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Q&A
Lubaina Himid

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Interview

Artist Lubaina Himid: 'The YBAs were wired into selling art. We had no idea that was how to do it'

Sarah Crompton



📍 Lubaina Himid: 'Black women artists were not part of the mainstream debate.' Photograph: Gareth Iwan Jones/The Guardian

The pioneering Turner prize winner on being ignored for years, representing the UK at next year's Venice Biennale, and the joys of Preston

Born in 1954 in Zanzibar (now part of Tanzania), Lubaina Himid moved to Britain when she was four months old. After studying at Wimbledon College of Arts and the Royal College, she trained as a theatre designer. From the mid-1980s, she was a pioneering artist and curator, organising significant exhibitions of black female artists, and making work on the themes of racism, feminism and cultural memory. *A Fashionable Marriage* (1986), her response to Hogarth, and *Naming the Money* (2004) - an installation of 100 life-sized cutouts which reimagined the lives of enslaved and forgotten black figures in European history - are now recognised as groundbreaking. She was the first black woman to win the Turner prize, in 2017, and last week it was announced that she will represent Britain at the 2026 Venice Art Biennale. Himid is now collaborating with her partner, the artist Magda Stawarska, on exhibitions at Mudam in Luxembourg and Kettle's Yard in Cambridge.

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How do you feel about being chosen to represent Britain at the next Venice Biennale?

I'm so happy. It's a huge honour and a huge challenge, but I'm determined to have a great time doing it. It's such a dream venue. Venice is everybody's favourite city, and the pavilion itself is so British, on the top of that little hill, trying to be very grand and actually quite domestic. I love making shows that work with the place they're in.

Your work was only really feted after you won the [Turner prize](#). Did you mind being ignored for so long?

All those years, really amazing art historians were writing about the work, and tiny galleries and big galleries with minute reputations were showing it. They were not the most famous curators in the most famous venues but they were people who totally believed in me. I was teaching [at the University of Central Lancashire] and I used to get a phenomenal amount of energy from talking to student artists. That's what kept me going. I knew time was passing but I was making art every single day and showing quite often, it was just that no one was talking about it. Those big curators knew all about the work, but they didn't want to take the risk.

■ ■ *I thought I could change the world through putting on political theatre*

Why not?

In the 80s and 90s, black women artists were not part of the mainstream debate. The YBAs were incredibly strong and making very dynamic work that spoke to the moment. I think people thought our moment had passed, but we kept going and we kept talking to each other. We kept hanging on to the things that were important.

Were you ever bitter about being ignored?

I felt that we missed a trick. We set out to show our work to as many people as we could. But we were not thinking about selling it. It didn't occur to us. We didn't understand the system of commercial art at all, whereas the YBAs were wired into selling art as well as making really brave stuff. I was cross because we had no idea that was the way to do it. I felt I had been stupid.



■ Naming the Money, 2004, by Lubaina Himid. Photograph: Guy Bell/Shutterstock

Your show, [The Thin Black Line](#) (1985), which showed the work of now renowned black female artists including [Sonia Boyce](#) and [Claudette Johnson](#), was actually hung in a corridor.

I wanted to take over the whole of the ICA and they said no. Instead, they offered me a space that went from the foyer to the bar. It wasn't quite what I had in mind, but I knew these artists were just so good, and I thought thousands of people would see it as they went to the loo or the bar or the performance space. This year, 40 years on, we're returning - and I am doing what I wanted to do in the first place. Filling the whole building with their work.

Did you ever think of being anything other than an artist?

I was heading towards journalism because I was interested in why people do things. But I always had a desire to be part of change, and I got pulled towards being a political theatre designer, making artworks for public places that would interact with people's everyday processes. I thought I could change the world through putting on political theatre.

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What's it like exhibiting with your partner, Magda Stawarska?

Most of the time it's hilarious. We have a really good time. It makes me very relaxed because I can really talk through an idea. Being an artist is a bit lonely, you have to make your own decisions every minute. But with this collaborative work, it's all about our conversations about language, about interpretation, about codes, about pattern. We just love telling each other anecdotes or showing each other films or playing each other music that the other person doesn't know and sort of riffing off that.

How do you cope with living and working together?

My mother was a textile designer, so from being a child I've lived in the same place as another artist. It feels very natural to me to be talking about work while doing quite domestic things like shopping or cleaning. They merge and blend.

You've lived in Preston since 1991. Why do you love it?

It's a small city, but it works for us. The marvellous thing is that it's got one of everything and it has great transport. You can get to the coast, to the Lake District, to London, to the big cities in the north. It really is very central in that way. And it's very green, with fantastic parks and fabulous buildings. It's full of odd but rather wonderful architecture and strangely tolerant people as well. It's a region that's open to having a conversation about something simple or something complicated.

- *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
- *Connecting Thin Black Lines 1985-2025* is at the ICA, London SW1, from 24 June to 7 September
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