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Give, take and make it up

Collaborations between two pairs of artists, across the century

By Rod Mengham



"Try Out A Few Of Them" by Lubaina Himid, 2025 | © Courtesy Hollybush Gardens, London and Greene NaMali, New York. Photo: Gavin Renshaw



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LUBAINA HIMID WITH MAGDA STAWARSKA

Another Chance Encounter
Kettle's Yard, Cambridge, until November 2

The title of the latest exhibition at Kettle's Yard is slightly misleading. *Another Chance Encounter* doesn't leave much to chance. It revolves around the latest collaboration between Magda Stawarska and Lubaina Himid, who have found ways of working with the gallery's collection that are shrewdly and tellingly calculated rather than accidental. An important dimension of the show is its sceptical examination of the curatorial practices of the founders of Kettle's Yard, Jim and Helen Ede. The Edes are best known for their promotion of modernist painting and sculpture, especially the work of Henri Gaudier-Brzeska. But they also spent about ten years, before and after the Second World War, in Tangier, where they acquired a great deal of applied art - especially carpets - and this aspect of their collection adds an orientalizing element to the Kettle's Yard environment.

Himid's large canvas "Flying Carpet" is a new work that depicts a room in which assorted objects are flying or floating through this interior space: a radio, a colander, a flower vase, a clock, various mats. At once a playful and a provocative work, it asks, what does it mean for things to be out of place? If they have been displaced from a different context, in what ways does their relocation distort or disguise their original function or meaning?

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Perhaps the most engaging work in the exhibition is Himid's *How May I Help You*, a series of paintings illustrating imagined negotiations between shopkeepers and customers at or near the entrances to their shops. These shops are located in precisely the kind of North African environment explored by the Edes, and the verbal interactions between the shopkeepers and the customers take the form of imagined conversations in which both parties reveal to the viewer of the painting exactly what they think of one another - while concealing from the interlocutor. This is a work that is playful in tone, but raises questions about the relationship between communication and transparency, and connects the transfer of ownership with the potential for dissimulation.

Collaboration between artists requires a parallel kind of transaction, involving a great deal of give and take, transparency and negotiation. It is a relationship that requires constant and active curation. Their own experience of working together has made Himid and Stawarska especially sensitive to the connection between Sophie Brzeska (Henri Gaudier's long-term partner) and Nina Hamnett, the Welsh artist with whom Brzeska maintained an intimate correspondence - and possibly an affair. This hidden but sustained relationship is effectively mirrored - or echoed - in the invisible but insistent soundwork that Stawarska has located in the kitchen of the Kettle's Yard house. This partly muffled recording, which sounds at first like static, ebbs and flows subtly like a mysterious organ.

Kettle's Yard has always insisted on itself as a lived-in home rather than just a housing for a museum. This has been a decisive factor in its attractiveness to generations of Cambridge undergraduates. But it can also make it seem rather smug and self-congratulatory about its own arrangements, and this can be grating, especially in view of the hardships endured by some of the artists whose works are now on its walls. The current installation has opened up the kitchen, which is normally closed, insisting on those aspects of the life of the house in which domestic work actually took place. For the duration of the exhibition, the kitchen is housing Stawarska's sound installation, whose synaesthetic title - "Sweet Sharp Taste of Limes" - references the preparation of food while supplying an idea-rhyme with the screenprint "Cytryny" (whose Polish title translates as "Lemons"), located in the downstairs extension.

The mixed-media installation at the centre of Himid's and Stawarska's collaboration is entitled *Slightly Bitter*, extending this series of associations with the acidulous and resisting, by implication at least, the formation of a bourgeois "tastefulness". Himid's painted ceramic "Jelly Mould", in the house's library extension, operates like "matter out of place" - to borrow the formulation of Mary Douglas - in order to disturb and degrade the bourgeois privilege that Kettle's Yard evokes. A jelly mould is used to prepare something that we can taste, while a physical mould is also something with which a sculpture might be fabricated (in bronze, for example). But moulding is also a metaphorical operation, especially with reference to the work of the art museum as a means by which taste in the sense of connoisseurship might be formed.

All of this makes the artists' "encounter" with Kettle's Yard and its collection seem anything but "chancy". It is in fact highly calculated and meticulously calibrated. And they certainly leave nothing to chance when deciding which postcards to display in order to illustrate the correspondence between Brzeska and Hamnett, because this correspondence is in fact largely fictive, substituting for the lost originals a series of postcards fabricated by Himid and Stawarska themselves.

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The boundaries that normally demarcate and define authorship have been deliberately obscured, making this show both intersectional and transhistorical. As Lubaina Himid expresses it succinctly, the later artists' act of homage to their two predecessors is "not a documentary; there's a lot of making it up". She has reportedly gone to the length of painting an entire series of fake Hamnett paintings. In some sense, this would be an act of reparation for the effacements and exclusions of art history, although it also runs the risk of displacing the lost originals with simulacra. The point, though, is to restore and reactivate the energies and concerns of an earlier generation with an emphasis on shared practice and shared strategies of engagement.