to speak to, contradict or relate to the next. I call this using the 'energized frame'; something where there are a number of dialogues, and platforms for the dialogues at play. For me this is a coming together of a number of elements; a script, pace; new meanings through a juxtaposition of image and text; and the use of the voice. This asks the maker, and subsequently the viewer, to play with the presentation and re-presentation of ideas through utterance, modulation and re-appropriation, consequently asking questions about authorship, value and the process of claiming social and political space.

It enables me to play with the idea of authorship, introducing myself to the viewer and re-presenting words that may be initially written by a novelist, philosopher or poet into a text alongside my own words – questioning the difference in meaning and impact when diverse singular voices say the same words – considering what happens in this interplay when different voices come together. This play is my 'audible fingerprint' – my voice in dialogue with others – but through a construction of my own.

This thinking always leads me back to the question Who Represents Who and for Whom.

### III

## CHANGING ROOM

Changing Room is a video piece built around ceramic works made by my father George Cammock set in his home of 27 years. At nearly 92 he is frail and nearing the end of life, one that has born witness to huge social /political change and upheaval. Some of these moments inform the script that is constructed from existing texts, scripted narrative and poems giving shape and meaning to the work.

The filmed ceramic pieces become characters but also witness to what's being said and are used to ask/show difficult questions around the construction of identity/ies and relationships, historically and currently. These lives of father and daughter span nearly a century in which black identity has been contested, fought over, and through which painful legacies of racism are still very much alive. This intergenerational conversation articulates how psyche and history are transferred; from his to mine, but also through and across generations, communities and nations.

It also considers questions around value and attribution, who gets to see what and why? Who becomes an 'artist' and why? Who is an amateur and who is not, and how and why can we value one activity over another?

Ultimately though, this is perhaps a necessary, if unrequited epistle, to a complex man and father.

# THERE WAS MUCH INTERRUPTION

Ingrid Pollard

This year I was Resident in  
Bierfield, Sacy le Petit, Berwick upon Tweed  
There Was Much Interruption

## **I remember**

Primrose dandelion dock  
wild garlic bramble sorrel  
jack by the hedge comfrey  
hazel elderflower  
teacups frying pan oil pesto  
Pulling

teasing

chopping

plucking

cut

seeping

I have been given a photograph of James Baldwin's home  
in southern France by Les Back  
I have another photograph of Baldwin  
in the same house being visited by Maya Angelou.

Paths road lanes footsteps through forests

deer paths fox tracks sheep trails

weeding

cutting

clearing

collecting

bagging

little forest kitchen garden dovecot

hills paths secret garden

climbing slopes

scrambling

walking

steps

### **I hear**

Laughter and voices in the night  
soldiers and music in Berwick  
soldiers and music in Port of Spain  
a trumpet in the garden      an accordion at the party  
a violin in the house      a whistle in the attic  
birdsong      woodpecker

### **I think about**

soldiers hand to hand fighting in the woods  
being lost in the woods  
    and  
        suddenly  
            surprised  
                by an emerging wild boar  
                making a rush for safety

### **I see**

fog cloudy      water rain showers  
sudden drenching

estuary      rivers      shore      sailing      boating  
bridges harbour      lifeboats

I walk past growing maize with  
stalks that are taller than me

I sit in the sunlight amongst the silent white stones  
as a brown deer slowly steps from the wood

**I think of**

printing calico at Loveclough  
printing Adinkra cotton cloth in  
Kumasi  
linen in Pendle mill  
cotton in Lahore  
sugar beets from France  
Demerara sugar from Guyana

**I see**

Graves      Names      Stones  
A soldier of the Great War      Known Unto God  
A Soldier of the War – Unknown Indian  
A Noble Duty Bravely Done  
A Good Reputation Endures For Ever

“Overlapping interpretations and visual echoes of what was there before.  
As the lens is sharper in the center, details nearer the edges become  
blurred and stretched, leading to some wavy, light details in the trees  
branches.”\*

\*Sam Smith

## Dark

"In a vast empty loft a figure stands both in and out of the light.  
Her leg is ever so slightly bent and her arm a little curved,  
it is as if she is on the verge of motion, just leaving or just arriving.  
She is standing just outside a rectangle of light  
she is between full light and full shadows."\*

## I remember

dark chambers      light-filled rooms

those who observe the moving spectacle  
in the darkened camera obscura  
note the flickering images  
the branches moving in the wind  
shifting in and out of focus  
the glimmering dance  
spectacle of moving water

look this way  
    don't smile  
        turn toward the light  
            close your eyes

I cycle amongst past fields coated in blue lime-scale  
I cycle slowly pass a fields of beans  
edged by luminance red poppies  
I cycle to collect the milk  
the watchful slow eyed cows  
gaze at my progress  
    on the path  
        that brings me  
            closer

\*Ella Mills

## **Light**

“... our eyes are capable of extremely rapid movement of instantaneous shifts in focus from a book in hand to a distant star of adapting to bright or dim light of distinguishing colours of estimating distance size and direction of movement”\*

## **Interrupted**

time drags delay revisions interruptions

\*R Modark

# IN THE COMFORT OF AESTHETICS

Christine Eyene

It is the approach that matters.

That of the artist of course, this goes without saying, but also that of the viewer.

It is the gaze that counts, in the slow unveiling of unknown forms, telling yet untold stories.

To look, not with innocent, but fresh eyes; and listen to what the image has to say, our minds cleared of preconceived ideas.

To lose oneself in the realm of what French author Georges Bataille once called the non-knowledge, embracing the many possibilities allowed by unconditioned modes of interpretations.

**Carte de Visite:** Helen Cammock, Claudette Johnson, Ingrid Pollard.

Some of us might know their names. Others might not. To all this exhibition serves as an introduction, as a snapshot of that moment in time. Like those mid-nineteenth century *cartes de visite*, calling cards whose purpose was to assert the sitter's identity while establishing the photographer's practice.

A *carte de visite* encapsulates the very act of representation. A double-sided medium, with a recto and verso of equal importance, it offers the dual perspective of the subject and the maker, of the scene and backstage.

An act of courtesy, a token of friendship, a marker of social status: undeniably. A sign of the affliction that saw Greek mythological figure Narcissus drown in his own image: far from it.

These calling cards may announce the artists in response to an invitation by their peer, the artist and curator Lubaina Himid, it is not their portraits that one finds on the front of the visual plane. The images are theirs not because of the staging of their own body. They are by virtue of their authorship and, to some extent, of the personal narratives embedded within.

## Those traces on our bodies

It took a ten-minute drive to get to her studio. Ten minutes to finally visit the workspace of the artist who instigated this historical moment Lubaina relates in her 2001 performance/paper “Inside the Invisible: For/getting Strategy”. A journey that could have been made five or ten years ago, maybe more. But the moment had to be right.

To enter Claudette Johnson’s studio is not to merely push the door of a physical space, it is much more than that. It represents being allowed into a thinking process, and invited to engage in a conversation about her work. Not just the finished one but also the one in progress. Aware of this window of trust granted by an artist who would only show her work once ready for a discussion to happen, I decide not to take pictures. Instead I look, carefully. Letting the work make its mark on my memory.

There are two paintings in front of me. One laying on the floor, the other hung on the wall. Two more pieces are on the wall to my left. Both bear testimony to the birth of a portrait. She then pulls one from behind me. This one was behind a stack of frames. Almost hidden, as if to be concealed from the curious eye until it was ready to come out, filled with meaning and relevance in the company of echoing pieces.

I may have seen this work before, or maybe not. I am not sure. The face looks familiar though. It represents a female nude. It reminds me of another of her paintings. Which one, I could not say. Maybe one of these untitled pieces, anonymous figures only she could name; women that speak to *us* and with whom *we* can relate.

Who is *we*, one could ask. *We*, black women, would be the answer.

If one accepts that the eye is not a neutral agent, the *we* in question cannot be dissociated from the viewer’s own identity. In fact, one could go as far as to say that one way to give meaning to a form is indeed to appropriate it as one’s own. The process of analogy whereby painting becomes a window open onto the world, or a mirror of society, is a useful tool here. Those paintings of black women gain potency in the intimate connection they instigate. They are a reflection of ourselves. Their presence is all the more significant in that they are a rare sight in the tradition of British painting. We know that they have a particular place in history, in that critical decade that was the 1980s. But why is it, I wonder, that I have not seen more of them? Why is it that the few times I have was in reference to the past?

Between the past and the present, I see continuity in her aesthetics. I ask her about her *modus operandi*. Are the pictures painted from a sitter, a photograph, or from memory? Does the process involve preparatory sketches?

Her visual sources draw from the first two, and the portraits are rendered through a combination of pastel and gouache directly worked on what is to become the final medium. Larger than life, their presence is imposing. Surrounded by them, we sit, outnumbered.

Yet their physicality is in no way menacing. The glance they cast upon the viewer calls for an acknowledgement of their being, of their existence, in places of invisibility and misrepresentation. This translates through the scale and texture of the portraits. If the sitter's size and engaging gaze grab our attention, the painterly treatment invites to wander across the picture plane and scan through the details that make up the features, anatomy and simulate textile materials.

In Claudette's work, forms and curves result from the juxtaposition of painted and empty surfaces, a device that gives it a sculptural quality with an impression of projections and hollow parts. Unworked neutral surfaces play their part in her technique of figuring, our eyes prompted to imagine merely outlined shapes, even the colours. Somehow, this process of revealing through emptiness echoes the dual condition of black visual representation oscillating between absence and over-exposure. The body is worked throughout in this technique and it is not unusual for parts of it to fade at its edges and materialise like appearances piercing through large pieces of paper. The medium itself challenging the notion of straight borders.

Male figures are a new addition to her repertoire. Of the man in front of me, I recognise his belonging to contemporary urban culture. He is seen exposing a sculptural chest. Claudette then points out something that is not immediately visible. This man is not just presenting a well-shaped body, he is showing a bullet wound. The act of lifting his shirt is not one of vanity, it is a gesture aimed at raising awareness of police brutality towards the male black body, sadly, an all too common occurrence. However this representation is not that of a martyr. The wound speaks of violence but the portrait refuses any form of victimization. In this piece there are signs of resilience. And in the man's eyes, one could almost read the message that "we are still standing".

In view of her unique aesthetics forged over a thirty-year career, seemingly unaffected by time save for signs of a perfection only maturity allows to achieve, I ask her if her figures bear the same significance they did thirty years ago. She tells me that things have changed and the context is different.

She once told Marlene Smith about “traces of our past that we carry in our bodies” (ref). In that, Claudette Johnson’s portraits can be seen as timeless figures that speak in the present tense but also encapsulate the legacy of black figurative expression.

### **The stories within the walls**

Imagine a room in a 19th century French castle. The door is closed. You take a first look around to get familiar with the space that will be your home for a month or so. Overtime, there is one feature to which you keep on returning: the wallpaper and its motives.

It is on the walls of her residency bedroom, at Chateau de Sacy in Sacy-le-Petit, Northern France, that the visual narrative created by Ingrid Pollard first took shape. Toile de Jouy is not an unusual feature in traditional aristocratic interiors. A quick search indicates that it is a type of decorating motif applied to white or plain fabrics or wallpapers, on which is repeated a pattern usually depicting pastoral scenes. Originally produced in Ireland in the mid-18th century, it became popular in Britain and France and, by the late 18th century, was known as Toile de Jouy, owing to its production in Jouy-en-Josas, west of the Parisian region.

It is worth highlighting that Jouy-en Josas is located just two miles from Versailles and, as such, has always benefited from its proximity to the jewel of what was then the French kingdom: the Palace of Versailles. To the ostentatious lifestyle one would imagine common to such environment can be added the very name of the town “Jouy”, a direct translation of the Latin *gaudium*, meaning “joy” and, in contemporary French, a conjugated form “jouis/joui” the definition of which range from the innocent “enjoyment” to orgasmic “coming”.

Having a bit of a background of this very connoted wallpaper helps frame the reading of Ingrid’s new compositions. It allows a better understanding of the other side of the story. The Chateau de Sacy was converted from what had previously been a farm building for two centuries, just a few decades after Christophe-Philippe Oberkampf set up his Toile de Jouy factory, in the town from which it bears its name. Both are contemporary.

Behind the decorative wall piece, behind the floral arrangements, the rural scene, or the depiction of affectionate moments between couples, lies the reality of those who worked the land, who worked in the factories, who picked the cotton used in the making of the fabric used in Jouy, and the domestic servants who tended to the masters who owned the land, the factories, and whose walls and windows were covered in this fashionable item.

Ingrid's new series revolves exactly around the notion of work but in the present time. Her wallpapers are both a medium and part of an assemblage bringing together composite visual elements including portraits, rural architecture, flowers, keys, and abstract motifs. The workers' portraits taken in Sacy, Lancashire, or Ghana, are all moments of interruption, the camera acting as an instrument of a gentle intrusion. In her work, Ingrid uses images that she took as well as archive photographs. She does not consider her photography work as being distinct from that of the man in Ghana creating patterns of a fabric, no more than the man handling a chainsaw, or pushing a wheelbarrow while wearing a Che Guevara t-shirt – coincidental but not insignificant. She sees her work as that of making pictures. She too has experienced these moments of interruption in her creative process.

Somehow this is reflected in her fragmented compositions. Each pattern could be seen from two angles: as an image of its own, or as a symbol of something more; forms calling for an interpretation, if not an iconographic analysis. Like those keys that represent the idea of access to a physical space, with the implied relationship between indoor and outdoor, as much as they do the notion of decoding. Or the mill, a structure transforming raw material, turning water into a power generating resource and, in the context of Lancashire, a symbol of the industrial revolution with its links to colonisation, in addition to signifying repetitive work.

And then there are those abstract shapes and textures open to free interpretation. Seeing and imagining are part of the experience Ingrid seeks to provoke in the viewer. She opted for a *camera obscura* to this effect. An antique optical device popularised in the 18th century – just like the *Toile de Jouy* – the darkened chamber affects the image, notably in its focus and depth of field. It also gives it a unique texture.

Using a tent-size *camera obscura*, Ingrid interrogates the way we observe things. The inverted image produced by the optical system translates the visual phenomenon as perceived by our eyes not our brain.

Beyond the portraits and symbolic forms composing her visual register, in this work Ingrid Pollard explores the very notion of gaze through the physicality of looking. Her approach of image making does not limit itself to the notion of visual occurrence. It also investigates what happens to the brain in the mechanism of vision and seeks to make sense of that process.

### **Only the objects to tell**

In her curatorial premise, Lubaina Himid asks the following question: “what happens when artists talk to each other over time about their work and exchange intangible visual moments?” Helen Cammock answers with a very personal conversation through a two-part piece consisting of a video and a mixed-media installation. This is not a verbal conversation, rather it is an unspoken dialogue taking place through invoking the past, and through the presence of objects left behind.

*Changing Room* opens on a ceramic okapi sculpted by her father. This is followed by a slow travelling shot along a room, maybe the living room, in which appears the corner of a table with a tucked-in chair and on the wall is hung a circular painting of antelopes. As we progress, a small sculpture emerges of a running puma, placed on a shelf above the heating. All along Helen’s soft voice lulls the viewer into the poetic tone of her narration. Immersed in the beauty of the images we are suddenly taken aback by the story being told, and the violence of the racism experienced, both insidious and overt. The film continues, drawing from her father’s life, her own reflections and citations from Frantz Fanon, Walter Benjamin and Michel Foucault.

The okapi is placed in her mixed media installation entitled *And there is something about a mountain*. It is the only figure present out of all the animals featured in the film. It is one of the ceramics made by Helen’s father over his twenty-five year practice. Although he was an amateur, his talent was not unnoticed, as proves a 1970 newspaper article on him showing him painting his young family. The installation elements also include a book on how to teach oneself ceramics, his woodcuts, and prints of animals and their cubs that he used to make as postcards to send out to family and friends. Almost like his signature, Helen adds, linking this practice to that of a *carte de visite*.

However, we know from the film of his frustration not to have been able to do more. We can also imagine the challenges he would have faced had he chosen to pursue a career in arts. Ironically, the okapi that has been sitting in the gallery for nearly two years has intrigued curators and collectors alike. This piece speaks to the viewers on a level that has nothing to do with

the status of its author. Its placing within a gallery office space has led to the assumption that it was made by a confirmed artist.

The boundaries, context and mechanism whereby someone is considered an artist or not are questions Helen addresses in her work. Her piece touches on the notions of barriers, worth, and filter systems examined from her father's perspective and his relationship to art, in light of her own experience as a relatively young artist. She does so through text using words, phrases or comments, some of them made to her about her work, such as "And are you only ever going to make work about black people and women?" Likewise, individual words build up an idea of expectation, of worth, of meaning and belonging like the infamous phrase "plastic Britain" that revived what we thought was an outdated debate on identity. Or, "light touch", that speaks to the unease for some – or their reluctance – to address deep, painful or challenging issues.

A "light touch" is not how one would describe Helen Cammock's approach. This is not what she set out to achieve in her art. Quite the opposite, when she proceeds to lure us with the beauty of her video, it is only to expose personal and collective narratives with a more dramatic effect. The same can be said of Claudette Johnson's exquisite touch or Ingrid Pollard's savant experiments on the process of imaging. All that is conceded by all three artists is the freedom for us to find solace in the comfort of aesthetics.



# Hollybush Gardens

## issue four

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Hollybush Gardens  
1–2 Warner Yard  
London EC1R 5EY  
T. +44 (0)207 837 5991  
office@hollybushgardens.co.uk  
hollybushgardens.co.uk

Editing: Karin Bähler Lavér, Lisa Panting, Malin Ståhl  
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