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# Lubaina Himid and Magda Stawarska on life, love and work

First the artists fell in love. Now they're planning their first show together

# HOLLYBUSH GARDENS

Rebecca Nicholson. Photography by Sam Wright

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Artists Lubaina Himid and Magda Stawarska have home studios next to each other, on the first floor of the Georgian terraced house where Himid has lived since she first moved to Preston in 1991. Himid works at the front of the building, where large windows overlook a park with the River Ribble winding through it. Her studio is packed and vibrant. There are piles of books, multiple desks and tables, countless framed photographs, newspaper clippings and drawings, and a Cary Grant coaster for hot drinks. When she paints, she likes to listen to music, to the radio, to football matches.

Stawarska, her partner since 2017, moved in a few years ago and works next door. Stawarska has a sparser, neater, more organised room – which she uses when not in an even larger, neater studio down the road. “I like it more empty. A cleaner space,” she says, though she still apologises for the mess.



Six Tailors, 2019, by Lubaina Himid © Courtesy of Lubaina Himid, Rennie Collection, Vancouver, Hollybush Gardens, London, and Greene Naftali, New York/Gavin Renshaw



Tension, Katowice, 2024, by Magda Stawarska © Courtesy of Magda Stawarska and Yamamoto Keiko Rochaix, London

Stawarska, 48, the quieter of the two, is wearing the palette of many of her silkscreen prints; a grey shirt, black jeans and red trainers. Himid, 70, who selected an endless supply of Yacomaricard shirts as her luxury item on *Desert Island Discs*, is sharp in dark denim, brown brogues and a beanie. The pair have known each other since the early 2000s; they have collaborated, in formal and informal settings, for more than 20 years. This year they will have two major exhibitions. One, at [Mudam](#) in Luxembourg, is a fully collaborative show, while the other, at [Kettle's Yard](#) in Cambridge, will exhibit Himid's work and an installation she made with Stawarska.

How do they work together? They are always interrupting one another. "Oh, yes," Stawarska says. "Constantly," nods Himid, who claims she is a "more polite studio visitor" than her partner.

"That's true," says Stawarska. "I probably ask more questions: 'What do you think?' I'm seeking an opinion more than you."

"I'm seeking an *agreement*," laughs Himid. "I think this is really working, and I just need you to say it's fab."

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*"Working together is very intimate – but it's very funny as well"*

– Lubaina Himid

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Himid won the Turner Prize in 2017 when she was 63, becoming its oldest recipient, but her career has spanned decades. She was born in Zanzibar and moved to London when she was a few months old. Since the early 1980s, she has revolutionised the British art world, both as an artist and as a curator and educator.

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“Lubaina was part of a generation of Black artists who emerged at a time when Black art wasn’t recognised by much of the UK’s art establishment,” says Lanre Bakare, author of the forthcoming book *We Were There: How Black Culture, Resistance and Community Shaped Modern Britain* (Penguin, £22). “It was marginal and misunderstood, often framed as ‘angry.’” Perhaps Himid’s best-known work is *Naming the Money*, made up of 100 life-sized cut-out figures, which examines slavery and servitude through names and identity. “It’s fashionable now to create art that delves into ideas of colonialism and empire, but Lubaina was doing it at a time when it was seen as worthy and deeply uncool,” says Bakare. “She forced conversations on Black feminism and queerness... If you look at many of the big shows of the past 12 months, Lubaina’s work is either in there or has directly influenced it.”



Stawarska, left, and Himid in Stawarska's studio They stand in front of Flying Carpet, a new painting by Himid © Sam Wright

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Silkscreen prints in progress for Stawarska's exhibition © Sam Wright

Stawarska was born in Poland in 1976, and did a master's at Manchester Metropolitan University in 2005. Her approach often explores movement and migration through what she calls "inner listening". One piece, on the wall at the top of their stairs, captures, in print, the phonetic speech patterns of her son, who is now in his late teens, as he learned to speak in both English and Polish.

"I imagined her as a character from a movie, and that is still how I see her," says Dr Omar Kholeif, the author of a [recent book](#) on Stawarska's work and curator of the Mudam show. "The very notion of a woman who walked the streets, traversing borders, accompanied by discreet microphones, capturing sounds that she could not hear herself, was bewildering, mysterious, and curious to me."

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**Stawarska and Himid** first crossed paths in the early 2000s at the University of Central Lancashire, where both were then working. Himid was an academic and Stawarska worked in the print room; Himid wanted to learn how to print, having become interested in Polish theatre posters. She never managed to pick it up, despite Stawarska's attempts to teach her ("I tried!" Stawarska insists). While working in print and paint, Stawarska also moved into sound-based work, which brought them together as artists. "I participated in some of those [pieces]," Himid recalls. "And then we started to have these conversations about language and interpretation and translation..."



Skip Door: Utility Room, 2024, by Lubaina Himid © Courtesy of Lubaina Himid, Hollybush Gardens, London, and Greene Naftali, New York/Eva Herzog Studio

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Both of this year's exhibitions were a result of curatorial matchmaking. "Omar Kholeif [of Mudam] and Andrew Nairne [at Kettle's Yard] were enthusiastic to see what happened when our work appeared together," explains Himid. The centrepiece of the Mudam show will be *Zanzibar*, nine diptychs of just under three metres in size each. Himid first started making them in 1998. "I showed them the first time, and then I didn't really show them, because they don't look like anything I made before or since," she says. A curator commissioned Stawarska to compose a sound piece to go alongside it. "It's a huge composition of voice, of archive material, of performed texts, shipping forecasts," says Himid. This transforms the pieces into a kind of performance in which the audience becomes a participant: "The paintings don't sit on the wall. They're in the middle of the room." The sound is of equal importance, she adds – she suspects she would never have shown *Zanzibar* again without it: "This piece is now the paintings *and* the sound. They'll never be separated, and you can't buy them as individual paintings. You can't show it, unless it's the whole thing. And that was very much about trust, I think."

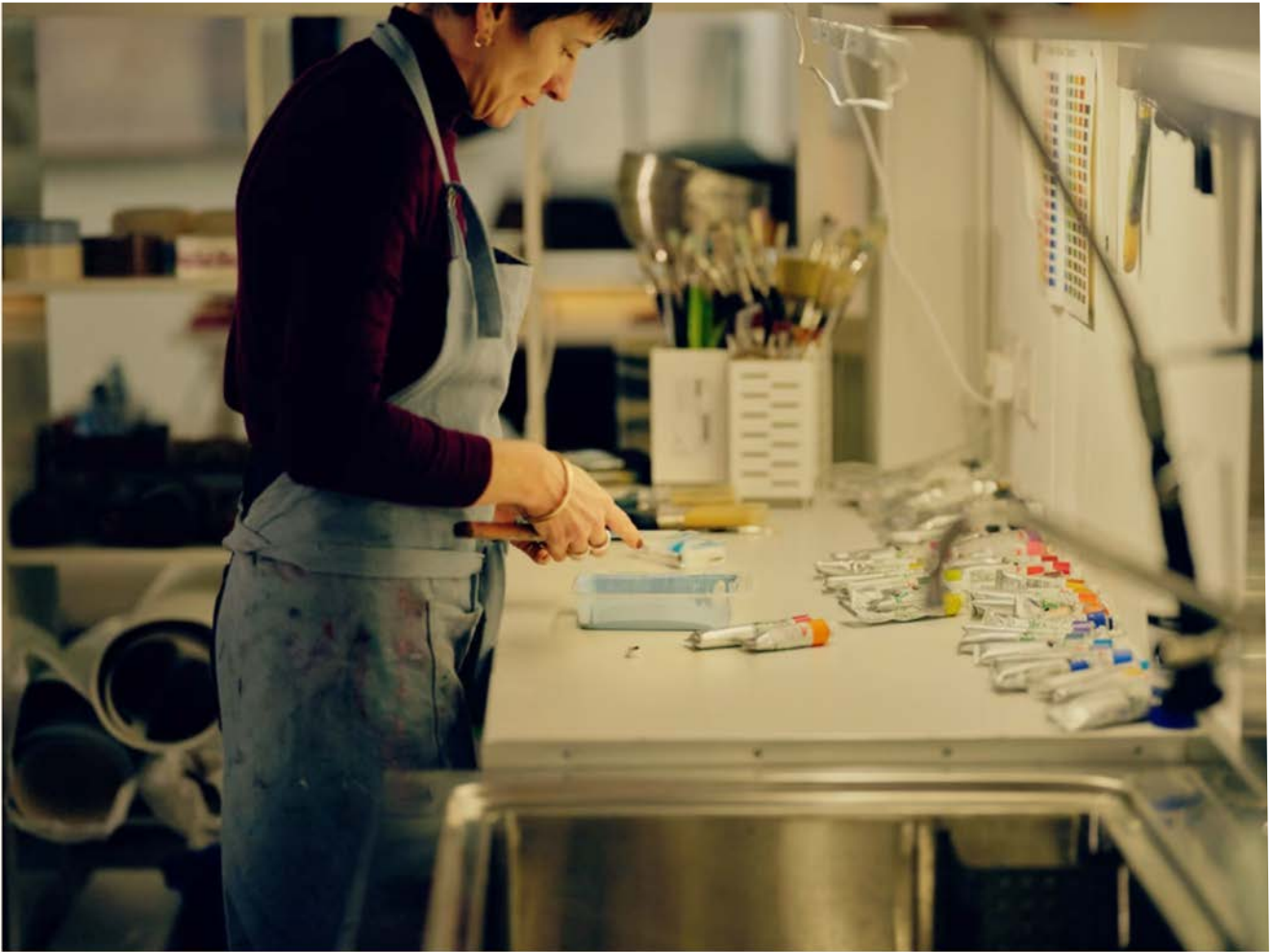
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**The process of working together** sounds very trusting and intimate. "It is, but it's very funny, as well," says Himid. "I find it easy. It makes me much more relaxed."

Adds Stawarska: "I was always interested in grids, but working with Lubaina has made me much more interested in patterns. I think that is definitely your influence on me – not that you wanted to have that influence."

They do, however, see their work together as very distinct from what they do individually. "When we're not collaborating, I'm painting big figurative paintings with loads of colour in and people in fancy clothes standing about talking to each other," says Himid, turning to Stawarska. "Which I think is very different from those very mysterious works about place and memory and archive and history and cities that you make."

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Stawarska mixes colours in her studio © Sam Wright

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A photograph of US poet Langston Hughes in Himid's studio © Sam Wright

At Kettle's Yard, one of their new pieces is called *Slightly Bitter*. It is currently being worked out in Himid and Stawarska's studios, and explores another kind of conversation between the late-19th-century Polish writer Sophie Brzeska and the painter and writer Nina Hamnett, "who was known as the Queen of Bohemia", says Himid. "I think she slept with everybody. She was in Paris, just hanging out and namedropping. Her autobiography is called *Laughing Torso*." Both Hamnett and Brzeska had relationships with the sculptor Henri Gaudier-Brzeska, and struck up an uneasy correspondence after he was killed in the first world war as they tried to bring his work to wider attention.

"The exhibition reflects the essential ethos of Kettle's Yard: that art and life are inextricable," says Andrew Nairne, director of Kettle's Yard, who adds that both Hamnett and Brzeska were "overshadowed and previously judged by criteria that now seem outdated and insular".

"There were so many funny things that made us laugh, and made us quite unhappy, about this not very known, quite tiny relationship," says Himid. "It made us think what fun it would be to take it and run with it, and mix in our relationship."

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Himid's studio in hers and Stawarska's house, overlooking a park © Sam Wright

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Stawarska and Himid in Himid's studio © Sam Wright

The work will feature postcard correspondences, some real, some imagined. One postcard is an old note from Himid to Stawarska apologising for taking so long to return some films that she had borrowed. Now there is no need to send notes – they can just interrupt each other all day. Once, Stawarska recalls, she wandered into the studio, where Himid was working on a painting. “She was painting these three people at a table...” she begins.

“Five!” corrects Himid.

“And I walked in, and I was talking, not about anything related to this painting. And Lubaina suddenly got this black paint and painted all of the people out, apart from one.” Stawarska was aghast. “I was like, ‘Oh my God. Is it something I said?’” she laughs.

“When Magda came in, she was talking about something domestic, or some practical thing, and I wasn’t listening,” says Himid. “But it was comfortable, and comfortable enough to do something so drastic. It would have been hard to do it on my own.”

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“It’s a really nice painting,” Stawarska says.

“Yeah, everyone really likes it,” Himid smiles. “So sometimes, the interrupting is really good.”

*Lubaina Himid and Magda Stawarska: Nets for Night and Day is at Mudam, Luxembourg, from 7 March to 24 August; Lubaina Himid with Magda Stawarska is at Kettle’s Yard, Cambridge, from 12 July to 2 November*