

LUBAÏNA HIMID

**IN CONVERSATION WITH
LISA PANTING**

Lisa Panting In a recent studio visit, there was a pile of old oars resting on the floor. They are different sizes and ages, and have been used for different kinds of rowing. Some are silken soft from years of being immersed in water. No longer practical or robust, they speak of a past and have been collected as objects to become artworks.

Lubaina Himid Simon Plum, the person who found and sold me all of the old carts I've used during the past ten years or so, sent me a WhatsApp message in June 2024 and said he'd got a fantastic set of unusually long oars and wondered whether I fancied them.

I messaged back precisely two minutes later and asked him to give me a price and arrange with my team to deliver them whenever he could. I was in a meeting in my studio in Preston with Emma Dexter from the British Council and knew they would work for the show I'd planned for Hollybush Gardens in November.

The point is that it's often other people who feel that I may be able to work with objects and actually it's very rarely me who finds them. It's not a romantic or magical process but something rather practical and pragmatic; the oars have smooth soft surfaces which are wonderful to paint on. They also represent the Italian paintings of Black gondoliers in Venice which I have long been in love with, and they remind me of rowing clubs along the River Thames, paintings by James Tissot and at the same time my own work *Drowned Orchard: Secret Boatyard* (2014), a series of sixteen paintings on long wooden planks made in response to an invitation to participate in the 10th Gwangju Biennial in South Korea.

LP The use of objects is a powerful focus in your work and has been a constant in your practice for over a decade.

LH I've been painting on objects since around 2007, starting with plates, jugs and tureens for *Swallow Hard: The Lancaster Dinner Service* and then *Jelly Mould Pavilions for Liverpool* in 2010, a series of 38 moulds repurposed as possible designs for public monuments, shown simultaneously in six locations across the city. The next endeavour was to paint old carts and farm wagons in 2014/15. The practice moved to painting inside drawers when at about the same time Susan Walsh gave

me the whole of her magnificent installation *87 Drawers* (2005) which no one was interested in talking about, writing about, showing, or buying and which she felt took up too much space in our garage. I think of her every time I paint a man in a drawer because it was her narrative about living in an endless series of rented rooms from childhood until she was in her mid-forties that struck me as a deep and unresolved duet about poverty and the search for home.

LP You use found wooden objects, employ disassembled musical instruments and furniture which are overpainted and often merge with the canvas.

LH For the installation *Blue Grid Test* (2020) made in collaboration with Magda Stawarska for the group exhibition *Risquons-Tout* at WIELS Contemporary Art Centre in Brussels, we worked together talking about codes and patterns, rhythms, numbers and colours in order for Magda to compose the sound piece at the centre of the work. I scoured the house, garage, cellar and studios to gather objects to paint on. I had wanted to paint on thin strips of zinc but the sudden lockdowns meant that nothing was being collected or delivered across the whole of the UK. The objects included a mandolin, a daybed, various parts of a pianola, a paper bag, several maps, a clock, a page from the Guardian, book covers and anything else we could find. They became the canvas and the carriers of 64 blue patterns from across the world, from Niger to Japan and from Austria to Mali.

LP When a new object is introduced into your visual language, it sometimes develops into a series, or becomes part of a sculptural configuration in which the objects speak to one another.

LH Over the past few years, my team have helped me to take apart and re-use a pianola which I had played about with inside my storage space for many years. It became part of the series which included *Chopin's Heart* (2017–18) and was a major thread through *The Blue Grid Test* (2020).

A fabulously heavy drawing table was at first dismantled for its top and painted on to become a work which casually leant against the wall, as if discarded. Recently, the rest of this item of furniture has become a moving

puppet-theatre like object in which the drawers move back and forth to enable a conversation between the painted protagonists.

The *Men in Drawers* are part of a series but one which unfolds and contracts unexpectedly – opening and closing, hiding and revealing. They didn't start as a series and could stop being made at any time.

The ceramic works were all made with the intention of creating huge 100 piece installations that could be secreted amongst recognised objects within a museum setting or across city sites such as shop windows and café shelves.

LP The oar is another object that will be encountered a number of times in your new works; here in *Venetian Radio* (2024) placed aloft a painting on canvas. I am curious to know about the decision to place this oar in relation to the figure in the canvas?

LH I can hear the music coming out of the radio and so can the person leaning against a shelf within the painting; they hear the sentimental songs of the canals, the straining violins and the tenor tones of the gondoliers. All of the objects: the painted radio, the real oar, the painted gondola and the desperate listener combine to summon – yet again in a work of mine – this dysfunctional and annoying city. The real oar and its painted boat channel the sound as much and as little as the old radio, but the combination makes me laugh.

LP I have a strong image of you moving around the studio and thinking through movement, as well as using and making objects that either actually move or evoke the feeling of movement.

LH Yes, the ability to make something that can be moved or which itself changes or triggers a reaction or shifts the perception of something else is at the heart of what I do.

The installation *How Do You Spell Change?* (2018) which was first shown as part of the exhibition *Our Kisses Are Petals* at the Baltic, Gateshead was designed to enable small children and the elderly to pull on ropes and pulleys and change the formation and meaning of texts and images of

the flag-like Kangas. In doing so they were able to control the look or feel of the room and at the same time to imagine a world in which they could experience the clichéd performance of heroism; wrapping oneself in a flag. I cannot bear this work to be displayed as decoration, where the flags are suspended high and out of reach.

The early cut outs were meant to be as casual as furniture; they were made to be leaned against the wall, waiting to be moved easily from a position next to a window or perhaps opposite a bed.

LP Some of the object paintings on piano lids, banjo cases, drawers, doors, jelly moulds and plates, jugs, tureens and the oars have all been held, used, pushed and pulled, lifted and dropped. They evoke those past movements even though their current state is static.

LH In their original setting in 2015 as part of *The Feast Wagon* exhibition at The Tetley in Leeds, the painted *Carts* and *Feast Wagons* were displayed in predetermined positions in the gallery space, but visitors could move them and change everything. People were encouraged to place their children and belongings inside the carts and wheel them about – they became both playthings and vehicles for escape. It is deeply troubling to see the objects in exhibition spaces where they are trapped behind stanchions, penned in like sheep or small babies.

LP Like the window onto the sea in many of your paintings, these objects indicate a sense of world making, of showing a way, of possibility and motion.

LH In a sense, each of my painted objects can trigger a series of muscle memories which in turn have the potential to move a viewer closer to an understanding of their ability to shift and change something, in the moment, on quite a simple level. The idea is that if you have been able to move a cart or pull on a rope in order to shift the configuration of an installation in an art space, surely it must be possible to then take this further and change something you want to alter for yourself, once you have left the place.

Even without touching them it is possible to remember cleaning a plate,

pulling a drawer or opening a door; it's easy to understand that the way is being left open to you to position yourself within the narrative offered by me and try it on for size.

LP Your titles are significant, they operate almost as captions. *Lost Door* (2021) has an exquisite economy. There is often a two-fold meaning; the titles seem full of mystery and secret messages, as well as explicit references. Sometimes the title is simply 'useful' such as *Tegu Lizard (Feast Wagon)* (2015).

LH The titles are themselves texts and are almost always secret messages which refer to conversations had with other artists during the making of the work. On the other hand, the 'useful' titles are reminders that information found in books, though sometimes partial and dysfunctional, can also be reassuring.

LP Language is very important to you, but you seem to enjoy the space between the prosaic and the esoteric, filling this with poetry and history?

LH Text as code or pattern is important to me. The English language is such a politically loaded animal; its fundamental borrowings and its idiosyncrasies as well as the embedded racism and misogyny are a burden but endlessly fascinating. The way in which the meanings of everyday words and phrases have shifted and melted then reformed during the past 70 years of my life is a constant puzzle waiting to be solved. Encountering people who speak the same English language I learned in the 1950s is rare now. The translation and the interpretation needed to simply communicate a feeling or a phrase which refers to the past, from what is in my head to what is spoken, requires careful thought.

Text as title, title as text is another way for me to work out what it is that I have made.

Of course, I have a plan before I start and a good idea when I have finished about what has been going on, but often surprise myself. The only problem with this is that the text can have other meanings, as can the image, with the passing of time and sometimes I have no recollection of the title because the piece has a nickname. *Freedom and Change* (1984) will

always be *Running Women* to me.

LP When you decide to use an object, do you always gauge its full metaphorical potential?

LH It's fairly impossible to gauge anything as loaded as this before I paint on an object; sometimes the weight of it emerges as the piece is being made. The only conversation I can have initially is with its former use, then its original colour, scale and surface or perhaps simply its potential ability to carry the paint.

The drawers tend to need to feel deep and wide enough to hold a person's life. In *Swallow Hard: The Lancaster Dinner Service*, the jugs and tureens are vessels of personal narratives while the meat and dinner plates depict historical events.

LP I am intrigued that most of the objects presented here are part of a journey or indicate moving from one space or place to another, either offering escape or domestic protection?

LH The carts try to evoke the answer to the question: 'What would you take with you if you had to leave your home tomorrow?'

The drawers tell the story of people in search of home who constantly have to move in order to find it and as a result leave traces of themselves behind each time they depart from a place.

The oars were possibly used for racing but could also have been used on working boats. Whatever their origin, their primary function was to move people in a boat from one place to another.

The doors previously either closed off or opened up rooms and had the ability to fulfil both functions at once. Their contact with our bodies is peculiar in that we leave sweat, grease and in the case of small children, food all over them. We clean them but only in quite a perfunctory way, so even doors in private spaces carry evidence of movement with them for months at a time. We kick them and bang things against them without repainting or refurbishing so that these mildly violent encounters can leave their scars for years.

HOLLYBUSH GARDENS

FRIEZE LONDON 2024