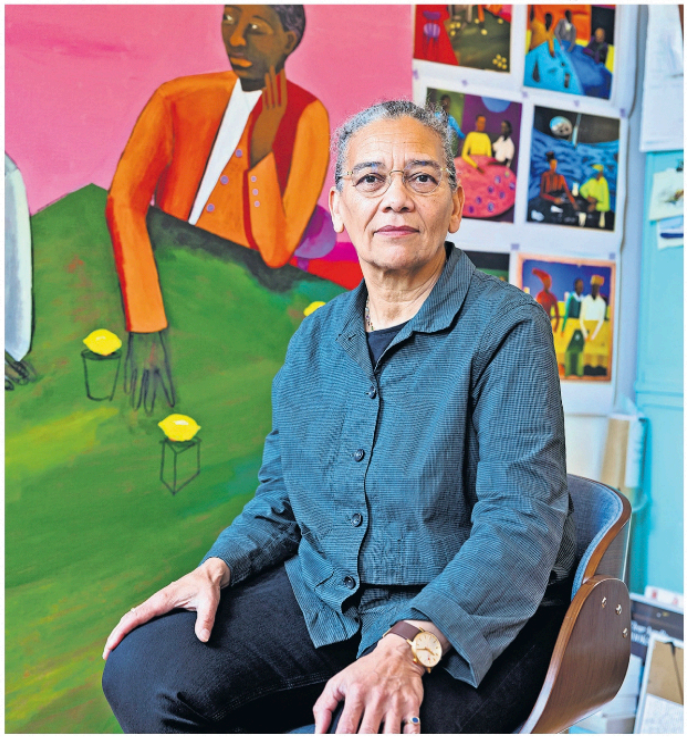
THE TIMES

visual art

I was a 50-year overnight success

Lubaina Himid won the Turner at 62 and is still finding her place in the art world, she tells Laura Freeman



JAKUB GLOSSOP FOR THE TIMES. © LUBAINA HIMID. PHOTO: ANDY KEATE

Lubaina Himid is a firebrand with a diplomat's finesse. A revolutionary who would mount the barricades having first checked that the climbing wasn't too hard on her comrades' knees. She has spent a lifetime trying to get the art world to talk about the issues it now never stops talking about: race, identity, empire, what it is to be black in Britain today.

I had been expecting an agitator — what I got was a sagacious great-aunt. Himid is 69. In 2017, at the age of 62, she became the hottest new thing in British art when she was nominated for — and went on to win — the Turner prize. She was made a Royal Academician in 2018 and was promoted from MBE to CBE for services to black women's art. A retrospective of her work opened at Tate Modern in 2021. One of those overnight success stories that takes 50 years.

It is a wet Monday morning when we meet at her house in Preston before the opening of her new show, *A Fine Toothed Comb*, at Home Manchester. It's an exhibition about homelessness and hidden lives in the city done in collaboration with three other female artists, Magda Stawarska, Rebecca Chesney and Tracy Hill.

Inside her early 19th-century terrace all is light. The walls, floorboards and stairs are painted white. In her studio, sash windows out over trees. She jokes that her cousin once called the house "a bunch of studios with somewhere to sleep". Work took up more space than life. She has a big studio in town now and a home studio across the front of the first floor. On the mantelpiece and in alcoves are a collection of Staffordshire spaniels and shepherdesses, some under glass cloches, that belonged to her mother. Himid was born in Zanzibar to a white mother and a black African father who died when she was a baby. Himid and her mother, a textile designer, moved to Britain when she was four months old.

I have read that Himid is up at 5am and in the studio without fail every day. As with most "habits of highly successful people", it's to be taken with a pinch of salt. It was true for the 30 years she was teaching, Himid says. She is an emeritus professor at the University of Central Lancashire. "I was always interrupting the painting with the teaching, always fitting the teaching into being an artist. And I've tried to teach everyone else I know not to fit the art into how you earn a living, but to fit how you earn a living into the art." Either way: "You have to get up early to do it."

She speaks without resentment. Teaching has been a wonder drug. "Every time you talk to a student they're telling you something all day long — what they've seen, what they've heard, what they've thought of, what they're trying to make — and so you're kind of fed. It's like being a vampire." She pauses. "Please don't write that." Why not? Himid won the Turner in her sixties not because she was overdue an award, but because she had the energy and ideas of an artist a third of her age.

She must be a brilliant teacher. We get to talking about the French painter James Tissot — we both have a soft spot for this fabulously unfashionable artist — and in three minutes she points out things about Tissot's scenes, figures and style that change the way I think about his art.

Great male artists had talent, but also 'slave servants who were their wives'

She doesn't mind being interrupted by teaching — how about by journalists? The demands of publicity are "exhausting", she says, but "to be honest, I spent all those years trying to get more visibility for myself and other artists, so really I'm not complaining. I'm moaning, but I'm not complaining."

Can she remember the first thing she made? "I went to nursery school at the age of 18 months, so I didn't have a childhood of 'making things at home with Mummy'. My mother was an incredibly creative woman, but she was a working woman." Himid remembers nursery school art sessions "with that horrible, thin paper and those watery paints — just green, red, blue, yellow — and making a big mess. And I can recall how I didn't like how the paper went bumpy when it's wet."

From top: Lubaina Himid in her Preston studio; Men in a Pyjama Drawer, 2018, from A Fine Toothed Comb

***A Fine Toothed Comb* is at Home Manchester, Oct 6 to Jan 7, homemcr.org**

From bumpy beginnings, Himid went from secondary school to "dabbling" in theatre. She has always been interested in theatre design and stage flats. "I was never really a sculptor. I was never really interested in making three-dimensional things. People ask me — seeing the cut-outs — are these sculptures? No, really they're paintings on found objects."

The work for which she is perhaps best known is *Naming the Money*, a series of 100 life-size black figures that are flat in form only. Himid gives them costumes, professions and back stories so that they become no longer "property" but people. At Home she will show a series of found objects — the back of a door, a drawer without its chest, parts of a bust-up piano — painted with faces, figures, animals, plants and signs. Lost souls found again.

Himid is the exhibitor and overall curator of the Manchester show. One of the big culture clashes of recent years has been over gallery captions. Do we need to know that the sitter in a portrait had links to the slave trade? "I think I do. Because otherwise the wealth and richness of the culture in Britain is hard to understand. There are the most magnificent collections, there are magnificent cities like Liverpool and London — you have to understand somehow how they came about. That's not a reason to destroy them, not a reason to rip things up, knock things down. You can understand how something came about and you can still appreciate how amazing it is." She likens it to a great chef preparing a meal. The dishes are put in front of you, you eat and you marvel. But if you watch the chef cook from scratch and understand the labour that went in, you marvel all the more.

"Understanding what enormous sacrifice went in, the amount of injustice…" She pauses. "I suppose some people might say it would give you a bad taste in your mouth because you see that cruelty had to happen. But if you can see it in terms of how much of a contribution those people who were mistreated made to the greatness, to the richness, to the layers, I think it's better."

She says that when it comes to cancel culture, she's "a retainer and explainer — but I am old-fashioned and old, so I would say that. My trouble is that all my life I've been with and taught with and lived with and loved artists, so I'm aware that an artist made that statue of that terrible person. If we start to destroy things, I don't want to discover that in 50 years' time we're going to destroy something else because the tables have turned and it's, say, Anish Kapoor now."

The biggest societal change she has seen in her lifetime is "a much broader understanding that women are equally important in the scheme of things. You know, when I was a girl, this was not the case. That is the hugest thing. And, among this, that black women have a voice and that people were listening. We were always listening to each other, and then others began to listen." When she was young she wanted things to change now. Today she understands that change is a negotiation.

Himid doesn't have children, but nor does she buy the pram-in-the-hall, enemy-of-creativity argument. Children shouldn't be a barrier to women making art, but it is easier for men. The great male artists had talent, but they also had time and that time was made possible by "slave servants who were their wives making food and welcoming them when they came back from the studio". She coins a phrase, which I find myself repeating: "If wives had wives."

Her 70th birthday is on the horizon. What hasn't she done? She talks with regret about never having lived anywhere else. "I was always trying to get this place right. I thought: I want to tackle how to belong here." Does she belong? "I think I probably do," she says with something between a laugh and a sigh. "I think I have to give in and say: I probably do."