

**A SENSE OF PLACE:
LUBAÏNA HIMID AND THE SEA**

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For four weeks in November 1998 and three weeks in March 1999 Lubaina Himid held an artist's residency with Tate St Ives. The invitation came from Tate St Ives curator Mike Tooby who had read what he called 'the quasi-autobiographical diary' (or that we might also think of as an autoethnographic essay) in the catalogue for Himid's 1995 Wrexham Arts Centre show, *Beach House*.¹ Tooby's invitation was prompted by a particular passage in Himid's essay for the *Beach House* catalogue, where, amongst other gems, she noted:

During World War One, the painters of St Ives could not paint the sea or the coast-line. Torture to have to turn their easels inward, their backs to the world, the roar of the waves and the wind. The threat of war something to be glanced at furtively over one shoulder until the planes came.

After hours and years of looking at paintings at Kettle's Yard in Cambridge and from the letters of Frances Hodgkins recently read, I am not surprised to find that I long to sit and stare out from a stone house high above the waves and marvel at the light, the warmth and the great distance from London. Quaint nostalgic small neat pretty and rather simpering St Ives until a storm rises and dashes hope and treasure onto the rocks.²

Having read of Himid's longing 'to sit and stare out from a stone house high above the waves' in the *Beach House* catalogue, Tooby invited her to St Ives to 'address that very possibility.'³ Yet as he remarks, 'the studio which resulted

1 Michael Tooby 'Introduction' in Tooby (ed.) *Lubaina Himid Plan B* (St Ives: Tate Gallery, 1999), unpaginated.

2 Lubaina Himid 'Beach House' in Martin Barlow (ed.) *Beach House Lubaina Himid* (Wrexham: Library Arts Centre, 1995), 12.

3 Michael Tooby 'Introduction' in Tooby (ed.) *Lubaina Himid Plan B* (St Ives: Tate Gallery, 1999), unpaginated.

however, was not the high terrace of Hodgkin's description, but the redundant Lifeguard's Hut – since no other space with a view of the beach was available.⁴

Although a space at Porthmeor Studios may not have materialised, the temporary studio improvised from the Lifeguard's hut proved to be a worthy location for Himid's imagination to set sail. In a March 2000 issue of *Art Review*, she published a short review of her experience:

Lifeguard's Office, Porthmeor Beach, St Ives, Cornwall

Inside is a narrow concrete staircase, shower room, smell of rubber suits, damp air, spartan loo, grimy kitchen. Then a low concrete room 8 feet by 15 feet, very very cold but bright and light like a spectacular diamond overlooking the most beautiful expanse of sea and sky. Hundreds of miles of water, thousands of tons of air changing with the sun, the wind, the temperature, the moon and the tides. Every minute is different. I chased lilacs, pinks, yellows, blues and greens by the hundred. White dazzled and deep purples enthralled me. I looked and mixed, looked again, mixed again, splashed, looked again, mixed again, painted, mixed, looked, looked all day, everyday, for four weeks in November 1998 and for three weeks in March 1999... Drawings and paintings made in my studio in Preston, Lancashire mixed with the paper paintings made during those periods in the Lifeguard's office in St Ives together formed the ten canvas works *Plan B* on show at Tate until early May 2000.⁵

Both Jane Beckett and Zoe Whitley have described the paintings of *Plan B* as akin to musical composition, 'distinct movements with variations, refrains and repetitions.'⁶ The concerto, to continue the metaphor, is composed

4 ibid.

5 Lubaina Himid 'Lighthouse Diary', *Art Review* (2000), reprinted 28 February 2005.

6 Jane Beckett 'Plan B' in Tooby (ed.) *Lubaina Himid Plan B* (St Ives: Tate Gallery, 1999), unpaginated.

of four text/image diptychs (three horizontal canvases and three upright, 9 feet by 4 feet *Pool* paintings whose titles *Red*, *Yellow* and *Blue* riff off a range of high modernist artists and their interlocutors, from Mondrian and Barnett Newman to Rasheed Araeen, Frank Bowling and Claudette Johnson, amongst others. The building blocks of modernist colour remain powerful tools in the continued reinventions of painting across the 20th century.

How, then, does this series of paintings speak to Himid's sense of place during the cold winter and early spring months spent in the quaint English seaside town of St Ives? Whilst the multiplicity of the works that she produced during the residency refuse an easy or resolute answer to this question (flaunting their right to opacity, in Édouard Glissant's terms), there are threads and connections worth teasing out, although my partial readings of a small selection of the works can only necessarily offer a partial interpretation of paintings of such complexity; paintings that are at once both hauntingly terrifying and dazzlingly beautiful – visual essays that manage a taut balance between tension and release.

As in many of Himid's deliberately interwoven works, I am unclear as to *Plan B*'s beginning and end and I am not sure it even matters. Indeed, such evocations of cyclical time, of no beginnings and no ends, are redolent of Julia Kristeva's conceptualisation of 'women's time' in which she asks, 'how can we reveal our place, first as it is bequeathed to us by tradition, and then as we want to transform it?'⁷ – questions that also inform Himid's practice in her ongoing painterly strategies for freedom and change.

A transcript of the texts in the *Plan B* paintings made for their recent exhibition *Plaited Time/Deep Water* at Sharjah Art Foundation in 2023 (for which a new collaborative libretto with Magda Stawarska was composed and accompanied the display), provides a narrative order that is a useful guide, one that begins

7 Julia Kristeva, et al. 'Women's Time', *Signs*, vol. 7, no. 1, 1981, pp. 13–35.

with *The Glare of the Sun*. Common to all of the paintings in the series, there is an absence of people, a significant move for an artist commonly associated with Black figuration, but if we think back to *Beach House*, (and forward to Himid's more recent series of *Architectural* paintings) we can regard it as a natural continuation of the strategy that deploys architectural spaces to think instead about the world we inhabit and how we might want to change it. In the *Plan B* diptychs, the architectural structures are in dialogue with a chorus, an antiphony of voices speaking the same lines in a round, like a liturgy of pain and suffering that is belied by the serene colours in which their painful text is recited, line by line:

The glare of the sun was always in tense/The glare of the sun/We suffered from exhaustion and lack/was always intense/of water. After many days of this followed/we suffered from exhaustion/by the pain of freezing nights we had/and lack of water. After many days/to cross a deep and/and were sure we would die there but/fast flowing river. Many of us were weeping/our friends helped and comforted us/with fear and were sure we would die there but/our friends helped and comforted us.

In the adjacent panel, the fiery orange walls inside the room invoke the pain and anxiety revealed by the text, and yet the delicate lavender and peach coloured letters of the text belie their angst. Only the glimpse of the ocean seen through the high-set window seems to offer a distant possibility of release or reprieve, tantalising in its unreachable marine splendour. Indeed, the tension inherent in this painting continues across all four of the diptychs.

What is especially interesting about the texts in all of these works: *The Glare of the Sun*, *The Sharp Undergrowth*, *Havana Night School* and *Our Entire Food Supply* is that whilst they speak to a heightened sense of danger, to a need for strategies for survival, to feelings of desperation and fear, each one nevertheless ends on a note of optimism. The last lines from each verse of each canvas read

as follows: ‘Our friends helped and comforted us’, ‘we reached the mountains’, ‘we could indeed survive long enough to enjoy our freedom’, and ‘the forest fed us well’.

At the end of the catalogue to *Plan B*, a series of letters written by Himid to Tooby and sent before, during and after the residency, reveal some of her thinking. On 20 December 1998, she notes:

If it wasn’t so frightening, it would be exciting to see how the image-and-text works from ’97, around interior domestic spaces and their double persona as war zone and havens of peace, have transformed over the last year and a bit. The early visits to St Ives in November ’97 then February this year shifted the space, intensified the text and opened up the walls to reveal sea vistas... the texts relate to exterior dangerous travails in hazardous conditions and could be slave narratives, soldiers’ letters or the dispossessed in the midst of war. The images are of calm elegant rooms empty but for odd-looking furniture... I’m trying to create visible and tangible illusions.⁸

And in a later letter dated 5th May 1999, the collisions between ‘quaint nostalgic small neat pretty and rather simpering St Ives’ and the world at large are writ large:

Since returning from St Ives, the blurring of the edges of the warzones have been extreme. All the work of the last 18 months, the reading of texts by Martha Gellhorn from the Spanish Civil War, the fabulous writings of Gertrude Stein in *Wars I have Seen*, has tumbled on top of itself. How is it possible that when I was in St Ives in November, Britain bombed

8 Lubaina Himid ‘Letters’ in Tooby (ed.) *Lubaina Himid Plan B* (St Ives: Tate Gallery, 1999), unpaginated.

Baghdad, when I was in St Ives in March, Britain prepared to bomb Belgrade, and has done so ever since. How is it that while shopping for fabric in Brixton or Brick Lane we ran the risk of dismemberment or death.⁹

And she continues:

Months of painting rooms, elegant but empty. The physical depiction of being inside a space looking out or working on an outside/exterior traumatic experience while not being able to get to it, or else having been in it (the outside) and needing badly to be out of it (therefore inside) but still engaging with it, is driving me mad. Magic tricks, changing light, relentless tides, crazy perspectives, optical illusions, and poetic texts, empty chairs and the ‘choice’ offered by two-canvas paintings, clarifies and confuses everything. However, I have to admit this totally expresses the point of the whole body of work. How do you tell the difference between war and peace? Where do war zones begin and end, where is the centre and who exactly occupies the margins. Is the land really safer than the sea, which is more difficult? To escape ‘to’? Or to escape ‘from’?¹⁰

One might be tempted to think that Himid’s paintings of the sea, bodies of water and beach-related works, remain primarily, and perhaps uncharacteristically abstract, yet this is far from the case. The sea is in fact an ever-present motif across Himid’s entire body of work. It is not always front and centre but it often makes an appearance, even if, as in many of her recent 2023 *Strategy* paintings, it is as a bit-part player in the corner of the drama that unfolds in front of it. Perhaps for Himid, like Dereck Walcott, the Sea is History, but it is also, deeply embedded in personal narrative, in an autoethnographic way of being in the world.

9 *ibid.*

10 *ibid.*

