A Fashionable Marriage

Lubaina Himid

On Hogarth:

> Garibaldi, "the painter of the people";
> Wordsworth, "this great master";
> Coleridge, "true genius";
> Fielding, "comic history painter";
> George II, "he deserves to be picketed for his insolence";
> Vertue, "an ingenious man";
> and Garrick's *The Clandestine Marriage:*
>
> Poets and painters, who from Nature draw their best
> and richest stories have made this law:
> That each should neighborly assist his brother,
> And steal with decency from one another.
> Tonight your matchless Hogarth gives the thought,
> Which from his canvas to the stage is brought.
> And who so fit to warm the poet's mind
> As he who pictur'd morals and mankind?
> But not the same their characters and scenes;
> Both labour for one end by different means;
> Each as it suits him, takes a separate road,
> Their one great object Marriage-à-la-Mode . . .
> The painter dead, yet still he charms the eye;
> While England lives his fame can never die.

London in the 1980s in the midst of the hedonistic, greedy, self-serving, go-getting opportunistic mayhem was a fabulous location for me as a satirist and wit. Everyone who shook or moved in artistic semicircles or political whirlpools was a deserving dartboard. I took aim and threw.

Hogarth provided the many layers I needed for the perfect plan to reveal the art folk and their intrigues by comparing them to the despicable players on the stage of world politics.

Hogarth, bad-tempered ambitious genius and critic of eighteenth-century manners and morals, painter of theatrical themes, storyteller, history painter, arch xenophobe, proved to be the perfect ally. He painted life as he saw it outside his back door. He had no qualms about heaping ridicule upon aristocratic architects, politicians, moneyed men, stupid women, avaricious families, lazy bureaucrats, and anyone French or Italian. Most important for me, he used black people to highlight the evils and misdeeds of almost everyone he saw; they were signifiers of European hypocrisy and the sordid falseness of white folk. Black people in Hogarth's work nearly always reveal pretentiousness, artificiality, and the dreaded sophistication.

In 1986 I wished to do the same, although I rather liked sophistication. His theatricality and storytelling tableaux fulfilled my desire for spectacle and drama, even though it had been ten years since completing my theater design degree and I had long abandoned any need to work with actors. Hogarth was interested in the time in which he lived—the people who stood in his way as much as those who, like Fielding and Vertue, praised his innovation and risk-taking.

London in the 1980s was a frustrating, infuriating place for me. Experimental work in the laboratory of British art was a full-time struggle: curating small shows, writing reviews and articles, creating new work, strategizing,

sitting on arts board panels, and speaking about the work. All done while writing a thesis on Young Black Artists, written at the Royal College of Art between 1982 and 1984. It was time-consuming and exhausting.

The right wing had won; they were to keep a political stranglehold on the country way into the 1990s. At the time it did not seem possible that the reign of the right could last; now of course they are disguised as the left. Still here: different name, different mask, same hypocrisy, same narrow view, same color. It was important to find a way of revealing this rather obvious political reality while at the same time showing how it was linked to a middle-class, complacent, liberal intellectual art community, which through newspapers like the *Guardian* and institutions such as the Arts Council pretended to be the opposition. Being an advisor on various arts panels gave me a unique insight into the workings of this complicated, many-layered world. Having ineffectual dealers exposed even more, none of it useful or moral or honest. The ever-silent media, however, was the most laughable spanner in the works.

The most important reason for my choosing Hogarth to take a swipe at the seething intrigue of contemporary life was that he used the black person to expose the shady morals of the white main protagonists. Once or twice, in the images *Chairing the Member* and *The Toilette* (fig. 118), there are two black characters, indicating interchange and thriving relationships in the world of slaves and servants, though the main narrative is of course white and European.

Imagine a large bedroom, hot with the morning scent of the night before. High, dark, curtained walls covered with paintings. On closer inspection the paintings depict rape, rape, and more rape. The violent violation of a woman's body. There is a bed with heavy pink curtains pulled slightly apart, a gilt mirror draped with cloth. There is a screen covered in lewd and "amusing" scenes. The floor is strewn with playing cards and sex toys. There are eleven people in the room, one playing an instrument, one singing, several of them drink hot chocolate, one plays with toys, one serves the drinks, two flirt, one dresses hair, one sleeps, two fawn like idiots. The owner of the house is not there—never mind.

Change the paintings a little. Replace them with late Picassos; plenty of rape scenes to choose from, many women's bodies to penetrate and destroy. Divide the room into two overlapping worlds. Place the black people at the center, politically active, as knowing intelligent catalysts of change and revolution. Here is the scene in London in the middle of the 1980s. It was a crowded, confusing, bitter, and twisted place (fig. 119).

The Critic/Castrato sings, beautifully dressed in an embroidered coat. He is covered in rings, earrings, buckles (gifts from admirers); he dominates the room. His body may be mutilated, but it is enormous. His voice is clear, high, false, and full of artistry; it fills the

Fig. 118. William Hogarth, *Marriage A-la Mode*, Plate 4, *The Toilette*, before 1743. Oil on canvas, 27 x 35 in. (70.5 x 90.8 cm). National Gallery, London

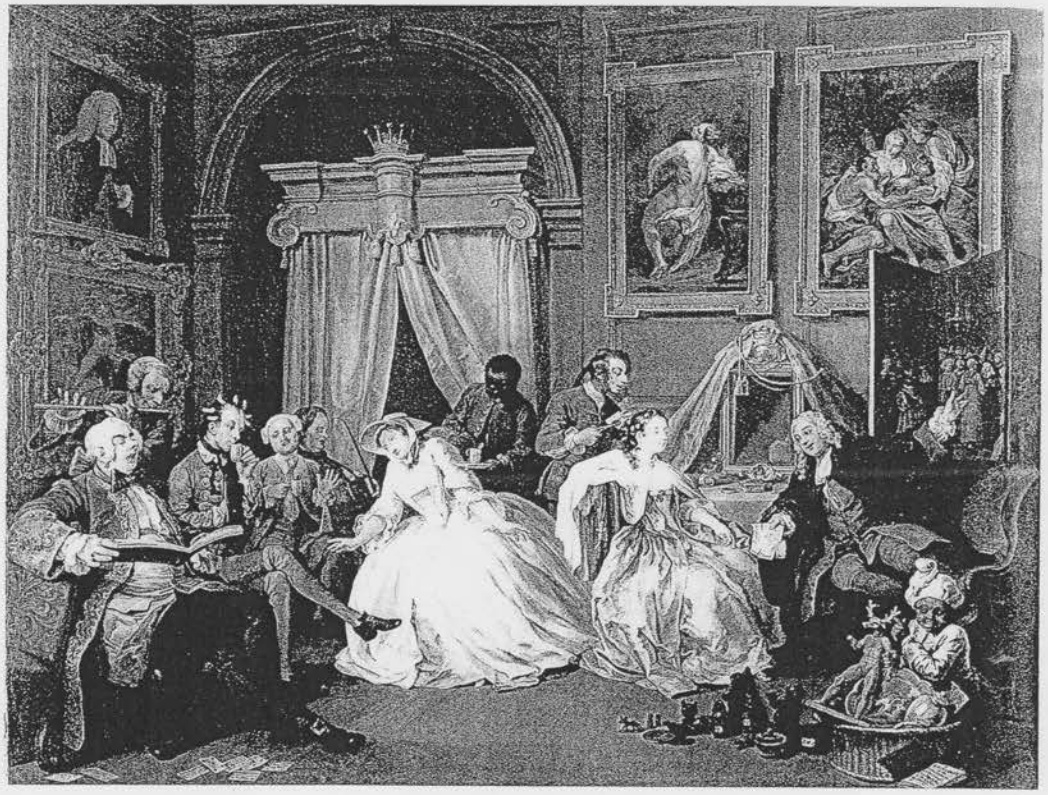


Fig. 119. Lubaina Himid (British, born 1954), *A Fashionable Marriage*, 1986. Multimedia installation, c. 10 x 20 x 8 ft. (300 x 600 x 240 cm). Private collection

Fig. 120. Lubaina Himid, *A Fashionable Marriage, The Art World*, 1986. Private collection

room. He is seductive, famous—a star. We need him to reassure us of our importance, we need him to bring culture to our lives. The foolish and deluded, breathless and newly arrived find him fascinating. In 1747 he could have been Farinelli, Senesino, Carestini, or all three. His sound covers the snoring and the whispering; the eager listener squeals with delight. In my 1986 version his domain is the half of the room designated as *The Art World* (fig. 120), he appears as the critic. The critic, an empty, self-centered creature who lurks in the twilight between history and the gossip column. The critic loves art but despises artists and tends to see an exhibition as a checkered dance floor upon which he can prance with silken shoes and a smirking mask. The hapless artist takes years to realize that the critic is not an audience or a historian, but akin to a paper advertisement or a radio jingle. The critic's comments may be clear, concise, to the point, current even, but of minute importance over many years of making artwork.

The critic has clothes made from clippings from several revered 1980s publications, *Block*, *Screen*, *Time Out*, and *Creative Camera* (fig. 121). The titles *Block* and *Screen* always remind me of creams used to protect white skin from the heat of the sun. His shirt is a cacophony of rubber gloves, he longs to be fondled or squeezed. He is enormous and heavy, but what he says disappears as quickly as a high note melts in the atmosphere.

The flautist in 1986 became the dealer; he and the critic are in harmony. The dealer, discreet, shadowy, dressed in gray, standing at the back. A silly shopkeeper of no consequence, who must follow the advertisements in order to be at the right place at the right time with artworks pitched at the perfect price. Is he playing our tune? No, he plays to the gallery.

Hogarth links the waiting ambassador with the castrato visually and sexually. The ambassador has his legs tightly crossed, his foot pointing to the inner thighs of the eager listener. His lips are pursed, ready to sip; his

Fig. 121. Lubaina Himid, *A Fashionable Marriage, The Art Critic*, 1986. Acrylic on paper, 72 x 48 in. (183 x 122 cm). Private collection

Opposite: Fig. 122. Lubaina Himid, *A Fashionable Marriage*, (detail), 1986. Private collection

hair is in curlers, ready for pampering. As a cutout, he appears as the dithering art funder, unable to decide between the critic's song and the fad of the day. Should he support the disabled, the black, the women, or wait until someone else gives permission—the countess perhaps? He is made from thin plywood, thinly painted, he sits on a wobbly fence. In the 1980s, funders needed to be seen as acknowledging the "other"; in the 1990s this is seen as ridiculous, far too political, and they swim around in a vacuous deceit.

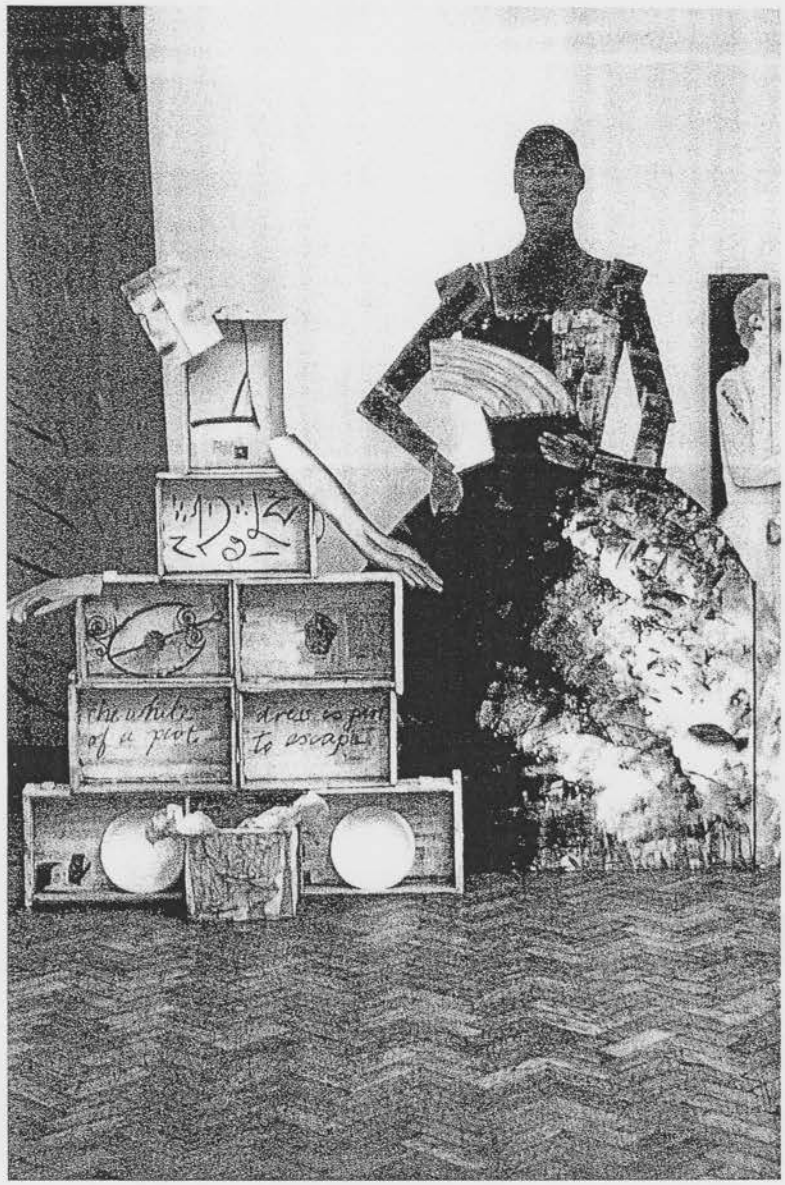
As the castrato sings, a woman—open-legged, open-armed, open-mouthed, open-fingered, clothes loose, echoing the open bed curtain—delightedly and limply leans toward him, drinking in his song. Her white dress, with its exposed underskirt of pale blue, is set against her pale skin, dainty hat, and red hair. Her tiny foot peeps out like a little tongue beneath her skirt. She is the feminist artist (fig. 122). She is made from empty drawers turned on their sides and casually filled with barely disguised pastiches of the American feminist art movement, which had so dominated the previous ten years—wealthy, white, exclusive, carnivorous, strategic, and knowing. She is sure she is the center of the scene, the prettiest and the most important woman in the room. She hangs on every word the critic says, waiting for something he cannot give. Does she really believe in the funder, the dealer, and the critic? They believe in each other.

Two men are paying attention on and off. In the corner a pudgy fellow sleeps, whip in hand, but next to him, joined at the hip, a tweedy, pale, bewigged companion looks on admiringly, his hand raised in awe, his hot chocolate poised for entry into his plain, bland, pasty face. These two so reminded me of the then very fashionable painters of the time, graduates of the Glasgow School of Art, at once eager and complacent, dozing and strategic (figs. 120 and 128). Mimicking the English world of *Private Eye* and *Gilbert and George*, but out on a provincial limb nevertheless. As contemporary painters, they appear forever entwined, inextricably linked—not waving, not moving from the edge. These men were the saviors of painting, the epitome of a nineteenth-century ideal. The worlds they depicted were peopled by men eccentrically dressed, going forth on Arthurian quests, subsequently meeting themselves coming back. Theirs was not a world of political marginality, but one firmly placed in a private commer-

cial dealer system, which exists to mirror the world of collectors.

Center stage stands a black slave in a sumptuous green uniform (fig. 118). He attempts to give the young woman the attention she so obviously craves; leaning toward her he offers a cup of hot chocolate in which lounges a melting biscuit at a rakish angle. He finds the scene amusing, but it preoccupies him. She ignores him—her loss. This pivotal black figure completely dominated the scenario in the 1986 cutout installation. The transformation of this slave into a black woman artist with articulated arms and an elaborate dress covered in wooden painted fish took the center (fig. 122). She had a larger offering and poured it towards the eager listener: energy. I believed that we as black women artists held the center; in fact, we rented rooms there. The ground shifted and it became clear that little had changed for us in five hundred years. We worked for nothing; we still do. We are signifiers of white corporate wealth, expensive to keep, but oh so decorative and useful for dealing with awkward situations and people. Black women are still useful spice for a bland "post-feminist" dish. In 1986 I was full of hope and looking for a fight as we stormed the citadel.

To help us we needed sharp and committed political minds, black minds convinced that culture could be an effective weapon for change. Hogarth's black slave boy is in charge of the auction lots, is at home in the bedroom, in the world of his mistress and her lover (fig. 114). He is the only character to interact with the audience. Not only is he absolutely in tune with what is happening in the room (world) but his is the role of narrator; he skillfully displays his sex toys gleefully arranged across the floor. There were young women working then in 1986 who could have strengthened the link between politics and culture. However, like the boy/slave sitting at the feet of Silvertongue, the politics of politics got in the way. The links



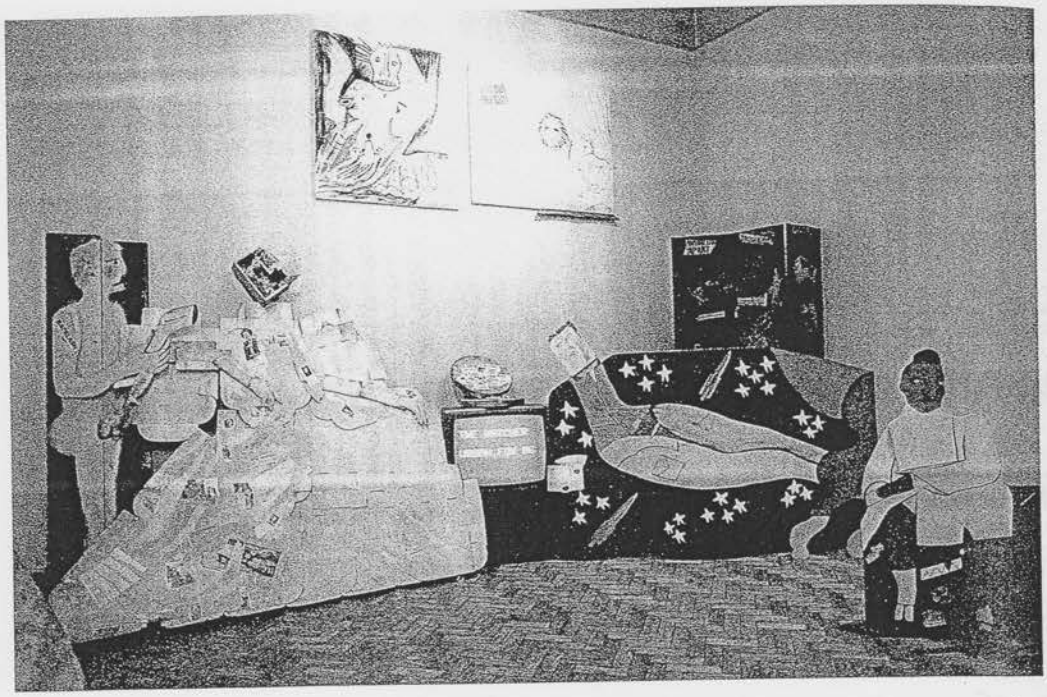


Fig. 123. Lubaina Himid, *A Fashionable Marriage, The Real World*, 1986. Private collection

burned out just like the candlewicks, only faster. The boy who became a girl understood the connection between media, representation, and power, understood that the power of global distribution infiltrated the world of the moving image and toyed with revolutionary intervention. While making the piece, all this seemed possible. The slave boy's preoccupation with sex toys became the sober mistressing of modern visual technology. A video screen replaced the gilt mirror, its sound track Handel's *Queen of Sheba*, Ghanaian women singing played over a face masked, veiled, revealed, concealed in turn.

Another servant, hired and white, helped the narrative along in this global and political section of the installation (fig. 123). He is the hairdresser. He fusses, primps, preens, arranges the countess's hair, he listens slightly flushed to Silvertongue; he tries to ignore the castrato. He performs his duty manfully, he is a lackey, a tabloid editor, a cheap trashy novelist, an ambitious young M.P., a short-sleeved shirt in local government, he does as he is told and gossips accordingly. The 1986 cutout is naked, his penis an electric hairdryer. He is made from bits and pieces of old discarded wood, painted bright ice-cream pink. He is a throwback to some early, infamous, naked, erect cutout men I made in the early 1980s.

The star of the piece for Hogarth is, of course, the countess, who has recently had a baby, so lounges casually at her dressing table, having spent the previous afternoon at the auction rooms, while her husband, the earl, is away (fig. 118). She is having her hair done. She smiles simperingly at her lover, the lawyer Silvertongue. Her dress is flesh or knicker-pink, under heavy yellow. Her toe peeps out; her cheeks are flushed; a pocket watch rests at her vagina. She languorously points an index finger at a note her lover is showing. She is Margaret Thatcher, the first and therefore the last woman prime minister of Britain, leader of the Conservative party, champion of business, destroyer of the unions, the welfare state, and favorite of newspaper proprietors worldwide

(fig. 123). She elegantly wove her way into and out of the latter part of the twentieth century, narrowly escaping assassination. She led her nation to war to save her reputation and courted the United States as if her life depended on it. The left in Britain loathed her. She brought out their most disgusting misogynistic texts and imagery. She went on and on, on and on, until she was defeated by her eunuchs, as usual, in the game of grand intrigue and male frustration. The cutout was made from bits of wood, cardboard, newspaper cuttings, which referred to her policies, her gaffes, and her everyday management. All this and a smattering of plastic trinkets were held together with glue and staples. It wasn't meant to last, nor was she; she does, and so does the cutout.

Her lover, the clever Silvertongue, was played by the most stupid Hollywood actor we could find. His first wife said he was as good in bed as he was on the screen. He could not act. He stayed in the limelight far too long. The makeup ran; he forgot which play he was in, but clever Americans kept prompting from the wings, clapping in all the right places, mopping his brow till the end. We lost. Their policies seeped into the left wing, thought and deed; their legacy limps and crawls on and on.

The time has probably arrived, thirteen years later, for another vicious visualization of art politics and its relationship to global politics. The art of war and the war of art. Hogarth and I may set about it soon.