frieze

CONTEMPORARY ART AND CULTURE

NO. 184 JANUARY • FEBRUARY 2017

City Report **BOGOTÁ**
ALICE RAWSTHORN *on design activism*
Time travelling with **HELEN JOHNSON**
DODIE BELLAMY *rethinking the body*
LUBAINA HIMID *my influences*

UK £6.95 US $12 €10

84

97 70962 067021

Lubaina Himid

Since the mid-1980s, the artist has been practising a form of expanded history painting. She works across media — canvas, collage, cut-outs, installation — to insert the missing figures of dominant social, political and cultural narratives: often, and especially, the black British woman.

Born in Zanzibar, east Africa, Himid moved to Britain as a child in the 1960s. She grew up in London, where she studied theatre design at Wimbledon College of Art before receiving a master's degree in cultural history from the Royal College of Art. Her thesis, 'Young Black Artists in Britain Today' (1984), was founded, as she has explained, on 'the absolute conviction that black people could be important artists', at the time, 'the maddest and most impossible idea imaginable'.

Himid has been an important supporter of work by her contemporaries – including Sutapa Biswas, Sonia Boyce, Claudette Johnson, Ingrid Pollard, Veronica Ryan and Maud Sulter – and was an early member of the British black arts movement. In the mid-1980s, she curated a number of important exhibitions in London – testimony, supporting her MA thesis, to the overlooked and ongoing contribution of black artists to British culture. These included 'Five Black Women' at the Africa Centre and 'Black Women Time Now' at Battersea Arts Centre, both in 1983, and 'The Thin Black Line' at the Institute of Contemporary Arts in 1985. In the late 1980s, she made a break with the London art scene, settling in Preston where she is Professor of Contemporary Art at the University of Central Lancashire and leads the Making Histories Visible research project.

Himid's theatre days prompted a Brechtian interest in the political potential of distanciation – the notion that rupture can lead to re-imagining – which runs throughout her work. Visual seduction is often interrupted by surprise. The cut-out figures that have appeared in her installations since the early pieces *A Fashionable Marriage* (1986) and *New Robes for MaShulan* (1987) are executed on a near-human scale that obstructs and confronts. Her paintings are largely figurative, bold in line and sumptuous in colour and pattern. (These are often applied to textiles, which the artist has called a kind of coded language – unconsciously learned and impossible to ignore – between women.) They are delicious, immediate, arresting, but full of troubling details. (The darkness of the sea carrying the two black women in *Between the Two my Heart Is Balanced*, 1991, for example, or the way that each pattern from the series 'Kangas and Other Stories', 2008, resolves in a form of spike.) Insertion always requires a cut, the sundering of a previous narrative: in opening space for other stories, Himid's work also wounds.

In a new painting, *Le Rodeur: The Exchange* (2016), an elegantly dressed woman in a yellow overcoat extends a strip of checked cloth to a seated man, behind whom stands a woman with a feathered bird's head and beak, one hand resting on his shoulder. The image relates to the history of the slave ship Rodeur, which set sail for Guadeloupe from the Bight of Biafra in 1819, carrying 22 men and 162 slaves. During the voyage, everyone on board inexplicably lost their sight. The captain threw 36 afflicted slaves into the water (hoping for insurance compensation) but this did not prevent the spread of the mysterious disease. The composition of the painting is taut, still; the darkness that it relates, unspeakable. As in the magical-realist writings of Gabriel García Márquez, for instance, enchantment veils the hard-edges of critique.

At this moment of wilful blinkering across the Western world and nationalisms fuelled by fictions of origin and entitlement, Himid's work, unceasingly attentive to our blind spots, feels more relevant and necessary than ever.

Amy Sherlock is deputy editor of frieze *and based in London, UK.*

Lubaina Himid
Le Rodeur: The Exchange,
2016, acrylic on canvas,
1.8 × 2.4 m

Courtesy
the artist and Hollybush Gardens,
London

1

1
Lubaina Himid with her aunt, Betty, and her mother, Laura, in the garden of her house in Maida Vale, London, c.1959

2
Lubaina Himid's grandmother, MaShulan, photographed in Zanzibar, 1954, and reproduced as a poster for the exhibition 'New Robes for MaShulan – Lubaina Himid, Work Past and Present', Rochdale Art Gallery, 1987

Courtesy
1 & 2 the artist

My Aunt and my Mother: Betty and Laura

The daughters of a publican (himself the son of a miner) from Bolton, Lancashire, as children, they were Shirley Temples in a land of *Angela's Ashes* (1996), raised on fortunes made from selling beer in The British Queen and The White Swan. Laura was a textile designer, Betty an accomplished violinist: the two brought art and music, books and gardening right into the heart of my world. They were glamorous, flirtatious, cosmopolitan, fashionable London women of the late 1950s. They held the most fabulous parties at our house in Maida Vale. Carpets were rolled up; walls were covered with huge paintings on paper in keeping with each gathering's theme. The garden was transformed as candle-lit jam jars lined with coloured film were hung in the hedges, the bushes and the enormous apple tree. Their red portable record player was always serviced beforehand, extraordinary amounts of alcohol were purchased, then hundreds of 78s were played at full volume as they blasted the night away. I was five; they were 30; the men were future politicians.

'I spent years visiting Venice, with its nameless streets and Moorish traces, trying to feel the fear and find the nerve to return to my place of birth.'

LUBAINA HIMID

Home: Zanzibar / London / Preston

Zanzibar: tiny planes, rickety bicycles, men in plaid shirts, big oven heat, big carved doors, piles of stone dust. I dream of delicious Kanga shops filled with multicoloured fabrics waiting to be turned into 'speaking clothes', the language of image, pattern and text through which one woman's outfit talks to another's. My mother was kept in dark rooms for 40 days and 40 nights when my father died. Years later, when I visit, I stumble down streets without names, see open stores filled with pyramids of goods, Bollywood music spilling out into the crowds. I try to imagine being with my grandmother, MaShulan, sitting in her patterned dresses sipping coffee from tiny cups. At Beit el Ras, further along the coast, where we lived until I was four months old, the Night of Long Knives (12 January 1964, when the last Sultan was inexplicably overthrown by revolutionaries) treads stealthily across my days. I stare out to the sea and watch cargo ships and fishing boats silently slip in and out, onwards, outwards and back again. I've made visits to Matanzas in Cuba, known for its wildness, trying to feel, then stem, the fear of being in Zanzibar. The facts of my father's unexpected death from malaria are threaded through with the story of the curse of the grocer, who begged my father to stop his pea-green Ford Prefect and take his wife to the doctor. My father drives on and doesn't help; the grocer's wife dies. More darkened rooms. I spend years visiting Venice, with its nameless streets and Moorish traces, trying to feel the fear and find the nerve to return to my place of birth. The rocking swinging sails of the wooden dhows, women in speaking clothes, mosquito nets, death certificates, *New Robes for MaShulan*.

London: horse-drawn milk carts in Maida Vale, a suicide attempt near Warwick Avenue, black women artists at Clapham North. The smell of rain on the Euston Road, disorientation at Seven Sisters, a hidden pub in Hampstead. The Finchley Road and apple strudel, Belsize Park Mews and cheesecake, Charlotte Street and wiener schnitzel, Elspeth Road and Alice B. Toklas. Hours spent over decades watching and working at the Unicorn Theatre, the Royal Opera House, the Roundhouse, Hampstead Theatre, Swiss Cottage Library, Wimbledon College of Art and Talawa Theatre Company; they intertwine, pulling me towards a career in theatre design I am trained in, but not equipped for. The Africa Centre, Battersea Arts Centre and the Institute of Contemporary Arts pull me towards a career in exhibitions that I am differently not equipped for.

Preston: Avenham Park Pavilion has a Victorian postcard view, as does my studio, which once had smalt walls. We watch goldfinches and woodpeckers from the window. The Harris Museum, a Palladian temple, glorious and wrapped in text, encourages looking up and aiming high. The huge Victorian covered markets, wrought iron, theatrical, busy and bonkers, tempt me to buy junk and seek out antique treasure, simultaneously. The River Ribble, as seen from my window, has sublime slack water, holding itself in check until the tide turns. Sometimes, kingfishers dart along the banks. The Harris Art School, three minutes' walk away, gave me the bliss of teaching all day long, painting *Revenge* (1992) in between. Preston bus station, an example of divine 1970s design and everyday repetitive poverty, promises little. My research centre at the University of Central Lancashire, the Making Histories Visible Archive, remains both safe and dangerous.

NEW ROBES FOR MaSHULAN

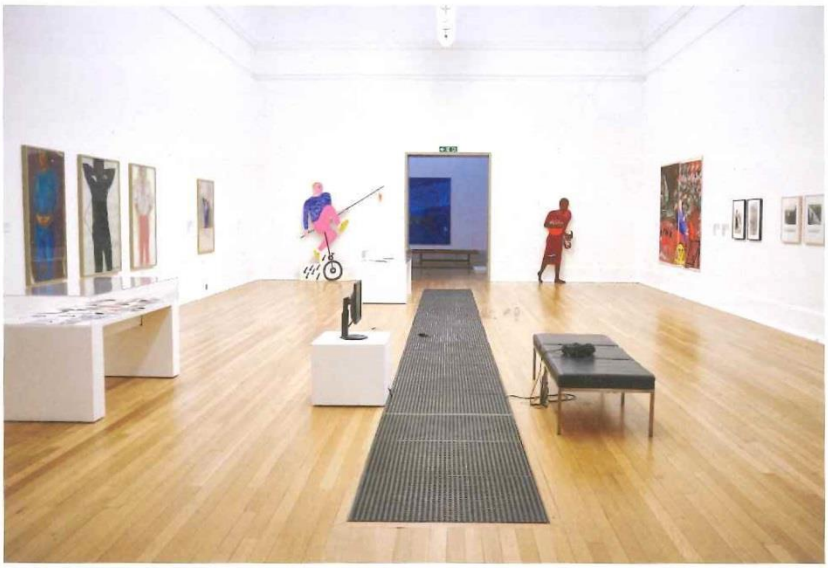
LUBAINA HIMID WORK PAST & PRESENT

A ROOM FOR MaSHULAN

MAUD SULTER & LUBAINA HIMID

Arts Council Funded

2



1

Museums and department stores: alternate Saturdays

Victoria and Albert Museum moments, from 1960: looking at and trying to remember thousands of patterned tiles; marvelling at the strength of white and writhing statues; wanting to enter old English shopfronts; trying not to pray in front of the seductive, glorious, gold- and pink-painted mother and child altars. Amused, over the years, by ever-changing courtyards, cherry blossom, cemetery decoration, shallow paddling pools. Overwhelmed by the dense, voluminous floral tapestries, heaving with dancing yearning bodies. Delighted by delicately painted virginals. Repulsed by distant and thin clothes, always longing to own glistening, shapely vases, elegant soaring silverware and gold leaf on wood. Postcard heaven.

London Museum, Kensington Palace, circa 1960: old bones, old armour, old teeth, old pipes, old coins, old dolls, old clothes, old friends – Kensington Gardens. Child heaven.

Selfridges, Whitley's, Liberty, from 1960 onwards: bright, warm, light and spacious palaces of touching and stroking, where smelling and nearly swooning under the spell of French perfume, their bottles sporting fonts designed to linger, is just the beginning. Squeezing and then opening creaking Italian handbags, brushing our hands over smooth Danish furniture, trailing a finger across fragile milky German crockery, lying down on piles of soft Persian rugs, wanting to unfurl bolts of fabric rolled tight and ready. I press my face against sumptuous bleeding silk, my arms seen for a moment through shimmering smoky chiffon. I place soft, deep wool next to crisp, clean cotton. Even then, 50 years ago, I avoid being bought clothes too bright for shy coloured girls. Mirrors tell the truth in between the lies. Look don't buy. Swishing staircases sweep up and down and round; people stare from regal balconies, seeing themselves via extraordinary vistas, floating escalators, clacking lifts.

'In Romare Bearden's collages, I saw the everyday life I had missed by leaving Zanzibar at four months old.'

LUBAINA HIMID

Tate Millbank moments, from 1965: My early years are spent seeking out fabulous and vulgar James Tissot girls in striped dresses, dreaming and leaning. I know, even then, that Bridget Riley's *Late Morning* (1967–68) lures and repels, seduces and rebels. I love to glimpse Anthony Caro's *Early One Morning* (1962): magnificent red metal wings lift and separate; it sings of every possibility. In 1971, the gargantuan figure of the egalitarian William Hogarth (subject of a solo exhibition) causes a collision between theatre and drawing in my mind. George Cruikshank and James Gillray flicker in and out of the frame across the decades in this place. My birthday in 1994 is spent at the R.B. Kitaj retrospective: I loved it then. A morning spent in the stunning Frank Bowling room, curated by Courtney J. Martin, opens new conversations. A joyous afternoon remembering Donald Rodney, marvelling at his digitized sketchbooks as I flick (virtually) from page to page.

For eight months, I visit the seamlessly invisibly visible 'Thin Black Line(s)' (2011–12), an exhibition I co-curated with Paul Goodwin. Artwork from the 1980s by Sutapa Biswas, Sonia Boyce, me, Claudette Johnson, Ingrid Pollard, Veronica Ryan and Maud Sulter is beautiful but hard to find; at the centre of things but without fanfare.

Phyllida Barlow fills, then steals, then nearly breaks and forever changes the Duveen Galleries. Structural heaven.

Romare Bearden and Betye Saar

The Art of Romare Bearden: The Prevalence of Ritual (1974) by M. Bunch Washington, which I bought in 1975 in New York, opened my eyes to the possibility of another kind of family. I saw the everyday life I had missed by leaving Zanzibar at four months old. I clung on to Bearden's collages of young women who might have held me in their arms on my first birthday, in *La Primavera* (1967), or the men who might have ruefully ignored me as I reached my fifth, in *Sunday after Sermon* (1969). *Junction Piquette* and *Conjunction Piquette* (both 1971) re-awakened my acute awareness of speaking clothes. The fruitless early searching for magazines with images of myself to cut up in order to re-assemble was rewarded by finding publications too precious to attack with scissors.

I encountered a Betye Saar image in a pre-packaged slide show I'd presented at the Black Art Gallery in Seven Sisters in 1982. It was *The Liberation of Aunt Jemima* (1972) with its 18 black women in the same assemblage. I've since tried to replicate its biting wit and political wisdom. When I met Saar in 1992, at her studio in the California hills, I fell in love with everything about the place: the dozens of drawers, her object filing system, her spirit catchers, electronic circuits, voodoo flags and painted window paintings. I also learned about the swap meet. Now washboards and birdcages, banjos and handkerchiefs, keys and buttons haunt my days.

Lubaina Himid is an artist based in Preston, UK. She currently has solo exhibitions at Spike Island, Bristol, UK (January–March 2017), and Modern Art Oxford, UK (January–April 2017). Her work is included in the group show 'The Place Is Here' at Nottingham Contemporary, UK, until April, and will feature in the Folkestone Triennial, UK, in August. A publication with Bookworks, London, will be published in March as part of the Hull City of Culture Freedom Festival. In October, Himid will curate an exhibition at the Walker Art Gallery, Liverpool, UK.

1
'Thin Black Line(s)', exhibition view at Tate Britain, London, 2011–12

2
Romare Bearden
Junction Piquette
1971, fabric collage on canvas, 2.3 × 1.7 m

Courtesy
1 the artist; photograph: Denise Swanson • 2 Debra Force Fine Art, New York

2