

**GROWING PAINS:  
GENDER AND THE LEGACY OF BLACK BRITISH ART**

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## **ABSTRACT**

### **GROWING PAINS:**

#### **GENDER AND THE LEGACY OF BLACK BRITISH ART**

This thesis explores the issues, themes, and debates concerning contemporary artists of African, Afro-Caribbean, and Afro-Asian descent who have lived, studied, and exhibited in Britain. Taking the instigation and development of the Black Art Movement in the 1980s as a starting point, it seeks to describe and explain the various relationships contemporary British artists of African descent have with this art history and with artistic and personal categorizations based on race, colour, ethnicity, and African heritage. A brief historiography of the social, cultural, and historical context of Britain during and after post-war immigration serves to contextualize their practice, and is followed by specific case studies. These focus on four artists: Magdalene Odundo, Veronica Ryan, Mary Evans, and Maria Amidu. The case studies represent new documentation of the artists' lives and careers as well as the re-interpretation of extant data and scholarship in order to explicate the multiple positionings of these artists and their work with regards to the overlapping social contextualizations, trajectories, and discourses in which they are situated. I conclude with a comparative discussion of a larger group of "Black British" artists focusing on several key concepts, including individual trajectories, and conceptualizations of diaspora, homelands, displacement, gender, audience, visibility, and identity. In order to understand the framings of these artists' agency and visual practice, I draw on a range of theoretical approaches, including phenomenology, iconography, semiotics, functionalism, and post-colonial discourse. This analysis and discussion serves to elucidate and explain, through a variety of responses and individual experiences, the

complexities, ambiguities, and evolutions of ways in which artists negotiate categorizations of “Black British.”

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

### **Volume One**

Title page	1
Declaration	2
Abstract	3
Table of Contents for Volumes One and Two	5
List of Illustrations	6
Acknowledgements	13
Dedication	14
Chapter One: History and Geography	15
Chapter Two: Case Studies	62
Chapter Three: Comparative Discussion	196
Chapter Four: Conclusion	315

### **Volume Two**

Title page	1
Table of Contents for Volume Two	2
Images	3
Appendix A	69
Appendix B	95
Bibliography	127

## LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

### Chapter One

- 1.1 Ronald Moody, *Johanaan* (1936), Elm 155 x 74 x 40 cm, Tate Collection.
- 1.2 Aubrey Williams, Triptych (1976): *Arawak*, Oil on canvas 122 x 71 cm, *Carib*, Oil on canvas 117 x 145 cm, *Warrau* 120.5 x 72 cm, Collection of artist's estate.
- 1.3 Uzo Egonu, *Restaurant at Bad Orb* (1980), Oil on canvas 124 x 178 cm, Collection of artist's estate.
- 1.4 Frank Bowling, *Mirror* (1964), Oil on canvas 335 x 213 cm, Collection of artist.
- 1.5 Yinka Shonibare, *Diary of a Victorian Dandy: 19.00 hours* (1998), C-type print, series of five 183 x 228 cm, Commissioned by inIVA, Courtesy the artist and Stephen Friedman Gallery.
- 1.6 Yinka Shonibare, *Gallantry and Criminal Conversation* (2002), Mixed media installation dimensions vary, Collection of artist and Stephen Friedman Gallery.
- 1.7 Godfried Donkor, *Gaming Room at Devonshire House* (2001), Inkjet print on canvas 133.3 x 133.3 cm, Collection of artist.
- 1.8 Lubaina Himid, *Between the Two My Heart Is Balanced* (1991), Acrylic on canvas 152.4 x 121.9 cm, Tate Collection.
- 1.9 Sonia Boyce, *Lay Back, Keep Quiet and Think of What Made Britain So Great* (1986), Charcoal, pastel and watercolour on paper 1525 x 650 cm each panel, Arts Council Collection.

- 1.10 Sokari Douglas Camp, *Church Ede (Decorated Bed for Christian Wake)* (1984), Welded steel, cloth, marine varnish, automotive paint, motors 237.5 x 298.5 x 264.2 cm, National Museum of African Art.

## Chapter Two

- 2.1 Magdalene Odundo, *Three Untitled Pots* (1982), Burnished and oxidized terracotta.
- 2.2 Odundo, *Untitled* (1983), Burnished and carbonized terracotta 32 x 20 cm, Private collection.
- 2.3 Odundo, *Untitled* (1984), Burnished and carbonized terracotta 28 x 20 cm, UCLA Fowler Museum of Cultural History.
- 2.4 Odundo, *Mixed-Colour Flat-Topped Winged* (1987), Burnished and carbonized terracotta, Private collection.
- 2.5 Odundo, *Untitled* (1986), Polished and carbonized terracotta 35.5 x 20.3 cm, Janis and William Wetsman Collection.
- 2.6 Odundo, *Angled Spouted Terracotta Piece* (1989), Burnished and oxidized terracotta 44.5 x 29.5 cm, Private collection.
- 2.7 Odundo, *Untitled* (2001), Polished and oxidized terracotta 80 x 33.5 cm, Collection of artist.
- 2.8 Odundo, *Orange Narrow Necked* (1987), Burnished and oxidized terracotta 36.5 cm, Private collection.
- 2.9 Odundo, *Untitled #15* (1994), Burnished and carbonized terracotta 45 x 30.4 cm, Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art.
- 2.10 Ryan, *Manna in the Wilderness* (1984-85), Plaster.

- 2.11 Ryan, *Relics in the Pillow of Dreams* (1985), Bronze, plaster 25.5 x 90 x 90 cm, Tate Collection.
- 2.12 Ryan, *A Place in the Scheme of Things* (1986), Bronze, reinforced plaster, pigment 35 x 250 x 90 cm.
- 2.13 Ryan, *Cavities in Cloister Court* (1988), Lead 1341 x 274 x 28 cm.
- 2.14 Ryan, *Pierced Repetitions* (1988), Lead, PVC 99 x 150 cm.
- 2.15 Ryan, *Baggage* (1988), Lead, silk, wire wood, kapok, lace 229 x 246 x 246 cm.
- 2.16 Ryan, *In Memory* (1988), Plaster, dried flowers 10 x 107 x 165 cm.
- 2.17 Ryan, *Pocket* (1990), Lead foil, feathers 48 x 38 x 5 cm.
- 2.18 Ryan, *Box Compartment with Feathers* (1992), Plaster, aluminium, feathers 26 x 39 x 42.5 cm.
- 2.19 Ryan, *Lean* (1994), Cast aluminium 211 x 14 x 16 cm.
- 2.20 Ryan, *Pierce* (1994), Stainless steel, nickel-plated pins, beeswax 104 x 18 x 11 cm, Private collection.
- 2.21 Ryan, *My Island (Repository)* (1995), Wire, milk bottles, crates, rubber, plaster, plastic 213 x 198 x 198 cm.
- 2.22 Ryan, *The Repository* (1996), Mixed media installation 300 x 358 x 356 cm.
- 2.23 Ryan, *Mango Reliquary* (2000), Marble, lead, mango stones 37 x 137 x 61 cm, Tate Collection.
- 2.24 Ryan, *Archaeology of the Black Sun 1956-2002* (2003), Mixed media installation dimensions vary, Collection of the artist.
- 2.25 Mary Evans, *Chinese Whispers I* (1993), Acrylic on canvas 180 x 150 cm.

- 2.26 Evans, *Standard* (1995), Alkyd on board 60 x 85 cm.
- 2.27 Evans, *Pretty Standard* (1996), Craftpaper on wall 250 cm dia.
- 2.28 Evans, *Wall Hanging* (1995), Craftpaper on wall 500 x 1000 x 800 cm.
- 2.29 Evans, *Wheel of Fortune* (1996), Craftpaper on wall 250 cm dia.
- 2.30 Evans, *Ring-a-rosie* (1995), Paper on shed 300 x 900 x 400 cm.
- 2.31 Evans, *Sugar & Spice* (1997), Craftpaper on wall 350 x 250 cm.
- 2.32 Evans, *Screen* (1997), Craftpaper on screen.
- 2.33 Evans, *Sharp* (1997), Ink on paper.
- 2.34 Evans, *Scope* (2001), Mixed media 400 x 1000 x 1200 cm.
- 2.35 Evans, *Bling Bling* (2004), Print on vinyl 200 cm dia.
- 2.36 Maria Amidu, *Ancestors* (1995) Glass, copper wire.
- 2.37 Amidu, *One, Two, Three, Four* (1995), Glass, copper wire, copper foil.
- 2.38 Amidu, *...a moment caught in three dimension(s)* (detail) (1999), Cast glass with copper die line print in acrylic cases 82 x 119 cm.
- 2.39 Amidu, *Finders, Keepers...* installation detail (2000), Cast glass, bird specimens 450 x 5450 mm, Temporary installation courtesy of Horniman Museum.
- 2.40 Amidu, *Tribute* (2002), Cyanotype prints on cotton fabric 190 x 120 cm, Arnolfini Collection on permanent loan to Bristol Royal Hospital for Children.

### Chapter Three

- 3.1 Eddie Chambers, *Destruction of the National Front* (1979-80), Collage, four panels, each 35.6 x 12 cm, Collection of the artist.

- 3.2 Keith Piper, *Go West Young Man* (1987) (detail), Photomontage and text, 14 panels, each 55.8 x 35.5 cm, Collection of the artist.
- 3.3 Godfried Donkor, *Kumasi de Ville* (2003) (detail), Mixed media installation, 30 photographs ink jet printed on vinyl, Astroturf dimensions variable, Collection of the artist.
- 3.4 Sonia Boyce, *Big Women's Talk* (1984), Pastel and ink on paper 148 X 155 cm, Private collection.
- 3.5 Lubaina Himid, *Shutters Only Hide the Sun* (1999), Acrylic on canvas 102 x 305 cm.
- 3.6 Himid, *Nets for Night and Day* (1999), Acrylic on canvas 102 x 305 cm.
- 3.7 Allan deSouza, *Terrain #7* (1999), C-Print 30.5 x 45.7 cm, Courtesy of the artist.
- 3.8 DeSouza, *Ed Goes East* (2001), C-Print 53.3 x 116.8 cm, Courtesy of Talwar Gallery.
- 3.9 Zarina Bhimji, *I Will Always Be Here* (1992) (detail), Burnt child's *kurtas* installation dimensions variable.
- 3.10 Zineb Sedira, *On a Winter's Night a Traveller* (2003) (detail), Multi-screen video installation dimensions variable, Courtesy of the artist and the Agency Contemporary, London.
- 3.11 Zarina Bhimji, *Out of Blue* (2002), Video still.
- 3.12 Keith Piper, *Reckless Eyeballing* (1995), Interactive installation with video projection from laser disk dimensions variable.

- 3.13 Chris Ofili, *Afro Love and Envy* (2002-2003), Acrylic paint, oil paint, polyester resin, glitter, map pins, and elephant dung on linen with two elephant dung supports 275 x 214 cm.
- 3.14 Ofili, *Afro Red Web* (2002-2003), Oil paint, polyester resin, glitter, map pins, and elephant dung on linen with two elephant dung supports 244 x 183 cm.
- 3.15 Ofili, *Afro Jezebel* (2002-2003), Oil paint, polyester resin, glitter, map pins, and elephant dung on linen with two elephant dung supports 244 x 183 cm.
- 3.16 Allan deSouza, *Everything West of Here Is Indian Country* (2003), C-print 50.8 x 127 cm. Courtesy of Talwar Gallery.
- 3.17 DeSouza, *The Goncourt Brothers Stand Between Caesar and the Thief of Baghdad* (2003), C-print 40 x 125 cm. Collection of the artist.
- 3.18 Sokari Douglas Camp, *Sharia Fubara* (1999/2000), Steel and fabric 141 x 51 x 60 cm, University of Indiana.
- 3.19 Allan deSouza, *The Searchers* (2003) (detail), C-prints dimensions vary, Courtesy of the artist.
- 3.20 Zineb Sedira, *Quatre Générations de Femmes* (1997), Computer-generated designs silk-screened onto ceramic tiles, Collection of artist.
- 3.21 Chris Ofili, *The Holy Virgin Mary* (1996), Paper collage, oil paint, glitter, polyester resin, map pins, elephant dung on linen 243.8 x 182.9 cm. Saatchi Collection.
- 3.22 Sonia Boyce, *She Ain't Holding Them Up, She's Holding On (Some English Rose)* (1986), Colour pastel and crayon on paper 218 x 99 cm, Middlesbrough Museums.

- 3.23 Claudette Johnson, *Trilogy (Part Three) Woman in Red* (1982-85), Watercolour, pastel, and gouache on paper 152 x 98.8 cm, Arts Council Collection.
- 3.24 Sonia Boyce, *Missionary Position II* (1985), Watercolour, pastel, and crayon on paper 123.8 x 183 cm, Tate Collection.
- 3.25 Sokari Douglas Camp, *Cheering Woman* (1986), Mixed media 191.1 x 97.2 x 49.5 cm, Collection of the Minneapolis Institute of Arts.
- 3.26 Zineb Sedira, *Self Portrait or the Virgin Mary* (2000), Life size photograph, Courtesy of the artist.
- 3.27 Godfried Donkor, *Pure Ali* (2000), Mixed media on paper 38 x 50 cm, Courtesy of the artist.
- 3.28 Rotimi Fani-Kayode, *Bronze Head* (1987), Gelatin silver print, Courtesy of Autograph ABP, London.

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*In memory of my father, James R. Paul*

## Chapter 1: History and geography

In the multicultural context of today's Britain, artists of African, Asian, and Caribbean descent play significant roles in creating, defining, and disseminating contemporary art. In the thirty years following World War II, unprecedented numbers of immigrants from the British Commonwealth settled in Britain and raised children. The coming of age of these populations, their community activism in the 1960s and the 1970s, and their postmodernist, post-colonial philosophies celebrating multiculturalism in the 1980s and 1990s, have permanently altered the British political, social, and cultural landscape. The categorization of black, or black British, in the UK has evolved over the last century to include people of Asian descent, for historical, political, and socio-economic reasons that will be explained below.<sup>1</sup>

This thesis concentrates on artists of African, Caribbean, and Asian descent who have lived, studied, and exhibited in Britain since 1980. It explores the issues, themes, and debates concerning their work and experiences through specific case studies using a variety of methodologies, assessing contemporary discourse and practice in light of the history of black British art and the legacy of the Black Art Movement. Developments in the last twenty-five years have heightened the profile of these artists and broadened their opportunities, but this growth has not been easy or without controversy, nor have all artists embraced the ethos of the Black Art Movement and its directives.

This first chapter begins with an introduction to the art, artists, and exhibitions defined within a range of concepts, such as African, diasporic, or black British,<sup>2</sup> from the post-war immigrant artists who were precursors to the Black Art Movement in the

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<sup>1</sup> See pp. 39 and 44. See also Appendix A.

<sup>2</sup> The terms black and black British denote people of African, Caribbean, and Asian descent born, raised, or living in Britain. When these terms are written as Black, "black," black British, Black British, or "Black British," capitalization and/or quotation marks serve to highlight academic and popular discourse s in reference to a particular grouping or categorization, as in "black British artist."

eighties, to the ways in which conceptualizations of “black British” are shaped and cultivated by these artists. A brief synopsis of the artists, activities, and exhibitions that came to be associated with such an artistic community details the evolution and developments in the British and international art scene with regards to these artists. Finally, various conceptualizations of and relationships to history and geography are explored in terms of their impact on the lives and creative practices of British artists of African, Caribbean, and Asian descent. For artists categorized as “black British,” history and geography are crucial concepts to the exploration and description of the various diasporas, immigrations, upbringings, and cultural stereotyping they experience in their personal as well as professional lives.

Chapter two focuses on four successful yet relatively little studied artists: Magdalene Odundo, Veronica Ryan, Mary Evans, and Maria Amidu. Magdalene Odundo is a Kenyan-born ceramicist who arrived to study in the UK in 1971 and has resided in the country for over twenty years. Veronica Ryan was born in Montserrat in the Caribbean and moved to England when she was just a few months old. She is primarily a sculptor; she studied and exhibited in England in the early 1980s, and moved to New York City in 1990. Mary Evans is a Nigerian-born artist raised and educated primarily in England. Trained academically as a painter, she has worked mainly in cut paper for the last ten years. Maria Amidu was born in London, and received her MA in glass and ceramics from the Royal College of Art in 1992. She has worked as an arts administrator and project manager as well as a professional artist, and her creative endeavours include installation, digital and CD-ROM, photography and multi-media projects.

All of these artists are associated with the categorization “black British artist,” although their relationship to this conceptual category is quite individual and therefore

unique. To varying degrees, their work engages with issues of history, identity, displacement, and the distillation of diverse cultural sources and resources drawn from various trajectories of experience: African and Caribbean, British, and the communities of the African diaspora. According to Paul Gilroy, people of African heritage living in the West grapple with a sense of “double consciousness,” comparing and contrasting issues of belonging with those of marginalization or exclusion. Double consciousness was a term originally used by W.E.B. DuBois in 1903’s *The Souls of Black Folk*:

It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder, (DuBois 1989, 5).

Although DuBois was writing in a specifically African-American, early twentieth century context, Gilroy extends this concept to post-slave populations in general (Gilroy 1993, 126). He contends that Western theories of modernity do not take into account the historical, cultural, linguistic, and political interaction and communication in Europe and the Americas that resulted from the transatlantic slave trade. Using the ‘Black Atlantic’ as a metaphor for the lives of slaves and their descendents, Gilroy describes how have they been confined to the margins of modern history. Yet he asserts that the history and tradition driving the Black Atlantic is quintessentially modern in its nomadic nature, transformative character, and continual dynamism.

Such a compelling ideological construct needs to be critically examined in the context of black British art. Is there a double consciousness operating in the professional and personal lives of these artists that defines their relationship to modernity and postmodernity? Is there an inherent *separateness* in their relationship to Britain and the West? Clearly such an idea cannot be applied uncritically to the

experience of all artists. Nor is it likely to be that simple. Today's artists of African, Caribbean, and Asian descent manage a host of identifying characteristics, and these are not strictly aligned on a linear spectrum, with "black" at one end and "British" at the other. A more apt image would be to understand these various components as spokes on a wheel. As writer and filmmaker Hanif Kureishi, explains,

When I was in my teens, in the mid-sixties, there was much talk of the "problems" that kids of my colour and generation faced in Britain because of our racial mix or because our parents were immigrants. We didn't know where we belonged, it was said; we were neither fish nor fowl... We were "Britain's children without a home." The phrase "caught between two cultures" was a favourite... Anyway, this view was wrong, (Beauchamp-Byrd 1997b, 25).

Magdalene Odundo, Veronica Ryan, Mary Evans, and Maria Amidu are four artists whose personal and professional relationships to African diasporic and British cultural history have yet to be fully investigated. In addition to issues of nationality, race, and class, as women they also negotiate issues of feminism and femininity. Extended case studies detailing these artists' experiences over the course of their lives and careers will investigate how and to what extent concepts of nationality, race, and gender have framed identity for them. Contextualizing specific past experiences within their personal histories will aid in understanding the extent to which these experiences act as inspiration in the course of their artistic endeavours (if at all), the kinds of strategies, appropriations, and inventions they employ, questions of patronage and the role of cultural institutions, and other artists' positioning with regards to their work and careers.

In addition to biographical information, a formal and stylistic analysis of their art works will be included. This analysis will examine the development of their individual formal characteristics and working methods within the context of the British and international art scene. Important aspects to consider include multiple and competing identities and the appropriation of African, and Caribbean visual and

cultural traditions in their work, as well as their engagement with Western academic traditions and practice. This study will illuminate the artists' interpretations of African, Caribbean, and Western/British history, society, and culture through an examination of recurrent themes, motifs, and media. Ultimately, it will explore to what extent being African, Caribbean, black, British, and female impacts issues of intentionality and agency, and the ways in which these are enabled and constrained by art discourses, institutions, and patronage. Central to this analysis are the complexities surrounding concepts of identity as fluid, multiple, contested, overlapping, situational, postmodern, post-colonial and diverse. By these means, the multiple positionings of these artists and their work with regards to the overlapping social contextualizations and discourses in which they are situated will be identified and elucidated.

Chapter three comprises a comparative discussion of several key concepts to the body of work defined as "black British," including individual trajectories, conceptualizations of homelands, displacement, diaspora, identity, gender, sexuality, audience, and visibility. The comparative analysis provides the opportunity to include a wider range of artists beyond the four examined in the case studies in order to bring the variety of work and experiences of numerous artists to bear upon these various concepts, and to highlight significant points of comparison and difference. In this way, the viability of assumptions about what it means to be a black artist in Britain are tested, particularly in light of the activities of the Black Art Movement, and a more holistic understanding encompassing the breadth and depth of their experiences and creative practices is achieved.

Chapter four is the conclusion of this research and analysis. The complexities, ambiguities, and evolutions of contemporary British artists of African, Caribbean, and Asian descent, and their relationships to the various framings of "black British" in

their professional careers and personal lives will be reviewed and assessed.

Furthermore, the conclusion will provide a critical discussion that contextualizes the information within British art historical discourse and suggests new and innovative avenues of inquiry in light of the conclusions drawn and questions raised in the previous chapters.

### **The First Wave**

Whilst there have been continuous and permanently settled populations of people of African, Caribbean, and Asian descent in Britain since the late sixteenth century, this thesis focuses on the post-war period (1939-1949) to the present.<sup>3</sup>

Despite continuous migration to the UK prior to the twentieth century, by far the greatest influx of people from Africa, Asia, and the Caribbean occurred between 1940 and 1970. Artists came too for opportunities in training, education, employment, and the stimulus and support of an established international art scene.

In a foreign, mostly unwelcoming, and often hostile environment, immigrant communities found themselves facing common scenarios of discrimination, disadvantage, and harassment. Immigrants and their children were accused of taking jobs away from the English working class and were discriminated against in areas of education, employment, and housing. They also faced ignorance and derision of their customs, and were targets of racist prejudice originating in the transatlantic slave trade, whereby enslavement and sub-human status were justified by propaganda that emphasized their heathen, savage, and bestial natures.

This history of black artists in Britain begins with the early immigrants from Africa, the West Indies, and the Indian sub-continent in the 1940s and 1950s. These “founding fathers” (and those recorded in history are overwhelmingly male) made the

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<sup>3</sup> For a detailed history, see Appendix A.

first inroads into the mainstream art world as immigrants from post-colonial countries who settled in the UK and became professional artists. They certainly did not have perceptions of themselves as founders of any kind of movement, black or otherwise; rather, they represent individual trajectories and experiences. Still, they negotiated, in their lives as well as their art, some of the concerns, aspirations, trials, and tribulations of Africans, Caribbeans, and Asians in Britain in the first half of the twentieth century. Four of the best known and successful of these are Ronald Moody, Aubrey Williams, Uzo Egonu, and Frank Bowling.

Ronald Moody was a Jamaican-born sculptor who was the first of this group to reach prominence as a professional artist. Born in Kingston, Jamaica in 1900, Moody was raised in a middle-class family of doctors and lawyers. In 1923, he left home to study dentistry in London. Visits to collections such as the Egyptian sculptures in the British Museum made striking impressions on him, and he began to experiment by modelling plasticine (Araeen 1989, 18). Lacking the time and money for formal art training, Moody taught himself. From plasticine he moved into clay, and three years later began carving wood (Araeen 1989, 18). Moody's first work, *Wohen* (inspired by a Schubert song), led film director Alberto Cavalcanti to recommend him to Galerie Billiet in Paris (Araeen 1989, 18). The gallery gave him his first one-man show in 1937, and was such a success that he moved to Paris by the end of the year. The following year Moody had another equally successful solo show at the Kunstzaal van Lier in Amsterdam.

Key early works from this period include *Johanaan* (1936; Fig. 1.1) and *L'Homme* (1937), solid and serene representations of the human figure and visage. Moody was interested in Indian and Chinese philosophies, as well as modern art, and these greatly influenced his work. He said, 'Art is not primarily concerned with the

mirror image, but with the inner significance of things...’ (Araeen 1989, 19). In Paris he received regular commissions and invitations to participate in annual shows at the Salon d’automne and Salon des Tuileries, however, the rise of Nazism forced Moody to leave Paris in 1941. He moved back to London and to practicing professional dentistry, but was compelled to sculpt in his spare time. He also continued to exhibit his sculptures, including shows at London galleries Arcade in 1946 and Galerie Appollinaire in 1950.

A severe bout of tuberculosis put Moody in hospital from 1950 to 1954, after which he was unable to do heavy carving (Araeen 1989, 18). He did resume sculpting after his recovery, however, and his work began to include expressions of the anxiety of war, both as personally experienced in France and in more general humanitarian terms. He had two successive solo shows at the Woodstock Gallery, London in 1960 and 1961. He also participated in some of the first exhibitions showcasing Commonwealth and Caribbean artists, such as *Caribbean Artists in England* in 1971, and *Commonwealth Artists of Fame* in 1977, which were both held at London’s Commonwealth Institute. Moody died in London in 1984. Essentially, Ronald Moody was a pioneer, achieving the status of professional artist both in England and internationally despite the socio-economic hardships facing immigrants at the time.

During the 1950s and 1960s, African, Caribbean, and Asian artists, writers, performers, and musicians pursued their cultural interests and their work in an environment where they found limited acceptance. Most had relocated to Britain for opportunities to develop their work through education, training, employment, exhibitions, and increased patronage. They were beset with the same problems as their fellow immigrants, however, and struggled against prejudice and discrimination.

Some, due to their talent and determination, achieved degrees of success in changing such perceptions.

Many of the artists that settled in Britain in the 1950s and 60s were part of an initial wave of intellectual émigrés from countries under British colonial rule or from former British colonies. Some of these countries gained their independence subsequently to the artists' departure. Aubrey Williams is one such example. He was born in Georgetown, British Guyana in 1926. As a young man, he studied agriculture under the colonial government and spent two years living with the Warrau Indians in the Amazonian jungle. In 1952, after growing political unrest, Williams left for Europe to pursue painting, and eventually settled in London; Guyana became an independent nation in 1966.

Williams was primarily self-taught, having found his short one-year stint at St. Martin's School of Art too creatively restrictive. Instead, he took inspiration from the art on view in museums and exhibitions. He began showing in London galleries, and in 1962 became an artist full-time. He was awarded the only prize at the First Commonwealth Biennale of Abstract Art in 1963 and the Commonwealth Prize for Painting the following year. Critics received his work as an individual appropriation of the style of Abstract Expressionism, although Williams always declared the basis for his oeuvre to be pre-Columbian culture. By the 1980s, emblems and figures of the ancient American civilizations, such as the Maya and Aztec, began to appear in his paintings.

*Quetzalcoatl* (1984; Fig. 1.2) demonstrates Williams' expressive use of saturated colour and forms evocative of pre-Columbian artistic painting and ceramic traditions. The title is the name of the Aztec feathered serpent deity, and the forms are taken directly from Aztec and Mayan headdresses. When questioned as to why he

identified so strongly with the pre-Columbian past rather than his African heritage, Williams replied that appropriating such material would be 'fake' because he did not have any personal experience of, nor did he feel any identification with, Africa. There was no other connection for him that was more relevant than that of his direct relation to the ancient cultures of America because he himself was South American (Walmsley 1990, 44). Williams died in London in 1990. His legacy has been a body of work that represents a unique and wholly individual synthesis of European visual traditions, Amerindian colour sensibilities, and indigenous cultural traditions.

Both Ronald Moody and Aubrey Williams were largely self-taught artists who eschewed professional training either by necessity or choice. They managed to achieve professional standing and success despite their lack of academic education in the arts, but there were other artists who went on to professional careers after receiving their formal art education in the UK. Born in Onitsha, Nigeria in 1931, Uzo Egonu came to Britain as an adolescent for opportunities in education and career development. He displayed an early propensity towards drawing and painting, and his father elected to send him to England for his education in 1945. He stayed in the home of an English patron in Norfolk until he left to study at London's Camberwell School of Arts and Crafts four years later. Upon graduation, Egonu remained in Britain to pursue painting as a full-time artist. In 1954 he met Mr. Bah, an influential and successful Gambian businessman who became an important patron and close friend. Through Bah and other contacts, Egonu found clients, shows, and commissions. His stature as an artist grew and he was gradually accepted into the English art scene. He participated in group exhibitions at the FBA Galleries in London (1963, 1968, and 1969) and *Into the Open* at the Mappin Art Gallery in

Sheffield in 1984. He had solo shows at London's Commonwealth Institute (1973 and 1982) and also in Germany and Nigeria.

Inspired by Nigerian Independence in 1960, as well as socio-political changes taking place across the African continent and the resulting excitement amongst the expatriate intelligentsia, Egonu began to paint nostalgic homages to his Nigerian childhood and Igbo home. As his creative practice matured, his work began to show an increased emphasis on line, experimental perspectives (such as bird's eye and cyclical), and play with texture. *Restaurant at Bad Orb* (1980; Fig. 1.3), part of Egonu's *Stateless Peoples* series, depicts a group of people sitting in a café. Some sit nursing cups of coffee with bowed heads, whilst others appear to eat from empty plates; they seem to demonstrate the consequences of post-colonial politics and economics, like the refugees from civil war.

The perspective in these paintings shifts from bird's eye views of the tables and floor to a bench and tabletop that recede into the picture plane. Attention to patterns of line and design within the overall composition hint at West African aesthetic traditions of body and shrine painting, and textile design. Whilst these works are indebted to Egonu's Western modernist training, they also resonate with certain Igbo aesthetics in composition and design, such as preoccupation with lines and boundaries, complementarity, and fragmental design (Oguibe 1995, 64-78). Not simply aesthetic, Egonu's work represents a commitment to his community aligned with a social vision and reportage. Despite his lifelong exile in England, he never ceased to feel that he was a member of the West African, Nigerian, and Igbo communities from whence he came. Egonu was an active and clearly felt African presence in post-war and subsequently post-colonial Britain. He died in 1996.

Frank Bowling was born in Bartica, British Guyana in 1936, and arrived in London in 1950 to complete his schooling. In 1953, he volunteered for the National Service and spent three years in the Royal Air Force, where he first 'learned about art' (Bowling 2004). His knowledge of art was soon expanded by his association with a circle of artists and students from Chelsea School of Art and the Royal College and immersion in the bohemian lifestyle of Fulham Road in London. Bowling decided to study painting, and began at the Royal College in 1959 with a scholarship. A year later, he married the registrar of the college and as a result was asked to leave the school. He spent a term at the Slade School of Art, but was eventually allowed to return to the RCA where he finished his degree in 1962, earning a Silver Medal for painting. At the same time, he was given a travelling scholarship to Rome that he converted into a trip to the Caribbean, which at this time he 'barely knew' (Bowling 2004). He visited Barbados, Trinidad, and British Guyana.

Bowling's paintings during art school were mostly still lifes and self-portraits, but as he progressed, he became increasingly interested in geometric form and framing. Although exposed to the same art history and influences as his art college peers, he was pressured by some tutors and critics to 'reflect Guyana' in his work (Bowling 2004). He experimented with paintings of Guyanese beggars, applying his interest in geometry, abstraction, and colour to the theme of Caribbean social ills. Comparisons with the work of Francis Bacon were frequent, and Bowling cites him as influential, especially in depicting suffering (Araeen 1989, 120). The rise of Pop Art and Minimalism were also crucial to his creative development, as evident in *Mirror* (1964; Fig. 1.4). In this painting, Bowling depicts himself, his wife, and his alter-ego descending a staircase that refers to a particular 'escape route' for RCA students to avoid their tutors and slip into the Victoria and Albert Museum (Bowling 2004). He

combines this personal narrative with formal quotations from Pop Art and Minimalist sources. Bowling asserts that the references to Pop Art, Minimalism, and Abstract Expressionist painting were intended to be ironic, a joking commentary on trends in the art world at the time (Bowling 2004). At the Royal Academy Summer Exhibition in 1966, *Mirror* was named 'Painting of the Year.'

After graduation, Bowling was offered a lectureship at Reading University, a position that allowed him to concentrate on painting and his ambitions as a professional artist. Although his work was critically acclaimed, he was often left out of exhibitions featuring the work of his peers, such as the Whitechapel Gallery's *New Generation* show in 1964. According to a conversation with Rasheed Araeen, 'When he tried to find out why he was turned down he was told: "England is not yet ready for a gifted artist of colour,"' (Araeen 1989, 40). At this time in the early 1960s, many international artists were looking to New York, and Bowling took a sabbatical from Reading to move there in 1966. In New York he succeeded in securing Guggenheim Memorial Foundation Fellowships in 1967 and 1973.

Bowling felt pressure to visualize his Guyanese heritage from critics, gallery owners, and curators, and he began playing with imagery specifically referring to his home country. Photographic images of his 'mother's house' and mapped shapes of Guyana, South America, and Africa began appearing within the abstract colour-fields and geometric forms of his painting. He remembers feeling the need to 'root' himself within Guyana at the time (Bowling 2004). From 1970 to 1971, he concentrated on large-scale paintings with map shapes and washes of colour. These works reflected his continuing concerns with geometry, and the influence of artists like Abstract Expressionists Barnett Newman and Mark Rothko. In 1971 he exhibited at the Whitney Museum in *Contemporary Black Artists in America*. Around this time,

Bowling's paintings become completely abstract; he no longer felt the need for figural 'crutches' (Bowling 2004). Debates about "Black Art" were popular in New York at the time, and Bowling was inevitably involved in the conversation. He says, 'I spent from the late sixties to seventies suffering through the whole nonsense about Black Art. I used up an awful lot of physical and psychic energy trying to get that together, and I found most of it had nothing to do with my real self' (Araeen 1989, 40).

Nonetheless, Bowling could not escape Guyana or black identity; it was constantly referred to in critiques of his work and exhibits, as in numerous references to the presence of Caribbean colour values. He was able to finally lay this issue to rest after meeting New York art critic Clement Greenberg in 1972. Under the influence of Greenberg and his circle, Bowling embraced modernism as his painterly ethos, and did not separate himself out, professionally or creatively, by his Guyanese heritage or black skin colour.

Bowling moved back to London in 1976, where he continues to live and work. He had a solo show at the Serpentine Gallery, London in 1986, participated in *The Other Story: Afro-Asian Artists in Post-War Britain* at the Hayward Gallery, London in 1989, and is represented in the Tate Collection, the Arts Council of Great Britain, the Museum of Modern Art in New York, the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, and the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. Bowling has established himself both in the UK and abroad as a painter of significant talent and critical engagement. Recently, in a book about black art written by an English art historian, Bowling's body of work was referred to as 'ahistorical' because of its distinct trajectory outside of black art history, both in Britain and the US. Bowling was immensely pleased, as he felt he had finally gotten out from under the shadow of ethnic or racial categorization, and had been recognized as an artist on his own terms (Bowling 2004).

Ronald Moody, Aubrey Williams, Uzo Egonu, and Frank Bowling are four renowned and successful artists from Africa and the Caribbean working in Britain during the forties, fifties, and sixties, but they were by no means the only ones. There were also artists who arrived from the Indian sub-continent to enjoy the advantages of British education, art institutions, and art patronage. Francis Newton Souza (b. 1924, Goa, India), Donald Locke (b. 1930, Stewartville, Guyana), and Avinash Chandra (b. 1931, Simla, India) immigrated to the UK and made their marks on local and international art histories with their own creative contributions. This “first wave” of artist immigrants from Africa, Asia, and the Caribbean helped to redefine Western modernism by synthesizing its stylistic trends and formal ideologies with their non-European heritages and their own imaginations. They also overcame the challenges of housing, employment, and education discrimination as well as racial prejudice to become professional artists. Their careers and influences represent a wide variety of creative and professional contexts and opportunities, and most studied and worked independent of any community or identification that marked them out as African, Caribbean, Asian, black, etc. However, the formation of the Caribbean Artists Movement in 1966 was to signal a change.

The Caribbean Artists Movement (CAM) was founded in London in 1966 to support writers and visual artists, and to promote their work. In the 1960s, Caribbean artists were actually receiving less critical attention than artists like Moody and Williams had garnered in the previous decade (Walmsley 1992, 35). The CAM was originally initiated by Kamau (then L. Edward) Brathwaite and John LaRose, both West Indian-born writer-poets residing in London. They recognized the number of Caribbean artists working in the capital and were surprised at the lack of association and communication between them. Through the assistance of Andrew Salkey, a

Jamaican freelance broadcaster and journalist who had been in London since 1952, they were able to establish a list of contacts (Walmsley 1997, 47).

Whilst the majority of those first invited to participate were writers and critics, artists Aubrey Williams and Frank Bowling were also included. By 1966, Williams and Bowling were already established professionals, but they were supportive of the ideals behind CAM's activities. Williams and Karl "Jerry" Craig, a Jamaican artist and art college teacher, were both enthusiastic early proponents of the CAM, and were largely responsible for encouraging the participation of more visual artists of Caribbean descent (Walmsley 1997, 47). After some initial meetings in private homes, the burgeoning CAM began to hold regular public monthly meetings in the West Indian Student's Centre in Earl's Court in 1967, and these continued over the next three years (Walmsley 1997, 47). In June 1967, the CAM held a "Symposium of West Indian Artists" attended by Ronald Moody, Aubrey Williams, Jerry Craig, and Trinidadian textile artist Althea McNish. McNish is the only woman visual artist regularly associated with the CAM in the historical record, and illustrates women artists' relative absence from this art history until the activism of the Black Art Movement in the 1980s.

As CAM activities continued, changing perceptions and contemporary events began to engender in some of its members a sense of solidarity with all immigrant workers in Britain, including Africans and Asians. This increased identification with Britain's black community led to a more politically activist orientation that was at odds with some of the founding members' interests and aspirations (Walmsley 1997, 50). Momentum and organization slowly declined from 1970 onwards, and sessions continued infrequently until 1972, when they ceased altogether. A West Indian cultural identification was superseded by the growing solidarity felt amongst the UK's

non-white populations. These political stirrings marked the rise of the “black British” socio-political categorization. There is no doubt, however, that the CAM served its members well by providing them with opportunities to share work and ideas, and by encouraging them to consider themselves part of a community with a rich cultural and historical heritage. In this way, the CAM also served as a frontrunner to and a model for subsequent organization and activism amongst British artists of non-European descent as members of a community. Indeed, this concept would characterize the Black Art Movement throughout the 1980s.

Whilst individuals had migrated to the UK from countries as various as India, Jamaica, Kenya, Nigeria, Sri Lanka, and Hong Kong, by the 1970s they were collectively identified as “black” despite the obvious disparity in their appearance and nationality. Once established, these immigrants often sent for their extended families and children. Subsequent generations were born and raised as British citizens, and approached issues of identity, history and geography from new and different perspectives. To paraphrase Ralph Ellison, “black” people are not united by culture, but rather by the politics of a shared opposition to European economic, social, and ideological oppression, as perpetrated in the histories of colonialism and imperialism (Gilroy 1993, 111). The immigrants and their families, especially their children, realized that being “black” in Britain had no physical or cultural basis of definition. This essentialism was based on racist discourses that resulted from various economic, social, and political factors as well as ideologies inherited from imperialism and nineteenth century colonialism. The categorization of these communities as “black” became characterized by the moral condition of discrimination, racism, and oppression they experienced in British society.

The diasporas themselves, however, were varied. There were first-generation economic or political exiles arriving from the 1940s onward, including Caribbeans originally displaced from Africa by the transatlantic slave trade. From the 1970s on, there were also increasing numbers of second-generation Africans, Caribbeans, and Asians raised by their immigrant parents in Britain, many of whom were actually born in the UK. Given their disappointment, frustration, and resignation at thwarted attempts to eke out a decent living and standing for themselves, black people began to fight back in the seventies and eighties by asserting their equal rights as citizens of the United Kingdom. As a result of their social and political agency, new particular forms of collective identity emerged that reconstitute narratives of migration, displacement, race, and nationality.

### **Twenty Years of Black British Art**

In order to understand better the creative practice of contemporary British artists of African, Caribbean, and Asian descent and the legacy of the Black Art Movement, a detailed history of its arts, exhibitions, and discourse is needed. Although the underpinnings of this art history began during the post-war period, this investigation concentrates on the last two and a half decades, during which time the artists in the case studies emerged. Critical dialogue concerning the expression of concepts of “black British” in the visual arts was actively encouraged and hotly debated in Britain by various participants of the Black Art Movement, a group of artists, curators, and academics who emerged in the late seventies. There was no one event or exhibition that declared the existence of the Black Art Movement. Rather, the appellation evolved retrospectively from the activities and publications of these practitioners who came together to support each other and to discuss the importance of their work. They were united in the need to increase their visibility, given that they

had been historically marginalized by and excluded from mainstream art practice, especially from well-known institutions, high-profile exhibitions, and in terms of gallery representation and patronage.

In the 1980s, a second generation of immigrants, born, raised, and educated in Britain, were finishing art school and coming into their own. The seventies had been a key period in the definition and identification of black British communities, and the eighties saw an explosion of new artists and work that tapped into discourses of race and multiculturalism. The hitherto loosely-formed community of artists of non-European descent in Britain was experiencing growing frustration at the conditions in which they lived and worked. As Zoë Linsley-Thomas, the late founder of London's 198 Gallery, explained, 'Artists would go to commercial art galleries and couldn't even get in the door. Oh, a black face, no, you can't even come in even though you're holding a portfolio, all this sort-of thing,' (Linsley-Thomas 2002). Black artists felt consistently under-represented, and sought to assure their creative voices were heard through exhibitions and publications conceived of, organized, selected, and administered by other black artists.

The exhibitions in Britain showcasing works by artists of African, Caribbean, and Asian descent over the last twenty-five years have developed through a variety of venues, sponsorship, and curatorial strategies. Some were group shows intended to showcase the most talented of these artists in order to redress their apparent exclusion from museums and galleries owned or operated by people representing the Establishment. Others were curated by the very mainstream venues previously believed to discriminate against black artists. Still others were one-person shows staged at galleries and universities. Each exhibition has contributed to an active debate surrounding the sensitive and often controversial issues defined and

disseminated by black art, to analyze the various themes explored by black artists, and to discuss its importance within a national and international perspective. Some of the most prevalent and contentious themes within academia and the popular press concern the artists' level of exposure within British (and by extension, global) society, the contested "quality" and "originality" of the art works, and the controversy itself that has been generated by these exhibitions.

Out of necessity, almost all exhibitions of black art in the early 1980s were organized by the artists themselves. These were often situated within community centres and took advantage of new policies of equal opportunities initiated by Labour-controlled municipalities. Others were staged as the result of personal vision and hard-headed determination. Eddie Chambers and Lubaina Himid were two of the most pro-active and influential artists of the Black Art Movement. They have both asserted that because of their non-European backgrounds and the racism they experience in Britain, as artists they have a political responsibility to create work specifically with a black audience in mind. Both had a definitive effect on the instigation and dissemination of the activities, art, and discourse pertaining to black arts in Britain from the early 1980s onward.

Eddie Chambers was born in 1960 in Wolverhampton, England to Jamaican parents. He curated some of the earliest contemporary black art exhibitions of the period, including *Black Art An' Done* (Wolverhampton Art Gallery, 1981), a group show of work carefully chosen to proclaim political and social concerns. The following year, Chambers curated *The Pan-Afrikan Connection* exhibition (Africa Centre, London, 1982), which comprised the work of five artists (four of whom were still students). All of the artists in the show shared a vested interest in black culture and the desire to unify their community through their art. This same group followed

with more exhibitions, including one at the Battersea Arts Centre in 1984. Chamber also organized conferences in association with the exhibitions, and wrote catalogues to accompany them. He was a key organizational figure in the First National Black Art Convention at Wolverhampton Polytechnic in 1982. In 1988, he published *ArtPack: A History of Black Artists in Britain* (London: Haringey Arts Council).

Chambers wrote in 1991 that:

In brief, our position was that as Black artists we were under obligation to make work which unreservedly aligned itself with the struggle of Black people: we fought against racism in our work, and sought to enhance and be part of a distinctly “Black” culture and its political identity, (Tawadros and Clarke 1999, 57).

Lubaina Himid was born in 1954 in Zanzibar, Tanzania, and moved to England with her family in 1955. She is an artist, curator, and writer instrumental to the Black Art Movement throughout the 1980s. Himid has been especially interested in promoting the work of black women artists, who in her experience were often subject not only to racism but sexism as well. Whilst she has never implied that black artists make a monolithic type of art that is limited to a black aesthetic, Himid does see solidarity amongst them, and a special need for black women to assert themselves and rely on each other for support. She wrote in 1987 that ‘[Black women artists] do not expect to agree with each other on form or function, and these [group] exhibitions have proved that this is where the daring and the richness lies. We do expect a loyalty and a commitment to showing together and especially a commitment to encouraging younger women,’ (Betterton 1987, 259).

Himid organized a series of exhibitions in the early eighties to give black women artists a space within which to be seen and heard. *Five Black Women Artists* (Africa Centre, 1983) and *Black Woman Time Now* (Battersea Arts Centre, 1983) brought together some of the most powerful work to specifically present these artists

as a unique and under-exposed group. Himid also curated *The Thin Black Line* at the Institute of Contemporary Art in London in 1985. As a mainstream institution, the ICA represented exactly the type of establishment participation and approbation from which black women artists had been historically overlooked.

Himid's text as well as the artist's statements in the show's catalogue contextualized the show within a politicized arena. She proclaimed her message clearly:

All eleven artists in this exhibition are concerned with the politics and realities of being Black Women. We will debate upon how and why we differ in our creative expression of these realities. Our methods vary individually from satire to storytelling, from timely vengeance to careful analysis, from calls to arms to the smashing of stereotypes. We are claiming what is ours and making ourselves visible. We are eleven of the hundreds of creative Black Women in Britain. We are here to stay, (Himid 1985, overleaf).

Himid's rather militant declaration in the catalogue situated the work of the eleven participants as staking a claim for themselves within an art world that had historically marginalized them due to their colour and their sex. The fact that the exhibition was staged in a mainstream art institution added to the poignancy of that claim, not only because of its prominence within the British art establishment, but because of the wide audience exposure that such a venue could provide. This exhibit was a seminal moment for black British women artists because of the degree of exposure the work received and the corresponding debates about quality and activism the work incurred.

Two years previously, in 1983, the Organisation for Black Art Advancement and Leisure Activities (OBAALA) opened the Black-Art Gallery in Finsbury Park to provide desperately needed exhibition space for Black artists. The OBAALA committee consisted of Lorna Chin, Shakka Dedi, Beverly Francis, Anum Iyapo, Michael Jess, Eve-I Kadeena, and Joel Woodley. *Heart in Exile* was the inaugural

exhibition and included works by Eddie Chambers and Keith Piper. In its printed guide for the exhibition, the committee described its mission for the gallery:

In the main, the exhibits will have a criteria [*sic*] applied to them which is based not simply on the imagery alone but equally on the consciousness and cultural identity behind the imagery. We believe that Black-Art is born and created out of a consciousness based upon experience of what it means to be an Afrikan descendant wherever in the world we are. 'Black' in our context means all those of Afrikan descent: 'Art', the creative expression of the Black person or group based on historical and contemporary experience, (*Heart in Exile* 1983, 4).

Shakka Dedi, the director, also gave solo exhibitions to many young black artists.

Sonia Boyce, Eddie Chambers, Claudette Johnson, Keith Piper, Donald Rodney, and Maud Sulter were amongst those offered one-person shows. The Black-Art Gallery continued to host exhibitions showcasing the work of British artists of African and Caribbean descent until the early 1990s, when it folded.

*Into the Open* at the Mappin Art Gallery, Sheffield, curated by Lubaina Himid and Pogus Caesar in 1984 and *The Thin Black Line* at the ICA in 1985 were the first two in a series of black art survey exhibitions at more well known, high-profile venues. These exhibitions sought to redress their apparent marginalization and exclusion from contemporary British art. Some were curated by black artists, and others by white curators, gallery owners, and administrators. Whilst black artists and activists welcomed these developments, there were also accusations that the artists had compromised their political and social messages for the dominant mainstream. Although it was curated by two black artists, Eddie Chambers criticized *Into the Open* as having dealt with the participating artists in a 'divisive and backward way,' (Chambers 1988, 10). *The Thin Black Line* represented a turning point in the narrative of recent black art exhibition history in that it was held at the ICA, a major institution in the nation's capital. The art in the show was received with some trepidation by critics who appreciated the work but were taken aback by its anger. In the black press,

it was praised for the powerful choice of art works, but critics were disappointed by the narrow and inappropriately small exhibition space. Waldemar Januszczak wrote that most of the works 'almost choke on their own anger,' ("Anger at Hand," *The Guardian*, 27 November 1985). This reaction was regarded as a misinterpretation by Lorraine Griffiths in *Blackboard*, who felt that the art embodied the 'moving, inspiring, hopeful cry of black women,' rather than a defensive, counter-racist attack on the museum-going public (Griffiths 1986).

The next survey exhibition, *From Two Worlds*, was organized at the Whitechapel Gallery, an important and well-respected institution of British and international art. The exhibition was the result of a curatorial collaboration between gallery staff Rachel Kirby, Jenni Lomax, and Nicholas Serota, and artists Sonia Boyce, Veronica Ryan, and Gavin Jantjes, with consultations from Eddie Chambers and Lubaina Himid. Boyce recalls,

For weeks we argued and debated over the question whether this was to be a black art exhibition or not. We wanted to include the work of African, Asian (North and South), Caribbean, Middle Eastern, and South American artists working in Britain. None of us knew of any indigenous artists from Australia or New Zealand working in Britain. Gavin [Jantjes] outlined an idea that he had been thinking about for some time, an exhibition that crossed and synthesized different cultural traditions, (Roberts 1987, 57-59).

*From Two Worlds* included work that demonstrated the cultural hybridity of its sixteen participating artists to explore how being "from two worlds" manifested in their creative practice and to move beyond an Afro-Caribbean concept of black art. Nicholas Serota and Gavin Jantjes, in their introduction to the exhibition catalogue, explained,

This exhibition seeks to show a wide diversity of work by artists who draw on their background to produced art which is a fusion of European and non-European vision. Of course, other shows could have been made which sought to explore difference rather than synthesis. However, at this point the selectors of the exhibition felt that the most valuable exhibition at this moment would

be one that sought to reveal the limitation of labels such as “Asian,” “Indian,” “Japanese,” or “Afro-Caribbean,” (Kirby and Serota 1986, 5).

In highlighting the artists’ cultural plurality, the organizers of *From Two Worlds* aimed to emphasize their engagement with a range of cultural heritages and influences, including their relationship, personally and artistically, to Britain. The title *From Two Worlds* hinted at the complexities, and perhaps difficulties, of such multicultural situations.

*From Two Worlds* was far more palatable to mainstream audiences in comparison to *The Thin Black Line*, and received favourable reviews. Flick Allen praised *From Two Worlds* as fascinating and moving in *Women’s Review* (Allen 1986). Critic Marina Vaizey was also impressed (“Why Partiality Does Not Tell the Whole Story,” *The Sunday Times*, 10 December 1989). Nevertheless, Eddie Chambers denounced *From Two Worlds* as complying with white art supremacy by exhibiting passive voices within the established system (Chambers 1988, 11). The next exhibition to come on the scene constituted a pivotal moment for black art and its visibility in the British mainstream: Rasheed Araeen’s *The Other Story: Afro-Asian Artists in Post-War Britain*.

*The Other Story* opened at the Hayward Gallery on 29 November 1989 and subsequently toured to Wolverhampton and Manchester. It was the brainchild of sculptor, writer, and critic Rasheed Araeen, who had been trying for over ten years to stage a major survey of black British art at a mainstream venue. Araeen asserted that the contribution of these artists to art history had been deliberately overlooked and denied. After the project experienced various difficulties securing funding and support, the Arts Council accepted it in 1987. Araeen selected the twenty-four artists in *The Other Story* to represent black artists from the post-war period to the present who had made the most significant impact as a way of inserting them into the British

art historical narrative. The exhibition, its catalogue, and its message of racist exclusion sparked an incredibly forceful debate within the art community and the general press.

Many critics responded to Araeen by arguing that for a minority group in a discipline where professional success is rare, black British artists were actually quite well-represented in contemporary British cultural history. A much-touted example of this equality was the selection of Anish Kapoor to represent Britain in 1990's Venice Biennale. However, the Royal Academy's *British Art in the Twentieth Century* in 1987 had exhibited a selection of seventy-two artists, none of whom were of African, Asian, or Caribbean descent, which effectively excluded them from British modernism. This was perhaps not surprising for a venue whose 1993 exhibition of twentieth century American Art excluded any mention of the Harlem Renaissance. According to Eddie Chambers, *The Other Story* was the first time Black British artists were acknowledged and considered to have a history that went back further than the 1980s (Chambers 1997, 77).

Other reactions to the exhibition included objections to the presentation of these artists as a group unto themselves. Anish Kapoor was one of at least five artists who were asked to participate in *The Other Story* but declined the invitation. Others included Veronica Ryan, Kim Lim, and Shirazeh Houshiary. Their refusal to participate was widely interpreted to be a result of their concern, even distaste, at being selected and further segregated on the basis of their race or national heritage. Frank Bowling was initially hesitant to participate, but reconsidered because he realized he *had* been excluded because of race and because *The Other Story* was *his* story (Januszczak 1989). Araeen himself countered declarations of the show's "ghettoization" of non-white artists by insisting that these artists and their work had

already been marginalized historically, and posited *The Other Story* as their attempt to come *out* of the ghetto (Gregory Jensen, *Compass News Feature*, 22 December 1989). Brian Sewell's scathing review in *The Sunday Times* ("Pride and Prejudice," 26 November 1989) challenged Araeen to prove the artists were equal to their white counterparts by encouraging such competition and comparison in a mixed exhibition.

Plenty of reviews within both the black and mainstream press were positive and found the art impressive. However, critiques levelled at the quality of works in *The Other Story* ranged from a lack of unity in the random selection (based on race or Afro-Asian heritage) to the simple opinion that they were not very good. The leading proponent of the latter was Brian Sewell, who declared that the reason the participating artists and their work had not been recognized by the establishment was because it was 'not good enough;' in his opinion, these artists 'borrowed all and contributed nothing' ("Pride and Prejudice," *The Sunday Times*, 26 November 1989). Several other critics agreed, like the *Independent's* Andrew Graham-Dixon ("Pride and Prejudice," 5 December 1989) and the *Telegraph's* Richard Dorment ("Vexed Questions of Colour," 9 December 1989). The response from the artists and the black press was that these writers had totally missed the point, which was that the artists had been marginalized and devalued as exotic, and thus excluded from Western art historical discourse (Bhabha and Biswas 1989). Moreover, they argued that those who responded to Western traditions were not fairly evaluated. They described a double standard whereby artists like Picasso were lauded as visionaries for incorporating non-European traditions in their work, but non-European art containing influences from the West was deemed unoriginal.

The overall quality of the works in the exhibition was not the only subject of debate. Some critics were disturbed by themes of social and political protest, and felt

this detracted from the works themselves, whilst others saw the assertive and confrontational nature of the works as one of the show's greatest strengths. The controversy and ensuing debate about *The Other Story* was in itself a point of contention amongst critics. Some believed that all of the arguments and agitation obscured the exhibit and the work itself. Others asserted that the furore surrounding the show actually achieved the goal of increased visibility for the artists and their work.

In the 1990s, other surveys of black British art continued to raise issues of marginalization and exclusion. The later survey exhibitions did not elicit as much criticism of black art as a whole. The South Asian Contemporary Visual Arts Festival, a series of exhibitions in 1993, was praised in the black arts magazine *Artrage* as the opportunity to explore traditions usually neglected because of the lack of black art curators and gallery owners (Sabratnam 1993). *Seen/Unseen* at the Bluecoat Gallery, Liverpool, in 1994 was organized by Nigerian-born artist, critic, and curator Olu Oguibe. It coincided with the Tate Liverpool's exhibition of *Africa Explores*, curated by Susan Vogel at New York's Museum for African Art. Oguibe sought to highlight the artists' contributions to postmodern culture and philosophy, which belied their perceived categorization as neo-Primitives, as in *Africa Explores* (Oguibe 1994).

The following year witnessed a number of exhibitions associated with *Africa '95: A Season Celebrating the Arts of Africa*, a six-month long catalogue of nationwide events and activities showcasing the arts of Africa and the African diaspora. Exhibitions included shows like the Bluecoat's *Cross Currents*, the Hayward's *World Imagery: Contemporary Jamaican Art*, the Tate Liverpool's *Vital: Three Contemporary African Artists*, and the Whitechapel's *Seven Stories about Modern Art in Africa*. However, contemporary African art made by academically

trained artists like El Anatsui, Atta Kwami, Uzo Egonu, or Sokari Douglas Camp was notably absent from the Royal Academy of Art's large-scale *Africa: Art of a Continent*. The Royal Academy countered criticism of this omission by explaining that the scope of the show was art up to 1900, and did not include trajectories of modern art in Africa.

This response raised issues of "traditional" versus "modern" and Western concepts of "authenticity." Critics Kobena Mercer and Olabisi Silva both felt that the celebration was overshadowed by a colonialist perspective and cultural paternalism. Mercer wrote that a 'lingering colonial paradigm' was behind the organizing principles as well as the critical acclaim of *Africa: Art of a Continent*. Furthermore, he argued that the show's de-contextualization of the objects promoted a 'de-historical' view of African aesthetics and encouraged the myth of Africa as a static place (Mercer 1995, 28-29). Silva remarked that the exhibition avoided the problematic ways in which the objects had been acquired, e.g. the 1897 Punitive Expedition to Benin, and debates concerning patrimony (Silva 1995, 6). The same year, the ICA's *Mirage: Enigmas of Race, Difference, and Desire* curated by David Bailey investigated the significance of Martinique-born French author and essayist Franz Fanon's writings on contemporary art and culture, and included the work of several notable black artists. Martin Maloney wrote in *Flash Art* that *Mirage* was a reflection of white perceptions of black culture and an attempt to simply add it into older, established white art history (Maloney 1996).

*Transforming the Crown: African, Asian and Caribbean Artists in Britain 1966-1996* was organized by New York City's Caribbean Cultural Center and exhibited simultaneously at the Center, The Studio Museum in Harlem, and the Bronx Museum of the Arts from October 1997 to March 1998. For an institution dedicated to

documenting and presenting African-derived cultural traditions, *Transforming the Crown* represented a shift in focus from the diasporas of the Americas to those of Europe, beginning with England. Asian artists were included because of their historical labelling as “black” in Britain along with Africans and Caribbeans. Curator Mora Beauchamp-Byrd sought to explore conceptualizations of home and nationhood in black British art, and their relations to the populations of North America ‘at a time of increased xenophobia and historical amnesia,’ (Beauchamp-Byrd 1997a, 13). As for critical response, the *New York Times* praised the show as ‘packed with terrific artists...projecting a unified force-field of energy,’ (Holland Cotter, “Art Guide,” *The New York Times*, 30 January 1998). Eddie Chambers, essayist in the catalogue, however, was critical of the exhibition brochure’s failure to describe the reasons that the period of 1966-1996 was specifically chosen, and to explain the criteria of selection that included some artists and excluded others (e.g. Rasheed Araeen, Frank Bowling, and Tam Joseph). In terms of the quality, Chambers complained that Beauchamp-Byrd had not chosen the best works to represent each artist in the show (Tawadros and Clarke 1999, 86-87).

In some cases, reviewers in both the mainstream and black press felt that the political thesis behind black art survey shows did not always best serve the art, or vice versa. Many noted that not all black art reflects ‘dual cultural experiences’ (Berman 1990) or an overt political message. In fact, artists like Eddie Chambers were often frustrated by the black artists who did not stress racial difficulties in their work or problematize definitions of black in terms of skin colour, cultural heritage, or a moral condition. Some artists, like Chambers, thought that survey exhibits of black art often reflected the very white Western values they were trying to undermine and against which they were protesting (Chambers 1988, 10-14). Other artists consciously

asserted their right to express themselves artistically based on their personal experiences and choices, rather than politics.

In addition to the survey exhibitions that specifically highlighted black British artists, the late 1990s also saw significant shifts in the ways these artists were participating in the international art scene. The “young British artist” (YBA) phenomenon that allegedly started with the 1988 *Freeze* exhibition in a Docklands warehouse organized by Damien Hirst, and reached an apogee with 1997’s notorious *Sensation* exhibition at the Royal Academy of Art (and subsequently, New York City’s Brooklyn Museum of Art) lent British art a new level of notoriety and respectability. Several celebrated YBAs are artists of African, Asian, or Caribbean descent, and were included in high profile exhibitions at well-respected mainstream institutions. In the last ten years, Steve McQueen, Chris Ofili, and Yinka Shonibare were included in the Tate Britain’s annual Turner Prize exhibition; Chris Ofili won the prize in 1998 and Steve McQueen won the following year. Ofili and Shonibare were featured in *Sensation*, and Shonibare, along with Oladele Bamgboye, was included in *Intelligence: New British Art 2000* at the Tate Britain.<sup>4</sup> Participation in these exhibitions by black artists alongside their white contemporaries differed from previous strategies of singling them out as a group.

2000’s *Intelligence* was posited as a Tate survey comprising the latest and greatest of contemporary British artists. Reviews for *Intelligence* were mixed. Many critics praised the originality and power of the art works, but felt the curators’ thematic conception left something to be desired. Others, like Adrian Searle, Richard Dormant, and Brian Sewell, were less than impressed with the works selected. Works by Oladele Bamgboye and Yinka Shonibare were mentioned specifically. Searle, for

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<sup>4</sup> Mona Hatoum, a London-based artist born in Lebanon to Palestinian parents, was shortlisted for the Turner Prize in 1995 and included in the *Sensation* exhibition. Despite her inclusion in *The Other Story*, because of her Middle Eastern background she is beyond the purview of this thesis.

example, felt that Bamgboye's video installation, *Spells for Beginners*, was full of feeling but too controlled and tersely edited ("Thick and Thin," *The Guardian*, 8 July 2000). Dorment was even less impressed, calling the work 'shallow' and 'narcissistic' ("Is There Intelligent Life Here?" *The Daily Telegraph*, 12 July 2000). Sewell was 'numbed by boredom' and irritated by the video's assumption of white male inferiority complexes with regards to the black male body, ("How the Tate Failed a Simple Intelligence Test," *Evening Standard*, 14 July 2000). It must be noted, however, that these critics were equally disappointed by the work of white artists in the show. In contrast to these negative critiques, Yinka Shonibare's *Vacation 2000* deserved mention as 'impressive' by William Packer in the *Financial Times* ("Cutting-Edge Intelligence Proves Artificial," 8-9 July 2000).

It is clear from these exhibitions and their critical reception that contemporary British artists of African, Caribbean, and Asian descent are exhibiting and being reviewed alongside their English/European peers. Their inclusion indicates a willingness on the part of curators as well as critics to judge them on par with their contemporaries, yet, as Sewell's review suggests, they still have to contend with some who seem resistant to their post-colonial and multicultural positionings. Whilst many artists and critics view such negative reactions to black British art as prejudiced and ignorant, others welcome such discussion as furthering the understanding and appreciation of the work of these artists within mainstream art discourse.

Since the beginning of the twenty-first century, contemporary African art by artists both on the continent and around the world has been the subject of a number of group exhibitions, such as *Continental Shift* (Bonniefanten Museum, Maastricht, 2000), *Unpacking Europe* (Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen, Rotterdam, 2001), *A Fiction of Authenticity: Contemporary Africa Abroad* (Contemporary Art Museum St.

Louis, 2003), and *Looking Both Ways: Art of the Contemporary African Diaspora* (Museum for African Art, New York, 2003), to name just a few. Several of the artists who participated in these various shows live and work in Britain, including Oladele Bamgboye, Godfried Donkor, Mary Evans, Zineb Sedira, and Yinka Shonibare. This recent rise in their international profiles will be examined more thoroughly in Chapter three, but there is one exhibition that deserves mention here: *Africa Remix: Contemporary Art of a Continent*.

Curated by Paris-based writer and curator of Cameroonian descent Simon Njami, *Africa Remix* originally opened at the Museum Kunst Palast in Düsseldorf, Germany, and subsequently travelled to the Hayward Gallery in London in early 2005. In London, *Africa Remix* was envisaged to be the focal point of the artistic and cultural programming for Africa '05, the successor to Africa '95. The exhibition's large scale and eighty-five artists had to be trimmed down for the Hayward Gallery, but the London installation still included the work of over sixty artists and occupied three floors of gallery space. The three UK-based artists included in the original exhibition were all represented in the Hayward's version: Eileen Perrier, Zineb Sedira, and Yinka Shonibare. Many black British artists attended the show and participated in Africa '05 programming, including Barby Asante, Maria Amidu, Oladele Bamgboye, Godfried Donkor, Ibrahim El Salahi, and Mary Evans. The exhibition showcased the variety and quality of artistic production on the continent and in the diaspora, and brought current African social, political, and cultural issues to the attention of the British public.

Critics were astounded at the enormous scope of *Africa Remix* and the diversity of the art on display, although not all of them felt that these were strengths. The emphasis on Africa's urbanity, cosmopolitanism, and modernist heritage left

many critics uncomfortable, even disappointed. It seems they prefer their African art to be “primitive,” naïve, and local. Jonathon Jones lamented the exhibition’s ‘lack [of] quality control,’ describing its curatorial ethos as that of an art fair, ‘in which a large number of artists of wildly varying merit display one or two works,’ (“Africa Calling,” *The Guardian*, 9 February 2005). He was hesitant to interpret the work on its own terms, comparing South African artist Jane Alexander’s installation *African Adventure* (1999-2002) to YBAs Jake and Dinos Chapman. He pined for “tribal” or popular art and claimed that, ‘By insisting on the urban and the technological, *Africa Remix* misdescribes the continent.’

Brian Sewell was more openly vitriolic. Of the work in the exhibition, he wrote that ‘not much of it qualifies as art in any contemporary European sense, and what little does is so European in its sad inadequacy that it hardly qualifies as African,’ (“Out of Africa,” *Evening Standard*, 18 February 2005). The irony of his comparing the work unfavourably to the European canon whilst at the same time declaring that ‘the contemporary art in this exhibition is so feeble precisely because it is so little rooted in any native tradition,’ seemed to be lost on Sewell himself. Instead, he ignored the possibility that African art can be urban and (post)modern and insisted that the Royal Academy’s *Africa: Art of a Continent* exhibition was ‘genuinely African in that it was largely pre-colonial and pre-Christian.’ Echoing his ‘derivative’ critique of *The Other Story*, he dismissed all the artists in the exhibition, declaring that ‘in following the West they mimic it in witless parody, or ape in modern materials and terms what little they know of a genuine African past, or embark on tasks that can only be completed with the obsessive industry of the deranged.’ Mark Hudson, however, described the exhibition’s ‘exhilarating sense of the creativity of the modern African city,’ and outlined ‘the vexed relationship

between Africa and the West—between poverty and wealth, power and powerlessness, the former colonizer and the formerly colonized—that remains its central theme,’ (“Art that Gets to the Heart of Africa,” *The Telegraph*, 22 January 2005).

Black British art has been the subject of passionate debate amongst artists, curators, critics, and the general public since the activities of the Black Art Movement in the 1980s. Not all artists of African, Caribbean, and Asian descent in Britain, however, have identified with the philosophical framings that are the legacy of the Black Art Movement. These artists are exploring a newfound sense of freedom with regards to their identities, and some are choosing to disassociate themselves professionally with any such overt categorization. Many key issues continue to surface, such as questions of exclusion, quality, authenticity, and controversy. Within these discussions, there are overlapping and recurring sub-themes, such as problems of interpretation, valuation, and racial categorizations. At their root are the complex historical and geographic circumstances that have contributed to these artists’ relationships with and differentiation from Britain’s majority population, and their negotiations with these relationships within their personal and professional trajectories.

### **History and Geography**

For Black people, “history” refuses to be a lifeless and dull conglomeration of boring dates and events. Instead, it presents itself as earlier episodes of our current existence. We are the latest chapters of history, and as such, we are scarcely able to downgrade its centrality and its importance in our lives....History refuses to let go of us, and demands an active involvement in our present, (Tawadros and Clarke 1991, 98).

Of course, this attitude towards and experience of history could be similar for anyone, but not in the manner or the details to which Chambers is alluding. This is the history that begins with European explorers “discovering” African, North American, and

Asian lands in the fifteenth century, and leads to the enslavement, exploitation, and oppression of non-white populations. British citizens of African, Caribbean, and Asian descent have ancestral, familial, and occasionally personal relationships to this history. These populations have settled or been born and raised in a country in which not only are they minorities, but which is responsible for violent and traumatic acts of oppression and exploitation such as the transatlantic slave trade and colonialism.

These acts continue to impact them in the twenty-first century through their experiences of racism and prejudice. It is only relatively recently that ideologies of postmodernism, feminism, and post-colonialism began to question 200-year-old assumptions of superiority and white, male meta-narratives. For contemporary black British artists, history is a recurring and significant concept in their artistic and personal lives, especially to the extent that members of the art world expect them to engage with it.

Geography is conceptually twinned with history. European commercial and colonial enterprises necessitated the movement of people as well as goods across oceans and between continents. Africa, Southeast Asia, and the Americas were conquered, carved up, and mapped out by European powers for their own interests. This geography is a legacy for those people whose ancestors and relatives were enslaved and/or displaced. It is equally important to those people directly affected by economic and political instability in their homelands, immigration, and/or racism. Once again, such a relationship to the historical course of events responsible for creating modern nation-states is not only the purview of those of African, Caribbean, or Asian descent; the difference is in the details, and the specific relationships that these create.

Every artist necessarily creates from his/her own perspective. However, artists socially and artistically classified as “black British” are often expected to address issues of colonial and post-colonial history, particularly in terms of racism, prejudice, and politics. Indeed these artists do address these issues, although not always and to the exclusion of others, and in subtle rather than overtly political ways. For example, several of them explore histories of communities, families, and individuals, and the memories and the attendant nostalgia these generate. The question today, in the twenty-first century, is: do black British artists engage with conceptualizations of history any more intrinsically or dynamically than contemporary white British artists? In other words, is this still a point of differentiation, as articulated by Eddie Chambers over a decade ago?<sup>5</sup>

Upon examination, there is no doubt that the past represents an important source of material and creative inspiration for today’s artists. Artists of non-European descent engage with such concepts in some unique ways, which can be categorized into two contrasting approaches. Yinka Shonibare and Godfried Donkor appropriate centuries-old images and cultural as well as racial stereotypes to question and re-conceptualize accepted historical narratives with regards to black populations. This reflects experiences in their own lives that call into question white English historical and cultural hegemony. Zarina Bhimji, Sonia Boyce, and Sokari Douglas Camp are more concerned with how history impinges upon them personally. They mine the emotional, nostalgic, and sometimes melancholy memories of their own personal as well as familial and communal pasts in order to discover how these memories affect

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<sup>5</sup> Chambers made a similar statement more recently in *Godfried Donkor, Michael Forbes, Johannes Phokela* (Nottingham: Future Factory Far Ahead Publications, 2001): ‘For many of us, “history” refuses to be a lifeless and dull conglomeration of boring dates and events from which we are terminally disconnected. Instead, our take on history, more often than not, constructs it as signifying earlier episodes of our current existence. We are, in the twenty-first century, the latest instalments of our history,’ (10).

them. Some of their work engages with feelings of nostalgia and loss, experienced in grieving the death of a parent or the process of leaving behind one's childhood, for example. Other work engages with experiences particular to circumstances of immigration or to being members of minority communities in the UK. Their collective interest in personal histories relates in particular ways to their multicultural heritage.

Twenty-five years ago, proponents of the Black Art Movement in Britain sought to recover their voices and images from mainstream Western discourses. These discourses were founded in ideologies based upon the colonial history that had oppressed and enslaved their ancestors, as well as the post-colonial politics that characterized them as immigrant outsiders with strange customs and criminal tendencies. The proliferation of such stereotypes continued to marginalize them, and limited their voices and images to trite and racist stereotypes. They experienced the legacy of imperial and colonial racism that, for example, characterized Africans as less evolved humans and white people as a civilizing force. Especially in the 1980s, artists who viewed history as a burden and colossal misrepresentation sought to redress this in their work by showing up such old-fashioned ideas and stereotypes as the faulty, racist reasoning that justified slavery, colonialism, oppression, and exploitation. They often decried the effect that such thinking had in their own lives and those of their families, such as the harassment and prejudice experienced at the hands of the British police expressed in the work of Keith Piper.<sup>6</sup> This represents one perspective within a diverse community of black British artists, but it is also part of the legacy of a strategically important movement that created a dialogical space for black artists both ideologically and in exhibitions.

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<sup>6</sup> See pp. 235-236 and Figure 3.12.

Yinka Shonibare, for example, clearly states that he is not, and has never considered himself to be, oppressed; he says he strives to transcend 'a victimhood way of thinking,' (Shonibare 2002). Instead, he often employs humour to challenge historical, especially Victorian narratives, as in his photographic series, *Diary of a Victorian Dandy* (1998; Fig. 1.5), and his installation for *Documenta XI, Gallantry and Criminal Conversation* (2002; Fig. 1.6). *Diary* is a collection of images from a typical day in the life of a Victorian dandy, from breakfast in bed, to conversation in the study, billiards, dinner, and after dinner antics back in the bedroom, except that Shonibare himself is the dandy in question and the centre of the assembled company's adoration. By ironically placing a black man (himself) in the centre of this world of libertine pleasure and privilege, Shonibare overturns nineteenth century concepts of racial superiority as well as classist and racist stereotypes. He is also commenting on the ways in which dandies act as social subversives who, whilst mad, bad, and dangerous to know, gain entrance into such upper echelons of society because they are fashionable, exciting, and the life of the party.

In *Gallantry*, frothily frocked and colourfully bedecked Victorians on a Grand Tour of Europe take all kinds of liberties with their extra time and money, especially in the free-form expression of their sexual perversions and peccadilloes. As with other similar works, Shonibare has rendered the characters headless in a seditious swipe at the power they claim over the world in which they inhabit and the Empire that they rule. Their skin tones are a range of brown, tan, and coffee-coloured, making them racially indistinguishable but obviously non-white. Their costumes are classically Victorian, but the cloth they are made with is the factory wax print fabric so ubiquitous in West Africa. Shonibare uses this fabric as a satirical comment on Western notions of Africanness.

This type of cloth was originally developed by Dutch trading companies as a cheap, industrial alternative to Indonesian batiks. When the cloth failed to sell in Indonesia, the Dutch traders, and later the English, found an enthusiastic market in their West African colonies. There, merchants adapted the fabric to local dress and aesthetic concerns and, as it began to be produced locally, even incorporated imagery inspired by local proverbs and political concerns into the designs. The irony is that the cloth became the quintessential signifier of African culture in the West, despite its distinctly non-African origins. In using such wax prints to clothe the Victorian imperialists, Shonibare challenges historical concepts of political authority, economic control, and cultural stereotype. In this way, his work uses playfulness and humour to satirize historical narratives of colonialism and relationships of Empire to subject. His use of African wax print cloth, his references to dandyism, and his appropriation of art historical tropes and quotations in works like *Diary* and *Gallantry* embrace British imperial and colonial history, and Victorian morality, by lampooning them. He effectively re-contextualizes Victorians, who are the antecedent to contemporary Englishmen and women. Shonibare has explored similar historical and art historical re-conceptualizations in works like *Mr. And Mrs. Andrews Without Their Heads* (1998), *Hound* (2000), *Dorian Gray* (2001), and *The Swing (After Fragonard)* (2001).

Godfried Donkor is another artist who appropriates historical imagery and narrative into his creative practice, and in doing so re-centres the place of people of colour in Britain in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. In works like *Gaming Room at Devonshire House* (2001; Fig. 1.7), Donkor takes up the question of the black sportsman as a means by which non-white members of Britain's underclass first rose to prominence in society, and the problematic stereotypes of black male virility that are the legacy of colonialism. He creates painted or printed collages of figures

drawn from eighteenth and nineteenth century engravings, prints, and popular imagery culled from a variety of European as well as Caribbean sources to recover characters omitted from history books.

*Gaming Room* centres upon the figures of underground boxers Tom Molineaux and Tom Cribb facing off for the “fight of the (nineteenth) century,” the championship of England. Molineaux was an American ex-slave trained by Bill “The Black Terror” Richmond to challenge the English country boy in a fight that riveted the attention of the fancy aristocrats who enjoyed the illicit scene of bare-knuckle boxing. They are pictured as a solid mass of lurid spectators behind the fighters, carousing with women and wine as they enjoy the show of brute strength and the symbolic showdown between black and white, savage and civilized. In this composition, Donkor juxtaposes the brutal and exploitive world of underground boxing with the rowdy, salacious, and wasteful habits of London’s moneyed upper classes. This work depicts the degenerate flipside to the distinguished world of finery and grace depicted in Shonibare’s *Diary of a Victorian Dandy* (although certainly referred to in the final bedroom photograph of Shonibare’s series). Donkor has recovered the stories of these black men, and replaced them into their rightful place in English history. Becoming underground boxing stars made both Richmond and Molineaux popular party boys and, in Richmond’s case, gained him money, fame, and social prestige, yet they were virtually unknown by the twenty-first century. Thus, *Gaming Room* works as a subversive agent to the whitewashed versions of history that had relegated these athletes to obscurity.

Attending underground boxing fights was not the only pastime of London’s rich and titled classes, who quite frequently mingled not only in gaming houses but also brothels. *Mama Calabah’s Chop Bar* (2001) depicts these be-wigged and hook-

nosed English rowdies being attended to by prim young Caribbean ladies, black servants, and Mama Calabah herself.<sup>7</sup> Donkor obtained the images of Mama, aka the notorious Barbadian madam Rachel Pringle, and her coterie from local engravings and combined them with a typical English eighteenth century chophouse.<sup>8</sup> The result is a compelling image of globalization that puts into perspective the intersecting relationships of Africa, Britain, and the Caribbean over 200 years ago.

Donkor does not stop there. *The London Mob* (2001) makes a clear statement about the presence of people of African and Caribbean descent, not just in the shadows of the gaming room or brothel, but right in the middle of the street. In this work he places figures from a 1779 Barbadian cudgelling match into a nineteenth century engraving of an unruly London mob thronging the streets. Donkor's subject matter is clearly rich with history, and in grappling with the marginalization and exploitation of people of colour in eighteenth and nineteenth century Britain, he takes up the mandate articulated by Eddie Chambers in the quote above. However, Donkor has criticized the current reception and documentation of his work as too restricted to issues of political commentary and social criticism (Donkor 2002). This may seem a bit facile or resolutely naïve in light of the works just examined, but his reaction illustrates the limitations of a persistent reliance on "history" as a means to understanding black British art.

In a series of paintings entitled *A Masque in Five Tableaux*, Lubaina Himid continually centres the figures of black women in order to redress their exclusion and even invisibility in the Western, white male-oriented world. Himid's *Between the Two My Heart Is Balanced* (1991; Fig. 1.8) refers compositionally to a nineteenth century painting by French artist James Tissot (1836-1902). Tissot's work depicts a soldier

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<sup>7</sup> The name Calabah may be a reference to Calabar, a notorious slaving port at the mouth of the Cross River in Nigeria at the height of the transatlantic slave trade.

<sup>8</sup> See, for example, Thomas Rowlandson's illustration *Rachel Pringle of Barbados* printed in 1796.

having a pleasure cruise in the company of two finely dressed young ladies in the Portsmouth Harbour, home to the British Navy at the height of Imperialism. In contrast to the original, Himid has replaced the soldier with a stack of maps and charts that two regal and boldly attired black women are in the process of tearing up and throwing overboard. Griselda Pollock has argued that with *Between the Two My Heart Is Balanced*, along with other paintings from the series, like *Act One No Maps* (1991) and *Five* (1991), Himid creates a particular type of history painting that appropriates and re-interprets Western academic tradition and ideas of European modernity by subverting them through a deconstruction that uses an Afro-centric iconology and historical vision (Pollock 1999, 169-198). In these works, Himid re-centres black women and restores their agency; they actively reject the geographic and ideological domination of Europe's colonial and post-colonial enterprise.

In a 2004 exhibition entitled *Naming the Money* (Hatton Gallery, University of Newcastle upon Tyne), Himid installed 100 life-size cut-outs in the gallery representing various Africans bought by European moneyed classes. Their knowledge and talents were co-opted by their masters to fill a range of domestic and entertainment needs. On the back of each colourfully-attired figure Himid placed an invoice with a simple poem expressing their change of circumstances, such as 'My name is Kenkebe/they call me Sam/I used to shout from the hilltops/Now I call the dogs to heel/But I still can sing,' (Himid 2004, 11). With this installation, Himid gives voices and names to those slaves who lost both in the Middle Passage from Africa to Europe and the New World, as well as highlights their significant contribution to the economic foundations of both continents (Himid 2004, 2-3). Thus Himid, like Shonibare and Donkor, re-examines the historical past to recover the figures and stories of black people in Britain lost as a result of racist exclusion.

Other artists have similar relationships to political and social histories, but express them in more personal ways. In her film *Out of Blue* (2002), Zarina Bhimji explores the painful past of Uganda, the country in which she was born to Indian immigrants in 1963, and from which she was exiled by Idi Amin in 1972.<sup>9</sup> Bhimji and her family settled in London in 1974, when she was eleven years old. *Out of Blue*'s soundtrack comprises a patchwork quilt of sound, including birdsong, thunder, gunshot, and radio broadcasts, that stands in for a verbal narrative of Uganda's transformative history. Rather than seeking to provide a set of absolute answers, Bhimji is consciously asking questions about this history and her relationship to it (Bhimji 2003). She articulates personal emotions, especially stress and grief, that arise from Uganda's drastic political and social changes and the resulting violence and upheaval that, tragically, are the disastrous legacy of colonialism in many parts of Africa. In this way, *Out of Blue* is both a lament and a catharsis, but also an emotional and melancholic tribute to the country of her birth and the memories of her childhood. For Bhimji, the colonial and post-colonial histories of Uganda and of Britain are inextricably bound to her identification with her homeland, her childhood memories, which include the trauma of war, violence, exile, and displacement, and her nostalgia for what she lost.

Born in London in 1962 to a Barbadian mother and Guyanese father, Sonia Boyce creates work that engages with her personal and familial relationship to colonial history. Some of Boyce's most well known works are large-scale pastel drawings characterized by intense use of pattern and repeated self-portraits. *Lay Back, Keep Quiet and Think of What Made Britain So Great* (1986; Fig. 1.9) is comprised of four panels depicting the histories of oppression and indigenous resistance in South

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<sup>9</sup> See pp. 215 and 231-232 (Fig. 3.11)

Africa, India, and Australia, which are observed and appraised by the artist herself in the final panel's self-portrait. The background of each section is a reinterpretation of a William Morris pattern designed to honour Queen Victoria, with the ubiquitous English rose of British femininity coloured black (Tawadros 1989, 140). With this work, Boyce interrogates the legacy of British imperialism within the context of her own relationship to that history. She effectively demonstrates the linkages between the history of nations and individuals, and the complex relationships engendered by the colonial past.

Boyce's pastels, such as *Big Women's Talk* (1984; Fig. 3.4) and *She Ain't Holding Them Up, She's Holding On (Some English Rose)* (1986; Fig. 3.22), deal more personally with her childhood and relationship to a Caribbean community. Her use of pattern and colour in these pastel drawings reflect a West Indian design aesthetic as well as a feminine, domestic setting. Boyce visualizes memories and reminiscences of a childhood rich with colour, food, religion, family, and a Caribbean identity within British society in order to take stock of where she has been and where she is now, in an appraisal of her evolving relationship to her personal history.

Sokari Douglas Camp, a Nigerian-born sculptor based in Britain, also mines personal history in her creative practice. She began working in metal for the first time when her father died in 1984, and she resolved to make a memorial for him. Returning to London from Buguma, Nigeria after the funeral, Camp went into her studio at the Royal College of Art and constructed *Church Ede (Decorated Bed for Christian Wake)* (1984; Fig. 1.10). She says,

I didn't have enough time to mourn my father. I had to go back and complete a degree. So when I went back, I just kept very quiet and decided to make this huge thing that filled the whole studio. Nobody could get in and out except me. And that's all that mattered anyway,' (Ainslie 1995, 39).

From the Kalabari funerary tradition of washing, dressing, and laying the deceased in a brass canopy bed, Camp was inspired to create a four-poster bed of welded steel attended by the figures of three women mourners. Camp manipulated the steel to recreate the fabric of the women's head ties, lace blouses, and skirt wrappers, and included motors to wave the handkerchiefs and flywhisks traditionally used whilst the body lies in state. The empty bed and the three attendants who softly but firmly stand vigil effectively communicate the pathos of loss and memorial, and commemorate Camp's father's life and legacy in a wholly unique evocation of Kalabari custom and ritual.

By referencing aspects of imperial and colonial history, Shonibare, Donkor, and Himid redress the omissions and misrepresentations of black people by demonstrating the deficiencies and distortions represented in well-known versions of eighteenth and nineteenth-century life. On the other hand, Bhimji, Boyce, and Camp take a more personal approach. Whilst some artists produce work that relates to historical narratives in the manner described by Chambers as quoted above, these artists look more internally. It is difficult to discern if and how these artists engage with colonial and post-colonial history as a continual influence on their lives and inspiration for their creative practice in ways unique to their racial and cultural backgrounds, as Chambers has claimed. Some of the work certainly does address the marginalization, exclusion, and exploitation of their ancestors, communities, and families, or the stereotypes they themselves face in the West. There is also a specific and special relationship to conceptualizations of geography, land, and nation that reflects the disparate and migrant backgrounds of the artists and their families and forebears. Artists who interrogate colonial historical narratives refer to the exploitation of the slave trade and Victorian Imperialism, and their attendant effects

on geographical boundaries, political powers, and indigenous landscapes. Others, who evoke nostalgic longing for the places of their childhoods or lands of their ancestors, make geographical, topographical, or cultural visual references to these locales.

Furthermore, there are other artists, defined by themselves or others as “black British,” who do not appear to be inspired by such concerns in their work. Being black and British does not require an artist to engage creatively with history and its attendant geography. There are other factors that weigh in to this circumstance, such as gender, politics, and differences in personal opinion and experience. Some artists are choosing to disassociate themselves, publicly and/or privately, with such notions of identity. Particularly since the Black Art Movement of the 1980s, younger, emerging generations are feeling freer to reject any and all categorizations applied to them that are based on race, nationality, or cultural background. Artists conceptualize their personal and professional identities as unique individuals with a wealth of characteristics, experiences, and concerns, as the following four case studies will demonstrate.

## Chapter 2: Case Studies

### Magdalene Odundo

I was very confused for a long time, but you gradually realize how privileged you are in Great Britain to come from a part of the world which you can continually look at in a different light. The riches that gives you! You can work from the African tradition and also view it from a distance. That was my culture shock: I thought I had left behind something that was mine, whereas I had actually gained something new, (Staal 1994, 18).

Magdalene Odundo's career and life trajectories contain several seemingly paradoxical elements that she has been able to skilfully integrate into strengths. Her layered personal and professional identities include her Kenyan heritage, English art education in ceramics within the context of British studio pottery, and international exhibition history. As a contemporary British artist of African descent, Odundo's pottery subsists within multiple contexts formed and framed by a series of contrasts: local/global, European/African, ancient and inherited traditions/modern art history, and handbuilt techniques/industrial technology.

In 1950, Kenya was struggling for independence from Britain; Mau Mau, an underground organization of indigenous Kenyans dedicated to reclaiming land taken from them by the British colonial government, was banned that year. 1950 was also the year that Magdalene Odundo was born in Nairobi. She was the second of four siblings: an older brother, a younger brother, and a sister. They were especially close to her aunt, uncle, and her three cousins, and together they formed an extended family wherein the children moved freely between both sets of parents (Cooper 2004, 10). In 1954, her father began working in India as a journalist for the Swahili papers and broadcasting in Kiswahili on the home services, and Odundo and her family moved to New Delhi for three years.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> The Swahili connection between East Africa and India dates back to sixteenth century trading activities across the Indian Ocean and Arabian Sea, when Kiswahili was a lingua franca amongst East African, Arabian, Indian, and Portuguese traders. In the 1950s, British colonial rule in Kenya combined

Odundo's memories of this period of her youth are good ones. Her father's work put him in exciting situations and in contact with important people, like then Prime Minister Nehru and Indira Gandhi. It was in New Delhi where Odundo first began her primary school education, at the Convent of Jesus and Mary. Her Catholic school had many international students, and Odundo made good friends there. She remembers the beautiful pageantry of First Communion and other rituals. Of New Delhi, she recalls hot days, travelling on trains with her family, and an entourage of assistants and servants. The Indians were generous and hospitable. There was also a significant and noticeable disparity between the wealthy and the poor in evidence around them.

When Odundo returned to Nairobi with her family in 1957, the Kenyan independence movement was ongoing and the Mau Mau rebellion was active. She recalls the 'simmering revolution,' and gatherings of people in her parents' house who represented various levels of involvement in the movement (Odundo 2004). She attended another Catholic primary school, Our Lady of Mercy in Nairobi. Choosing a school was difficult for her parents, because they wanted the best for their daughter and until independence, Kenyans lived 'under an apartheid system' that was both segregated and hierarchical; there were schools for white children with the finest facilities, next in line were "half-castes," a term used to denote those of mixed race, then Asians, with Africans at the lowest rung on the ladder (Odundo 2004). Her father searched in vain for a non-segregated school.

Tragically, Odundo and her siblings suffered the death of their father the following year, in 1958, followed only two years later by the death of their mother in 1960. Odundo and her siblings went to live with their aunt in Mombassa, where

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with post-colonial ties in India meant there were Kiswahili speakers in Kenya interested in Indian news.

Odundo attended Marycliff Tudor School. She returned to the Nairobi region for secondary school at Loreto Convent, Limuru, followed by Pangani Girls, Nairobi until the age of eighteen. At Pangani Girls, she studied art with Dora Betts, who herself had trained at Dartington Hall School.<sup>11</sup> At this time, Odundo had the opportunity to exhibit some of her paintings in Nairobi.

Upon finishing school in 1968, Odundo secured an apprenticeship in graphic and commercial arts with S H Benson Advertising Agency in Nairobi. After three years, she went on to work as Assistant Sign Designer for the Neon & General Sign Design & Manufacturing, Ltd in Nairobi, where she stayed until 1971. She also attended evening classes in graphic arts, layout, and design at Nairobi Polytechnic from 1968 to 1971. Her foster mother in Nairobi, Isabel Beverley, felt Odundo should further her education in an environment where she would be free from the demands and duties of her extended family, and sought sponsorship to send her to England (Cooper 2004, 10). In 1971, Odundo arrived in England to continue her studies in the Foundation Course at the Cambridge College of Art, and to pursue a career in advertising.

Odundo says she did not feel frightened or overwhelmed in her new surroundings, as she had some sense of what to expect from her experiences working in advertising in Kenya. She did, however, find that the accents with which people spoke sounded strange (Odundo 2003). One of her first impressions of school in England was that her education in Kenya and India was much more rigorous in terms of assessment. In her first year at the Cambridge College of Art, her Foundation Course covered a range of different artistic disciplines. These included ceramics and printmaking, which Odundo especially enjoyed. She had already begun to show an

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<sup>11</sup> Dartington Hall was an experimental and progressive boarding school in Totnes, Devon from 1926 to 1987 that was characterized by its then-radical promotion of coeducation, the absence of corporal punishment and uniforms, student self-governance, and pupil-defined curriculum.

aptitude for creative endeavours, studying jewellery making with an artist in Cambridge and dabbling in welded metal and wire to create geometrical and abstract sculptures. Her ceramics tutor was Zoe Ellison, a Zimbabwean-born potter in who ran the Cross Keys Pottery outside Cambridge. In her class, Odundo produced both functional designs and more abstract sculptures, like a black incised minaret-like form with white glazing (Cooper 2004, 11).

Whilst she was a student at Cambridge, Odundo used the Africa Study Centre library and attended lectures with other African students to explore the ideas and writings of Léopold Senghor, Franz Fanon, James Baldwin, and Uli Beier, as well as Angela Davis and the Soledad brothers (Odundo 2003). Together they debated African politics and self-government, nation building, and Negritude. Odundo was exposed to and became familiar with ideas about “double consciousness,”<sup>12</sup> civil rights, Black Power, and identity politics. She also became acquainted with local museums, like Kettle’s Yard, the Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, and the Fitzwilliam Museum. At Kettle’s Yard, there was a varied programme of contemporary art exhibitions, including the sculptures of Gaudier-Brzeska and British studio ceramicists. During this period, curator Henry Rothschild organized regular exhibitions of modern pottery that included work by Lucy Rie and Hans Coper (Cooper 2004, 54). Odundo was especially interested in non-Western art and studied these independently of her course. She visited the Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology to study pre-Columbian pottery and Sepic artefacts from Papua New Guinea (Cooper 2004, 11). The Fitzwilliam’s diverse permanent collections include ancient Egyptian antiquities, ancient Greek pottery, European pottery and glass,

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<sup>12</sup> See pp. 17-18.

medieval illuminated manuscripts, and European paintings from the Renaissance through the end of the twentieth century.

Odundo filled her sketchbook with drawings, especially seventeenth century slipware like that of Staffordshire potter Thomas Toft. She noticed the way that the art was 'centralized in buildings,' that is, collected and displayed in specific institutions to be presented in a historical or ethnographical context (Odundo 2003). In Kenya, Odundo had experienced indigenous artistic and creative traditions as woven into the fabric of daily life, where functionality and utility were as much of a consideration as aesthetics and art history. She had previously seen exhibitions and installations similar to those in the Cambridge museums in Nairobi at the National Museum, like Louis Leakey's collection of anthropological artefacts, as well as when she exhibited her own work in Nairobi during secondary school. Through her growing familiarity with Cambridge museums, Odundo began to understand the analytic and didactic traditions of Western institutions and academic disciplines as the structural basis for these various exhibitions, especially the way fine art was separated from the quotidian (Odundo 2003).

After the first year of her course, Odundo chose not to continue with the second year, opting instead to move on to the commercial art vocational course in order to continue the training she had begun in Kenya. However, perhaps as a result of her art experimentation and self-study in her first year, she soon realized that she did not find commercial art very interesting. Reflecting on her work experiences in Nairobi, she concluded that she did not want to continue a career in advertising; she seriously considered studying ethnography (Odundo 2003). Zoe Ellison suggested making objects, and Odundo began thinking about art school.

Although Odundo loved the city of Cambridge, she began to look further afield for better opportunities in art education. She applied to Newcastle for painting and sculpture, and with Ellison's encouragement, met with Henry Hammond, then Head of Ceramics at the West Surrey College of Art and Design (now the Surrey Institute of Art and Design) in Farnham. Hammond was in Cambridge to see an exhibition of ceramics at Kettle's Yard. After this meeting, Odundo was subsequently invited for a formal interview at the college. Despite her limited practical experience, Hammond was impressed with her interest and her sketches, and offered her a place. She returned to Kenya for a few weeks and consulted her family and friends, including her former headmistress Fiona Evans. They encouraged her to stay in England and continue her studies. Once again Isabel Beverly organized sponsorship and bursaries from Kenya. Odundo took up the offer in Farnham in September 1973.

It was after her serendipitous move to Farnham that Odundo began to develop a fascination and affinity for ceramics. The ceramics department was headed by Henry Hammond and Paul Barron, Deputy Head, both of whom trained under proponents of British studio ceramics based in traditions of Oriental aesthetics. Hammond had studied under William Staite Murray at the Royal College of Art in London, whilst Barron had studied under Norah Braden, an apprentice of Bernard Leach, before studying at the Royal College as well (Cooper 2004, 12).<sup>13</sup> Both developed a ceramics practice based on high-fired thrown forms in stoneware and porcelain (Cooper 2004, 12). The course also included a number of part-time and visiting lecturers, including Vera Acheason, Gemma Bontempo, Ron Hackney, Anita

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<sup>13</sup> William Staite Murray (1881-1962) and Bernard Leach (1897-1979) were key figures of British studio ceramics in the 1920s and 1930s. Murray created pots as works of art that were not at all functional. He was influential during the 1920s and 1930s, when he was Head of Ceramics at the Royal College of Art. Leach studied ceramics in Japan with master potter Shoji Hamada. In 1920, with the help of Hamada, he set up the St. Ives Pottery in Cornwall to produce wares embodying Oriental techniques and philosophy that balanced functionality and aesthetics.

Hoy, Mo Jupp, Siddig el Nigoumi, Helen Pincombe (who taught handbuilding), Walter Keeler, and Ann Shepley (Cooper 2004, 54). Odundo began to familiarize herself with clay as a medium and to learn the necessary skills in the studio. She found throwing particularly difficult:

I had no co-ordination of the wheel and found it difficult to understand the practical idea of having to centre a lump of clay. The experience reminded me of the desperate attempts to learn to ride on my uncle's full-sized bicycle when I was young, falling off every time my brother pushed me forward. I had not understood that peddling was essential. Kicking the wheel and holding on to a lump of clay seemed a daunting exercise, (Cooper 2004, 14).

After eleven weeks of practice, Odundo managed to centre the clay on the wheel.

In the spring of 1974, Odundo and fellow students travelled down to Cornwall to tour the china clay outcrops and visit Bernard Leach's Pottery in St. Ives. Leach spoke to the students about his work and his Japanese-influenced philosophy combined with a Western understanding of ceramics, which made an impression on Odundo. She says, 'Coming from a family where, for my dad, travelling had been a part of work, it seemed that Leach was describing a very enriching culture...I thought the philosophy Bernard Leach was advocating, which I understood to be about being engaged in making objects or making art, was sound and relevant,' (Cooper 2004, 15). She was also introduced to his ideas about the enclosed inner space of a vessel and purity of a sparsely decorated surface, which were strongly influenced by Japanese ideals aesthetics. These ideas resonate with her mature practice, as Odundo describes an interest in the relation to the inside versus outside formal qualities of her pots as she creates them (Odundo 2003).

Later that spring, Hammond arranged for her to return to Cornwall with three other students. It was during this second trip that Odundo met Michael Cardew at the

Wenford Bridge Pottery.<sup>14</sup> She noticed various African artefacts in his house and Nigerian pots in the showroom. She learned more about his work in Abuja, Nigeria, where he had founded the Pottery Training Centre in 1951 and been its supervisor until 1965. Cardew had originally been asked by the Nigerian colonial government to set up a ceramics training centre to provide a trade and vocation to local residents. However, in reality the centre was more artistic than commercial. Odundo says that speaking with Cardew 'increased my interest in West African art. In Cambridge I had already made friends with people from this part of Africa and they had offered invitations to go to Ghana and Nigeria. Meeting Cardew helped in my decision to travel to Nigeria in particular,' (Cooper 2004, 15). Cardew gave Odundo the address of Mallam Shaibu, who was in charge of the pottery at the time. She arranged to visit Nigeria later that year during her summer holidays.

At this time, the Pottery Training Centre in Abuja was producing a range of stoneware fired in a wood kiln. Cardew had developed a unique hybrid of British studio techniques and forms with shapes and patterns directly borrowed from local Gbari motifs (Cooper 2004, 18). He introduced the potter's wheel, high temperature kiln firing, and chemical glazes to traditional Gbari potters like Ladi Kwali, one of the Centre's original apprentices. These contrasted with Gbari traditional techniques of handbuilding, open-air low temperature firings, and finishing surfaces by burnishing and coating them with a liquid vegetal mixture. The clay of handbuilt pots is coarser than that used in throwing, which makes them better able to withstand thermal shock when used over open fires; the treated surfaces retain a degree of porosity that makes them useful for water storage in a hot climate (Johnson 1984, 209).

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<sup>14</sup> Michael Cardew (1901-1983) was an apprentice of Bernard Leach in St. Ives from 1923 to 1926. He opened the Wenford Bridge Pottery in Cornwall in 1939. He also spent many years living and working in Ghana and Nigeria between 1942 and 1965.

When Odundo arrived, the male potters were all throwers, whilst the women handbuilt their pots in the Gbari tradition. Odundo worked in a two-week rotation with each of the eight potters at the Centre. She explains that, 'I literally did a mirror image learning with them,' (Cooper 2004, 18). Working with the throwers, Peter Bako, Bawa Ushata, Abu Karo, and George Garba, greatly improved her throwing abilities. With their help, she learned how to make all the items of domestic tableware. She remarks that, 'These individual and intensive lessons taught me humility for clay,' (Berns 1995, 3).

From the women potters, Asibi Aidoo, Lami Toto, Ladi Kwali, and Kainde Ushafa, Odundo learned handbuilding. Starting with a lump of clay, the potter would begin by hollowing out and pulling the clay to build walls, and then adding short coils to build up the vessel's shape. The Gbari women potters in Abuja have traditionally handbuilt their pots using shorter and thicker sections of clay than a fully circular coil, a method referred to as 'sausage building' by researchers (Simmonds 1984, 55). The Gbari technique of pulling and smoothing the clay differs from handbuilding as taught in English art schools, which usually involves adding longer coils to a flat, pancake-like base (Cooper 2004, 19). In her final two weeks, Odundo also helped pack, fire, and unpack the kiln, which had originally been designed by Michael Cardew. Odundo appreciated her training at the Abuja centre for its emphasis on practice and technique. Afterward, Odundo travelled around Nigeria, observing potters in Ekiti and Ilorin. She concludes that, 'For me this had been a wonderful apprenticeship; I had learned a lot. I had acquired new skills, gained more knowledge of the arts and crafts made in Nigeria and after travelling in the country had learned some sentences of Hausa,' (Cooper 2004, 19).

Upon her return to Farnham, Odundo continued her studies. Along with pottery, she took supporting subjects in printmaking and photography, as well as art history and complementary studies courses. In printmaking, Odundo enjoyed the processes of etching and mezzotinting (Cooper 2004, 68). She particularly liked rucking and polishing the copper plates, which fed into her future practice of burnishing her pots to a fine, smooth lustre. Twice weekly, Odundo attended lectures and wrote essays on topics ranging from classical architecture to modern European and African art. She read Claude Lévi-Strauss and Maoist philosophy. In a course called "Primitive Art," she studied West and Central African traditions like masquerade and wood sculpture.

Odundo also continued her ceramics training, creating the foundations for her mature body of work. In the first term of her second year, she practiced her new throwing skills, producing tableware with her own abstract decorations and finished with Oriental temmoku and ash glazes (Cooper 2004, 19). In the second term, Odundo decided to experiment with handbuilding large pots. She combined European, Oriental, and Nigerian techniques, making rounded jugs with glazed interiors, tall necks, and handles incised with geometric designs, as well as rounded bowls with carbonized markings on their surfaces. Some were fired at high or earthenware temperatures in wood-burning kilns, whilst others she put through sawdust and pit firings (Cooper 2004, 21).

In her final year, Odundo continued to refine her ceramic techniques and experimented with forms influenced by her admiration for seventeenth century English slip-decorated ware as well as pre-Columbian, ancient Egyptian, Mediterranean, and Middle Eastern ceramics. She also went back to Wenford Bridge several times for firings at Michael Cardew's invitation. As part of her course

requirements for graduation, she began working on her dissertation. Odundo's subject was the ceremonial use of vessels in funerary rituals and customs amongst the Abaluyia people of Kenya and Uganda, of which Abanyala is a subgroup (Berns 1995, 5). Focusing on the Abanyala community in which her parents were born as a case study, she returned to Kenya in 1975 to interview and observe potters. She conducted a comparative study of women's pottery techniques and their ceremonial uses by studying the ways in which vessels were used in ritual contexts to mark the transitions associated with important rites of passage (Berns 1995, 5). As she describes,

They were about celebration, appeasement, and pleasing. They were the vessels from which the living partook and shared the passage of the dead person to continue with life amongst the ancestors; they were the chalices and fountains that offered sustenance for those rejuvenation ceremonies and the vessels that offered the gods the sacrifice, (Cooper 2004, 41).

Although raised primarily in the cities of Nairobi and Mombassa, it is the Bunyala community of her Abanyala heritage that Odundo most identifies as "home" (Berns 1995, 5). Both her parents were from there, and only moved to Nairobi as young adults to find work. She explains, 'the concept of "home" for me, as for many Africans, originates in the birthplace of my parents. My response to "Where do you come from?" is the connection I feel with my ancestry and the land of that place,' (Odundo 2004). Despite years living in other places, both in childhood and adulthood, Odundo views the Bunyala community as the touchstone of her roots and her cultural identity.

Odundo completed her BA degree in 1976. After graduation she travelled abroad and observed various pottery traditions. She went to California to visit a cousin studying at Stanford University. During her stay, she went to Los Angeles and Palo Alto to see friends, who took her out to Idyllwild in the mountains of southern

California. The local summer arts programme had organized workshops with famous Native American Pueblo potter Maria Martinez. Odundo was so impressed with the dark, smooth, black-on-black ware that she went to New Mexico to study the coiling, burnishing, and reduction firing techniques in Pueblo, especially San Ildefonso. Her experiences made a startling impression. She says, 'When I finished at Farnham I really had thought I knew a lot and it took me being in America, travelling around, talking to potters, to realize that I actually knew very little and there was much more to learn,' (Cooper 2004, 22). She also travelled to Ghana and Zimbabwe. Not only was she influenced by the ceramics she encountered, she returned with sketches of the flora and fauna of these newly-discovered landscapes, as well as local fashions and traditions.

Upon returning to England, Odundo settled in London. After meeting the Commonwealth Institute's education officer at a writer's conference, she became a Commonwealth Fellow in the education department for six months. Afterward, she taught in the Department of Museum Education at the Commonwealth Institute in Kensington, from 1976 to 1979. The Institute's programme was aimed mainly at schools and teacher-training colleges, and Odundo had her first experiences as an instructor. She worked on projects concerning the cultures of the different Commonwealth countries and introduced instruction in clay and ceramics to the Institute (Cooper 2004, 22). Her position also involved visiting museums; Odundo saw collections she had not seen before, like those in the Museum of Childhood in Bethnal Green and the London Museum in Kensington Palace. It was in the London Museum that she became fascinated by Elizabethan costume (Cooper 2004, 22). Whilst attending dance rehearsal and performances at the Institute, Odundo sketched

the performers, attempting to capture their movements and gestures in the stillness of her drawings.

Odundo translated these forms and experiences into her studio practice. At his invitation, she worked at a pottery in Leatherhead run by Michael O'Brien, a student of Michael Cardew's who she had originally met during her visits to Cornwall. She produced pots with rounded bellies and small necks, some of which she decorated with raised lines and flattened pellets; she experimented with firings and glazes. Her first solo ceramics exhibition was held at London's Africa Centre in 1977. The following year, Odundo participated in the Commonwealth Arts Festival in Canada and an exhibition at London's Commonwealth Institute with three other artists. She received commissions from the Institute for their Kenyan exhibition. At this point, Odundo realized that she 'ought to give ceramics a go,' and applied to study for her MA at London's Royal College of Art (Cooper 2004, 23). She was drawn to the programme because of her interest in and appreciation for the work of Hans Coper, who had been teaching at the Royal College since 1966. Odundo explains,

My admiration for Coper was not particularly because he was producing the sort of ceramics I wanted to make, for I did not want to produce glazed wares or, indeed, hard stoneware and high-fired work. What I admired was the simplicity of his forms, his clarity of line, his rhythmical and restrained approach and the fact that he was not afraid of repetition, (Cooper 2004, 24).

Unfortunately, Coper had retired the year before due to ill health. Nevertheless, Odundo began her course in 1979.

Compared to the Surrey Institute, the Royal College has a stronger emphasis on fine arts. Odundo maintains, however, that she did not experience a hierarchal attitude to art production at the Royal College that denigrated ceramics at the expense of painting, drawing, and sculpture (Odundo 2003). Her ceramics tutors were a mix of commercial and studio artists. David Queensberry was a Professor of Ceramics at the

time, and a founding member of the design firm Queensberry Hunt; David Hamilton was the other Professor of Ceramics. Sculptor and printmaker Eduardo Paolozzi and sculptor Graham Clarke also taught in the department.

During her MA, Odundo conducted an extensive investigation into the working qualities and physical compositions of different clays. Her original intent was to create a knowledge base to inform research on clays in Kenya where, eventually, she wanted to set up a pottery. She performed chemical and physical analyses, and discovered a particular blend of seventy-five percent Etrurian marl, a smooth red clay from Stoke-on-Trent, England, and twenty-five percent brick, a sandy yellow clay from southern England (Berns 1995, 7 and Cooper 2004, 24). This became Odundo's preferred blend of clay and remains so to this day. This mixture gives Odundo the right amount of elasticity and control when handbuilding her vessels, as well as creating the desired texture and colours in the finished product.

After her first eighteen months at the Royal College, Odundo had extensive discussions with David Hamilton in which he urged her to change her focus from an MA by project to a regular MA, in order to combine her clay research with studio ceramics work. Odundo began working with handbuilding techniques in the studio and studied Kerma pottery from ancient Sudan, as well as early Egyptian, Minoan, and Mediterranean pottery and figures. Eduardo Paolozzi also introduced her to curators from London's Museum of Mankind who he had met as a result of his interests in African art (Cooper 2004, 26). These contacts gave Odundo special access to a wide array of ethnographic objects, displays and archives. She also had regular tutorials with David Queensberry, who encouraged her to tune in to developments in contemporary ceramics as well as these more ancient traditions.

At this time, the Black Art Movement was gathering momentum, especially amongst young black art students.<sup>15</sup> Odundo, however, was not interested in participating in the debates and activities of “black British art” at this time, nor was she pressured to do so by her tutors (Odundo 2004). Having explored issues of African politics and identity when she was at Cambridge, she did not feel the need to further discuss her emerging artistic practice in terms of her African heritage or race. Instead, she focused on her interests in ceramics and art history.

One of Odundo’s tutors from Farnham, John Donne, had an active interest in African art and took her regularly to Portobello Market in Notting Hill to search out pieces for sale. A group of African art scholars and dealers used to congregate in the area, and it was here that she met William Fagg, John Picton, Paula Ben-Amos, Hebert Cole, and Anthony Slayter-Ralph, who would later represent her through his commercial galleries. Trawling Portobello market with Donne and discussing African art with this group of experts and scholars gave Odundo the opportunity to expand her knowledge and familiarity with a range of African artistic production, and both revived and satisfied her enthusiasm for African art.

Back in the studio at the Royal College, Odundo began to refine a myriad of ancient and contemporary techniques to develop her unique creative method (Fig. 2.1). Instead of throwing her pots on a wheel, Odundo uses a technique she calls ‘coil pull building:’ she feeds clay from her hand onto the body of the pot, pulling up as she proceeds around the circumference. Related methods of coiling and ring building are literally thousands of years old and still used worldwide. Odundo refined her own handbuilding technique from observing West African and Native American women potters, especially during her apprenticeship at the Abuja Centre.

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<sup>15</sup> Eddie Chambers’ *Black Art An’ Done* opened at the Wolverhampton Art Gallery in 1981. Two years later, the Black Art Gallery held its inaugural exhibition, *Heart in Exile* in Finsbury Park and *Five Black Women Artists* opened at the Africa Centre in Covent Garden. See pp. 34-37.

Odundo begins by pulling a cone of clay into a concave form, then hollowing out the interior with gourd and coconut shell scrapers. The rest of the vessel is then built up by pulling lengths of clay around the circumference of the piece. After completing the base, which is most consistently full and round, Odundo begins to develop the vessel's neck and mouth. She describes the process as a dialogue between the clay and her hands, both equal sources of creative expression (Berns 1995, 7). Often, she works on several vessels simultaneously; they take days, and sometimes weeks, to complete. During this period, they are kept under wet cloths or refrigerated to prevent them from drying out.

Once the neck and mouth are fully sculpted, the pots are left to dry until they are leather-hard. Then Odundo burnishes their surfaces with smooth stones. The next stage in the process is the application of a slip instead of a glaze. Odundo observed potters in Nigeria and Kenya using cakes of red ochre-coloured clay to make a fine slip, which led her to research the use of slips in ancient pottery (Cooper 2004, 26). She discovered *terra sigillata*, first developed in classical Greece for black- and red-figure pottery in the seventh to fifth centuries BC, and employed by the Romans of Arezzo around the first millennium AD (Berns 1995, 9 and Cooper 2004, 26-27). The same very fine clay used in building the pot is suspended in water and thinly applied, which blends into the surface when fired and creates a high gloss. Initially, Odundo applied the slip by pouring and dipping; more recently, she has begun to spray the slip onto the works (Cooper 2004, 40). After the application of the slip, the pot is burnished again before firing.

The firing process initially takes place in a gas kiln: an oxidized or smokeless atmosphere that produces a bright red-orange colour. Often, Odundo will decide that a vessel needs a secondary firing in a reducing atmosphere, which creates the charcoal

black hues that comprise the other half of Odundo's ceramic palette (Fig. 2.2). For the reduction process, or carbonization, the vessel is placed in a container called a saggar, packed with wood chips and shavings, then fired in an oxygen-poor environment (Berns 1995, 9). The metal oxides from the clay and slip drawn out by the fire cause the surface to turn black.

Whilst the gas kiln is a Western device, the oxidization of the reduced firing is a centuries-old technique used by African and Native American potters to achieve similar effects. Odundo observed the oxidization firing technique amongst Ekiti and Ilorin potters in Nigeria. Likewise, she witnessed the carbonization firing process during her research with Pueblo potters in the US, although she also learned of similar techniques used in the Kerma culture to produce black-topped ware in ancient Sudan, and later in the production of Aegean pottery. Ilorin potters also use a carbonization firing process to produce black-on-black ware like that of San Ildefonso. The use of the saggar was inspired by potters in Stoke-on-Trent who sought to protect their pots from the dust and grit of coal-fired bottle kilns, and for Odundo they created the perfect enclosed carbonizing atmosphere. She arrived at this solution after many experiments with kiln firing: first building a brick chamber in the kiln inspired by the pit/tunnel-like kilns used for black Buganda pottery in Uganda, then trying a type of raku buried in tea leaves in an appropriation of techniques used in Congo by the Chokwe and in Ekiti, Nigeria by the Edo (Cooper 2004, 27). None of these methods achieved the desired effect until Odundo practiced with the saggar.

The alchemy of the firing process is paradoxical for Odundo; she hates the loss of control involved, but she loves the surprises that can result (Odundo 2003). She says,

The kiln became a tool in the making process and pieces may be refired several times to get the desired effects. Firing is an essential and integral part

of my making process, and my work would not be what it is without this chosen method. Fire and flame fascinate me, the flame colluding with the metals in the clay to achieve a black lustre metallic or matte black; it is like alchemy. The process is arduous and my least favourite aspect of making ceramics. I spend a lot of time deliberating and prolonging the actual task of firing, and am a nervous wreck when the kiln is on (Cooper 2004, 29).

The strength and maturity of Odundo's vessels were widely recognized when she was still a student at the Royal College. Visiting tutor Janice Tchalenko commented that Odundo 'should be out exhibiting this work,' (Slayter-Ralph 2004, 30). Her graduation show was a great success, and UK firm Dairy Crest bought her pots for its 1983 calendar. The show also led to a solo exhibition later that year at Rosenthal Studio-Haus in Hamburg, Germany, which subsequently toured to their galleries in Dortmund, Germany and London. Odundo received a 1982 Crafts Council Setting Up Grant to build a studio at the back of her residence. Odundo exhibited in association with the Craftsmen Potters Association both at the Victoria and Albert Museum (1983) and in their own gallery space (*Individual Eye*, 1984), as well as in three consecutive exhibitions entitled *Modern British Ceramics* at Queensberry Hunt Studio (1983, 1984, and 1985), where her pots were showcased alongside the work of Hans Coper, Lucie Rie, Bernard and David Leach, and Elizabeth Fritsch, amongst others.

In 1984, just two years after graduating from the Royal College, Odundo was the subject of a feature article in *Crafts* magazine, which commented on the 'striking...powerful simplicity of her pots,' ("Kenyan Heritage" 1984, 24). She continued to exhibit throughout the 1980s, and had solo shows in both museums and commercial galleries in London, Manchester, and Wales. By 1987, her pots were selling for four-figure sums. David Briers' review of her show at Glynn Vivian Art Gallery and Museum in Swansea praised the 'sumptuous richness' of her 'stunning' ceramic forms, and commented that 'Odundo's prices, averaging £1700 per pot, seem

entirely reasonable—and her London dealer is, after all, a fine art dealer,’ (Briers 1988, 49).

Bolstered by funding, patronage, and critical acclaim, Odundo focused on developing her professional ceramic practice. She describes her state of mind: ‘For me it seemed more like a beginning, a realization that this chosen metier was going to be a way of life...’ (Cooper 2004, 32). Odundo concentrated on a limited number of forms and their slight variations, expanding her repertoire as she became more experienced. Whilst the pots she made during her MA were rarely over fifteen centimetres high, her work began to grow in height to an average of sixty centimetres. Elements like nodules, looped handles, and a seam resembling a backbone (Fig. 2.3) began to embellish the smooth lustrous forms of her pots. None of these serve any functional purpose. Instead, they accent the expressive qualities of the curves, swells, and bends of the pots’ forms. Odundo created vertical necks with widely flared mouths (Fig. 2.4), and necks that bend to one side and end in thin spouts or wide flares, sometimes articulated in two sections (Figs. 2.5 and 2.6).

Throughout her career, Odundo has continued to study, sketch, and appropriate a variety of forms for her ceramic oeuvre. She cites the formal influence of vessels and ‘earring figures’ from ancient Cyprus, Cycladic figurines, Attic vases, pots and figures from the Jomon period in Japan (12,000 to 2400 BP), Ganda pots from Uganda, Nupe vessels from Nigeria, and Pokot pots from Kenya, to name a few (Berns 1995, 13). Beyond ceramics, she has derived inspiration from Fang masks from Gabon, Dan masks from Liberia, and modernist sculpture by Brancusi, Arp, and Gaudier-Brzeska (Berns 1995, 13). Not limited to art objects, Odundo has also been inspired by organic forms such as the unfurling of a plant, the falling of a sleeve, the belly of a pregnant woman, the posture of a dancer, or even the profile of women

gossiping (Berns 1995, 25). Since 2000, she has created vessels up to ninety centimetres high (Fig. 2.7). She relates these grand and statuesque shapes to the funerary posts, called *vigango*, that are erected as abodes for the spirits of the deceased by the Giriama people and neighbouring groups in East Africa, which Odundo remembers from her childhood in Kenya (Odundo 2004). Odundo's memory draws out and retains essential details to incorporate and assimilate into her work. Interestingly, the distillation of these disparate forms and artistic traditions has resulted in a range of very fine variations of relatively consistent forms over the course of Odundo's career. Within these recurrent and conscripted forms, the slightest and most subtle alteration can produce a monumental aesthetic effect.

Although Odundo has said more than once that she is striving in many ways to ultimately achieve perfectly harmonious form, she also allows the clay to pull her into experiments of asymmetry and geometry. In 1995, when asked to characterize her development over the course of her career, she responded,

I still make vessels, this has not changed, and this is strictly a deliberate choice. It helps me avoid being distracted from my quest to one day make the piece that achieves perfect harmony—having perfect symmetry and perfect balance. However, this is not to say I am not tempted to digress. I have considered sharp geometric shapes, which I have encountered in my teaching. Indeed, I openly encourage my students to handbuild asymmetrical pieces. But perfect harmony is much harder to achieve and that is the challenge. It is like trying to make a good teapot. Everything about it has to work, (Berns 1997, 13).

Odundo has remarked that she often deliberately subverts the utilitarian nature of the pot's form, playing with the boundaries between applied and fine arts.<sup>16</sup> *Orange Narrow Necked* (1987; Fig. 2.8) demonstrates this ambiguity: the vessel's generous round belly contrasts with the sleek, pinched neck whose lip takes a 90-degree turn and opens no wider than a drinking straw. Odundo explains,

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<sup>16</sup> John Picton, personal communication, 2004.

In Africa, functionality never has a one-dimensional meaning. An object could be used in a ritual for the dead, which is a utilitarian purpose, for instance; then given to the king or chief who, as guardian of the people, may posit the objects on a shrine, thus imbuing it with sacredness, rendering it fit for the gods, untouchable for the living and later to be used as part of worship or in healing. These different meanings are preserved in the object. They become part of its history (Cooper 2004, 48).

Yet this seamless connection between aesthetics and functionality, between making art and making craft, and between sacred and profane, is not restricted to African contexts. Odundo sees the same dynamics operating between objects and people in the West. She says, 'The debate between function and non-function, and utilitarian and non-utilitarian is a fake one because aesthetically work that is made to be put in a house to be looked at *is* a form of function....I know someone in Newark [NJ] who told me that looking at [my work] enabled him to play classical music. That is a function; that is a utility that my work has,' (Odundo 2005).

Odundo wants her work to 'amuse, enchant, please, entertain, and delight' (Odundo 2003). She describes her repertoire of forms as having 'sexy, gestural' qualities (Odundo 2003). She says, 'An object and vessel made in clay has nuances and gestures.... A lot of my early work referred to movement and gestures people made, often abstracting these in sketches and then trying to capture their essence in clay,' (Odundo 2001). Much of their sense of movement and energy is accented by the varieties of solid colour and swirling, floating permutations that are the effects of reduction firing. Upon seeing Odundo's work at a lecture, Zimbabwean artist Locadia Ndandarika stood up with a spontaneous expression of joy, waving her arms in a Shona manner of celebration, saying 'How is it possible that you can make pots look like that, like they are dancing, contorted in one direction and then the other way?' (Cooper 2004, 44). Odundo's pots bend, sway, and curve like dancers motionless, yet full of contained energy and captured movement (Staal 1994, 15-19).

Odundo is fascinated by the suppleness of the human body; she is 'attracted to something that is almost a kind of electricity in how pliable the body can be. Thus with plastic, malleable clay, which, whilst it is capable of being shaped to capture that mesmerizing, hypnotic achievement, the pot ends up in a motionless state. This is what I try to capture,' (Cooper 2004, 44). Displayed alongside one another, they seem to interact and communicate, even narrate; Odundo regards them as 'performers' (Berns 1995, 27). In an installation of her 1995 solo exhibition *Ceramic Gestures* at the Smithsonian National Museum of African Art in Washington, DC, her vessels were all grouped close together in one huge vitrine. The display emphasized their anthropomorphic qualities and created relationships that made them look as though they were communicating with one another through gesture, a type of ceramic "body language." At the private viewing of her solo exhibition *time and again* in July 2004 at the Crafts Study Centre in Farnham, Odundo remarked that she has become more concerned with relating the pieces together in their installation and presentation, further shifting the emphasis in her practice from simply making objects (Odundo 2004). Odundo says they are, 'able to hear each other, speak to each other and create friction whilst intimating—don't touch,' (Cooper 2004, 45).

Odundo's vessels make obvious references to bodily form; her unique repertoire of forms alludes to a head, neck, spine, collarbone, or navel. Bernard Leach expressed the view that pots were best understood in terms of their similarity to the human figure, through an appreciation of neck, shoulder, belly, and foot (Cooper 2004, 44). Odundo has been especially interested in the metaphor of vessels as women's bodies. One aspect of this is her ceramic translations of the modifications of the female form to conform to standards of beauty. Some of her works evoke the corseted waists of nineteenth century European women, the emaciated figures of

twentieth century fashion models, or the triangular hats worn by married Zulu women (Berns 1995, 17). She has also appropriated the stiff ruffs and bell sleeves of Elizabethan costume into ceramic forms like those she dubs 'wings' (Fig. 2.4). She is particularly captivated by the elongated, wrapped, and elaborately coiffed heads of Mangbetu women from the Democratic Republic of the Congo. For Odundo the act of coiling the flared shape as she builds the pot mirrors the labour-intensive process of head wrapping and hair styling of Mangbetu women (Fig. 2.5).

Through her ceramic oeuvre, Odundo not only explores the physical metaphor of woman as vessel, but also historical, social, and religious relationships of women to pottery (Berns 1995, 19 and Lucie-Smith 1999, 18). There is an ages-old association of women, pottery, and procreation in Africa whereby women are perceived of as progenitors in the same way that the earth provides sustenance and life, and are thus linked with the clay and the soil itself. According to Nigel Barley, 'In sub-Saharan Africa, the earth is commonly regarded as female and potters may have a special relationship with it,' (Barley 1994, 52). Throughout the continent, collecting clay, moulding it into pots, and firing them is a particular manipulation of earth and its properties usually involving specific rituals and prohibitions. In this context, 'earth is often...associated with female creativity and fertility,' (Barley 1994, 57 and 63).

Often, vessels are metaphors for women's bodies, especially wombs, and the alchemy of the process whereby clay becomes terracotta when transformed by fire is linked to the mysterious and powerful forces of life that grow within a pregnant woman. In urban parts of North Africa, potters who use an updraught kiln (a tall, rounded cave-like structure) conceive of the kiln as the body of a pregnant woman and the process of firing the pots as giving birth (Barley 1994, 44). "Belly" is

commonly associated with a water-jar, whilst the words for “stomach” and “womb” are often the same in many parts of Africa (Barley 1994, 88). For Odundo, this history has profound ramifications in her creative practice, giving her anthropomorphic vessels an unmistakable femininity (Fig. 2.5).

Odundo’s ceramic references to fashion and image consciousness suggest women’s bodies are in some ways a site of contestation. The vessel as a procreative metaphor is especially poignant in light of contemporary political, religious, and cultural connotations. The contour of a pregnant woman’s belly represented in the swell of one of her pots (Fig. 2.9) alludes to conceptualizations in West Africa of a woman’s passive role as a vessel for the moulding of a child (Barley 1994, 52), as well as debates surrounding the assertion, particularly by Europeans and Americans, that childbearing is a personal choice. Odundo’s experiences as a Catholic schoolgirl, a potter researching in West and East Africa, and as a professional artist living in Britain have all given her a unique perspective that informs her ceramic practice. Her vessels resonate with multiple and conflicting interpretations of women’s reproductive capacities and individual civil liberties versus community morals, religious beliefs, and political stances on foetal constitutional rights.

Odundo’s accomplishments as a ceramic artist are not limited to her pots, but are also represented by the diverse contexts in which they are appreciated. Her exhibition history demonstrates the fluidity with which her work moves through and beyond categorizations like fine art versus craft, or African versus British art. As she says, ‘One thing about my work is that it has defied people putting it into various boxes,’ (Odundo 2005). Whilst some exhibition curators have emphasized Odundo’s applied arts training and her position within British studio ceramics, others have placed her in contexts that showcase her as a contemporary fine artist. 1991 was a

landmark year for Odundo in terms of this diversity. Her work was featured in *Colours of the Earth—Twentieth Century British Ceramics*, a British Council touring exhibition of modern British clay artists in India and Malaysia. The same year, Odundo had her first solo show in New York City at the Anthony Ralph Gallery, a fine art dealer. She was also included in 1991's *Africa Explores: 20<sup>th</sup> Century African Art* (Museum for African Art, New York).

Odundo's participation in *Columbus Drowning* (Rochdale Art Gallery, Lancashire) in 1992 signalled yet another contextualization of her work. *Columbus Drowning* featured five women artists of non-European descent: Jaune Quick-to-See Smith, Lubaina Himid, Magdalene Odundo, Robyn Kahukiwa, and Veronica Ryan, and was conceived as a creative response to colonial exploitation and oppression. The gallery guide proclaimed that 'the immorality of imperialism and colonialism finds itself drowning under a tidal wave of rebellion. The beauty and sensitivity of the works in *Columbus Drowning* belies their powerful chant for equal rights and justice.' Curator Maud Sulter and participating artists Lubaina Himid and Veronica Ryan had been participants in exhibitions associated with the Black Art Movement.<sup>17</sup> In the exhibition, Odundo's work was seen as a reclamation of African traditions as well as an appropriation of European ones, and interpreted as a rebellion against oppression. This was the first time Odundo's vessels were exhibited in a politically charged black British context.

Throughout her career, Odundo has continued to build upon her layered artistic identities. Her curriculum vitae lists her participation in numerous ceramics exhibitions as well as exhibitions of African art and artists. She has also been honoured with several important solo shows. The first was a mid-career retrospective,

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<sup>17</sup> See pp. 35-38 and pp. 108-111.

*Magdalene Odundo: African Beauty—A Retrospective*, at Het Kruithuis, Stedelijk Museum voor Hedendaagse Kunst, 's-Hertogenbosch, Netherlands in 1994. That Odundo received such critical attention just twelve years into her professional career is testament to the strength and influence of her growing body of work at the time. The following year, she was the subject of a major solo exhibition at the University Art Museum of the University of California Santa Barbara entitled *Ceramic Gestures: New Vessels by Magdalene Odundo* which subsequently toured to venues in California, Missouri, New Jersey, Indiana, and Washington DC.

Odundo's exhibition history, recognition, and success demonstrate a broadening of her audience and patronage as she has continued to teach as well as exhibit. Between 1983 and 2003, she taught part-time at several universities throughout the UK, including Goldsmiths College. In 2002, after two years as a member of faculty, Odundo was made Professor of Ceramics at the Surrey Institute in Farnham. She continues to teach at the Institute today, giving courses in glass and metalworking as well as ceramics in the Department of Three-Dimensional Design.

In 2001, Odundo had the opportunity to create an installation for *Acknowledged Sources* at the Russell-Cotes Art Gallery & Museum in Bournemouth. Originally the residence of Sir Merton and Lady Annie Russell-Cotes and designed to hold the couple's extensive collections of art and artefacts from their world travels, the Victorian house was bequeathed to the city of Bournemouth and the museum was created upon their deaths in 1922. Odundo was first introduced to the museum through her activities as a founding board member for Southern Arts, a regional arts development agency based in Winchester. As a result of the Southern Arts Residencies Scheme (1995-96), the Russell-Cotes hosted glass artist Sasha Ward and

thus demonstrated an interest in educational programming that combined showcasing contemporary work with the Victorian setting of its galleries and rooms.

*Acknowledged Sources* grew out of a specific project designed by Southern Arts Crafts Officer David Kay, in collaboration with Russell-Cotes staff, to combine the work of contemporary practitioners with historic museum collections from world cultures. The project sought to explore ‘the relationship and difference between genuine artistic influence and recognition to acquisition and appropriation of symbols and identity of diverse cultures,’ (*Acknowledged Sources*, [www.acknowledgedsources.org/origins.htm](http://www.acknowledgedsources.org/origins.htm)). Eight artists participated in conjunction with three museums: the Hastings Museum, the Nottingham Castle Museum and Art Gallery, and the Russell-Cotes. In the Russell-Cotes, Odundo was invited, along with textile artist Deirdre Wood and textile artist and designer Steve Wright, to interpret the collections and the roles that institutions play in their local communities.<sup>18</sup>

Odundo thus had the opportunity to experiment with the museum context and to express her views in terms of collection practices and objects as markers of identity. Through her installations, she explored her conceptualization of museums and galleries ‘as a starting point for acquiring knowledge through which one would seek enlightenment,’ (Odundo 2001). For Odundo, the path to ‘enlightenment’ includes reclaiming a heritage ‘lost to Africa,’ an empowering sense of re-connection with a continent and its cultures that grounds her in a strong personal self-identity (Odundo 2001). The loss of such a heritage is not only historical, in the sense of heritages and histories erased by imperial and colonial enterprises like slavery, but it is also personal. For Odundo, this loss is part of her experiences living under colonial rule in Kenya and self-imposed exile in Britain.

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<sup>18</sup> Lubna Chowdhary, Lynn Settrington, and Jivan Astfalck exhibited at the Hastings Museum, and Ali Pretty and Dawn Dupree exhibited at the Castle Museum.

In *Acknowledged Sources*, Odundo's exploration of her personal history included a confrontation with the colonial past. For the museum's dining room table, she produced a Spode fine china dinner service adorned with smiling images of herself and her family members as children. The central images on the plates, bowls, and tea cups are photographs of the colonial offices in Kenya where her family had to apply for travel documents, her mother's passport photo, and a snapshot of Odundo and her brothers taken in New Delhi. Victorian china has particular resonances with Odundo's childhood memories:

The first china I recall in our house was heavily decorated with portraits of King George and the Queen Mother. These images told a history of imperialism, colonialism, and triumphalism. What was being celebrated however was the glory of Victoria and Victoriana. Africa was apparently "discovered." Everywhere and everything was being named Victoria and was awash with pink. There was Lake Victoria, Port Victoria where my parents were born... Victoria Falls, Queensway, Lake Albert, King George Hospital and even dukes and earls had streets named after them. It is hard to imagine a more enslaving environment and power. Victorian colonialism and its history had such an impact on Africa, to fail to understand this impact is to fail to understand history (Odundo 2001).

With this installation, Odundo rejects the superimposed imagery of the benevolent Empire, and deposes the King and Queen of England in favour of herself and her family members.

Odundo's personal history is of course not limited to Kenya and India; she has also lived, studied, and worked in England since she was a young adult. In another installation for *Acknowledged Sources*, she displayed various African cloths, including East African printed *kanga* textiles, folded in a basket next to a suitcase packed with Land's End fleeces amongst the luxurious paintings and case displays of one of the galleries. The juxtaposition of these two different modes of dress suggests the vast differences in climate and culture and intimates Odundo's migratory experiences across both continents. For the accompanying text, she used the device of

letter-writing to revisit her state of mind upon arriving in England from Nairobi. She remembers writing to her family would alleviate but not eradicate her homesickness, which in fact has never gone away (Odundo 2001). In the letter, Odundo imagines herself arriving in Bournemouth to stay in the room that has become the museum's Gallery IV. She expresses shock at the cold temperatures and lack of sunshine, and describes the impression she and other Africans made on the locals: 'We were stared at everywhere we went. Maybe because most of us are wearing very bright colours. I personally think it is because we are black and different,' (Odundo 2001).

Odundo describes settling in to her new 'lodgings' in East Cliff house (now the museum), and indicates that the basket and trunk of clothing in her room are not completely unpacked in hopes she will return home soon and 'not be in exile forever,' (Odundo 2001). She goes on to describe her interaction with the art objects in the room: covering the cold nude marble statues with warm, colourful cloth, hanging *kangas* to brighten the dark walls, and juxtaposing photo screen prints of three Maasai girls with a Victorian painting called *Going to Church*, in order to make the comparison that both depict people observing a belief ritual. These interventions with the gallery displays express how integrating familiar images and objects with her new surroundings allows Odundo to assimilate the two experiences, simultaneously invoking the reassuring presence of her old environment and coming to terms with the new one.

Odundo's installations for *Acknowledged Sources* represent an exceptional opportunity for a deeper involvement and intervention with the interpretive qualities of a particular art institution. The various objects and artefacts of the Russell-Cotes collection amassed during the Victorian age were the backdrop for Odundo's displays of her own vessels and personal possessions; both collections express the unique

concerns of their owners. Her interpretation of material culture incorporates her colonial Kenyan background, her residence in England, and her contemplation not only of the exhibition, valuation, and contextualization of her pottery, but museum collections and displays around the world. She observes, 'Making objects is...common to us all. What is different is the diverse way in which we depict and interpret what we make because of diversity within our cultures,' (Odundo 2001).

In 2003, Odundo travelled to Pietermaritzburg, South Africa on the invitation of Professor Juliet Armstrong at the Centre for Visual Art, where she led student workshops, and to Newtown for a residency at the Fordsburgh Artists Studios. Afterward she visited ceramics studios and weaver's workshops in KwaZulu-Natal, including the pottery of the locally renowned Magwaza family, and conducted research on Zulu ceramics funded by the Director's Research Award from the Surrey Institute of Art and Design. An exhibition of her new and recent ceramics, *time and again*, took place in the temporary gallery of the newly opened Crafts Study Centre at the Surrey Institute of Art and Design in Farnham in June 2004. Over the course of her career, Odundo's multiple and frequent research, lecture, residency, and teaching activities have continued to promote her work within diverse contexts.

Today, Odundo's ceramics are in the collections of premier institutions including the British Museum, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, Smithsonian National Museum of African Art, and the Victoria and Albert Museum. As always, Odundo's vessels are interpreted within a variety of contexts. One of her vessels features prominently in the Sainsbury African Galleries at the British Museum, which opened in March 2001. It is positioned centrally in a display case in the first gallery, making it the first object one encounters upon entering. At the Smithsonian National

Museum of African Art, as in the British Museum, Odundo's vessels are displayed alongside other art objects from the African continent.

Odundo's work is branded "contemporary" because it was made by a professional, academically trained artist for the international art market. This term is contrasted with "traditional," which is used to describe objects produced in conjunction with local African methods. Upon examination, these prove to be highly problematic categorizations, as "contemporary" simply denotes "of the same time as." Equally problematic, "traditional" implies a stasis with regards to longstanding African art forms, when in fact many of these forms continue to be produced in the present day and have evolved over years of practice. In addition, many African artists who do not receive a university education nevertheless undergo extensive apprenticeships with local masters. Odundo's vessels thus call into question these specious and ultimately false categorizations by their very presence in galleries of African art. In applied arts contexts, Odundo is a ceramicist and details of her African background are downplayed in favour of her academic training in British studio ceramics. Odundo's work is collected within a context of British design history at the Victoria and Albert Museum, whilst the British Museum holds her vessels in two departments: the national collection of modern British ceramics in the Department of Medieval and Later Antiquities since 1982 (now the Department of Europe) and the African collection of the Department of Ethnography since 1991 (reinstalled in the Sainsbury African Galleries in 2001).

For Odundo, such ambiguities and multiple interpretations of her creative practice are strengths. Odundo comments,

In my case, there are no restrictions. Restrictions are based in the categories of Western critics. Developing countries have a broader, more eclectic view, like the Swahili concept of *sa-na*, which simply means something that has been created or made. [Western] writers have agendas, like presenting "traditional"

and “non-traditional” as preconceived categories in Africa. This creates lots of problems... They’re looking superficially, (Odundo 2003).

Odundo recognizes the shortcomings of Western art historical categories. Concepts like *sa-na* encompass a broad range of creative practice and supersede notions of fine art versus craft or traditional versus contemporary. She explains,

Debating who or what culture or nation or ethnicity one is for purposes of exhibiting is a non-starter, because one is who one is. Critics are the ones who pigeonhole the art and artists by calling art “primitive,” applying an anthropology that’s fifty years out of date. [African] artists are fed up with being seen as exotics. It is a curator’s problem, and it has made people of African descent wary of how they are perceived... The work is interesting regardless of where it’s reviewed! (Odundo 2003).

Odundo does not play into such spurious debates. Her exhibition history defies the limitations of stereotypical categorizations, and prevents the critical segregation of her body of work from that of artists of European descent. She says, ‘I don’t mind being represented as [an artist] from Kenya or Africa, but I’m not totally pleased if [my work] is always next to a mask!’ (Odundo 2003).

Odundo’s reputation and success is equal to that of artists like Steve McQueen, Chris Ofili, and Yinka Shonibare. She has enjoyed commercial success and wide exposure since the beginning of her career. As early as 1987, her pots were selling for four-figure sums; most of her works are now priced from £10,000 to £15,000. Her first solo exhibition in 1991 at Anthony Ralph Gallery in New York completely sold out. The twelve vessels were priced between \$5600 and \$7200. In a review of the show for *American Ceramics*, Judith Schwartz praised Odundo for ‘wonderful forms with arresting aesthetic purity, vitality of spirit, and recognition of the medium, which sets them squarely at the forefront of art,’ (Schwartz 1991, 51). Louisa Buck was impressed with the way Odundo’s vessels ‘generate a presence so strong you can almost hear it, or feel it,’ (Buck 1992, 20). The work reminded Buck of Brancusi ‘at his most streamlined and provocative; it appears simultaneously

archaic and modern, eastern and western, whilst having its own unmistakable identity...Only a few artists have ever said so much with such rigorous economy,' (Buck 1992, 20).

Odundo has even been seen as over-appreciated by some critics. Whilst praising her talent and 'tremendous command of form,' Paul Rice commented in 1989 that even as a student she was the subject of a massive amount of media coverage and hype unusual for any ceramicist, and this acclaim raised the prices of her works higher than those of any other potter of her generation (Rice and Growings 1989, 217). Rice continues, 'Although Odundo has not yet lived up to her promotion, she certainly has the potential to do so, (Rice and Growings 1989, 217). In 2002, Rice concluded that, 'Odundo's output has been surprisingly small and sometimes surprisingly uneven in quality but, in general, she has lived up to her promotion and been one of Britain's finest potters,' (Rice 2002, 187).

In her ceramic exploration and appropriation of a cornucopia of creative influences, Odundo expresses universal yet also personal diasporic experiences: 'a sense of belonging...tempered by the ambiguity of a sense of belonging elsewhere at the same time' (Picton 1994, 46). Odundo has been living and working in England since 1971. She has decided that practically and professionally, it is better to stay, yet she says she will never feel 'at home' in England (Odundo 2003). She states, 'Many of us have lived dual lives on the one hand being African and on the other appearing to be normal in the Western sense...It may be that having this cultural duality may have its advantages artistically. One has a license to tap into both histories and make them work to one's benefit,' (Odundo 2001). Odundo integrates her background, training, and influences into a body of work that effectively celebrates the diversity contained within it.

Odundo's vessels embody a host of paradoxes: they are containers, but non-functional; they are still whilst suggesting movement; they recall ancient methods yet reside resolutely in the contemporary. Her methods of ceramic production, as well as the pots themselves, interrogate notions of nationality, race, gender, and art versus craft. Furthermore, Odundo counters restrictive categorizations by participating in exhibitions and other activities that showcase her alternatively as a craftswoman, a fine artist, traditional, contemporary, African, and British. Theoretically, as a British resident of Kenyan nationality, she falls under the rubric of black British artist, and yet her professional trajectory is far from limited to that category. Instead, she challenges the art world to experience her pots and her world on her own terms.

### **Veronica Ryan**

[My work] was addressing my own experiences as being a black woman. That is how I have always wanted to work and it is how I *still* want to work, and I feel as though in lots of ways people are trying to force me to be somebody other than who I am. I think it is enough to be black; it is enough to have had my particular experiences. It is enough to make the work how I want to make it, (Ryan 2002).

Caribbean-born, raised and educated in England, and currently residing in New York City, Veronica Ryan is an artist whose personal and professional trajectories embody diversity. Ryan's work explores her personal as well as ancestral past, her present experiences in her surrounding environment, and concepts of place, memory, and psychology. Although she participated in important group exhibitions of black British art in the 1980s, subsequent exhibitions and residencies gave her the opportunity to explore her individual vision more fully. Her move to New York in 1990 provided an opportunity to position her creative practice within an entirely new environment, art scene, and in some senses, art history. Throughout her career, Ryan's artistic identity as an Afro-Caribbean, black, British, and US-based artist has tended to shift emphasis from one place to another.

Ryan was born in Plymouth, Montserrat, West Indies in 1956, the eldest of eight children. She moved with her parents to England when she was just eighteen months old, before the birth of her siblings. Her father arrived first and then, once established, sent for his wife and daughter. Initially, they lived in Notting Hill alongside many other Caribbean immigrants. Ryan describes her earliest memory as, 'pushing the pushchair in Notting Hill and it was right around the time of the race riots and Teddy Boys. I remember walking down the road with my mum and [sister] Patricia in the pushchair,' (Ryan 2005). Tensions were high and violence was common in late 1950s London neighbourhoods like Notting Hill. As they walked past bands of Teddy Boys, she recalls feeling afraid of them (Ryan 2006). At the time, the neighbourhood was not an easy one in which to live; rents were controlled by slumlords and families often had to share living space. When she was just two or three years old, Ryan discovered a woman who shared their house with her head in an oven in an attempted suicide.

A couple of years later, the family moved to Watford, north of London. It was quite different from Notting Hill. Ryan says, 'there were not many black people living there,' (Ryan 2005). She began elementary school, but after a couple of years, Ryan's parents decided that they wanted to return to Montserrat. They had been longing to return because, as Ryan explains, her parents experienced the sense of dislocation common to those who have left one country to start a new life in another (Ryan 2005). The family stayed with an aunt in north London for about a year, whilst her parents worked out a plan for their future. They decided to sell their house and their belongings to move the whole family back to Montserrat when Ryan was nine years old.

The family settled in Plymouth, the capital city. Whilst Ryan's father was from Plymouth, her mother grew up in the more rural countryside on the north of the island. She remembers listening to her mother's nostalgic descriptions of her girlhood and being very curious about the place. Once there, however, a strange and uncomfortable realization set in: the island fell far short of her expectations. Ryan says, 'I hated it. It was too hot and I often felt faint, and terribly disappointed that my mother's account of the island wasn't recognizable in any way. We went to school there for a short time and one of my recollections was of being in the schoolyard. A girl asked me if I wanted some sweets, which she offered in a brown paper bag. I said "yes" and tried to get a sweet from the bag. But there was a snake in the bag. It was not large, but it was a terrible experience,' (Wagstaff 1993). Her encounters with the more domesticated animals on the island were not much easier. The young Ryan was dismayed to witness the slaughter of chickens for family meals, a process that she describes as 'absolutely ruthless,' (Ryan 2006). This 'juxtaposition of different realities' between country and urban lifestyles came as a shock (Ryan 2006). Her experience of the climate, the local fauna, and the people in Montserrat were on the whole inhospitable. Such a realization must have been more than 'disappointing'; Ryan could not identify with the place that had been built up in her young mind as "home."

After about six months, Ryan's parents decided that staying in Montserrat was not a viable option for the family; her father returned to England to start building a life there all over again. Ryan's mother joined him after a few months, whilst Ryan and her siblings remained with their grandmother in Plymouth. Living with her grandmother was not a happy experience; she was deaf, and too old to take care of six children (Ryan 2005). After another six months, Ryan's parents sent for four of them;

it was another four or five years before her parents could afford bring her other two sisters back to England. It was difficult for the children to be separated from their parents and each other. Ryan says, 'Montserrat was never somewhere that I had idyllic memories of,' (Ryan 2005); 'It was a great relief to finally go back to England,' (Wagstaff 1993). Once reunited in England, the Ryan family settled in London, and then Stevenage.

Ryan describes some of the feelings that characterize her childhood:

I have been preoccupied all my life with a 'sense of belonging.' Growing up with an awareness of 'being apart' has certainly defined who I am now. However, that alienation was in part to do with constantly moving—my parents never stayed in one place when we were younger for very long, so there was little chance of continued friendships, or a feeling of being settled. Being 'out of place' characterized my growing up, (Wagstaff 1993).

This feeling of 'being apart' and 'out of place' was intensified by the responsibilities Ryan had towards her younger siblings. She explains, 'I always had to look after the younger ones. I think I missed out on all the stuff that kids do, or did...playing, and just being around and interacting with kids my own age. I can see with [my daughters] how they are with their peers, and I never learned how to do that,' (Ryan 2005).

When Ryan finished comprehensive school at the age of eighteen, she began to think about university. She was interested in literature and sociology but was ultimately drawn towards art. She took a Foundation course at the St. Albans College of Art and Design from 1974 to 1975. The curriculum was very structured and 'quite rigorous;' she studied colour theory and painting as well as several different media in the first two terms in order to discover her strengths and interests (Ryan 2005). She was drawn to three-dimensional work because she liked the tactile experience. This fascination with the process of making objects explains her affinity for printmaking as well, which requires the execution of lithographs and etching plates. In contrast, she

describes the painting as ‘very conventional—a lot of still lifes,’ and it did not hold much appeal (Ryan 2005). She did, however, enjoy the experimentation with colour theory. At the time, she admired modern Italian painter Giorgio Morandi for his ‘quite sculptural’ images of bottles and household objects (Ryan 2005). During the second half of the year, the work became more project-based and self-initiated, and Ryan began to gravitate towards sculpture:

The ceramic people really wanted me to continue in ceramics, but in actual fact the ceramics I was making were very sculptural, so I felt that...if I worked in sculpture I could explore some of those other possibilities in sculpture, whereas if I went into ceramics, depending on which course I went into, it would be very classical ceramics or ceramics sculpture. At the time, I could not remember lots of ceramic sculpture that I had responded to, and it just seemed to me to be a very rigid way to think of myself as an artist. John Mills was then Head of Sculpture at St. Albans, and he was very encouraging. I was making things in card at that point, and I remember he really liked something I made in card, (Ryan 2005).

In addition to studio work, Ryan studied art history and completed a research paper. She remarks that she was well acquainted with art history from comprehensive school, where her studies had covered ‘the whole gamut,’ including African art (Ryan 2005). After finishing her Foundation course, Ryan decided applied to Goldsmiths College for her BA in fine art. Unfortunately, she was ‘on the borderline’ and was not offered a place (Ryan 2005). She was, however, accepted at the Bath Academy of Art with a full grant.

Ryan studied sculpture at the Academy from 1975 to 1978. She describes the art school as ‘very purist,’ (Ryan 2005). She explains that, ‘Whilst I was [there], I had to deal with certain kinds of sculptural conventions which derived from Rodin, Brancusi, David Smith and William Tucker,’ (Wagstaff 1993). Tucker was particularly fashionable due to his 1974 book, *The Language of Sculpture*, and his exhibition, *The Condition of Sculpture*, at London’s Hayward Gallery the following

year. Ryan also cites Henry Moore as another significant influence upon the sculpture department's curriculum.

This emphasis on the accomplishments of European male artists provided a limited base from which to draw inspiration. As Ryan began to explore her own artistic interests, she searched for a wider range of sources to provide diversity, and to serve as role models: 'people I could relate to in terms of ideas and subject matter,' (Ryan 2005). The school's 'masculinist emphasis did not give me confidence that it was possible to be a woman sculptor,' (Ryan 2005). At the time, there were no significant women sculptors in England that Ryan could look to as examples, and artists like Barbara Hepworth were studied very little in comparison to their male contemporaries. However, she did discover exciting contemporary American women sculptors, such as Louise Bourgeois, Lydia Bengalis, Louise Nevelson, Alice Aycock, and Eva Hesse. She says, 'I really learned about Eva Hesse. Not as part of the teaching, but just because some of the students were interested in her, so we would look at stuff,' (Ryan 2005). In addition to gender, Ryan also sought to expand upon artistic responses to race, and the 'need to fix those kinds of investigations into a very tight pocket,' (Ryan 2005). She found Bath a relatively difficult and challenging atmosphere in terms of pursuing these interests. As she explains, 'I was always looking at African art and black artists in America, and it was very difficult to get literature. There was the Beacon Bookshop in Finsbury Park [in London] that I went to and found interesting,' (Ryan 2005).

During her time in Bath, Ryan was able to develop her sculptural practice in terms of craft and technique; she learned how to draw, carve, and use particular materials effectively. One of the processes she particularly enjoyed was wood carving, and she made 'objects that looked a bit like Miro figures. There might be a

ladder or a [Mesopotamian-like] ziggurat with these elongated figures on top. I was interested in Giacometti at the time; I was really fascinated with [Giacometti's sculpture] *The Palace at 4a.m.*' (Ryan 2005). Ryan also continued to experiment in clay and plaster as she had during Foundation, producing egg-like sculptural forms. She was dismayed when the critical reception of these works amongst her tutors and colleagues over-emphasized and even essentialized her femininity. She felt the reaction was 'a little disparaging, with comments like "Girls tend to make this kind of egg-related work;" I would get it quite a lot,' (Ryan 2005). Student's critiques focused on how the artist arrived at particular themes in their work, and Ryan was often described as 'working intuitively,' which was seen as an essentially feminine paradigm (Ryan 2006). The sculpture department itself she describes as very male-oriented; there were, for example, no women lecturers during her years there except for one visiting welder.

In contrast to her studio practice and its emphasis on Brancusi, Tucker, et al., Ryan's complementary studies tutors encouraged her to think about her identity in terms of her creative practice and influences, and felt African art and culture were more appropriate than her literary interest in European authors like Henry James and Vladimir Nabokov. She explains,

I think because I was black, and it was a very white college, they were trying to get me to think about myself and my identity in relation to my work. In those days, I have to say, I felt as though I was being treated as the Other, rather than just encouraging me to develop a sense of who I was personally. I felt that I was very much there on my own, and it made me feel pretty self-conscious actually, (Ryan 2005).

Ryan's experiences at Bath Academy encouraged her further development as a sculptor in media like wood and plaster, but she also found that the curriculum emphasized a male Eurocentric creative tradition that made her feel marginalized. There were, however, two tutors who were especially supportive. The first was

Michael Pennie, a visiting tutor from Goldsmiths who instructed her in carving and provided critical feedback and crucial support. The second was Dave King, a sculptor who encouraged her to read critical theory, and also suggested applying to the Slade School of Art for her MA.

Ryan attended the Slade School of Art, University College, London, from 1978 to 1980 for her post-graduate studies. During the application process, she interviewed with Head Professor Sir Lawrence Gowing, who was very enthusiastic about her work (Ryan 2005). She considered her acceptance into the programme to be solid encouragement towards professionalism and a future career as an artist. At the Slade, Ryan began to come into her own as an artist and to incorporate her interests and background more freely into her creative practice. She says,

It was only when I went to the Slade, and particularly in the second year, that they really responded to all kinds of things that I was making, tiny little objects. Nothing looked very grand. At Bath I had the sense that you had to make these grand statements. So the Slade was really good in terms of the encouragement. That was where I started to have a sense of my own identity.... That was where I felt a sense of possibility, (Ryan 2005).

Ryan focused on sculpture, and made small plaster objects which she placed into containers such as 'trays, boxes, etc. I was obsessed at the time with trying to find the right context for the objects, literal as well as metaphorical,' (Ryan 2004). Ryan describes these works as 'loosely architectural;' one work consisted of a small table with twelve niches in the top that contained removable cast objects (Ryan 2006). These early artistic explorations have been proved influential to her subsequent work, especially in terms of the containers' relationships to what is contained within them, and their compartmentalization. Ryan also tried theatre design, building on the wood sculptures she had made previously in Bath. She hated it, however, and found the making of scale models 'tedious' and 'too prescriptive' (Ryan 2005).

Ryan was still one of few black students, and explains that defining a black artistic identity was not part of the dialogue at the Slade at that time. She recalls one black post-graduate painting student who resisted being categorized as a “black artist;” he considered himself a formalist. She explains that ‘he was adamant that making paintings was not about being black,’ (Ryan 2005). Ryan’s own work was perceived of as more abstract and less narrative, and was not directly associated with black art issues. She flourished in the freedom of the Slade environment. Her growing artistic confidence, the support of her tutors, and the diversity of London were some of the most positive aspects of her years studying at the Slade.

During her studies, Ryan regularly visited many of London’s galleries and museums. She saw *Eva Hesse: Sculpture* at the Whitechapel Gallery in 1979, during her second year at the Slade. The exhibition was Ryan’s first chance to see the artist’s work in person. Hesse’s sculptures had a profound impact on her, particularly in terms of exploring the expressiveness of unconventional materials and visceral, biomorphic shapes strongly evocative of the body. Despite her untimely death in 1970, Hesse represented a successful woman artist who made a significant impact in terms of the development of sculpture and its critical reception. Ryan also recalls being impressed with the work of Louise Bourgeois and Alice Aycock on exhibition at the Hayward Gallery. At that time, Ryan explains that there were not many working British women sculptors who could serve as equivalent role models, beyond Elizabeth Frink (Ryan 2005).

Ryan did not limit her gallery going to contemporary art. In the British Museum, Museum of Mankind, and Ethnographic Museum in Shoreditch, for example, she observed a wide range of objects that piqued her curiosity, including Egyptian mummies and sarcophagi, Cycladic figures, Palaeolithic goddess figures,

and Benin ivory leopards. She describes seeing these as ‘a tremendous revelation,’ (Wagstaff 1993). Some of this material Ryan translated into her sculptural practice back in the studio. For example, she was inspired to create Cycladic-like figures in plaster encased in wooden structures that resembled sarcophagi (Ryan 2006).

As a result of her observations and research, Ryan developed an increasing interest in African art. At the Slade, Sir Lawrence Gowing was very supportive in general, and he encouraged her to pursue her research in African art in particular. He suggested studies in art history, which she considered. In retrospect, Ryan feels this was not exactly the direction she wanted to take. She says, ‘My interest in African art was coming out of the work, rather than an academic interest, but I was being encouraged to look at it as an academic pursuit rather than a formal inquiry into subject matter and ideas,’ (Ryan 2005). The year she completed her MA equivalency, her tutors nominated her for a Boise Travelling Scholarship.

Ryan was awarded the grant and travelled to Nigeria, where she experienced West Africa for the first time. She arrived with letters of introduction, including one to Uli Beier, and a list of contacts from Gowing as well as an anthropology professor at University College London and her sister’s Nigerian boyfriend. She spent a month in Nigeria and stayed in Lagos, Ibadan, Benin City, Ife, Jos, Kano, and Kaduna. Her main project was visiting the museum stores of each place to look at undocumented objects. Ryan began to explore the contexts in which different objects were made. She says, ‘I was much more interested in “fetish” objects than masks,’ (Ryan 2005).

In addition to art objects, Ryan also observed the local landscape, flora, and fauna, and the making and use of ritual objects (Ryan 2005). Along quiet roads in Benin, she saw gourds of human hair that were offerings to the deceased, as well as other offerings of kola nuts, eggs, beads, and clay. In rural areas, she spied

strategically placed objects tied amongst the trees on farms to protect the crops from theft. Ryan says that these expressions of 'spiritual preoccupation' have haunted her through the years, and explains that 'I have always wanted that same kind of intensity in my work,' (Ryan 2005). She was particularly inspired by the Nigerians' ability to express a transcendent spirituality through the manipulation of simple, natural materials for ritual offerings and shrines.

Whilst in Nigeria, Ryan was keen to experience an African environment and to possibly engender a more personal relationship to her African heritage. The Nigerians 'thought that was very amusing and quaint. They thought that I was very English. To this thing about trying to understand my cultural background and find out about an African connection, their reaction was, "This is not where you come from. This is not your home. You are culturally very different. And you are Caribbean,"' (Ryan 2005). Ryan was disturbed by their response, and did not agree with the 'paternalistic, colonialist perspectives' that classified her as European by association and excluded her from any belonging to Africa, however distant (Ryan 2005). Instead of a sense of belonging, Ryan felt foreign. As in Montserrat, she found the heat and humidity difficult conditions in which to live and work. She describes feeling 'ground down, trying to keep cool,' (Ryan 2005). Nevertheless, Ryan's experiences in Nigeria were significant not only in terms of formal influences and her anthropological and ethnographical research, but also in terms of her personal relationship to Africa and Africans.

When Ryan returned to London, she was concerned with the need to make a living and dedicated to her professionalism as an artist. Contemplating her next step, she considered Sir Lawrence Gowing's encouragement to study African art history. She was also inspired by what she had seen in Nigeria. Ryan decided to learn more

about the objects that so intrigued her; she wanted to pursue art history in context of her work as a sculptor (Ryan 2005). She says, 'my interest in African art came out of the way I was being influenced at that time in my own work. Certainly I was becoming particularly aware of West African art,' (Ryan 2002). Rather than a formal interest, Ryan had an intellectual curiosity as to how ritual objects were produced in their particular cultural settings (Ryan 2005).

Ryan studied at the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, from 1981 to 1983 under John Picton, with the intention of exploring 'European influences on West African art' (Ryan 2002) for an MPhil degree. In many ways, her ideas were prescient frontrunners to later discourses on diaspora and contemporary African art. Both emphasized cultural exchange, cross-fertilization, and contemporary artistic traditions in Africa that did not subscribe to Western academic descriptions of "traditional art." During the course of her research, Ryan read Daniel Biebuyck's 1973 study, *Lega Culture: Art, Initiation, and Moral Philosophy amongst a Central African People*. This was to have a profound and lasting impact on her creative practice. She was captivated by the art assemblages created for use in the Bwami initiation societies of the Lega people in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. The collections of objects have no single, distinct interpretation, but instead incorporate different proverbial meanings at successive stages of each ritual, building up the philosophical knowledge of the initiates through their dramatic presentation. Ryan found sympathy with this idea and the ways that these assemblages related to social organization, and would later appropriate this sensibility into her work. In her words, 'it shed light on my own practices as an artist,' (Ryan 2005). She explains,

I was interested in the way objects convey different kinds of meanings, and how meaning in particular societies and with certain audiences could be very specific, depending on what kind of object you make...[W]hen I was doing the research, it was much more intellectual probing about the discourse,

almost separate from me. But now I can see it is much more. The way I think about putting things together is much more to do with all those different kinds of dialogues that I researched over long periods of time,' (Ryan 2002).

The Lega objects expressed semantic possibilities, for example the use of light bulbs for their gourd-like, organic shapes, and Ryan was fascinated by the similarities of these semiotic concepts to ideas expressed by British conceptual artist Michael Craig-Martin. One of his most notorious works, *Oak Tree* (1973), addresses fundamental questions of semiotics and philosophical inquiry: Craig-Martin declared that he transformed a glass of water on a shelf into an oak tree through his stated intention to do so. Ryan sees a philosophical similarity between *Oak Tree* and the light bulbs used by the Lega. Making the connection between Craig-Martin's ideas and the Lega material was an exciting revelation; for Ryan it articulated a dialogue between European and African visual culture.

Despite these insights and discoveries, Ryan found that her research took her away from her own artistic endeavours. She felt conflicted about not continuing her MPhil degree after almost three years, but ultimately decided to concentrate once again on making and exhibiting objects (Ryan 2002). All the time she was studying at SOAS, Ryan had continued to make sculpture. Limited to materials and processes that did not require a lot of funds or machinery, she made small sculptures out of plaster, wood, and nails that were comprised of tiny components fit into a larger context. After leaving SOAS, Ryan participated in group exhibitions such as *Third World Show* at the London School of Economics (1981), *Fine Art Staff Show* at Aspex Gallery in Portsmouth (1982), *Creation for Liberation* (1983) in Brixton, south London, the 6<sup>th</sup> Cleveland (UK) International Drawing Biennale (1983), and *Black Woman Time Now* (Battersea Arts Centre, London, 1983) curated by Lubaina Himid. Around this time, Ryan also began teaching at various colleges to supplement her

income. Between 1982 and 1990, she was a visiting lecturer at several universities and colleges, including the Slade School of Art, the Surrey Institute of Art and Design, the Byam Shaw School of Art, and Goldsmiths College.

In 1983, Lubaina Himid selected Ryan for *Five Black Women Artists* at the Africa Centre in London.<sup>19</sup> Ryan participated along with Sonia Boyce, Claudette Johnson, Houria Niati, and Himid. She says,

Now that was really quite an interesting show because that is what it was: five black women artists. We all got together and we showed work, and my sculpture was quite abstract, and there was painting, and drawing. And as a context that worked very well. But then I felt that it was as though that was not quite enough. It had to become much more polarized than that; it had to become very politicized, (Ryan 2002).

For Ryan, this mandate was at odds with her creative practice. She explains, 'I did not see how I could make sculpture with political or social issues as the primary reference point. I was always much more interested in psychological ways of thinking,' (Ryan 2005).

In 1985, Ryan participated in *The Thin Black Line*.<sup>20</sup> In contrast to other artists' concerns with politics, racism, or social activism, Ryan's statement in the catalogue describes the influence of natural objects on her sculptures and their resemblance to sea and landscapes. *Manna in the Wilderness* (1984-85; Fig. 2.10), for example, is comprised of soft, rounded plaster forms reminiscent of pods, seeds, and leaves; they nestle into one another and remain low to the ground as if natural extensions of the earth's features. She describes these works as 'organic forms which reflected a particular mood, a state of mind. They might have been the result of seeing decayed tropical fruit, the remaining husks and seeds on the ground;' these works 'reflect an experience and not a representation' (Wagstaff 1993).

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<sup>19</sup> See p. 35.

<sup>20</sup> See p. 36.

Ryan vividly recalls tasting the exotic fruits available in Montserrat when she was a child: sickly sweet sugar apples, odd-tasting avocados, and 'slimy' okra (Ryan 2006). By far her favourite fruit was—and still is—mangoes. After eating them, Ryan always saves the pits, and these appear as a constant feature in her works year after year, sometimes bound together, wrapped, or placed in niches and containers. The opulent fruit she remembers from Montserrat evokes mixed feelings of fascination with its exoticism mingled with sadness and even trauma from being in such a strange environment and experiencing years of separation from her parents and siblings. As she explains, 'food can have profound psychological [implications],' (Ryan 2006). Ryan's oblique allusions to Caribbean landscape do not necessarily express nostalgic longing. Her relationship to Montserrat as a "homeland" is much more complex than such a straightforward interpretation. She says,

I consciously experimented with organic forms in earlier work. It was one way of addressing and identifying objects which belong to the place I come from. With these shapes I responded to the memories of Montserrat. Memories of growth, the landscape, taste, and colour which were intrinsically bound up with "my place;" *which was also the unfamiliar place,*' (Bettinger 1988, emphasis added).

Ryan's difficulties in Montserrat as a little girl complicate her relationship to the place of her birth and heritage, and she refuses to idealize the Caribbean. Through the manipulation of her materials, she creates sculptural worlds that afford her a method of recovering lost places and that effect a reconciliation of her past with her present. In the exhibition catalogue, Ryan comments, 'I am trying to establish a sense of place historically, culturally and psychologically....The sculpture could be described as having a direct parallel with the very diverse ways in which human behaviour communicates, or remains alienated,' (Himid 1985).

*The Thin Black Line* received a significant amount of media attention.<sup>21</sup> Nigel Pollitt praised Ryan's 'singularly extraordinary painted plaster, and now bronze, sculptures. *Relics in the Pillow of Dreams* (1985) is an unforgettable three-dimensional world of psychic swirls—an outsize grey scatter cushion—cradling a variety of her metaphorical objects loosely based on seedpods and beach debris,' (*City Limits* 22-28 November 1985). Waldemar Januszczak wrote 'There is also a gentle sadness which emerges in the splendid sculpture of Veronica Ryan,' ("Anger at Hand," *The Guardian* 27 November 1985). Lorraine Griffiths explained, 'Veronica Ryan's work successfully challenges this colonial dehumanization process. Her gentle, wistful sculptures, such as *Manna in the Wilderness* depicting heaven-sent manna resting on the cushion of the earth, communicates black women's humanity,' (Griffiths 1986).

Ryan was not, however, limited to black art exhibitions. The same year, 1985, she exhibited in *Beyond Appearances: Sculpture for the Visually Handicapped and Sighted to Share* at the Nottingham Castle Museum and Art Gallery, which included work by Richard Deacon and Antony Gormley. Ryan's work was also included in 1985's *Manna in the Wilderness*, a group show of contemporary art at Angela Flowers Gallery in London. The following year, she participated in the 1986 Whitechapel Open at London's Whitechapel Art Gallery. One of her sculptures in the Open, *Relics in the Pillow of Dreams* (1985; Fig. 2.11), was subsequently purchased by renowned collector Charles Saatchi.

In 1986, Ryan was invited to collaborate with the curatorial team for *From Two Worlds* at the Whitechapel Art Gallery.<sup>22</sup> One of Ryan's works, *A Place in the Scheme of Things* (1986; Fig. 2.12) was featured in a promotional poster for the show.

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<sup>21</sup> See pp. 37-38.

<sup>22</sup> See p. 38.

Like other sculptures from this period, it sits relatively low to the ground, hugging the gallery floor. Its overall form is reminiscent of a seedpod fallen to the ground, as well as a canoe tilting slightly on the surface of the water. Within its inner compartments, two dried fruit- or seed-like forms rest upright, like passengers. The work expresses a very human relationship with the natural world, and evokes metaphors of travelling and migration. Ryan explains, 'It is a response to what I see going on outside. I hope that the work suggest levels of human experience,' (Solanke 1986, 11). Through such sculptures, Ryan seeks to inspire thoughts of difficult historical relationships between people and continents, and to explore the possibilities of reconciliation. She comments, 'I am trying to re-enact a sort of history in my work,' (Solanke 1986, 12).

As in the *Thin Black Line*, critics analyzed Ryan's sculptures in terms of race. Solanke writes, '[Ryan's] unusual and enigmatic sculpture is sometimes criticized as being esoteric and detached from the struggles of black people. [She states,] "I'm aware that the way I work is to do with being a black artist. The fact that this is not obvious is to do with people not being sufficiently aware of their own traditions,"' (Solanke 1986, 11). Ryan's response refers, for example, to her creative inspiration from Lega initiation baskets. She explains,

A lot of black art is overtly political and I feel my work could never be like that. The difference is in how people translate what they are receiving. In the face of violence I think most people respond in the same way, with very ugly feeling. It is how it is then digested and how it surfaces in the work that is different, (Solanke 1986, 12).

Ryan observes, 'All along I have had various people be very critical of me because I did not fit into their politicized agenda,' (Ryan 2002).

In 1987, Ryan was the subject of a self-titled solo exhibition at Bristol's Arnolfini Gallery of contemporary art, which subsequently toured to Wolverhampton and Glasgow. The eight sculptures featured in the exhibition were made of plaster,

clay, bronze, and lead with the addition of stain or pigment. She applied bright, tropical, and pastel shades reminiscent of the Caribbean. Some of the works showcased included *Relics in the Pillow of Dreams* (1986; Fig. 2.11), *Memories Are Spatial* (1986-7), and *Fragments from a Lost World* (1987). In an essay for the exhibition publication, Rupert Martin discussed Ryan's works in terms of their 'biomorphic' qualities 'inspired by [a] landscape of ripening, fruition, and decay,' (Martin 1987). In her artist's statement, Ryan explains, 'I am trying through my work to explore concerns with boundaries, where boundaries occupy a very particular territory. There is a sense in which it is not always apparent where something begins or ends. This introduces the question of identities, cultural, historical, and psychological,' (Martin 1987). Ryan thus extends the landscape references in her sculptures into a metaphor for human self-definition and relationships through her exploration of boundaries and edges. She is also concerned with the way the sculptures are associated with one another and their environment. She says,

The close proximity of the sculptures to the ground is important in terms of their intrinsic relationship to the earth. I am interested in Eric Newmann's *The Great Mother: An Analysis of the Archetype*, where he outlines the Jungian perspective of the female earth. There is a relationship to natural organic objects in the world. These exist as a vehicle for exploring fundamental issues of life, (Martin 1987).

Ryan likens the repetition of forms in *Fragments from a Lost World* to 'fragments describing repetition in time, such as serial rhythms, ritual drumming; structuring an order,' (Martin 1987). She sees *Memories Are Spatial* as suggestive of a human-sized shell, its interior filled with a person's historical past. She continues, 'There is an idea that that space is able to contain opposites, polarities, disorientation, birth and decay, life and death: the struggle to change received notions which impede human emotional development,' (Martin 1987).

In 1987-88, Ryan was an Artist Fellow at Jesus College and Kettle's Yard in Cambridge. Earlier in 1987, curator Hilary Gresty had included Ryan in a group exhibition at Kettle's Yard, *A System of Support*, in which Ryan exhibited her first works made with perforated lead foil: a pin cushion and a pocket (Ryan 2005). The artist fellowship that followed was a full-time yearlong commitment through which Ryan expanded her use of materials to include dried flowers, canvas, lace, kapok, steel wire, and domestic objects like sieves and strainers. Throughout the year, Ryan held monthly open studios, helped organize *Sculpture in the Close* on the grounds of Jesus College in summer of 1987, and curated an exhibition entitled *Dislocations* held at Kettle's Yard at the beginning of 1988. *Dislocations* featured work from Simone Alexander, Zarina Bhimji, Mona Hatoum, Ruth Lakofski, Derek Mawudoku, Peter Robinson, and Ryan herself. For *Sculpture in the Close*, Ryan created *Cavities in Cloister Court* (1988; Fig. 2.13), a series of geometric shapes in lead sheeting sunk into the ground. She described her inspiration as, 'the sense of moving on, leaving behind the fossilized, but still being left with its residue, the traces of its history, the ghost image... With the wholeness broken down, the sculpture gets literally subverted in the ground, fixing itself to the ground, holding on to the memory without it being there,' (Bettinger 1988). The reference to fossils in *Cavities in Cloister Court* relates to regular discussions Ryan had with the College's Dons and Fellows about palaeontology, microbiology, and mathematics, amongst other topics. She explains that microbiology formally influenced her sculptures. Microbiologists, for example, recognized in her work the articulation and visualization of organic structures at the cellular level (Ryan 2006).

At the end of the year, Hilary Gresty of Kettle's Yard and Greg Hilty of Riverside Studios in London co-organized *Veronica Ryan*, a solo exhibition of new

work at both galleries that included the publication of an illustrated catalogue. The exhibition highlighted Ryan's experimentation with new materials. She explains, "Instead of trying to make a few traditional materials take on all possible kinds of qualities, I wanted the material to speak directly for itself. Lead foil, a soft metal, was one of the first materials which lent itself to being manipulated in a very flexible way..." (Wagstaff 1993). Ryan's use of perforated lead sheeting and foil in works like *Pierced Repetitions* (1988; Fig. 2.14) and *Baggage* (1988; Fig. 2.15) convey a sense of vulnerability yet also comfort from the soft cover they provide. She says, 'I always thought of [lead] like a membrane,' (Ryan 2005). Its soft, silken feeling contrasts with its metallic appearance, and Ryan's use of a chisel to pierce and slash its surfaces breaks up the smoothness and creates a rhythmic repetition that relates to earlier work featuring series of niches or sculpted forms. The lead sheeting is industrially manufactured, but its soft pliability, especially when combined with materials like feathers or cotton wadding, creates a paradoxical naturalness. There is an unusual, and even uneasy, combination of materials and functionality, as in *Baggage*, where the kapok stuffing peeks through the perforations. Ryan cites the influence of Marina Warner's *Monuments and Maidens*: '[Warner] presents this fascinating image of sieves full of water which do not drain, containers that are not containing. The sieve which is not sieving is a beautiful picture of sabotage, of subversion, stagnation,' (Bettinger 1988). These works continue Ryan's fascination with the container versus the contained; 'the metaphorical content interests me as the focus of concern, for example the idea of interior and exterior, which extends right through the relation of self to the world,' (Rendell 1988, 15).

Ryan also explains her desire to move beyond emphasis on her Afro-Caribbean heritage. She states, 'I am moving away from the seed pods and some of

the more organic aspects because I don't want my sculpture to be seen simply as exotic, Caribbean, and drenched in sunshine,' (Rendell 1988, 15). *In Memory* (1988; Fig. 2.16) is indicative of this shift. It consists of a roughly rectangular-shaped plaster slab covered with shallow niches that are filled with dried flowers. The flowers, she notes, are not simply to be 'sneered at with all the connotations of femininity... There are a variety of social practices for which flowers are tremendously important universally, such as weddings, funerals, births, beginnings, and ends,' (Bettinger 1988). Ryan's words encourage a more psychological approach to the work. The dried flowers rest in their niches like the residual memories of human experiences, informing our relationship with the world around us. Ryan explains, 'I am still using container-like objects, and the ritualistic aspect of my work remains very important,' (Rendell 1988, 15). Rather than spiritual ritual, her concentration is on the process of making.

In 1989 Rasheed Araeen invited Ryan to participate in *The Other Story*.<sup>23</sup> She declined.

At the time I felt that there was so much focus on trying to separate out black artists; I really felt bombarded with being bullied into participating in shows because they had this very specific focus. It was not that I was not sympathetic, I just felt that I wanted to be able to decide whether I wanted to be in that exhibition or not, and I did not like the way I felt pressured... At that time it just did not feel right. I did not always want to be only situated in those specific shows to do with black racial politics, (Ryan 2002).

Ryan's complex, subtle, and often ambiguous sculptural explorations of place, memories, boundaries, and psychology were not an overt articulation of political and racial issues, and she felt uncomfortable with the limitations of this contextualization of her work.

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<sup>23</sup> See pp. 39-40.

In 1990, Ryan moved to New York City. Whilst her decision to settle in New York was ‘completely personal, about getting married,’ she also comments that it ‘really changed the whole course of my life, creatively,’ (Ryan 2004). Leaving Britain to live in New York was a drastic change and an exhilarating challenge, personally as well as artistically. She says,

[New York] is full of immigrants, people who have relocated themselves. I feel much more on the edge of life here: there are no safety nets. What is so strange though is that having grown up in Europe, my [British] history is part of my sense of place in terms of my identification. Living in New York has forced me to redefine my sense of where my locations are,’ (Wagstaff 1993).

Ryan’s relationship to a British history stems from her lived experiences in England rather than tracing literal, ancestral roots. The family name Ryan is actually Irish in origin; when she stayed in Limerick for a teaching appointment, Ryan discovered from a genealogist that her Irish ancestors were from there. Yet when one considers that Ryan has spent most of her life living in England, it is possible to imagine why she refers to aspects of her personal history as British. Ryan’s Britishness is highlighted in her relationship with her daughters, who have been born and raised in New York. She says, ‘Well, they are American! They make fun of me because of some of the things I refer to. The other day, I said something about the “Bogeyman,” and they responded, “Mommy, you are really strange, what are you talking about?”’ (Ryan 2005).

Professionally, Ryan has experienced shifts in emphasis. Her move to New York removed her from the context of the UK art world, and she was thrust into an entirely new art scene. As a result, she experienced a sense of dislocation and alienation. She explains, ‘I do not belong in a debate here [in New York], so I feel as though I am working in a bit of a vacuum. England is a place where I was involved in a discourse. England is where I really belong as an artist,’ (Ryan 2005). Whilst she

certainly became involved in exhibitions, residencies, and teaching in the US, there was an initial period of integration that represented a significant change from her higher profile in the UK.

Ryan was both surprised and disconcerted to discover that a lot of the issues prominent in the debates of the Black Art Movement in Britain in the eighties were being still being grappled with in the US in the early nineties. She says, 'Living here [in New York] has forced me to really understand that the whole question of one's racial identity had not moved on as much as I thought it had [in 1990]; the conflict has been reconciling this with my expectations,' (Ryan 2006). She describes her reaction:

In fact, when I first came here I felt as though I was sort of going backwards, because in certain ways I had been able to define myself in a more independent way in terms of how I saw myself as an artist. But then when I came here, I really had the sense that who I was as an artist was really being defined for me... Various people said, "You ought to go see this and that gallery, who show specific black work." When I was first here and people saw my work, there was not any direct reference that [they] could relate to if they were looking for any kind of race-related context. I think when people were looking in a more general way, they could relate to my work, (Ryan 2002).

Ryan also feels that there is a large gap between the black British and African-American experience. She says, 'I find being from Europe quite a different experience and perspective than being African-American, especially in an historical context,' (Ryan 2002). According to American scholar Judith Wilson,

On the one hand, British conceptions of blackness represent the intersection of England's colonial past with English nationalism and racial hierarchies. On the other, Afro-Asian self-designation as "black" during the 1980s represented a strategic act of antiracist coalition and symbolic resistance. By contrast, in the United States, a "one-drop rule" for defining blackness signals the enduring stigma of slavery and its crucial role in shaping ongoing racial hierarchies, (Wilson 2005, 93).

The "one-drop rule" to which Wilson refers is the US slavery-era definition of a "Negro" as a person with any African or African-American blood in his or her veins, no matter how small or distant the ancestral connection. At the time, this served slave-

owners by increasing their numbers of potential slaves, especially in the case of offspring born to slave mothers. Such racial categorization has continued, however, long after the practice of slavery ceased, and still defines American racial categories in the twenty-first century. The ways in which physical features have correlated with racial hierarchies in American history, for example, resulted in the emulation of lighter skin tones and straighter hair before the Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s and the embracing of the opposite by many African-Americans afterward. In the US, Ryan has faced assumptions that she feels superior to darker African-Americans because of her pale skin tone, compounded by her 'uppity' English accent (Ryan 2006).

Racism has had a devastating impact on American history, from the lynchings of black people in the southern states circa 1880 into the 1940s, to the legislation of so-called "Jim Crow" segregation laws in a majority of American states from the 1880s until the 1960s and the atrocities committed against activists during the Civil Rights Movement. Today the societal fissures that are the legacy of this history remain. Ryan has observed her children's difficulties confronting categorizations of blackness amongst their peers, whether they are accused of not being 'black enough' or strive to embrace a 'ghetto' identity and attitude (Ryan 2006). She asserts that she never experienced such pressures in England as a child, and speculates that similar symptoms of latent racism in English society would date back to her parents' experiences in the 1950s (Ryan 2006). Racial prejudice is also seen as a factor in the generally lower socio-economic status of African-Americans (Collins 2000, 4-5). Conflations of race and class continue to be a problem. Ryan observes that the persistence of racial and ethnic labels within the art world generally is more related to issues of class than art theory (Ryan 2006). Furthermore, she is often confronted by

condescending attitudes from people who assume she is uneducated and cannot fathom that she is a highly trained professional (Ryan 2006). On the other hand, some African-Americans are scornful of her English accent as a snobbish affectation.

Ryan is wary of assumptions based on race or skin colour and resists their politicization into hallmarks of a unified black identity or a singular discourse. This approach towards her creative practice constricts as well as obfuscates its interpretation. She rejects the implication that all black artists should be lumped together:

There is no homogeneity; we are not a monolith. Our experiences are as varied as anyone else's...I still think that despite all the kinds of movements: postmodernist, post-structuralist, post-whatever, [people still have] a lot of these very ingrained notions. If your hair is a different texture, or your eyes are a different colour or something, people seem to need to differentiate you in some way...I feel it even more now, because twenty years later some of those issues still exist. It is difficult because there are lots of different stories, always will be, always have been, and ideas of how to define the ways in which a group of people might be situated in a context seem to come and go, (Ryan 2002).

Over the course of her residence in the US, Ryan has found that the art world, at least in New York, has become less inclined to limit black artists within a specific trajectory that conceptualizes them as a united group (Ryan 2006). She cites Ken Johnson's recent *New York Times* articles as opening up the debate. Johnson's reviews of the annual National Black Fine Art Show have questioned the usefulness of selecting artists for a show based solely on racial categories, and he has commented that 'artists of African descent work in many different cultural contexts, from that of the self-taught outsider to that of the New York avant-gardist with a Master of Fine Arts degree,' ("Art in Review," *The New York Times*, 4 February 2000 and 2 February 2002).

Ryan explains that when she arrived in New York at the point in her career when she left England, it was a question of finding her niche (Ryan 2006). As she

settled in, she found that not everyone viewed her work as inherently “black art” and she was able to continue her activities as a professional artist independent of any racial categorization. In 1991, she organized an Open Studio at Pietrasanta Fine Arts, a fine arts bronze foundry in New York where she had a studio. The following year Paula Cooper invited Ryan to participate in a group show at her prestigious Soho gallery. Her participation in the exhibition at Paula Cooper Gallery led to an invitation to teach at the School of Visual Arts in Manhattan where she taught Fine Arts, including painting, sculpture, and photography, part-time for five years from 1993.

In 1993, Ryan had a solo exhibition at the Wood Street Gallery in Pittsburgh curated by Sheena Wagstaff in conjunction with the Three Rivers Arts Festival. The exhibition included wall and floor sculptures from the previous five years, and a series of new works. *Pocket* (1990; Fig. 2.17) and *Box Compartment with Feathers* (1992; Fig. 2.18) developed out of Ryan’s fellowship at Kettle’s Yard and Jesus College, where she continued to use metals to form the structures of her sculptures, including lead foil, wire mesh, and aluminium, and juxtapose these industrial materials with natural substances. In these works, Ryan continues to emphasize the relationships of containers to their contents, and exteriors versus interiors. Wagstaff discusses *Pocket*: ‘The work brings to mind a shallow nest clinging to the wall, a protective haven for its young fluffy charges, or the stuff of life—unleavened bread, holding the potential for creation and continuation, or a resilient skin, like a skeleton, holding in place its precious interior,’ (Wagstaff 1993). Similarly, *Box Compartment with Feathers* contrasts soft feathers with aluminium and plaster. However, this work further emphasizes the contrast in the rigid geometry of its compartmentalized container. Instead of a nest-like form, the feathers are packed into a structure that seems almost clinical. Ryan says, ‘There are key words which are important for me,

acting as triggers for thoughts: residues, traces, memory, deposits. They are about all kinds of end,' (Wagstaff 1993). The residues that flowers and feathers leave in the metal and plaster containers act as metaphors for memory in the ways in which past experiences and contacts leave traces on our personal histories.

The contrast between the softer edges of *Pocket* and the squarer edges of *Box Compartment with Feathers* indicates a larger shift in perspective that occurred during Ryan's early years in New York. Surrounded by a more intensely urban environment of steel and concrete, she moved away from the soft forms of her previous work and towards a harder, more industrial edge. She remembers, 'When I was first here, it was as though I had shut off all of the organic references that were in my work in England, because it seemed completely foreign to how I was experiencing New York,' (Ryan 2002). The urban environment's architectural organization and the specific context of American art history illuminated Minimalist works for Ryan in ways she had not appreciated whilst living in England. She explains,

That was when I started to be very aware that I was being influenced by people like Carl Andre and Donald Judd, artists who in England I really would not have been interested in. I found, once I got here and spent some time looking at their work, that they were interested in making containers of various sorts. Their containers came out of different kind of historical moment. However, I found them intriguing, and started emptying out my containers. It was quite relevant to the concept that maybe I was emptying out all kinds of things in my life,' (Ryan 2002).

This direction became more apparent when Ryan had her one-person exhibition, *Compartments/Apart-ments*, at the Camden Arts Centre in London in 1995. In the exhibition catalogue, Stella Santacatterina writes, 'The works are made from various materials—dust, metal, feathers, paper, plaster. Some present themselves as rigorous, geometric structures, whilst others convey a strong emotive energy which resists being bound within a rational system,' (Santacatterina 1995, 3). The materials are similar to previous works, but the use of the adjectives 'rigorous'

and 'geometric' signal a new emphasis only hinted at in *Box Compartment with Feathers*. Although the softness of materials like feathers and dust is still present, and not all of the containers are emptied of materials, the harder edges and more forceful geometries of the structures in which they are contained seem more strongly emphasized. *Lean* (1994; Fig. 2.19) tilts against a corner and reaches halfway up the gallery wall, its even, empty spaces reminiscent of Ryan's earlier work as well as Andre and Judd.

Behind these formal properties, Ryan explores the psychological resonance of both the containers and the material contained within some of them. In her catalogue essay, she cites British psychologist D. W. Winnicott's *Playing and Reality* (1971):

The place of the object—outside, inside, at the border... There may emerge something or some phenomenon—perhaps a bundles of wool or the corner of a blanket or eiderdown, or a word or tune, or a mannerism that becomes vitally important to the infant for use at the time of going to sleep, and is a defence against anxiety, (Santacatterina 1995, 10)

Ryan is fascinated by Winnicott's description of the creative approach to the world developed in childhood, in particular the way objects take on psychological significance, for example a child's baby blanket as substitute for a mother's breast. In this way, her sculptures hint at connections between external objects and one's interior world.

In her catalogue essay, Ryan writes, 'Capsules, divisions, compartments, are all metaphors for the wider issues of dissociation, fracture, displacement, alienation, and so on,' (Santacatterina 1995, 7). *Pierce* (1994; Fig. 2.20) is comprised of a long metal shelf-like box that contains a tidy row of soft squares carefully and evenly covered in pins. Ryan has cited the influence of Carl Jung's writings about evil in *Memories, Dreams, and Reflections* (1962), and the juxtaposition of soft beeswax and piercing metal spikes in *Pierce* speaks to Jungian notions of a dark and sinister

shadow inherent in human beings. In her catalogue essay, Ryan quotes a passage from Julia Kristeva's *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (1982) about the simultaneous fascination and repulsion of 'improper/unclean' material, and explains its significance to '*Empty Compartments Full of Dust* (1993), [which] contains the contents of a vacuum cleaner, making reference to intimate lives—the shedding of human skin, hair and fingernails all part of the texture of everyday life. Underlying this focus on dust heaps, there is a search for the spiritual,' (Santacatterina 1995, 10-11).

With *Compartments/Apart-ments*, Ryan began making work that became larger as well as sharper, and filled up more space. In 1988, she commented, 'When I am told that my work is still hugging the ground and should rise up and become more aggressive, I like to think that horizontality and container-like forms have their own capacity for aggression. Small objects can have an immense resonance, and can suggest monumentality in the world,' (Rendell 1988, 15). Five years later, she considered that, '[a] lot of my work is quiet, unstated, about ambiguities. I have had to reconcile this preoccupation with the risk that the work could be too subtle to make any impact,' (Wagstaff 1993). With the works in *Compartments/Apart-ments*, Ryan seems to be addressing the question of impact and force. Sonia Boyce certainly felt this impact. In the catalogue, Boyce describes her response to the works: 'Whilst standing by the hallway piece I suddenly realized I was holding my breath. The proximity of the dust made me hesitant about inhaling dirt. The positioning of some of these pieces is very uncomfortable,' (Santacatterina 1995, 13). However, the quiet contemplative aspects and subtle ambiguities had not disappeared, as Boyce notes:

Somehow I sense a...quiet melancholia hovers around your pieces. Yet this sensibility, this anxiety, is what makes the work beautiful. Feelings of anxiety are stirred when I think of the kind of activity involved in the making of these things. There is a kind of meticulousness. A disquietened patience... There are

several references to a kind of internal/intestinal dialogue,' (Santacatterina 1995, 13).

The containers in Ryan's sculptures, however, did not remain empty. She admits that, 'at some point I started to have this sense that all the objects had gone, and I wanted the objects back,' (Ryan 2002). In 1995, she created a work using milk crates to recreate the twelve by twelve foot dimensions of her studio for *Six Sculptors*, an exhibition at Long Island University in Brooklyn. She describes it as, 'a bit like a skeletal structure, and each crate had various objects in, and then I strapped them all together with plastic cable straps. It was very architectural,' (Ryan 2005). The following year, guest curator Mora Beauchamp-Byrd selected works by Ryan and Jamaican artist Petrona Morrison for a 1996 exhibition at the Bronx Museum of the Arts. Ryan exhibited seven works, including *Shelves* (1990-1995). In *Shelves*, she uses stacked crates as containers for her sculptures and assemblages.

Also in 1996, Ryan participated in EAST, an international open submission exhibition held annually at the Norwich Gallery and Norwich School of Art and Design in England. She exhibited *My Island (Repository)* (1995; Fig. 2.21), in which she used chicken cages to structure the work. Inside were milk bottles and various objects made of rubber, plaster, and plastic, suggestive of the leftovers of daily living. The work has a more urban feel than earlier versions due to the steel cages wired together and the presence of more manufactured objects inside. Although they emphasize the structural regularity of their container building blocks, all of these works hold objects which create a significant series of references, whether to Ryan's sculptural, interior worlds or to the detritus of daily life. With these works, she explores interior versus exterior space in a more architectural way, and retains the effect of using dust and rubbish first seen in *Compartments/Apart-ments*. Later in 1996, Ryan participated in a group show, *Landscape Reclaimed*, at the Aldrich

Museum of Contemporary Art in Ridgefield, Connecticut. Exploring the idea of interior landscapes, she created a multi-media installation in the gallery as a life-size replica of her studio entitled *The Repository* (1996; Fig. 2.25). As with *My Island (Repository)* and other crate-based works, *The Repository* was an extension of the container as a structure. The work investigates the intersections of architecture and personal, interior space, in this case focusing on the space at the centre of Ryan's creative practice.

Between 1997 and 2000, Ryan travelled regularly to St. Ives, Cornwall for a residency at the Barbara Hepworth Museum organized through the Tate St. Ives. The resulting work was presented in the exhibition *Veronica Ryan: Artist in Residence 2000* (Tate St. Ives, 2000). *Mango Reliquary* (2000; Fig. 2.23) was one of the sculptures conceived and constructed during her residency. It consists of a rectangular block of marble with niches carved in the top, and mango stones wrapped in lead in each niche. The marble was part of a donation of three unused white Carrera marble blocks given to Ryan by the Hepworth estate. Beginning in 1995, there was a devastatingly destructive volcanic eruption on Montserrat. The resulting mud, ash, and debris completely submerged most of the southern part of the island, including Plymouth, where Ryan lived briefly as a child. A fertile eco-system subsequently developed out of the ashes. Ryan explains that *Mango Reliquary* comments on these events, saying, 'Out of total devastation, the possibility of volcanic ash has engendered new hope and transformation,' (Cole 2002, iii). The sarcophagus-like shape of the marble cradling the wrapped mango stones creates a special memorial. Mangoes have specific relevance for Ryan. She explains that, 'mangoes hold a fascination for me—I think there are more than 100 varieties in the tropics. My favourite was the grafted mango—a hybrid, particularly sweet and juicy. It was great

fun finding them when we stayed in Montserrat as children,' (Cole 2002, iii).<sup>24</sup> Ryan has commented on the psychological implications of food, and cites the influence of Bruce Nauman's videos of 'sexy, drippy, messy fruit,' that she observed at his solo exhibition at the Whitechapel Art Gallery in 1987. Rather than emphasizing the organic and fecund, life-sustaining qualities of the fruit, Nauman's work tackles themes of death and decay.

Ryan carefully wrapped each stone in lead foil and placed them in the carved niches of the marble. She comments on the contradictory nature of the act, because, 'lead preserves but is also toxic. In this context, preservation alludes to hope and the possibility of regeneration,' (Cole 2002, iii). In terms of her earlier work, Ryan says, 'The residency at Tate St. Ives really made me think much more consciously again about the relevance of [the] objects to the containers,' (Ryan 2002). In *Mango Reliquary*, the relationship of the mango stones to their repository extends the process of wrapping and placing them into a memorial act reminiscent of *In Memory* (1988; Fig. 2.16). She explains, 'Niches suggest a kind of home and comfort. Montserrat was on my mind as a conceptual ancestral home rather than any tangible reality,' (Cole 2002, iii). Her memorial tribute to Montserrat's destruction and subsequent transformation is closely related to her bereavement at the losses of her brother and her sister in 1999 and 2000, respectively. She says,

It brings together contradictory feelings of memory, joy, and regret. I remember moments when we were all together as a family and how short that time is. I think of *Mango Reliquary* as a container which reconciles impermanence. It is a sarcophagus about mourning and loss, about honouring the dead, about letting go and transformation,' (Cole 2002, iii).

Back in New York, Ryan's family situation was changing. She separated from her husband in 2001 and they divorced in the following year. Motherhood has

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<sup>24</sup> See p. 109.

significantly impacted Ryan's working methodology, both literally and thematically. After her daughters were born, the demands on her time increased exponentially, and she had to juggle her career needs with those of her children. Monetary considerations are a significant challenge to her artistic endeavours, especially since the divorce. She says, 'If [the kids] need a pair of shoes, then I have to buy them the pair of shoes as opposed to buying materials. I mean, I try to do both but that is the reality,' (Ryan 2002). Ryan has found that a professional dedication to her artistic practice is often difficult for others to understand. She says, 'There's still the whole issue about whether one is taken seriously and whether people still think one's involved in a hobby when you happen to have children,' (Ryan 2002). Ryan's new familial situation has also meant other lifestyle changes. Before 2002, Ryan returned to England two or three times a year for short visits, which kept her abreast of the latest artists and exhibitions in Britain. Unfortunately, legal entanglements, caring for her daughters, and monetary constraints have all prevented her from such regular visits and contact with the British art scene.

Despite these difficulties, Ryan remains committed to working in her studio and exhibiting. From 2001 to 2005, she participated in yearly open studios at the Elizabeth Foundation for the Arts in New York, where she had studio space. She also created an installation work, *Archaeology of the Black Sun 1956-2002* (2003; Fig. 2.24), at Long Island University's Salena Gallery in 2003. *Archaeology* consists of various found objects and materials wrapped, tied, and pinned neatly to a large, curved wall; these are accompanied by several objects and assemblages placed on the floor. The objects in the installation, as well as the dates in the title (1956 was the year Ryan was born, 2002 the year of the exhibition) convey an autobiographical quality. There are objects that invoke the feminine and domestic spheres, such as stainless

steel measuring cups and sewing implements, which are contrasted with stones, wire, and bits of metal, foam, and plastic. She comments that *Archaeology* is about 'one's interior world,' (Ryan 2004), and recreates her own interior world through the manipulation of the objects and materials that inhabit it, telling their stories and serving as metaphors for her experiences.

Ryan's readings in psychology have continued to shape her ideas. Here she takes inspiration once again from Winnicott, in particular the way objects take on psychological significance. The work's title is also a reference to Julia Kristeva's *Black Sun: Depression and Melancholia*, a post-structuralist book on psychoanalysis in which Ryan found the author's study of semantic referencing particularly intriguing. Ryan also sees a relationship between the creative developments during her Jesus College/Kettle's Yard residency and her recent work in terms of experimenting with new materials, found objects, and the interesting juxtapositions they create (Ryan 2006).

In 2004, Ryan felt the urge to re-navigate ideas surrounding architectural versus interior space that she had explored in works like the *Repository* (1996; Fig. 2.22) and *Archaeology*. She says, 'I wanted to explore the idea of the room and the interior, thinking more about [the Salena Gallery] exhibition,' (Ryan 2004). Her latest work, *Between Spaces*, is still in progress. It is comprised of a series of structures of domestic interiors made of cardboard and stacked to form several mini-skyscrapers. Ryan explains, 'It is really just another way of exploring the container, only now it is related to one's body size rather than the size of the objects contained within. Well, it is more architectural I suppose...' (Ryan 2004). In fact, *Between Spaces* seems very connected to New York's concrete jungle. She says, 'I go running along the [Hudson] River, and there is a lot of building going on. I am sure I have been affected by the

[destruction of the World Trade Center] Towers and everything,' (Ryan 2004). Ryan also cites the continuing influence of French scientist and philosopher Gaston Bachelard's *Poetics of Space*, a book she first read during her BA studies in Bath. She explains, 'Bachelard talks about space...from a very Jungian perspective. He talks about the inside and the outside, about wardrobes and closets as being kinds of secret receptacles. I still find that quite relevant in terms of the ideas I have,' (Ryan 2005).

*Between Spaces* is a continuation of Ryan's interest in both physical and psychological interiors. Certain details, like the inclusion of family snapshots or slides of her previous work, reference personal experience, but Ryan is conscious not to make these references too obvious or specific. In both cases, these images are painted over and obscured. Ryan explains, 'It is about things being insidious. There are a lot of references to psychological underpinnings. I do not want them to look like a narrative,' (Ryan 2004). *Between Spaces* involves a play between the personal and universal. There are objects and images attached onto as well as inside the stacked structures, such as plastic containers, silver CD discs, bandages, matchboxes, and light bulbs, as well as cut-out windows and mesh-covered sections jutting out from the sides. Peering into some of the shadowy interiors, one feels a sense of unease. Again, there is a relationship with Jungian ideas concerning the shadow in every personality that harbours evil intent. In addition, Ryan has included organic materials, like mango stones sewn into plastic. She says, '[Mango stones] have always been there. Even when I was at the Slade, [they have] always been in the work,' (Ryan 2005). In some ways, *Between Spaces* represents the marriage of the creative inspiration of the natural world with Ryan's very urban environment.

*Between Spaces* also builds on earlier explorations of containers and shelf-like compositions, extending into a scaled version of a human environment through

architectural references. Rather than being drawn down and into sculptural landscapes, as with Ryan's earlier sculptures, with *Between Spaces* the viewer feels smaller, surrounded by interiors that invite closer inspection yet create an environment of tall structures. She says, 'In England the skyline is so low which makes you feel something much more powerful about the landscape. The work I was doing there was very much about hugging the floor. I think that is one of the main differences [with later work in the US],' (Ryan 2005). Ryan has also experimented with various shades of pink, orange, and turquoise, subverting the greyscapes of the "concrete jungle" traditionally associated with big city architecture with washes of colours reminiscent of the Caribbean. She ended up toning down the brightest shades in order to focus on a dialogue with the structure of the work and its interior, rather than an overpowering surface exterior. Ryan continues, 'Colour has to be integral [to the work], rather like any other material or medium,' (Ryan 2006).

Ryan describes sculpting as 'a way of playing for me, creating my own world,' (Ryan 2004). Whilst her sculptures and installations represent a very personal set of experiences, memories, and the feelings attached to them, they also offer an account of collective human experiences of landscape, place, home, memory, loss, and grief. She addresses diverse cultural histories in her work. Certainly there are many generations who relate to the migrant experiences explored in Ryan's work. Even more universal are the tensions expressed between the organic and the urban, and one's personal relationship with one's environment. Her investigations of femininity and motherhood resonate with contemporary dialogues in the humanities and sociology, not to mention politics.

Whilst Ryan's exposure and patronage in the US have been affected by personal circumstances and financial constraints, she continues to work and to search

for exhibition opportunities as well as gallery representation in New York. She maintains a high profile in the UK, and in 2005 was included in a new installation at London's Tate Britain. The Tate online guide for October and November 2005 notes the inclusion of 'recent art addressing themes of cultural displacement and alienation by artists including Simon Patterson, Rachel Whiteread, Veronica Ryan, and Simon Starling,' (Tate Online, [www.tate.org](http://www.tate.org)). Significantly, these issues are presented as the purview of artists from all backgrounds, not simply non-Western. Museum director Nicholas Serota explains the motivation behind the rehang:

One of the most important things that has been happening in British art over the past twenty-five years is the way it has been steadily infused by artists who were perhaps not born here, but are working here, or perhaps who are second generation—such as Mona Hatoum, Steve McQueen, Chris Ofili, and Veronica Ryan,' (Higgins 2005, 96).

Serota wants a Tate that 'does not appear mono-cultural' but reflects 'broader British society,' (Higgins 2005, 96). The promotion of such a perspective expressed within a leading cultural institution is a hopeful sign of a curatorial worldview in which artists are exhibited and critiqued according to the issues explored in their work, rather than specious categorizations based on racial differences.

### **Mary Evans**

The images in my work are based on signs, symbols and pictograms culled from popular culture. The imagery and concepts in the work deal with characterizations which are often devised by our society to contain people, sexes and races. I try to synthesize elements of my African background with the European culture of my experience. I am involved in articulating the emblematic devices of two cultures by using equally emblematic methods of image production: stencilling, pasting, printing and stamping... The work proposes that we seek beyond... human existence, in order to approach a more conciliatory dialogue (Tawadros and Amidu 1997).

Mary Evans was born in Lagos, Nigeria in 1963. She lived in Benin City with her parents until her mother left her father and moved with her daughter to Lagos. In Lagos, her mother met an accountant from Yorkshire and in 1969, a six-year-old

Evans moved to London with her mother, who married the accountant. Evans' stepfather legally adopted her, and she received her naturalization papers and a British passport. She has never known her biological father, even his name. She was raised in northwest London in a close-knit, mixed-race household with her Nigerian mother, English stepfather, and five half-sisters. Evans' happy relationship with her stepfather, as well as her parents' marriage and subsequent five children, set a familial precedent for positive race relations. She describes her situation as 'comfortably off, in terms of being brought up in a mixed race family and never giving racism a second thought...it was never something I felt,' (Evans 2004). She characterizes her neighbourhood as very diverse, including Irish, Afro-Caribbean, and Asian families living in the same street and attending the same schools.

When she was fourteen, Evans and her family moved to Lagos. Her stepfather was working for Dunlop Multinational and was offered a three-year position as Finance Director in Lagos. The family decided to make the temporary move from London, primarily because Evans' mother wanted to return and see her family. Her mother's family, whose name is Idode, were from Benin City, but quite a few of her family members lived in Lagos. Whilst it was wonderful to be reunited with these relatives, living in Nigeria was not easy for Evans' family.

Evans characterizes this period in her life as a very difficult time, and describes feeling 'uprooted from England' (Evans 2002). Every element of their lifestyle changed radically. Not only did Evans find herself in a completely different country, but she also experienced a shocking discrepancy between her modest northwest London lifestyle in a semi-detached house and living in Lagos in a huge house with servants. They lived in an elite international community called a Government Residential Area, which also included well-to-do Nigerian families.

Evans and her sisters attended an international school with European children and wealthy Nigerians. She found it hard to reconcile her Nigerian background with their 'expatriate' lifestyle in Lagos. She says, 'We lived as British people in Nigeria, not as Nigerians in Nigeria,' (Evans 2004).

For Evans, conflicted feelings about this newfound lavish lifestyle had their roots in the lingering atmosphere of colonialism after Independence. She confesses, 'That sort of lifestyle just makes me cringe because it was still all about colonialism. It was still about the British and the Nigerians, and the way people behaved. I am sure it has changed now, but people did not question that you had a cook and a cleaner. Even wealthy Nigerians have them,' (Evans 2004). She remembers one episode where she insisted on making her own bed, and the nanny complained that Evans was trying to put her out of work. Despite the fact that having servants is much more ingrained in West African society than merely as an inherited practice from colonialism, and despite (or perhaps because of) the fact that she was from Nigeria originally, for Evans their social position as a well-to-do English family with a white, male head of household characterized their lifestyle as colonial and expatriate. Evans' familiarity with British class culture likely intensified her discomfort, feeling that an aristocratic lifestyle somehow implied moral and intellectual superiority.

Evan's sisters also experienced difficulties being half English and half Nigerian. In Lagos, Nigerians taunted them with the label "*oyibo*." *Oyibo* (or *oyinbo*) was originally a Yoruba term for white man or woman, but since Independence has evolved into a word used to describe any well-educated or wealthy Nigeria-based expatriate or foreigner, including African-Americans. This broader use within local perspective notwithstanding, Evans and her sisters interpreted this as a derogatory label because their father was white (Evans 2004). For them, the insinuation was that

being biracial meant that someone in one's family was a traitor, allied with the oppressor. Through her familial relationship to her sisters, Evans was thus a traitor by association.

Evans had started her secondary education in England, and finished in Nigeria. Taking her history O-levels was especially confusing because of the conflicting historical narratives concerning the colonial past. Instead of the English emphasis on conquering and civilizing enterprises, the Nigerian narrative focused on enslaving, oppression, and exploitation. It was during her history lessons in Lagos that Evans first encountered the graphic diagram of slaves packed in a ship's hold that was to become a key image in her art. She had never seen it before, in England, and it dramatically changed her perspective. Evans explains, 'I found it so confusing. It was like the flipside. "They came and they took us to America." Whereas (in London) it was, "we went and we conquered!" When you're fourteen...It was really heavy. When I took my exams it was so hard. And...it wasn't just that, it was going from a north London suburb to (Lagos),' (Evans 2002). During a crucial and difficult period of adolescent self-discovery, Evans found herself faced with troublesome interpretations of English and Nigerian history as well as identity. Furthermore, she did not fit neatly into either category and struggled to reconcile the contradictions in her own experience, which simply could not be neatly divided up into allegiances with either England/Britain or Nigeria/Africa in perpetual opposition to each other.

Evans spent two years in school in Lagos and finished her O-levels. Because her stepfather only had one year left on his Nigerian contract, Evans decided she should return to England a year before the rest of her family to study for her A-levels, in order to avoid having to move halfway through the programme. She explains, 'It was tough, but it was my decision, and I wanted to do it,' (Evans 2004). Evans thus

returned to attend boarding school in Lancashire, where her stepfather had family. Initially it was quite a difficult transition. Evans was not well acquainted with her father's Lancashire relatives, and she only stayed with them during short holidays and weekends. She did not see her immediate family until they returned to London the following year. Despite having spent family holidays in Yorkshire as a young child, she was far from the suburban London neighbourhood in which she had been raised. She was lonely, and hated her first year of boarding school. Most of her classmates had attended the school for years and knew one another from an early age. Happily, she was joined by her younger sister in her second year and was able to visit her family once again in London.

Despite her family's return, boarding school did not become more enjoyable. For Evans, it was the means to an end: art school. From a young age, Evans had always been quite certain that she wanted to attend art college. She focused on art, but also took other subjects in the humanities. When studying A-level English, she read Jane Austen and Shakespeare, but no non-European writers. She searched out black writers, like Alice Walker and Toni Morrison, to broaden her perspective and to read about experiences that resonated with some of her own. Once she completed her A-levels, Evans focused on choosing a Foundation course. The emphasis at the boarding school had been preparing students to study academics at university, and no other student had ever gone to art school. Her art tutor was thus unable to provide guidance or support in getting her into a Foundation course. Left to her own devices, Evans chose a school based on personal reasons. She wanted to defer returning to London in order to 'be different,' and continue to live independently (Evans 2004). She had a friend from school in Nigeria who lived in Liverpool, and she was drawn to the idea

of being close to a city in which she had a friend. She decided to do her Foundation course at St. Helens College of Art and Design, Merseyside (1981-82).

Evans was thrilled and describes her year in Foundation as, 'such a good time for me. I was finally at art school....So I just worked like crazy. I lived to work, because that is all I wanted to do,' (Evans 2004). As with every Foundation course, the curriculum was designed to give students experience with a wide range of media, and Evans was required to work in a number of techniques including graphic design, photography, textiles, ceramics, sculpture, painting, and printmaking. Because her art tutor at boarding school had been a graphic designer, Evans originally envisioned studying for a graphics degree. However, during her Foundation course she found the assignments tedious and uninspiring. Evans also found the science involved in photography hard to understand and did not enjoy the process. She did, however, enjoy printmaking. She explains, 'I could understand that if you put a piece of metal in acid, it [will] etch. And where you put varnish on and the acid cannot get to it, it will not etch. But I could not understand F-16 and stuff like that!' (Evans 2005). The curriculum focused on diverse studio and technical experience until the second term, when the students had to decide on their concentration for their BA applications. For Evans, painting and printmaking were far and away her favourite subjects.

At this early stage of her artistic development, Evans focused on rendering objects. She describes her technique as 'very direct in style, painting still lifes, just drawing what I could see. I had been doing that for years at home, just on the kitchen table....So I just carried on with that...' (Evans 2005). Whilst she was primarily drawn to painting, Evans also enjoyed printmaking. She says, 'I love printmaking, and have from day one, from Foundation...I took to it like a fish to water. I do not know why. Something to do with having to do things in a certain way, in a certain order...In a

way, it is similar to the way I ended up painting, with processes, first do this and then that. I just loved it...having what seemed like a magical outcome,' (Evans 2005). She found her tutors wonderfully supportive. Evans credits their support to her enthusiasm and dedication. She explains,

I lived and breathed art. I went to school and did what I had to do, and I was finally doing what I really wanted to do. And that was all I wanted to do. I was first in, last out all the time. It was where I wanted to be....And I suppose I was different; I was the only person there from London, I was eighteen, everyone else lived at home with their mum and dad and I lived in a bed-sit, (Evans 2005).

Evans was also the only black student at St. Helen's. She confesses, 'I always felt a bit like a pioneer in some sense because I was on my own and the only black woman there....Those college years, which is kind of a long time, eight years, have been the only time that I felt that I had to prove a point in some way, to work twice as hard as everyone else...' (Evans 2004). Despite being different, Evans was accepted by her tutors and classmates alike and made friends on her course. She does not remember any particular difficulties arising from her unique status, but she nevertheless felt a certain need, even responsibility, to prove her capabilities. Whilst this ambition can be attributed to Evan's enthusiasm for art school in general, and her personal joy at seeing her goal realized, there was also a subtext of racial difference that lingered in her mind.

Evans decided to apply for her BA in painting. Wishing to defer her eventual return to London and to have a college experience away from home, Evans chose the Gloucestershire College of Art and Technology in Cheltenham because it was purpose-built as an art school rather than a department 'tacked on' to a larger university, and she admired their printmaking facilities and fashion courses (Evans 2004). Although she focused on painting during her degree, Evans describes herself as always having been 'a sort-of painter-printer' (Evans 2002). In fact, she had trouble

initially choosing a specialization for her BA. She says, 'I did not know what to apply for: painting, printing, or textiles, so I left that line blank in my form until the last minute when I had to put something, and put painting,' (Evans 2005). Part of the problem was the tendency within Western art academies to view painting and sculpture as superior to applied arts. Evans describes printmaking in art school as 'sidelined,' (Evans 2005). She realized that if she did printmaking as her concentration, she would have been given a tiny studio space relative to painting and sculpture students and been required to share materials and facilities with the other printmakers. Thus she applied for painting, but planned to keep printmaking as a secondary interest; she ended up dropping textiles. Evans felt restricted by this artistic hierarchy of media throughout her art school experience, and it would even delay her eventual segue into the cut paper compositions that comprise her mature work.

It was during her BA course at Gloucestershire (1982-1985) that Evans began to develop her early fascination with transforming objects into two-dimensional images. She describes her working technique:

I used to just paint objects, anything I could get hold of. It started with junk, just dragging things in from the street. I stacked them all into a corner of my studio space, and I would just draw and paint them, ignoring the table and any other supports they were on. So it looked like they were just floating around. There were old clocks, old things, often things that were amorphous and did not look like anything in particular, like a bit of rusty tube or something. I could sort of animate them myself, in a way, personify them...I painted them like crazy, and I really got to know them to the point that I did not need [the objects themselves] anymore. I could just paint them. I knew what they looked like, what they were. So I got rid of [the actual objects in the studio]. They just became these things, these objects that I could paint and put them into amorphous landscape-type scenarios, like just blue backgrounds, all very quite vague, (Evans 2005).

Each term Evans would start with hundreds of pieces of primed paper stapled to the wall of her studio, and 'just draw and paint, blitz them with stuff. It was like just getting everything out of your head,' (Evans 2005). Then she would go through all of

them with her tutor and pick out the strongest ones to make into paintings. Even as she continued to develop as a painter, she did not lose her attraction to printmaking. She says, 'I have never been able to just stick to painting...So my (BA degree) show was half painting and half printmaking. For me they were equally important, but everyone else thought the paintings were the thing. But for me, the prints were also really important,' (Evans 2005). In addition to studio work, Evan's curriculum required Critical Studies in the first year, which was a theoretical and methodological approach to history of art. In the second year, students got to choose their area of academic study, and Evans chose Film Studies. Having studied history of art during her A-levels in boarding school and again in Critical Studies, Evans appreciated the opportunity to branch out in her studies. For her final essay in the class, she wrote about Italian neo-classical cinema.

As at St. Helens, Evans felt her tutors were overwhelmingly supportive of her work and her artistic and academic progress, and she made good friends with fellow students. Once again, she was the only black student at the school during the years she studied there. Despite her overall positive experiences, at the end of her first year she had an eye-opening discussion with one of her tutors that exposed the subtle shades of racism in her environment. After she received a 100% on her end of term exam, her Critical Studies tutor asked to see her. Whilst he was congratulatory, he seemed slightly mystified as to how she had achieved such an outstanding mark. During the course of their conversation, he asked questions about her background and her family name. When she revealed that Evans was the name of her adoptive English stepfather, her tutor seemed to conclude that this was the explanation for her high mark.

Of course, Evans' success had nothing to do with her English stepfather and everything to do with her own ability and hard work, which was her response to her

tutor (Evans 2004). The tutor was surprised, even to the point of suspicion, that Evans had achieved a perfect score on her exam. Whilst this is not so disturbing in itself, as educators will often question such a performance in order to rule out the possibility of cheating, in this case the explanation for this tutor involved the racist assumption that a young woman of African descent could not perform at such a high level without the influence of a white, English mentor. In Gloucestershire in 1983, there were simply no other people of Afro-Caribbean descent in the school or the community, or even present enough in the media, to adequately demonstrate this attitude as a racist fallacy. As Evans says, 'He had just never seen the like, basically,' (Evans 2004).

Towards the end of her BA studies, Evans began hearing about the activities of black British artists like Eddie Chambers, Keith Piper, Lubaina Himid, and Sonia Boyce. Evans made a conscious decision not to be a part of them, because she was not interested in joining herself creatively to a strategy that she felt was too limiting and prejudicial. She explains, 'To me it just felt divisive. Even though I appreciate, especially now, that it was something that needed to be done, it just felt to me like...I live my life with enough people putting me in a box, why do I have to put myself in a box, in terms of my creativity? I just was not going to do it,' (Evans 2002). Instead of feeling a sense of solidarity with these artists, Evans felt alienated by their desire to categorize and emphasize their non-whiteness as a moral condition that deeply affected not only their creative processes but also their visibility as artists. She says, 'I think that one of the reasons that I did not really fall into the early wave of Black art was because I did not feel the same black consciousness...' (Evans 2004). Whilst Evans was not untouched by racism and stereotyping, as the incident with her Critical Studies demonstrates, overall she felt her status within British society was secure. To make distinctions and attach valuations to certain racial categorizations for Evans

would mean alienating half of her family. Because of her own positive experiences growing up in a middle-class, mixed-race household in a diverse northwest London neighbourhood, she did not identify with the frustration expressed by other black British artists.

Evans' career at this point was on a different trajectory, and her focus during her years in Gloucestershire was primarily characterized by 'getting on with it:'

I did feel quite cocooned in Gloucestershire, in a way. It is a little town, and it is a very college-y place. We were just getting on with it. It was not so much about what was going on in London, even though we would come down and...check things out. I know, especially when I look back now, that I consciously decided that I was going to do my own thing, and I did that for quite a whilst (Evans 2004).

Whilst Cheltenham is not exactly a tiny village, it did allow Evans the relative insulation to find her own working method independently of prevailing artistic trends and critical discourse, including the Black Art Movement.

In her final year, Evans applied to study for her MA at the Royal College of Art in London. She was keen to continue her art education, and felt that the Royal College was the best institution. However, she was disappointed when she was not accepted. Instead, she returned to Cheltenham, deciding that it was better to stay there and continue to paint rather than return to London and face the high cost of living. She knew of a couple of houses in town that had been slated for demolition, and made an agreement with the local Council to use them as art studios. For ten months, she worked in the studio with three or four fellow art school graduates and continued to paint objects as she had during her BA, focusing on rendering their formal qualities in compositions devoid of narrative, landscape, or other context.

After ten months of building up her portfolio, Evans moved back to London, leased a studio in Deptford, and began working part-time at an art supply store. At this time she also reapplied for postgraduate programmes. She had an interview at the

Royal College of Art, but it did not go well; they did not seem receptive to her work. Afterward, she felt certain she would not get accepted, and considered her options. She remembered one of her tutors in Gloucestershire had taught at Goldsmiths College, and she contacted him. He agreed to give her a reference, and she applied to their MA programme. Goldsmiths' programme was a part-time two-year MA that required the student to provide his/her own studio and necessitated a part-time job, both of which Evans had already. She had an interview two weeks later, and it went so well that she knew she would be accepted. Her predictions for both schools turned out to be true, and Evans attended Goldsmiths from 1987-89.

In hindsight, Evans feels her acceptance at Goldsmiths was the best possible outcome. Goldsmiths, according to Evans, is a school 'where the ethos was really to work out your own critical discourse in relation to your practice. Not to shy away from it, to look things in the face,' (Evans 2004). The students were expected to explain their methodology and defend their decisions artistically. For Evans, the impact of this critical emphasis solidified the objects she depicted in her paintings into representations of tangible reality. In her own words,

[The objects] got more definite. They just became actual, not like "That looks like an airplane," but "That *is* an airplane"...The way that I painted became definite. I started to use masks and stencil things, and paint the background with this colour that I called "Goldsmiths grey" because everyone just painted grey paintings! I was painting with a roller, so it was quite devoid of all sorts of marks, devoid of my hand. I would paint it with a roller like six times, sanding in between, then roll it and sand it, until it was this really gorgeous surface. Then in one take, I would just sort of write-paint everything on, like I was writing calligraphy. It would be like a big sheet of paper that I would write on in acrylic. I had to do it in one take, no starting again, no "I changed my mind," nothing like that, (Evans 2005).

During this period, the subject matter in her painting began to shift slightly, from found objects to more standardized signs and pictograms found in public media.

At the time, discussions concerning signs and signifiers were quite prevalent in art schools and galleries. Well-known artists like Victor Burgin and Matt Mullican were then exploring such imagery in their work. Burgin's work during the 1970s was based on the juxtaposition of text and images. In 1986, a year before Evans started at Goldsmiths, he was nominated for Tate Britain's Turner Prize. Mullican is a New York-based artist known for his collages and paintings featuring abstract symbolism. He has often used images taken from the international sign lexicon, and other sources like road signs, maps, architectural plans, and scientific code. Evans' postgraduate work engaged with an important dialogue within conceptual art criticism that focused on the imagery with which people are bombarded in a post-industrial society. She declares, 'It was everywhere. It was very mainstream. It was all about signs and signifiers. Everybody was talking about it. Notification, and all that. So I was very "in" there, in terms of the way I wanted to use imagery, but then I started to look a little bit more at culturally specific imagery,' (Evans 2004).

Evans looked to standardizations of racial characteristics found in graphic arts magazines, for example. She describes these initial experimentations, however, as 'tentative,' and says, 'I remember one of my tutors [Gerard Hemsworth] at Goldsmiths saying to me, "You have got this fantastic language but what are you saying with it?" It cut me to the quick, because he was right. He was absolutely right. I was not saying anything with it. It was all very formal, very academic,' (Evans 2004). Hemsworth's comments were disheartening to Evans because they rang true. Evans was creating beautiful paintings of colour and pattern, but they did not communicate a coherent message or address a particular ideological construct that she, the artist, had in mind. She remembers, 'I spent years tentatively painting, trying to paint these symbols and signs and work out what they meant to me. And it just was

not working. They were always beautiful paintings, but they just did not mean anything,' (Evans 2002).

Recognizing Evans' interest in the imagery of pictorial signs and symbols, one of her Goldsmiths tutors gave her a book of Isotype images. Isotype is a pictorial language devised in 1936 by Austrian educator and philosopher Otto Neurath in conjunction with illustrator Gerd Arntz to communicate information simply and nonverbally. It was originally intended for the education of young children, but in fact it became a significant influence on modern public signage and information graphics. Evans was fascinated with the familiarity of these standardized images so prevalent in contemporary life. She was particularly inspired by the concept of one image representing a large quantity for the graphic depiction of statistical data. In terms of Evans' work, developments during her MA represent a semiotic shift: she moved from a focus on the objects depicted in her paintings as beings in themselves to a fascination with the ways in which society standardized representations of people, events, and objects into a supposedly universal lexicon of images. As she explored her newfound interests, Evans was drawn towards signs, symbols, and pictograms that, although assumed to be universal, actually indicated a cultural bias at least, and a reigning ideology at most. These developments also foreshadowed a seismic change in her creative practice: giving up painting for cut paper installations. Such theoretical exploration and its effect on Evans' work would come to fruition during her post-graduate study in Amsterdam.

At both St. Helens and Gloucestershire, Evans had experienced a nurturing of technical talent that did not require addressing issues of critical theory. In contrast, Goldsmiths' programme emphasized an international art historical discourse, and every artist's responsibility to answer to that community at least to some extent. At

Goldsmiths she was confronted more directly with the Black Art Movement. She still felt uninspired to join in with such debates, and she chose to turn away from them. This failed to satisfy her critics, who could not understand why she was not drawn to the issues being discussed. Evans protests that, 'I always felt like I could not just make it up. I could not jump on the bandwagon because I did not feel it. It was not until I felt it in the early nineties that it became a life experience and I was able to draw on it. But before that it was not really an issue. It was only an issue in that I felt that people, like my tutors and other artists, were thinking that I was a bit of a cop out, or that I was ignoring issues; I was not being responsible,' (Evans 2004). Her tutors and fellow students kept 'banging on' about her supposed place within that discourse and responsibility within it, and Evans resisted this imposition (Evans 2004). Furthermore, she felt that activities and exhibitions based on race as served only to create, or perpetuate, a "Black art" ghetto. Evans expressed this opinion in her MA dissertation about Black art and her objection to its ethos. She explains, 'I was not saying that what they were doing was wrong, I just did not see why everyone, all black artists, had to be under that umbrella, otherwise they were not doing anything of any value. It was not that I was criticizing them as such...I just felt there should have been a bit more space to manoeuvre,' (Evans 2005).

Unlike during her Foundation and BA, at Goldsmiths there were other black art students, including Alan Miller, who had just left when Evans began her course, and Yinka Shonibare, who started when Evans was in her second year. Although the number of non-white art students was certainly low for a population as diverse as that of London, it was still a change for Evans from being the only non-white student in her entire school. There were in fact 'lots' of black students at Goldsmiths when she

was there, but most were taking sociology, anthropology, and other disciplines, rather than studying for an art degree (Evans 2004).

After graduating, Evans stayed in London and worked in her studio in Elephant and Castle, south London, but she soon found sudden independence from the support and structure of Goldsmiths difficult. In the process of finding funding after Goldsmiths, Evans won the British Airways New Artist Award, which she used to finance a three-month trip to South America. She was quite interested in Mayan glyphs and symbols, and observed stone carvings at various sites in Mexico and Guatemala. Evans began to realize just how important graphics and symbols were, and how culturally ubiquitous throughout human history. Seeing the carved stone images of the Mayans and the Aztecs also solidified her fascination with signs, symbols, and hieroglyphs. It was a pivotal moment in her artistic development, because 'that was when I actively decided that was the imagery that I wanted to explore,' (Evans 2005).

When Evans returned to London in January 1991, she contemplated her next move. She knew that staying in London would be difficult financially, and she would either be forced to work or live on government benefits. She remembered an exchange between Amsterdam's Rijksakademie van Beeldende Kunsten and Goldsmiths, when she had met some of the Rijksakademie's visiting tutors and spoke with them about their programme. Evans applied, and subsequently did post-graduate work at the Rijksakademie from 1991-93.

Evans' initial experience of Amsterdam was lonely and difficult as she struggled to find housing and funding. After spending a week in a hotel, Evans had to move into her studio at the Rijksakademie for a time. Eventually she found an apartment and began to feel more settled. As for funding, the Rijksakademie was

sponsored by a number of Dutch companies, and a television company, Veronica Broadcasting Organization, sponsored Evans in exchange for one of her paintings upon her completion of the programme. In addition, the Netherlands Organization for International Cooperation and the Dutch Institute Villa Borghese in Rome also provided her with study bursaries.

Having secured additional funding, Evans concentrated wholeheartedly on making work in her studio. The students were given virtually free reign to experiment how they liked. As she describes it,

I remember one day I made this painting, one of lots of small paintings. It was calligraphic, all little white canvases about A3, six of them, two groups of three, and then I painted on them with pearlescent paint so you could hardly see it. I wrote images on the canvas, and then on each canvas I picked out one to paint in colour and in high detail. One was a pink rose, in really fine detail. For me the idea was like having all this white noise and then every now and then there would be a moment of lucidity just coming out of this noise. My tutor walked in to my studio, and he said, 'Thank God for that. That is more like it!' And I felt the same. Finally I had gotten somewhere! I felt like I had broken through. That was eight months after I started there, (Evans 2005).

That same year, 1993, Evans painted several versions of this series with different subjects; each version was titled *Chinese Whispers* (1993; Fig. 2.25). Interestingly, because of the exchange programme between Goldsmiths and the Rijksakademie, some of Evans' tutors from her MA were also her tutors in Amsterdam, including Gerard Hemsworth and John Hilliard. Evans comments, 'It was quite nice that the input into my work was constant, and I could carry on with the same argument I had been having with my tutors and try to bash it out in a new place with more time and more money to make the work,' (Evans 2005). Hemsworth, for example, recognized it when she began to clearly articulate a phenomenological perspective about making sense of objects and signs in the world. Her subjects were no longer devoid of an interpretive context, but instead represented the ways in which individuals perceive

and process signs, symbols, and visual imagery in order to understand their relationship to them.

Beyond these developments in the studio, Evans' experiences of racial prejudice in Amsterdam were the catalyst for an even more significant development. Upon arriving in the Netherlands, she was required to present herself to the "Aliens Police" to get a stamp for the right to stay. She was sent away more than once and only after talking with her white colleagues did it occur to her that she had been treated differently. She explains, 'I had to get a stamp because I was a student, but they seemed to make the point that I had to get a stamp because I was black,' (Evans 2004). Evans had never had such experiences growing up and living in England. She feels that in many ways Amsterdam and Dutch society are twenty-five years behind in race relations compared to Britain (Evans 2004). She was one of two black artists at the Rijksakademie during her years there, and both of them were from Britain. Despite a sizable non-white Dutch population, mainly immigrants from Suriname (a former Dutch colony), her inquiries after black Dutch artists were met with incomprehension. In fact, Evans hardly ever saw black people at all. Evans explains that Amsterdam's citizens live in neighbourhoods that are quite segregated, and these communities were not on the radar of her everyday experience (Evans 2002). Surprisingly, neither she nor any of her colleagues knew of any black Dutch artists because there were none in the dominant mainstream. Those that existed did so on the margins of the Dutch art scene.

For Evans, issues of her nationhood, identity, and belonging came to a head when she had her British passport stolen in her second year of postgraduate study. Without her naturalization papers, which were in her parents' house in London, proving her English-ness was difficult. She tried to persuade the officials by urging

them to listen to her accent; they were unconvinced. Suddenly, she was confronted with the feeling that she was a stranger, someone who did not belong anywhere. In the end, it took three weeks of bureaucratic wrangling to re-establish her British citizenship and rectify her visa status. She describes her bewilderment: 'For about three weeks I walked around and I was thinking so much about it. I had to prove who I was. I did not belong anywhere. I could not leave. I kept thinking, "Oh, I will just go home," but I could not go home without a passport!' Evans had never before experienced such traumatic feelings of statelessness, or confronted so completely questions of where she was from, where she belonged, and where her allegiances lay. She continues, 'Realizing that I was a British citizen, especially through this problem, was very poignant for me. Thinking about where I belonged, who I was, and where I was from woke me up, in a way,' (Evans 2004). Questions of her own categorization in relation to colonial and post-colonial models of nationality, e.g. Britishness, brought about the crisis of realization, just as they had in Lagos when she was a schoolgirl.

As a result of this epiphany, Evans began to recognize how the issues that she had been exploring graphically had personal as well as universal significance. She explains,

All of the sudden, I felt like I had found what I wanted to talk about, which was allegiances, and who you were, and where you belonged, and how you end up where you are....I know we all move around in the world, but [for me the issue is] how you define in any given moment where you belong, how mutable you are. I have always felt quite mutable because I was born in Nigeria, came to Britain at a young age, went back to Nigeria, came back to England, then went to the Netherlands and all over. I have always been quite fluid in terms of my identity, to a certain extent, (Evans 2004).

Evans' newfound perspective launched her investigation into signifiers of identity, nationality, loyalty, and history. She responded by creating a series of flag paintings exploring the processes by which such allegiances to these ideals are formed and

expressed. Some of the flag paintings, like *Standard* (1995; Fig. 2.26), depict the Isotype symbols for men, women, and crowds or populations on a background of stripes of colour. In other paintings the figures of the people are coloured red, white, and blue in reference to the colours of the British, American, Dutch, and French flags. The titles feature the word “standard” as a play on the double meaning of the word as a flag and as generic. Issues of race, nationality, and belonging began to percolate through Evans’ work.

At this stage, Evans increasingly felt the need for the guidance of her British tutors because, as she explains, ‘It was really important, actually, for me to be able to talk to them with my newly emerging consciousness, because they were from Britain and from London, and they knew where I was coming from,’ (Evans 2004). She explains that the Dutch art tutors were largely uninterested in issues of nationality and multiculturalism coming to the fore in her work. The exception was French-Belgian painter Narcisse Tordoir, whose own work also concentrated on the interpretation of signs and symbols. Evans says, ‘So with those three guys [Hemsworth, Hilliard, and Tordoir] I could talk about England and that context,’ (Evans 2005). One of the essential elements to Evans’ ‘newly emerging consciousness’ was the way in which living in the Netherlands served as a foil to growing up in England. She concludes,

I started to think about these global issues, and all because I finally realized that I was a foreigner in the Netherlands. And in some ways, I was a foreigner in Britain. Something clicked. It was really like an epiphany. It was like, ‘this is what it is all about!’ Having to go to the Aliens Police to get my passport stamped, and getting different treatment, and I thought ‘Why? What is this about? What is happening here?’ Not wanting to believe that these people were being racist, because I just really was not used to that. Then, suddenly thinking, ‘This is how some things work,’ (Evans 2005).

It was during this same year, her second year of study at the Rijksakademie, that Evans gave up painting and began working entirely in cut paper. She explains,

I was always a sort-of painter-printer. I was never a painter that was interested in paint. So I used to do these screen prints, and masking off with paper on paint. Then I would take the masks off the canvas and I would be left with the result. I would think, Well, what should I do with it? Then I started to chuck the paintings and stick the masks on the wall! That is how the work changed. Basically the images are the same, but the process changed, so much so that I ended up using the whole space [of the room], (Evans 2002).

Although she feels such categorizations are less rigid than when she was in art school, Evans was initially reluctant to give up painting, because of its status as a fine art medium within the academic hierarchy as well as her years of training (Evans 2002). She says, 'I carried on painting for quite a while....And when I say I carried on painting, I carried on painting in the printing sort of way; I was still masking and stamping...so it was never just brush on canvas painting,' (Evans 2005).

Eventually, Evans found paper a much more suitable medium. She admits, 'I used to cut these things and stick them on canvas, and then, it just felt so wrong. When I was cutting the paper, it just felt right. It just felt appropriate,' (Evans 2002). She appreciates the ways that cutting and pasting paper resonate with traditional women's handiwork, such as sewing, quilting, and cooking, and also notes that her maternal grandfather was a tailor in Nigeria. Evans contrasts art versus craft divisions in the Western academic sense with attitudes towards creating that she feels are African. She says, 'I think that maybe there is something innately African about it. Just a making, not making a definition between art and craft, as they would not do in Nigeria, for example....It is a creative process, but without making a big deal out of it, which I think for me, is African. The flair,' (Evans 2004). She feels that blurring the Western distinction between art and craft is intuitive to her own work, but also observes that such conceptualizations have been the subject of increasing critical debate within the art establishment in the last decade. She cites increasing interest in British artists 'working in a crafty way,' like Yinka Shonibare's fine tailoring, Chris

O'Flaherty's use of collage, spangles, and shellac, and Hew Locke's cardboard cut-out compositions (Evans 2004).

Once she gave up painting altogether, Evans began to cut out shapes and silhouettes depicting various gender and racial characteristics. Playing with standard images of men and women from graphics magazines, she sought to comment on the rigid and arbitrary nature of racial and gender classifications, and to use the seductive aesthetics of lacy paper cut-out forms to entrance and draw the viewer in to observe more detail. One such work is *Pretty Standard* (1996; Fig. 2.27). Originally executed as a painting in 1995, Evans created a larger version as a studio installation the following year. No longer restricted by the frame of the canvas, the work began to spread out and around the space it occupied. As she describes it: 'It is pretty, and it is standard. These are just bog-standard people that you get from graphics magazines, like "how to draw a figure" books. What I would do is change the heads. I would go through magazines and find black faces, or white faces, and cut and paste them on. I wanted them to look standard, but if you looked closely you would see that they actually had features,' (Evans 2002). With her title, Evans highlights the decorative, pretty nature of the piece whilst referring to the 'pretty' or basic standard-issue figures of men and women, black and white features, and the insidious ways in which people are stereotyped in the public domain.

Another aspect of Evans's work involves investigations into childhood games and rhymes. She explains, 'History is a really big thing for me: social history, political to a certain extent, Europe, Britain, and Africa; also history in terms of nostalgia. So, lots of things that I think about are to do with childhood games, and toys, and rhymes...because that was the thing with my own personal history,' (Evans 2002). Evans uses cut-out silhouettes of stick-figure men and women taken from Isotype

prototypes to illustrate the playground practice of *Ring-a-ring-a-rosie* (1994) and *Wall Hanging* (1995; Fig. 2.28) to refer to the game of hangman. She is intrigued by the ways that seemingly innocent children interact with and are perhaps corrupted by macabre references to disease, like the plague in the case of ring-a-ring-a-rosie, or execution, like hangman. These types of works contrast the innocence of children at play with the sinister content of the games, which highlight tragedies of human frailty, suffering, and violence. Images of hanging recall the history of lynching in the southern United States, a particularly chilling and devastating chapter in the history of black and white race relations. Evans says, 'Those are the things that influence me, I suppose...Some of the shared histories between black and white people, basically...these are themes in my work. My stepfather is English; he's white. My sisters are all mixed race...Those are the sorts of issues that are just in my life,' (Evans 2002).

History, particularly that between Africans and Europeans, holds particular fascination for Evans. *Wheel of Fortune* (1996; Fig. 2.29), another studio installation like *Pretty Standard*, is based on a graphic diagram of captives packed in the hold of a slave ship for transport across the Atlantic, an image she remembers from her history lessons in Nigeria.<sup>25</sup> In *Wheel of Fortune*, the slave ship diagram is repeated to form spokes on a giant wheel in a powerful illustration of the tragedies of the transatlantic slave trade beyond the physical loss of life, indicating also the loss of liberty and dignity as well as labour, resources, and economic strength. The arbitrary nature of the captives' fate is alluded to in the chance circumstances that ended in one person's capture and another's escape, and their helpless spinning serves to further accentuate their powerlessness. As in *Pretty Standard*, the seductive nature of the decorative cut

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<sup>25</sup> See p. 134.

paper belies the horror of the work's content. Evans continues, 'One thing about my work is that it is nearly always decorative. That aesthetic is important, the thing about looking twice: seeing the awful provenance of some rhyme, like the plague, and then looking at the work and it is actually really nice to look at. I like that frisson between the two [aspects],' Evans 2002.

After she left the Rijksakademie, Evans stayed in Amsterdam. She explains that she wanted to have a broader experience of the Netherlands than the 'incredible, privileged bubble' of the Rijksakademie (Evans 2005). It was not easy to obtain funding, and 1994 was a tough year. She supported herself with cleaning jobs in hotels, and shared studio space with a friend. She then applied to the Dutch government for an artist's grant called a Basis Stipend; any EU citizen living in the Netherlands for at least two years was eligible. During her last year at the Rijksakademie, Art and Project, a prominent Rotterdam commercial gallery, saw her work and invited her to have a solo exhibition. Evans feels that the fact that she had exhibited at such a prestigious gallery impressed the judges, and thus she got the grant. The Basis Stipend provided adequate funding for another year, which took Evans into the summer of 1995. She remarks that the grant was an unheard of amount for England; artists in the Netherlands are highly valued and find it easier to make a living. For Evans, however, the Dutch art scene is 'quite stagnant,' and she speculates that this is because, 'You did not have to fight; you did not have to go and get it. It is different [in England]. [In England] I think the art scene has gotten so interesting because it is so difficult...So I really needed to leave. I needed to get away from the Netherlands,' (Evans 2002). After four years in Amsterdam, Evans returned to London.

In July of 1995, Evans' friend and fellow artist Anna Best was organizing a two-week workshop called Shave in the Somerset countryside, and invited Evans to participate. The workshop was sponsored by the Triangle Arts Trust, a UK-based charity that initiates international workshops and residency programmes, and took place at Shave Farm, home of one of the organizers. Sixteen artists from seven countries participated in the opportunity to work and share ideas in an open environment, both topographically and psychologically. Evans had just stopped painting completely in May, and remembers, 'I was not sure what I was going to do there, because I was not going to paint...So I turned up with a roll of brown paper...'" (Evans 2005). Building on *Ring-a-rosie*, an installation work she had created when still at the Rijksakademie, Evans sought to move beyond decorating the walls of a gallery 'in a flat way.' (Evans 2005). She explains, 'I had reached a point in painting [with]in a space. I wanted to use [my studio] building somehow, in the work. I made *Ring-a-rosie* again, but in the round,' (Evans 2002). *Ring-a-rosie* (1995; Fig. 2.30) encircles her studio building, thus creating a life-size visualization of children playing the game that encloses the space contained within the encircled arms, blocking out outsiders to the game. She feels that it is one of her most successful pieces of work (Evans 2005).

The following month, Evans was one of thirty-five artists chosen from an open submission for the 1995 EAST International exhibition and competition in Norwich, England. Her entry was an installation of *Wall Hanging* (1995; Fig. 2.28). Like *Ring-a-Rosie*, *Wall Hanging* had also initially been a painting, and to Evans the work seemed much more effective once she moved beyond the frame of the canvas to encompass the whole room. She explains, 'I like this [version] because it is life-size. The figures are all about five foot five, except the small ones are kid's sizes....I did a

painting of it earlier, and it just did not work as a painting. It hung on the wall. But this [version], you walked into it. You came into the room and you were surrounded by it,' (Evans 2002). Initially, it was installed in a very clean, white gallery space in Amsterdam. For EAST, Evans installed *Wall Hanging* in the Norwich School of Art and Design, which is a Victorian building with ironwork windows. In this sense, each version of the work became site-specific.

Evans won the EAST International prize with *Wall Hanging*, and the £5000 award, along with the second year of her Dutch Basis Stipend, gave her the funds to return to England and find housing and a studio in Camberwell. She continued to develop her cut paper compositions, using the walls of her studio. She muses, 'I try things out there, because the way I work now tends to be in the space in a gallery. The studio is like a big sketchbook [in which] to work things out, because I never know what something is going to look like until I do it,' (Evans 2002). *Sugar & Spice* (1997; Fig. 2.31) dates from this period. Evans realized halfway through the finished work that all of the images and pictures were of female figures, and was inspired to title it after the childhood rhyme, "What are little girls made of? Sugar and spice and all things nice."

Around this time, the British Arts Council sent a Purchasing Committee to visit her studio. They expressed interest in *Sugar & Spice* for the Arts Council collection, but eventually decided not to purchase it. Evans explains, 'For a whilst they said they were interested in buying it, but then they came back to me and said, "Well, no." For them the excuse was, "We do not know how we buy it. What is it? What are we buying?" And I thought, Oh come on! That is a really feeble excuse,' (Evans 2002). Evidently, the committee felt that a cut paper installation was not a sturdy or durable enough medium for their collection, a conclusion that Evans defines

as an 'excuse.' Perhaps in this instance, the old academic preference for and privilege given to painting and sculpture won out amongst committee members over the impulse to collect an artwork that challenged these artistic hierarchies.

In spring 1997, Evans answered an advert in *Art Monthly* for an Artist Residency program at the Leighton House Museum in Kensington. The residency was part of an initiative of the Institute for International Visual Arts (inIVA) in collaboration with The Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea Libraries and Arts Service. In the words of inIVA Director Gilane Tawadros, the objective was to explore Britain's Imperial and colonial history, specifically 'how British history and culture has been shaped and influenced by its international relations, by its contact with people and cultures from around the world,' (Tawadros and Amidu 1997).

Evans was awarded the six-month residency at the Leighton House Museum, which culminated in an exhibition and catalogue entitled *Filter*. The brief was to examine the ways in which the house and its contents, as well as its design, expressed Lord Leighton's fascination with North Africa and the Middle East. Leighton House originally comprised the home and studio of Frederic, Lord Leighton, celebrated painter, President of the Royal Academy, and art aficionado. The house was completed in 1866, and was Leighton's home until his death in 1896. A virtual gallery of Victorian fine and decorative arts, the centrepiece of the House is the Arab Hall, which was built in 1877 to showcase Leighton's unique collection of fifteenth- and sixteenth-century tiles from Rhodes, Damascus, and Cairo (Tawadros and Amidu 1997).

Evans' approach as Artist-in-Residence was to investigate Victorian Orientalism through Leighton's personal history and the Museum's assemblages of objects, pattern, and design drawn from North African, Middle Eastern, and British

cultural traditions. Leighton's knowledge of art and design included extensive study in Italy, Germany and France, and travel across Europe and to North Africa and the Anatolian Peninsula. Evans describes his interest in collecting as resonating with a similar contemporary sensibility:

I like the way that our houses can also be full of things from all over the world that do not necessarily go together. They are a record of the places that we have visited and what we have done. We throw them together in our homes and they go together because we want them to; that is what Leighton did. It is that cultural gleaning or buying of culture from another part of the world and making it fit or adapting it to your own needs and your own aesthetics; taking what you want and discarding the rest, (Tawadros and Amidu 1997).

Focusing on Leighton's juxtaposition of disparate elements like Victorian paintings alongside Middle Eastern cabinetry or Islamic tiles within the classical architectural setting of the Arab Hall, Evans created installations throughout the House consisting of veils of cut paper that obscured the contents of a display case, draped the bay windows of the Drawing Room overlooking the garden, or superimposed onto a screen standing in the Dining Room, as in *Screen* (1997; Fig. 2.32). The geometric forms and standardized male and female figures created a lacy filter through which one could perceive Leighton's carefully controlled interior and exterior spaces, as well as the meeting of Eastern and Western art and design. Sprinkled into the imagery were shapes taken from objects and motifs found in the House, such as vases, figural silhouettes, and the birds depicted in the tiles of Arab Hall. For the *Filter* exhibition in the modern gallery off of the main house, Evans created multiple wide strips of white paper with cut patterns repeating the same set of shapes and motifs. Critic Julia Thrift describes the installation as 'like a gothic cathedral, a fragile paper palace of light, utterly different from the heavy opulence of the house itself. The installation is a celebration of pattern and light, both of which are essential to the house's architecture,' (*Time Out* 5-12 November 1997).

Through *Filter*, Evans sought to bring to light Victorian attitudes towards the cultures of countries and peoples encountered through travel, trade, and in some cases, conquest and rule. She explains,

There is such an overwhelming mixture of sign and belief systems in the House, systems of coding and recoding that have broken out of their frames of East and West and reflect shifts in borders and attitudes. [I wanted] to look into the sign system of the House and the era in which it originated; our bittersweet legacy of colonialism and cultural imperialism. As in my own practice, I want to look behind the façade of decoration and ornament to see what lies there, (Tawadros and Amidu 1997).

Leighton's collection of objects reflects a Victorian curiosity about non-Western cultures rising from increased travel and trade, but also recalls British exploitation of the peoples and goods of these cultures. Contact with the British nearly always led to dominance, either through Imperialism or colonialism. For Evans, this historical legacy is crucial. She says, 'In fact for me that is a lynchpin for my work....I think partly that is because of my personal background. I equate my personal history very much with Britain's global history, because it came about as a result of Britain's global history, its imperial or colonial past,' (Evans 2005).

Beyond the lecture and workshop programming associated with particular exhibitions, another aspect of Evans' professional development has been her regular work with children in the London community. In 1998, Evans had a ten-week residency in the science department at Acland Burghley School in North London through the inIVA Artists in Schools programme. She collaborated with students from years seven and eight to research and develop a visual census of the school. They created icons for groups of the school's population, including age, race, and gender. They then transferred the icons to sponge blocks, cut them into stamps, and created a mural in the science department corridor. From 1999 to 2001, Evans participated in the Whitechapel Art Gallery's Schools & Whitechapel Artists Programme (SWAP),

completing a three-year residency at Clapton Girls School in Hackney in which she led year ten pupils through Whitechapel Art Gallery tours and art sessions.

During the 2000 Liverpool Biennale, Evans participated in a loosely-organized fringe show with a number of other artists. She researched Liverpool's history as one of Britain's most important slave-trading cities. She explains,

Historically I find it quite fascinating how all these fantastic and powerful European cities were built on the back of a trading empire, and exportation...It is just so fascinating that people choose not to realize where things come from, and why things are the way they are. Everyone loves the [Royal] Liver Building in Liverpool, and they got their money by insuring slave traders. That is their reason for being, (Evans 2002).

Seeking to respond to Liverpool's history as a port city vital to the "triangular trade" in slaves and the products they cultivated in the Caribbean, Evans baked gingerbread men and women that she arranged to be sold that month in the Tate Liverpool's Café (profits went to charity).

What I did was, in the same way that I work with all these people figures, I got some cookie cutters of men and women and made gingerbread biscuits out of all the ingredients that the slaves used to work on in the Caribbean: sugar, ginger, and spices. I made those, and I packaged them in these really cutesy packets of twelve biscuits, six men and six women in each packet, and inside was the label of the [slave] ship. That was the label, and on the other side of the label were all of the ingredients. You know how when you buy food, the packaging says 'Product of more than one country'? I put that on there, (Evans 2002).

The café manager reported to Evans that the gingerbread biscuits were purchased by Tate museum-goers initially ignorant of their allusion to economic exploitation and slavery. It was only careful study of the label that provided clues to Evans' undertaking, creating a situation in which the consumer became an unwitting accomplice to such exploitation. The project was a subtle provocation to jog the collective British memory with regards to the traumatic displacement of African people through the slave trade and its ramifications in the British economy as well as contemporary race relations.

Personally, Evans' relationship to European slave brokers and colonial powers is an ambiguous one. Unlike the descendents of African slaves in the diaspora, Evans' African ancestry and heritage are not lost as a result of deliberate historical amnesia. Her parents were from Benin City, and her mother's decision to move with her young daughter to England was not the result of coercion or exploitation. Furthermore, enslaving war captives and trading them for goods was a widespread West African practice before the arrival of the Europeans, and certainly the early development of the transatlantic slave trade was assisted by such practices. Not only are Africans themselves implicated, but the consequent movement of populations, establishment of trade and agricultural economies, and enduring political and social ties all contribute significantly to the circumstances of today's multicultural Britain. Thus, Evans' Bini ancestors could have themselves been slave brokers. On the other hand, her stepfather's English ancestors might just as easily been involved in the British side of the transatlantic trade. Being from Lancashire, it is possible that they benefited from the slave trade economy in Liverpool. For Evans, historical and personal narratives are intertwined.

In 2000, Evans participated in *Continental Shift*, a collaborative exhibition project between four museums in the Dutch-Belgian-German border region that highlighted the works of Asian, African, and Latin American artists living in Europe. Participating institutions included the Ludwig Forum für Internationale Kunst in Aachen, Musée d'Art Moderne et d'Art Contemporain in Liège, Stadsgalerij in Heerlen, and Bonnefantenmuseum in Maastricht. The Bonnefantenmuseum showcased eleven artists of African descent, including Evans. The museum's website archives describe the exhibition as bringing together 'artists from the African continent who criticize the hegemony of Western centres of art and Western-oriented

modern art history in their work. Overshadowed by European views, they present alternative models, maps, and stories—the products of mixing African and European experiences,’ (Bonnefantenmuseum, [www.bonnfantenmuseum.nl](http://www.bonnfantenmuseum.nl)).

For the exhibition, Evans created an installation entitled *Scope*. In Maastricht, *Scope* comprised three kaleidoscopes pointed towards three images on the wall: collages of silhouetted figures, hearts, razor blades, slave ships, and other icons recurring in Evans’ work. The viewer shifts the various components of the images around by turning each kaleidoscope to form continually unique configurations, and compares them to the compositions on the wall. As Evans describes:

I make kaleidoscopes, and inside are these images...I just draw them on acetate, cut them out, and put them in...The kaleidoscope stands on a tripod...and each one is aimed at the wall. On the wall is what you would see in there, so the idea is to see if you can see that, but you can never see that. You always see different [arrangements]. Audience members will always see something different, which I like. It is constantly changing....For me, the title *Scope* is about the kaleidoscope, and scope as in what you see and how you view the world. Also about hope as well...(Evans 2002).

*Scope* builds upon images and patterns of earlier works, like *Wheel of Fortune* (1997; Fig. 2.29) and *Sharp* (1997; Fig. 2.33), that use graphic depictions of slave ships or female silhouettes in razor-blade shapes to bring in interpretations pertaining to bondage and violent oppression. As with *Wheel of Fortune*, the figures in *Scope* are at the mercy of the turn of the wheel like ‘puppets,’ (Evans 2002). In a kaleidoscope, the random nature of each configuration underscores the arbitrary nature of fate’s delegation of power, wealth, and prosperity. Exhibition curator Marjorie A. Jongbloed writes, ‘Mary Evans analyzes the power of cultural codes in our modern European reality, adding much irony and humour to her interpretation...here, she explores typically Western ways of perceiving, receiving and representing,’ (Jongbloed 2000). *Scope* illustrates the prevalence of a modern European (thus historically white and

male) perspective as the standard from which Evans derives her repertoire of symbols and signage.

Evans has developed *Scope* into a several subsequent versions that build upon her repertoire of images, particularly her razor-blade women, the hangman from *Wall Hanging*, and nooses. The second version of *Scope* was included in *Five Continents and One City* at the Museo de la Ciudad de Mexico in Mexico City also in 2000.

*Scope* (2001; Fig. 2.34) was then developed into a solo show as the inaugural exhibition for Café Gallery in London's Southwark Park in 2001. In an artist's statement of that year, Evans writes, 'The devises of decorative patterning, when used to encapsulate the reductive signs of racial and sexual stereotyping, seek to make that reduction more disturbing through the use of "innocent" and "loaded" material. The work proposes that we seek beyond divisive thinking in order to approach a more conciliatory dialogue,' (Fitzgerald 2003, 18). Herein lies the 'hope' Evans mentions above.

In 2003, Evans participated in *A Fiction of Authenticity: Contemporary Africa Abroad*, the inaugural exhibition of the Contemporary Art Museum St. Louis. For *Scope* (2003), Evans had circular compositions of figures and symbols printed on laser cut vinyl and installed on the gallery's windows. The kaleidoscope stood in front of the compositions, juxtaposing the two ways of perceiving the imagery: within the kaleidoscope and in the larger compositions on the windows. The vinyl on the windows allowed the natural light to filter through, as well as the views and activity inside and outside of the museum building. As in the Leighton House Museum, Evans uses filter as a metaphor for the process in which some things are hidden and others are revealed.

The latest work to build on *Scope* is *Bling Bling* (2004; Fig. 2.35), a large kaleidoscopic window installation and print Evans created for a 2004 exhibition of the same name at the London Print Studio; it features many of the same icons as the previous ones, but with the addition of diamonds and sparkle. “Bling bling” (or simply “bling”) is a late twentieth-century term that describes a showy display of wealth, especially with diamonds and jewellery, and is associated firstly and primarily with African-American rap and hip-hop stars. As a visual signifier of success and status, “bling” is still a buzzword for such display, but it now refers to the flashy accessories of any sumptuous lifestyle, regardless of race, and has been adopted more generally within pop culture. The attitude of bling was the theme of the London Print Studio exhibition, which featured works by Evans and Godfried Donkor. In this context, such a concept juxtaposed with Evans’ standardized men and women, razor blades, and gallows emphasizes, according to the exhibition guide, ‘the bitter aftertaste behind the glitter.’ If the self-aggrandizement of bling obscures the exploitative legacy of colonial and slave-trade histories, Evans’ work does the opposite. Her inclusion of diamonds alongside her more familiar images interrogates the nature of stereotypes like the young rap superstar with five-carat diamond earrings and a stretch Hummer, and considers the deprivation of some that is often counterpart to the excessive good fortune of others. She effectively explores this contemporary rage-to-riches narrative wherein the (younger generations of the) exploited and oppressed finally get their just rewards for hard work, talent, and business acumen, thereby reversing the trend of the previous century.

Evan’s participation in group exhibitions of contemporary African art, such as *Continental Shift* and *A Fiction of Authenticity*, and her recent work exploring racial and colonial histories demonstrate a significant shift from her earlier attitude towards

the Black Art Movement when she was still in art school. She experienced an artistic breakthrough during her stay in Amsterdam regarding nationality, statelessness, and belonging. This breakthrough led to a shift in content that included overt references to the history of Africans in Britain and the Americas, images of racially-categorized figures, and investigations into imperial and colonial history. In addition to these developments, Evans has adjusted her attitude towards contexts, such as group exhibitions, that focus on the work of artists of African descent. She describes how dialogues on black art, non-Western art, or art of the African diaspora are located within contemporary art discourse rather than tacked on as a nod to post-modern inclusionist sensibilities. She says,

The arena [of debate] seems to have changed...perhaps because the climate has changed politically, perhaps because art has gained such currency in the last ten, fifteen years, especially in England...So it is being taken seriously whether you are a white artist or a black artist. So why would I want to kick myself in the foot and not be a part of that?' (Evans 2002).

It does seem that the art scene has shifted. Yet, it also seems that Evans' approach has shifted in how she perceives these categorizations, and also how popular they are.

Plurality is currently more acceptable than during the eighties, when a line was often drawn between black and white identities. Instead, artists can situate themselves into multiple contexts and shifting identities. Evans adds, 'You have to *not* be naïve. Of course there is race and politics, and all that comes into it. You have to weigh that up with just wanting to be an artist doing your work. So I feel now, being asked [to participate in a group exhibition with other artists of African descent], if I can do what I want to do, and there is no "You can do this show but you have got to do this," then it is great,' (Evans 2002).

Evans has also continued working with school-age children in conjunction with various London institutions. In 2004, she participated in the national Gallery

Deutsche Bank Artists in Schools Programme, specifically two residencies for ten weeks with year seven students from Lilian Baylis School and four weeks with year ten students from Islington Arts and Media School. The purpose of the residencies was to engage with the National Gallery's collection in ways that would make the museum relevant to the pupils, and culminated in their creation of a collaborative work. From 2001, Evans worked on a commission for Evelina Children's Hospital funded by Guy's and St. Thomas's Charity and the NHS, which was unveiled in 2005. From 2001-2004, Evans completed a three-year residency in the children's wing at Guy's Hospital, where she worked with patients to design the rubber flooring for six stories in the new building over the course of ten sessions to develop a design scheme based on 'the natural world,' (Evans 2004). Using a kaleidoscopic design plan, Evans developed a scheme of colours and icons for the theme of each floor, from Ocean and Beach through to Savannah and Sky.

Over the course of her evolution from formalist painter to cut paper and installation artist, Evans has developed her practice intuitively, and this is one of its greatest strengths. She has refused to be pressured into representing a particular community or ideology, or into adhering to media hierarchies ingrained in art school. She is committed to creating work that engages her audience with systems of codification that effectively standardize human interaction and relationships into generalities. She seeks to reveal the ways in which cultural and national ideologies are articulated through an exploration of personal and historical narratives of human experience. For Evans, these experiences express universal struggles for belonging, acceptance, prosperity, and freedom from oppression and prejudice, and thus offer the promise of 'conciliatory dialogue' and ultimately, a more compassionate and united humankind.

## **Maria Amidu**

People always ask me, 'Do you not think you should represent yourself in your work? You need to talk about yourself as a black British woman.' My response is, 'Well I do. It is just that you have this one-dimensional perception of what a black British female artist is, and I am telling you that I am a black British female artist and this is the kind of work that I make.' That's it. End of story, (Amidu 2002).

Maria Amidu was born in London in 1967 to Nigerian parents from Lagos. She and her family lived in London until her mother's sudden death in 1973. After she died, the six-year-old Amidu and her two sisters were put into care in the 'somnolent little seaside town' of Bexhill-on-Sea, about fifty miles southeast of London (Amidu 2003).

They stayed in a Catholic residential children's home. Amidu describes her experience in the second person:

So, you are black, you are growing up in a predominately white town, and it is 1973. In your own, quiet way you are clear about what you want in life, you cannot put your finger on it but you know it is not what you see around you in Bexhill. Life trickles on, you go to school, and you struggle with who you are and who other people say you are...(Amidu 2003).

Her father remained in London until 1977, when he moved back to Lagos. In 1980 when she was thirteen, her older sister moved to nearby Hastings to live and work, and Amidu and her younger sister were relocated to Wigan in Lancashire, where they were placed in different foster homes.

For Amidu, Wigan was very different from 'small and sleepy' Bexhill-on-Sea, and she had a hard time adjusting to the move (Amidu 2005). When she first arrived, she could not understand the northern accents of the people there, whilst they thought her accent and her manners were posh. She was always a top student in her class, having received a 'higher standard of education' in Bexhill, and she noticed that this surprised her teachers and the other students (Amidu 2005). Amidu was always the only black student in her class, and remembers thinking that all black children did not have parents, because she and her sister were the only ones in the community that she

knew. She did not want to stand out, but felt different because of her Nigerian heritage, her accent, her academic performance, and even her tall height during adolescence (Amidu 2005). Her foster family was English and white, and although they were kind and supportive, they were less sensitive in terms of her feelings of difference. Rather than addressing her concerns, they always assured her that she was the same as everyone else (Amidu 2005).

Amidu remembers that people were polite and tried to include her in school as well as at home, but she always felt on the periphery (Amidu 2005). She describes neighbourhood in which she lived as 'very parochial but quite well-to-do,' (Amidu 2004), and Wigan in general as 'isolated, insular, homogenous and close-knit,' especially in comparison to its larger neighbour cities of Manchester and Liverpool (Amidu 2005). She was stared at in the street and in shops and felt that there was a sense amongst the locals that she did not belong. During the years she lived in Wigan, from 1980 to 1986, racial conflicts and social ills such as unemployment and criminality in black communities were on the rise, and Amidu remembers media reports portraying minorities as inferior, primitive, and not welcome in Britain (Amidu 2005).

For sixth form, Amidu attended St. John Rigby College and moved to lodgings in a rural area just outside of Wigan. Although she had been interested in becoming a social worker, perhaps fostered by her own experiences of social systems, Amidu was also drawn to art school. Her decision was bolstered by the college's strong art department, and the encouragement of her teacher, Mr. Spruce. She completed her Foundation course at St. Helens College of Art and Design, Merseyside from 1985 to 1986. During her course, she moved to her own flat in Wigan town centre. As far as she can recall, she was the only student not living with

her family and the only black student during the years she was there. Nevertheless, Amidu found the atmosphere friendly and the tutors supportive (Amidu 2004). Selwyn Hughes-Jones, Head of Fine Art, was especially encouraging. She enjoyed the course and was stimulated by the exposure to all the various art forms. As with most Foundation courses, emphasis was on learning techniques and experimenting in various media. Amidu was intrigued by three-dimensional work, and discovered a 'natural aptitude with clay' (Amidu 2002). By this time the activities and dialogue associated with the Black Art Movement had gained considerable credence in the mainstream art world.<sup>26</sup> Amidu, however, had 'no notion of a black artists' practice,' at the time (Amidu 2004).

After St. Helens, Amidu decided that she wanted to study for BA degree in a three dimensional medium. She felt clay was 'a bit obvious.' so Alan Whittaker, Head of Ceramics, suggested she talk with James Kirkwood, Head of 3D Design at the West Surrey College of Art and Design (presently the Surrey Institute of Art and Design) in Farnham about working with glass (Amidu 2002). She decided to pursue a glass BA and attended the college from 1986 to 1989. Her decision was mitigated by a desire to 'get back down south and as far away from Wigan as I could,' (Amidu 2004).

During her BA, Amidu was immersed in the formal, technical emphasis of applied arts. She recalls being 'completely mesmerized by the material,' (Amidu 2002). The focus of the course was on design and making, as well as becoming a master of one's chosen medium. Amidu was still 'completely oblivious' to discussions surrounding conceptual work and cultural studies, including issues coming to the fore in the Black Art Movement. She explains, 'It was a very formal

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<sup>26</sup> See pp. 34-39.

education, very much about becoming an expert in the particular material...the focus was very much on design and making. There was nothing to do with conceptual kinds of ideas or cultural theories,' (Amidu 2002). She adds, '[There was] a lot of emphasis on technique, but a very traditional European approach. There was no cultural element at all really, apart from European,' (Amidu 2002). Amidu's work was constantly compared to that of Magdalene Odundo, who had studied ceramics at the same college ten years previously (1973-76). Amidu was frustrated by a narrow-minded tendency of tutors to assume that because they were both of African descent, their creative practice was automatically similar. As she phrases it, 'The "she is black and you are black" connection got really boring and annoying!' (Amidu 2004).

Despite the overall emphasis on studio work, Amidu's course included a written component and she chose to do her dissertation on child psychology, in particular the ways in which disadvantaged young people cope with stress. Amidu's choice of topic recalls her earlier interest in social work as well as her own childhood circumstances. This focus on childhood development in relation to her own experiences would become significant to her professional career, informing her future work with schoolchildren in museums and workshops, and in particular, a project and residency designed to provide mentoring to young adolescents in care. During her BA studies, however, Amidu did not yet envision combining her creative practice with her social studies.

There were few other students of non-European descent at the college, but Amidu felt comfortable. The cost of living in Farnham was relatively low, the community was small, and the school was one building with 600 students, all of whom were united because the locals hated the art school. She had a close-knit group of friends there. In retrospect, Amidu views her time in Farnham as easier than the

next stage in her art education at the Royal College in London, when she would face issues of racial difference and prejudice more directly (Amidu 2004).

Amidu completed her BA in 3D design in 1989. Afterward, she went to work in Stroud, Gloucestershire as an apprentice in the studio of glass artist Colin Reid, previously a visiting tutor at the West Surrey College of Art and Design. She assisted him two days a week and worked independently in the studio the rest of the time. After nine months, Amidu returned to London and worked in the Crafts Council shop at the Victoria and Albert Museum for six months. She participated in *Diverse Cultures*, a group exhibition at London's Crafts Council featuring the work of twenty-nine artists of African, Afro-Caribbean, Middle or Far Eastern descent living in Britain that opened in August 1990 and subsequently toured around England and to Scotland. At this point, Amidu began to consider postgraduate studies. James Roddis, a design professor at the Royal College had seen her degree show in Farnham and urged her to apply. She applied and was accepted for an MA in Ceramics and Glass at the Royal College in 1990.

The programme at the Royal College was geared towards guiding its students into professions in product design rather than creative arts. Amidu allows that one of the Royal College's strengths was organizing 'real projects with actual companies that led to work and commissions,' but on the other hand, she found that her tutors 'resisted more explorative work,' (Amidu 2005). Unlike in Farnham, where the students had all worked in the same building, the Ceramics and Glass Department at the Royal College was architecturally separate, and this precluded contact amongst the students and tutors from other disciplines. As a result, ceramics and glass students were encouraged to focus on commercial design and little else. Although Amidu

found this emphasis restrictive, she also feels that her MA studies gave her the opportunity to develop her ideas into sculpture (Amidu 2005).

During her course at the Royal College, Amidu was expected to investigate and discover how she fit into the art world beyond school, rather than seeing herself simply as an art student. She explains, 'On an MA, you are being asked to consider what you are going to contribute as an artist in society and where you fit in,' (Amidu 2002). As Amidu began to think about these issues and move beyond simply making objects, she had a 'slow awakening' to the debates surrounding black British art (Amidu 2002). She found the Royal College disappointing in terms of what she refers to as its 'mono-cultural attitude' (Amidu 2004). The ceramic and glass art history studied in the department focused on artists and designs associated with Bauhaus, Venice glass, Sweden, Denmark, and Eastern Europe. The only non-Western area covered was Asian ceramics, and this was introduced through the work of Bernard Leach.

Amidu searched the school's library for sources that went beyond this limited scope; she sought out wider categories of artists both in terms of non-utilitarian object making and in terms of racial identity in order to discover 'how I fit into the arts practice infrastructure,' (Amidu 2005). One aspect of her burgeoning artistic identity was her African heritage, and Amidu struggled to reconcile this awareness with her tutors' lack of sympathy and support. Once when she was in the studio, Amidu was introduced to some visitors as 'our little African,' to which she responded, 'Yes, I am the token in the department,' (Amidu 2005). Although Nigerian-British ceramicist Lawson Oyekan had graduated from the department the year before, and Asian ceramicist Lubna Choudhary had also attended when Amidu was there, Amidu nevertheless felt exoticized as the only black person in the department.

She describes the MA programme as 'rigorous' and the tutoring style 'critical' and 'hard on students,' but she observed that certain students were especially singled out because they were different, including a Japanese woman, a homosexual Australian man, and herself (Amidu 2005). Amidu cultivated a resistance to these attitudes, and clashed with a few of her tutors as a result. However, her Critical and Historical Studies tutor, Martina Margetts, was supportive of her search for a broader, non-Western perspective. One visiting tutor introduced Amidu to Veronica Ryan, who she enjoyed meeting. She says, 'I appreciated how Veronica was reconciling being black without concentrating on it in her work,' (Amidu 2005). Overwhelmingly, however, Amidu felt the department and the tutors resisted any type of discourse about difference or diversity. For Amidu, encounters with such art and dialogue were the result of an active search on her part. At the end of her first year of study, she wanted to leave the Royal College programme but James Roddis convinced her to stay. Then in the summer of 1991, she travelled to Nigeria for the first time.

Amidu's experience in Nigeria was quite brief; she went for six weeks to see her father and meet relatives. Before her trip, she researched the country and discussed with others what to expect because her familiarity with West Africa was limited. In Nigeria, she stayed in Yaba, just outside Lagos. Aside from family reunions and introductions, she tried to observe as much local arts production as possible. She visited the Nike Centre for Arts and Culture in Oshogbo and met its founder, textile designer and batik artist Nike Davies-Okundaye, but did not go to Ife as planned. Amidu found that she was unable to research as much as she would have liked because of the constraints that her newfound family members and Nigerian social protocol placed on her movements and time, both of which would not allow her

to travel anywhere without proper introductions. She characterizes the trip as 'intense,' and has not been back.

In autumn 1991, Amidu returned to the Royal College programme. She felt even more strongly about her need to investigate diverse art traditions, particularly African and black British. She explains that as a minority in the very Eurocentric environment of the Royal College 'it is inevitable that you are going to begin to question your own identity,' (Amidu 2002). Realizing that she was not going to find this type of discourse within the college, Amidu availed herself of the opportunities in London. In the winter of 1991 and 1992, she attended a series of lectures organized by Clementine Delis at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) featuring black British artists including Sokari Douglas Camp, Sonia Boyce, Yinka Shonibare, and Eddie Chambers; this was Amidu's introduction to black contemporary practice.

As she discovered a larger arena of debate, Amidu began to contemplate whether and how her work and personal sense of self fit into this wider perspective that celebrated cultural difference and diversity. Her tutors 'responded as if my study of cultural issues was some kind of affront to them and the department' (Amidu 2004). At this point, Amidu describes her increased independence from her tutors after she began 'telling them what I thought about their [narrow-minded] attitude,' and she worked in the manner that coincided with her own creative interests rather than theirs (Amidu 2004). She worked mostly independently of her tutors, coming into the studio either very early in the morning or very late at night.

Amidu completed her MA dissertation under the supervision of Martina Margetts. Margetts was both encouraging and supportive, and Amidu relied mostly on the resources of the SOAS library for her research. It was entitled *Art or Ethnography*, and detailed her research into contemporary visual arts practice in

Nigeria. Its primary concept was inspired by Cuban curator Geraldo Mosquera's notion of 'curating from the South,' meaning the southern hemisphere. The idea is that art professionals based in the Northern hemisphere work from a position of absolute authority because of the assumption that their cultural perspective is the norm. Amidu says, '[My dissertation] was a bit of a naïve crusade to dispel myths around what arts practice is outside of Europe and the US. It is amazing looking back at it...to see how much the debate around contemporary arts practice has become much more visible globally,' (Amidu 2004). Amidu had had little exposure to non-Western contemporary practice through her art education. Her trip to Nigeria as well as the SOAS lecture series and library provided the resources she was looking for to compensate for the British educational system that she perceived of as immensely Eurocentric.

Amidu graduated from the Royal College in 1992. Her MA degree show impressed many people, including Barclay Price, then Head of Crafts Development at the Crafts Council. As a result, she participated in *The Glass Show* (1993), a Crafts Council group exhibition featuring the work of fifty-nine British glass artists that toured throughout northern England and to Wales. After completing her degree, however, Amidu stopped making and exhibiting work because she felt that she needed a break (Amidu 2004). There was also a significant economic factor to her decision: she had to find a viable way to support herself and pay off her debts after art school. Subsequently, she sought work as an administrator within the black art community in London. After feeling so marginalized at the Royal College, she felt a need to 'witness a black arts infrastructure,' (Amidu 2004).

From 1992 to 1995, Amidu served as Training & Arts Services Administrator at Artrage Intercultural Development Agency in London. She managed events across

a variety of art forms, which involved projects from mentoring to conferences and career development programmes. She specialized in marketing workshops for emerging artists, 'giving individuals tools to be creative,' (Amidu 2005). For example, in 1995 she organized the National Visual Artist Audit consultative Seminar along with Faisal Abdu'allah, Rita Keegan, and Carole Morrison in collaboration with the Institute of International Visual Arts (inIVA). Its aim was to assess the needs, views, concerns, and ideas of young visual artists from different cultures throughout the UK. Amidu also wrote art listings, reviews, and articles for their publication *Artrage: Intercultural Arts Magazine*. In the February 1993 issue, for example, she contributed "One City: Many Faiths," an article about religious diversity in Bristol.

Through her acquaintance with artist and curator Godfried Donkor, Amidu joined the curatorial team at 198 Gallery in Herne Hill for the 1996, 1997, and 1998 exhibition programmes. She enjoyed creating opportunities for graduating artists and working with the rest of the team: Godfried Donkor, Faisal Abdu'Allah, and Carole Morrison. Amidu's administrative activities during this period allowed her access to a wider spectrum of artists and creative practice than she had been exposed to during art school. She explains, 'Being an administrator gave me the opportunity to work with and meet many people in the arts that I would not have otherwise met. It broadened my perspective from an international point of view and enabled me to think about my work in a broader context, not as a craftsperson but as an artist,' (Amidu 2004). She feels that working at Artrage and the 198 Gallery was like studying for another MA in terms of her education and professional development. Whilst her work and experiences in this sector are ongoing, in 1995 Amidu was inspired to make art objects again. She says, 'Once I decided to start making work again it was because I

realized I missed it so much, that I have a need to express myself creatively,' (Amidu 2004).

Amidu thus left Artrage that year and received a Setting Up Grant from the Crafts Council as well as a Prince's Youth Business Trust Grant and a London Arts Board Grant for Individual Artists, which allowed her to set up a studio in East London. On her CV she described her work as 'Kiln formed decorative glassware, produced in short runs. The main creative concerns are tactility, colour, form, and surface decoration. I also work on sculptural projects focusing on human interaction, the senses and processes by which we understand our world using glass, found objects, clay,' (Amidu 1995). Resurfacing after a three-year hiatus, Amidu's creative practice evolved as a result of her experiences in black arts administration. Her influences were listed as 'Race, Culture, Nature; own cultural identity (African); own gender (Female),' (Amidu 1995).

During this period, Amidu produced *Ancestors* (1995; Fig. 2.36) and *One, Two, Three, Four* (1995; Fig. 2.37). *Ancestors* is described as 'one of five pieces which make a 3D narrative: family matters,' (Crafts Council Photostore, [www.craftscouncil.org.uk/photostore](http://www.craftscouncil.org.uk/photostore)). In this work, Amidu's objects are considered as a group, nestled together to intimate human, specifically family, relationships. Their colours are partly inspired by the indigo of African textiles, like the *adire* cloth produced by the Nike Centre (*Translucent Words*, 2000). The delicate, translucent forms of *One, Two, Three, Four* seem inspired by fallen leaves, and the fused copper detailing suggests nature's alchemy. The flat leaf or shield-like shapes explore the technique of slumping and the use of copper to create a multitude of different effects—like a thread running through the material, as spots or marks, or to add texture and colour.

In 1996, Amidu named her glassware *ajike*, and stated on her CV that her aim was ‘to produce glass exploring the less obvious properties of the material,’ (Amidu 1996). She explains her fascination with her chosen medium: ‘I think glass is a really special material to work with and you have to learn what its possibilities are. It has an ethereal beauty about it and has so many ambiguous properties which can bring meaning to the piece: it can be translucent, transparent or opaque, it seems solid but scientifically it is a liquid, it is strong and yet fragile, vulnerable yet tough,’ (Amidu 1998; DARE, [www.dareonline.org](http://www.dareonline.org)). As part of her return to making objects, she also began exhibiting again. That year, she participated in *Craftworks* at the Barbican, London and *New Faces '96* at the Crafts Council Shop, Victoria and Albert Museum; her work was also featured in *Contemporary Decorative Arts* at Sotheby’s London in 1997.

In 1995, Amidu also began working for inIVA as Projects Administrator. Her activities included assisting artists-in-residence, curating exhibitions, setting up workshops in conjunction with exhibitions and schools, and creating and maintaining digital and online resources. In this capacity, she interviewed Mary Evans and Julia Findlater for 1997’s *Filter* catalogue, which she also co-edited with Gilane Tawadros. In 1997, she began working as researcher-in-residence for *enTRANSit*, a collaborative online project between inIVA and Caribbean Contemporary Arts in Port of Spain, Trinidad. In 1998 she went to Trinidad for three months to collaborate with artist Steve Ouditt on the *enTRANSit* website.

During Amidu’s time away, Amidu had the opportunity to reflect on her artistic future. She explains, ‘When I came back I decided I was not interested so much in making things, creating things in a tangible way. I realized that it was not such a big issue for me, and process became much more important to my practice than

actual product. That was a major watershed, a real epiphany for me,' (Amidu 2002).

After years of making decorative glass work, she came to the realization that she was not interested in being an artist in the 'conventional' sense: making art objects for exhibitions, sales, and commissions (Amidu 2004). Consequently, that year she sold her kiln and her sandblaster. She muses,

I am creative in my thinking in everything I do and I think I am compelled to make "stuff." The need to make has its phases. I am always full of ideas for "stuff" but have a problem with reconciling why the "stuff" should exist. I think this is one of the main reasons why writing interests me more. Having ideas can sometimes be enough and if I do need to produce then I enjoy the fact that the "thing" can be intangible. It is interesting because I think if I look back, my work has always had an ephemeral quality, (Amidu 2004).

As a result of this development, she started writing, and produced 'a kind of memoir, but it was very magic-realist in form,' (Amidu 2002). The writing piece, called *air*, formed the basis of ...*a moment caught in three dimension(s)*, a mixed media installation work which Amidu completed during *exCHANGES*, a residency at 198 Gallery in 1999.

The residency was a three-month collaboration with Rea, an indigenous Australian digital artist, organized by Paul Howard from the Cultural Studies Centre at Goldsmiths. Its aim was for the artists to develop work informed by each other's practice. For ...*a moment caught in three dimension(s)* (1999; Fig. 2.38), Amidu took five extracts from *air*, and replaced various nouns in the text with cast glass objects. She made oversized, digital prints of the text and mounted the objects in acrylic boxes across the wall. The objects—a small book, a cotton reel, a house, an apple—stand out as poignant memory triggers in the recounting of her childhood experiences and fantasies. In the following excerpt, the nouns replaced by objects are in brackets:

She is sitting perfectly still in a carefully mapped out place with the warmth and the yellowness of the sun making a bright shape on the words of her reading [book]. At present she is sharing a meal at the cotton [reel] table belonging to the Borrowers. She looks toward the skirting board in no doubt

that they are there watching her reading them into existence. She spends the rest of the afternoon drawing her ideal [house]; again and again she makes a square mark on the paper and colours it in with her fantasies of the perfect childhood, it is something she strives to be good at. There, there they are in the smoke from the chimney and the tree in the garden, the signs, the beginnings of an obsession for home. *It's a disappointment that I can't gather up fantasy and fill up that hollow space located somewhere between my adam's [apple] and my solar plexus,* (Amidu 1998).

The effect of the work overall is an 'explor[ation] of personal history and loss,' (Amidu 1998). Amidu recalls, 'For the first time in a really genuine way, I had shifted [from making objects in a crafts context]. I was very conscious that I needed to make this shift...So it was a really nice progression, and it was...appropriate,' (Amidu 2002). She felt incredibly nervous at the exhibition's opening because she had never made such autobiographical work before, and because it was so different from her previous work. She was, however, quite pleased with its reception.

In conjunction with the exhibition, Amidu participated in two seminars with Paul Howard at 198 Gallery and Goldsmiths respectively. To her frustration, she says, 'I would constantly get this question about not being represented in my work as a black female practitioner...The issue that kept coming up in the talks was "You're not visible in your work," and I could not be *more* visible in my work!' (Amidu 2002). She was baffled as well as frustrated by such critiques, considering the autobiographical content of the work. Both a Goldsmiths tutor at the school's lecture and a Far East Asian student who attended the 198 Gallery seminar criticized her because the work did not visibly illustrate her skin colour. Amidu remembers, 'They really felt I had an obligation to be more directly referential to being black. I felt, and still feel, that this is a one-dimensional perception of my identity,' (Amidu 2005).

Amidu's next major project was a five-month residency at the Horniman Museum in south London in 2000, and a corresponding solo exhibition that engaged with and responded to several of the museum exhibition displays. Amidu was the

second artist-in-residence as part of the *My Africa, Your Africa* programme designed to stimulate public interest in the museum's African Worlds permanent exhibition. Developed through consultation with local artists and 198 Gallery, the programme included participating artists such as Rita Keegan, who was the first artist resident, Amidu, and Godfried Donkor, who succeeded her. Each artist conducted research in the museum, and developed their ideas into an end-of-residency exhibition and practical workshops for adults and children. Although the original mandate was to make new work in response to the African Worlds exhibition, Amidu found this restrictive. She explains, 'Of course, as a black artist they expect you to [focus on African art]. The objects in the African Worlds exhibition were all incredibly performative and figurative, and it just did not really interest me...as an artist. Not that it was uninteresting, it just did not motivate me in the same way that the music collection would have, or the natural history collection did, (Amidu 2002). Beginning in the Museum's stores and archives, Amidu found herself drawn to various types of currency, including African blades, crosses, and other types of metal currency. She says, 'I took that as a starting point...I started thinking about dialogue and trade, and the value of objects, how we place the value on something like a manila or a salt bar. How that became currency and now we have a monetary currency. It became a real metaphor for the value of objects,' (Amidu 2002). She began to question how the processes of classification and valuation were established in museum contexts, and by whom.

As a result, Amidu was inspired to write a mythical tale using the Museum's wide range of artefacts as metaphors for their valuation and consequent collection. She then divided the text up into seven parts to be installed in cases around the museum. As in *...a moment caught in three dimensions* (1999), Amidu made cast

glass objects for the text; in this instance they were the actual letters of her words. She found the idea of making objects out of writing a rewarding amalgamation of her various dimensions as a creative practitioner. She explains, 'That was really successful for me, I think, because I was merging the idea of making...objects [with] writing. I liked the fact that the boundaries were completely blurred....I wanted to make something in a material that had an ancient feel about it, because I was dealing with these artefacts,' (Amidu 2002). Fragments of the text were placed in the seahorse tank in the Living Waters Aquarium, the Bird case (*Finders, Keepers...*, detail, 2000; Fig. 2.39), the frog tank in the Vivarium, the Apostle Clock, the Permian case, the Evolution of the Horse case, and the Egyptian case. Text fragments included '...feather of a blue wren and twill' in the Bird Case, 'at precisely midday catch the twelfth chime of the clock in the palm of your hand and swallow it whole then' in the Apostle Clock case, and 'study the map before digging deep with a golden spoon until you see air' in the Permian case.

Amidu designed the installations in each case to highlight issues of trade and value. The exhibition was called *Finders, Keepers...* and its aim was to get museum-goers to question the process of collecting and cataloguing the objects on display and their status as precious objects in a museum case. In the gallery guide for the exhibition, Rohini Malik Okon writes, '[Amidu's] subtle interventions suggest the pleasure of discovery and allude to a mysterious quest as the objects she points us to become imbued with a magical presence,' (Okon 2000). Amidu explains,

The main thread that I am interested in is archiving, archives, personal testimony, and hidden history, so I tend to make work which is very much about revealing those things. I make very temporal work as well. I like the idea of process as very key in what I produce. I also like the idea of making an intervention in a space, which is something you have to look for. I like people to apply themselves in my work, (Amidu 2002).

In conjunction with exhibition, Amidu ran several creative workshops at the Museum, local community centres, and schools. These were well received by an enthusiastic museum-going public and the pupils (Amidu 2002). Most of the participants were children and their parents. The workshops looked at definitions of archive, what is collected or discarded, and why. They were designed to take the participants through the process of story-making. Following a storyteller's performance, participants used objects from the Museum's collection to devise a story collectively through word association. In the second half of the workshop, the participants each made a book that visually illustrated the story. Both in the exhibition and workshops, Amidu explored the notion of translation, in particular the translation of personal and public (institutional) histories. In a process similar to the way that Amidu made physical objects with the words of her narrative for *Finders, Keepers...*, the participants in the workshops started with objects to create narratives, and then translated the words back into objects again, both in terms of visual illustration and the books that resulted.

Although the feedback she received from the exhibition audience and workshop participants was overwhelmingly positive, Amidu was surprised by the reactions of some critics. She received 'a real blasting from one Caribbean woman writer, who could not bear the thought that I had not taken the opportunity to expose the Museum for their [*sic*] pilfering. I just thought, if you want to come in here and do that, you come in here and do it,' (Amidu 2002). She remarks that no one constrains a white artist creatively by putting restrictions on their creative process, saying,

The way I see it is that nobody is every saying to a white female artist or a white male artist, "You should be doing this." I mean, it might come up if the nature of their work is touching on certain social or political issues...Even as an applied artist...I was not expected to represent anybody, but people did have notions of the kind of work that they would expect me to produce. I think all that is just a type of ignorance really,' (Amidu 2002).

In Amidu's experience, the reception of her work has been encumbered by expectations of critics and audiences alike that she foreground her race and African parentage in her creative practice. Amidu does not describe herself as "of African descent," but rather as a black woman in Britain (Amidu 2002 and 2004). Such criticism has abated only recently because people in the art community are now recognizing the nature of her creative process (Amidu 2002).

Despite these pressures, Amidu has allowed herself to be true to her own creative process, rather than 'to be bullied by other people into doing certain things,' (Amidu 2002). Whilst her work may not explicitly reference her experiences as a black woman, she is articulating her experiences more holistically. She says,

I am not talking about what it means to be black in [the present]. Although I am...because I am part of society. For some reason, I think people forget that I do not live in a vacuum. I have the same experiences as everybody else: I have to pay my bills, I have to do whatever I have to do, and I have to get on with my life. So, if I want to talk about that, then that is just as important, because it is happening to me too, (Amidu 2002).

Amidu's African heritage is implicit in her biography; she does not work in a way that discusses or emphasizes it, nor does she feel beholden to a minority community. She states, 'I feel very comfortable now with the way I work, but I think there was a period of time when I did feel a bit anxious, because I was thinking, Well maybe I should be representing all these people, maybe I should be doing this or should be doing that,' (Amidu 2002). She credits artists like Keith Piper and Sonia Boyce and others for paving the way for black artists' visibility, respectability, and opportunities in the twenty-first century.

Amidu's next major project was an inIVA-sponsored project archiving a five-year school programme at Acland Burghley School in northwest London. The programme consisted of five different artists in residence at the secondary school for

four months. Each residency was in a department other than the art department; participating artists included Mark Ingham in Maths, Fernando Palma in Technology, Mary Evans in Science, Zineb Sedira in History, and Tertia Longmire and Tanya Peixoto in Modern Languages. The aim of the programme was to encourage young people to explore ‘the value of artistic practice as a tool for teaching and learning across the curriculum,’ (inIVA, [www.iniva.org/season/tourist/project\\_04](http://www.iniva.org/season/tourist/project_04)).

Amidu felt that this programme needed to be archived, and she was interested in finding a unique and creative way to achieve this by working with the pupils to produce an online artist work (Amidu 2002). To this end, Amidu created “little book of opinion,” a subjective set of questions for which students could hand-write their answers, and conducted a series of videotaped interviews. The result, *Joining the Dots* (2001), is a website created in collaboration with multimedia designer Michael Uwemedimo that revisits the work the artists produced with the students, and gives the web user the opportunity to evaluate the material and the workshops. Using the architecture of the school as the organizing structure, the website focuses on dialogue as a central theme to reveal a variety of personal responses to the artist-in-residence programme. Through the collection and archiving of the material, Amidu was able to explore the notion of documentation by examining the process of including certain information whilst electing to edit out other information.

Concurrently with *Joining the Dots*, Amidu developed DARE: Digital Artists Resource for Education. Another inIVA-sponsored project, DARE is a website and CD-ROM developed through collaborative workshops between artists and young children at Columbia Primary School in Tower Hamlets, east London. The object was to enhance an existing website that was serving as a visual arts resource for secondary schools. Amidu describes the project as ‘a series of creative endeavours around

practice and creativity, which were the foundations for the CD-ROM,' (Amidu 2002). She and another artist, Barby Asante, worked with three classes of children by exploring the themes of 'play,' 'space and place,' and 'translation.' Amidu worked on 'translation' with the reception and early years pupils, and on 'space and place' with year three; Asante worked on 'play' with year two.

With the reception and early years pupils, Amidu organized a series of satellite workshops designed to encourage them to think about and understand the use of language and translation, including related concepts of construction, communication, interpretation, and transformation. She sought to discover how these concepts are defined, not just in terms of language but also between texts, images, sounds, and even cultures. Her workshops looked at artists like Takahiko Imura, who explores these issues through video, as well as drawing, textiles, and sculpture. The students then created calligrams, a phonic keyboard, sound captions, and drawing from photographs. One of the first projects involved a Polaroid portrait of the children that served as the inspiration for their own self-portrait drawings. Amidu also worked with word play, supplying objects or narratives around which they developed their own stories, or asked them to create stories from collages and art works they created.

For 'space and place,' Amidu staged a project that involved mapping as the central theme. Starting first with a map of each desk in the classroom, the children added outlines of their own bodies to extend the visualization into an actual size (9.1 x 5.5 m) collaborative map of the entire classroom. Within the outlines of their own bodies, the children were encouraged to mark, signify, or describe their own identities and personalities. Other activities included timed observational drawing, making maps from memory, identifying topographical features and landmarks that were then labelled on the map, and both visual and written descriptions of journeys like

travelling from home to school. They added images of places special to them, cyanotypes of objects and pictures brought from home, and photographs of the classroom itself. The finished 'map' held images and text that indicated the origins, locations, memories and identities of the individual pupils and the class as a whole.

Amidu's 'translation' and 'space and place' workshops, along with those created about 'play' by Asante, were recorded and then taken as a framework for the CD-ROM and website, which was developed by Rebecca Sinker, research fellow in Education and Lifelong Learning at Middlesex University. According to inIVA's website,

The Digital Art Resource for Education (DARE) Primary CD-ROM is a multimedia art and education resource, created with and for children aged 5-10. Interactive, accessible and playful, the CD features a number of contemporary international artists, along with the children's video, voices and artwork. It offers a range of activities across the curriculum and includes a supporting booklet for parents and teachers, (inIVA, [www.iniva.org/archive/project/268](http://www.iniva.org/archive/project/268)).

As with the artist-in-residence programme at Acland Burghley School and the *Joining the Dots* project, DARE emphasizes the educative value of artistic practice for young schoolchildren. For Amidu, it is the creative process itself that is inspiring, and she enjoys the opportunities to both witness this process and engender new projects with resources like the CD-ROM (Amidu 2002). In these workshops, there are echoes of ...*moment caught in three dimensions* and *Finders, Keepers...*, in particular the focus on origins, location, memory, identity, and translation.

In 2002, Amidu spent four months as the first ever artist-in-residence at Bristol Royal Hospital for Children. The residence was organized in collaboration with Arnolfini, the city's centre of contemporary art. Her presence was a catalyst for the investigation into why art and a residential artist are important in the hospital context, as well as how the artist, staff, and patients could respond to such a sensitive

environment in a creative and positive manner. Amidu's tenure started one week after the hospital's momentous move from a nineteenth century Victorian building to a brand-new facility. She thus focused on the theme of moving from one place to another, and the attendant feelings of children, parents, and staff. First, she developed a series of workshops called 'Transfer,' in which she encouraged children, parents, and staff to document their memories and feelings through photographs and sound recordings in both the old and new buildings. The children used disposable cameras to photograph elements in both buildings that were significant to them, and then chose images to make iron-on transfers for T-shirts. The older children also used a tape recorder to compose audio diaries, and Amidu interviewed the younger ones. In collaboration with sound producer Celine Lecompte, Amidu created a sound piece entitled *Transfer* (2001) from the tapes of the diaries and interviews, which was broadcast in Arnolfini in September 2001. *Transfer* is an amalgamation of various voices with Amidu's own, incorporating different words that for her triggered memories and feelings about her experiences during the residency (Amidu 2002).

Amidu explains,

Because I was asked to do the workshops and a commission, and there was no definition about whether they should be one thing or not, I decided to separate them out. If I had done the workshops and a commission as a result of the workshops, my personal experience would have been lost, and it is such a sensitive environment that you have to think really hard about what you are going to do with the kids. I just thought as an artist, I do not want to be compromised in that kind of way, so I separated them out. So there are the workshops and the T-shirts, and the sound piece is a little bit of both. It is about my experience and also theirs, (Amidu 2002).

Amidu also created a textile work, *Tribute* (2002; Fig. 2.40), to express her experience of the workshops with the children, their parents, and hospital staff, as well as her investigations of the old building. She says, 'I did not want to make something that was just going to sit on a wall...So I decided to make something that

people could handle and actually be involved with,' (Amidu 2002). *Tribute* is a single white hospital bed sheet with a series of cyanotypes of objects, old photographs, and excerpts from letters attached across the front, which is stored folded in a matching pillowcase. Amidu created the cyanotype images from various objects that she collected from the old building, such as a surgical glove, a jigsaw puzzle piece, a tongue depressor, and a set of steel instruments.<sup>27</sup> Amidu describes her experience exploring the old building as 'creepy,' remembering,

There was hardly anybody in there and it was all packed up. It was a really damp, rainy day...and after about a half an hour I thought, That is it, I have had enough now, and I did start getting a bit spooked. So these are all little things that I found, just the leftovers of moving really. I found things on the floor, and by the sink I found a plug; I found a set of keys...I picked up all these things, and I made these cyanotypes, (Amidu 2002).

Attached to the sheet, the cyanotype images and the objects they depict seem suspended in place and time. Some of the objects in the images are cold and clinical, even invasive and menacing, whilst others are soft and comforting, even friendly. The X-ray-like quality of the cyanotype process gives these objects a ghostly luminescence.

Interspersed with the images are letters from former patients and parents detailing their stories and memories of the old building, which were collected by the hospital's previous chaplain. Most of the experiences related in the letters date back a few decades or more, and describe the conditions of the hospital. In reading the excerpts, there is a sense of clinical sterility and institutional imprisonment, a stifling atmosphere where children were often kept separate from their parents, and sometimes each other, whilst they were being treated. However, there are also warm memories of kindly nurses, who provided comforting words and ice cubes for

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<sup>27</sup> The cyanotype process involves placing an object on a surface treated with photo-sensitive solution, and then exposing it to light, which results a negative image with a bluish background.

sucking. Cyanotypes of photographs of the old building, staff, and patients, mostly from the nineteenth century, complete the montage. The work is a poignant illustration of how a children's hospital, and a child's experience of it, can retain such lasting significance, and it effectively communicates the pathos of a place where children faced the anxiety, fright, and pain of illness. Thus, *Tribute* is an evocative homage to childhood difficulty and memory, and the personal and psychological import of a particular place.

Amidu's creative inspiration is often drawn from personal and general childhood experiences, and her fondness for working with children demonstrates her fascination with the processes of growing up. Amidu finds the memories of childhood and feelings of nostalgia rich sources of inspiration. She comments, 'I think the generation of people educated in Britain in the 1970s and 1980s have a very particular and unique perspective on themselves and life...It is not surprising that we have revisited childhood memory etc. because we were always asked to justify our place in the playground, in the classroom, everywhere, in fact...Perhaps looking back is a way of reconciling these issues. It is very complex and, in a way, a private process. Which is not to say it should not be discussed, it is just a large thing to unravel and examine,' (Amidu 2004). Amidu's creative practice seems to be a way of revisiting her childhood that, with the benefit of maturity and hindsight, has allowed her to make sense of confusing, difficult, or simply memorable episodes in her past. When asked about particular examples, she is circumspect, saying 'Very particular events in my childhood have been poignant sources of inspiration but it is important to point out that they are not all to do with being black,' (Amidu 2004).

Much of Amidu's work and creative activity since 1995 has centred on the recovery of personal and communal narratives, thus touching on the feelings of

nostalgia, melancholy, and loss experienced with reflections on the past. After she resumed her creative endeavours, she incorporated new ideas, techniques, and disciplines into her applied arts background, including writing, sound, and CD-ROM as well as paper, fabric, printmaking and photography. Amidu has continued to create objects and projects that resonate with similar themes. ...*a moment caught in three dimensions* and *Tribute* both record and recover childhood memories and experiences. The archival element explored in *Finders, Keepers...* and *Joining the Dots* remains significant in later work. Assessing her oeuvre in light of these new creative directions, Amidu says that her work, even her glassware, has always had an ephemeral quality (Amidu 2004). This may also be why the fleeting years of childhood have such important implications for her both as an artist and as a project manager.

Amidu cites two people in particular that have served as inspirations to her project- and process-based practice: John Latham and Alistair Raphael. John Latham (1921-2006) was a Rhodesian-born conceptual and performance artist based in London. From 1954, Latham's practice centred on the expression of a concept he termed 'Event Structure,' a philosophical, scientific, and artistic ideology of existence centred on time as a series of events. One of Latham's most notorious performance works is *Spit and Chew: Art and Culture*, created in 1966 when he and students from the St. Martins School of Art chewed up pages of art critic Clement Greenberg's well-known book of formalist art criticism and then distilled the resulting pulp into a clear liquid. Also in 1966, Latham co-founded the Artists Placement Group with his wife, Barbara Stevani, an organization dedicated to involving artists in local government, business, and industry. Latham's interest in and emphasis upon the process of creating over the end product resonates with Amidu's concentration on workshop activities,

and the (often collaborative) process involved therein. Furthermore, the ideology behind the Artists Placement Group parallels Amidu's efforts to integrate her creative practice into the wider community through institutions that sponsor workshops and residencies outside of traditional artistic contexts, such as schools and hospitals.

Amidu also names Alistair Raphael as a significant influence. Raphael, an artist and freelance educator, was Education Coordinator at inIVA from 1995 to 1998. Amidu was particularly influenced by his *Artist-in-Research 1996-1998* programme and subsequent edited volume. Raphael initiated the Artist-in-Research programme to assist working artists in creative research by facilitating dialogues between the artists and employees of non-art, industrial, and scientific institutions and businesses not normally seen as accessible to artists, such as a furniture factory, government cartographer's office, and chemical distribution plant. There are striking similarities between the Artists-in-Research programme and John Latham's Artist Placement Group in terms of connecting working artists with local business and industry, and these resonate with Amidu's own work as a project manager and administrator in the London community. Amidu describes her interests as much broader than studio art, and she seeks to expose people to new ideas in order to open up their minds, even transform them through creative projects and activities (Amidu 2005).

Since her Bristol residency, Amidu has participated in projects both as an artist/educator and project manager, but has not made any new work (Amidu 2004). For Black History Month in October 2002 at the Hackney Museum in East London, Amidu created an art work/archive inspired by the exhibition *Real Lives: Black and Asian Londoners 1536-1840*. Working collaboratively over the course of three drop-in sessions open to all ages, Amidu produced a large roll of paper containing images and writing that related personal experiences of the participants. It now resides in the

London Metropolitan Archives. In 2003, she was appointed Project Development Manager for the Understanding Slavery Initiative at the National Maritime Museum in Greenwich and at present continues to work in an administrative capacity.<sup>28</sup> Amidu is interested in doing more socially-oriented work, especially with children in care. Her most recent project has resulted from her interest in working with the Foundling Museum in London.

Retired sea captain Thomas Coram established the Foundling Hospital in 1739 to care for abandoned and homeless children. The children lived in Brunswick Square through the 1920s, when the Hospital moved to the Surrey countryside and the original building was demolished. In 1935, the Hospital was again moved to a new building in Hertfordshire, and a London headquarters was built in Brunswick Square at the site of the original hospital. Today, the Brunswick Square building is the home of the Foundling Museum, dedicated to the history of the Foundling Hospital, its founder Thomas Coram, and its two most famous patrons, William Hogarth and George Frideric Handel. Hogarth and Handel, along with other artists such as Sir Joshua Reynolds and Thomas Gainsborough, donated important art works to the Hospital in the eighteenth century. After extensive renovations, the Foundling Museum opened to the public in 2004.

In 2003, Amidu approached the Museum with the idea for a long-term, artistic, practice-based research project called *loop*. In a grant application for the project, she describes her childhood experiences in the second person as someone who feels ‘on the periphery. Now, this out-of-the-loop-state-of-mind is not (strangely enough) just about your ethnicity, it is in large part, due to the way you have been brought up,’ (Amidu 2003). According to the same application,

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<sup>28</sup> The Understanding Slavery Initiative is a national education project to support the teaching of the history and legacies of the transatlantic slave trade created in April 2003.

*Loop* is about my experience as a child in the public care system, and the means through which I shifted the boundaries set by circumstance. It is about using the tools, skills and methods I employ as an artist as a means to investigate the history of public care for young people; and about undertaking other forms of research (including the study of theories and methodologies in learning, child psychology and art therapy) to examine what sustainable support and mentoring provision exists for children in care today to enable them to reach their full potential, (Amidu 2003).

The primary goal of the project is to develop a 'creative mentoring toolkit' for mentors supporting children in care (Amidu 2005). In the short term, the project has consisted of a series of workshops designed by Amidu for eleven- and twelve-year-olds in care and their carers. This age is seen as a particularly seminal period in childhood development and growth, and is especially significant for children in care, who often shift homes and institutions. During July and August 2005, the Museum hosted the workshop series, entitled *21<sup>st</sup> Century Reporter*, with funding secured through the ALM London Audience Development Funding Programme 2004/5. Using archival materials, like photographs, and artefacts in the Museum's galleries, the children used photography, drawing, painting, and creative writing to tell stories about the Foundling children. They also created a Wishing Tree, whereby each participant selected and painted a branch to which s/he tied his/her written wishes sealed in envelopes.

Amidu has applied for additional funding to implement a research project focusing on the Foundling Museum's collection and its archival documents housed at the London Metropolitan Archive. In particular, she would like to study the large collection of tokens that mothers gave their infants when they left them at the Hospital (Amidu 2005). Interviews with children from the Hospital published by the Thomas Coram Research Unit supplement this material. Amidu predicts that this project may result in an artwork, but that such a work is more likely to be print or publication based (Amidu 2004). Her interest in the creative process and her emphasis

upon ideas over objects has drawn her to writing as her preferred form of expression.

In her grant application for the Arts Council England she writes,

Narrative, memory, and archiving are central to my arts practice. I have developed ideas around these themes to question the processes of documentation and the mechanisms used to preserve histories. I am interested in the subjective element of recording that invariably remains hidden in the mapping of a wider, authoritative history, and try to develop projects which elicit other, more personal stories.

Institutional archives, historical places and the indelible, solid space they occupy excite me; and I'm always inspired to produce projects, in and of these environments which act as pauses or points of discovery.... (Amidu 2005).

Amidu's professional and personal trajectories reveal an artist of surprising breadth, and exhibit a very strong sense of self-awareness. Labelling her a black British artist drastically limits the scope of her practice. Amidu's creative hiatus after her initial training in ceramics and glass allowed her the opportunity to develop her skills as a project manager and administrator. When she did begin making work again, it was in response to a realization that she was more interested in process. As a result, Amidu has found a unique way of working that is personally fulfilling. She incorporates a wide range of media and often collaborates with other curators and project managers, as well as museum audiences and children. Due to Amidu's focus on projects and archiving instead of creating objects and staging exhibitions, she is in danger of moving under the art historical radar. The general under-representation of women and minorities in academia also contributes to this potential obscurity. Yet Maria Amidu's creative endeavour represents a significant artistic contribution to her community (local, national, global), and is a compelling example of an emerging generation of contemporary artists who are able to push beyond the orthodox boundaries of categorization, whether it be racial, medium-driven, or even what constitutes an "artist."

### Chapter 3: Comparative Discussion

Constituting oneself as “black” is another recognition of self through difference: certain clear polarities and extremities against which one tries to define oneself. We constantly underestimate the importance, to certain crucial political things that have happened in the world, of this ability of people to constitute themselves, psychically, in the black identity. It has long been thought that this is really a simple process; a recognition—a resolution of irresolutions, a coming to rest in some place which was always there waiting for one. The “real me” at last! The fact is “black” has never been just there either. It has always been an unstable identity, psychically, culturally and politically. It, too, is a narrative, a story, a history. Something constructed, told, spoken, not simply found... So the notion that identity is a simple—if I can use the metaphor—black or white question, has never been the experience of black people, at least in the diaspora. These are “imaginary communities”—and not a bit the less real because they are also symbolic. Where else could the dialogue of identity between subjectivity and culture take place? (Hall 1987, 45).

With these words, British cultural studies scholar Stuart Hall illuminates the constructive and constantly shifting nature of identity, and the complex nature of identifying oneself as “black.” Rather than a single or unified community, Hall recognizes ‘imaginary communities,’ within which black identity is a dialogue ‘between subjectivity and culture,’ or in other words, between personal interpretation and collective ideology.

The only way investigation into a categorization like “black British art” can be fully useful is if personal differences of experience and opinion are weighed in equally with the supposed similarities of black experience. Experiences resulting from racism that artists may have in common do not eradicate the detailed differences in their life histories. These factors include where they were born, where their parents were from, where they were raised, conditions in which they moved (i.e. forced or by choice), socio-economic background, education, and most importantly, each artist’s personal relationship with his or her non-European ancestry and cultural heritage.

What are the various trajectories and artistic responses for a black artist in Britain? The case studies examined earlier provide some answers in terms of the work

and lives of Magdalene Odundo, Veronica Ryan, Mary Evans, and Maria Amidu.<sup>29</sup>

Whilst the merits of in-depth studies of these four artists have been previously discussed, there are, however, a host of other contemporary British artists of African, Caribbean, and Asian descent. This chapter provides the opportunity for comparative discussion that identifies points of likeness and contrast based upon the following key issues: homelands, displacement, diaspora, identity, gender, sexuality, audience, and visibility.

Whilst this discussion provides the opportunity to bring a wide range of artist's experiences, testimonies, and of course, artwork, to bear on these issues, visual analysis of every one is not possible within the limited scope of this thesis. Instead, the intention is to elucidate the four case studies of the previous chapter with additional data, thus demonstrating how the artists' diversity of experiences and personal convictions are essential to a thorough understanding of the legacies of the Black Art Movement and its major debates.

### **Trajectories**

A trajectory defines a particular path of movement and development, and can signify voluntary choices made with certain aims in mind, but can be equally impacted by circumstances beyond an individual's control. In the context of an artist's professional and personal life, trajectory does imply a measure of force or direction borne of choices made and beliefs held. The categorization "black British artist" embodies a diverse group of individuals, each with unique and disparate perspectives that inform their artistic production. They vary in age, gender, sexuality, nationality, cultural origins, familial circumstances, education and training, exhibition histories, media, and a myriad of other factors. In a British context, their non-white, non-

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<sup>29</sup> For the explanation of why these four artists were chosen for the case studies, see pp. 16-19.

European heritage links them together generally as “black.”<sup>30</sup> Solidarity amongst these various populations developed during the post-war period of heightened immigration as a result of racism and marginalization, circumstances that have evolved significantly over the last twenty-five years. However, they do not necessarily or always choose to define themselves as “black,” either personally or professionally. When evaluating the usefulness of such a term, an artist’s personal circumstances in relationship to the various decades in question, and how these might have changed, need to be taken into account. Using “black” as a blanket term for these artists threatens to reduce diverse individual trajectories to over-simplistic generalizations. As Maria Amidu has said, ‘We are not one homogenous lump,’ (Amidu 2002).

The diversity of these artists’ various origins is evident in their personal circumstances of birth, familial heritages, and migration.<sup>31</sup> There are those who were born abroad and came to the UK as young adults. Gavin Jantjes was born in Cape Town, South Africa in 1948, and classified as “Cape Coloured” under the Apartheid system. He settled in Britain in 1982 after living in Germany for twelve years. Zineb Sedira was born in Paris, France to Algerian parents in 1963, and settled in London in 1986. Johannes Phokela was born in Soweto, Johannesburg, South Africa in 1966, and moved to London in 1987 to further his art education. Yinka Shonibare was born in London to Nigerian parents in 1962, was raised in Lagos, Nigeria from the age of three, and moved back to London in 1986 to attend art school. Despite colonial or familial ties, these artists were not residents of the UK until they were past adolescence.

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<sup>30</sup> See pp. 39 and 44.

<sup>31</sup> Conceptualizations of homelands, displacement, and diaspora will be discussed in more detail in subsequent sections of this chapter.

A number of artists were born abroad, then moved to the UK as children for a variety of reasons, including political and economic security. Ingrid Pollard was born in Georgetown, Guyana (then British Guiana) in 1953 and was four years old when her family moved to London. Rotimi Fani-Kayode was born in Nigeria in 1955 and moved to Britain in 1966 to escape war and civil unrest in Nigeria. Lubaina Himid was born in Zanzibar, Tanzania in 1954 and immigrated to England with her family as an infant. Sokari Douglas Camp was born in Buguma, Nigeria in 1958 and first went to England to attend boarding school in 1966. As a student she returned frequently to Buguma for school breaks and holidays. Allan deSouza was born in Nairobi, Kenya in 1958 to Goan parents, and moved to Britain with his family when he was seven years old. Oladele Bamgboye was born in Odo-Eku, Nigeria in 1963 and moved to Glasgow when he was thirteen years old. Keith Piper was born in Malta in 1960 to Caribbean parents; he moved to Birmingham at the age of three. Zarina Bhimji was born in Mbarara, Uganda in 1963 to Indian parents, and emigrated to Leicester, England in 1974 when she was eleven as a result of General Idi Amin's 1972 expulsion of Ugandan Asians, after living two perilous years in hiding. Godfried Donkor was born in Kumasi, Ghana in 1964 and moved to London with his family when he was nine years old.

All of these artists arrived in Britain when they were children, and attended primary and/or secondary school in the UK. In their homes, they had conversations about and reminders of their countries of origin, and sometimes spoke languages other than English; at school and in their neighbourhoods, they had British friends and neighbours, received British education, and were exposed to British media. Some had substantial childhood memories of their initial homelands, whilst others' recollections were formulated from stories their parents told them, information they gleaned from

schoolbooks and/or the media, or visits to relatives who still resided there. Allan deSouza, in text written to accompany his C-print series *Indian Aphorisms* (1992-94), muses,

I don't know which of my memories are my own...which are memories of my own remembrance, which are whispered to me secretly as I lay in my bed, or which are ghostly afterimages, effigies petrified between the tissue leaves of photo albums, which have happened, which are wild imaginings, which are yearnings on my part for memories greater, more colourful than my present experiences, for existence in which adventure, possibility, abandon, are relived in a quest not for experience itself, but for representation, a catalogue of experience, (Beauchamp-Byrd 1997b, 27).

Other artists were born in Britain to immigrant parents; these artists have British passports and citizenship. Their identification with Africa, the Caribbean, and/or Asia is a matter of heritage rather than place of origin and birth, although the circumstances of living in Britain as second-generation immigrants include cultural connections through food, music, religion, and the condition of being a minority. Claudette Johnson was born in Manchester in 1959. Eddie Chambers was born in 1960 to Jamaican parents in Wolverhampton. Isaac Julien was born to St. Lucian parents in 1960 in London. Donald Rodney was born in 1961 in Birmingham to Jamaican parents. Sonia Boyce was born in London in 1962 to Barbadian and Guyanese parents. Chris Ofili was born in 1968 to Nigerian parents in Manchester. Steve McQueen was born to Grenadian parents in London in 1969.

Most of these artists, whether they came to Britain to study, immigrated as children with their families, or were born in the UK, still live in Britain. Most live in London, which offers the most opportunities in terms of art education, institutions, and patronage. Notable exceptions include Eddie Chambers, who lives in Bristol, and Lubaina Himid, who teaches at the University of Central Lancashire in Preston. Some, however, have since moved to other countries. Allan deSouza moved to Los Angeles in the early 1990s and has been based there ever since. Steve McQueen

currently resides in Amsterdam. Their reasons for moving from the UK are personal as well as professional. For example, Veronica Ryan relocated to the US because of her marriage and remains there today because of the needs of her children,<sup>32</sup> whilst deSouza and McQueen have taken advantages of educational and professional development opportunities abroad. Interestingly, none have returned to their places of birth or familial origins, but have remained in Europe or the US. Sokari Douglas Camp lives in both London and Buguma, Nigeria. In this way, she maintains a physical connection to her place of birth and village of early childhood as well as establishing herself and her family in London. She is the only one of these artists who spends such a significant amount of time in Africa. Where one decides to reside is certainly a combination of factors, but Britain remains significant as the place where these artists lived for many crucial years during their childhood, education, and professional development.

The next significant stage in their development was the art education during which they began their vocational training and experience. An art education represents the catalyst to a professional career and is enormously influential in determining an artist's formal development and chosen range of practices as well as environmental factors. Not the least of these is the building up of a network of friends and acquaintances amongst whom knowledge and experiences are shared. The first step towards an art degree in the UK is a one-year Foundation course following secondary school. This is designed to acquaint the student with basic art media and techniques as well as art history. Often, the artists go to the school that is nearest to where they live. Thus, Sonia Boyce went to the East Ham College of Art and Technology in 1979-80, Donald Rodney attended Bournville School of Art in

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<sup>32</sup> See pp. 116 and 126-127.

Birmingham in 1980-81, Zarina Bhimji completed her Foundation course at Leicester Polytechnic in 1982-83, and Chris Ofili attended Thameside College of Technology in greater Manchester in 1987-88. Those living in London were spoiled for choice. Allan deSouza chose Goldsmiths College in 1976-77 and Steve McQueen chose the Chelsea School of Art in 1989-90. Shortly after his arrival in the UK, Johannes Phokela attended St. Martin's School of Art (incorporated into Central Saint Martins School of Art & Design since 1989) in 1987-88. Others went further afield for their Foundation courses. Eddie Chambers and Keith Piper met during their Foundation course at Lanchester Polytechnic in Coventry in 1979-1980.

Foundation courses are the prerequisites for higher diplomas in fine arts, and they must be considered significant to the artists' subsequent development if only because they provide the first opportunity to study and make art full-time. One of the primary outcomes of a Foundation course is the experimentation that allows a student to choose a preferred medium and practice. In some cases, it also provides the opportunity to meet other like-minded artists. After meeting in Coventry, Eddie Chambers and Keith Piper formed the BLK Art Group and became incredibly involved with a network of other black art students across the country, like Claudette Johnson and Donald Rodney. The BLK Art Group was based in the Midlands, and met, worked, and exhibited together in the mid-1980s (Mercer 2005, 49).

Exceptionally, Sokari Douglas Camp did not complete a Foundation course in Britain. After finishing secondary school at Dartington Hall, Camp felt she needed to broaden her horizons and moved to California to study at the California College of Arts and Crafts in 1978. She explains,

I quite fancied going to America, because I thought, why not...get a little more Western education? And I thought that in America black people had a profile. Little did I know! So off I went, hoping to balance things a bit....After

school, I thought, why stay in England? It's not really my country, (Ainslie 1995, 37).

All of the artists listed above continued their art education by proceeding to one of the many three-year programmes for their BA in Fine Art at British institutions. At this level of study, art students begin to focus their studio practice within particular media, as well as continue their study of art history. With the possible exception of Goldsmiths College, the emphasis is on gaining technical proficiency rather than a grasp of the theoretical bases of art practice. In the case of Magdalene Odundo and Maria Amidu, the school they chose reflected their respective interests in ceramics and glass, and thus emphasized applied arts.<sup>33</sup>

Many artists who became active in the Black Art Movement studied for their BA degrees during the late seventies and early eighties. Claudette Johnson studied at Wolverhampton Polytechnic from 1979-82. Sonia Boyce went to the Stourbridge College of Art and Technology, 1980-83. Eddie Chambers studied at Sunderland Polytechnic from 1980-83. Keith Piper was at Trent Polytechnic, Nottingham from 1980-83; Donald Rodney first met Piper at Trent when he studied there from 1981-85 (inIVA, [www.iniva.org/autoicon](http://www.iniva.org/autoicon)). Chamber and Piper continued their collaborations during this time, organizing the exhibition *Black Art an' Done* at the Wolverhampton Art Gallery in 1981; they formed the Pan-Afrikan Connection art group in 1982. Also in 1982, the Pan-Afrikan Connection staged the First National Black Art Convention at Wolverhampton Polytechnic to debate the definition and function of black art in Britain.

Other black artists continued to work and study for their BAs at various schools around the country. Sokari Douglas Camp studied 1980-83 at the Central College of Art and Design, London. Allan deSouza attended Bath Academy of Art

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<sup>33</sup> See pp. 67 and 169.

from 1980-83. Isaac Julien studied film at Central Saint Martins School of Art & Design from 1980-84. Zarina Bhimji studied at Goldsmiths College from 1983-86. In 1984-89, Yinka Shonibare studied at Byam Shaw School of Art (incorporated into Central Saint Martins College of Art & Design since 2003). Godfried Donkor attended Central Saint Martins in 1984-89. Subsequently, younger artists emerged who represent a different artistic generation than those who came of age and graduated in the early eighties, during the heyday of Black Art Movement activities. Johannes Phokela studied at the Camberwell College of Art, London, 1988-91. Chris Ofili attended the Chelsea School of Art in 1988-91. Steve McQueen went to Goldsmiths from 1999-93. Zineb Sedira, having moved to London from Paris in 1986, studied at Central Saint Martins, 1992-95.

Not all black British artists completed Fine Arts BA degrees in Britain. Gavin Jantjes studied graphic design at the School of Fine Art, University of Cape Town in 1966-69 and at the Hochschule für Bildende Kunst in Hamburg in 1970-72. He did not settle in Britain until 1982, although he came to London in 1976 to work with the Poster Collective (Swarup 1989, 145). Other artists did not complete Fine Arts BA because they were studying other subjects. Lubaina Himid studied Theatre Design at the Wimbledon School of Art in 1973-76. Oladele Bamgboye received a BSc in Chemical and Process Engineering from Strathclyde University, where he attended in 1981-85. Significantly, every artist within the scope of this study, except Sonia Boyce, continued his/her art education at institutes of higher learning, most receiving MA degrees from universities and art schools with renowned Fine Arts graduate programmes.

Studying for a Master's degree not only gave these artists enhanced skills in their respective media, but perhaps more importantly, provided the means to explore

and develop a theoretical basis for their practice, and educated them about the professional resources vital to pursuing art as a viable career. Thus it is significant that many of these artists trained at the same schools, and often at the same times. By far the most common institutions for postgraduate study amongst these artists are the Royal College of Art, the Slade, and Goldsmiths. Of the artists listed, seven of them received MA degrees from the Royal College, six went to the Slade, and three did their postgraduate work at Goldsmiths.

The Royal College is unique in that it is a strictly postgraduate institution.

According to its website, its mission is expressed in the 1967 Charter of

Incorporation:

The objects of the College are to advance learning, knowledge and professional competence particularly in the field of fine arts, in the principles and practice of art and design in their relation to industrial and commercial processes and social developments and other subjects relating thereto through teaching, research and collaboration with industry and commerce, (Royal College of Art, [www.rca.ac.uk/pages/study/the\\_colleges\\_mission\\_120.html](http://www.rca.ac.uk/pages/study/the_colleges_mission_120.html)).

It enjoys a stellar reputation, with a substantial number of prestigious alumni, including Henry Moore, Barbara Hepworth, Peter Blake, David Hockney, Tracey Emin, and Jake and Dinos Chapman. Lubaina Himid attended in 1982-84, Sokari Douglas Camp in 1983-86, Keith Piper in 1984-86, Chris Ofili in 1991-93, and Johannes Phokela, also in 1991-93.

Unlike the fortuitous meetings of Eddie Chambers and Keith Piper at Lanchester Polytechnic, or Keith Piper and Donald Rodney at Trent Polytechnic, there is not much evidence to support the idea that these fellow Royal College students had a significant influence on each other's practice at the time, at least in terms of collaboration and the formation of collective networks like the Pan-Afrikan Connection. This might be attributed in part to the fact that there was not a lot of communication between the departments (Amidu 2005). So, for example, Maria

Amidu (Ceramics and Glass) did not have much contact with Chris Ofili or Johannes Phokela (Painting), despite the fact that all of them were there in 1991-92.

Lack of contact, however, could not have been the only impediment to artistic collaborations. Despite their contemporaneity in the Painting Department, neither Ofili nor Phokela cite the other as a significant influence. Lubaina Himid began studying for a research MA in Cultural History at the Royal College in 1982, when Magdalene Odundo was in her final year in the Ceramics and Glass Department. Himid was in her second year at the Royal College when Sokari Douglas Camp started in the Sculpture Department. After graduation, Himid concentrated on promoting black women's art in exhibitions like *Five Black Women Artists* and *The Thin Black Line*, neither of which included Odundo or Camp. Whilst any explanation as to why this was so can only be conjecture, the emphasis during MA studies is on the development of each artist's unique artistic contribution to their discipline and the wider community.

The Slade School of Fine Art, located within University College London, is another esteemed institution of art education with its own share of famous alumni, including Wyndham Lewis, Eduardo Paolozzi, Richard Hamilton, Paula Rego, Antony Gormley, Mona Hatoum, Rachael Whiteread, and Jenny Saville. According to its website,

The Slade School of Fine Art is concerned with contemporary art and the practice, history and theories that inform it. It provides for the education of professional artists by professional artists and scholars of the history and theory of art.... The Slade's belief in fine art as a subject worthy of study in its own right and belonging within a humanist liberal arts tradition was radical at a time (founded 1871) when almost all British art schools existed to service the needs of industry.... The Slade continues to approach the study and practice of art in an enquiring, investigative, experimental and research-minded way, consciously contributing to the lively discourses of contemporary art, nationally and internationally,' (Slade School of Fine Art, [www.ucl.ac.uk/slade](http://www.ucl.ac.uk/slade)).

Donald Rodney studied at the Slade 1985-87, Zarina Bhimji in 1987-89, Zineb Sedira in 1995-97, and Oladele Bamgboye in 1996-98. Like their peers at the Royal College, each of these artists focused on their chosen medium in the appropriate department, and there are no accounts of meetings or collaborations between them as a result of being together at the Slade, as black artists or otherwise.

Goldsmiths College, like UCL, is part of the University of London, and offers both undergraduate and postgraduate degrees. The Visual Arts Department is well known for its strong basis in theoretical approaches to learning and conceptual arts practice (Hynes 2001, 62). In recent years the school has attained notoriety for having produced many fashionable young British arts, or “YBAs,” like Damien Hirst, Gillian Wearing, Sarah Lucas, and Sam Taylor-Wood. The Goldsmiths website states that,

The Visual Arts Department specializes in fine art and textiles practice developed in a dynamic, critical and distinctive environment. We consider it crucial to see contemporary art as a continuing and transformative undertaking. We believe that an understanding of innovative contemporary art is best conveyed through critical discourse and direct interaction with those who are involved in developing an innovative culture of contemporary visual art in its diverse practical and critical aspects, (Goldsmiths College, [www.goldsmiths.ac.uk/departments/visual-arts](http://www.goldsmiths.ac.uk/departments/visual-arts)).

Yinka Shonibare studied at Goldsmiths in 1989-91, and Steve McQueen attended 1990-93.

Some artists chose to pursue other technical training in Britain and abroad, whilst others completed critical studies and art history programmes. Most artists studied at the postgraduate level, like Veronica Ryan at the School of Oriental and African Studies and Mary Evans at the Rijksakademie. Godfried Donkor did postgraduate studies in painting at the Escola Massana in Barcelona, Spain (1991-92) and an MA in African Art at SOAS (1995). Overall, MA and postgraduate studies gave the artists opportunities to further develop their talent as well as their knowledge

of art theory, history, and criticism. In addition, the credentials added to their CVs demonstrated their commitment as well as their qualifications as professionals.

After education, artists focused on building their professional profiles. Some artists were readily associated with the exhibitions and activities connected with black British art, whilst others eschewed these debates and purposefully avoided association with any such classifications. Artists are constantly negotiating their relationship to such a categorization, and this relationship changes over time. Artists that have been regularly associated with the Black Art Movement include Eddie Chambers, Keith Piper, Lubaina Himid, Sonia Boyce, Veronica Ryan, and Gavin Jantjes. Chambers, Piper, and Himid were instrumental in organizing conferences and curating exhibitions pivotal to the promotion of art produced by young British artists of African, Caribbean, and Asian descent.<sup>34</sup>

Chambers and Piper have promoted a politically charged aesthetic to deconstruct racist stereotypes and agitate for social change. Eddie Chambers writes:

Black artists' gallery exhibitions became relatively commonplace (in the 1980s), beginning with a number of exhibitions by younger artists, such as Keith Piper and Donald Rodney whose fiery brand of racially charged and assertive images and text announced the arrival of the new generation of Black artists with a distinctly different aesthetic. The use of image and text by Piper and some other artists drew heavily from connections long associated with agitprop, (Chambers 1997, 78).

Eddie Chambers' *Destruction of the National Front* (1979-80; Fig. 3.1), produced during his Foundation course in Coventry, visualizes the racial tensions that resulted from campaigns led by the National Front, Britain's extreme right political party. Chambers' work consists of a series of collages based on a swastika-shaped Union Jack. As a symbol of racist nationalism, the British flag is often appropriated by the National Front as a symbol of solidarity; the swastika is an obvious reference to the

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<sup>34</sup> See pp. 34-36 and 202.

party's neo-fascist ideology. In an act of angry revenge, Chambers progressively tears up the symbol over the course of four panels, until it is shredded into tiny pieces in the final panel. Keith Piper's *Go West Young Man* (1987; Fig. 3.2) is a series of images of the black male body accompanied by commentary text that represents the oppression and exploitation of slavery and the sexualization of black men's bodies as contradictory objects of fear and desire.<sup>35</sup>

Lubaina Himid's work as a curator promoted the art of black women artists in Britain.<sup>36</sup> However, she did not always exclusively select the work of black women for her shows; *Unrecorded Truths* (inaugural exhibition, Elbow Room, London, 1986) included art by Keith Piper, Allan deSouza, and Donald Rodney. Nevertheless, promoting, showing, and discussing work by *women* artists of African, Caribbean, and Asian descent was definitely her focus during the years she was a curator. Sonia Boyce and Veronica Ryan were included in *Five Black Women Artists*, *Black Woman Time Now*, and *The Thin Black Line*; they were very much a part of these early exhibitions and dialogues about black British art and about black feminism.

Allan deSouza participated in the activities of the Black Art Movement during his days as an art student at Goldsmiths College and Bath Academy of Art, but relocated to the US during the late eighties. Gavin Jantjes was also involved; his work was included in the exhibitions *Into the Open* (Mappin Gallery, Sheffield, 1984), *From Two Worlds* (Whitechapel Art Gallery, London, 1986), and *The Other Story* (Hayward Gallery, London, 1989). Like Allan deSouza before them, Gavin Jantjes and Veronica Ryan have both relocated outside of the UK, and have therefore shifted their professional contexts. Moving outside of the UK has meant that their

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<sup>35</sup> For further discussion, see pp. 235 and 202-203.

<sup>36</sup> See pp. 35-38.

participation in exhibitions of black British art has been limited, whilst other kinds of exhibitions with different curatorial emphases have become much more frequent.

Sonia Boyce continues to live and work in London. In the summer of 2003 she led gallery talks at the Serpentine Gallery on the occasion of Cindy Sherman's solo exhibition, and in spring 2005 she participated in the Victoria and Albert Museum's critical debates series entitled *Beyond Identity: New Directions in Visual Culture* featuring a group of diverse artists, including African, Caribbean, Asian, and Jewish. For many of these artists, their relationship to a black British categorization depends on the context of their work in time and place.

Sokari Douglas Camp and Oladele Bamgboye, like Magdalene Odundo and Mary Evans, are examples of artists who were contemporary with the Black Art Movement but worked primarily outside of it; at the time, their creative practices, as well as critical reception, did not centre on the politicized racial debates espoused by artists like Chambers, Piper, and Himid. Whilst they might occasionally participate in forums highlighting black identity or diverse cultural origins, like *Columbus Drowning* (Odundo) or *Transforming the Crown* (Camp), they were still relatively independent.

Godfried Donkor (MA 1995), Kinsi Abdullah (MA studies 1997), Maria Amidu (MA 1992), Chris Ofilé (MA 1993), Steve McQueen (MA 1993), Zineb Sedira (MA 1997) and Yinka Shonibare (MA 1991) are all artists who finished art school and began their professional careers after the Black Art Movement had reached its apex. Whilst some have exhibited in group shows predicated on a relationship to an African heritage (Johannesburg Biennale 1997, *Authentic/Ex-centric*, and *Looking Both Ways*) or worked as administrators in black art contexts (e.g. Donkor and Amidu at the 198 Gallery and inIVA), they have by no means been limited to such a

contextualization. Moreover, other artists, such as Chris Ofili and Steve McQueen, have eschewed such conceptualizations of race and identity altogether. Whilst both artists' work contains references to black popular culture or Afro-Caribbean history and heritage, neither has participated in group exhibitions highlighting black British artists.

The notoriety and dialogue surrounding black British artists in the 1980s led to opportunities for exposure and patronage that propelled them into, if not the limelight, than at least professional status as artists. This in turn paved the way for more art school graduates, and served as encouragement to the succeeding generation. Since the 1990s, exhibition opportunities for and patronage of the work of British artists of African, Caribbean, and Asian descent has expanded to include more mainstream institutions like the Tate's annual Turner Prize exhibition and representation in prestigious galleries like Stephen Friedman and Thomas Dane, who show Yinka Shonibare and Steve McQueen, respectively. The context created or promoted by the Black Art Movement is no longer the dominant one for younger artists who finished art school ten years ago. Some of them have exhibited in institutions like the 198 Gallery, Gasworks Gallery, and the Institute of International Visual Arts, whilst others enjoy representation in Britain's top contemporary galleries. Yet others have chosen to exhibit independently, or even curate their own shows.

As further analysis with regards to audience and visibility will illuminate, an earlier generation of artists like Eddie Chambers and Lubaina Himid used their art school networks to challenge the racism they perceived as endemic in British culture, particularly in regard to the patronage available to non-white artists within the mainstream art scene. In general, younger artists have not felt excluded or marginalized to the same degree. In 1998, Chris Ofili was awarded the Turner Prize,

and Steve McQueen won the following year. The annual Turner Prize exhibition is arguably the best-known exhibition of contemporary art in the country, and since its inception in 1984, has been the subject of yearly media attention and critical scrutiny. Furthermore, Steve McQueen was awarded an OBE (Office of the British Empire) in 2002. In 2004, Yinka Shonibare was shortlisted for the Turner Prize; he was awarded an MBE (Member of the British Empire) in 2005. Beyond such national recognition, Anish Kapoor was chosen to represent Britain at the Venice Biennale in 1989; Chris Ofili had the honour in 2003. Though racism in the British art world has yet to be eradicated, circumstances have most definitely changed in the last twenty-five years. Arts funding bodies, museums, and galleries are all aware of the need to promote cultural diversity in their programming and sponsorship, and artists representing a multitude of national origins and cultural backgrounds enjoy a wide patronage today that might have seemed unimaginable to the previous generation of art school graduates.

All of the artists in this survey have had various measures of success as professional artists, and have achieved their success through different means. Their individual trajectories, delineated by place of birth, migration, education, exhibition history, and patronage, represent diverse histories of personal and professional development. As a generality, the term “black British artist” denotes such a plethora of art practitioners and practices as to be almost meaningless. However, the multiple, complicated, and constantly shifting ways that artists respond to dialogues concerning “black art” is one of the most valuable outcomes of the Black Art Movement and a critical point of art historical and cultural analysis.

## Homelands

For better or for worse, debates surrounding feelings of nationalism, patriotism, and belonging for Britons of non-Western descent in general, and artists in particular, have consistently hinged on conceptualizations of “homelands.” The use of the plural is not just because the artists have numerous and separate physical points of origin, but also because one person can call more than one place his or her “homeland.” Is home simply one’s point of origin, as in place of birth? Or does it represent a host of feelings, loyalties, and attachments associated with a particular geographical place? Can the latter be a different place than the former?

Location, for a human being, situates one within the world, and more specifically, within a particular “lifeworld.” A lifeworld is a unique socially and culturally constructed existence lived within a specific environment and through a given period of time with all the events and implications thereof; it is a world that creates and sustains both individual and group identities. Place is a particular situatedness within space, a socially produced locale, within which people live certain experiences and perceive their belonging. The phenomenological conceptualization of space, as a particular place and as lived through the social experience of landscape,<sup>37</sup> illustrates the manner in which this experience shapes one’s existence and its significance to personal and communal identities. The identity of a place itself is based on the interdependence of physical, environmental features, human ordering of spaces and resources, and most significantly, the individual and communal narratives of it (Malpas 1999, 185). For black British artists, this is true of Britain but also of other countries and landscapes they consider “homelands.” Insofar as these individual

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<sup>37</sup> Whether landscape is conceived as primarily social, or via the social construction of the ‘natural’, it is always social.

and communal narratives can be maintained within the memory of a person, family, or community, the identification of oneself with a place occurs.

If one's homeland were indeed his or her place of birth, then it would simply be a matter of recording this detail on each artist's biography. However, it is clearly not that simple for the artists who are the subject matter of this thesis. Gavin Jantjes, Lubaina Himid, Allan deSouza, Sokari Douglas Camp, Oladele Bamgboye, Zarina Bhimji, Godfried Donkor, and Johannes Phokela were all born on the African continent.<sup>38</sup> Most, however, did not grow up in the same place they were born. Of these, only Jantjes and Phokela were raised and educated in Africa until they were adults.

The origin of one's parents and family is a significant factor. Allan deSouza and Zarina Bhimji were born of immigrant parents from India who settled in Kenya and Uganda, respectively. DeSouza's parents originated from Goa, which was a Portuguese colony until it was annexed by India in 1961. Both artists have made work about the countries in which they were born that reflects their parents' experiences of east Africa, and both were in part inspired to return and make the work as a result of their parents' deaths. In March 2004 at the Arts Council for the African Studies Association Triennial in Boston, deSouza spoke about his return to Kenya the year before and the photographs he took there. It was his first visit since he left as a seven-year-old boy. He described Kenya as both 'the place of my birth' and 'the place of my mother,' using the term 'mother-place' (deSouza 2004). His mother was then dying in Portugal. When he visited her, he described to her the photographs he had taken of their old neighbourhood, which she could not see because of her increasing blindness. To deSouza himself, each site seemed empty and artificial in the photograph, but as

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<sup>38</sup> See pp. 198-199.

he described them to his mother, her memories reconstructed her lived experiences therein. This was a type of homecoming, both for his mother as she remembered her home in Kenya, and for deSouza as a source of his imagined vision of it. He concludes that home is the place where the self resides, which is in the memory of a place rather than the place itself (deSouza 2004).

After her father died in 1997, Zarina Bhimji began to explore Uganda's troubled history in relation to her own biography as a way of excavating its emotional ramifications. She returned to Uganda in 1998, taking photographs of empty spaces, particularly in the old Asian communities that had been traumatized and subsequently abandoned. These photographs would form the basis for her short film *Out of Blue* (2002).<sup>39</sup> Considering place of birth to determine homeland does not allow for familial and ancestral points of origin beyond geographical locale at the time of birth, and migratory pasts (as well as futures). Such heritage would undoubtedly impact how a child was raised. Certainly, in the case of Bhimji, being born of Indian parents caused her and her family to be ousted from Uganda, exiled by political dictatorship, and precipitated their settlement in Britain, as former colonial subjects and members of the Commonwealth.

Many of the artists discussed in this thesis experienced these displacements as children. Oladele Bamgboye and Zarina Bhimji were barely adolescent when they left for the UK, whilst Allan deSouza, Sokari Douglas Camp, and Godfried Donkor were still in primary school. The fact that they spent some of their formative childhood years in Britain as well as their various African homelands is significant to their attachments to each place. In Camp's case, her relationship to Nigeria and to her home in Buguma continued because of her frequent visits, and she has been directly

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<sup>39</sup> See pp. 231-232.

inspired by the masquerade performances of Kalabari people she has observed and recorded there. For her 1995 exhibition *Play and Display: Steel Masquerades from Top to Toe* at the Museum of Mankind in London, Camp created life-size steel masquerade performers and presented them in order to ‘say very loudly that ethnographic museums have not been showing masquerades in their correct state. In no sense have they been doing that ever and it’s a miseducation for everybody—Africans and westerners,’ (Ainslie 1995, 39). In 1998, the National Museum of African Art (Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC) mounted *Echoes of the Kalabari*, Camp’s exhibition that included steel figures of masquerade performers, drummers, and female audience members as well as footage of Buguma festivals; that same year, New York’s American Museum of Natural History featured Camp’s *Spirits in Steel: The Art of the Kalabari Masquerade*. Her desire to set the record straight illustrates her identification with her Kalabari heritage as well as her concerns with educating the “westerners” with whom she lives. In fact, for many years Camp avoided telling her friends and relatives from Buguma that she was a sculptor, because not only are Kalabari women discouraged from making images for the sake of its negative impact on fecundity, but also because women did not do sculpture in any case, and her sculptures violated Kalabari taboos of replicating masquerades (Ainslie 1995, 37).<sup>40</sup>

Godfried Donkor has alluded to childhood memories of Ghana as well as Britain in his work. In *Kumasi de Ville* (2003; Fig. 3.3), created for *A Fiction of Authenticity: Contemporary Africa Abroad* at the Contemporary Art Museum St. Louis, he juxtaposes archival photos of families, schoolchildren, and sports teams from the Ville, a historic black St. Louis neighbourhood, with snapshots of his own

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<sup>40</sup> Exceptions are made for the ancestral screens typical of Buguma since the late eighteenth century, which often depict the deceased wearing the masquerade headpiece he was well known for performing in his lifetime.

family during the fifties, sixties, and seventies. The photographs are installed on a wall above an expanse of green artificial grass, evocative of the lawns of suburban neighbourhoods. He explains,

Driving around the Ville, East St. Louis, and other areas, I found myself thinking of my different childhoods; in Kumasi, Ghana first and then London and thinking how different it was in St. Louis. The images that this produced in my head were not only about how similar it was, but also about how strange and different it all was to me,' (Fitzgerald 2003, 14).

*Kumasi de Ville* is unique to Donkor's oeuvre in its direct biographical references, portraying his childhood years spent both in Kumasi and in London. Watching England play Sweden in the 2002 World Cup football tournament, he was asked which team he was supporting. Donkor replied, 'England of course! It's my country,' (Donkor 2002). One wonders if the response would be the same if the England team were matched up against one from Ghana or another African country. For many of these artists, feelings of belonging are far from fixed. In fact, it seems that allegiances and even nationalities can be interpreted in multiple ways depending on the circumstances.

Some of the artists were only infants when they moved away. In such cases, ideas of "homeland" are mediated through parental and family memories. Lubaina Himid was four months old when she and her mother immigrated to Blackpool. Himid's first memories include summers making sand castles on the beach at Lytham and a school trip to the Isle of Wight with her schoolteacher aunt and her class (Pollock 1996, 150). The supposedly simple contrast between homeland and place of exile is in reality a complicated web comprising, on the one hand, all the parental and ancestral origins, places of birth, memories, and narratives that incorporate all the subsequent places of migration, and on the other hand, all the very personal memories

and experiences of the artists themselves. “Diaspora” may be a simple idea but it is certainly not a simple experience.

Considering “African diaspora” further complicates the issue. The transatlantic slave trade and European imperial and colonial interests caused the displacement of generations of Africans to Europe and the New World.<sup>41</sup> Ingrid Pollard was born in South America but her skin colour and hair indicate her African ancestry.<sup>42</sup> However, the identities of her African forebears, and any hope of knowing where they were from in Africa, have been irrevocably lost as a result of the slave trade. As a child through to adulthood, Zineb Sedira experienced her parents’ native Algeria through periodic visits and familial memory rather than residence in the country. Sedira herself grew up in France, the very nation responsible for Algeria’s colonization.<sup>43</sup> Equating place of birth with feelings of homeland and belonging clearly does not tell the whole story. Ancestral ties as well as personal attachments to other countries, continents even, must also be taken into account.

There are, of course, many black British artists who were born in Britain, some the descendants of Caribbean slavery, others part of latter-day economic migration. Eddie Chambers, Isaac Julien, Donald Rodney, Sonia Boyce, and Steve McQueen are included in the former group, whilst Yinka Shonibare and Chris Ofili are part of the latter.<sup>44</sup> Exceptionally, Shonibare’s family moved back to Nigeria when he was three years old; he lived in Lagos until returning to London to study fourteen years later. All of the other artists were raised and educated in England.

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<sup>41</sup> Other diasporas exist because of the trans-Saharan slave trade in the nineteenth century, as well as the Nile and Indian Ocean slaving routes. Moreover, Dutch military interests led to the recruitment of West Africans, not as slaves but as free men, to assist in the colonization of Indonesia in the mid-nineteenth century and in the war against those fighting for independence of Dutch rule during the twentieth century. The artists featured in this thesis are either descendents of the diasporas of slavery or are part of the more recent economic diaspora that postdates World War II.

<sup>42</sup> See p. 199.

<sup>43</sup> See p. 198.

<sup>44</sup> See pp. 198-200.

Having African and Caribbean parents meant that these artists were perceived as different from the majority of Britons, and more importantly, treated as different, foreign even, by their neighbours, colleagues, the government, and the media. Eddie Chambers remembers:

Throughout my junior and secondary school days, I was at all times made painfully aware of the negative power of advertising and packaging, vis-à-vis racism. Taking their cue from a TV advert for Robertsons jam (which featured an animated Golly skipping across a laden tea table, then returning to the label of the jam jar), my white school friends, by way of a greeting to me, would sing the advert's jingle 'See you at tea time.' Another popular variation was the verbally more aggressive yell 'Get back on your jam jar.' Five years later, not much had changed, apart from the adverts themselves. By now, the favourite sung greeting was 'Cadbury's take 'em and they cover them with chocolate,' (Tawadros and Clarke 1999, 71).

In a 1994 interview, Donald Rodney described similar feelings of hostility towards people of colour in his childhood neighbourhood in greater Birmingham:

Smethwick [was] where I lived and Smethwick's claim to fame was at sometime during the elections in the sixties, some Tory MP coined the phrase 'If you want a nigger neighbour, vote Labour.' It was a very popular slogan that was used a great deal. And around this time, Enoch Powell's "Rivers of Blood" speech was given in Wolverhampton. So Birmingham and Wolverhampton had a large contribution of bigots around which made things a bit scary, (inIVA, [www.iniva.org/autoicon](http://www.iniva.org/autoicon)).

As these statements illustrate, being born and raised in Britain did not necessarily engender a comfortable sense of belonging.

Far from being outsiders to British culture and ways of life, there seems to have been a confluence of cultural interests in these artists' lives and homes that is more of a reflection of British multiculturalism than an illustration of difference.

Artist Barby Asante talks about some of the preconceived notions she faced and continues to face as the London-born daughter of Ghanaian immigrants:

We do not live in houses that are filled with African art! You might have African music. I had Jim Reeves and country music in my house as well as Highlife and god knows whatever else.... There is this whole idea that somehow your culture is just so completely different, and you know, it is not. I grew up watching the same TV programmes as everyone else... British culture

might be a bit alien to my parents, but they still brought me up in that British culture, (Asante 2002).

Sonia Boyce illustrates this type of multicultural home environment in pastel drawings like *Big Women's Talk* (1984; Fig. 3.4). In this work, a young Sonia is depicted in a domestic setting draping herself over a copious female lap, propped up on her elbows and listening. It is an evocative scene of support, love, and community, both between mother and child and between the women presumably doing the talking. The woman's floral dress as contrasted with the striped chair and wall covered in a pattern of marbled squares evinces a distinctly Caribbean aesthetic. Boyce says:

My use of pattern owes a lot to my mother's house; your eyes can't stop blinking for all the patterns in the house... They have their own co-ordination. When I started doing drawings about my childhood, I found a book on fifties design, and I began to use some of the designs as backgrounds. It was at this point that I realized I was including my mother's influence, or rather a West Indian sense of decoration, (Roberts 1987, 62).

Whilst *Big Women's Talk* emphasizes the Caribbean influences of her upbringing, Boyce is emphatically British, as titles like *She Ain't Holding Them Up, She's Holding On (Some English Rose)* (1986; Fig. 3.22) and *From Tarzan to Rambo: English Born 'Native' Considers Her Relationship to the Constructed Image and her Self* (1987) aptly express. In an artist's statement for the exhibition *Five Black Women* at the Africa Centre in 1983, Boyce describes herself thus: 'I am British born of West Indian parents. I live a schizophrenic life, between an anglicized background and a West Indian foreground; to put it another way, between "but look at my trials nah," and "gaw blimey,"' (Himid 1987, 261).

London-based artist Zineb Sedira relocated to the UK out of curiosity and the pursuit of higher education rather than familial or ancestral ties. Sedira was born in Paris and came to London when she was twenty-three. Whilst her family had lived in Algeria for generations, political and civil upheaval surrounding the country's

independence forced their migration to France. Sedira grew up in migrant housing estates outside of Paris' city centre. She recalls, 'Growing up everyday [hearing]: "*Les arabes, ils sont dégoûtants.*" (Arabs, they are disgusting.)' (Sedira 2005, 69). Like Chambers and Rodney, Sedira's differentness, in this case her North African heritage, elicited the scornful remarks of schoolchildren, neighbours, and the French media. As in Britain, the root of this scorn can be traced to colonial history and racist prejudice.

Place and one's experience of it is also inextricably tied to physical landscape. The natural topography of one's environment is infused with human significances resulting from its inhabitation and a society's collective involvement with and experience of the land (Tilley 1994, 34). This is demonstrated, for example, in the importance of local histories and ancestry to one's sense of self in the world in West African regions amongst people such as the Yoruba or Asante. Such relationships have obviously evolved over the centuries, especially after the shift from small, agricultural villages to larger, more industrialized urban centres. For the artists featured in this study, such a direct topographical relationship with their countries of origin would necessarily be mitigated by subsequent migration to and residence in the UK. However, it is worth considering that a conceptualization of landscape and geography in terms of inherited cultural attitudes may have been part of their childhood or heritage. Most significantly, contrasts between the environmental, meteorological, and geographical characteristics of places in Africa, the Caribbean, and Asia with those of the British Isles could still be recognized by anyone who had migrated from one to the other, or could be appreciated by anyone whose parents immigrated and passed on the remembrance of those experiences to their children.

Thus, some of the artists express connections to a particular landscape and physical environment. Lubaina Himid, in the gallery guide published for her 1999 exhibition *Zanzibar* at the Oriel Mostyn Gallery in Llandudno, Wales, uses her own prose and excerpts of a 1952 Guide to Zanzibar to describe its sea vistas, beaches, sunshine, trees, and rainfall as poetic accompaniment to her paintings. She writes:

Zanzibar is a series of paintings I made about a journey. First there was the journey I made from Zanzibar to England in 1954 with my mother after the death of my father; he was 33 and I was 4 months old, my mother was 26. The second journey has been the years spent painting works that were and were not Zanzibar. The third journey was a visit I made in 1997 with Maud Sulter when I discovered that I had indeed been painting the place, the sound and the memory of the island all along, (Himid 1999).

Paintings like *Shutters Only Hide the Sun* (1999; Fig. 3.5) and *Nets for Night and Day* (1999; Fig. 3.6) contain shapes and colours from the local landscape and refer to homes fitted with the shutters and mosquito nets needed to inhabit a tropical climate. Himid recognizes the influence of Zanzibar on her creative practice as a remembered environment, and feels that the land of her birth has left its marks on the forms, patterns, colours, and arrangements of her work.

These artists' individual circumstances demonstrate a range of belongings to Africa, Asia, the Caribbean, Britain, and even France. Clearly, the situation is far more complex than simply a matter of checking passports. One cannot assume that these artists feel a sense of belonging to their countries of personal or parental origin, either in the case of those who were born outside of the UK or those who were born within it. In many cases, artists feel deeply connected to more than one place, as explained by Barby Asante and Sonia Boyce. In some cases, where one is from does not automatically coincide with a sense of where one belongs.<sup>45</sup> Others have been

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<sup>45</sup> See pp. 97 and 132-134.

made to feel like outsiders in the only “homeland” that they have ever known, as Eddie Chambers and Donald Rodney have described.

Instead of a simple binary opposition of “homeland” versus “exile”, what emerges is a complicated network of nationalities, loyalties, travel, education, and professional development. Most importantly, the place or places identified as “homeland” tend to shift and elide in different contexts and over time, as one accumulates more experiences and memories. What is the relationship between conceptualizations of “homeland” and the condition of displacement from one place to another? What are the effects of migration and belonging to more than one place? For answers, we must turn to conceptualizations of displacement as they have impacted the lives and work of the artists.

### **Displacement**

By definition, British artists of African, Caribbean, and Asian descent are in some sense removed from their places of geographical and family origin; yet, if there is one thing that is patently obvious from the above discussion, it is that there is a contrast between nostalgia for a lost homeland and actual complex trajectories and migrations, together with the tangled webs and networks of memories and experiences both direct (the artists themselves) and indirect (mediated via their families). The artists were originally from somewhere else, but how “originally” was defined might be a matter of one’s nationality or one’s birthplace, or those of one’s parents or even long-lost ancestors.

The extent to which and/or the manner in which these artists have experienced displacement is widely disparate. Yet, the concept of displacement continues to have force as a badge of identity despite the fact that it is quite at odds with the realities of individual experiences and memories. Transatlantic slavery, enforced political exile,

self-imposed exile for whatever reason, and the search for economic or educational opportunities are each very different. A Caribbean sense of displacement from a now-unknowable African homeland contrasts with the subsequent displacement that follows from having arrived in post-war Britain in search of economic opportunities (a sense of displacement then exacerbated by the encounter with racism), and each would be experienced quite differently from that of an East African Asian expelled by military dictatorship or civil war, a West African who chose relocation to Britain for reasons of economic or professional security, or a South African who had to escape the tyranny of apartheid. The fact that all were immigrants at some stage neither makes them any less British, nor should it obscure the oversimplification inherent in the very concept of immigrant. In addition, some of the artists' trajectories entail more than one of these circumstances

Moreover, for some artists there is no way back to that point of origin, others choose not to go back, whilst yet others seem to prefer a transhumant shuttle between alternative locations. Sonia Boyce, Eddie Chambers, Keith Piper, and Steve McQueen are examples of those for whom finding a way back to their African ancestry is impossible; Godfried Donkor, Zineb Sedira, and Yinka Shonibare choose not to return, whilst Sokari Douglas Camp has established residency in more than one place simultaneously. Camp has moved regularly between Nigeria and Britain since she was in boarding school. She has frequently described herself as an 'airmail child,' posted to England for her education and posted back to Nigeria to be with her family (Barnwell 2001, 163). Although this was originally seen as a temporary consequence of her overseas education, as an adult she continues to reside in England and return to Buguma at least every two years. Being in transit has become an integral part of her life (Barnwell 2001, 162).

What emerges here is that the notion of displacement is overtly simple but in reality a variable complex of ideas. In some cases the reality from which an artist is alienated turns out to be an essentially nostalgic image to which no return is possible, as seems to be the case for Allan deSouza, Veronica Ryan, and Mary Evans.<sup>46</sup> In others, there is a place to return to but returning is impeded by the knowledge or the suspicion that there would be no way of finding patronage for the kind of work one produces, or a lack of political and/or economic stability, or perhaps because the UK is now a more familiar and thus comfortable place. Examples include Oladele Bamgboye, Yinka Shonibare, and Godfried Donkor, all of who trained and established successful careers in Britain, and for whom returning to their countries of birth would likely present many professional challenges, not to mention difficulties relocating families and leaving friends behind.

The human species is characterized by its migratory nature, as archaeology has amply documented. Modern transportation has sped up such movement and, along with communication and information technologies, effectively collapsed great distances. Displacement is not only the situation of immigrants and racial minorities. This is especially true in a capital city like London. If displacement is a life-altering and traumatic experience, then a great percentage of the population in London and many other parts of Britain have experienced the uneasiness, anxiety, and grief that is supposed to result. The contemporary art scene is filled with foreign-born Western artists, and unless specific references to nationality are made in their work, these artists are not perceived to be struggling with their displacement from Germany or Sweden, for example.

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<sup>46</sup> See pp. 97 and 132-134; see also pp. 200 and 214-215.

Displacement is not, then, exclusively an act of migration or a physical move from one place to the next. There is a significant distinction between the experience of and longing for rootedness, and the broader circumstances of migration and transhumance. This distinction is based as much in the great cultural differences between Western and non-Western societies as it is in the geographical differences in countries, landscapes, and climates. Conceptualizations of displacement are also used to describe feelings of disorientation or alienation resulting from one's experience of and familiarity with a different language (leading to communication barriers), system of education, legal system, set of social values (such as etiquette or fashion), or other cultural factors. These feelings are exacerbated by the historical traumas of imperialism, colonialism, and slavery. Alienation due to racism is caused specifically by discrimination in education, employment, housing, and institutions such as the police, government, or media. Displacement is further emphasized by the noticeable physical distinctiveness of non-Western peoples from those of European descent, their classification as "ethnic minorities," and inherited racial prejudices and stereotypes.

In some cases, cultural alienation is mitigated by the imprint of British institutions, infrastructure, and media upon former colonial nations. Yinka Shonibare grew up in the big, bustling urban metropolis of Lagos, and has never been to a rural African village. He says, 'I watched the same television programmes as everyone else (in Britain)!' (Shonibare 2002). Much more often, however, expectations of the "Mother Country" served only to confuse and disappoint newly arrived immigrants. This was true of African, Caribbean, and Asian people moving to Britain but also of British-born people returning to the "homelands" of their parents.

If both individual and communal identity is constructed and lived through place,<sup>47</sup> then it follows that displacement from the place in which one resides and/or one's place of origin is a necessarily life-altering and even traumatic experience. Referencing the past is a means of creating stability during change, especially if the change is one of physical displacement. People who have experienced a significant change in their lived place as a result of moving often maintain emotional and psychological connections to a "homeland" other than the one in which they presently live. Magdalene Odundo's installation for *Acknowledged Sources* at the Russell-Cotes Museum and Gallery (Bournemouth, 2001) communicates some of the disruption, confusion, and homesickness she experienced when she came to Britain as a young student and her attempts to personalize her new surroundings with objects and possessions brought from Kenya.<sup>48</sup> Allan deSouza, Zarina Bhimji, and Zineb Sedira have similarly explored their experiences of migration and displacement.

Place, location, and dislocation are recurring themes in Allan deSouza's work, and he attributes this as a consequence of his own moves throughout his life (DeSouza 2001). He explains, 'I was born in a British colony [Kenya], to parents who had earlier migrated from a Portuguese colony [Goa; now part of India]; we subsequently migrated to England. My parents later moved to Portugal, my children to Ireland, and myself to America' (DeSouza 2001). His work often concerns the places he is in or has just left. He says, 'I feel "at home" in a number of places, but do not feel a particular sense of belonging to any one place. Maybe that is also connected to loss, and that one is always leaving' (DeSouza 2001). He expresses attachments to these various 'home[s],' and feelings of loss when he has left them, as well as not 'belonging' to any one of them more than another.

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<sup>47</sup> See pp. 213-214.

<sup>48</sup> See p. 90.

For his 2001 solo exhibition *Recent Works* at the Talwar Gallery in New York, deSouza showed several light-boxes from his ongoing *Terrain* and *Cityscape* series, C-print photographs of small tabletop assemblages of sand, glass, wood, wires, and even the artist's own hair and nail clippings. Enlarged to canvas-sized proportions, the images are created worlds, desert vistas and urban skylines. In the case of *Terrain #7* (1999; Fig. 3.7), the landscape, which features tufts of his hair, is literally and physically part of him. In *Ed Goes East* (2001; Fig. 3.8), deSouza uses computer parts to signify industrial sprawl, with small fiery explosions alluding to terrorist activity, which he experienced during visits to Northern Ireland over the previous five years.

DeSouza comments,

I am interested in the histories and mythologies of places, and how it is partly through those that we engage with a place, in the way NY or LA have a familiarity from film and TV, even for someone who has never been to either place. And also how those histories and mythologies are viewed or constructed through the lens of ideology, e.g. of nationalism or patriotism, so that we may feel a sense of belonging to particular landscapes, or come to think of the land almost as an extension of our sense of self (and be prepared to wage war on its behalf), (DeSouza 2001).

With these words, deSouza inquires about a phenomenological understanding of place as it relates to feelings of belonging and patriotism. He brings his own peripatetic experiences to bear on his and others' relationships to places and landscapes that are new but quite possibly not foreign, due to exposure through the media. This exposure is another aspect of the cultural familiarity that Yinka Shonibare described watching British television programmes in Lagos as a child. Whilst the photographs in *Recent Works* did not reference migration directly, their investigation of the significance of place and landscape to identity and belonging, as well as patriotism and violence, correlates with concepts of displacement.

In his *Threshold* (1996-1998) photographic series, deSouza addresses the movement of migration and displacement more directly. The photographs capture

spaces of travel and transportation, like airport halls, bus terminals and train station waiting rooms, all devoid of people. Normally bustling with travellers, the lack of human presence forces the viewer into a closer encounter with the architecture and the space itself. These are the liminal spaces between departing one place and arriving in another, and suggest the excitement and anticipation of the journey as well as the anxiety, sadness, and loss of leaving. In his *Terrain*, *Cityscape*, and *Threshold* series, deSouza explores how the act of moving from one place to the next effects one's physical as well as psychological relationships with one's surroundings. Within these contexts, deSouza inquires into why we decide to move in the first place, how as human beings we interact with a place by engaging with its 'history and mythology', and how places themselves accrue "personalities" that we can feel when living in them.

Zarina Bhimji also mines her migratory history and memories of the trauma associated with exile. For a 1992 exhibition at the Ikon Gallery in Birmingham, Bhimji created *I Will Always Be Here* (1992; Fig. 3.9) by hanging partially burned children's *kurtas* (traditional Indian tunics) from the ceiling in a pattern that resembled the flying formation of migrating birds. She comments that the work investigates feelings of loss, and the shirts are in flight because they are trying to escape out of the door. She explains:

[The work was] in fact inspired by the book *Poetics of Space* [by Gaston Bachelard] where they [*sic*] talked about wardrobes and spaces. I was amazed when I first read that because I remember hiding in the wardrobe as a child...The idea is that the shirts have all flown out of the wardrobe like angry children, (Flood, Fogle, and Dewan 1997, 29).

Using the *kurta* as a metaphor for her childhood self and a signifier of her heritage, Bhimji addresses her personal experiences of migration, and the anger, fear, and frustration she and others felt as exiled children.

Zineb Sedira documents her migratory experiences in *On a Winter's Night a Traveller* (2003; Fig. 3.10), a video work comprised of seven video screens hung side by side that record various stages of a journey from London to Algeria by airplane. On the different screens, the viewer gazes through the camera's lens over the plane's wing as it pulls away from the departure gate in rainy England, into the clouds during the journey over Europe and North Africa, and into the sunshine as the plane lands in Algeria. The climatic changes not only underscore the shift in environments from one to the next, but also allude to much broader differences in the countries and their continents. Sedira's recording of her personal journey is representative of many journeys, not just her own or even her family members', but journeys across time and space that have resulted from colonization, independence, political violence and socio-economic upheaval. Yet the viewer's experience of *On a Winter's Night a Traveller* is a tranquil one. There are no people either oppressing or protesting oppression; in fact there are no people in the work at all. There are very few indications of place; one cannot see any of either the English or Algerian landscape and very little of either country's airport architecture. It is as if all of this difficult history is absorbed into the commonplace, even routine, facts that define Sedira's circumstances.

Sedira has also written about her migration from France to England and its ramifications on her sense of identity and relationship to colonial history:

Arriving in London, it was 1986. A further displacement (from Algeria to France) occurred. Zineb—an Algerian, Arab, Muslim, French, African, Maghrebi, beurette.<sup>49</sup> I started to be very much aware that Britain, compared with France, entertained a different sense of difference, born from its own historical experience of Empire building and closely aligned to notions of race and colour. Coming from France, it felt alien to encounter monitoring of race, ethnicity. Filling in forms created a mixture of unease. Was this a form of surveillance? I came to learn that the British post-war system of racialization

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<sup>49</sup> *Beurette* is a feminine version of *beur*, a French slang word for "Arab."

reproduced a particular dualistic white/black colonial code of subordination and domination. It came in the wake of colour-based exclusion, discrimination, and so on. I could not place myself in this binary black/white racialization. Growing up everyday: “*Les arabes, ils sont dégoûtants.*” (Arabs, they are disgusting.) Crude, humiliating, painful. Now white? My new home, (Sedira 2005, 69).

After the taunts of her childhood in France, Sedira found in London that British conceptualizations of race and ethnicity were based on a hierarchy of skin colour and features that placed her closer to the top than the bottom. This did not make her more comfortable, however. On the contrary, full disclosure of race on school forms and job applications felt invasive and she feared governmental and institutional discrimination. Sedira felt different and displaced.

Displacement is also associated with missing the geographical locale of one’s personal, familial, or cultural past, and the attendant feelings of loss and nostalgia that result. These feelings are often conflated with memories, actual as well as imagined, and ancestral legends. Some artists demonstrate the need to (re)claim and remember their past in this way. Their work reflects a longing for the past, but more importantly for the *places* of the past, and their artistic practice affords them a method of its recovery. Their reconstruction of place is personalized through idealized memory (personal or collective, or both) and nostalgic yearning rather than constructed as a result of being lived in. Place continues to form a basic part of their identity whilst they also formulate the identity of place, all from a point of removal. Zarina Bhimji and Steve McQueen conjure visions of their literal and familial homelands in order to delve into the histories of colonialism and post-colonial trauma that resulted in the displacement of themselves and their families and ancestors. These works also evoke the pain of loss and the nostalgia for lands lost to them.

Zarina Bhimji’s film *Out of Blue* (2002; Fig. 3.11) is a reverie of lush mountain landscapes juxtaposed with scorched warehouses and desolate jail cells.

Each shot is devoid of people, who are only indicated in the abstract by empty rooms, cast-off shoes, or guns stacked along a wall. With a soundtrack that is a collage of thunder, gunshot, crackling fire, Muslim calls to prayer, the voice of singer Adiba Parveen, and radio broadcasts announcing the 1972 exile of Asians, the viewer pieces together a non-linear narrative of the effects of violence, dictatorship, and upheaval upon Uganda. Bhimji has said that it is both an expression and an examination of the stress and grief resulting from the historical events that precipitated enormous personal changes in the lives of Ugandans, including herself (Bhimji 2003). As a result of Idi Amin's proclamations, Bhimji and her family went into hiding for two terrifying years, and eventually escaped to England. *Out of Blue* is both a record of the trauma and loss experienced through exile, and a tribute to the sights, sounds, and memories of the country of her birth.

In an earlier work for the 1997 exhibition *No Place (Like Home)* at the Walker Arts Center in Minneapolis, Bhimji made little girl's dresses from maps to explore a child's interpretation of herself in relation to cartography, to the mapping of and nation-building around landscapes and territories, and what it feels like to shift from one to another. The child's perspective adds the pain of confusion and helplessness to the trauma of displacement forced by the threat of violence. These feelings would have been exacerbated upon arrival in Britain. From the time of their 1972 expulsion, Ugandan Asians began arriving in Britain as refugees. 27,000 refugees arrived in September and October 1972 alone, and throughout 1973 they were urged to settle outside of designated "red areas," considered overpopulated by immigrants (Thompson 1997, 153). The Bhimjis' 1974 arrival in Leicester coincided with mounting xenophobia and difficulties for Asian immigrants. In Leicester, twenty-six National Front candidates ran for election to the local council in May 1973; Asian

workers at Imperial Typewriter Works called a strike in May 1974 (Thompson 1997, 154). The young Zarina, in addition to being expelled from her land of birth, must have perceived a less-than-enthusiastic welcome from her newly adopted country from reports in the media and local events. Her installation for *No Place (Like Home)* underscores her experience of displacement as a young girl, and recovers those feelings and memories twenty-three years later.

For Steve McQueen, memories of leaving the Caribbean for Britain are not his personally, but those of his parents and extended family members. In his film *Carib's Leap* (2002), McQueen juxtaposes idyllic island scenes of sea, sand, and tropical sun with unsettling shots of people falling through a cloudy atmosphere in a circular narrative. The people in the sunshine and frolicking on the beach are McQueen's family and friends during visits to his parents' homeland of Grenada, whilst the other scenes refer to a legend of the indigenous Caribs of the island who leapt to their deaths rather than surrender to French colonial forces in 1651. To this day, the cliffs are known as Sauteurs ("jumpers") in French and as Carib's Leap in English. The images of falling people, a hopeless act of suicide, represent a defiant refusal to be conquered. Their freedom cost them their lives, and the French settlers took over the island and imported slave labour for indigo, tobacco, coffee, cocoa, sugar, and cotton plantations.

The scenes in McQueen's film of contemporary Grenadians are like postcards from a tropical paradise, but they also convey an aimlessness borne of limited economic opportunity and relatively recent political instability. Grenadians of African descent have inherited a history of colonialism, slavery, and exploitation, and in *Carib's Leap* their circumstances are compared and contrasted with those of the indigenous islanders four centuries ago. The picture that emerges is emotionally

complex. McQueen does not attempt to idealize Grenada or eulogize the leapers as brave heroes, although these impressions do play a part in the overall reception of the work. The silence, or complete lack of soundtrack, and the slow speed of the film makes for haunting, even oppressive viewing. McQueen feels that it describes a ‘longing—for something that is not there’ (McQueen 2002). For the leapers, the anguish is borne of hopelessness and death. For the Grenadians, it is something even less tangible; perhaps it is weight of the history of slavery and oppression, or the island’s continued economic dependence on other countries that leave it vulnerable to invasions (like that of the US in 1983) or to political corruption and money laundering. Like Bhimji’s *Out of Blue*, *Carib’s Leap* is a lyrical tribute to the country, its landscape, and its people, yet it is full of a sense of loss, both of place and of lives.

Some artists do not represent nostalgia for a lost place; rather, they focus on their experiences in their current location, i.e. Britain, with a critical gaze. Experiences of prejudice and racism, and the attendant limitations on personal and professional development, are a direct result of being noticeably physically different. Displacement, then, is expressed in a sense of not belonging to the place in which one currently resides or claims citizenship. Mary Evans has described how her experiences in Amsterdam made her feel stateless, because she had such difficulty establishing her British nationality. In this case, her feelings of displacement stemmed from feeling as though she was *out* of place, and served as the catalyst for her *Standard* flag paintings.<sup>50</sup>

Keith Piper was raised and educated in Birmingham from a very young age, and has lived in the UK for all of his adult life. Much of his work, especially during the 1980s, is a rigorous and overt critique of racism that explores the legacy of

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<sup>50</sup> See pp. 148-150.

slavery, oppression, and stereotypes experienced by people of colour in the West. In *Go West Young Man* (1987; Fig. 3.2),<sup>51</sup> Piper employs photomontage and text to indict the culture in which he lives for its oppression of people of African descent through stereotyped representations of black bodies. Beginning with the phrase ‘Go west young man’, which was originally coined in the mid-nineteenth century to encourage young American men during an age of westward expansion, Piper uses the words ironically to illustrate an image of a slave ship. Subsequent panels catalogue the ways in which male and female black bodies were exploited for their strength to labour and reproduce, as well as exoticized as oversexed. In part two, entitled “Mother Country,” Piper describes white Britons’ fear of black people mingled with sexual fantasy as ‘a nexus of sex and savagery.’ The work’s narrative is a series of letters from son to father that describe the younger man’s distress at these attitudes, and his feelings of rejection in face of criminalization in his “Mother Country.”

Whilst these experiences refer to his Afro-Caribbean heritage, in later works Piper relates more directly to his lived experience in England. For example, in his 1997 exhibition *Relocating the Remains* (London, Institute of International Visual Arts), he comments on the ‘re-segregation of urban space’ through racialized forms of surveillance and police profiling (Mercer 1997, 78). In the catalogue’s forward, David Chandler and Gilane Tawadros outline the three themes of the exhibition: ‘UnMapped,’ the perceptions of the black body under the dominant gaze, ‘UnRecorded,’ the gaps in historical narratives that continue to distort and obscure black presence, and ‘UnClassified,’ the impact of technologies of surveillance and policing on the community, the nation, and cultural difference (Chandler and Tawadros 1997, 4). *Reckless Eyeballing* (1995; Fig. 3.12) is a video and laser disk

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<sup>51</sup> See pp. 209 and 282-283.

installation activated when gallery-goers approach one of three lecterns. The projected images of black people and soundtracks thus activated explore historical, as well as recent, surveillance of the black male, and episodes of violence triggered by their supposed transgressions. The title refers to 1950s southern American term that simultaneously forbids black people to look at white people, especially black males at white women, and claims outrage if they are judged to be looking. Piper explores historical examples of oppression, but through his use of new technologies and media, also alludes to similar contemporary practices by governments and police forces. It is about watching, and being watched, with the black subject consistently criminalized.

Chris Ofili has, in recent work, explored themes of fantasy, paradise, and liberation that refer to Africa as a spiritual homeland. By limiting his palette to the red, black, and green of the pan-African flag, Ofili invokes ‘African nationalism and black unity—there’s a connection with Marcus Garvey in the 1920s, the Black Panthers and militant political groups in the 1970s and 1960s’ (Jonathan Jones, “Paradise Reclaimed,” *The Guardian*, 15 June 2002). He elaborates on the references to paradise and liberation by taking, as a starting point, ‘Marcus Garvey’s idea of Africa as paradise, the land of plenty where black people could go to no longer be oppressed,’ (Ofili and Golden 2003). The first four paintings of the *Paradise* series were included in his solo exhibition *Freedom One Day* at London’s Victoria Miro Gallery in 2002, and feature a man and woman together in a tropical paradise. Ofili’s inspiration for the vision developed from an image he found on a hanger from a dry-cleaner’s and sketches he made during a trip to Puerto Rico, Trinidad, and Grenada. He expanded the idea further for his installation *Within Reach* for the Venice Biennale in 2003, and made a series of paintings and works on paper that he exhibited in a pavilion designed in collaboration with architect David Adjaye. Together, the

architecture and the works create a fantasy world infused by red, black, and green in which the couple embrace.

The four paintings, *Afro Love and Envy* (2002-2003; Fig. 3.13), *Afro Red Web* (2002-2003; Fig. 3.14), *Afro Jezebel* (2002-2003; Fig. 3.15), and *Afro Apparition* (2003) portray the elegantly attired couple in idyllic, tropical surroundings, but both the titles and the images hint at trouble in paradise. Ofili explains, 'These pictures have developed from the group I showed in *Freedom One Day* in that, for me, on reflection there is more feeling of threat in these pictures' (Ofili and Golden 2003). In *Afro Love and Envy*, a snake drops from a palm tree on to the woman's shoulder, an allusion to the dangers of temptation and jealousy as well as the Biblical legend of Adam and Eve. In *Afro Red Web* and *Afro Jezebel*, Ofili paints an ambiguity into the stability of the couple's union. In *Afro Red Web*, he explains that:

...into the frame have come some possibilities of threat. In this case, they're in a web, a red web. I was thinking about being a fly caught in a web, and ultimately if you see a web there is a spider around and the chance of getting bitten is present. In this painting, the woman is the passive one, she is less aware of the situation, whereas he is either part of the web or he is the predator, (Ofili and Golden 2003).

The dynamic is reversed in *Afro Jezebel*, in which 'the man is more engrossed in the embrace, and she's got this double vision, looking at him and looking out with two faces' (Ofili and Golden 2003). Ofili's vision of a fantasy paradise, although inspired by the tropical climes of Africa and the Caribbean and Black Nationalism that eulogizes them as such, is not blindly optimistic. Whilst recognizing an historical need for such dialogue growing out of dissention to racism and oppression, he does not look upon escape to paradise—mythical or actual—as a final solution. He explains:

It is why I don't firmly position Africa as paradise. I think we've gone through enough experience to know the myth of Africa as a paradise isn't the case...For those that have been to Africa, it's not paradise it's just another

country [*sic*] with great beauty and great tragedy. But at the same time it can be seen as the motherland, historically and biblically, as the beginning of everything, (Ofili and Golden 2003).

Ofili moves beyond actual place altogether to create a world of fantasy that recognizes its roots in the frustrations of displaced people of African descent in Europe and the Americas.

In their work, these artists describe the consequences of migration, transhumance, nostalgia, and occasionally, trauma experienced as a result of personal, familial, or ancestral displacement. The locus of displacement, that is, the place for which feelings of nostalgia, longing, and loss are expressed, can entail both physical places or conceptual ideas attached to memories, both actual and imagined, as well as legends and even myths. Of those who evoke an actual geographical locale, most draw from their own migratory experiences. They articulate some of the phenomenological aspects of place by delving into the sensory experiences of living in a certain environment through the lens of dislocation. The artists' work that expresses a more conceptual notion of place is characterized by feelings of nostalgia and loss, and the search to recover lost memory. Some artists evince a sense of displacement as a state of feeling *out* of place and not fitting in, despite having lived in Britain for most, if not all, of their lives. They express an experience of their estranged "homeland" through their location in and consequent acculturation (to a certain extent) to a Western lifeworld.

The artists' conceptualization of place and landscape is informed by the ideologies and experiences of both (or multiple) lifeworlds, to which they remain connected through memories, tradition, and heritage. Some seem to search for a lost place or sense of belonging, whilst others examine their experience of the British environment. Feelings of estrangement or alienation from the British places they

inhabit may be a result of their marginalization from mainstream British society, either through the preservation of their original culture in insular communities, or as a result of racism.

Displacement is a “catch-all” term that is used to encompass hugely various trajectories of experience. Furthermore, whilst many of these artists engage with ideas surrounding the importance of place to personal, familial, and cultural identity, not all of them do. Notions of displacement have been closely associated with black British art since the 1980s, in exhibitions such as *Heart in Exile* (Black-Art Gallery, 1983) and *From Two Worlds* (Whitechapel Art Gallery, 1986), and in academic publications.<sup>52</sup> Yet artists’ responses to experiences related to dis-location from various homelands represent widely diverse perspectives and are based in personal interpretations of such concepts. Such an engagement with place is significant not only because of one’s non-European origins, but also because it is such a crucial human experience.

### **Diaspora**

“Diaspora” is an ancient term originally used to describe the dispersion of Jews beyond Israel. The word derives from the Greek for a scattering or sowing of seeds, thus implying dispersal. In contemporary discourse, diaspora describes the settlement of any group of people outside of their point of origin. With the acknowledgement that, scientifically, the origin of modern human beings was in southern Africa, “point of origin” is here understood as ancestral, or possibly familial. Thus the African diaspora comprises people of African descent wherever they are now located throughout the world. The best-known locations include North and South America, the Caribbean, and Europe, especially those countries with histories of

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<sup>52</sup> See pp. 17-18 and 36-38.

imperialism and transatlantic slavery. There are also more recent social, political, and economic factors encouraging movement out of Africa. Substantial populations of Africans and descendants of Africans have been living in Britain for at least two hundred years.<sup>53</sup>

There are a variety of other diasporas represented in Britain. Significant numbers of immigrants from Southeast Asia settled in the UK after 1960. In 1979, large numbers of Vietnamese refugees arrived in Britain (Thompson 1997, 156). In 1989, the British government granted UK citizenship to 225,000 Hong Kong immigrants (Thompson 1997, 163). In the last twenty-five years, the term “black British” has evolved to identify communities and people of African and Afro-Caribbean origin, sometimes of Asian descent, and occasionally to encompass everyone of non-European heritage. In the broader sense, “black” represents the moral condition of being subject to racial prejudice. The term “diaspora” is often employed to distinguish between the various homelands of these communities, but there is a danger of these concepts being conflated. Historical and personal circumstances are different for each individual, and using “diaspora” as a monolithic term to imply a homogeneous community is both inadequate and misleading.

There are disparities of race, nationality, heritage, language, and religion within this categorization. In addition, generation must be taken into account. For someone like Sonia Boyce, who was born in London to Barbadian and Guyanese parents and who has lived her entire life in the UK, “immigrant” cannot be an appropriate description. For Trinidadians, Jamaicans, and Barbadians, the general term “Caribbean” is not very descriptive of their particular heritage. Yet in Britain, this diversity is often ignored, and they are perceived of as one group. They have been

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<sup>53</sup> See Appendix A.

lumped together by politicians, academics, and media pundits. Paradoxically, they have added to this perception by grouping themselves into community organizations, political movements, and art exhibitions under a black British banner.

Clearly, there is more than one diaspora in Britain. In fact there are many, of diverse origins and spanning generations of elites, slaves, servants, immigrants, and their descendants. In addition to these differences, one must reckon with the varieties of West, East, and South African, Caribbean, Southeast and East Asian, and British diasporas. Ultimately, a reference to “diaspora” in any context (political, historical, artistic, etc.) signifies residing in one place whilst being from somewhere else. Often, all of Britain’s various diasporas have been united as “black” or “black British.” Conceptualizations of diaspora and its problematic conflation with the term “black (British)” have been and continue to be used to represent all of these nationalities, heritages, and backgrounds.

Historically, these various diasporas have been delineated by community activist groups organized around common interests or to fight discrimination. The Black Parent’s Movement of the 1970s was based in north London and represented the concerns of a group of West Indian parents that their children suffered deprivation as the result of prejudice in British schools, and thus united parents from several Caribbean countries. In 1976, the Southall Youth Movement was formed in the Asian community of southeast London in response to a race-related murder in the neighbourhood (Thompson 1997, 155). These groups were community associations of people from a particular diaspora: Trinidadian, West Indian, and South Asian. In the case of Trinidadians, the situation is complicated by the fact that there were communities of indentured labourers from India in places like Trinidad and Guyana.

Of course, these groups often joined together to form larger ones that represented more pluralistic communities, such as the Campaign Against Racial Discrimination, which was created in 1964 from the unification of the West Indian Standing Conference, Indian Worker's Association of Great Britain, and National Federation of Pakistani Association. The Organization of Women of Asian and African Descent was founded to 1978 at Warwick University to address British political issues such as prejudice in the educational system, immigration policies, and police brutality (Thompson 1997, 156).

The history of art's relationship to diaspora in Britain has its roots in the influx of immigrants from Africa, Asia, and the Caribbean after World War II through the 1970s. Artists like Ronald Moody, Aubrey Williams, Uzo Egonu, and Frank Bowling were initially independent from diasporic artist organizations, which did not exist when they first arrived in the UK.<sup>54</sup> It was not until the 1960s that Africa, Asian, and Caribbean artists in Britain started forming support groups. From the 1960s through the 1980s, such groups articulated the various diasporas represented by artists of non-European descent. The Caribbean Artists Movement in London (1966-1972) brought together visual artists and writers who had migrated from all over the West Indies.<sup>55</sup> The Drum Arts Centre organization was founded in London by Zimbabwe-born John Mapondera to promote the arts and culture of African and Caribbean people in Britain in 1974. Ibrahim Wagh, Yeshwant Mali, Lancelot Ribeiro and Balraj Khanna founded the London-based Indian Artists United Kingdom in 1977 from the previous members of the Indian Painters Collective (1964) to promote the work of South Asian artists.

From 1981 to 1984, a group of young British artists of African and Caribbean descent known at different times as Wolverhampton Young Black Artists, the BLK

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<sup>54</sup> See pp. 20-29.

<sup>55</sup> See pp. 29-31.

Art Group, and the Pan-Afrikan Connection collaborated on eleven different exhibitions from the West Midlands to London. Members included Eddie Chambers, Dominic Dawes, Andrew Hazell, Claudette Johnson, Wenda Leslie, Ian Palmer, Keith Piper, Donald Rodney, Marlene Smith, and Janet Vernon (Tawadros and Clarke 1999, 132). In 1983, Indian Artists United Kingdom merged with and became the Indian Arts Council (1983) after the death of its founder, the Sri Lankan poet and editor Tambimuttu. The IAC opened the Horizon Gallery on Marchmont Street in London in 1987 as the visual branch of the council, and from 1987 to 1991, held exhibitions and events showcasing the work of British Southeast Asian, Indian, and European artists. The Organization for Black Art Advancement and Leisure Activities (OBAALA) was founded in 1983, and opened the Black-Art Gallery in London's Finsbury Park to showcase work by artists of African and Afro-Caribbean descent. For the members of OBAALA, "Black" did not include people of Asian or any other non-European descent.<sup>56</sup>

The use of "black" to describe British art and artists, however, would expand throughout the eighties to encompass most, if not all, of the various diasporas represented in Britain. As in areas of politics and community activism, people of diverse origins began to unite based on the difficulties they faced due to their skin colour and/or non-Western heritage. The Black Audio Film Collective was formed in 1982 in London by John Akomfrah, Reece Auguiste, Edward George, Lina Goupal, Avril Johnson, David Lawson, and Trevor Mathison. From 1982 to 1998, the group produced documentaries such as *Handsworth Songs* (1986) and *Testament* (1988) that explore themes of diaspora, memory, and political struggle. In 1983, Martina Attille, Maureen Blackwood, Isaac Julien, and Nadine Marsh-Edwards formed Sankofa Film

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<sup>56</sup> See pp. 36-37.

and Video; the group produced films like *Territories* (1984), featuring aggressive policing at London's Carnival in Notting Hill, and *The Passion of Remembrance* (1986), which examines black feminism and black gay politics. Autograph, the Association of Black Photographers, was formed in 1988 with Rotimi Fani-Kayode as its first chair; a coalition of South Asian, African, and Caribbean photographers in Britain, Autograph continues to promote its programme of exhibitions, publications, and advocacy to the present day. Other groups serving more specific diasporas continued to emerge, like the Hounslow Asian Visual Collective (HAVAC) in southwest London in 1985 and Panchayat: South-East Asian Arts, an arts and education information resource in 1988.

Along with the support and advocacy these groups provided to their various constituencies, they also promoted the work of British diasporic artists through exhibitions. Before the activism and community organization of the late seventies and early eighties, such exhibitions were relatively rare. In 1969, the Hampstead Arts Council organized *Contemporary African Art* at the Camden Arts Centre and included work by Uzo Egonu. Many artists of African, Caribbean, and Asian descent exhibited together at the Commonwealth Institute. Exhibitions like the *Commonwealth Biennale of Abstract Art* (1963), *Eight Commonwealth Artists* (1973), and *Commonwealth Artists of Fame 1952-1977* (1977) showcased the work of Aubrey Williams (who won the Biennale prize in 1963) and Ronald Moody.

The Commonwealth, however, was much too broad of a coalition to adequately represent and cater to the needs of artists of the various diasporas in Britain by the 1970s. At the Commonwealth Institute, exhibitions began to represent more specific demographics. For example, 1971's *Caribbean Artists in England* was largely instigated by the Caribbean Artists Movement. Established artists Aubrey

Williams and Ronald Moody participated along with other younger artists like Winston Branch, Art Derry, and Althea McNish. Later in 1985, the Commonwealth Institute exhibition *Three Asian Artists* focused specifically on the work of Said Adrus, Sardul Gill, and Gurminder Kaur Sikand.

At the same time, various mainstream art institutions became more interested in displaying such work. Over the course of the next two decades, exhibitions proliferated under various curatorial strategies. Many specifically named the diasporas represented by the artists in the exhibitions and introduced various diasporic identities to the British public. A selection of exhibition titles illustrates the emergence of these terms; use of the term “black” varied to specify African, Caribbean, Asian, or non-European diasporas. Throughout the eighties and into the nineties, the proliferation of exhibitions by these artists, especially shows of “black” art by “black” artists, precludes the possibility of naming them all.

Some of the earliest examples include *Afro-Caribbean Art* at London’s Warehouse Gallery in 1978 organized by the Drum Arts Centre and *Afro-Caribbean Exhibition* at Birmingham’s Midlands Arts Centre in 1980. Eddie Chambers and Keith Piper curated *Black Art an’ Done* at the Wolverhampton Art Gallery in 1981. *The Pan-Afrikan Connection: An Exhibition of Work by Young Black Artists* opened at the Africa Centre in London in 1982 and toured to Birmingham, Bristol, Nottingham, and Coventry. In 1986, *Caribbean Expressions in Britain* at the Leicestershire Museum and Art Galleries in Leicester and *Black Edge: Afro-Caribbean Photography in Britain* at the Mappin Art Gallery in Sheffield specifically stated in their titles that the artists were Caribbean but *in Britain*. *Third World Within: Cross-Section of Work by Afro-Asian Artists in Britain* at the Brixton Art Gallery, London, also in 1986, and 1989’s *The Other Story: Afro-Asian Artists in Post-War*

*Britain* at London's Hayward Gallery used the term "Afro-Asian" to combine African, Caribbean, and Asian diasporas. By the late 1980s, "black art" exhibitions expanded to include artists of diasporas beyond African and Caribbean. Eddie Chambers included artists of South Asian and even Chinese descent in his 1988 exhibition *Black Art: Plotting the Course*, organized in collaboration with the Oldham Art Gallery, the Wolverhampton Art Gallery, and the Bluecoat Gallery, Liverpool.

As the eighties segued into the nineties, there were fewer exhibition titles that specified national heritage or diaspora. There were still exhibitions that showcased the work of a particular diasporic group, such as *Passion: Blackwomen's Creativity of the African Diaspora* curated by Lubaina Himid at The Elbow Room in 1989. Of all the exhibition titles surveyed, *Passion* is the only one to specifically use the term "diaspora." Whilst some of Himid's other exhibitions had included artists of Asian descent as well as men, for *Passion* she chose works by women of African descent and in so doing, highlighted their common origins and their relocation. By the early 1990s, exhibition titles began to reflect the exploration of certain themes or media rather than diasporic identities or affiliations. In 1997, the same year as *Transforming the Crown* in New York, the Yale University Art Gallery in New Haven, Connecticut presented *Unmapped Body: Three Black British Artists* showcasing the work of Sutapa Biswas, Sonia Boyce, and Keith Piper.

This litany of organizations and titles is by no means exhaustive, but indicates the ways in which conceptualizations of diaspora were articulated by and concerning artists of African, Caribbean, and Asian diasporas who were living in the UK from the sixties through the nineties. Encouraged by the politicization, organization, and advocacy of various diasporic communities in Britain, these artists began associating and exhibiting together. As a result, the practice of using "black" to describe art and

artists from all of these diasporas became more common. In the 1980s, this trend coincided with the maturation into adulthood of a number of second-generation immigrants, who identified with Britain as much as with their parent's homelands. In this way, a multiplicity of diasporas became collectively known as "black Britain."

In these artistic contexts, conceptualizations of diaspora are based on continually shifting terrain. As with "homelands," each artist has his or her own particular relationship to "diaspora." Before the Black Art Movement happened, before its exhibitions occurred, and the attendant critical dialogue was debated, Aubrey Williams deliberately repudiated the notion of an African influence in his personal life or creative practice.<sup>57</sup> Williams chose instead to describe himself as South American. In Britain, he was a part of the Caribbean diaspora as well as the Commonwealth, as his participation in several exhibitions as well as the Caribbean Artists Movement suggest. In similar ways, diaspora is a personalized concept for many contemporary black British artists.

Allan deSouza recognizes affinities to several specific diasporas in his own history: Goan/Southeast Asian, African, and British (since his relocation to the US). He does not tend to privilege any particular one in terms of his personal identification, as his statements about homelands have indicated.<sup>58</sup> However in artistic contexts, his Asian and African heritage is often highlighted. DeSouza's participation in *The Essential Black Art*, curated by Rasheed Araeen at London's Chisenhale Gallery in 1988, is one example. Another is deSouza's representation by the Talwar Gallery in New York since its opening in 2001; all of the artists showcased by the Talwar Gallery are of Southeast Asian descent. At the College Art Association conference in February 2004, deSouza contended that the subject matter in some of his work is not

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<sup>57</sup> See pp. 23-24.

<sup>58</sup> See p. 227.

explicit, and explained that ‘to be or remain unknown is a diasporic tactic to avoid being labelled as “Other,” (DeSouza 2004). He continued, ‘It is not a question of being neither here nor there, but of being *both* here *and* there, in a simultaneity of multiplicity,’ (DeSouza 2004). He used some examples of his recent work shown in a 2003 solo show at the Talwar Gallery, *People in White Houses*, to illustrate such simultaneity.

Both *Everything West of Here Is Indian Country* (2003; Fig. 3.16) and *The Goncourt Brothers Stand Between Caesar and the Thief of Baghdad* (2003; Fig. 3.17) are constructed landscapes; one is pieced together with found objects and bits of wood, and the other is a carefully composed photograph of the Las Vegas strip. Initially, the connection of the titles to the images is obscure. DeSouza mines historical and contemporary events in a set of layered and interrelated references to politics, military actions, and power struggles over nations, peoples, and resources. Whilst both works refer to the US-led Iraq War following the September 11<sup>th</sup> terrorist attacks, they also draw parallels between World’s Fairs and contemporary imperialism. “Everything west of here is Indian country” are purported to be the words of a US Marine upon landing in Basra. *The Goncourt Brothers* is a shot of the Las Vegas strip that portrays the Tour Eiffel effigy of the Paris casino next to the Arabian turrets of the Aladdin resort, with Caesar’s Palace in the background. Caesars’ serves as a metaphor for US imperialism, and the French monument rising before Caesar and ‘the thief of Baghdad’ alludes to France’s opposition to the war. *Everything West of Here* is formally and ideologically inspired by the White City built for the 1893 World’s Columbian Exposition in Chicago, a construction designed to announce the United States’ ascendance as a world power and to upstage Paris’ 1889 Universal Exposition—for which the Tour Eiffel was erected. *The Goncourt Brothers*

portrays Las Vegas, in its celebration and reconstruction of great cultural monuments and regimes in a theme park atmosphere as a contemporary American World's Fair.

DeSouza's interpretation of the works is uniquely positioned by his relationship to Asia in terms of his heritage and the US as his place of residence; he also insists that the American viewer is implicated and involved in the 'simultaneity of multiplicity' generated by the images. The works create and sustain multiple narratives of central Asia through US foreign policy; these are 'maps of multiple, superimposed, and overlapping locations,' (DeSouza 2004). These locations, as they refer to imperial domination and contended ownership, are seen through a diasporic lens of who owns what and who belongs where, as well as the viewer's own personal perspective based on nationalism, patriotism, and shifting relationships to landscape.

As a result of her regular movement between London and Nigeria, Sokari Douglas Camp's diasporic situation is not constant. In her film *Alagba: A Water Spirit Masquerade* (1995), made and produced with Jane Thorburn, Camp narrates scenes of various masquerade performances in her home village of Buguma. Her stated aim was to create a film of Kalabari life that portrays masquerades as community-wide festivals comprised of a range of activities and participants, to counter Western perceptions of masquerades as masked performers only, or of masks as separate objects (Barnwell 2001, 215). She has also described its concept as a record of her extended holiday and her interactions with her family and events in her hometown (Barnwell 2001, 217).

In the film, Camp narrates the actions of masquerade performers, musicians, and community members' participation in support of the festivities. She is present as a villager, and interacts with other members of the community, speaking in both Kalabari and English. The film shows Camp as a member of the Nigerian diasporic

community when she is in Britain, but still perceived of as Nigerian when she is visiting her hometown. Her continued connection to Buguma has had immediate impact on her creative practice and exhibitions, as seen in her works based on Kalabari masquerade.<sup>59</sup> More recent pieces like *Sharia Fubara* (1999/2000; Fig. 3.18), completed during a residency at University of Indiana, also mine Kalabari artistic tradition as well as Nigerian current events. The central figure is positioned in front of a screen whose composition references Kalabari ancestral screens (*duein fubara*) designed by their descendents to laud their accomplishments, which serves as ironic commentary to the enforcing of Sharia law in contemporary Nigeria. Camp was inspired by the news that some state governments had acquired implements for the swift and efficient amputation of hands as a traditional punishment for stealing under Sharia law.

Kinsi Abdullah was born in Somalia and moved to Britain as a young adult after living some years in the Middle East. She is one of the estimated 15,000 Somali refugees that, according to the Refugee Council, have come to the UK since the 1988 outbreak of war in northern Somalia and Ethiopia (Sophie Goodchild, "Tide of Hatred Engulfs Somali Refugees," *The Independent* 3 September 2000). Abdullah has expressed frustration that Africans of Somali descent are often left out of representations of Africa, even those that include North and East African countries (Abdullah 2004). The fact that North Africa and Egypt have been historically separated from sub-Saharan Africa in art, history, and archaeology has been well documented. Abdullah wrote her BA dissertation at the Surrey Institute of Art and Design in Farnham on Somali art and its general perception as "not African enough" because of its Arabic and Indian influences; she explored the origins of local

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<sup>59</sup> See pp. 215-216.

techniques and their different influences due to the country's position as a multicultural port (Abdullah 2004). Even as North Africa and Egypt have begun to be included as African in institutions and exhibitions in recent years, Somalia often remains underrepresented and overlooked.

Whilst the Royal Academy's *Africa: Art of a Continent* for Africa 95 made a point of covering the entire continent and did include Somali headrests in the catalogue, Abdullah's initial impression was that Somalia was excluded. It does seem as though the headrests are scant representation of an entire country's artistic history. Even if one argues that the majority of Somali peoples are nomadic cattle-herders and therefore produce very little permanent art and architecture, art historians have documented other traditions, like jewellery, textiles, coiffure, body-painting, and saddle bags, in similarly nomadic African cultures, and some of these were included in *Africa: Art of a Continent*. Moreover, there are certainly Somali artists, both self-taught and university trained, that have emerged over the course of the last century, Abdullah being a case in point. Also organized in conjunction with Africa 95, *Seven Stories About Modern Art in Africa* at London's Whitechapel Gallery included art and artists from Sudan, Ethiopia, Kenya, and Uganda, but not Somalia. Other exhibitions have also ignored Somali artists. The recent *Africa Remix: Contemporary Art of a Continent*, which opened at the Museum Kunst Palast in Düsseldorf in 2004 and toured to London's Hayward Gallery the following year, included the work of no less than eighty-six artists. None were Somali.

Instead of positioning herself and Somali artists generally within a broad, UK-wide context, Abdullah has shifted the focus of her creative practice and administrative activities to her local community. Currently, she works at the Brady Arts Centre in Tower Hamlets, east London, as an arts officer and administrator.

Tower Hamlets has the highest concentration of Somali refugees and their families in London. She organizes events to celebrate Somali arts and culture for the local Somali community, like an evening of music, video, and fashion at the Centre in September 2004.

Similarly, Zineb Sedira fits into an Arab and an African diaspora that, until recently, seemed almost mutually exclusive. She initially understood “black” in Britain as a designation based on an African or Caribbean heritage;<sup>60</sup> it was only as the Black Art Movement developed throughout the late 1980s and early 1990s that Sedira found space for herself within that debate. She has positioned her work in contexts that highlight her North African and Arab heritage, such as *Shatat: Arab Diaspora Women Artists* curated by Salah Hassan at the University of Colorado in Boulder in 2003, and *Veil: Veiling, Representation, and Contemporary Art* organized by Sedira and Iraqi-born, UK-based artist Jananne Al-Ani in conjunction with inIVA, also in 2003.

*Shatat* showcased the work of four women artists from the Arab diaspora: Fatma Charfi, Susan Hefuna, Emily Jacir, and Sedira. Charfi is a Tunisian artist living in Switzerland; Hefuna is a German-Egyptian artist who lives in Europe and Cairo; and Jacir is a Palestinian artist based in New York. According to Hassan, ‘The major aim of the exhibition is to present contemporary work from England, Switzerland, Germany and the United States that explores this experience of diaspora through visual art practice. *SHATAT*, referenced in the exhibition’s title, is the Arabic word for diaspora, but it also means scattering or dispersal, referring to the complexity of the diaspora experience,’ (CU Art Museum—Shatat, [www.colorado.edu/cuartmuseum/shatat.html](http://www.colorado.edu/cuartmuseum/shatat.html)). The artists’ work creates and extends a

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<sup>60</sup> See pp. 230-231.

dialogue of translating cultural difference from the specific perspective of Arab women artists living in Europe and the US; Africa is coincidental rather than a unifying theme in this case.

*Veil* explores modern and contemporary images of the veil by twenty artists that portray women of North African and Middle Eastern descent who wear veils for political, social, and religious reasons. The exhibition and accompanying catalogue examine the multiplicity of veil symbolism, including Western interpretations inherited from 19<sup>th</sup> century colonialism and Orientalism. Here again Africa recedes in diasporic importance and the conceptualization of a culturally determined Arab diaspora (over national boundaries or heritages) emerges from the curatorial focus on veils.

Sedira often wonders why more Asian- or Arab-African artists, like Allan deSouza or Zarina Bhimji, have not been included in more exhibitions and programming that focus on the African diaspora (Sedira 2002). Sedira herself participates regularly in African diasporic exhibitions, such as *Authentic/Ex-centric* (2001), *A Fiction of Authenticity* (2003), *Looking Both Ways* (2003), and *Africa Remix* (2005). There are many other artists with Arab and Asian backgrounds in Africa who also participate in such group exhibitions. Algerian-born Rachid Koraïchi was one of the seven artists in *Authentic/Ex-centric*; Fatma Charfi was included in *A Fiction of Authenticity*; Allan deSouza, Ghada Amer (Egypt), and Hassan Musa (Sudan) were amongst the artists featured in *Looking Both Ways*; and nineteen artists of North African and Afro-Asian descent (including Sedira) participated in *Africa Remix*.

As a UK resident, Sedira is part of a French diaspora; however, this is not readily apparent in her practice except that French is her native language. In her video

*Mother Tongue* (2002), Sedira films three different conversations: herself and her mother, herself and her daughter, and her mother and daughter. Each of them speak their native language, which for her mother is Arabic, for Sedira is French, and for her daughter is English. Portrayed are three generations of women and three different languages. Sedira is the only one who can understand all three. Her mother and daughter cannot converse; each one's speech is unintelligible to the other. Because her mother is Algerian, and because her daughter has only lived in Britain, Sedira is the only one for whom French is her mother tongue.

Black British artists represent a multiplicity of diasporas: African, Afro-Caribbean, South Asian, Afro-Asian, French, and even British (for those who now live outside the UK). For many of these artists, their personal migrations and professional associations encompass two or more of these diasporas. If artists occasionally formed groups and organizations based on their diasporic connections in the sixties and seventies, by the 1980s, these had proliferated and often joined forces under the umbrella of "black art." Being from somewhere other than Britain, or being perceived as such because of skin colour or family background, constituted a significant unifying force in the face of racism, both within the art world and without. For the artists emerging during the 1980s and practicing today, highlighting or emphasizing a particular diaspora in the course of their professional activities is an intensely personal decision. There are certainly concrete manifestations of their connections to and associations with an African (or Caribbean, Asian, etc.) diaspora, in terms of organizations joined, exhibitions curated, or work created that specifically highlights their extra-British origins. However, one cannot make assumptions about these artists' experience of diaspora based on the simple fact of where they or their parents were born. As we have seen, each person's relationship to African, or

Caribbean, or Arab, or British communities is necessarily unique. Furthermore, how each one chooses to interpret and relate to conceptualizations of diaspora is constantly changing. As with “homelands” and “displacement,” diaspora cannot be nailed down to a singular experience or relationship; at best it can be conceived of as a slippery and constantly shifting set of ideas.

### **Identity**

For artists of non-European descent in the UK, conceptualizations of identity based on race, homelands, and diaspora are inescapable. Identity is conceived of in its pairing with difference, as in ‘who am I the *same as* versus *different from*?’ It is as much about who or what one is *not*, as it is about who or what *is*. Being and feeling different from the majority population, motivated by British/European attitudes to skin colour and/or non-European heritage, is a fact of life for these artists. Identities are based not only in self-perception, but are also constructed within social contexts that entail hierarchies of power. These artists have often been set apart in social, political, and artistic circles; in some cases they have set themselves apart as a response to perceptions of their difference. The creation of a single adjective, “black British,” as an identification to encompass a range of individual circumstances is a result of their non-white minority status and their shared histories as peoples dominated politically and economically during British colonialism.

Very soon after arriving in the UK, immigrants of African, Caribbean, and Asian descent were marked out by the white majority as different, as strangers, the “Other.” In the seventies, such perceptions served to unite these immigrant communities. The Black Art Movement during the eighties promoted their difference and the separateness that they experienced as a result. Then as now, artists did not always choose to define themselves and their creative practice in this way. Some have

avoided professional association with contexts that situate them within a non-European context, as Mary Evans did in the eighties and Chris Ofili has done since emerging from art school in the early nineties. Whatever the artists' response to their minority status, it is often conflated with their individual identity by assumptions made in the art world, the press, and academia. This perceived "Other-ness" may be more rooted in the social, political, and cultural history of Britain than the actual lived experiences of these artists.

Identity denotes a host of ideas conceptualized in different contexts. Non-European nationality, heritage, and/or race are one aspect of identity, namely the same aspect applied to categorize the "black British" sector of the population. Identity might just as well be conceived of in terms of one's local community, language, class, age, gender, sexuality, religion, or profession.<sup>61</sup> Identity-building is a complex and ongoing process, and individual identity is a result of shifting and overlapping positioning on multiple pivot points. Identification as black British is only a part of that process. The group of artists represented by such a conceptualization have divergent backgrounds within various diasporas, as well as different perspectives in terms of their generation, i.e. those who immigrated versus those born and/or raised in the UK.

How do the artists position themselves in terms of their nationality? Identity is, in part, constructed through people's living out their lives in a place and their sense of being part of it (Tilley 1994, 18). Of course, for these artists residing in their present location, whether Britain or another place, is not the only determining factor. How does ethnicity frame identity, and what are its limitations? "Ethnicity," as it is articulated in Britain, has a wide range of interpretations, including physical, national,

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<sup>61</sup> Gender and sexuality comprise pivotal points of identification, relating to histories inherited from imperial and colonial strategies of oppression as well as conceptualizations of difference. For this reason, they are examined more thoroughly in the next section.

continental, religious, and linguistic. For example, the 2001 Census for England and Wales included a remarkable eighty-six categories based on skin colour (e.g. white and black), country of origin (e.g. Polish, Chinese, Somali), continent of origin (e.g. Asian and African), and religion (e.g. Hindu and Muslim). There was also an “Arab” category, which could be based on linguistic, religious (Islamic), or geographic connections, depending on personal interpretation. Finally, there were categories under the rubric of “mixed,” which included various combinations of the other categories (National Statistics Online, [www.statistics.gov.uk](http://www.statistics.gov.uk)). Evidently, the ethnic classification of the British population is nothing if not complex, with generous room for personal interpretation. Such an interpretation is so various, subjective, and arbitrary as to render the word “ethnicity” redundant. Yet any category that is not “white” is considered part of an ethnic minority, since the majority of respondents classified their ethnic group as “white British” (National Statistics Online, [www.statistics.gov.uk](http://www.statistics.gov.uk)).<sup>62</sup>

All of this contrasts with ethnicity as a concept in ethnographic literature, which defines ethnic group as interlinked families or communities sharing a common culture and dialect which is not necessarily in itself a state, although they may recognize a common authority or leader. For artists of African descent, defining ethnicity in this way would identify them as Yoruba, Asante, and Igbo, for example. For many of these artists there is no way to recover their relationship to such a concept.<sup>63</sup> Others do have such knowledge, particularly those who came to Britain from Africa, or whose parents did. For example, Yinka Shonibare spoke Yoruba at home as a child, Barby Asante’s family name in itself is an ethnic group based in

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<sup>62</sup> Similar results were recorded for Scotland (General Register Office for Scotland, [www.gro-scotland.gov.uk](http://www.gro-scotland.gov.uk)) and Northern Ireland (Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency, [www.nisra.gov.uk](http://www.nisra.gov.uk)).

<sup>63</sup> See p. 218.

modern-day Ghana, and Magdalene Odundo has specified her heritage as Abanyala.<sup>64</sup> None of these artists, however, draw upon these specifically ethnic sources within their creative practice. One artist who does is Sokari Douglas Camp, for whom Kalabari masquerade and culture has been a constant and significant source of inspiration.<sup>65</sup>

Zarina Bhimji, born in Uganda to Indian parents, and living in Britain since 1974, is an example of the cultural diversity that can be found within the identity of a single person. She says, 'Culturally I was brought up as Indian. At the same time, I'm very different from Indians in India. And I like the idea of being Ugandan...I've always thought I was [African],' (Flood, Fogle, and Dewan 1997, 28). In 2002, she amended, or at least clarified, her feelings:

I do not want to be constricted by my homeland, especially by a nostalgic point of view. My feelings about Africa and Uganda are not exclusively positive. I am still affected by being kicked out by Amin when I was eleven. I do not feel African only, but being African gives me an alternative cultural perspective (Bhimji 2002).

In Uganda, she wore Indian clothes and spoke a different language at home than at school (Flood, Fogle, and Dewan 1997, 28). In Britain, she adjusted to another language and dress. Bhimji thus identifies with three different nationalities: Indian, Ugandan, and British.

Allan deSouza was born in Kenya to parents who were immigrants from Goa, was raised and educated in Britain from the age of nine, went to art school in New York as a postgraduate student, and now lives and works in Los Angeles. His frequent migration has caused him to forge connections with several countries and communities.<sup>66</sup> He is ambiguous about which of these places is the source of his nationality, because they all are. His recent work, *The Searchers* (2003; Fig. 3.19), is

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<sup>64</sup> See p. 72.

<sup>65</sup> See pp. 215-215 and 250.

<sup>66</sup> See p. 227.

a series of photographs of holidaymakers and their local guides in Kenya with their cameras and binoculars poised to capture their African experience in terms of its flora, fauna, and landscape. The title alludes to tourists' expectations, and implies deSouza's own feelings of longing and discovery upon returning to the land of his birth for the first time since he left as a child. DeSouza's relationship to nationality is layered, additive, and always shifting.

Unlike deSouza, Veronica Ryan has expressed feeling a connection to a European, specifically British, identity that is emphasized by her residence in the US.<sup>67</sup> In one version of his curriculum vitae, Oladele Bamgboye states his nationality as 'British.' In 1996, Kinsi Abdullah applied for an art grant in the UK but was refused because she was told she was not British, that is, born in Britain and white (Abdullah 2004). Having been a British resident since her teens, Abdullah felt confused. Was she a "refugee?" She did not feel like one (Abdullah 2004). Mary Evans' brief experience living in Nigeria did not engender a sense of identification with other Nigerians. In Amsterdam, her difficulties proving her British citizenship in order to procure a new passport made her feel as though she belonged nowhere.<sup>68</sup>

Within the complexities of identity and identity-building, national and cultural affiliations have multiple and layered dimensions. Both Yinka Shonibare and Barby Asante have attested to their identification with a British heritage as much as with their West African parents, for example through the television programmes they watched when they were younger. Asante feels there is a stereotypical notion of 'black culture' as being separate and different from mainstream British culture, which is a distortion of her experience being born and raised in England (Asante 2002).<sup>69</sup> This concept is especially unsatisfactory for the children of immigrants: artists like

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<sup>67</sup> See p. 116.

<sup>68</sup> See pp. 132-134 and 148-150.

<sup>69</sup> See pp. 219-220.

Sonia Boyce, Eddie Chambers, and Keith Piper. They were all born in England to Caribbean parents, and they were key participants in the Black Art Movement of the 1980s in which they identified themselves as “black British.” Many times these artists find that the constant foregrounding of their non-white skin colour or non-European heritage obscures and even denies their citizenship to Britain, the country that they have called home for their entire lives. From these and other examples, there is the sense that an artist’s identity as Ugandan, Indian, Kenyan, Nigerian, African, Caribbean, Asian, Arab, or British is a matter of personal choice.

Beyond aspects related to minority and difference, other points of identification must be taken into account. Age determines a person’s peer group and thus their community, whether globally, locally, or professionally. There are artists who immigrated to Britain, i.e. “first generation,” and artists who were born and/or raised in the UK, i.e. “second generation.” Of course within these distinctions, various trajectories, homelands, and diasporas are represented. There are those who settled in England when they were infants or toddlers, such as Lubaina Himid, Veronica Ryan, and Mary Evans, those who were primary school age when they arrived, like Sokari Douglas Camp, Allan deSouza, Zarina Bhimji, and Godfried Donkor, those who were a bit older such as Oladele Bamgboye and Kinsi Abdullah, and finally those who arrived as young adults, like Magdalene Odundo, Gavin Jantjes, and Johannes Phokela. Although these widely divergent backgrounds and childhoods cannot be coherently understood as one common experience, their extra-British childhoods and memories make them different from those who were born and raised in the UK, like Maria Amidu, Barby Asante, Sonia Boyce, and Eddie Chambers. This differentiation seems clearly articulated in the contrasts between early exhibition titles highlighting “Commonwealth” artists or artists from a particular country or diaspora, in

comparison to the exhibitions and organizations that use “black art” or “black British” in their titles.<sup>70</sup>

Another aspect of age or generational identity is parental. Magdalene Odundo, Sokari Douglas Camp, Sonia Boyce, Oladele Bamgboye, Barby Asante, Kinsi Abdullah, Yinka Shonibare, and Zineb Sedira are all parents whose children were born and are growing up in England. As a result, their children are perhaps more exposed to and entrenched in British social and cultural contexts than their parents. Allan deSouza’s children are being raised in Northern Ireland, which, although part of Britain, is another point of removal from where deSouza spent his childhood. Zineb Sedira currently resides in London with her children. In her work, *Quatre Générations de Femmes* (1997; Fig. 3.20), Sedira silk-screened a computer-generated Islamic pattern onto ceramic tiles featuring images of her grandmother, mother, herself, and her daughter; when installed in a gallery, the tiles form a three-walled room. The images of the women interspersed within the geometric repetition of the design create the structure of Sedira’s culturally specific and wholly unique family tree, spanning four generations and at least two continents. It is an exploration of ancestry and heritage that is definitively Arab, in her case Algerian, but negotiated through lived experience in Europe, specifically France and subsequently England. There are embedded contrasts of Africa and Europe, Arab and Western, and within the European/Western context, France versus England. Thus being parents of children in a British context may cause these artists to engage with Britain in a specific way, through their identification with each other as a family unit.

Another kind of generation is the artistic one. In the 1980s, some artists were graduating art school and asserting themselves in the art scene as “black British”

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<sup>70</sup> See pp. 244-246.

through the activities of the Black Art Movement, including Eddie Chambers, Keith Piper, Sonia Boyce, and Lubaina Himid. Other artists of this same academic generation, however, did not participate in these groups. Then there are younger artists who were still in school in the 1980s, and who represent the next generation, including Kinsi Abdullah, Maria Amidu, Barby Asante, Godfried Donkor, Steve McQueen, Chris Ofili, Johannes Phokela, and Yinka Shonibare. The difficulty is that graduation dates do not necessarily indicate artistic generation, or artistic peer group. Other factors include where the artist went to school, where his or her studio is/was, and the other artists with which s/he exhibited and otherwise associated. For example, Mary Evans was studying for her MA at Goldsmiths from 1987 to 1989, whilst Godfried Donkor was at Central Saint Martins getting his BA from 1984 to 1989. They were born only one year apart. Yet, Evans is a contemporary of Chambers, Piper, Rodney, and Boyce in terms of professional development, whilst Donkor did not begin working as a professional artist until the early nineties. Such distinctions do not seem that significant with the passage of time and as their careers have developed, but it is important to understand their generational position with regards to the eighties Black Art Movement. Many younger artists, like Maria Amidu and Steve McQueen, have expressed their indebtedness to the previous generation for paving the way, and their own relative freedom from the “politics of representation.”<sup>71</sup> In a 1996 interview, McQueen stated, ‘I’m in the position I am because of what other people have done and I’m grateful, for sure. But at the same time, I am black, yes. I’m British as well. But as Miles Davis said, “So What?” I don’t say that flippantly but like anyone else I deal with certain things in my work because of who I am,’ (Bickers 1996-1997, 5).

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<sup>71</sup> For Amidu’s perspective, see p. 184.

This brings us to another important point of identification: professional artist. One's profession is a key factor in any person's response to "Who are you?" It is often the second piece of information people offer or ask for during an introduction. As Veronica Ryan has said, art is not her hobby.<sup>72</sup> By classing themselves as professional artists, they are identifying with a particular community, mainly, the art establishment. Which particular art scene: local/communal, regional, national, and/or international, fine or applied art is important in determining which other identity factors might be emphasized, for example, at the Venice Biennale versus New York's Museum of African Art. All of these artists have had professional training at the secondary level or higher; all have been paid for their art, residencies, curatorial activities, and/or teaching positions.

Quite a few of these artists are resistant to the idea that their identity is conceptualized through race, skin colour, and non-European heritage, as they find this perspective both restrictive and over-emphasized. If identity is as much about what one is not, in this case it is also a matter of not *always*. Strategies of resistance to such assumptions serve to revisit "black British" conceptualizations and refute such oversimplifications of who these artists perceive themselves to be. Some have contested the assumption that being black or of non-European descent is a critical component to their creative practice. Perhaps resistance to the "black British" art-historical model is not necessarily due to the narrowness of artistic interpretation as much as fear that the legacy of the Black Art Movement will cast a shadow so dark that little else is perceived or appreciated in their work.

Steve McQueen and Chris Ofili are well-recognized contemporary artists who post-date the eighties Black Art Movement; they reject overt alliances with or other

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<sup>72</sup> See pp. 126-127.

people's expectations of their responsibilities to the African diaspora or black art. In a 2000 interview, Steve McQueen described an episode where he was asked to draw a line: 'Someone said to me, "Are you an artist or are you a black artist?" and I said, "Sometimes I am, sometimes I'm not, sometimes I forget,"' (Tricky [Showstudio Interview], [www.moon-palace.de/tricky/showstudio.html](http://www.moon-palace.de/tricky/showstudio.html)). Chris Ofili has declined to participate in exhibitions that specifically showcase the work of artists of African descent, like *Looking Both Ways* (2003),<sup>73</sup> and refused interviews with writers who investigate other artists of African descent.<sup>74</sup> Art historian Nancy Hynes writes, 'Ofili is one of a number of artists in the UK who refuse to frame their work within the discourse of "origins"—that is, their parents' origins in the Caribbean, the Indian subcontinent, or sub-Saharan Africa. Early in his career this position extended to not participating in African, pan-African, or Black art exhibitions,' (Hynes 2001, 10).

Works like *The Holy Virgin Mary* (1996; Fig. 3.21) highlight Chris Ofili's Catholic upbringing as much if not more than his Nigerian parentage. Inspired to include resin-coated spheres of elephant dung in his paintings since a 1992 trip to Zimbabwe, the Virgin's bared breast is one such sphere, whilst she is depicted with dark skin and African facial features and surrounded by cut-outs of genitalia from pornographic magazines shaped like the traditional *putti* of Renaissance religious paintings. Ofili thus juxtaposes notions of sexuality and promiscuity with an icon of motherhood and purity sacred to Catholic ideology. Much of the iconography and cultural references in his paintings display African diasporic influences; he just places the work outside of exhibitions and other contexts that privilege his Nigerian background. He does not, however, unilaterally avoid any association with black artists or institutions. Ofili participated in *One Planet Under a Groove: Hip Hop and*

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<sup>73</sup> Laurie Ann Farrell, personal communication, 2002.

<sup>74</sup> Nancy Hynes describes how, after she explained that her research included artists Sokari Douglas Camp and Yinka Shonibare, Ofili responded that they were 'not his posse,' (Hynes 2001, 9).

*Contemporary Art* (Bronx Museum of the Arts and tour, 2001-2), which included work by well-known contemporary African-American artists. He has exhibited twice at the Studio Museum in Harlem, New York; founded in 1968, the museum is dedicated to the art of African-Americans and the African diaspora. Ofili exhibited in *Seeds and Roots: Selections from the Permanent Collection* (2004) and *Afro Muses* (2005), his recent solo show of works on paper.

Zarina Bhimji has likewise avoided what she perceives as facile categorizations lumping her with black British artists or with other artists of African descent by declining to participate in exhibitions like *Transforming the Crown* (1997) and *Looking Both Ways* (2003) (Bhimji 2002). However, when she was younger she did not have as many reservations and exhibited alongside other participants actively promoting themselves as “black artists” in shows like *Darshan: An Exhibition by Ten Asian Photographers* (Camerawork, London, 1986), *From Two Worlds* (Whitechapel Art Gallery, London, 1986), and *Polareyes: Black Women Photographers* (Camden Arts Centre, London, 1987).

Shifting strategies of representation through exhibition participation is a significant factor in identifying with labels like “black British artist” or “artist of African/Caribbean/Asian descent.” After her initial avoidance of black art exhibitions, Mary Evans modified her approach to participate in group exhibitions of African artists because she feels that the work is being seen and appreciated on its own terms, beyond racial and cultural politics.<sup>75</sup> In contrast, Godfried Donkor professes exasperation that his work is consistently interpreted within a relatively narrow racial and social context rather than a broader, worldwide contemporary one (Donkor 2002). Like Evans, however, Donkor has also participated in group exhibitions that present

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<sup>75</sup> See p. 165.

him and the others as artists “of African descent,” like *Transforming the Crown* (1997) and *A Fiction of Authenticity* (2003).

In response to assumptions that conflate his identity with his African Yoruba heritage, Yinka Shonibare creates works that interrogate and spoof aristocratic, Victorian Englishness and essentialist notions of “Africanness,” as represented by factory-made wax print cloth. As he is fond of saying, ‘English artists are not required to make work about Morris dancing!’ (Shonibare 2002 and 2005). Whilst he has been included in exhibitions like *Sensation* (1997) and *Intelligence* (2000) that present his work without a curatorial emphasis on his African heritage, he has also participated in many that do make such a reference, such as *Transforming the Crown* (1997), *Looking Both Ways* (2003), and *Africa Remix* (2005).

Many artists feel compelled to deflect perceptions that they struggle with some type of identity crisis and that this conflict originates in their non-white, minority background. Chila Kumari Burman is a British artist of Asian descent (b.1957 Liverpool, England) who participated in black British art exhibitions in the eighties and nineties. In response to a journalist from a feminist publication, she answered:

Sona from Spare Rib asked me what I felt about being between two cultures. I don’t think I am between. I hate that phrase, it’s more like beyond two cultures. All this labelling is something the media has conjured up. The media doesn’t half go on about stereotyping us: mash the media up. We have to untangle all this and take control of our lives. (Himid 1985, 2).

Zarina Bhimji says, ‘I am not “obsessed” with my childhood or my identity, as critics often claim,’ (Bhimji 2002). Yinka Shonibare asserts that, ‘I am not in pain over my identity!’ (Shonibare 2002). Maria Amidu and Veronica Ryan have repeatedly expressed similar frustration at assumptions that their work should reflect racial politics or their African/Caribbean heritages.<sup>76</sup>

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<sup>76</sup> See pp. 95 and 167.

Godfried Donkor allows that fifteen years ago he might have emphasized issues of identity and African heritage in his work (Donkor 2002). Now, however, he feels that limiting the interpretation of his work to African or black experiences impoverishes the work's multivalent iconography and wide-ranging art historical references, not to mention its formal properties.<sup>77</sup> He says,

There are images, ideas, artistic language, compositional and colour choices that are beyond this limited scope. Personally, I have a much wider range of influence, like the work of Francisco Goya or investigations into body language. Much of my recent work deals with repetition, colours, and the juxtaposition of images with letters and text (Donkor 2002).

According to Donkor, such influences and artistic interests are not explained by the fact that he was born in Ghana and has dark skin. He complains that black and African issues are over-stressed in critiques of his work, but his work is loaded with such imagery and references.<sup>78</sup> It is perhaps disingenuous to expect audiences and critics alike not to pick up on allusions to racial politics and history, however one suspects that much of his artistic creativity and originality may be overshadowed as a result of artistic circles emphasizing political correctness and re-historicizing the "Other." For Burman, Bhimji, Shonibare, Amidu, Ryan, and Donkor, their difficulties with concepts of identity are rooted in assumptions made about their work and stereotypes foisted upon them by critics, audiences, and even other artists.

If this is what the artists say, how do they explore identity issues in their work? In some cases, the artist inserts herself literally into the work, as in many of Sonia Boyce's pastels, like *Lay Back, Keep Quiet and Think of What Made Britain So Great* (1986; Fig. 1.9), *Big Women's Talk* (1984; Fig. 3.4), and *She Ain't Holding Them Up, She's Holding On (Some English Rose)* (1986; Fig. 3.22). Each of these works refers to Boyce's relationship to her Caribbean heritage, either by referencing

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<sup>77</sup> See p. 56.

<sup>78</sup> See pp. 54-56.

her family directly or alluding to colonial imperialism in South Africa, India, and Australia. As in *Big Woman's Talk*, Boyce portrays herself in *She Ain't Holding Them Up* as a member of a Caribbean family living in Britain. The images of Boyce and her family are configured against a wallpaper-like background, a dense pattern of coloured hexagons highlighted by a black ribbon-like garland, whilst she herself wears a pink dress covered in repetitive rows of black roses. The title indicates an ambiguous relationship between Boyce and her family, in which she feels burdened with familial responsibility yet also needs to cling to them for survival. The subtitle 'some British rose,' suggests Boyce as the black British rose, and thus parodies expectations of English femininity. In *Lay Back*, Boyce pictures herself observing the ways that English forces subjugated indigenous populations in the colonies through war and oppression. Her observation is not only bearing witness, but also exploring conflicting feelings about being British herself, if this is 'what made Britain so great.' In both *She Ain't Holding Them Up* and *Lay Back*, Boyce has co-opted the metaphor of the English woman being an English rose, by painting them black. Boyce is the black English rose, and as such expresses her ambiguity about the inherent contradictions within such an identity.

Yinka Shonibare has also centred himself within historical European, Imperial, and Victorian narratives in photographic series, as the be-wigged scholar reminiscent of royal portraiture in the eighteenth century in *Effnik* (1996), and as a dandy in *Diary of a Victorian Dandy* (1998; Fig. 1.5) and *Dorian Gray* (2001). He has described his ambiguity in terms of the 'notion of complicity' (Shonibare 2002). He explains:

Actually, I am a guy who would enjoy the trappings of power and money. In other words, my concern is that I do not approve of colonialist exploitation, but at the same time, I would absolutely enjoy the position of being a

colonialist...if you could forgot the exploitation. You cannot. This is where it becomes a contradiction (Shonibare 2002).

Shonibare's works reposition black populations from the margins to the centre, reinscribing their historical presence and impact.<sup>79</sup> He uses his own image to explore his personal perspective and positioning with that history, and to investigate his contradictory feelings about power, wealth, and exploitation.

Zineb Sedira created *Quatre Générations de Femmes* (1997; Fig. 3.20) featuring portraits of herself and her grandmother, mother, and daughter in order to visualize her familial heritage and illustrate the various linguistic, national, and cultural identities embodied within.<sup>80</sup> Sedira further explores mother-daughter relationships and her maternal genealogy with *Mother Tongue* (2002) and *Mother, Daughter, and I* (2003), a series of photographs that explores the non-verbal gestures of affection between the three generations who each have a different native language. Sedira uses images of herself and her family members to express a personal history that resonates with many others' experiences in post-colonial Europe.

Some artists are not as personal in their interrogation of identity, but investigate various signifiers of identity and difference specific to the experiences of people of African, Caribbean and Asian descent in Britain or the West in general. Some of Sonia Boyce's work examines racial stereotypes through signifiers like hair or coiffure. *Do You Want to Touch?* (1993) is a series of soft sculptures covered or adorned with tufts or braids of black hair. The title is both an invitation and a dare to the audience, and the act of touching is part of the interpretive experience of the work. In this way, *Do You Want to Touch* explores and exploits the historic fetishization of black bodies as strange or inferior. *The Audition* (1997-8) is a series of photographs

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<sup>79</sup> See p. 53.

<sup>80</sup> See p. 261.

taken of people from all cultural backgrounds wearing an Afro wig and posing for Boyce's camera at the Cornerhouse gallery in Manchester during her residency at Manchester University; in her application, Boyce wrote, 'Much of my recent work has got close to the body. Close to those areas of the body that are loaded with cultural significance,' (Crinson 1998, 44). Black or African hair, with its particular texture and unique styling needs so different from European hair, has been a locus for differentiation for centuries. Methods of hair ironing, relaxing, and straightening and the pain and damage they can cause have often been cited by black activists as evidence of the internalization of oppression and subjugation. The Afro first became popular as a hairstyle during the 1960s, as part of the "Black is beautiful" campaign promoted by black activists in the US. The importance of coiffure as a potent signifier of identity throughout Africa as well as in the West has been well-documented. Recent examples include *Hair in African Art and Culture* (exhibition and catalogue, Museum for African Art, New York, 2000) as well as African-American artist Ellen Gallagher's print-based work *DeLuxe* (2005), exhibited at the Whitney Museum in New York in 2005. Boyce's investigations into the emotional reactions to Afros and black hair interrogate identity-building from the basis of physical difference.

Yinka Shonibare takes a different approach. Instead of expressing an identity constructed from difference, he plays with Western notions of Africanism through his use of factory-made wax print fabrics, which clothe his Victorian models of the elite, the aristocracy, and men and women of leisure enjoying the fruits of colonial exploitation. To understand how Shonibare approaches his practice, it is worth repeating a frequently-recounted episode from his days at art school. During his BA at Byam Shaw, he created a series of work about *perestroika* in the Soviet Union. During a critique, his tutor commented that he did not 'see' Shonibare in the work,

that it did not 'reflect himself very much,' (Shonibare 2002 and Hynes 2001, 61).

Shonibare was baffled. He says:

Up until that point I simply assumed I was a citizen of the world and I could express myself in any area, without people being judgemental. I don't know if that was naïve but certainly because of my upbringing, I have always been made to feel that I could do anything. So I saw no limitation on what subjects I could be interested in (Shonibare 2002).

Shonibare's response to his tutor's advice was to create work that investigates stereotypical notions of "African." He made a series of paintings juxtaposing African art objects from the British Museum next to domestic appliances from an Argos catalogue: an Ife head next to a coffee maker; a Lega stool with a telephone (Hynes 2001, 62). Then, during a visit to Brixton market in south London, he observed the Dutch wax print cloth for sale that was such a potent signifier of Africanness in the western world (Shonibare 2002). Shortly thereafter, he began to use the fabric in his work, first as canvas for paintings like *Double Dutch* (1994), and then for installations of figures in Victorian costume, like *How Does a Girl Like You, Get to Be a Girl Like You?* (1995), aliens, as in *Dysfunctional Family* (1999), and space travellers, as in *Vacation* (2000). Shonibare plays more on expectations tied to his Africanness than his own personal experiences or feelings.

Of course, a person's artistic output is just one dimension of his/her character and does not represent his/her whole self. In other words, issues and themes visualized and explored in the work of these artists do not necessarily represent overriding obsessions in their personal journeys through life, and one cannot take a body of work to represent every significant experience of an artist throughout the duration of his/her life. In the same vein, artists make professional choices that do not always relate specifically to their identification with a particular group or concept. For example, an artist may decide to participate in a group exhibition billed as artists from

the contemporary African diaspora, not because s/he feels a particular connection to being categorized as such, but because of the opportunities for exposure and patronage available thereby. In addition, changes in creative practice and evolutions in professional trajectory are inevitable as an artist matures, thus keeping the whole of the situation in constant flux.

If there is one over-riding characteristic that applies to the identity of British artists of non-European descent, it is changeability. Artists give weight to different aspects of their experience depending on the circumstances. They find it frustrating when their audiences, critics, and peers inhibit this natural process by consistently foregrounding their race or non-European heritage as the standard by which all other aspects of their identity are measured. There is also the possibility that association with the Black Art Movement of the 1980s obscures any interpretive perspective other than that based in black experiences, and artists today avoid these associations because of the danger of being pigeonholed. The London dealers who represent Chris Ofili and Yinka Shonibare tend to steer them away from exhibitions that present them as black British, or “of African descent.” Ofili’s avoidance of any overt categorization as African demonstrates his strategy. Shonibare avoids being pigeonholed by participating in numerous exhibitions and events that present him in a myriad of contexts, only some of which reference his Nigerian heritage.

Critics’ and audiences’ constant classification of this group of artists as black British, and expectations that their professional and personal trajectories should thus follow some sort of formula, can be a burden. One’s national, linguistic, religious, familial, and racial background is important, definitely, but not always. Perhaps one of the outcomes of the Black Art Movement is a tendency to conflate a certain skin colour or parental nationality with a certain kind of artistic production. Promoting the

work of these artists in this context has been a deliberate strategy to challenge stereotyping, as in the eighties, and yet is not always interpreted as such, as demonstrated by the reluctance of Veronica Ryan and others to participate in *The Other Story*, or the repudiation of black British labels by Steve McQueen and Chris Ofili. For contemporary British artists of African, Caribbean, and Asian descent, constructions and conceptualizations of identity are sometimes, but not always, based on their extra-British origins and ancestry. Identity-building is a process constantly in flux, and depends on various contextualizations of “Who am I?” including, but not limited to, location, age, peer group, profession, as well as gender and sexuality. It is to these last two that we now turn.

### **Gender and Sexuality**

Black British activism served to galvanize artists in the 1980s who felt marginalized by the mainstream art scene, and hinged on notions of difference as a well-spring of solidarity. However, there have always been other, equally important points of identification, especially in terms of difference. As Kobena Mercer has noted,

The innocent notion of Blackness as a unitary and undifferentiated identity has been radically questioned in the work of Black women and Black gay men. Through a range of artistic strategies, their practices have disrupted the idea that a single artwork could ever be totally “representative” of Black experiences because questions of racial and ethnic identity are critically dialogized by questions of gender and sexuality. Monolithic and monologic versions of Black identity are therefore pluralized and relativized to create a critical dialogue between artists and audiences about the multiple differences we each inhabit in the lived experiences of our specific identities (Mercer 1991, 79-80).

Conceptualizations of gender intersect with race in terms of differentiation and disenfranchisement. Both gender and race significantly impact constructions of sexuality within the nexus of identity-and-difference; homosexuality further complicates such constructions. Whilst sexuality cannot be considered a subcategory

of gender, since the ramifications of each are very different, there are important similarities in the ways these are problematized in the work of black British artists. They express their frustration at prevailing stereotypes, describe their perspectives, and create their own visions of who they are.

The women's movement that gained momentum in the 1970s in the US and Europe was a catalyst for rebellion against the objectification and oppression of women as the supposed second, and weaker, sex. Feminist sensibilities and empowerment resonated in political strategies and community activism, but also in academic and artistic circles. Feminist artists sought to overthrow existing paradigms constructed from patriarchal perspectives by questioning power relations that privileged white, Euro-centric, heterosexual male experience. In the eighties, the women's movement was increasingly criticized for focusing on the perspective of white, middle-class women and ignoring the experiences of minorities and the working class. According to Heidi Safia Mirza, editor of *Black British Feminism: A Reader*, in the seventies and eighties, black British feminism focused the struggle on the "right to be equal," whilst in the postmodern nineties, it celebrated the "right to be different," (Mirza 1997, 12). Black feminists sought to examine how the convergence of racism, sexism, and classism impacts the lives of black women, especially in terms of the family, patriarchy, and reproduction (Carby 1997, 46). They had to counter dominant ideologies privileging Western culture as liberated and progressive, and characterizing black and Asian family relations and customs as deviant and oppressive (Carby 1997, 47). This included challenging essentialized images of the black woman, often portrayed within the dominant mainstream as a workhorse, super woman, and/or single mother.

In Britain, the Organization of Women of African and Asian descent, founded in 1978 and active until 1983, was the first recognized national network of black women. Such political and social activism was contemporaneous with other minority groups and community reform efforts, including those associated with the Black Art Movement. As Stuart Hall writes,

Gender and feminist politics and the sexual liberation movements were the revolution within the revolution—movements that exposed the structures of oppression and exclusion and the habits of “secondariness” *within* the ranks of the oppressed, exposing the unconscious practices of “male mastery,” which passed unremarked in the daily and sexual life of the subordinate, whilst never entirely supplanting the struggles against other forms of oppression (Hall 2005, 15).

There were commonalities between these different struggles, but also contention between different interests. Sonia Boyce describes an incident during the Women in Art Education conference at the Battersea Arts Centre in London in 1982:

Amongst the three hundred or so people there, there were four other black women and two black men. The atmosphere was very peculiar; I got the feeling from some of the white women that not only were they surprised that we should be interested in such a conference, but that we should have been in the canteen serving behind the counter instead! Throughout the two days there was one workshop on black visual art that was taken by a very nice but patronizing English woman who had lived in Africa for several years, and one equally bad discussion on a draft document to be put before the CNAA saying that there should be proportional representation of women in art colleges. I stood up and said that there should be proportional representation full stop. There was a huge argument about this; I was accused of being emotive. Then Trevor Mathison (who is now a member of the Black Audio Film Collective) got up to say something in support, and another woman stood up and said ‘I can’t deal with him as a black man.’ Well, all hell broke loose, Trevor walked out followed by the remaining black women. I stayed to argue it out, which was stupid because they kept me there trying to explain their own view. I thought we were there to campaign for a change in art education—production and consumption—however, it turned out that we were there to further the careers of the middle-class white women there. They failed to see their own racism. For the first time, it occurred to me that there was a chasm between the struggles of the women’s movement and the struggles of black people (Roberts 1987, 56).

Not only were black women subject to the racism of white women, they were also subject to sexism within the black community. In 1989, Rasheed Araeen was

criticized in both the black and mainstream press for including only four women in *The Other Story* out of twenty-four artists. Whilst Veronica Ryan, Kim Lim, and Shirazeh Houshiary had refused his invitation, there were others, like Sokari Douglas Camp, who were not asked to participate. Araeen's response was that the artists were selected before many of the black women artists presumed appropriate for the exhibition had become practicing artists, and that many women had returned to their countries of origin (Amanda Sebestyen, *City Limits*, 30 November–7 December 1989). He is also on record as saying he did not like the work of any of the other women artists (John Cunningham, "Scaling the Walls," *The Guardian*, 28 November 1989).

Thus, black British women artists had to negotiate their activism on two liberation fronts, and often felt the need to express both simultaneously. In 1982, at the First National Black Art Convention in Wolverhampton, Claudette Johnson decided the issues for black women artists were significantly different enough to organize a women-only discussion during the course of the conference. Black women artists formed groups and organizations like Mirror Reflecting Darkly (later called Black Women in View) in 1984 and Polareyes (for black women photographers) in 1986. Exhibitions like *Five Black Women Artists* (Africa Centre, London, 1983), *Black Women Time Now* (Battersea Arts Centre, London, 1983), and *The Thin Black Line* (ICA, London, 1985) showcased their work.<sup>81</sup>

Artists like Claudette Johnson, Lubaina Himid, and Sonia Boyce participated in these exhibitions and produced work that addresses issues of race and gender. Such work shows tendencies towards centring black women, including themselves, as subjects, and thus restores their agency within a society that had sought to rob them of

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<sup>81</sup> See pp. 35-36.

it. Claudette Johnson, in the catalogue of the *Pan-Afrikan Connection* exhibition in 1983, explains:

My work is about the conflict and growth that has been the experience of the African women born and raised here in the West...It attempts to express the myriad aspects of oppression, racist and sexist, that have shaped us. It deals not with specific events but with our responses: anger, frustration, fear and depression... (Araeen 2005, 26).

In her artist's statement for the 1995 exhibition *Portraits from a Small Room* at London's 198 Gallery, Johnson specifically addressed her need to make images of black women: 'My images are of women—black women....I want to convey that the completeness of black women has not been "seen" and recognized by the world of men and work. These works are for Black women and other enlightened witnesses,' (Howard 1995, 5). Johnson's pastels on paper depict their subjects in firm lines and vivid colours, vigorously announcing their presence and energy. *Woman in Red* (part of a trilogy, 1982-85; Fig. 3.23) is a full-length portrait of a woman who stands with her hands on her hips, filling the space and confronting the viewer with a gaze that is both powerful and defiant. Other works, such as the nude study *Untitled* (1990) and *And Babies* (1992), celebrate black women's sexuality and maternity.

Lubaina Himid represents her colour and her gender, both of which she experiences as de-valued in British society and culture. Her participation in and organization of activities during the 1980s amount to a crucial contribution to the Black Art Movement in terms of black feminism.<sup>82</sup> Himid describes her own creative practice as specifically concerned with repudiating stereotypes, creating positive images, and agitating for the overthrow of the art historical canon that privileges white men. She states,

I make images of black women because there are not enough of them. I expose the lies of the printed media because they have got away with too much for too

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<sup>82</sup> Ibid.

long. And I am interested in smashing the notion that creative genius is solely in the hands of the white male. I want to change the order of things and take back the art which has been stolen. My work is satirical and sometimes vicious, uplifting and funny, depending upon your health, your wealth, your colour or gender...I want to destroy the stereotypes that television, the newspapers and advertisements are constantly feeding us—when they acknowledge that we exist at all. I am only interested in painting black women as independent, strong-thinking people. I try not to be naïve and over-optimistic, we are not going to be able to run off into the sunset together, not without a bit of a fight (Himid 1987, 264-265).

One of Himid's strongest and most forceful images of a black woman is *We Will Be* (1983) (Tawadros 1989, 148), which is a full length cut-out of a woman in a headscarf and long dress, reminiscent of a black slave or servant of the nineteenth century. She stands with her arms folded across her chest, and looks thoughtfully and searchingly over her right shoulder. Her dress incorporates patterns of beads and yarn, collage, and text; photographs of prominent black personalities adorn the bottom of her skirt, and inscribed within are the words: WE WILL BE/WHO WE WANT/WHERE WE WANT/WITH WHOM WE WANT/IN THE WAY THAT WE WANT/WHEN WE WANT/AND THE TIME IS NOW/AND THE PLACE IS HERE/+ THERE AND/HERE + THERE/+HERE/NOW NOW/NOW NOW/NOW NOW/HERE HERE HERE NOW/HERE NOW + NOW HERE/NOW NOW. Other works, like the paintings in Himid's *Masque in Five Tableaux* series, depict black women asserting active roles in the shaping of dialogues surrounding post-colonialism and modernist art history.<sup>83</sup>

Sonia Boyce uses pastels, crayons, watercolours, and ink on paper to visualize women's domestic spheres, and interrogate black women's sexual exploitation and religious placation. Her long titles offer poignant and often sarcastic commentary, and her works interrogate the ways in which women are perceived. They engage the viewer as a witness or even implicate him or her. In *Lay Back, Keep Quiet, and Think of What Made Britain So Great* (1986; Fig. 1.9), *Big Women's Talk* (1984; Fig. 3.4),

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<sup>83</sup> See pp. 56-57.

and *She Ain't Holding Them Up, She's Holding On (Some English Rose)* (1986; Fig. 3.22), Boyce recreates decorative patterns and colours that recall Victorian as well as Caribbean design aesthetics common to women's domestic settings, such as the kitchen and sitting rooms.<sup>84</sup> Some of the patterns resonate with the intense femininity of Victorian design whilst the bright colours and combinations also evoke her mother's household.

Imbued with the decorative, domestic, and feminine, Boyce's images highlight the familial and social significance of women even whilst exploring ambiguous feelings tied to heritage, history, and oppression. In *Lay Back*, Boyce documents the subjugation and colonization of South Africa, India, and Australia under the holy sanction of the Christian cross. Boyce's self-portrait is featured in the fourth panel and serves as a witness to history; her presence subverts notions of passivity and asserts her resistance to inherited historical narratives. The work's title refers to prudish Victorian notions of female sexuality that expected women to submit to the sexual desires of men out of duty to family, God, and country, but that required female revulsion for any sexual activity. Within the rose wallpaper design of the four panels, Boyce has written 'Mission—Missionary—Missionary Position—Changing,' which indicates a growing refusal to accept sexual and religious oppression.

In *Missionary Position II* (1985; Figure 3.24), Boyce features a couple in a domestic interior. The man is kneeling, hands clasped and eyes closed in prayer, whilst the woman looks at her companion, arm outstretched from her position on the floor as if she is getting up. Boyce's caption reads, 'Missionary Positions II: position changing/They say keep politics out of religion/and religion out of politics/Laard but look at my trials nuh—but when were they ever separate? Laard give me strength.'

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<sup>84</sup> See pp. 59, 220, and 268.

'Missionary position' evokes the sexual passivity of women as well as their Christian roles as docile wives and mothers, whilst the caption refers to religion's role as "opiate to the masses." Boyce draws insightful parallels between the subjugation of non-European peoples by colonial powers and that of women by men as justified by Christian ideology. Instead of remaining passive and waiting for rewards in heaven, *Missionary Position II* portrays a moment of awakening, the beginning of a revolution where black women overthrow the constraints of such roles to become forces for political change. In another pastel titled *Mr. Close-Friend-of-the-Family Pays a Visit Whilst Everyone Else Is Out* (1985), a teenage Boyce looks at the viewer with surprised resignation as the predatory hand of the man named in the title reaches toward her. Here Boyce addresses the sexual subjugation of women and girls more directly, interrogating the viewer's complicity with a society in which men feel they have the right to molest women and girls for their own pleasure.

Sokari Douglas Camp actively negotiates the conventions of gender in both her Nigerian homeland and adopted English home. Her professional identity as an artist, especially a sculptor, remains unusual and even controversial within her native Kalabari community, where sculptors have traditionally been exclusively men.<sup>85</sup> As late as 1995, Camp admitted, 'I am still very shy about telling people that I am a sculptor. I say artist and they immediately imagine that I draw, and I let them think that way,' (Ainslie 1995, 37). She continues, 'The only pressure I felt came from making sculpture and not being a man. It still is, even here [in London], for getting commissions and things. Most of the panels that look at work are men; most of the people that you are competing with are men,' (Ainslie 1995, 39).

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<sup>85</sup> See p. 216.

Works like *Cheering Woman* (1986; Figure 3.25) and *Iriabo Woman in her Prime* (1995) celebrate women's roles in masquerades specifically, and Nigerian society generally. *Cheering Woman* portrays a jubilant supporting participant of a masquerade performance, whilst *Iriabo Woman in her Prime* is in the act of collecting offerings for the masquerade from the crowd. Both are swathed in wraps that roll around their waists, accentuating their curvy solidity, and wear tailored blouses. *Cheering Woman* sports a matching headscarf, whilst *Iriabo Woman* asserts her stature and ceremonial authority with an elaborate, crown-like headdress. Camp also focuses on women's quotidian, familial roles as caretakers and mothers, in works like *Rose & Vi* (1993), which features an elderly pair of women in Western coats and headscarves with their shopping cart, and *School Run* (1991), portraying a mother driving her young daughter to school.

Zineb Sedira celebrates Islamic culture and challenges Western stereotypes of Arab women as repressed and disenfranchised. In a series of life-size photographs entitled *Self Portrait or the Virgin Mary* (2000; Figure 3.26), she uses the *haik*, the long white veil worn by Algerian women, to explore notions of cultural stereotyping and Arab versus Western femininity. Likening her image to the Virgin Mary, Sedira recalls the Middle Eastern roots of Christianity and French Catholicism, and notions of women as pillars of purity, maternity, and self-sacrifice. By exploring Marian mythology and its resonance with modern gender politics, Sedira problematizes stereotypical perceptions of Arab women by comparing them with Western ideals of femininity.

In her film *Silent Sight* (2000), Sedira narrates the memory of arriving in Algeria with her mother for one of their regular visits when she was a little girl. She describes her impressions when her mother would retrieve the *haik* from her suitcase

and put it on before they left the airport. Whilst she is afraid of her mother's disappearance under the white veil, she is comforted by the warmth in her eyes, her only recognizable feature. She alternates between anger and resignation, but her mother seems happy to wear it, feeling protected. *Silent Sight* explores some of the ambiguities concerning empowerment and oppression that the veil evokes. Sedira later organized an entire exhibition, *Veil: Veiling, Representation, and Contemporary Art*, around representations of the veil to further explore this potent signifier of identity and cultural politics.<sup>86</sup> Sedira has repeatedly represented herself, her mother, and her daughter in work that questions stereotypes and celebrates women of Arab and/or Islamic heritage.<sup>87</sup>

Other artists have been inspired by feminist artists, and recognize that the oppression and exclusion of those under subjugation to the dominant white male power structure are not exclusively women. Yinka Shonibare explains the significance of feminist theory and practice as 'primarily the way they question the establishment, and the privilege of white, Western males,' (Shonibare 2002). Likewise, women are not the only artists who interrogate notions of gender in their work. Like the black female body, the black male body was exoticized and commodified during British imperialism and colonialism, especially as a result of the transatlantic slave trade. In most cases, male artists explore masculinity in terms of the exoticization of the black male body as virile and primitively, savagely sexual. Keith Piper's indictment of the objectification and demonization of black men in *Go West Young Man* (1987; Figure 3.2) is one example.<sup>88</sup> Godfried Donkor and Yinka Shonibare depict black sportsmen in contexts that highlight their objectification,

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<sup>86</sup> See pp. 252-253.

<sup>87</sup> See pp. 261 and 269.

<sup>88</sup> See pp. 209 and 235.

whilst Oladele Bamgboye uses his own body as a territory of inquisition into such stereotypes.

In works like his *Slave to Champ* series (1996-1999) and *Pure Ali* (2000; Figure 3.27), Godfried Donkor uses mixed media on paper to construct images of black boxers that rise above diagrams of slave ships in a manner reminiscent of Francisco Goya's *The Colossus* (1808-1812). The images are culled from eighteenth and nineteenth century archives as well as contemporary photographs of twentieth-century athletes, and include well-known celebrities and figures Donkor resurrects from relative obscurity. The juxtaposition of the boxers and the slave ships brings to the fore narratives of black men born slaves who fought their way to freedom to become wealthy and fêted figures of social prominence, like Bill "The Black Terror" Richmond and Tom Molineaux.<sup>89</sup> The association of the slave ship with stories of overcoming adversity, emancipation, and liberation draws parallels with other sportsmen like Muhammad Ali and Mike Tyson. Ali came from a working class background in the southern US during the turbulent sixties to become the heavyweight champion of the world and one of the greatest sports figures of all time. Tyson came from similarly humble beginnings in Brooklyn, New York and was also heavyweight champion.

Whilst their stories are inspirational, they also highlight the legacy of slavery in the continued exoticization of the black male body as synonymous with brute strength and bestial sexuality. The latter is emphasized in *Pure Ali* by the presence in the background of two white women in Victorian dress. One appears to gaze at Ali's physique whilst the other comments smilingly to her companion. Sports and entertainment have historically been two of very few avenues to success and

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<sup>89</sup> See p. 55.

recognition available to black men. Such success is put into ambiguous context when the tendency towards their objectification is taken into account. Yinka Shonibare exposes similar class and race relations in *Victorian Philanthropist's Parlour* (1996-1997) by featuring black footballers in the Dutch-wax print design of the wallpaper. Victorian "philanthropy" was based in supposed religious and moral superiority that justified the exploitation of imperial subjects. The success of black footballers who first came to prominence in the UK in the 1960s is in defiance of that oppression, but, paradoxically, it perpetuates characterizations of the black male body as a commodity for consumption.

Working in photography and video, Oladele Bamgboye interrogates notions of race and sexuality using his own body as a site of inquiry. In *Puncture* (1993/1997), Bamgboye contrasts two colour close-ups of his genitalia, whose compositions recall images from pornographic magazines, with two shots of himself seated in front of them in a gallery installation. In one, he faces the camera and the audience sitting cross-legged and eating an apple; in the other, he faces the works on the wall. In this way, *Puncture* creates layered gazes of his body, challenging the viewer as voyeuristic and complicit in sexual objectification, especially confronting stereotypes concerning the size of black men's penises. However, such objectification is not always as obvious or explicit. The video work *The Hair or the Man* (1994/2000) was inspired by Bamgboye's experience when he shaved off his dreadlocks; many women expressed their disappointment. Featuring footage of him running naked through woodlands, he evokes stereotypes of savage sexuality and dreadlocks as a signifier of both exoticism and sexual prowess. Considering Bamgboye's extensive education and urban lifestyle, he effectively demonstrates the absurdity of such assumptions.

The photographic series *See Also the Lighthouse—Revisited* (1991-93/1997) and the video work *Spells for Beginners* (1994/2000) investigate desire and sexuality within a particular relationship. In these works, Bamgboye explores the sexual and emotional dynamic of love between a black man and a white woman. *See Also the Lighthouse* is six photographs featuring a couple in a bedroom, posing naked for the camera. Without looking into the camera, Bamgboye and the woman display their bodies in various standing poses, and in the final shot the woman seems to sleep in bed whilst Bamgboye stands against the far wall, arms out, legs splayed, and buttocks to the air in a position of submission. *Spells for Beginners* features footage of a naked Bamgboye getting in and out of the bath that alternates with interview testimony of his Scottish ex-girlfriend. The work is a chronicle of the pressures that contributed to the end of their relationship, such as Scotland's predominantly white culture.

Black British artists have also investigated the intersections of racial, gender, and sexual politics associated with homosexuality. In a video work entitled *Bear* (1993), Steve McQueen explores stereotypes about the black male body through a slow-motion physical confrontation between two black men with homoerotic overtones, indicated by their gestures and facial expressions. Shonibare has explored homosexuality in works like *Gay Victorians* (1999), *Big Boy* (2002), and others that portray gender-bending fashion, transvestites, and alternative lifestyles. In visualizing people who have been historically persecuted for their sexuality and pushed to the margins of society, Shonibare draws parallels with racial prejudice and the oppression of minorities.

In this way, Shonibare addresses more than one set of stereotypes. *Alien Obsessives: Mum, Dad, and the Kids* (1998) portrays a nuclear family touted as the norm within mainstream society. The figures are fantastical aliens, but resemble an

adult male, adult female, and a male and female child. They are constructed from the wax print cloth ubiquitous in Shonibare's work,<sup>90</sup> which denotes the multicultural, if not immigrant, background of these 'aliens.' However the term 'alien' also highlights the fact that for some people such a family life (i.e. mum, dad, and the kids) is an alien experience.

Artists Rotimi Fani-Kayode and Isaac Julien explore issues of black gay sexuality in their work that also address more than one set of stereotypes. From 1986 until his death from AIDS-related illness in 1989, Rotimi Fani-Kayode produced photographic work focusing on the black male nude that explored homoerotic fantasy and spiritual traditions inherited from his Yoruba ancestors. Works like *Bronze Head* (1987; Figure 3.28), which features the muscular buttocks and thighs of a black model atop a bronze head from the ancient Nigerian kingdom of Ife, interrogate the conflicts and ambiguities of this gay photographer's attempts to understand and recapture his African heritage through the lens of the British diaspora. In *Bronze Head*, the viewer is unsure whether the head is emerging from the man's body, or if he is in the act of sitting down upon it; thus it is a visualization of the contentious push-and-pull nature of this sexual and cultural relationship. In his 1988 essay "Traces of Ecstasy," Kayode explained these tendentious dynamics as three parts of a whole:

In my case, my identity has been constructed from my own sense of otherness, whether cultural, racial, or sexual. The three aspects are not separate within me. Photography is the tool through which I feel most confident in expressing myself. It is photography, therefore—Black, African, homosexual photography—that I must use not just as an instrument, but as a weapon if I am to resist attacks on my integrity and indeed, my existence on my own terms, (Fani-Kayode 1999, 280).

Isaac Julien investigates black and gay activism in his docu-drama *The Passion of Remembrance* (1986), and his *Looking for Langston* (1989) is a

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<sup>90</sup> See p. 54.

groundbreaking film exploring the homoerotic subtext in poet Langston Hughes' writing. In *Looking for Langston*, Julien mixes archival footage from the 1920s and thirties with contemporary photography. In addition to Hughes' own poetry, the soundtrack includes recitations of African-American poet Essex Hemphill and the hypnotic rhythms of house music. The film combines documentation with fantasy 'to show a black gay presence in the world, and once it was identified, to celebrate a beauty denied and a sexuality demonized,' (Powell 2002, 210).

Photographer Ingrid Pollard is probably best known for her series *Pastoral Interlude* (1987), which examines black Britons' relationship with rural and coastal landscapes, and counters the equation of black history with urban history. Although she is a lesbian, her work did not directly address homosexuality until she attended a 1991 photography class at London's Camerawork gallery led by Rotimi Fani-Kayode and white lesbian photographer Della Grace. *DENY: IMAGINE: ATTACK* (1991) consists of three panels of four photographs each with handwritten text in which Pollard visualizes experiences of rejection, homophobia, and violence as a result of homosexuality. *DENY* evokes a mother's shame in the face of her daughter's sexuality. *IMAGINE* features shadowy images of a woman or women's bodies juxtaposed with the definitions of "butch" and "femme," crude stereotypes of lesbian identity. *ATTACK* uses sexual epithets like "dyke" and "lesbo" with the phrase "sticks and stones will..." to allude to homophobic violence as well as self-defence. Altogether, the triptych expresses Pollard's impressions of the ways in which lesbian sexuality is repressed and rejected by the dominant mainstream.

The activism of the 1970s attacked Western ideologies that privileged white, middle-class, male, heterosexual values and relegated any qualities outside of these as deviant. For black British artists, the attendant discourse centred not just on racial

difference, but also gender and sexuality. These artists recognized the effectiveness of strategies like those used in feminist art to overthrow the dominant paradigm. They sought to relocate themselves and their own experiences from the margins to the mainstream in order to effect their liberation from a nexus of racial, gender-based, and sexual oppression.

### **Audience and Visibility**

An artist's audience is bipartite. On one hand, it represents the community to which or persons to whom the artist desires to communicate. On the other, it is the community or persons who are exposed to his or her work within the context in which it is exhibited and critiqued. One is defined by intention, the other by circumstance. Once an artist creates a work, s/he has limited abilities to circumscribe its reach to a select focus group. People view art in a variety of contexts, from exhibition venues to printed publications as well as the Internet; all of these play a part in defining whom the work reaches. Furthermore, an artist's audience evolves with his or her professional development and personal circumstances. The gaps that exist between the intended audience and those who actually see the work are where matters of visibility lie. An artist's visibility corresponds to the contexts in which his or her work is available to an audience, and the degree to which those contexts extend to reach that audience. In other words, visibility is equated with an artist's professional profile within a particular art scene.

As they struggled to move from the margins to the mainstream in the 1980s, black British artists asserted that they had been discriminated against within the British art establishment. They protested that artists of non-European descent were not exhibited or patronized in proportion to their numbers in Britain. They cited their continual exclusion from commercial galleries and the country's most prestigious

publicly funded institutions by dealers and curators who ignored them. According to Lubaina Himid in the 1987 Channel 4 television programme *State of the Art*, their excuse was that, 'there aren't any black artists. Black people don't make pictures,' (Chambers 1997, 78). As a result, their creative practices were largely invisible within British society.

For artists of African, Caribbean, and Asian descent, this drastically limited artistic visibility resulted in unacceptably small audiences for their work. In response, the artists organized exhibitions, and published catalogues and articles. For this reason, they often had total curatorial control, and certain individuals involved had quite a prescribed audience in mind. Although deeply contested at the time by artists and critics alike, Eddie Chambers and Lubaina Himid, for example, felt strongly that the work should be created by black artists *for a black audience* to address specifically black issues.<sup>91</sup> In the early eighties, activities organized by this group were staged in venues and communities specifically to draw upon local black populations. The organizers sought to expose them to art made by non-white artists that communicates common experiences of racism and cultural difference; they also provided an antidote to the lack of diversity within more mainstream institutions. These artists advocated a political responsibility to create work that spoke to their own experiences and those of their communities in order to communicate their trials and tribulations, as well as their joy and pride, to one another. In 1995, Chambers expanded on a slogan that appears in a number of his exhibition catalogues, 'No art but Black art,' by stating that 'the only kind of art that is important in the Black community is art that focuses on the Black struggle and sees itself as an integral part of our struggle against racism (Tawadros and Clarke 1999, 21).

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<sup>91</sup> See pp. 34-36.

However, the audience exposed to such exhibitions could not always be contained to such a specific demographic group. As the artists' profiles increased, they most certainly realized that their audience was not exclusively black. In 1990, Himid wrote,

So long as [the black woman artist] makes the work for herself, other versions of herself will take the time and the trouble to trek the land in search of the latest, or the earliest work of the black woman artist....In the past ten years, there have been many occasions...where the question of whether we make work for an exclusive audience is debated. I would argue that we do, whether we admit it or not and whether we succeed or not. That audience is ourselves, (Himid 1990, 69).

In order to fully contextualize these remarks, Himid adds,

Art is about dialogue and there are many entry points....In other words if the work that has been made has been successful it has been work with a variety of entry points for a wide range of people. There is little point making work to please everyone all the time. That is a thankless and ultimately hopeless task. If work addresses a particular audience this does not mean it excludes all other audience [*sic*], (Himid 1990, 70).

*Black Art an' Done* (Wolverhampton Art Gallery, 1981), *The Pan-Afrikan Connection* (Africa Centre, London, 1982), *Five Black Women* (Africa Centre, 1983), and *Black Woman Time Now* (Battersea Arts Centre, London, 1983) were some of the first exhibitions organized in existing spaces secured by their curators to showcase work by black artists. Galleries like the Black-Art Gallery, Elbow Room, and 198 Gallery, which opened in 1983, 1986, and 1988 respectively, were owned and administrated by black curators and artists, and were new and much-needed venues specifically designed to promote and exhibit art by artists of African, Caribbean, and Asian descent. These venues were not well known outside of the communities in which they were situated, and much of the audience was either local residents or fellow black British artists and students.

The Black-Art Gallery in Finsbury Park is a case in point,<sup>92</sup> as are The Elbow Room and 198 Gallery. In 1986, Lubaina Himid opened The Elbow Room gallery in south London and curated its inaugural exhibition, *Unrecorded Truths*. Inspired by her daughter's inability to get her art and design work shown in any mainstream institutions, Zoë Linsley-Thomas founded 198 Gallery in 1988 to showcase the work of black artists in the south London community.<sup>93</sup> The first exhibition was entitled *Contemporary Art by Afro-Caribbean Artists*, and the response was tremendous; as Linsley-Thomas describes: 'I thought, I'll open a shop and show [my daughter's] work and other local artists. When we first opened I changed the display three times in three months and showed the work of seventy artists. I had people pouring in the door,' (Linsley-Thomas 2002). At that time the area was heavily populated by people of Caribbean descent, and Railton Road, in which the gallery is situated, was peppered with squats. 'We used to get loads of people into private views. There used to be a lot of people, black people, walking around the streets. We used to get lots of black people coming in...' (Linsley-Thomas 2002).

The activities of the Black Art Movement in the seventies and eighties created contexts in which its participants attracted an audience that was overwhelmingly local and black. The work was exhibited in black-owned and administrated spaces patronized by local residents as well as other black artists, administrators, and journalists, and these contexts thus defined their visibility. Attracting a wider audience and increasing the work's visibility in more mainstream contexts happened gradually, which is not unusual for any group of emerging artists. The fact that the black art exhibitions cited above took place in London, a city in which the vast

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<sup>92</sup> See pp. 36-37.

<sup>93</sup> See p. 33.

majority of British artists seek the support to establish professional careers, certainly increased the competition for patronage and increased visibility.

In 1988, the same year of 198 Gallery's inaugural exhibition, Damien Hirst organized *Freeze* in the vacated Port of London Authority Building in the Docklands.<sup>94</sup> This exhibition, legendary though it now may be as the beginnings of the Young British Artist phenomenon, was 'slow to catch on and received scant attention even in the art press [though] some of the visitors were alert and well placed,' (Shone 1997, 18). The same could be said of exhibitions like *Black Woman Time Now* (Battersea Arts Centre, 1983), *Heart in Exile* (Black-Art Gallery, 1983), *Unrecorded Truths* (Elbow Room, 1986), and *Contemporary Art by Afro-Caribbean Artists* (198 Gallery, 1988). Through coverage initially in the black and later mainstream press, word of mouth amongst gallery-goers, and marketing to their local communities, the curators of black art exhibitions and the participating artists began to move from the margins into the mainstream.

*The Thin Black Line* (1985) and *From Two Worlds* (1986) presented visitors to London's Institute of Contemporary Art and Whitechapel Art Gallery, respectively, with the opportunity to view the work of participating artists. Writing in 1986, Eddie Chambers assessed the situation:

So, two of London's (and indeed, the country's) most prestigious galleries [i.e. the Institute of Contemporary Art and Whitechapel Art Gallery] finally played host (reluctantly or otherwise) to work by Black artists. Five years ago, these exhibitions would not have happened. Black artists couldn't even hope to command this sort of ostensible attention. Clearly, Black artists seem to be increasing their profile. Unfortunately, however, one sobering factor prevents my jubilation at this apparently improved situation for artists. This factor is my belief that both of the above-mentioned exhibitions, along with a score of others, have been organized and mounted on terms which are clearly not our own, (Tawadros and Clarke 1999, 16).

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<sup>94</sup> See p. 45.

Chambers' fears of institutional tokenism notwithstanding, these artists were becoming more visible within Britain's dominant mainstream. These larger, publicly funded institutions drew a wide audience cultivated through their international reputations as centres of contemporary art. Those who attended the exhibitions were likely to represent a more diverse audience. Along with these exhibitions came critical attention in the media, not the least significant of which was the tremendous amount of dialogue prompted by *The Other Story*.<sup>95</sup>

*The Other Story* (Hayward Gallery, London, 1989) may have taken over ten years to actualize, but the South Bank venue, the size of the exhibition (over 300 works), and volume of critical dialogue generated in the press expanded the audience of the show's artists exponentially.<sup>96</sup> Several artists received critical acclaim that raised the professional profiles, of both older artists, like Ronald Moody, and younger, emerging ones such as Sonia Boyce. If the initial activities and exhibitions of the Black Art Movement were aimed specifically at a black audience who could expect the work to relate directly to their experiences, soon this audience expanded to include other British and international art enthusiasts. With this expansion, artists were able to communicate to a wider spectrum of people and thus began to break away from the idea that their work was specifically for a black audience. Likewise, patronage by a wider audience and participation in a more general contemporary art scene increased their visibility.

Over time, some artists began to feel uncomfortable with being presented in a black British context. They were reluctant to align themselves with a politically activist stance that concentrated on work relevant only to members of Britain's black communities. At issue was not only their intended audience, but also their visibility as

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<sup>95</sup> See pp. 39-42.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid.

contemporary artists. They did not wish to maintain a professional profile that constantly emphasized their racial and national backgrounds. Four artists, including Veronica Ryan, refused the invitation to participate in *The Other Story*, despite the large scope of the exhibition and the calibre of the venue.<sup>97</sup>

Other artists were on a different trajectory from the outset, consciously eschewing black art exhibitions and debates. Mary Evans has described her early career trajectory as purposefully separate from these activities because of her reluctance to be pigeonholed into an artistic ghetto.<sup>98</sup> Magdalene Odundo was included in *Columbus Drowning* (Rochdale Art Gallery, Lancashire, 1992) alongside Lubaina Himid and other black artists, but of course participated in many other types of exhibitions, including contemporary African art and applied arts.<sup>99</sup> Still others, rather than making a choice about the contextualization of their work, were at the whim of exhibition curators. Sokari Douglas Camp was not invited to participate in *The Other Story*, and speculates that this was because she was not 'black enough,' that is, in a politically active sense.<sup>100</sup> Yet Camp was included in *From Two Worlds* (Whitechapel Art Gallery, 1986) and *Africa Explores* (Museum for African Art, 1991), exhibitions that showcased the work of contemporary artists of non-Western and African descent, respectively.

In retrospect, the politically active stance of the Black Art Movement seems particular to a time when the participating artists were on the margins of the contemporary art scene. As British society became more attuned to postmodern values of multiculturalism, these artists began to get their work seen and their opinions heard. If exhibitions in more mainstream venues expanded their audience,

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<sup>97</sup> See pp. 40 and 115.

<sup>98</sup> See pp. 140-141 and 144-145.

<sup>99</sup> See pp. 85-87.

<sup>100</sup> Personal communication to John Picton, 2000.

then increased press coverage and its attendant dialogue certainly improved their visibility. Subsequently, the shelf life of black art for black audiences about black experiences began to diminish. Artists and critics began to discuss problems of “ghettoization,” concerned that presenting the work of these artists only in this context was limiting to both the artists and the art.<sup>101</sup> Not surprisingly perhaps, black artists gained increased control over how their work was seen and by whom, and began to move beyond exhibitions and discourses that limited their work to such a context.

In 1989, the same year that *The Other Story* opened at the Hayward Gallery, Indian-born Anish Kapoor was chosen to represent Britain at the 1990 Venice Biennale. Sonia Boyce, Veronica Ryan, Black Audio Film Collective, British-Palestinian artist Mona Hatoum, and British-Malaysian artist Lesley Sanderson were amongst those selected for the prominent *The British Art Show 1990* organized by the Hayward Gallery. Steve McQueen and Chris Ofili were amongst the artists selected for *The British Art Show 4* in 1995, and work by Donald Rodney was included in *The British Art Show 5* in 2000. The Turner Prize, not only one of the UK’s most prominent exhibitions but also the subject of much yearly critical discussion and media attention, has included black British artists amongst its nominees and winners since Anish Kapoor won in 1991. Chris Ofili won in 1998 and Steve McQueen in 1999, whilst Shirazeh Houshiary was nominated in 1994, Isaac Julien in 2001, Yinka Shonibare in 2004, and Zarina Bhimji in 2006. The Turner Prize is arguably one of the highest honours awarded to a contemporary British artist, and its nominees and winners represent the most well-known artists working in the UK. Such shows were aimed at the general British museum-going public, and necessarily expanded the

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<sup>101</sup> See pp. 40, 115, 140-141, and 144-145.

reach of the work to a larger audience than the earlier shows at venues like the Africa Centre and Wolverhampton Art Gallery. Likewise, these exhibitions also served to increase the artist's visibility within the contemporary British art scene generally.

Meanwhile, the venues established to specifically showcase black British artists have had to evolve. The 198 Gallery's south London neighbourhood has changed a great deal, due to gentrification and escalating housing prices. The young professionals who now live in the area do not visit the gallery as much as the local residents did in its first years of operation. The 198 Gallery has built up its reputation, exhibitions, and education programme by expanding the gallery itself as well as its original mission of enhancing 'the cultural perceptions of the wider community through the comprehension and appreciation of culturally diverse visual art' (Beauchamp-Byrd and Sirmans 1997, 162). Its programming now includes artists and art from around the world, including Europe. As 198 Gallery has moved beyond its original emphasis on 'culturally diverse' (i.e. non-European) art to include, for example, South American artists, it still seeks to serve south London residents and bring them in to the gallery. These days their connection with the community is primarily through arts education with schoolchildren and young offenders. Neither the Black-Art Gallery nor the Elbow Room are still in operation today. Whilst funding was certainly difficult to find and sustain, the need for venues to promote Black art has waned.

The decline of black-owned and administrated spaces coupled with increased participation in exhibitions of mainstream institutions and commercial galleries has created an interesting set of choices for artists and curators, according to Eddie Chambers. In a 1995 interview, he stated:

Certain galleries have a notion that they don't need Black exhibitions because they don't have a large enough Black community to merit it. I don't think it's

acceptable for a gallery to say that. On the other hand, when galleries situated in regions with a large Black community do have "Black" exhibitions, it probably suits an ultimately racist agenda, in terms of fulfilling a token slot, (Tawadros and Clarke 1999, 22).

Here Chambers takes the view that institutions outside of neighbourhoods with concentrated black populations have little room for exhibitions dedicated to artists of non-European descent, and that those they do organize are motivated by political correctness, or even worse, a desire to showcase sub-standard art to prove its inferiority. Chambers concludes that the increased participation of black artists in exhibitions that do not focus on race or national origin does not amount to increased respectability or acceptance within the mainstream. This point of view, however, is both extreme and contradictory. On the one hand, Chambers considers black art to be a politicized force aimed specifically at black communities, but on the other, he wants to see the art and artists given due respect and exhibition space in institutions with more diverse audiences.

Questions of audience and visibility have evolved for the generation of artists who were just finishing art school when *The Other Story* took place. This new generation of artists sees itself as freed from obligation to any ideology or community other than themselves (individually). As Maria Amidu explains,

I think the difference between Keith Piper and Sonia Boyce and that particular generation, and the way that say, I work, or Chris [Ofili] works, or Mary Evans works is that...they paved the way for us, and I really respect them for that, and really thank them actually, that I can be so blasé, and say, 'Well I'm not doing that,' because I don't have to. Because they basically worked so hard for us not to... There are some of them who do get frustrated with our generation, that we're just a bit blasé about being black artists. I think, but that's good, you obviously did such a good job that I have the freedom now to say, 'Well, I'm *this* kind of artist, (Amidu 2002).

These artists' intended audience is not limited to black communities, and their visibility is not limited to black art contexts. In fact, some of them can reach almost as wide of an audience as they can imagine. Over the last twenty-five years, exhibitions

of their work have moved from community spaces and local galleries to internationally touring exhibitions. They are no longer limited to producing work for exhibitions that highlight race and national origin.

When these younger artists finished art school in the nineties there were more opportunities available to them than to artists in the early eighties. Institutions like London's Institute of International Visual Arts provided funding and resources for the promotion of artists of non-European descent locally and worldwide, whilst journals such as *Third Text* encouraged international critical debate. Most crucially, mainstream venues and administrators continued to show increased interest in the work of black artists. Furthermore, evolutions in the British art establishment were not limited to more multicultural interests. Contemporary art being produced in Britain, primarily in London where most artists studied and congregated, was receiving international attention and acclaim. Private patrons like Charles Saatchi injected considerable money into the art scene and raised the profile of the artists and their work, and the establishment of new galleries like White Cube provided commercial exhibition space as well as patronage and support.

Oladele Bamgboye did not become a practicing artist until 1985, after he finished his studies in chemical engineering and received his MA from the Slade in 1998. He has participated in shows worldwide alongside other African and British artists, like *In/sight: African Photographers 1940 to the Present* (Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, 1996), *Trade Routes: History and Geography* (Johannesburg Biennale, 1997), *Documenta X* (Kassel, 1997), the Dakar Biennale (1998), *Intelligence* (Tate Britain, 2000), and *The Short Century: Independence and Liberation Movements in Africa 1945-1994* (Museum Villa Stuck, Munich, 2001). Bamgboye was not a professional artist during the eighties and most of the nineties,

when exhibitions like *The Other Story* were curated. Instead, he emerged at a time when the situation was quite changed and problems of visibility had abated a great deal.

Zarina Bhimji, Sokari Douglas Camp, Godfried Donkor, Mary Evans, Steve McQueen, Chris Ofili, Zineb Sedira, and Yinka Shonibare are artists with international exhibition histories, patronage, and reputations. Their audiences are quite similar, in terms of the contextualization of their work in critical discourse as well as their exhibition history. All of them completed postgraduate studies in fine art. During art school, their primary audiences were their tutors and other art students with whom they studied. It is significant that their postgraduate studies took place, at least in part, in London, the richest, most populated, and most cosmopolitan city in the UK. Individually, they attended different schools and graduated years apart from one another, but collectively they represent a larger group of young professional artists of African descent who circulate in artistic circles comfortably situated in the contemporary art mainstream.

These artists do not feel the same desire to create the kind of politically-based art championed by Eddie Chambers and Lubaina Himid. Yinka Shonibare has stated that he does not want to create work that privileges politics over aesthetics (Shonibare 2002). He claims that galleries are not interested in such issue-based work, and that it is marginalized because it is not commercial. He has always wanted to be in the mainstream rather than on the periphery (Shonibare 2002). Chris Ofili has deliberately avoided association with terminology and contextualization associated with “black British art.”<sup>102</sup> For Ofili, Chambers’ idea of producing art for a specifically black audience is anathema. Instead, Shonibare’s and Ofili’s goal is to

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<sup>102</sup> See pp. 211 and 264.

reach general audiences of contemporary art internationally. These artists' participation in various group exhibitions has in fact made their work available to such audiences.

Zarina Bhimji, Sokari Douglas Camp, Godfried Donkor, Mary Evans, Steve McQueen, and Zineb Sedira likewise enjoy international profiles, primarily through group exhibitions. Some of these exhibitions focused on artists of African descent whilst others included artists from all backgrounds and nationalities. Was the audience for *Transforming the Crown, A Fiction of Authenticity, Looking Both Ways*, or *Africa Remix*, for example, different than that for *Sensation, Documenta XI*, or the Turner Prize exhibitions?<sup>103</sup> Perhaps to some degree gallery-goers are drawn to a particular theme (e.g. African art, international contemporary art) or venue (e.g. Museum for African Art, Royal Academy of Art). Whatever differences there may have been, however, are diminishing, especially as the growing public profile of each artist draws in more people. All of these artists are exhibiting their work in prominent exhibitions like the Venice Biennale and *Documenta*, and staging solo shows at renowned institutions and prestigious commercial galleries worldwide. Their audiences represent the most well-educated and moneyed classes of the international art world, both in terms of critics and curators, and in terms of patrons and dealers.

These opportunities for exhibition, publication, press, and patronage have created increased visibility. The "YBA" phenomenon has given contemporary British art a new level of notoriety and critical appreciation.<sup>104</sup> 1997's *Sensation: Young British Artists from the Saatchi Collection* garnered an enormous amount of attention in both London and New York, due to what some of the press, public officials, and museum visitors deemed "offensive" work. This notoriety naturally sparked curiosity

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<sup>103</sup> See pp. 43-48.

<sup>104</sup> See p. 45.

in the general public, who attended *Sensation* in droves. In New York, the object of greatest controversy was Chris Ofili's *Holy Virgin Mary* (1996; Figure 3.21).<sup>105</sup> Despite Ofili having been raised Catholic, the popular press and the (also Catholic) mayor of New York, Rudolph Giuliani, accused him of being anti-Catholic and denounced the work as "Catholic-bashing." As a result, the mayor tried to revoke the Brooklyn Museum's funding, which incurred objections within the museum community. There was a corresponding frenzied debate in the media, and Catholics picketed outside the Museum's entrance whilst people lined up in long, snaking queues to see the show. The work in Chris Ofili's concurrent solo show *Afrobiotics* at Chelsea gallery Gavin Brown Enterprise was rumoured to have sold out before it opened, and the gallery was packed during the private viewing.

The opening of the Tate Modern to much fanfare in 2000 bolstered London's newfound identity as the centre of the art world. The museum continues to draw Britons and tourists alike to its exhibitions, including particular interest in the works commissioned to occupy its cavernous turbine hall. Anish Kapoor was the third artist to receive the commission and *Marsyas* was unveiled in 2002, a giant sculpture specially designed to fill the space. Subsequent artists chosen to create work for the turbine hall include Olafur Eliasson and Bruce Nauman. Participation by black artists alongside their white contemporaries in exhibitions with international audiences designates a shift from previous survey shows that singled them out as a minority group, and their presence in these mainstream contexts has expanded their audience and their visibility accordingly.

There have been a number of high-profile international group exhibitions that included the work of British artists of non-European heritage. *Trade Routes: History*

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<sup>105</sup> See pp. 264.

*and Geography*, the second Johannesburg Biennale, was curated in 1997 by Okwui Enwezor and showcased work by contemporary artists worldwide, including Oladele Bamgboye, Zarina Bhimji, Isaac Julien, Steve McQueen, Keith Piper, Johannes Phokela, and Yinka Shonibare. In 2000, Salah Hassan and Olu Oguibe curated *Ex-Centric/Authentic* for the forty-ninth Venice Biennale to highlight the work of several prominent contemporary artists from Africa and the African diaspora. In 2001, Enwezor organized *The Short Century: Independence and Liberation Movements in Africa 1945-1994* which opened in Munich and toured internationally. Oladele Bamgboye, Zarina Bhimji, Uzo Egonu, Gavin Jantjes, Isaac Julien, and Yinka Shonibare participated. 2002's *Documenta XI* in Kassel, again curated by Enwezor, showcased a plethora of international artists from multicultural backgrounds and included work from Zarina Bhimji, Isaac Julien, Steve McQueen, and Yinka Shonibare. Most recently, *Africa Remix: Contemporary Art of a Continent*, which opened in Düsseldorf in 2004 and toured to London, Paris, and Tokyo, showcased the work of eight-five artists, including Allan deSouza, Zineb Sedira, and Yinka Shonibare.

This litany of exhibitions and names offers several interesting points. For one, the curatorial strategy of each show was distinctive. Some focused only on artists of Africa and the diaspora, whilst others were not concerned with artists' origins. Some were staged in major metropolitan institutions, others in the temporary exhibition halls of biennials. Most were in some way investigating issues of history, migration, and globalization, all recently hot topics in contemporary art. Participation did not depend on the artist's heritage, but the ways in which their work addresses themes chosen by the curators. Finally, such worldwide exposure has resulted in a wider

general audience, increased funding and patronage, and more artistic freedom for these artists.

International acclaim is not the only trajectory available to these younger artists. Kinsi Abdullah and Barby Asante work on projects generated by a variety of venues and institutions, like the Brady Arts and Community Centre in east London and inIVA. Abdullah's degree in textiles, textile design, and fashion from the Surrey Institute in Farnham have led her to applied arts and design projects, like six silk hangings commissioned by an Edinburgh gallery to commemorate a 1995 exhibition of Somali artefacts. In east London, where Abdullah works as the council's arts officer at the Brady Centre, there is a substantial enough population of people of Somali descent to support programming such as the Somali-inspired music and design event organized in Tower Hamlets in September 2004 by the Iskudar-Mix project. Like Maria Amidu, Abdullah works with community arts programmes to bring art education to local neighbourhood audiences, especially to children. Her work is thus not very visible beyond such community contexts.

Barby Asante has worked with schoolchildren for projects sponsored by inIVA, and worked alongside Maria Amidu on Digital Artists Resource for Education (DARE).<sup>106</sup> Asante has also participated in other projects with a much wider reach in terms of audience. In 2001, she created an exhibition and performance project out of a residency at 198 Gallery called *I Accept Your Image; I Am You*. The project explored issues of self-image as constructed through fashion and consumer marketing. For example, Asante placed made-up slogans in and around Brixton boutiques and clubs. She also staged *Wig Therapy* at a local hairdresser's, where people tried on new looks and identities with different wigs, which was videotaped and installed in the gallery

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<sup>106</sup> See p. 186.

for the show. In this way, *I Accept Your Image; I Am You* interrogated stereotypes about hair and self-image. In keeping with 198 Gallery's connection to its community, the audience was necessarily quite local because of venues in which Asante staged her interventions and performances. However, she does not limit the promotion of her work to such a localized context. Later that year, she was invited to stage another *Wig Therapy* at a beauty school in Slovenia, demonstrating the international reach of the project.

Asante's 2002 solo show, *Journey into the East*, at the Showroom in London's East End demonstrated an interest in gallery space that is committed to contemporary art regardless of its racial or national origins. The Showroom has existed as a publicly funded contemporary art gallery since 1989, and its exhibition policy is to offer an artist his or her first solo show in London. According to its website, 'these are solo shows of new work by emergent artists, whose practice is ready to make the transition from grassroots innovation to a more established context,' (The Showroom, [www.theshowroom.org](http://www.theshowroom.org)). Exhibitions organized by Showroom curators have included Rasheed Araeen as well as Sam Taylor-Wood, Simon Starling, and Jim Lambie. Recently the Showroom has refined this mandate to commissioning individual artists to make new work for the gallery space.

Asante's exhibition explored issues of imperialism, trade, and cultural exchange through an examination of the place of tea in British culture using installation, archive materials, and video. Whilst the Showroom and its audience have demonstrated sustained interest in contemporary art that investigates multicultural and international issues, they are not promoting black British art to the exclusion of others. Through their various projects, Abdullah and Asante, like Maria Amidu, have a connection to local communities of African, Caribbean, and Asian descent.

However, they do not see this as their artistic mandate or racial responsibility; it simply represents one aspect of their professional activities. In Asante's case, her work is also aimed at more general audiences that increase her visibility beyond the immediate local community.

Maria Amidu is an artist and a project director, and does not seek to have exhibitions but instead emphasizes the creative process itself. Her audience tends to be the children in her workshops, or the people who use the spaces in which she creates. She is very connected to her audience, and seeks to improve the community in which she works through art education and projects with local schools, institutions, and museums. She explains,

I am not particularly interested in exhibitions...I am just not interested in making work for that particular context. I am really interested in the process of things, and how people interact with things. Putting a body of work on a wall just does nothing for me. Only if it is a result of all this other [project work] that has happened before, (Amidu 2002).

Amidu's work is rarely seen in galleries anymore, and thus her audience differs markedly from that of artists like Chris Ofili, Steve McQueen, or Yinka Shonibare. Abdullah, Asante, and Amidu have focused their activities on more localized audiences, and as a result are less visible in national and international contexts created through group exhibitions in mainstream institutions. However, the significant difference between their situations and those of other non-white artists twenty-five years previous is the degree of choice they feel they have.

The audience for contemporary British artists of African, Caribbean, and Asian descent, throughout the past twenty-five years, has always been connected to the various contextualizations of their work as well as the artists' personal aims and professional associations. For some, the artists and activities of the Black Art Movement gave them an opportunity to address community populations from a

perspective of racial and cultural difference, and to storm their way into the mainstream through political activism. For others, especially artists who came of age in the 1990s, representation of race or heritage was not their priority, and fearing they would be pigeonholed, they sought to conceptualize their work beyond these contexts. Some artists have cultivated local audiences through projects and exhibitions in their communities. Some have striven for success in the commercial art market through gallery representation and careful marketing strategies. If black British artists felt that they were invisible within the dominant mainstream twenty-five years ago, today these artists succeed in a variety of artistic milieus that support their talent and their work.

With wider audiences, these artists have enjoyed relatively high visibility. Their work has been collected by some of the most prominent national and international institutions as well as private patrons. In the UK, the British Museum owns work by Chris Ofili, and has sculpture by Sokari Douglas Camp and pottery by Magdalene Odundo on display in the Sainsbury African Galleries. The Victoria and Albert Museum owns works by Gavin Jantjes, Magdalene Odundo, Chris Ofili, and Zineb Sedira. The Tate Collection includes works by Rasheed Araeen, Zarina Bhimji, Frank Bowling, Sonia Boyce, Lubaina Himid, Gavin Jantjes, Anish Kapoor, Steve McQueen, Ronald Moody, Chris Ofili, Donald Rodney, Veronica Ryan, Yinka Shonibare, and Aubrey Williams. Charles Saatchi includes works by Yinka Shonibare and Chris Ofili in his collection.

Overseas, equally prominent institutions and collectors have acquired black British artists' work. The National Museum of African Art, Smithsonian Institution, has work by Sokari Douglas Camp, Godfried Donkor, Gavin Jantjes, Magdalene Odundo, Johannes Phokela, and Yinka Shonibare in its collection. The Museum of

Modern Art in New York has collected Chris Ofili, as has the Studio Museum in Harlem. The Guggenheim Museum in New York owns work by Oladele Bamgboye. Important private collectors with significant impact on the art scene such as Americans Peter Norton and Eli Broad own works by Steve McQueen, Chris Ofili, and Yinka Shonibare. These lists are by no means exhaustive, but are only an example of the wide circulation of work by these artists and their growing group of patrons.

Out of this group, Chris Ofili, Steve McQueen, and Yinka Shonibare have achieved the most notable commercial success and attention in both academic and the popular press. They have risen to prominence from art student to international renown within just a few years. Before he finished his MA, Chris Ofili had participated in three consecutive *Whitworth Young Contemporaries* shows at the Whitworth Art Gallery in Manchester in 1989 (prizewinner), 1990, and 1991, and received the *BP Portrait Award* at the National Portrait Gallery in 1990 and 1991. Ofili finished art school in 1993; by 1996 he had commercial gallery representation and a solo show, *Affrodizzia*, at Victoria Miro Gallery, London. In 1993 he was the second prizewinner of the Tokyo Print Biennale, and in 1996 he was awarded the Wingate Young Artist Award and received an Absolut Vodka commission for *About Vision*, Museum of Modern Art, Oxford. Charles Saatchi bought his paintings and included him in 1997's *Sensation*. By 1998 he had won the Turner Prize.

Ofili's audience, by this time, was not only British but also international art professionals and gallery-goers. He continues to have high-profile, highly acclaimed exhibitions in prestigious institutions worldwide, including a solo show at the Serpentine Gallery, London, in 1998, *within reach*, 50<sup>th</sup> Venice Biennale, 2003, and *Afro Muses* at the Studio Museum in Harlem, New York, 2005. He has received a

profuse amount of coverage in the art and mainstream press, from an article in *Frieze* just one year after finishing his degree (Morgan 1994) to two extensive reviews of *Afro Muses* in *The New York Times* (Carol Vogel, "An Artist's Gallery of Ideas," 5 May Vogel 2005) and the *International Herald Tribune* (Michael Kimmelman, "Ofili and the Inspiration in Routine," 7 May 2005).

Steve McQueen has enjoyed an equal level of visibility and renown. He has been a presence on the international art scene almost from the moment he finished art school. After completing postgraduate studies at the Tisch School of the Arts in New York in 1994, his video works were included in *Mirage: Enigma of Race, Difference, and Desire* (Institute of Contemporary Arts, London) and *The British Art Show 4* the following year. In 1996, he won the Institute of Contemporary Art's Futures Award and had a solo show at Chicago's Museum of Contemporary Art. He exhibited with other prominent contemporary artists in high-profile exhibitions, including *Documenta X* (Kassel, Germany) and the second Johannesburg Biennale in the same year (1997). In 1998, he was awarded a DAAD (Deutscher Akademischer Austausch Dienst) artist-in-residence in Berlin, and had solo shows in Rotterdam, San Francisco, and Paris. The level of success and renown McQueen had obtained by this time was confirmed when he won the Turner Prize in 1999. In 2002, he was awarded an OBE.

McQueen has continued to participate in exhibitions that are the most talked about in the contemporary art scene, like *Documenta XI* (Kassel, Germany, 2002) as well as more solo shows worldwide. He has commercial gallery representation in London, with a solo inaugural exhibition in 2004 at Thomas Dane gallery's new space in Piccadilly, as well as with Marian Goodman, who held a solo exhibition of his work in their New York gallery in 2005 and in Paris the following year. McQueen has been the subject of several articles in prestigious art journals, including *Art Monthly*

(Bickers 1996/1997), *Nka* (Mulcaire 1998) and *October* (Demos 2005) as well as receiving numerous reviews in the general media.

Yinka Shonibare has said that visibility was a critical issue for artists of non-European descent in the seventies and eighties but that the situation has changed over the last twenty years (Shonibare 2002). He sees the difference in these generations as primarily one of visibility, and feels that the success of artists like himself, Ofili, and McQueen has changed the political dynamics surrounding the struggles over identity that occupied art critics in the 1980s (Shonibare 2002). According to Shonibare, art school as well as society in general is more racially integrated and the economy has improved, bringing the money and patronage that supports them (Shonibare 2002).

Shonibare has received exposure comparable to Ofili and McQueen since he left Goldsmiths in 1991. In 1992, he won the prize for Barclays Young Artists Award show at the Serpentine Gallery. He was also featured in *The Art of African Textiles: Technology, Tradition, and Lurex* at the Barbican Centre in London in 1995, when Charles Saatchi first purchased his work. He has been represented by Stephen Friedman Gallery in Piccadilly, London, since 1997. Over the last fifteen years, Shonibare has exhibited in several notable solo shows as well as a plethora of group exhibitions, including the second Johannesburg Biennale and *Sensation* in 1997, *The Short Century* and *Authentic/Ex-centric* in 2001, *Documenta XI* in 2002, *Looking Both Ways* in 2003, and *Africa Remix* in 2005.

Shonibare's solo projects include 1998's *Diary of a Victorian Dandy*, which was commissioned by inIVA as a site-specific project for the London Underground, *Yinka Shonibare* at the Studio Museum in Harlem, New York, 2002, *Double Dress* at the Israel Museum in Jerusalem in 2002, *Double Dutch* at the Boijmans van Beuningen Museum, Rotterdam in 2004, and four solo shows in Stephen Friedman

Gallery between 1997 and 2006. More has been written about Shonibare than can possibly be listed here, but highlights include *Frieze* (Mercer 1995), *Nka* (Enwezor 1997), *Art Journal* (Oguibe 1999), and *ARTnews* (Holmes 2002).

Is it problematic that these three artists are all men? Certainly, British women artists of African, Caribbean, and Asian descent have faced discrimination and marginalization in the arts based in sexist as well as racist oppression.<sup>107</sup> Yet Sokari Douglas Camp, Magdalene Odundo, Mary Evans, Zineb Sedira, and Zarina Bhimji have all achieved a relatively comparable amount of success. Camp has had solo exhibitions at major metropolitan institutions in Britain and abroad, such as the Smithsonian National Museum of African Art in Washington, DC (*Echoes of the Kalabari*, 1988-89; 1997; *Sokari Douglas Camp: Church Ede, A Tribute to Her Father*, 1999), the British Museum in London (*Play and Display*, 1995-96), and the American Museum of Natural History in New York (1998). She has participated in prominent group exhibitions that have spanned the globe, including *Black President: The Art and Legacy of Fela Anikulapo-Kuti* (New Museum of Contemporary Art, New York, 2003) as well as numerous shows in Europe, Asia, Africa, and the Caribbean. She was awarded a CBE in 2005.

Camp's concentration on Kalabari ethnography, however, has placed limitations on her accessibility and thus her audience, who most often associate her with African art and culture. Despite her sculptures dealing with British and international issues, like *Brit Flag* (1999) and *11<sup>th</sup> September* (2001), Camp is viewed by most art professionals as an African artist. This has frustrated her, and she notes, 'My work is about what's going on in London, but it is in the British Museum and not the Tate. They're a bit slow in this country,' (Aidin 2000). Although her work has

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<sup>107</sup> See pp. 273-282.

been exhibited on occasion as contemporary British art, she has not participated in the Venice Biennale or *Documenta*, for example, and does not have commercial gallery representation outside of Galerie Peter Herrmann in Berlin, which specializes in African art and international artists who emphasize Africa. Press coverage of Camp includes an interview in *Nka* (Ainslie 1995) and a mention in Olu Oguibe's article in *Art Journal* on contemporary Nigerian artists (Oguibe 1999), but is scant within contemporary art criticism.

Magdalene Odundo has received critical acclaim as well as achieved great commercial success.<sup>108</sup> Despite her participation in contemporary art exhibitions, her connections to applied arts contexts present limitations not only on her saleability but her availability to the same international contemporary art market that has made stars of Ofili, McQueen, and Shonibare. Whilst Odundo herself may be comfortable inhabiting multiple contexts as a contemporary artist and a craftswoman, art professionals and critics tend to have more difficulty breaking down traditional academic categorizations. Odundo's continued contextualization within British studio ceramics as well as her continued participation in African art exhibitions keeps her on the margins of the international contemporary art scene in ways similar to Sokari Douglas Camp.<sup>109</sup>

Mary Evans' professional profile has expanded steadily since her return to London from Amsterdam; the last several years have been especially productive in terms of increased exhibition activity.<sup>110</sup> From 2000's *Continental Shift* (Bonnenfantenmuseum, Maastricht) to a site-specific work commissioned for

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<sup>108</sup> See pp. 93-94.

<sup>109</sup> Whilst a ceramicist, Grayson Perry, may have won the Turner Prize in 2003, Perry's fine art exhibition history, his work in other media such as film and photography, his pottery's narrative figuration, and its social and psychological content all contribute to his career ascendancy to the forefront of the British avant-garde.

<sup>110</sup> See pp. 161-165.

*Meditations on African Art: Patterns* at the Baltimore Museum of Art planned for summer 2007, Evans has had the opportunity to reach international audiences in contexts that have increased her visibility worldwide. Her participation in group exhibitions alongside renowned contemporary artists gives her the opportunity to circulate amongst elite dealers and collectors, and it is quite possible that she is establishing contacts that will secure her gallery representation, significant patronage, and significant critical acclaim within the near future.

Zineb Sedira has garnered a considerable amount of curatorial and critical interest. She has an impressive exhibition history since leaving art school in 1998, and has participated in many of the highest profile group exhibitions featuring artists of African descent, including 2001's *Authentic/Ex-Centric* at the Venice Biennale and 2005's *Africa Remix*. She was also included in *Strangers: The First ICP Triennial of Photography and Video* (International Center of Photography, New York, 2003). Her first major solo show, *Telling Stories with Differences*, opened at the Cornerhouse in Manchester in 2004. As a result, her work has become part of an international critical dialogue in exhibition catalogues and the art press, including *Nka* (Highet 2000) and *Third Text* (Connor 2001 and Azizov 2001/2002), as well as *The New York Times* (Holland Cotter, "Art in Review: 'Insertion,'" 19 May 2000) and *Art in America* (Sotiriadi 2002). She is represented by The Agency Contemporary, London, and Galerie Kamel Mennour, Paris. Both the Victoria and Albert Museum and the Arts Council, England hold her works in their collections.

Zarina Bhimji is another artist who has achieved great international success. She was awarded DAAD (Deutscher Akademischer Austausch Dienst) artist-in-residence in Berlin in 2002, the same year she created *Out of Blue* (2002) for *Documenta XI*. In 2003, she participated in *Fault Lines* at the Venice Biennale. Most

recently, her work was included in Okwui Enwezor's *Snap Judgements: New Positions in Contemporary African Photography* (International Center of Photography, New York, 2006) and *How to Improve the World: 60 Years of British Art* (Hayward Gallery, London, 2006). She has had several solo exhibitions in the UK since 1992's *I Will Always Be Here* at Ikon Gallery in Birmingham, including *Art Now* at the Tate Britain in 2003, *Archive Season* at inIVA in 2004, and her self-titled 2006 show at London's Haunch of Venison, the well-respected commercial gallery who represents her. She has been nominated for 2007's Turner Prize. In the US, Bhimji is represented by Talwar Gallery, where she had a solo exhibition, *Cleaning the Garden*, in 2001. Bhimji has been featured in numerous reviews and articles in the press, including *Artforum*, *Art Monthly*, *The Independent*, *The Guardian*, and *The New York Times*. Her work is included in the Tate Collection, the Arts Council Collection, Victoria and Albert Museum, and the Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago.

For these women artists, it seems that art stardom equal to that of their male peers is within reach. However, claiming that sexism in the art world has been eradicated is premature, especially within the art market. For example, both noted YBAs Rachel Whiteread and Damien Hirst have won the Turner Prize (in 1993 and 1995, respectively), and both have works in important contemporary art collections. However, when one compares recent Christie's estimates for their work, Whiteread's is \$400-600,000 whilst Hirst's works easily sell for sums in the millions; his notorious pickled tiger shark, *The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living* (1991) sold for \$13.3 million in January 2005. According to private art advisor Mark Fletcher, 'Whiteread has an extraordinary, esteemed museum exhibition and patronage history, but it's Hirst, [who] has such little institutional support, [who] does

extremely well in the marketplace,' (Greg Allen, "The X Factor: Is the Art Market Rational or Biased?" *The New York Times*, 1 May 2005). Whilst Christie's director of contemporary art, Amy Cappellazzo, believes that, 'amongst artists in their 30's, "There's definitely a parity in gallery representation,"' (Allen, "The X Factor," 2005), feminist art activist group the Guerrilla Girls continue to protest against the under-representation of women artists, recently at the 2005 Venice Biennale and on the occasion of the Tate Modern's 2006 rehang, which featured a room dedicated to their polemical posters. Like racism, sexism has not been eradicated, but the situation has undeniably improved since the early 1980s when black British artists, men as well as women, had to organize on their own behalf in order to be seen and heard within the mainstream.

## Chapter 4: Conclusion

In early 1980s Britain, young black artists were emerging from art schools and appearing in exhibitions in increasing numbers, and began to organize a new politics of resistance. Although there had certainly been successful black British artists before this time, calling oneself “black” became a way of referencing common experiences of racism and marginalization. This generation was largely born and/or raised in the UK, and representative of a new homegrown British multiculturalism. Faced with treatment as immigrants and outsiders, as many of their predecessors had been, these artists worked together to change the system. It is important to remember, however, that black artists were in fact quite a disparate group with a multitude of backgrounds and histories.

The first chapter provides the details of the historical moment of the Black Art Movement’s emergence, and discusses the artists’ personal and artistic relationships to that history. We see how before the 1980s, artists of African and Caribbean descent achieved successes that were mitigated by racism and their marginalization from mainstream art discourse in Britain, particularly by emphasizing their exotic backgrounds. This created the impetus for the group organization amongst black artists in the 1980s that would eventually propel them into the mainstream. A brief look at black British exhibition history describes how early associations of black artists were geared towards galvanizing a political minority whereas later group exhibitions were more inclusive and less apt to emphasize the artists’ collective experiences resulting from racism. More importantly, it hints at different artists’ attitudes towards such categorizations of their work, particularly through their activities as curators and critics. For example, Eddie Chambers and Lubaina Himid remain dedicated to overthrowing white cultural hegemony whilst other artists strive

for a more inclusive approach, e.g. the curators of *From Two Worlds* (Gavin Jantjes, Sonia Boyce, and Veronica Ryan) or the artists who refused to participate in *The Other Story*. What emerges is the diversity of the artists' relationship to a black British identity, both professionally and personally, from the very inception of the politics and strategies that would comprise the Black Art Movement.

Moreover, the visual analysis of works by Yinka Shonibare, Godfried Donkor, and Lubaina Himid elucidates these artists' relationship to a much broader history, i.e. imperial and colonial. Through specific historical references, they seek to evaluate the ways in which people of African, Caribbean, and Asian have been marginalized and excluded from much more than modern and contemporary art history. In contrast, Zarina Bhimji, Sonia Boyce, and Sokari Douglas Camp approach history from a more personal viewpoint by weaving their own experiences into larger narratives of history, migration, and memory. The differences with which these artists approach conceptualizations of history and geography serve as an appropriate introduction to the case studies as opportunities to compare artists' personal visions and professional choices on a much broader level. The complexities of "Black British" as an artistic categorization are illuminated through the artists' biographies and visual analysis.

The case studies in the second chapter provide the details of four different trajectories over the course of the years that defined the Black Art Movement to the present day. With an in-depth description of the personal circumstances, art training, and professional activities of each, they offer significant and unprecedented studies of Magdalene Odundo, Veronica Ryan, Mary Evans, and Maria Amidu.<sup>111</sup> Such research and publication is precisely the kind of scholarship needed to recognize these artists'

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<sup>111</sup> The publication of *Magdalene Odundo*, Anthony Slayter-Ralph, ed. (Aldershot: Lund Humphries, 2004) is an exception, although it does not assess Odundo's body of work in relationship to the Black Art Movement or her participation in various black art debates (through exhibitions, lectures, etc.).

art historical contribution beyond an African diasporic or black British context.<sup>112</sup>

Whilst the differences in their personal and professional trajectories are numerous, there are parallels in their experiences that are equally compelling.

Some of the artists' experiences in the British education system reveal the presence of institutionalized racism and prejudice. At university, Odundo, Ryan, Evans, and Amidu consciously sought out art, literature, and debates associated with African and black identity. All of them felt a need to redress the lack of such diversity in their curricula, just as countless other black writers, artists, and academics had done before them. In all four cases, the system was not providing it, and in some, actively resisting it, as Amidu's experiences at the Royal College describe. Yet, at Goldsmiths Evans was expected to engage with other black artists on the basis of her Nigerian parentage. In both cases, assumptions about their creativity were based upon their African heritages. Both Ryan's and Amidu's research and cultural analysis during their postgraduate studies sought out contemporary African arts practice and a cultural perspective beyond the Eurocentric one that dominated their studies in art school.

Beyond the development of each artist's unique body of work, there are interesting similarities to their creative approaches. Odundo, Evans, and Amidu all have a relationship to their creative process that does not privilege or indeed even separate fine art from craft. They point out that such a separation is a Western construct; both Odundo and Evans characterize a non-hierarchical attitude towards making as "African." Amidu extends her arts practice beyond the confines of the fine arts gallery or exhibition space, and indeed some of her work has an ephemeral quality that precludes its collection or consumption in this manner. Despite Amidu's distinctive project-based approach, she shares an emphasis on the creative process

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<sup>112</sup> Odundo's reputation as a British ceramicist moves her beyond such contextualization, but limits her appreciation in a more contemporary fine art milieu.

itself with Odundo and Ryan. Odundo's precise ceramic method, carefully developed and refined over the course of her career, celebrates the techniques learned from other potters who hand build and burnish their pots, and her fascination with the vagaries of firing, although stressful, certainly indicates the significance of this alchemy. Ryan has expressed the importance of the ritual aspects of creating sculpture, for example, in carefully wrapping mango stones.

These artists also share interesting formal and thematic similarities. Ryan's sculptures of organic pod-like forms and curling leaves from the 1980s resonate with the swelling bellies and furling spouts of Odundo's pots. Childhood memory and nostalgia are significant sources of inspiration for Ryan, Evans, and Amidu. Ryan's exploration of memory and nostalgia is rooted in psychological theory, Evans concentrates on innocence and play, and Amidu excavates memories with the gentle pathos of hindsight and lost innocence. Evans' interrogation of systems of social, racial, and national classification and categorization resonate with Amidu's similar investigations of objects in a museum context in *Finders, Keepers*. It is vital, however, not to assume these relationships stem from a kind of inherent black experience or perspective common to all artists of African descent. In fact, these similarities could be considered arbitrary; instead, however, they are original representations of a diasporic condition.

As women, Odundo, Ryan, Evans, and Amidu face issues regarding femininity as well as race. Interestingly, there are much fewer instances of sexism affecting the artists' professional profiles than of racism. As mothers, Odundo and Ryan have had to juggle the significant demands of child rearing with their artistic ambitions; Ryan has specifically confronted expectations that art making must be a hobby secondary to motherhood. Beyond these insights, we can only speculate as to

how the artists' gender may have impeded them professionally based on testimonies from art world experts about the disparity in patronage and recognition between male and female artists. We might also wonder if a non-hierarchical approach to applied arts, an emphasis on creative process over product, and an interest in memory, nostalgia, categorization, and organic forms are inherently feminine concerns. Once again, however, this is an analytical dead end. Odundo, Ryan, Evans, and Amidu have each developed a unique body of work as a result of their individual experiences, and one can always find male artists, or white artists for that matter, with such formal and thematic affinities. What one does gain from such comparisons, however, is a revelation of the breadth and depth of human experience, and the richness each individual perspective brings to this collective knowledge.

Chapter three provides a wider perspective by introducing a host of other black British artists. The details of their experiences and the originality of their work demonstrate that, no matter how various exhibition strategies or the Black Art Movement package them as "black," each artist is unique and it is this uniqueness that gives his/her work its full value. The analysis demonstrates the sheer complexity of forces that impact each one's creative process, and the diversity of work effectively deconstructs the malign over-simplifications of race. Artists are not only individually different, but the situation is complicated by the ways in which they are constantly negotiating their place in the discourse about black art. This is true even if the artist has carefully positioned him- or herself *outside* such discourses; this also represents a choice.

Chapter three also takes us from the inception of the Black Art Movement to the present day. How has the situation for black British artists evolved over the last twenty-five years? For some, like Chambers and Himid, there have been failures and

disappointments, namely, a lack of sustainability of funding for black-owned exhibitions and institutions, and a lack of recognition within institutions on an administrative or academic level, e.g. no black curators or professors at major institutions. Comparing statistical numbers of black populations and of working professional artists to the percentage of working black British artists simply does not take tell the whole story. For one thing, one must take into account all the variables that define the categories like “black” and “working professional artist.” For another, this approach does not allow for extra-statistical data, like class and other economic factors. If, in the 1980s, it was a question of lack of visibility, today there are several prominent and successful black artists at the forefront of the British art scene. Certainly, with the successes of Chris Ofili, Steve McQueen, and Yinka Shonibare, there have been positive signs of change within the art establishment. Whether or not this is sustainable will be determined by the numbers of art school graduates who follow their art star trajectories.

Is this the kind of success for which that the Black Art Movement was striving? Some would say no, mostly those who were proponents of community activism and wished to establish an art that served the needs of that community. Those who would say yes have appreciated the increased visibility and opportunity within the British art establishment and do not see the advantages to either separating themselves out of the mainstream or limiting their creative practice to the representation of their experiences in terms of race or non-Western heritage. It seems as though there are more artists today interested in diversity and individualism than a conceptualization of “black” as a single, unified experience at the forefront of everything they are and do.

It is time, then, to return to Paul Gilroy's account of double consciousness.<sup>113</sup> Certainly works like Keith Piper's *Go West Young Man* (1987; Fig. 3.2) and *Reckless Eyeballing* (1995; Fig. 3.12) express the unease with which a black man exists in a dominantly white society. Zineb Sedira's *Quatre Générations de Femmes* (1997; Fig. 3.20) and Sonia Boyce's *She Ain't Holding Them Up, She's Holding On (Some English Rose)* (1986; Fig. 3.22), by documenting the backgrounds of both artists' families, seem to stake a claim of belonging that is as much based in the West as in Africa and the Caribbean. Both artists live within the context of their multicultural heritages, which are necessarily complex; it is not that they grapple with a sense of *not* belonging, but it does seem as though their national, cultural, linguistic, etc. allegiances are sometimes contradictory. Magdalene Odundo's description of the perspective on Africa she gained from living in the UK is perhaps a more dynamic description of double consciousness; rather than feeling torn between two, she is enriched by her experience of both.<sup>114</sup>

Is there an inherent *separateness* in these artists' relationship to Britain and the West? As the above examples demonstrate, it is not that these artists feel marginalized or excluded as much as that they feel as though their right to belong to a British identity is compromised by assumptions that their African heritage is somehow more prominent or precious to them, and that belonging to one continent precludes belonging to another. Maria Amidu's comments about her generation having to 'justify our place in the playground, in the classroom, everywhere in fact...' hint at such an attitude, that having dark skin or African parents means that you are never accepted as British *a priori*.<sup>115</sup> This is, of course, silly and faulty reasoning on anyone's part, and certainly outmoded by today's standards of political correctness

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<sup>113</sup> See pp. 17-18.

<sup>114</sup> See p. 62.

<sup>115</sup> See p. 226.

and the multiculturalism not only acknowledged, but also celebrated in British popular culture today. This does not, however, prevent the insidious influence of these stereotypes affecting how these artists are perceived in the art world.

Does their membership in the 'Black Atlantic,' as Gilroy suggests, define their relationship to modernity and postmodernity? Yinka Shonibare, Godfried Donkor, and Lubaina Himid have all engaged in a revision of modern historical narratives that literally white-washed people of African descent out of British history. Their works demonstrate the presence and participation of black people in a modern age characterized by exploration, encounter, and movement as well as the evolutions in technology and transformations in society that resulted. As for a postmodern perspective, we only have to look to the roots of the Black Art Movement itself to see that it was founded on the values of multiculturalism, and sought a deconstruction of the old order in favour of one in which every person has equal opportunities and respect. In many ways this parallels the aims of feminist art in the 1970s; both feminists and black artists had a vested interest in dismantling Western patriarchal hegemony.

If we are fully to reckon with the art history in this thesis, there are several problematic terms that must be identified in order to either avoid or clarify them. Many buzzwords of black art discourse are misleading at best, and usually nonsensical in light of the data. The various proliferations of black (Black, "black," "Black," etc.) are carefully chosen to reflect the user's concerns and contexts, whether representative of a political base, artistic community, cultural generalization, or any other conceptualization. Likewise, African can denote a distant ancestral connection as equally as a person born on the continent. Race, in a scientific sense, is a genetic fiction; however, it is also a powerful signifier of particular human communities and

the fierce allegiances they inspire. Ethnicity is used in so many diverse contexts as to be rendered practically meaningless;<sup>116</sup> minority has similar problematic uses. Culture represents such a vast array of factors that is usually too general to stand on its own, and needs to be qualified.

In terms of art history and criticism, distinctions between fine art and craft and the valuing of one above the other have repeatedly been shown as limiting our understanding of the work of these artists. All of the above labels are defined rather arbitrarily by curators, critics, and the artists themselves. This does not mean that to make any sense of the matter, the concept of “black British artist” should be completely discarded. If, for example, Mary Evans did not feel an affinity to other black artists’ issues of belonging during art school, she did experience a conflict about her heritage versus nationality when she was in Amsterdam, and this led to a significant artistic breakthrough with ramifications on her subsequent work and overall career trajectory. Beyond the personal identifications with such a concept, it has been aptly demonstrated that the community of artists who participated in the Black Art Movement did so because of the advantages that they felt it gave them. Jettisoning the term “black British artist” would be like throwing the baby out with the bathwater.

If black British art were only interpreted within the context of a black British discourse, then its shelf life would be determined by the consequent inadmissibility of any alternative interpretations. This is exactly the problem that many artists have. Clearly, there is no single, unified artistic response to being identified as black British, despite contentions by some that there should be. Whether or how artists choose to express such complex issues in their art is a matter of professional and

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<sup>116</sup> See pp. 256-258.

individual choice. Whilst analyzing these artists' work and bibliographies in relation to conceptualizations like history, identity, displacement, diaspora, etc. might be illuminating, the very richness of the analysis and contradictory data attest to the futility of using these terms as tangible realities. Instead they should be conceived of as points of reference on an ever-turning wheel of personal and professional experience. Some artists feel strongly that black artists have responsibilities to their (minority) communities. Other artists have felt understandably constrained by this injunction. They may have their own approaches to black art that go beyond this definition or lie outside of it altogether.

Moreover, contemporary ideas of multiculturalism and postmodern values of diversity have contributed to black British artists' prominence within contemporary art debates. Paradoxically, this increased inclusion has a tendency to limit their abilities and achievements as artists by insisting that they express, for example, exoticized ideals of their "homeland" or the effects of racism. In an ironic reversal of the very characteristics that marginalized them in the first place, they are often criticized for not being "black" enough.<sup>117</sup> Pressures like these on the artist, from both within and without the black British community, stem from essentialist discourses that insist one's non-British heritage be represented as one's primary identifying characteristic.

Here one comes to an impasse with regards to established categories defining African art. Are these artists to be considered African or Afro-Caribbean if they have lived most, if not all, of their lives in Britain and have achieved success on an international scale? What of artists working in African countries who create objects based on local artistic traditions whilst simultaneously using modern technologies and

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<sup>117</sup> This criticism comes from both black and white curators, critics, and the public. For example, see Amidu's testimony, pp. 167 and 180. See also Picton 2001, p. 66.

Western popular culture to broaden and deepen the boundaries of their art? Clearly, art historical discourse cannot effectively continue academic analysis and discussion of black British artists without deconstructing the very modes of categorization that labelled them “Black British” in the first place. Whilst this has been subverted into a politically useful concept in the past, the time has come to reckon frankly and intelligently with the inadequacies of this old, even outdated model.

Academics might take their cue from current frustrations of the artists themselves at being continually labelled “Other,” “African,” or “black.” If these artists have the creative freedom to draw upon their myriad of experiences beyond those related to race and non-Western heritage, then at least some of them still seek academic and critical recognition that interprets their work outside the black British box. The success of the Black Art Movement has left a bittersweet legacy of not only increased visibility but also the imposing shadow of racial politics. The attempts these artists have made to overthrow this shadow, or outrun it, demonstrate the need for an interpretive shift within the art world; they are experiencing the pains of outgrowing the old model.

There are several possible strategies to consider towards affecting such a shift in order to construct a new paradigm that embraces the richness of a multitude of histories, heritages, and trajectories without sweeping generalizations. Britain has begun to recognize and even celebrate its multicultural history on an institutional level, as seen with the renewed look at empire and slavery in galleries and educational institutions, or in Sir Nicholas Serota’s recent Tate Britain rehang.<sup>118</sup> In order to move forward in a practical sense, more black artists need to be appointed as professors and curators at the institutional level. In an art historical sense, there need to be more solo

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<sup>118</sup> See pp. 131 and 193.

exhibitions and retrospectives, with accompanying publications, that feature the work of black artists beyond the group exhibition context.

Once again, there are interesting parallels with the trajectory of feminist art history. In 2007, there has been a significant attempt to historicize the movement, particularly with the exhibition *WACK! Art and the Feminist Revolution* (Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles) and the publication of its exhibition catalogue. Concurrently, New York's Museum of Modern Art organized its conference, "The Feminist Future: Theory and Practice in the Visual Arts" and the Brooklyn Museum of Art staged *Global Feminisms* in order to assess the state of feminist art today. Both the artists and the works are more diverse than thirty years ago; the definition of "feminist art" has expanded over the years. The re-interpretation of feminist art has been a key factor in its continued art historical relevance. More importantly, younger women artists, like Cindy Sherman, Kara Walker, Tracey Emin, and Sarah Lucas, are frequently exhibited and interpreted beyond this context.

Whilst sexual parity in the arts is yet to be fully achieved, women artists can create within an increasingly less restrictive and sexist art establishment. Black British artists deserve equal creative freedom, especially freedom from prejudice and recognition that does not continually foreground their "Otherness." Zarina Bhimji has been nominated for 2007's Turner Prize. The inclusion of a woman of African descent amongst the nominees continues a hopeful indication that indeed, the art establishment is maturing beyond the growing pains suffered as a result of gender and the legacy of black British art, and building on the successes of Chris Ofili, Yinka Shonibare, and others. It is perhaps ironic then, in 2007, the bicentenary of the abolition of British involvement in the slave trade, that British artists of African descent should be called upon to prepare work as an intervention in the displays of

great national institutions such as the Victoria and Albert Museum (Lubaina Himid, Keith Piper, and Yinka Shonibare in *Uncomfortable Truths*) and the National Gallery (Yinka Shonibare in *Scratching the Surface*). These artists have avoided being pigeonholed in the past, yet there seem to be some contexts in which highlighting their African heritage is useful, acceptable, and even desirable.

**GROWING PAINS:  
GENDER AND THE LEGACY OF BLACK BRITISH ART**

**MONIQUE FOWLER-PAUL**

**THE SCHOOL OF ORIENTAL AND AFRICAN STUDIES  
UNIVERSITY OF LONDON**

**PHD 2007**

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

### Volume Two

Title page	1
Table of Contents for Volume Two	2
Images	3
Appendix A	69
Appendix B	95
Bibliography	127

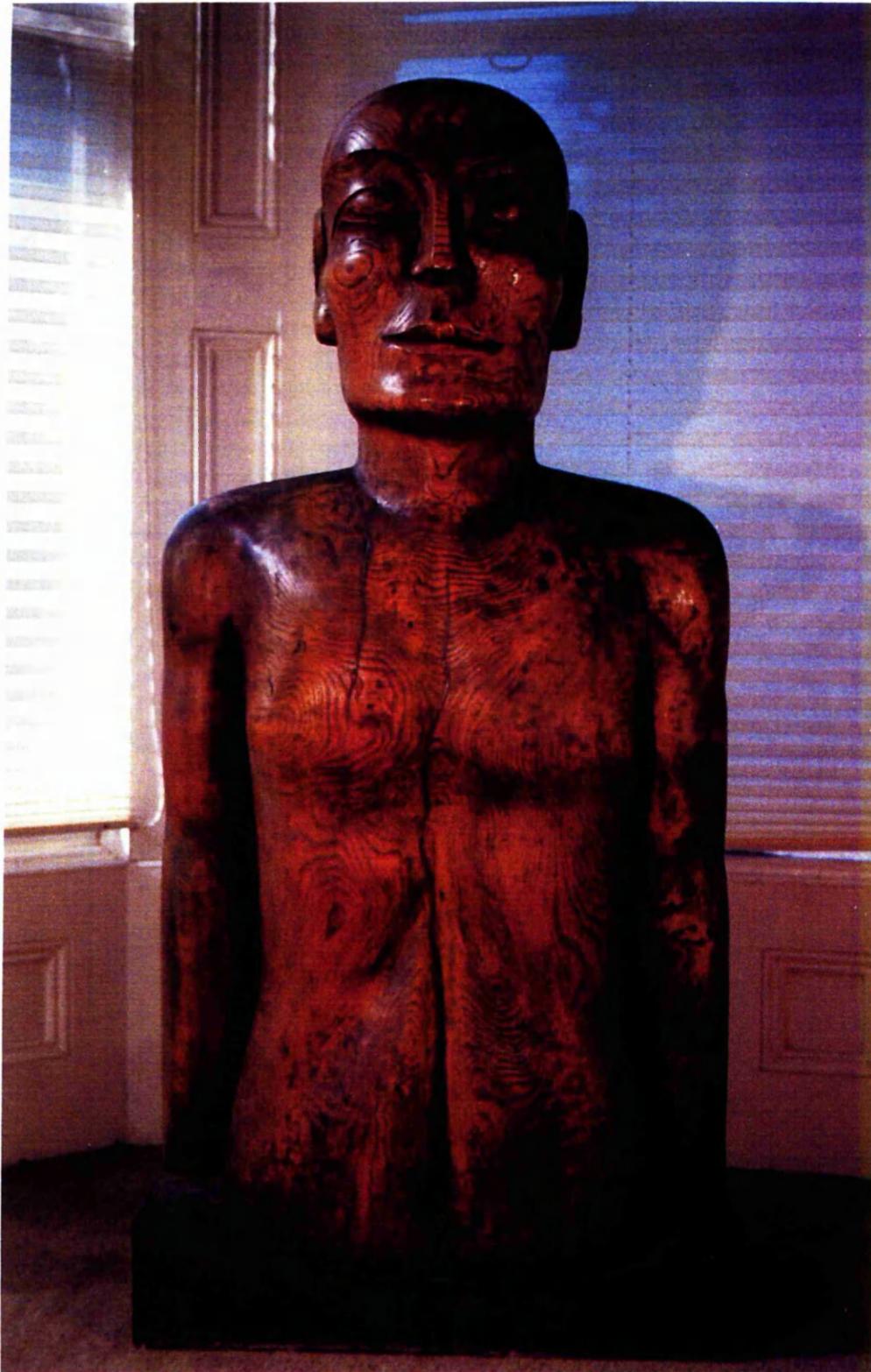


Figure 1.1 Ronald Moody, Johanaan (1936), Elm 155 x 74 x 40 cm, Tate Collection.



Figure 1.2 Aubrey Williams, Triptych (1976): *Arawak*, Oil on canvas 122 x 71 cm, *Carib*, Oil on canvas 117 x 145 cm, *Waarau* 120.5 x 72 cm, Collection of artist's estate.



Figure 1.3 Uzo Egonu, *Restaurant at Bad Orb* (1980), Oil on canvas 124 x 178 cm, Collection of artist's estate.



Figure 1.4 Frank Bowling, *Mirror* (1964), Oil on canvas 335 x 213 cm, Collection of artist.



Figure 1.5 Yinka Shonibare, *Diary of a Victorian Dandy: 19.00 hours* (1998), C-type print, series of five 183 x 228 cm, Commissioned by inIVA, Courtesy the artist and Stephen Friedman Gallery.



Figure 1.6 Yinka Shonibare, *Gallantry and Criminal Conversation*, detail (2002), Mixed media installation dimensions vary, Collection of artist and Stephen Friedman Gallery.

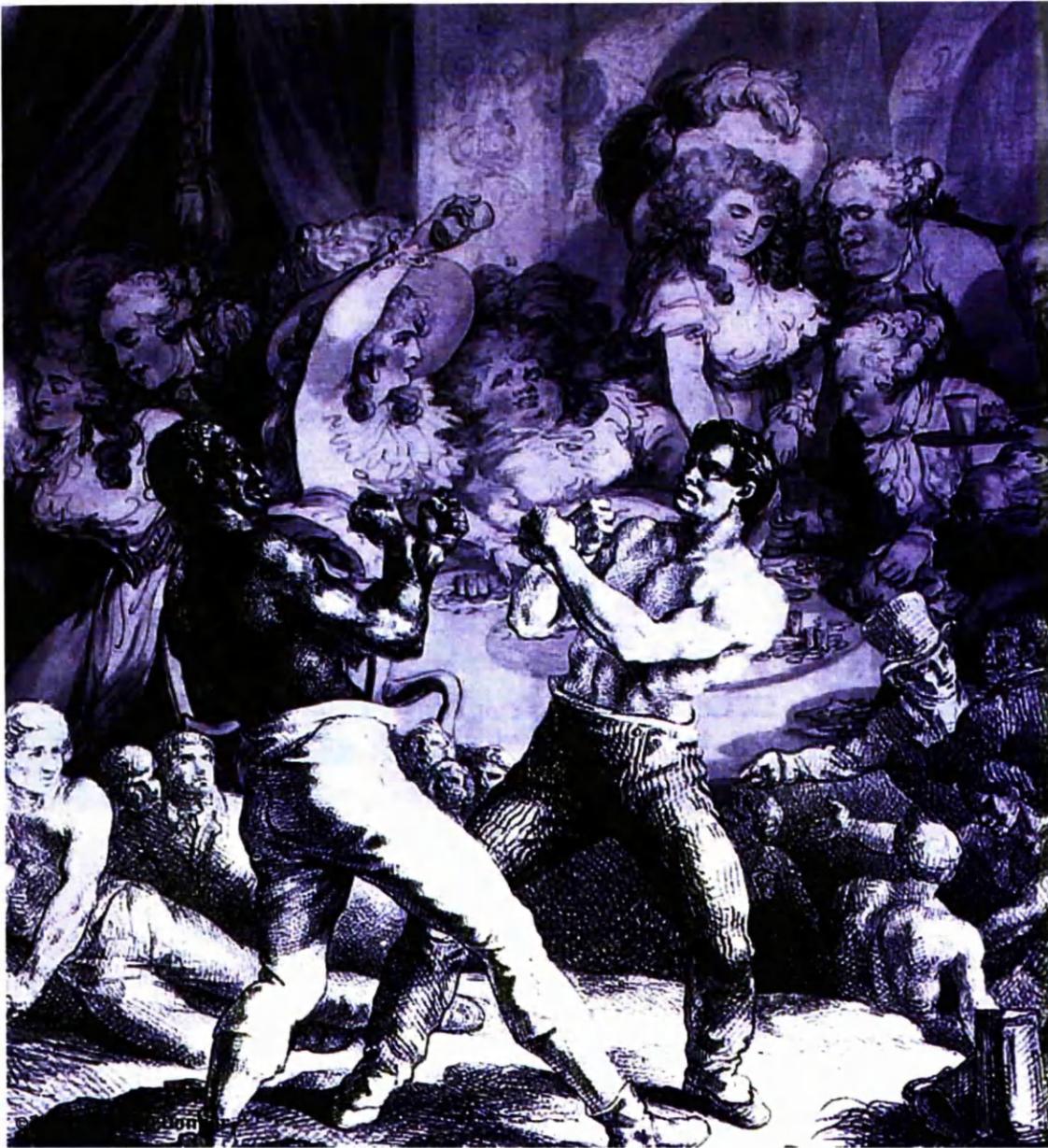


Figure 1.7 Godfried Donkor, *Gaming Room at Devonshire House* (2001), Inkjet print on canvas 133.3 x 133.3 cm, Collection of artist.



Figure 1.8 Lubaina Himid, *Between the Two My Heart Is Balanced* (1991), Acrylic on canvas 152.4 x 121.9 cm, Tate Collection.

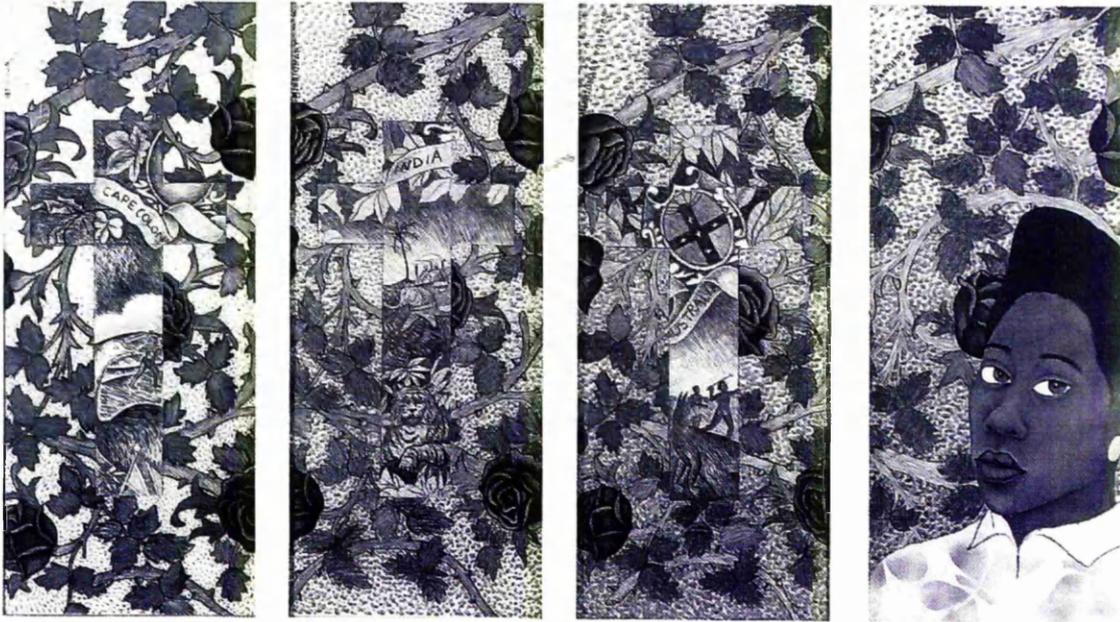


Figure 1.9 Sonia Boyce, *Lay Back, Keep Quiet and Think of What Made Britain So Great* (1986), charcoal, pastel and watercolour on paper 1525 x 650 cm each panel, Arts Council Collection.



Figure 1.10 Sokari Douglas Camp, *Church Ede (Decorated Bed for Christian Wake)* (1984), Welded steel, cloth, marine varnish, automotive paint, motors 237.5 x 298.5 x 264.2 cm, National Museum of African Art.



Figure 2.1 Magdalene Odundo, Three Untitled Pots (1982), Burnished and oxidized terracotta.

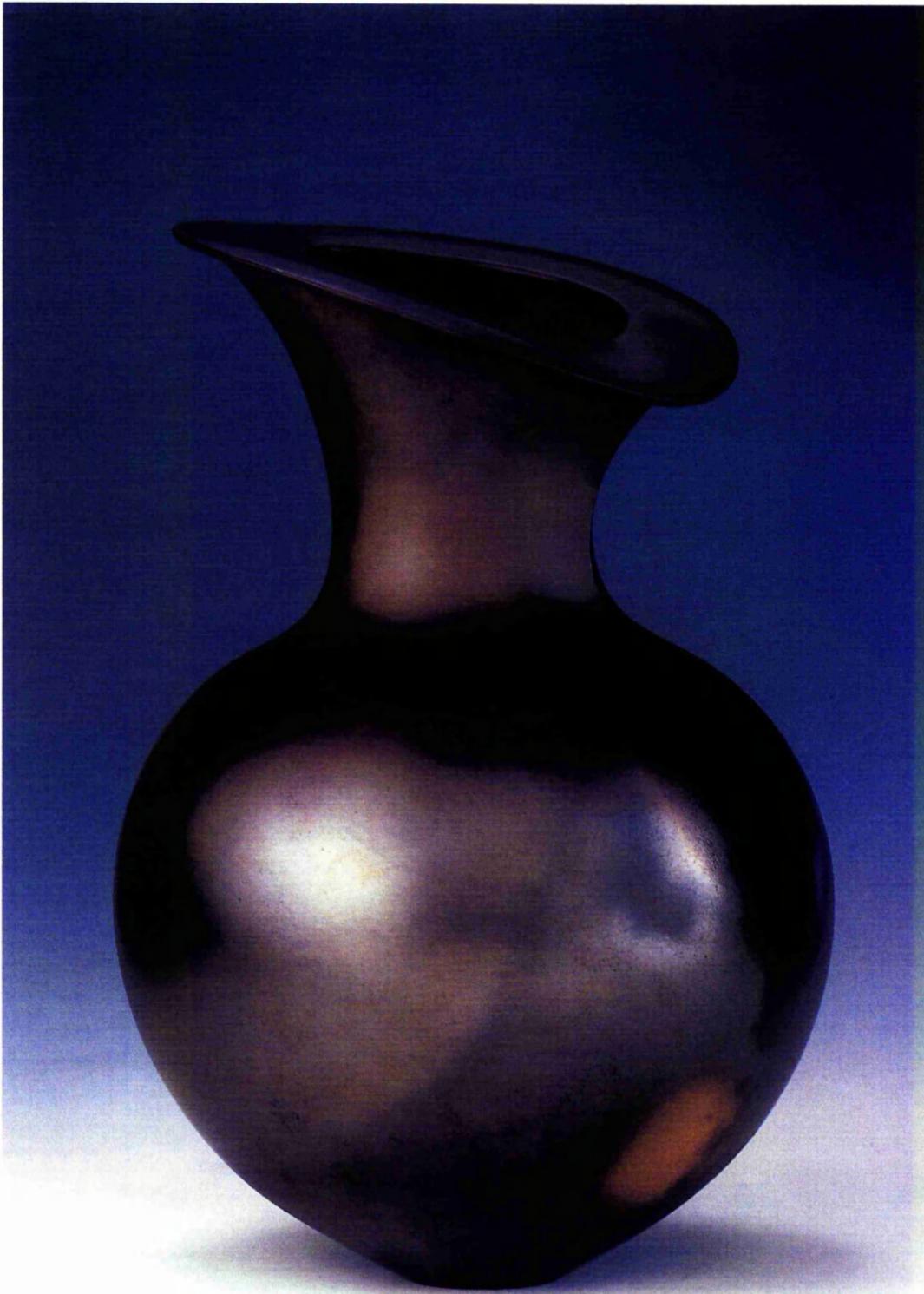


Figure 2.2 Odundo, Untitled (1983), Burnished and carbonized terracotta 32 x 30 cm, Private Collection.

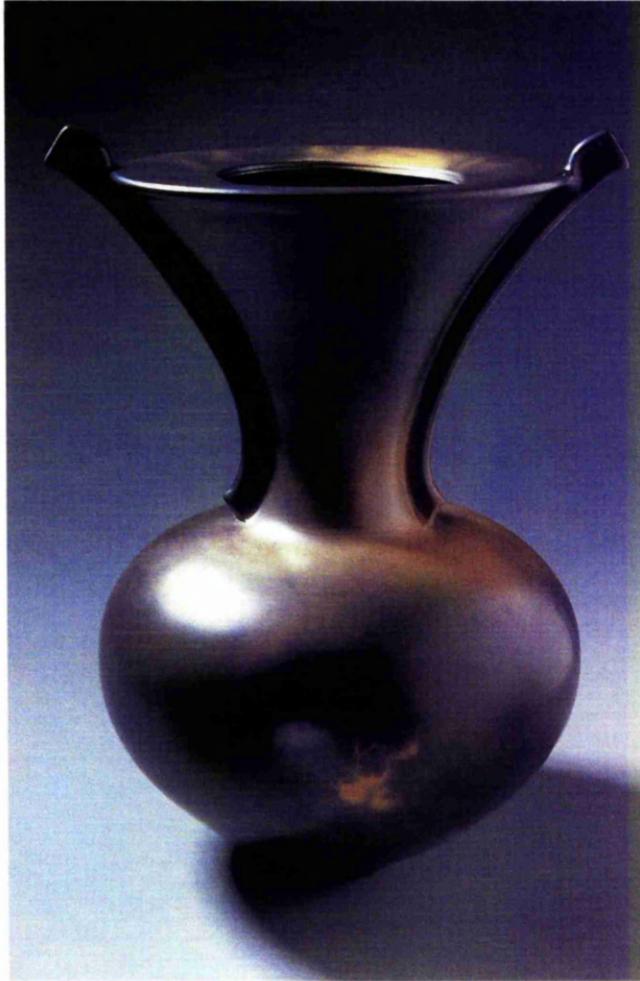


Figure 2.4 Magdalene Odundo, *Mixed-Colour Flat-Topped Winged* (1987), Burnished and carbonized terracotta, Private collection.

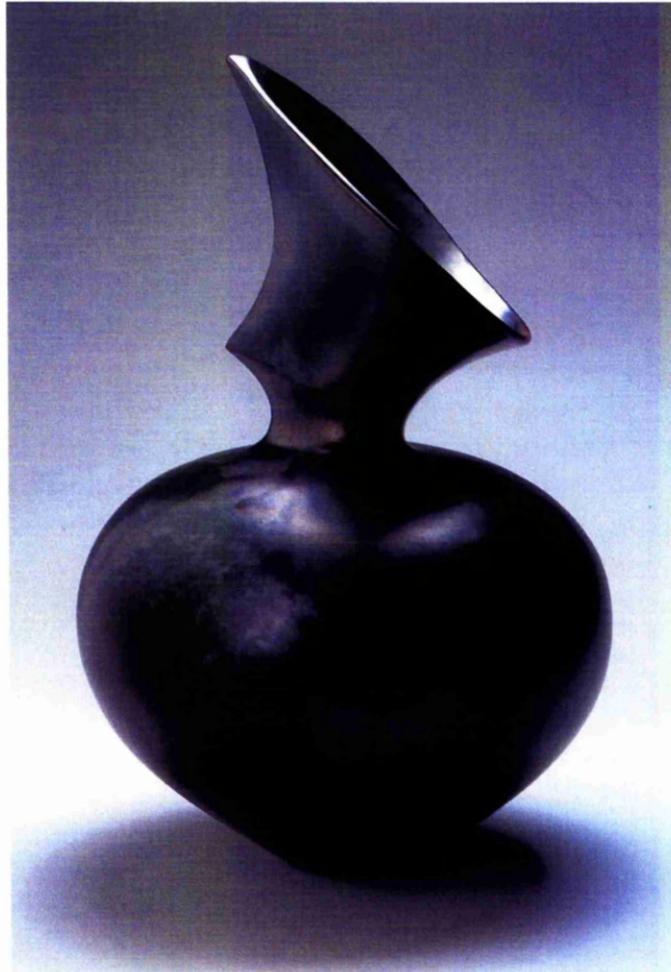


Figure 2.5 Magdalene Odundo, Untitled (1986), Polished and carbonized terracotta  
35.5 x 20.3 cm, Janis and William Wetsman Collection.

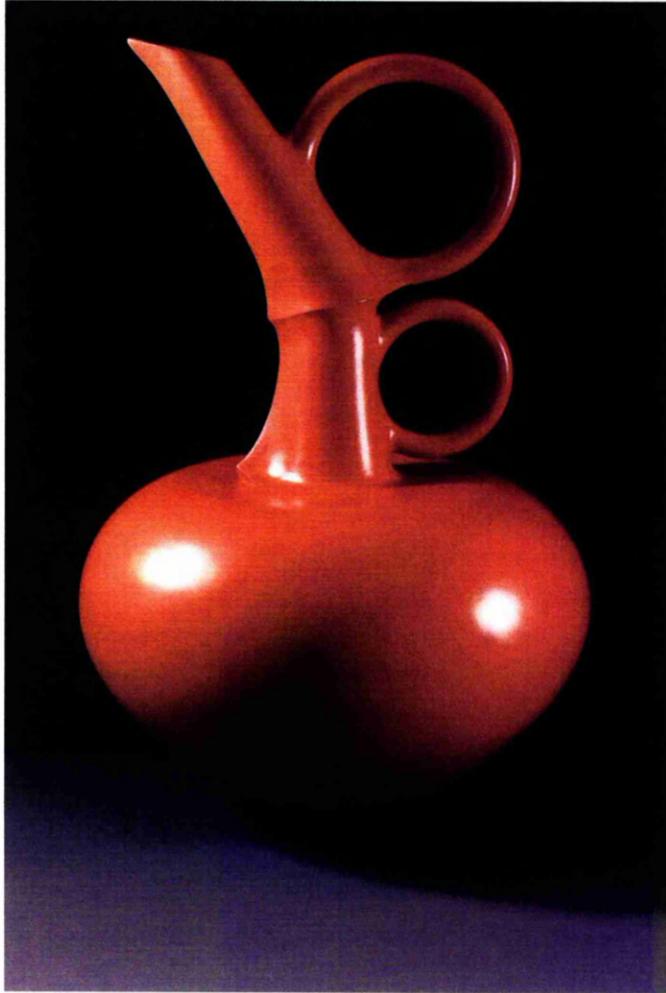


Figure 2.6 Magdalene Odundo, *Angled Spouted Terracotta Piece* (1989), Burnished and oxidized terracotta 44.5 x 29.5 cm, Private collection.



Figure 2.7 Magdalene Odundo, Untitled (2001), Polished and oxidized terracotta 80 x 33.5 cm, Collection of artist.

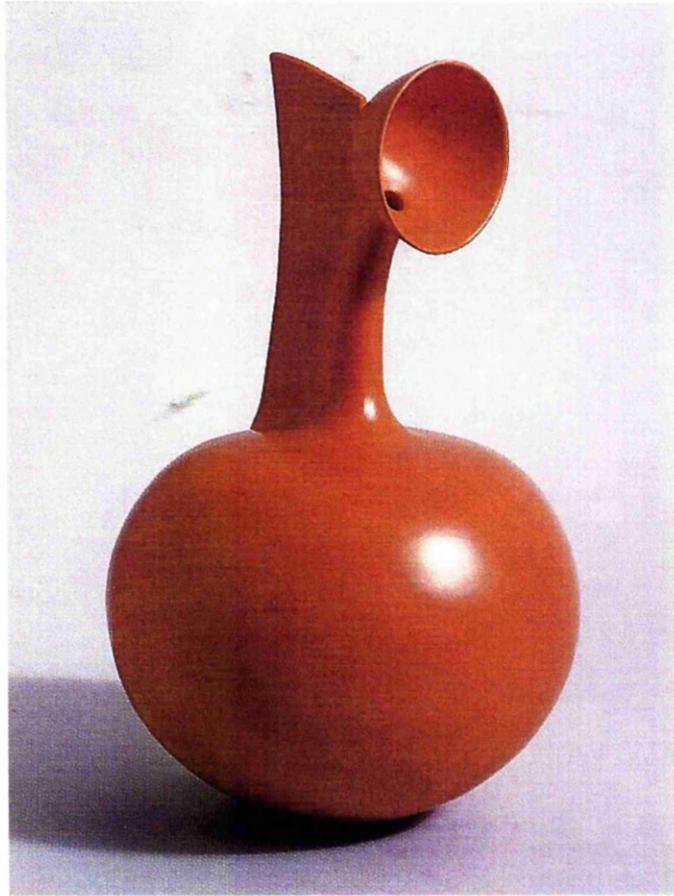


Figure 2.8 Magdalene Odundo, *Orange Narrow Necked* (1987), Burnished and oxidized terracotta 36.5 cm, Private collection.

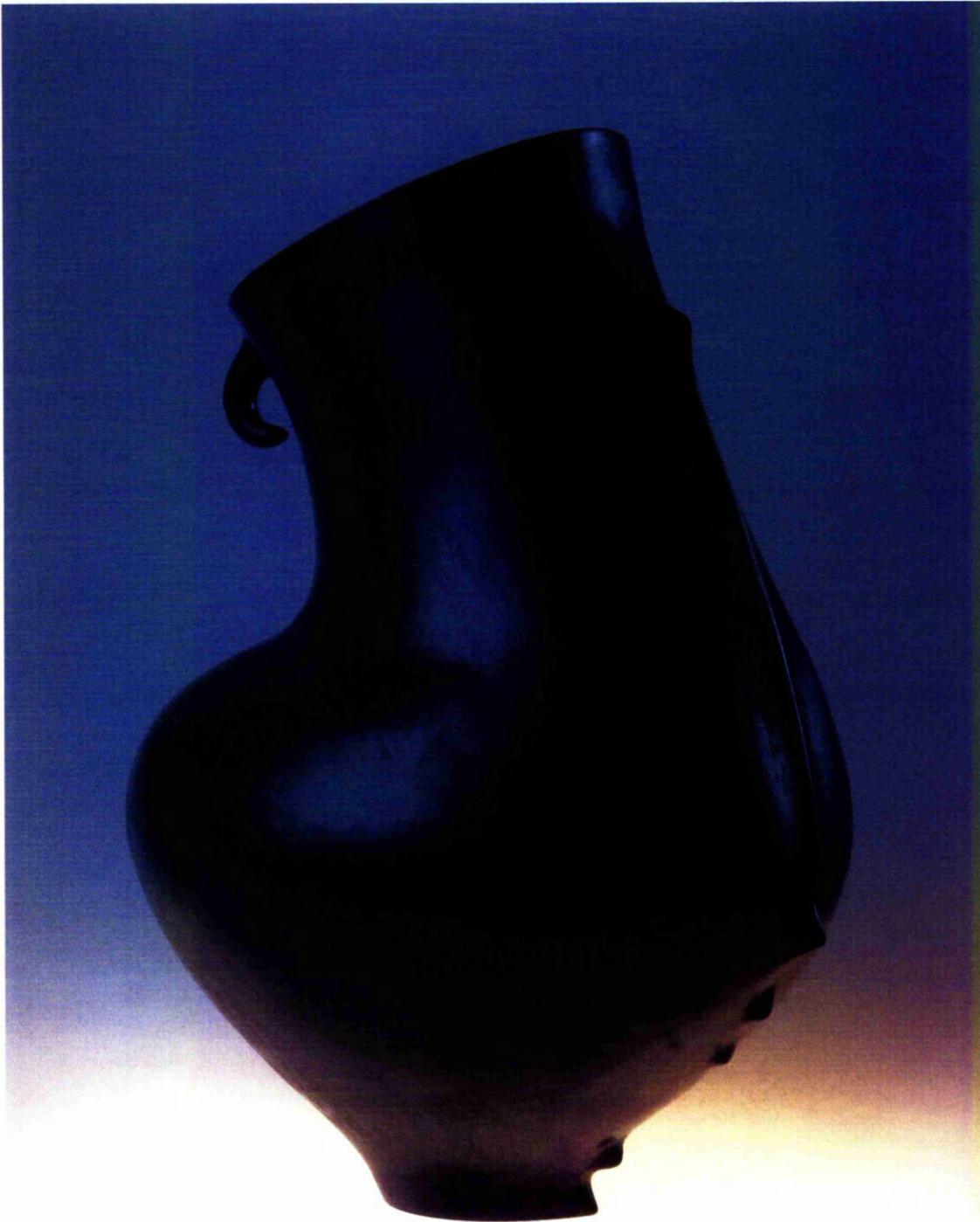


Figure 2.9 Magdalene Odundo, Untitled #15 (1994), Burnished and carbonized terracotta 45 x 30.4 cm, Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art.



Figure 2.10 Veronica Ryan, *Manna in the Wilderness* (1984-85), Plaster.



Figure 2.11 Veronica Ryan, *Relics in the Pillow of Dreams* (1985), Bronze, plaster  
25.5 x 90 x 90 cm, Tate Collection.

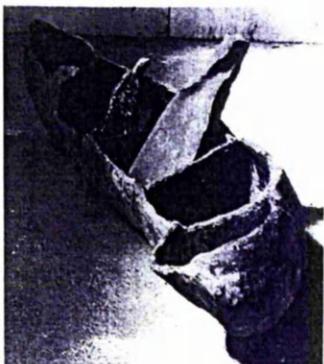


Figure 2.12 Veronica Ryan, *A Place in the Scheme of Things* (1986), Bronze, reinforced plaster, pigment 35 x 250 x 90 cm.

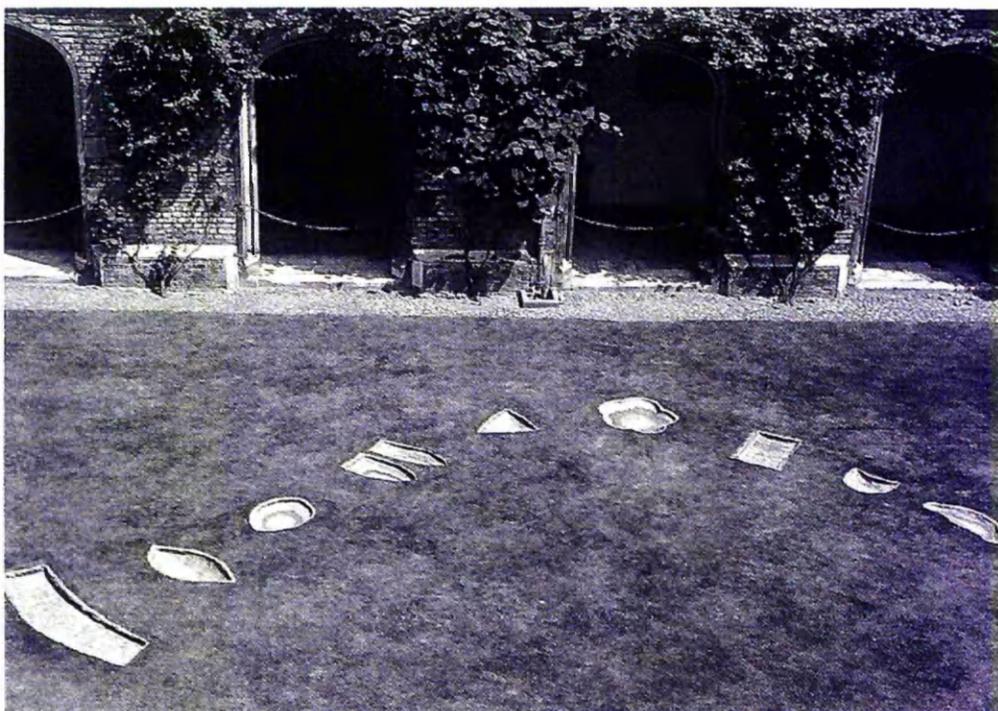


Figure 2.13 Veronica Ryan, *Cavities in Cloister Court* (1988), Lead 1341 x 274 x 28 cm.



Figure 2.14 Veronica Ryan, *Pierced Repetitions* (1988), Lead, PVC 99 x 150 cm.



Figure 2.15 Veronica Ryan, *Baggage* (1988), Lead, silk, wire wood, kapok, lace 229 x 246 x 246 cm.

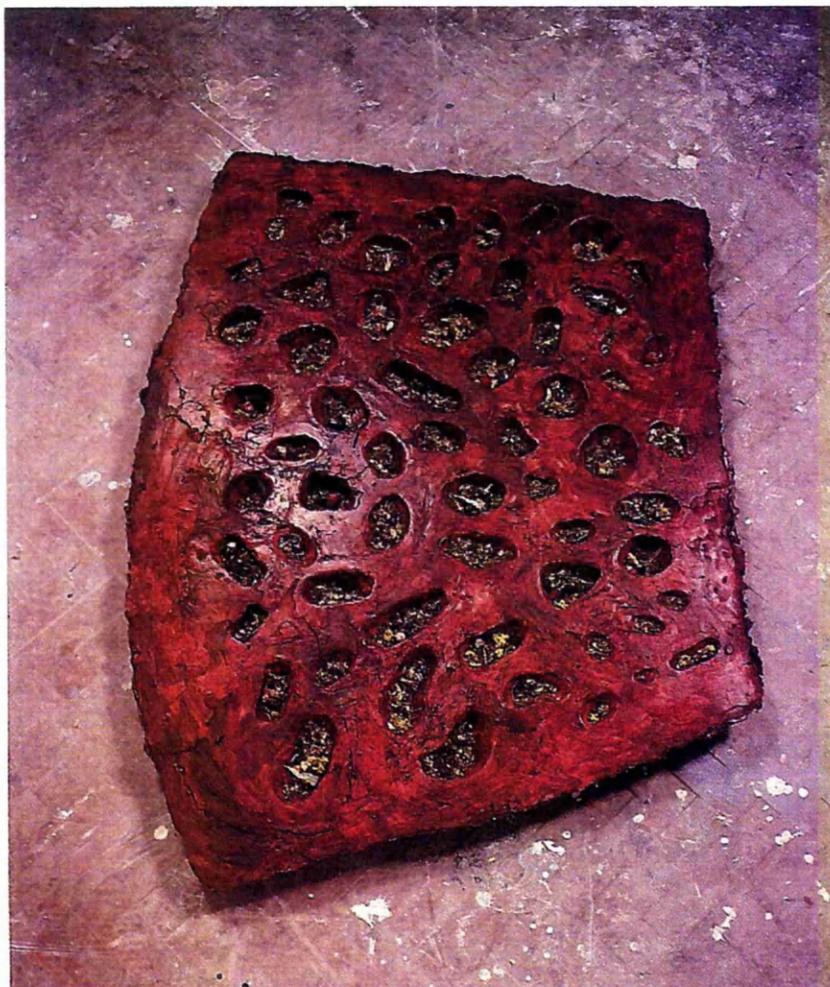


Figure 2.16 Veronica Ryan, *In Memory* (1988), Plaster, dried flowers 10 x 107 x 165 cm.



Figure 2.17 Veronica Ryan, *Pocket* (1990), Lead foil, feathers 48 x 38 x 5 cm.

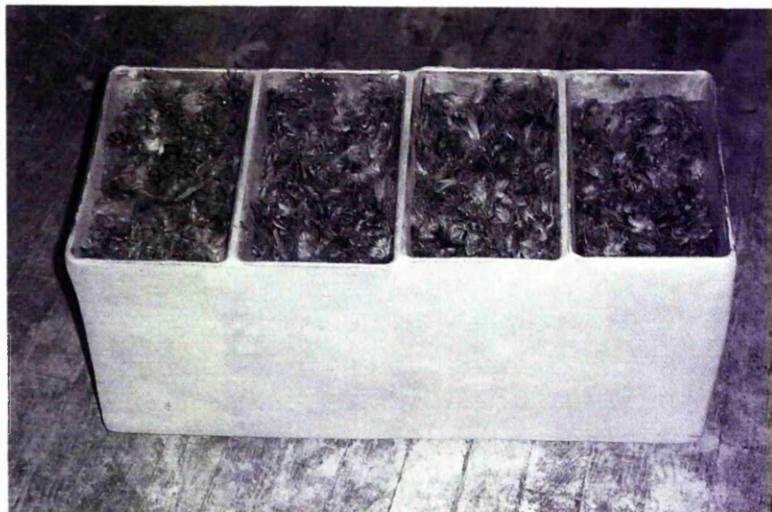


Figure 2.18 Veronica Ryan, *Box Compartment with Feathers* (1992), Plaster, aluminium, feathers 26 x 39 x 42.5 cm.

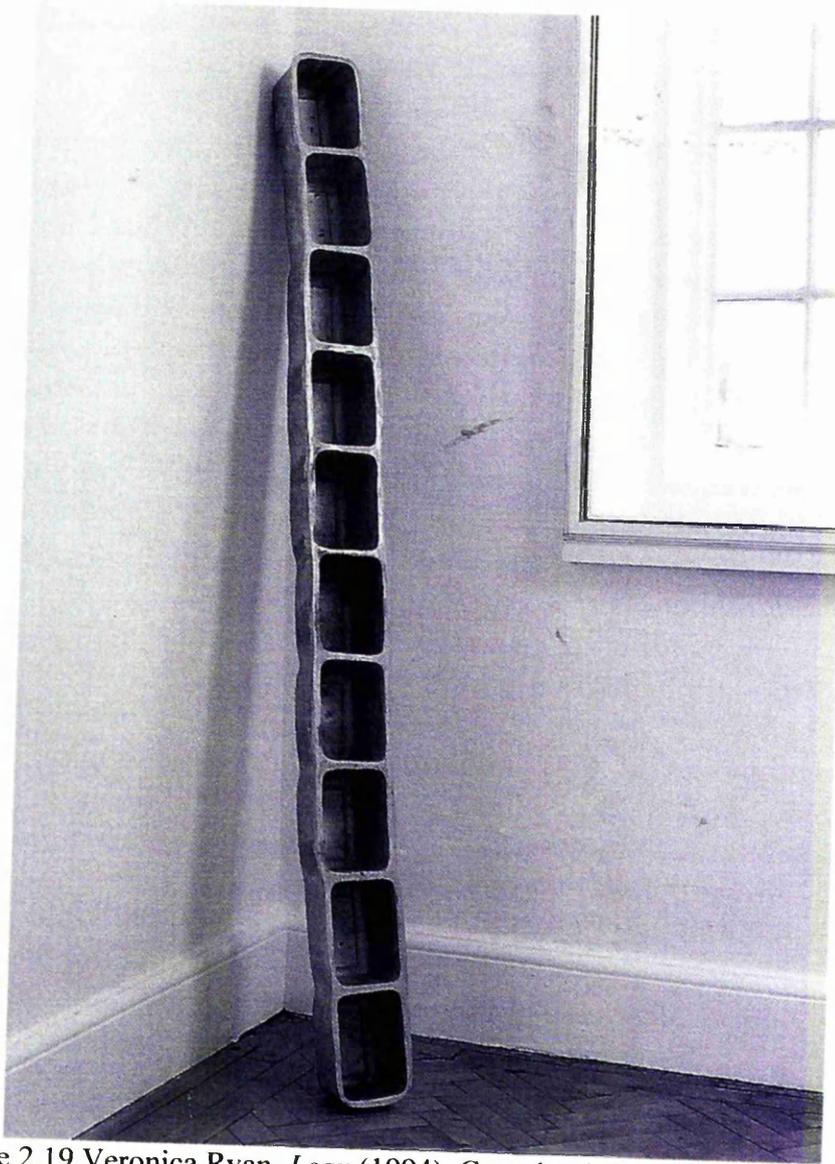


Figure 2.19 Veronica Ryan, *Lean* (1994), Cast aluminium 211 x 14 x 16 cm.

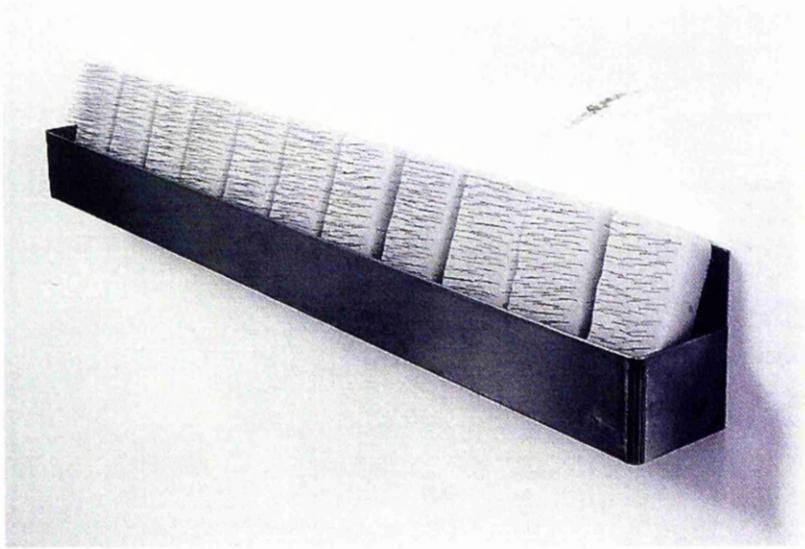


Figure 2.20 Veronica Ryan, *Pierce* (1994), Stainless steel, nickel-plated pins, beeswax 104 x 18 x 11 cm, Private collection.

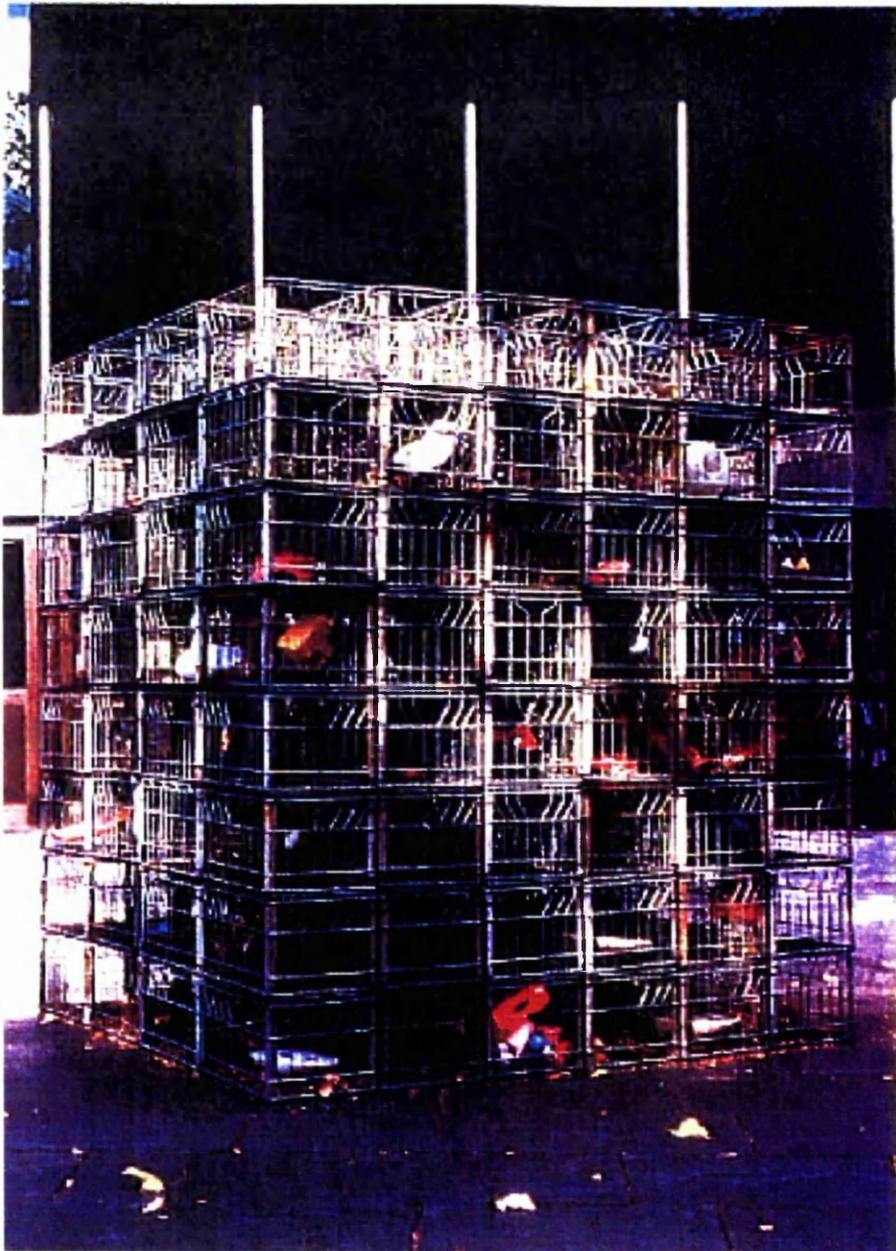


Figure 2.21 Veronica Ryan, *My Island (Repository)* (1995), Wire, milk bottles, crates, rubber, plaster, plastic 213 x 198 x 198 cm.



Figure 2.22 Veronica Ryan, *The Repository* (1996), Mixed media installation 300 x 358 x 356 cm.

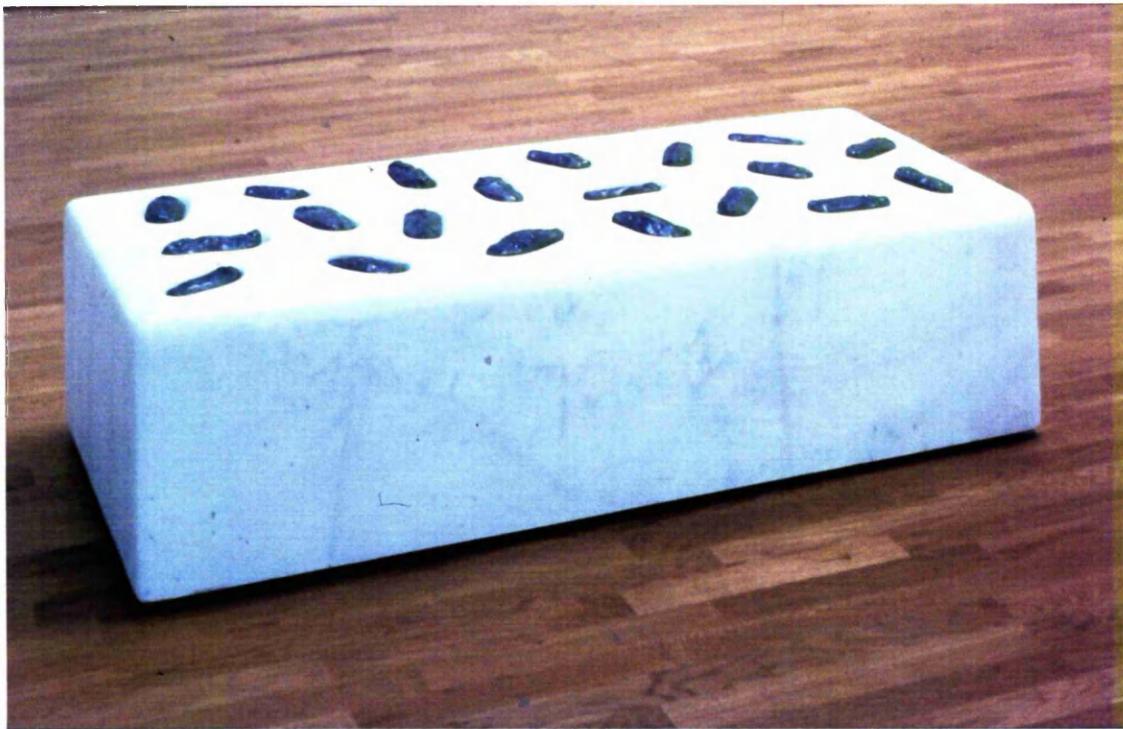


Figure 2.23 Veronica Ryan, *Mango Reliquary* (2000), Marble, lead, mango stones 37 x 137 x 61 cm, Tate Collection.



Figure 2.24 Veronica Ryan, *Archaeology of the Black Sun 1956-2002* (2003), Mixed media installation dimensions vary, Collection of the artist.

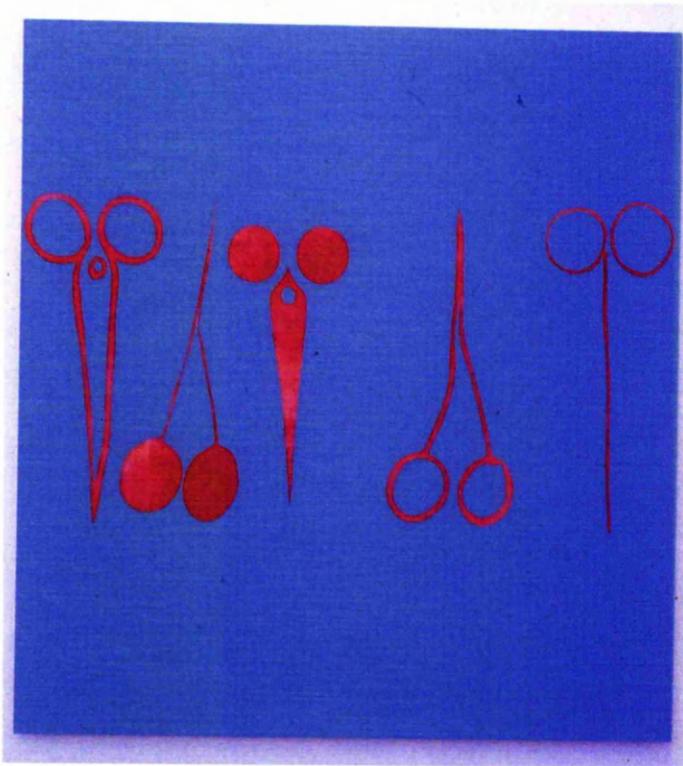


Figure 2.25 Mary Evans, *Chinese Whispers I* (1993), Acrylic on canvas 180 x 150 cm.

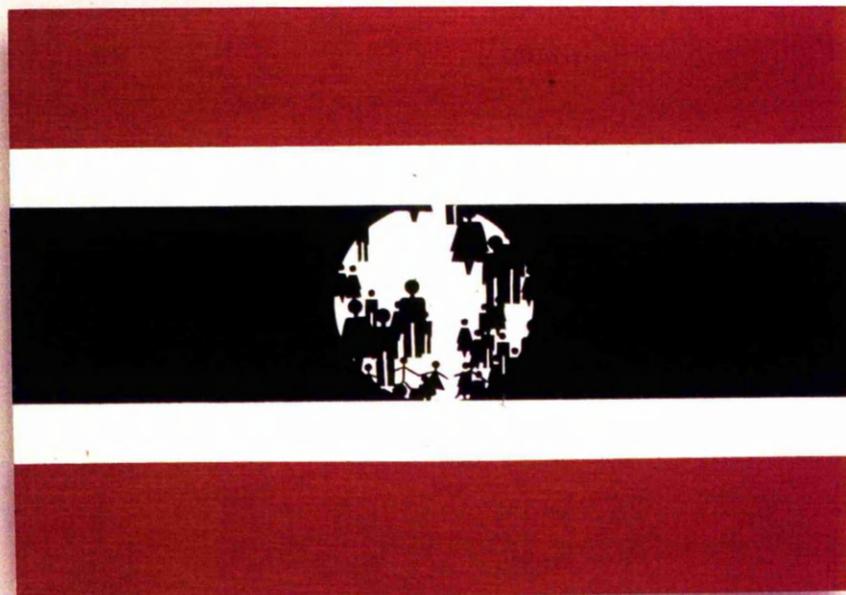


Figure 2.26 Mary Evans, *Standard* (1995), Alkyd on board 60 x 85 cm.

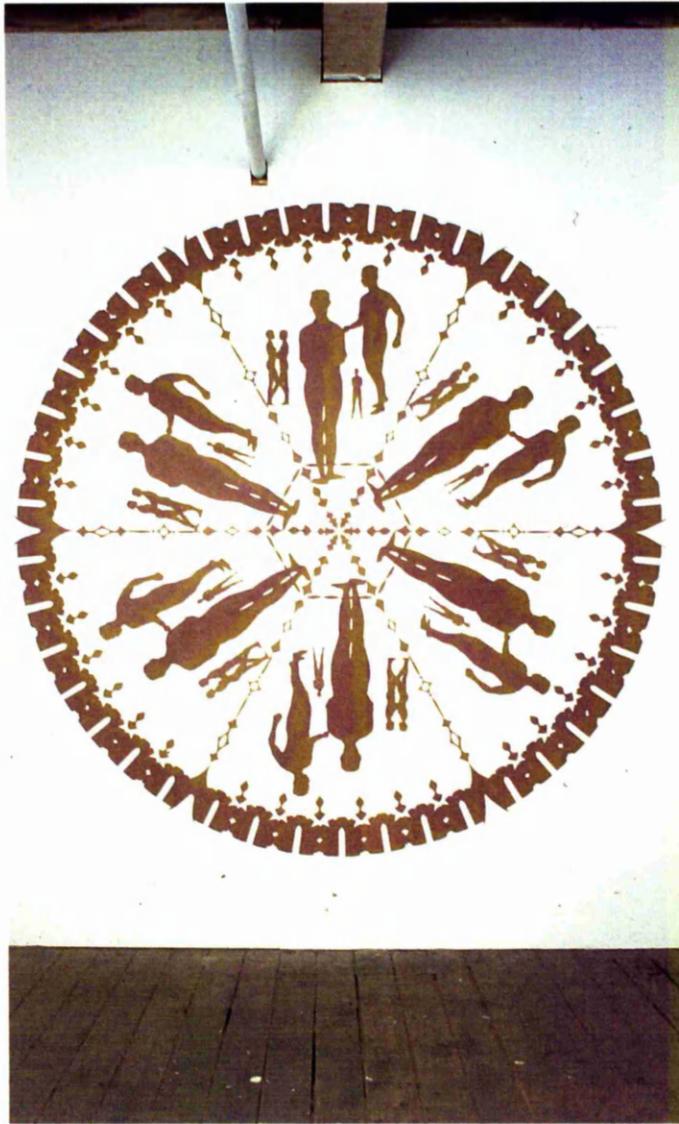


Figure 2.27 Mary Evans, *Pretty Standard* (1996), Craftpaper on wall 250 cm diameter.



Figure 2.28 Mary Evans, *Wall Hanging* (1995), Craftpaper on wall 500 x 1000 x 800 cm.

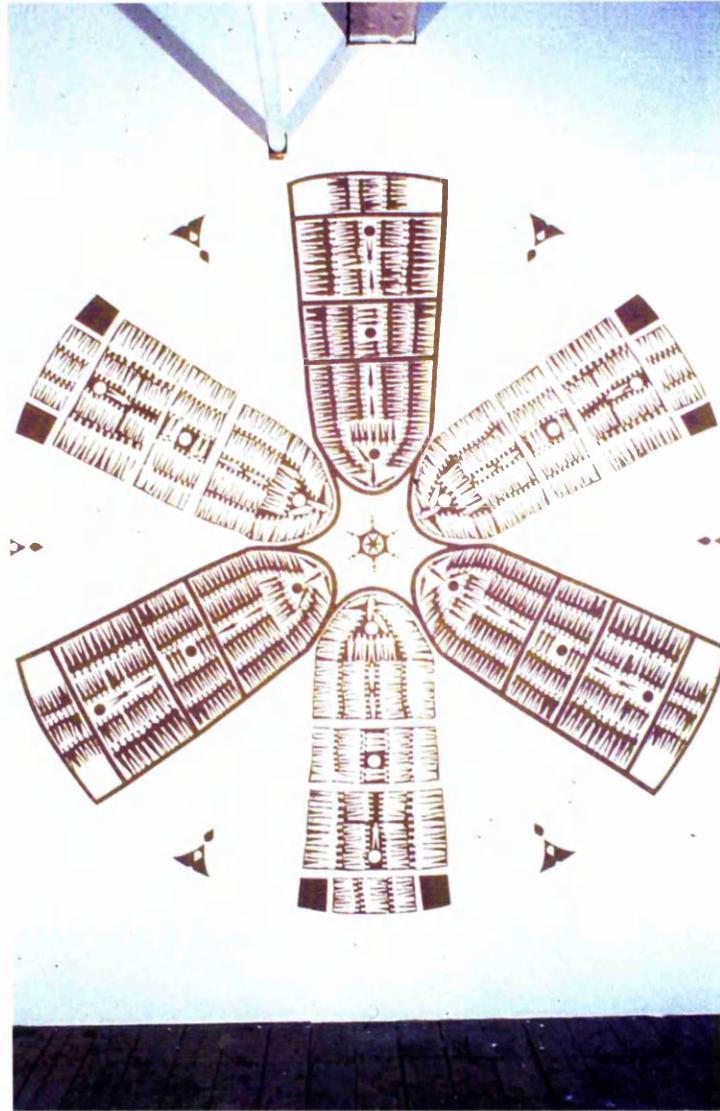


Figure 2.29 Mary Evans, *Wheel of Fortune* (1996), Craftpaper on wall 250 cm dia.

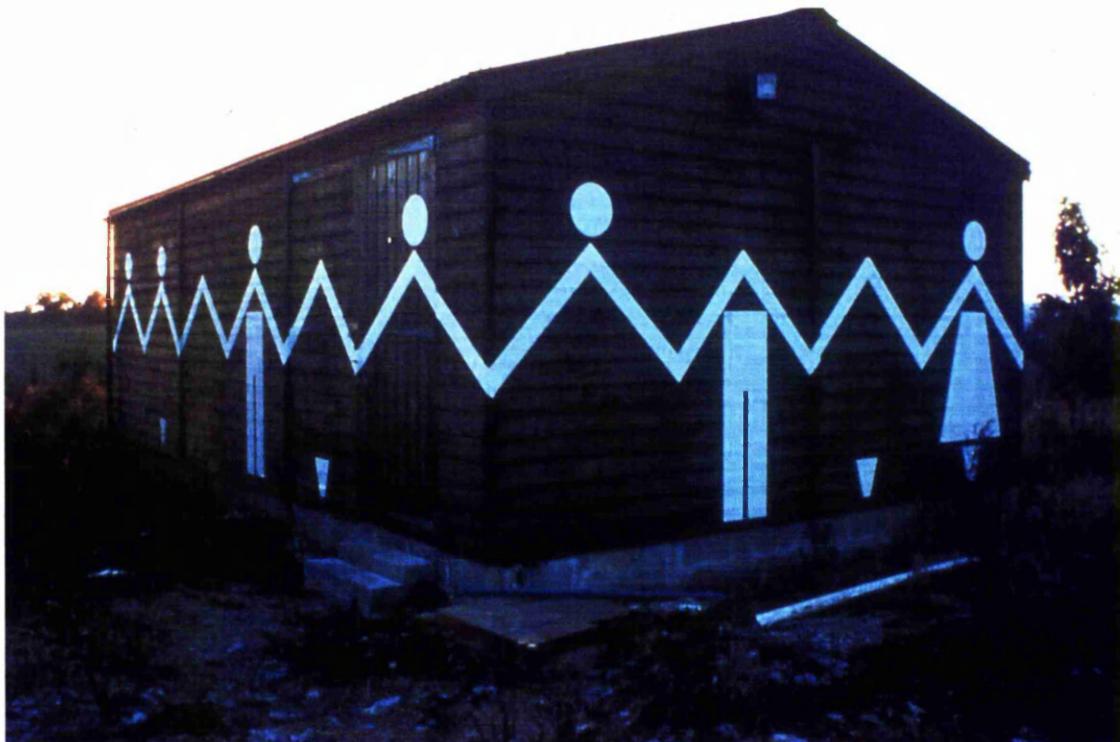


Figure 2.30 Mary Evans, *Ring-a-rosie* (1995), Paper on shed 300 x 900 x 400 cm.

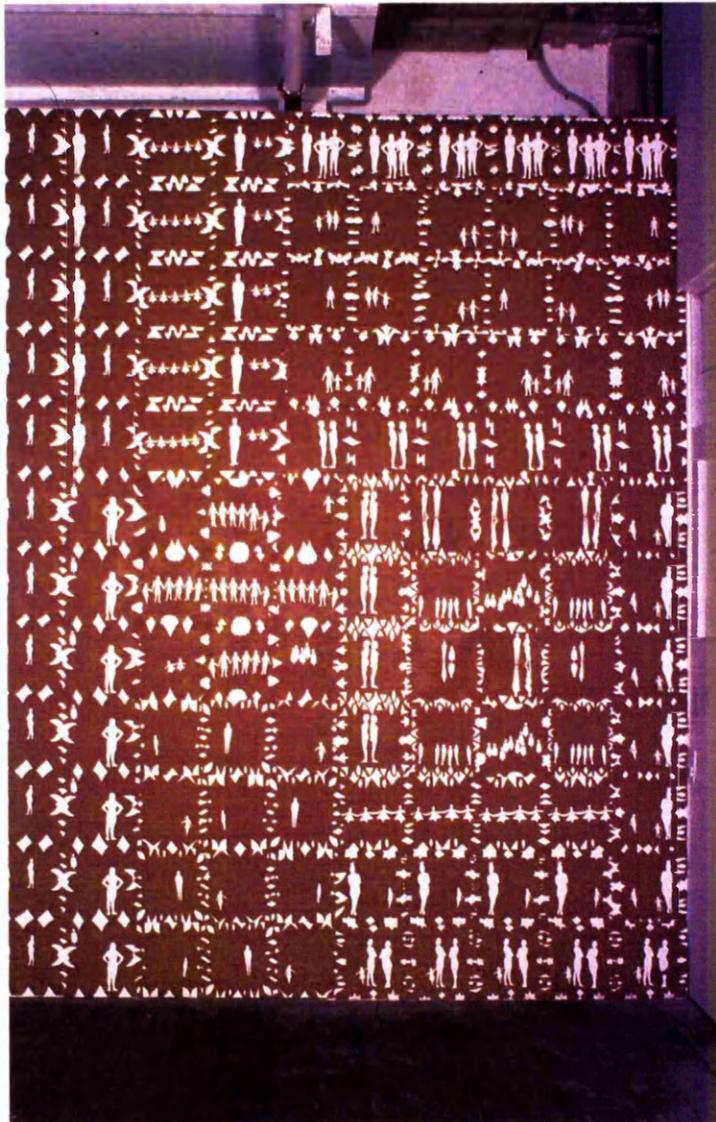


Figure 2.31 Mary Evans, *Sugar & Spice* (1997), Craftpaper on wall 350 x 250 cm.

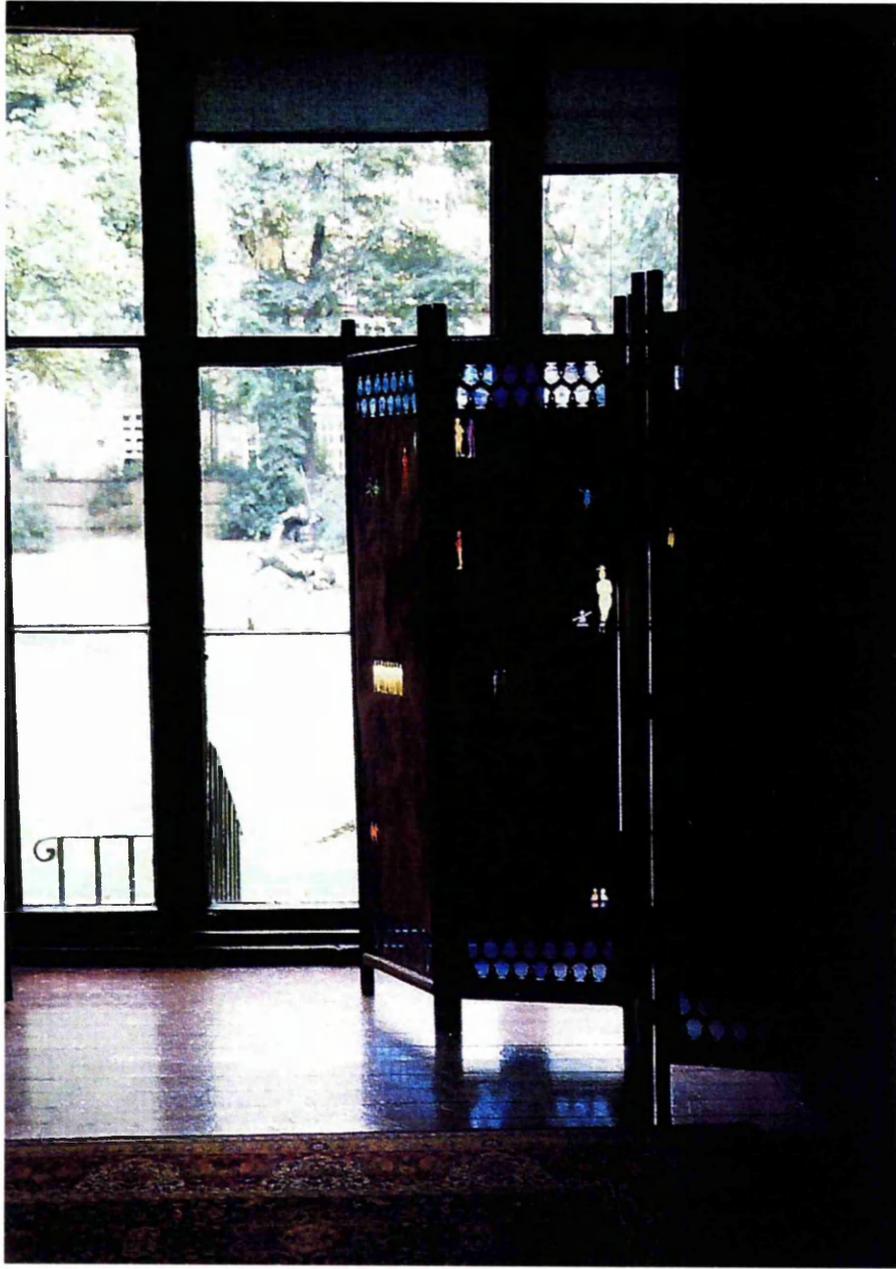


Figure 2.32 Mary Evans, *Screen* (1997), Craftpaper on screen.

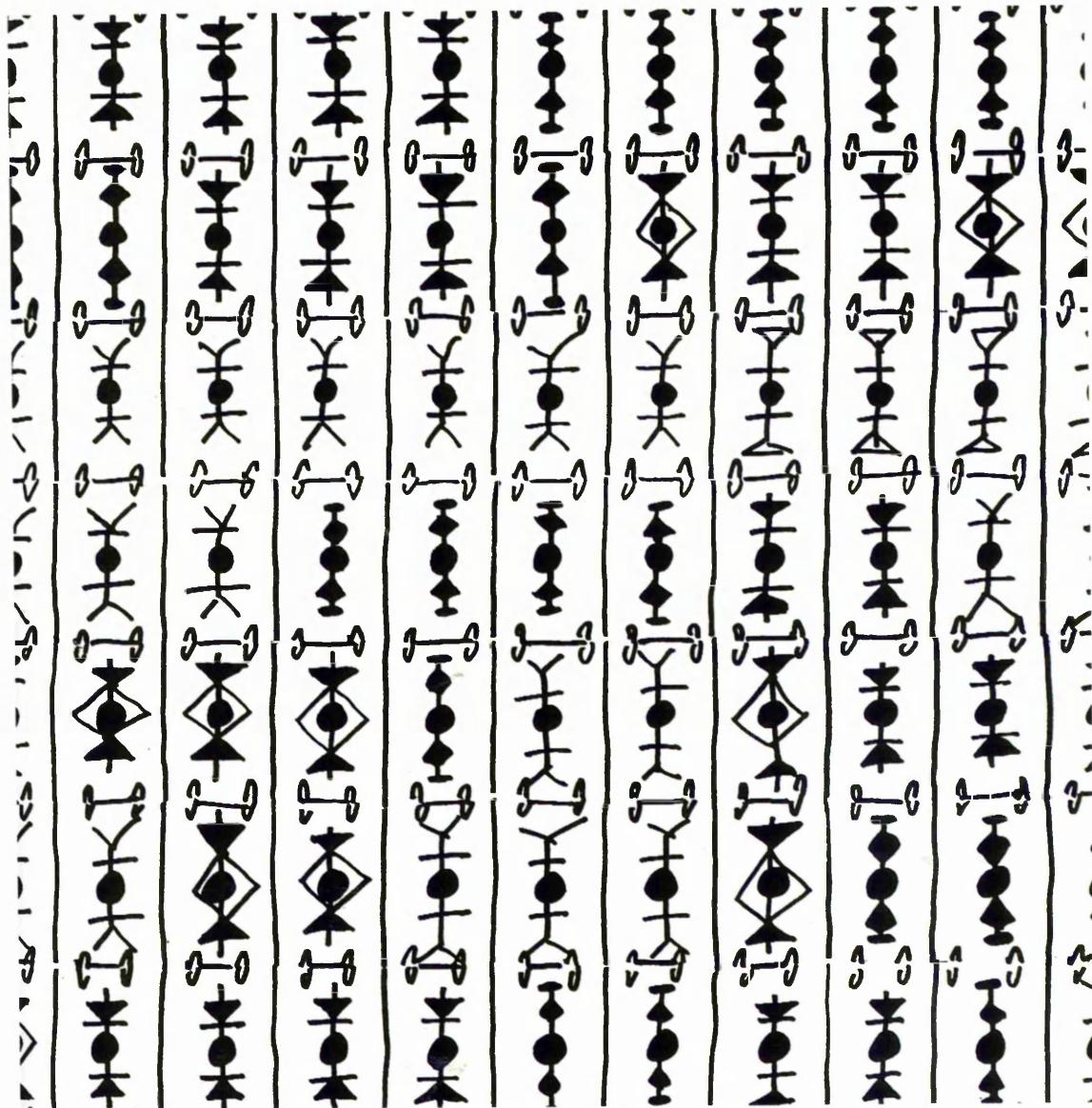


Figure 2.33 Mary Evans, *Sharp* (1997), Ink on paper.



Figure 2.34 Mary Evans, *Scope* (2001), Mixed media 400 x 1000 x 1200 cm.

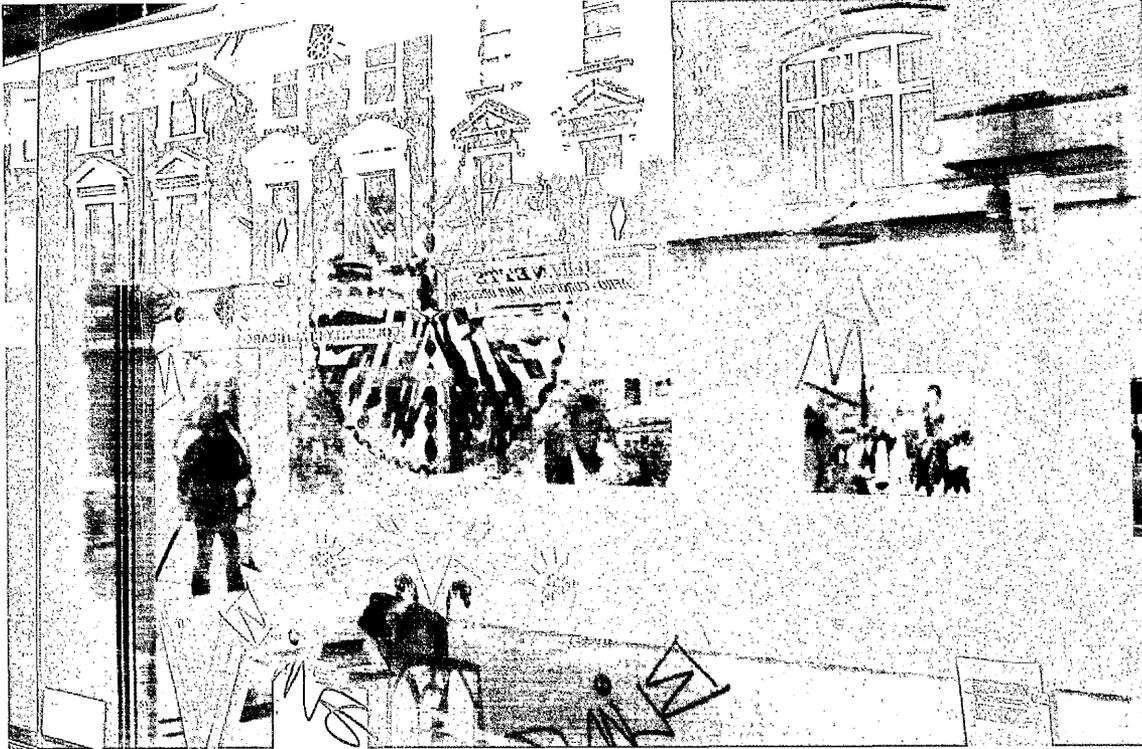


Figure 2.35 Mary Evans, *Bling Bling* (2004), Print on vinyl 200 cm dia.



Figure 2.36 Maria Amidu, *Ancestors* (1995) Glass, copper wire.

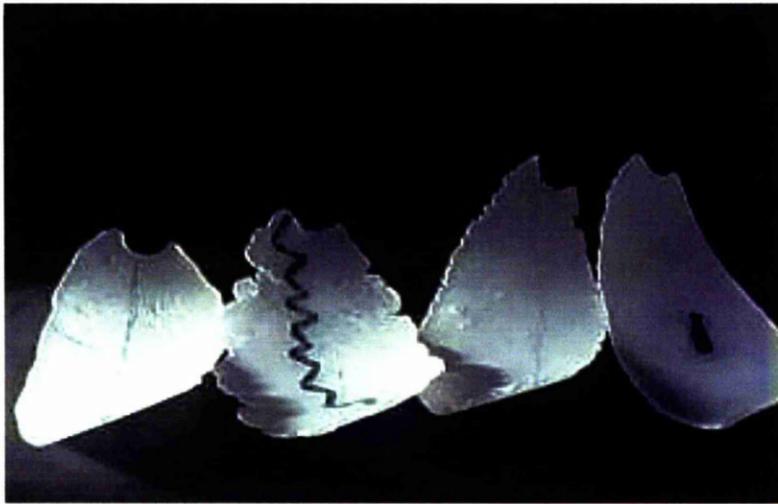


Figure 2.37 Maria Amidu, *One, Two, Three, Four* (1995), Glass, copper wire, copper foil.

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Figure 2.38 Maria Amidu, *...a moment caught in three dimension(s)* (detail) (1999),  
Cast glass with copper die line print in acrylic cases 82 x 119 cm.



Figure 2.39 Maria Amidu, *Finders, Keepers...* installation detail (2000), Cast glass, bird specimens 450 x 5450 mm, Temporary installation courtesy of Horniman Museum.



Figure 2.40 Maria Amidu, *Tribute* (2002), Cyanotype prints on cotton fabric 190 x 120 cm, Arnolfini Collection on permanent loan to Bristol Royal Hospital for Children.

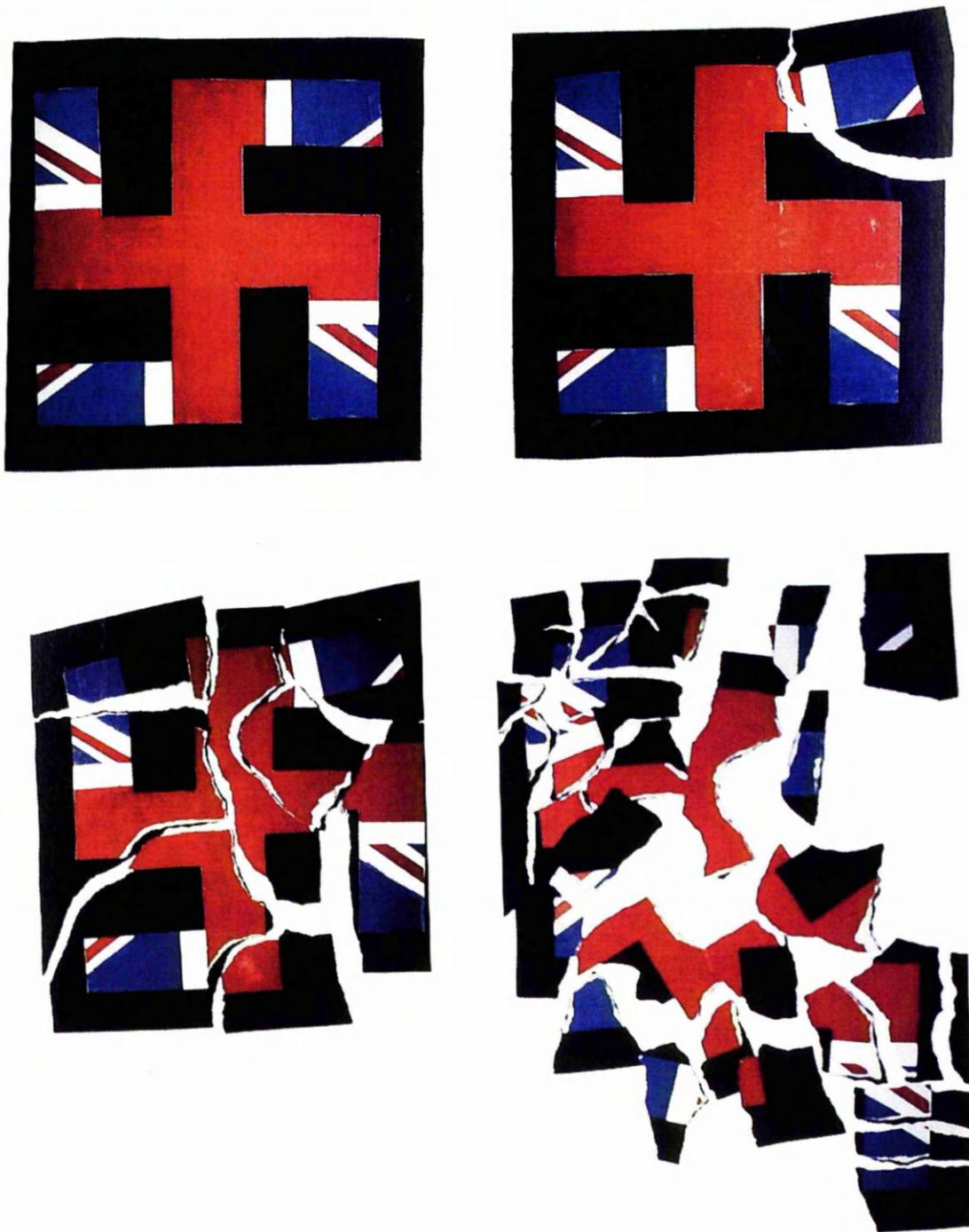


Figure 3.1 Eddie Chambers, *Destruction of the National Front* (1979-80), Collage, four panels, each 35.6 x 12 cm.

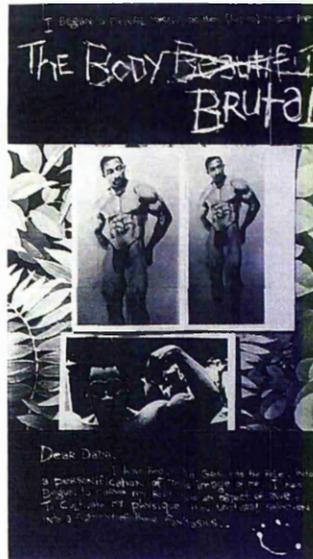
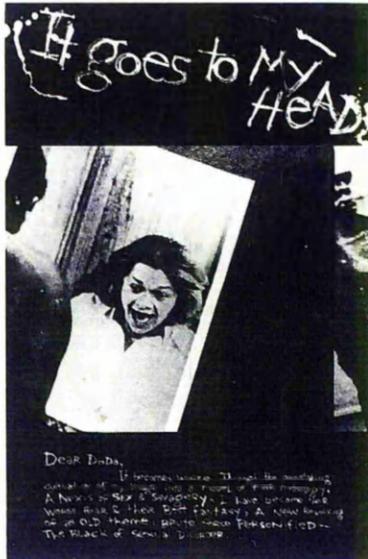
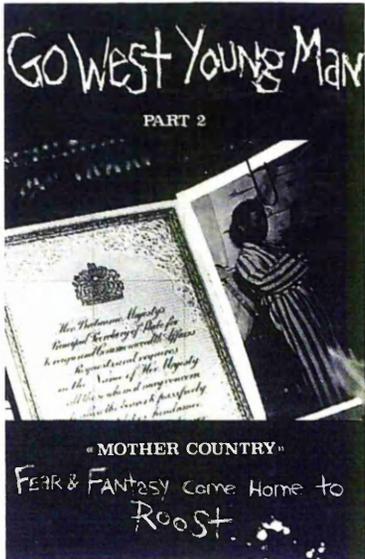
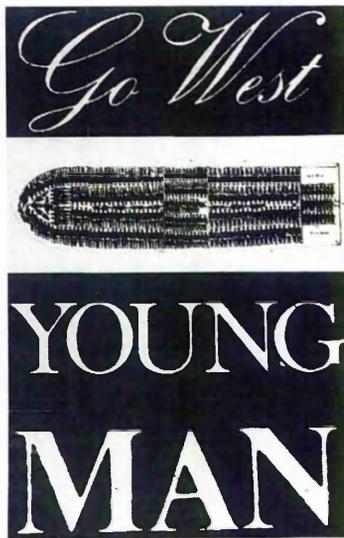


Figure 3.2 Keith Piper's *Go West Young Man* (1987) (detail), Photomontage and text, 14 panels, each 55.8 x 35.5 cm, Collection of the artist.

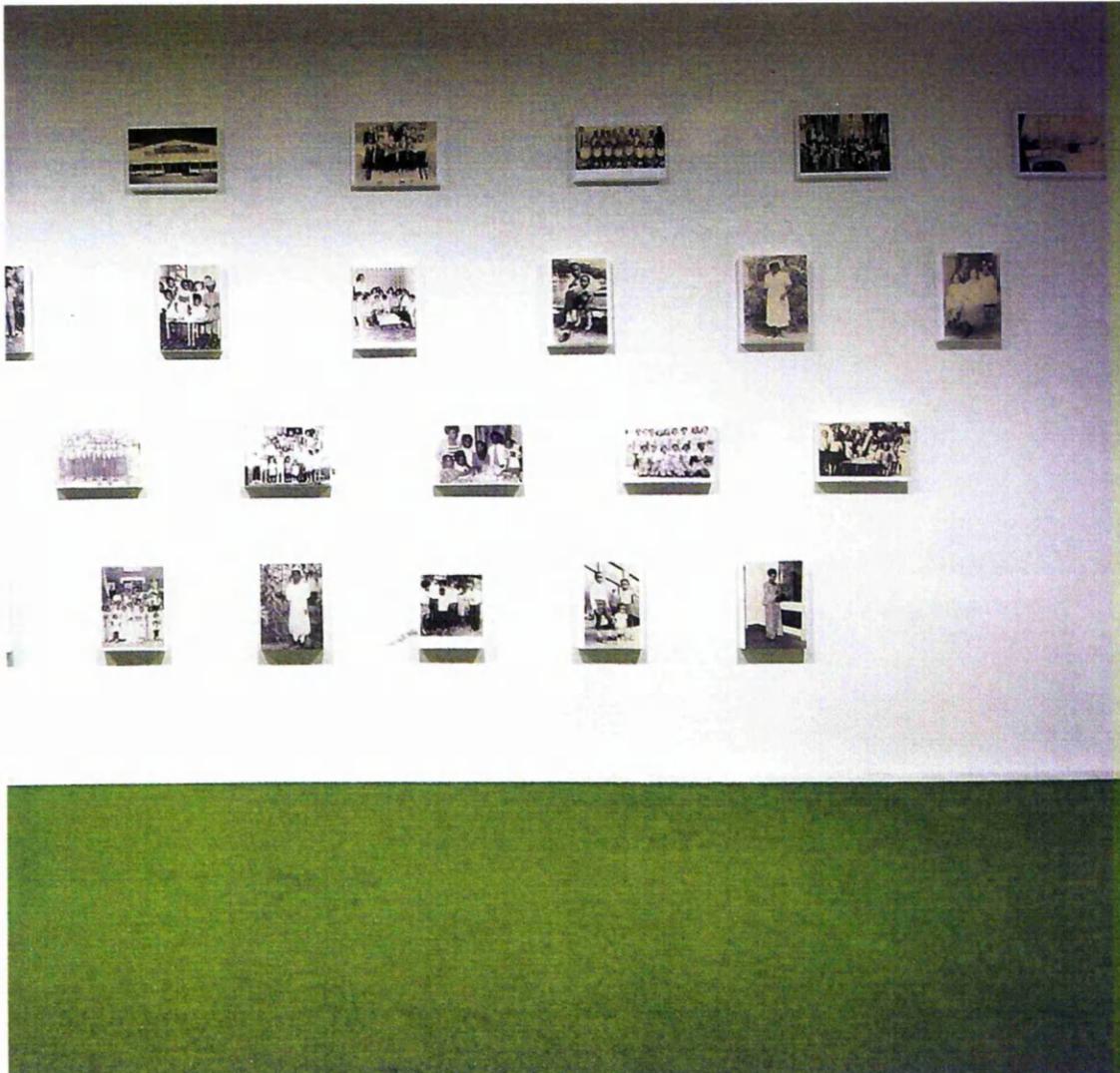


Figure 3.3 Godfried Donkor, *Kumasi de Ville* (2003) (detail), Mixed media installation, 30 photographs ink jet printed on vinyl, Astroturf dimensions variable, Collection of the artist.



Figure 3.4 Sonia Boyce, *Big Women's Talk* (1984), Pastel and ink on paper 148 x 155 cm, Private collection.

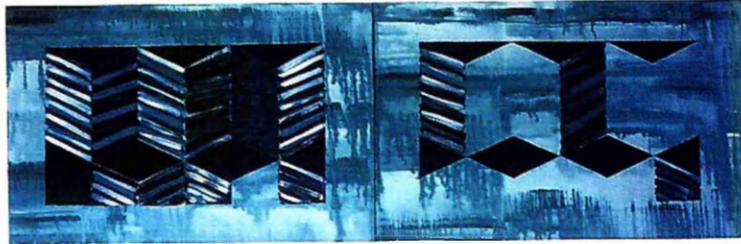


Figure 3.5 Lubaina Himid, *Shutters Only Hide the Sun* (1999), Acrylic on canvas 102 x 305 cm.

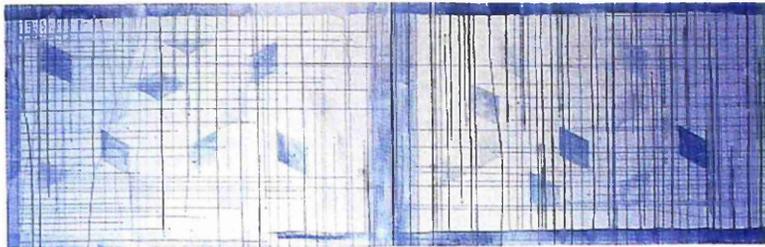


Figure 3.6 Lubaina Himid, *Nets for Night and Day* (1999), Acrylic on canvas 102 x 305 cm.



Figure 3.7 Allan deSouza, *Terrain #7* (1999), C-Print 30.5 x 45.7 cm, Courtesy of the artist.



Figure 3.8 Allan deSouza, *Ed Goes East* (2001), C-Print 53.3 x 116.8 cm, Courtesy of Talwar Gallery.

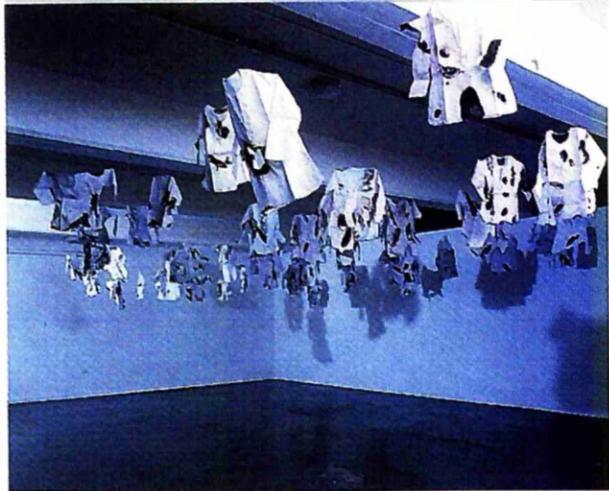


Figure 3.9 Zarina Bhimji, *I Will Always Be Here* (1992) (detail), Burnt child's *kurtas* installation dimensions variable.



Figure 3.10 Zineb Sedira, *On a Winter's Night a Traveller* (2003) (detail), Multi-screen video installation dimensions variable, Courtesy of the artist and the Agency Contemporary, London.

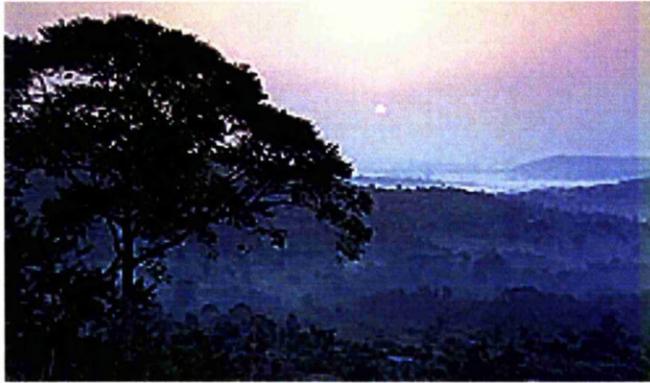


Figure 3.11 Zarina Bhimji, *Out of Blue* (2002), Video still.

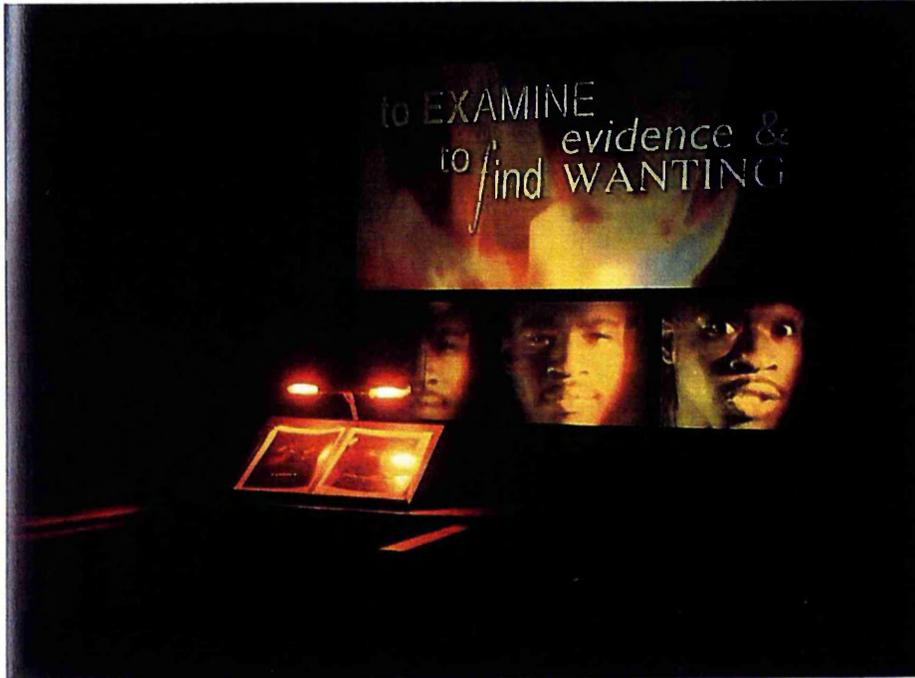


Figure 3.12 Keith Piper, *Reckless Eyeballing* (1995), Interactive installation with video projection from laser disk dimensions variable.



Figure 3.13 Chris Ofili, *Afro Love and Envy* (2002-2003), Acrylic paint, oil paint, polyester resin, glitter, map pins, and elephant dung on linen with two elephant dung supports 275 x 214 cm.



Figure 3.14 Chris Ofili, *Afro Red Web* (2002-2003), Oil paint, polyester resin, glitter, map pins, and elephant dung on linen with two elephant dung supports 244 x 183 cm.

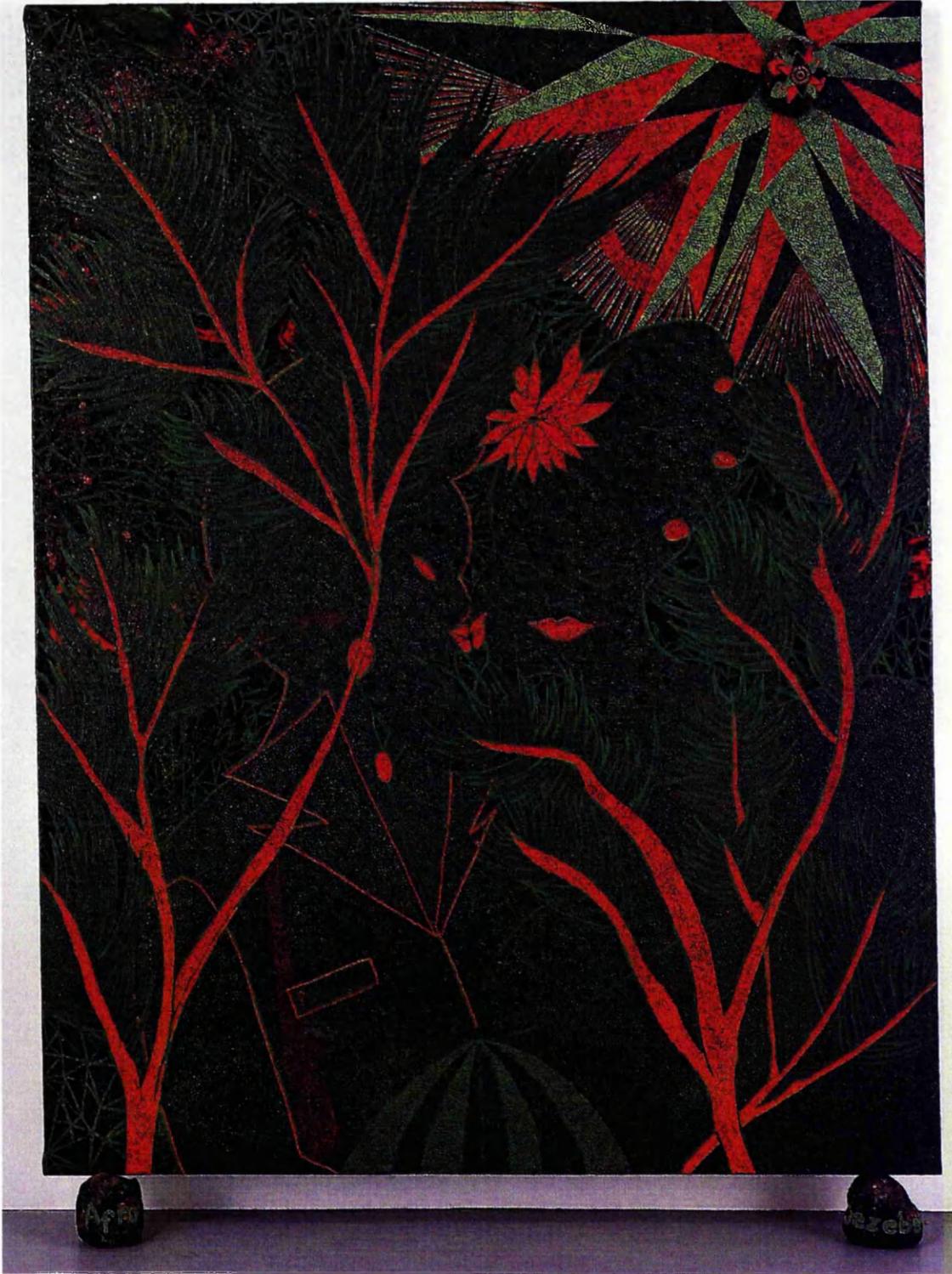


Figure 3.15 Chris Ofili, *Afro Jezebel* (2002-2003), Oil paint, polyester resin, glitter, map pins, and elephant dung on linen with two elephant dung supports 244 x 183 cm.

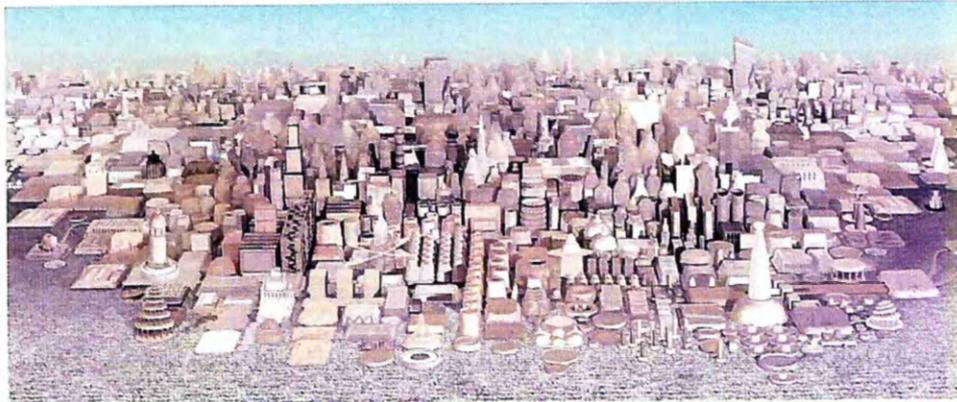


Figure 3.16 Allan deSouza, *Everything West of Here Is Indian Country* (2003), C-print 50.8 x 127 cm. Courtesy of Talwar Gallery.

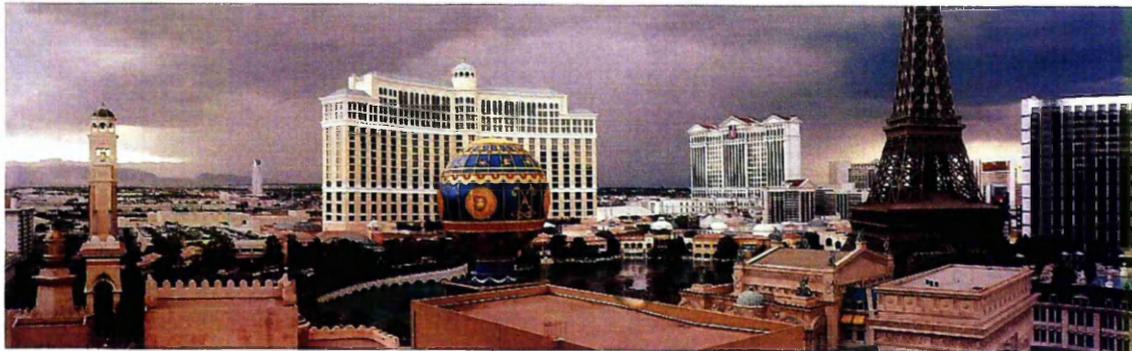


Figure 3.17 Allan deSouza, *The Goncourt Brothers Stand Between Caesar and the Thief of Baghdad* (2003), C-print 40 x 125 cm. Collection of the artist.



Figure 3.18 Sokari Douglas Camp, *Sharia Fubara* (1999–2000), Steel and fabric 141 x 51 x 60 cm, University of Indiana.



Figure 3.19 Allan deSouza, *The Searchers* (2003) (detail), C-prints dimensions vary, Courtesy of the artist.



Figure 3.20 Zineb Sedira, *Quatre Générations de Femmes* (1997), Computer-generated designs silk-screened onto ceramic tiles dimensions vary, Collection of artist.

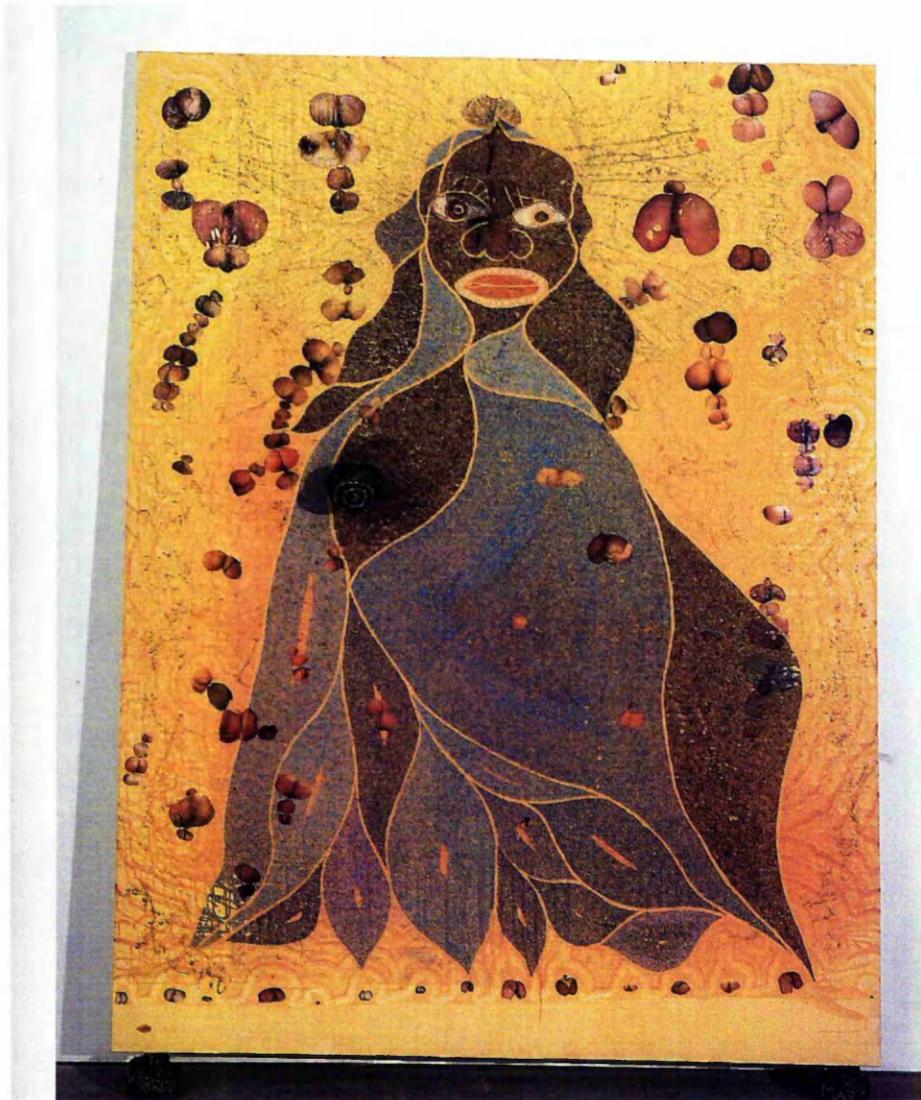


Figure 3.21 Chris Ofili, *The Holy Virgin Mary* (1996), Paper collage, oil paint, glitter, polyester resin, map pins, and elephant dung on linen 243.8 x 182.9 cm, Saatchi Collection.

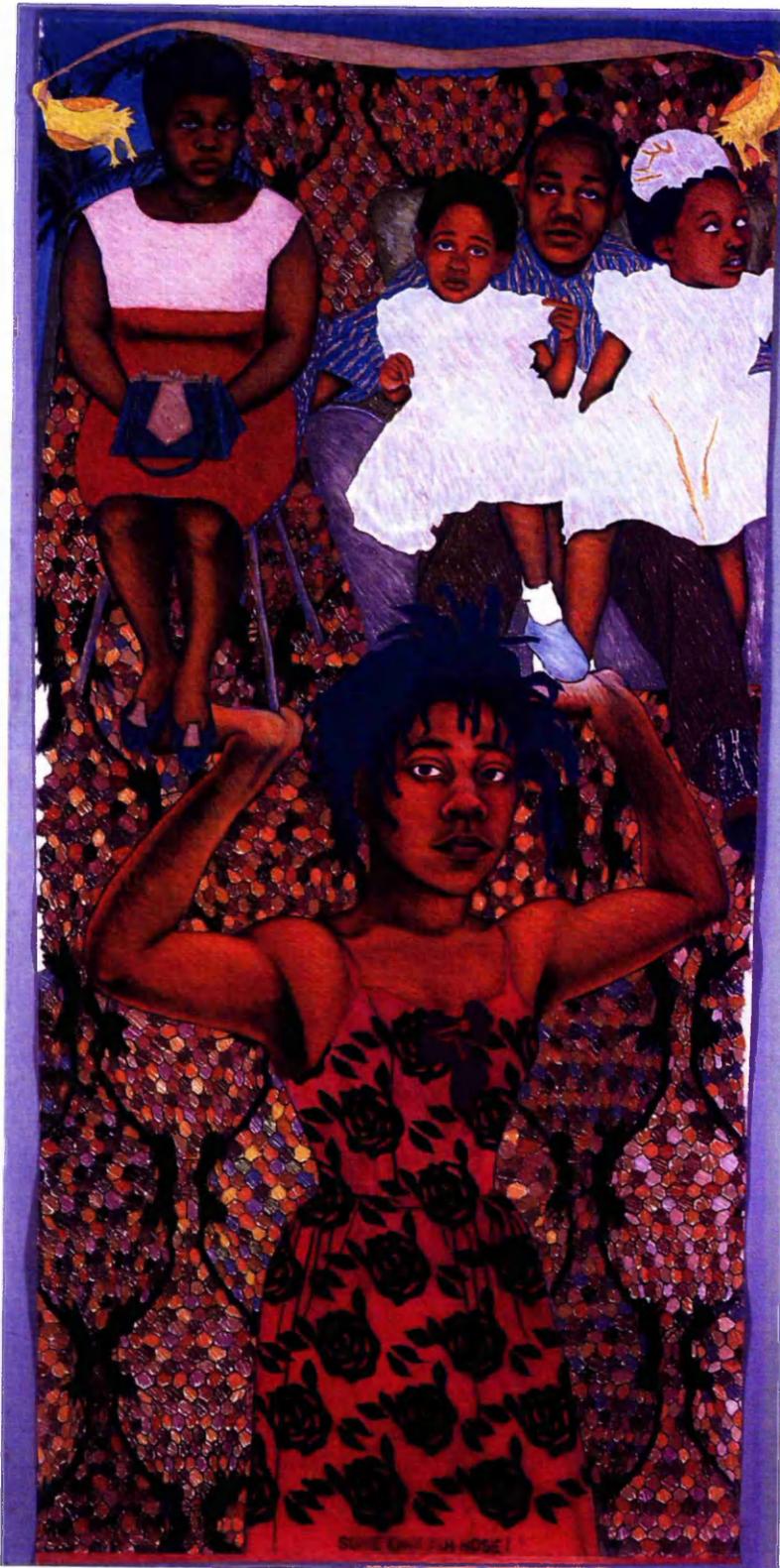


Figure 3.22 Sonia Boyce, *She Ain't Holding Them Up, She's Holding On (Some English Rose)* (1986), Pastel and crayon on paper 218 x 99 cm, Middlesbrough Museums.



Figure 3.23 Claudette Johnson, *Trilogy (Part Three) Woman in Red* (1982-85), Watercolour, pastel, and gouache on paper 152 x 98.8 cm, Arts Council Collection.



Figure 3.24 Sonia Boyce, *Missionary Position II* (1985), Watercolour, pastel, and crayon on paper 123.8 x 183 cm, Tate Collection.



Figure 3.25 Sokari Douglas Camp, *Cheering Woman* (1986), Mixed media 191.1 x 97.2 x 49.5 cm, Collection of the Minneapolis Institute of Arts.

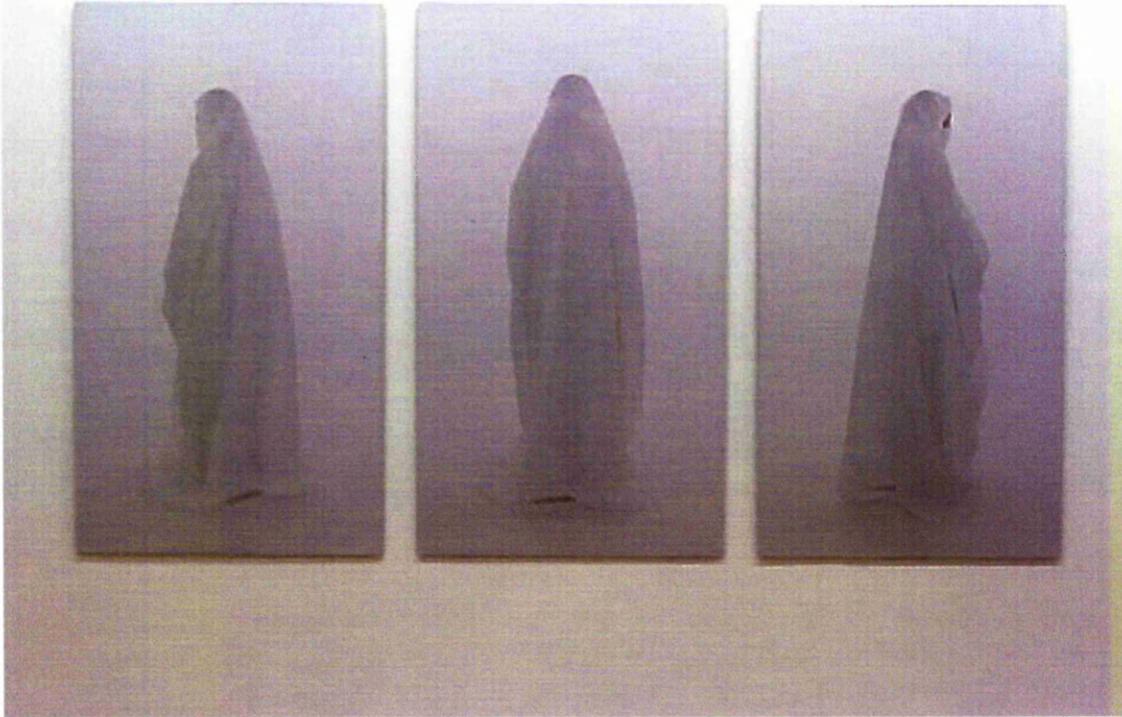
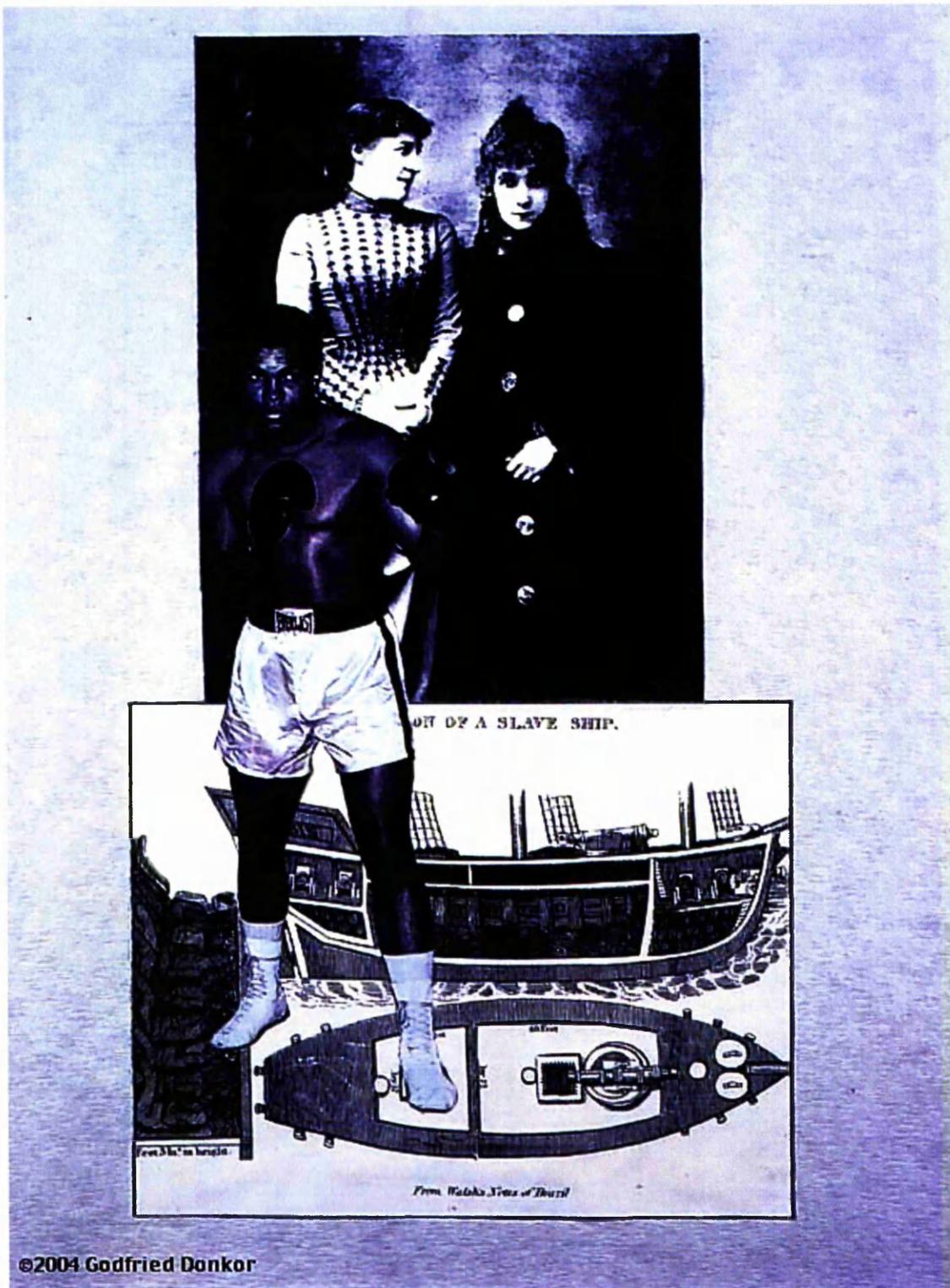


Figure 3.26 Zineb Sedira, *Self Portrait or the Virgin Mary* (2000), Life size photograph, Courtesy of the artist.



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Figure 3.27 Godfried Donkor, *Pure Ali* (2000), Mixed media on paper 38 x 50 cm.

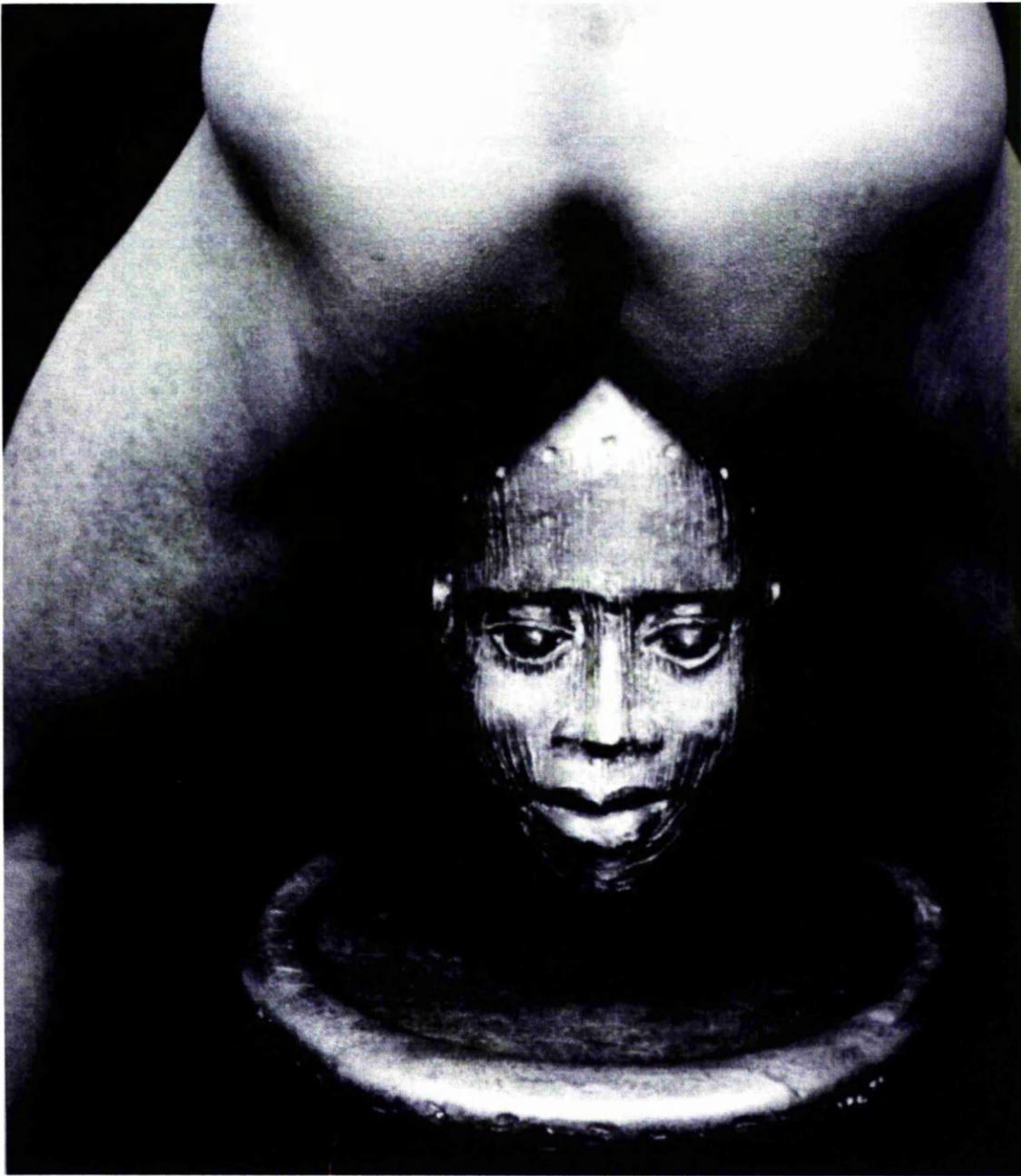


Figure 3.28 Rotimi Fani-Kayode, *Bronze Head* (1987) , Gelatin silver print, Courtesy of Autograph ABP, London.

## APPENDIX A

### **Black British History: A Brief Outline**

Although records of individuals of African descent in England go back to as early as the third century AD, the origin of continuous and permanently settled populations only date back to the late sixteenth century during the reign of Queen Elizabeth I, when the first Africans were imported into the country by merchants to assist trading ventures in Africa and to serve as domestics in noble households (Walvin 1973, 7). Black minstrels and servants were also part of court life under King James I, who succeeded Queen Elizabeth to the English throne in 1603. Africans were often caricatured as unintelligent, lascivious, and violent, a view popularized in Shakespeare's *Othello* (Walvin 1973, 24 and 160). Over the course of the next two and a half centuries, trading and commercial interests in African labour and goods grew into a flourishing "triangular trade" in raw materials and human beings, from Africa across the Atlantic to the New World, and back across to Britain. Direct English involvement in the slave trade was 'desultory and perfunctory' until the British colonization of the Caribbean and the establishment of the sugar industry, and subsequently the tobacco industry in America, by approximately 1660 (Shyllon 1977, 7).

Racist attitudes propagated by planters and merchants to justify the profitable slave trade characterized people of African descent as unintelligent and savage (Fryer 1984, 49). The image of blacks in Britain was based more upon the dissemination of distorted tales and travelogues from Africa and the West Indies used to justify chattel slavery and subsequently colonial enterprises, than on actual firsthand experience (Barker 1978, 184). During the time of imperial expansion and colonialism, such

ideas and attitudes continued to be propagated by politicians and in the media in order to justify their domination and exploitation.

Before the seventeenth century, the sight of a person of African descent in Britain was relatively unusual and unfamiliar. With Britain's increased involvement in the slave trade, however, more Africans and Afro-Caribbeans, primarily young men, were brought into the country. Slave ship captains were allowed to keep a few slaves for their own personal profit (Shyllon 1977, 8). Plantation owners returning to Britain from the West Indies, as well as America, also brought their black slaves and servants with them, as badges of their success and wealth. The population of Africans and Afro-Caribbeans in Britain did not exceed 10,000 throughout the eighteenth century. It became quite fashionable amongst the nobility, especially aristocratic women, to keep young black boys as slaves, valets, or even pets (Shyllon 1974, 11 and Shyllon 1977, 10). By 1772, thousands of these slaves and servants, or those who managed to escape, resided in the UK (Shyllon 1974, 2). The newspapers were filled with notices of runaways from slave owners. Slave-hunters and kidnappers were employed to capture them, after which they were usually incarcerated and subsequently shipped back to the New World (Shyllon 1977, 11-16). This situation produced an abolitionist movement that brought the debate about slavery's legality within the judicial system to a head. In 1778 slavery was made illegal in Scotland, and likewise in England and, by automatic application Ireland in 1807. However, chattel slavery continued in England and its colonies. In 1789 freed slave and black community leader Olaudah Equiano published his autobiography *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa the African*. The book's depiction of the horrors of slavery was influential to the Abolitionist cause. Captured in West Africa as a young boy and enslaved in the Caribbean, Equiano earned his

freedom from his sea captain master, worked as a seaman in the Navy, and was educated in England. In 1833, Parliament promulgated the Abolition of Slavery Act and guaranteed freedom for all slaves in the British Empire (Shyllon 1977, 27).

From the seventeenth to the eighteenth centuries, Britain's black population consisted of three classes: slaves, escapees, and those who were free (Shyllon 1977, 35). This population came from Africa, the West Indies, and North and South America. Whilst some were servants, freemen, and "fêted individuals," the vast majority were slaves (Walvin 1973, 47). There was also a privileged caste made up of foremen, coachmen, house servants, and companions who enjoyed some degree of good favour, treatment, and liberty (e.g. education) from their masters (Shyllon 1977, 39).

Some came temporarily from Africa and the West Indies for education. Often, they were the sons of African leaders and royalty sent to be educated in Britain, or the mixed race offspring of white traders or plantation owners in the Caribbean. The practice of promoting a Western education dates back to early European explorers and traders instructing Africans in English in order to obtain their assistance in West African commercial enterprises. The number of these students increased over the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and by the twentieth century became an established elite tradition amongst African, Caribbean, and Asian upper classes. The motives for such study were primarily economic. However, the students were also educated in British culture, fashion, and manners as well as academics and for some, particularly upwardly mobile light-skinned West Indians, assimilation in British society was the goal (Walvin 1973, 195). Other students became influential in abolition and pan-Africanist politics. William Davidson, for example, was born in 1786 in Jamaica, the son of an Attorney General and a black woman. His father paid

for his education, sending him to Edinburgh when he was fourteen. Davidson became involved in radical anti-slavery politics, and was eventually executed for his activities with three white co-conspirators in Britain in 1820 (Walvin 1973, 214). Similarly, James Africanus Beale Horton was born in Freetown, Sierra Leone in 1835, and attended King's College in London before graduating as an MD from Edinburgh University in 1859. Horton was a key figure in the emerging Pan-Africanist movement at the time, and published *West African Countries and Peoples* in 1868 as a call to self-government, as well as an attack on pseudo-scientific theories of racism (Walvin 1973, 276).

These transient princes, students, and scholars enjoyed the advantages of education and a measure of social inclusion within mainstream society whilst the permanent black communities faced poverty and homelessness. Before Abolition, these communities consisted primarily of escaped slaves, although some had gained their freedom. Once free, they were usually unemployable and disastrously poor because work and wages were scarce. There was little animosity between them and the poor white populations since they faced the same bleak circumstances, and turned to the same criminal activity and debauchery for relief (Walvin 1973, 57). Prejudice and discrimination, in addition to poverty, kept the majority of them in menial labour. Some were in apprenticeships and denied wages; most worked as domestics or in livery, and others earned a living through begging or street entertaining (Shyllon 1977, 84-88). A few talented and dedicated men became celebrated stars of the English underground boxing scene patronized by the aristocracy in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, such as American ex-slaves Bill Richmond and Tom Molineaux. The "black poor," as this community came to be known, was seen as a specific social problem, which eventually led to the exportation and repatriation of 400 of them back

to West Africa and the founding of Freetown in what is now Sierra Leone in 1787 (Shyllon 1977, 118).

A decade later, the black population swelled due to an influx of black seamen after the peace of 1783, black American Loyalists who arrived after the Revolution, and Indians brought from the sub-continent by colonial officials (Shyllon 1977, 159). After Abolition in 1833, they were no longer separated out as the “black poor,” but joined the ranks of the simply “poor.” These communities became a diverse mix of Africans, Caribbeans, Indians, Chinese, Greeks, mixed race and others (Shyllon 1977, 160-161). Widespread intermarriage and declining immigration contributed to a degree of assimilation into white communities, but there were still black citizens living in cities like Liverpool and Cardiff with shared problems and common interests (Fryer 1984, 236). Anxiety mounted about the increasing size of the African population and its menace to the purity of English blood, exacerbated by the liaisons between lower class women and African and Caribbean men, and the children they produced (Shyllon 1974, 151-152). Considering the low numbers of African and Caribbean women amongst them, the men had little choice. The subsequent comments in the press about the situation sensationalized black male sexual prowess (Walvin 1973, 52) and much was made of the ‘threat posed by the black phallus’ (Shyllon 1977, 101).

At the beginning of the nineteenth century, the ‘overwhelming majority’ of the black population was male, which caused an increase of relations between black men and poor white women (Walvin 1973, 52). As less black men arrived due to the cessation of slave trading, they were assimilated into surrounding communities. Through intermarriage, their offspring became increasingly lighter until they were absorbed into poor white communities or, as in London, drawn into racially mixed

poor communities (Walvin 1973, 197 and Shyllon 1977, 159). Subsequent generations did not consider themselves part of a black community, and their African heritage faded into forgotten history (Fryer 1984, 235).

Between 1900 and the beginning of World War I, Britain's remaining black population was small and fragmented, and mainly poverty-stricken (Walvin 1973, 202). The majority of this population was unemployed sailors, and those of African and Caribbean descent were greatly outnumbered by Indians. These sailors, along with soldiers from the West Indian and African colonies, were conscripted into military service during World War I. The men who stayed behind were needed to fill the labour gaps left by others who had gone off to war (Walvin 1973, 205). At the end of the war, the black population in Britain had grown to 20,000 (Fryer 1984, 294), employment dried up, and blacks competed with poor whites for jobs, leading to increasing tension and eventually race riots in the summer of 1919 (Walvin 1973, 206).

For over four hundred years, the black population in Britain caused consternation in government ranks, the popular press, and the local populations. Africans were often caricatured as overtly sexual, musical, stupid, indolent, untrustworthy, and violent. Between World War I and World War II, most black people were excluded from employment and housing, discriminated against in bars, restaurants, and hotels, and the objects of general scorn (Fryer 1984, 356). In the 1920s and 1930s, a new generation emerged in black communities who were the children of unemployed workingmen. They were generally raised on public assistance and largely excluded from employment after leaving school because of discrimination by management, unions, local authorities, and the British government (Walvin 1973, 211). The World War II again necessitated more soldiers from the

colonies and more labour at home from Britain's largely unemployed working-class black men (Walvin 1973, 212). By the end of the war, the black population in Britain was estimated at 10,000. The majority were working class, although there were a few professionals amongst them, such as doctors, nurses, students, as well as artists, musicians, and sportsmen (Walvin 1973, 213).

### **1940s-1950s**

In 1948, the Labour government passed the Nationality Act, effectively granting British citizenship to all citizens of British colonies and former colonies in the Commonwealth. This was an important cornerstone of British post-Imperialism. The recent history of non-white people in Britain began most significantly with the arrival of West Indian immigrants after World War II, who came to find work. Many had served in the British military during the war and were confronted with economic hardship upon returning to the Caribbean. They arrived on ships like the *Empire Windrush*, which docked at Tilbury in 1948, carrying 500 West Indians. Whilst unskilled and semi-skilled labourers were needed in the UK to fill vacancies created by a labour shortage, adequate housing and living conditions were much harder to come by. "Coloured" (as members of the African and Caribbean communities were called at the time) applicants for rooms, as well as other minorities such as the Irish, were routinely rejected or barred by white landlords (Phillips and Phillips 1998, 106 and Hiro 1991, 27). Consequently, the migrants settled in small, crowded enclaves in urban areas, especially London and the manufacturing and industrial towns in northern England.

After the McCarren-Walter Act of 1952, which restricted immigration from the West Indies into the US, many more people from the islands began to arrive in Britain. As part of the colonial infrastructure, they had been raised in educational

systems that emphasised British history and values, and grew up envisioning Britain as the “Motherland” (Hiro 1991, 20-21). As citizens of the Commonwealth, they had a lifetime right to British residence. The socio-political situation on the Indian sub-continent following Independence in 1947 was also an incentive for young men familiar with Britain and comfortable speaking English to migrate as citizens of the Commonwealth (Hiro 1991, 114-115). Most these included seamen, ex-Indian army personnel, university graduates, teachers, and doctors. Overall, however, Asian migration was low.

Asian immigrants had a much different relation to the Britain than those from the Caribbean. Social interaction and customs on the sub-continent were based on hierarchical categorisations of class or “caste,” kinship, and religion. Colonial rule in British India had been defined by racially and culturally segregated boundaries between European administrators and the colonized population, unlike the historical situation in the Caribbean. There, the plantation environment and a population of children born of slaves and white slave owners undermined efforts to impose and maintain complete British colonial detachment and racial segregation. Pakistanis and Indians thought of Britain as a distant and alien country of strange customs, dress, religion and diet, certainly not the “Motherland” promoted in the Caribbean (Hiro 1991, 113). The only incentive for migration to Britain was economic, and often occurred as a form of chain migration whereby migrants joined relatives and friends who had already made the long journey. In addition, actions in 1954 by the Indian central government vastly restricted the issuing of passports, and initiated high educational and financial requirements. The situation in Pakistan was similar. In 1960, however, the Indian Supreme Court ruled passport refusal unconstitutional, and Pakistan similarly relaxed its rules. An abrupt rise in migration to Britain by young

men seeking economic opportunity swiftly followed. Unlike those who left before 1960, the majority were agriculturalists and generally unfamiliar with the English language and British culture (Hiro 1991, 115). They found employment in unskilled factory jobs in manual labour industries like textiles, clothing, foundry, engineering, and manufacturing.

Over the course of the 1950s, public opinion concerning Afro-Caribbean and Asian immigrants evolved from patronizingly tolerant to suspicious and openly hostile. A few months after the arrival of the Empire Windrush, for example, local newspapers like the *South London Press* changed its reporting from earlier human interest stories about 'dusky' musicians to complaints about the immigrants' criminality, vagrancy, drug use, and predatory disposition towards young English girls (Phillips and Phillips 1998, 106 and 163). More and more, immigrants were stereotyped as lazy and criminal. Faced with exclusion, discrimination, and racism in British society, especially in the areas of employment and housing, Africans, Caribbeans and Asians looked to their own communities and fellow immigrants for company and leisure. By far the majority were young single men who found themselves excluded from clubs and dance halls, and thus opened their own in their local neighbourhoods (Phillips and Phillips 1998, 110). Each group of immigrants relied on their fellow countrymen and women for assistance in finding employment and housing, as well as social and psychological support. As a result, close-knit communities developed.

In the 1950s, racial tensions escalated dramatically. White communities in Britain perceived black immigrants as an increasing threat. "Teddy Boys," bands of racist, angry, and violent white youths, expressed the increasing discontent and resentment of the working class. As young men from low-income working-class

urban areas, they faced further social decline during this period, in part as a result of scheduled re-development. Unsurprisingly, these lower-class whites took their frustration out on immigrants “making it” at their expense (Hall and Jefferson 1976, 82-83). For their part, the immigrants endured prejudice and hardship, as well as personal, racially motivated intimidation and violence, especially by these young men. The mounting tension and violence culminated in the 1958 Nottingham and Notting Hill riots. In 1959, the Conservative Party was elected to government, and it reacted by circumscribing immigration, ignoring the obvious wider socio-economic discontent of white rioters and racists.

Members of the African, Caribbean, and Asian communities reacted to this violence and upheaval by creating various organizations and institutions to assist and manage their difficult living conditions and fight discrimination. In various cities, West Indian advocacy groups united smaller organizations from Jamaica, Barbados, Trinidad, and other islands. Similar political and social organizations emerged in Asian communities. Several journalists founded news magazines and weeklies to promote and cater to the needs of their communities, especially those for whom English was a second language. From these early steps towards social and community activism, the immigrant communities of Africans, Caribbeans, and Asians began to coalesce into larger advocacy groups united by a shared identity that was defined by the social and economic conditions of being “non-white.” At the instigation of Dr Martin Luther King Jr during his 1964 visit to London, the leaders of the three federal organizations of West Indian and Asian immigrants (the West Indian Standing Conference, Indian Worker’s Association of Great Britain, and National Federation of Pakistani Associations) united to form the Campaign Against Racial Discrimination (CARD) (Hiro 1991, 44-45 and 139). The term “black” began to be used by whites

and non-whites alike to refer collectively to immigrants; they were characterised primarily by the common racism and marginalization they experienced living in Britain. In this way, racialized lines of social discontent and difference were drawn which continued to segregate the white British population from the black for decades, physically, politically, culturally, and psychologically.

### **1960s**

Throughout the 1960s, black organizations and movements marshalled their strength, whilst the major political and social institutions of mainstream society ensured that they were kept on the margins. Black communities continued to gather political steam and took inspiration from the American Civil Rights movement. This period witnessed a dramatic increase of Asian self-owned businesses, homeownership, and the development of stronger community ties. There was also a gradual move of black skilled and semi-skilled working-class trades people from activism at the community level into local government. In 1961 the Co-ordinating Committee Against Racial Discrimination was set up in Birmingham, and in London the Conference of Afro-Asian-Caribbean Organizations was formed. Both of these groups represented a coalition of Afro-Caribbean *and* Asian political interests, specifically in opposing the 1962 Commonwealth Immigrants Bill (Hiro 1991, 42). Self-help groups also began to challenge institutional racism in housing and homelessness, harassment of black youth by the police, and discrimination in schools.

In British politics during the 1960s, the subject of immigrant populations became a contentious issue. As in the eighteenth century, the problem was seen as originating within the black communities, rather than dissention and dissatisfaction within “white” or “English” populations. Instead of examining the roots of this, which included competition for jobs and housing and the desire to establish a decent

standard of living, members of the government focused once again on limiting immigration and restricting multiculturalism. As a result of a 1959 campaign for immigration control by a group of Tory MPs from Birmingham, the Commonwealth Immigrants Bill was promulgated in 1962, which restricted and severely limited immigration by only admitting Commonwealth citizens issued with employment vouchers into the country.

In 1964, Labour won the general election. Despite this victory, however, anti-immigration campaigning remained powerful. In Smethwick, for example, Tory MP Peter Griffiths was elected on a platform of ending immigration and repatriating “coloureds” (Walvin 1973, 381). Griffiths stated, ‘The word “integration” is not one we want to find in the town,’ (Phillips and Phillips 1998, 199). The Labour government’s White Paper on Immigration from the Commonwealth, published the following year, assumed the problem to be a surfeit of immigrants; strict controls were thus implemented (Walvin 1973, 383). The 1965 Immigrants Bill further curtailed immigration by limiting the number of vouchers to 8,500 per year, down from 20,000. The following year, the government passed the 1966 Race Relations Act, which outlawed ‘incitement to racial hatred’ and discrimination in public places. Discrimination in areas of employment and housing, however, continued unabated. Rather than imposing penalties, the Act put in place a complex system of mediation monitored by the newly established Race Relations Board and the National Committee for Commonwealth Immigrants (Phillips and Phillips 1998, 229 and 243). Still, the immigrants’ arrival and settlement in Britain continued to be pinpointed as the root of the problem. In 1968, the Commonwealth Immigrants Act introduced the concept of “patrials” (those with a parent or grandparent born, naturalized, or adopted in the UK) to exclude Kenyan Asians being pushed out of East Africa by

governmental “Africanization” policies from residency in Britain. Since patrials would almost exclusively be white, this constituted blatant discrimination against black Commonwealth citizens (Walvin 1973, 384).

There were other examples of the institutionalization of racism within the government and British society. Throughout the sixties, Tory MP Enoch Powell continually complained in articles and speeches that blacks were pushing whites out of neighbourhoods and schools, and advocated immigration restrictions and repatriation. This campaign culminated in his infamous “Rivers of Blood” speech on 20 April 1968, in which he predicted that violence in the streets would result from any attempt to integrate immigrants and their descendents with local populations. Conservative Party leader Edward Heath subsequently dismissed Powell from the Shadow Cabinet, but Powell received considerable popular support (Hiro 1991, 247-248 and Phillips and Phillips 1998, 245). Within law enforcement, metropolitan police forces tended to harass, bully, and raid black-owned businesses and social gatherings. The National Front and British Movement (or British National Socialist Movement), formed from fascist and extreme right wing groups in 1967 and 1968 respectively, actively protested against the immigrant and black population, especially the immigration of Kenyan Asians, in marches and street rallies. Out of the ensuing political debate over the “race problem,” the Labour government passed the new Race Relations Act of 1968, which extended the jurisdiction of the anti-discrimination law to employment and housing. In their practical applications, this legislation and its advisory boards were more effective in confronting racist attitudes and the resulting difficulties they caused in local communities than the scapegoating inherent in the anti-immigration policies of earlier government administrations and leaders.

Nonetheless, Powell's "Rivers of Blood" speech and his call for the establishment of a 'Ministry of Repatriation' had enormous and continuing effects on British politics.

### **1970s**

The seventies was a decade of transition in politics. The Conservative party defeated the Labour government in the 1970 general election. The following year, the Conservative government passed an Immigration Act that virtually ended all primary immigration. Then in 1972, Idi Amin's sudden expulsion of Ugandan Asians resulted in the arrival of approximately 27,000 refugees in Britain, causing consternation in Conservative politics as well as the media. Most of the new arrivals held British passports, which forced Britain to admit them despite the UK's restrictive immigration policies. These new immigrants were placed into detention centres and detainment camps, and the government established the Ugandan Resettlement Board to find them jobs and homes. Areas considered overpopulated by immigrants were designated as 'red areas,' and Ugandan Asians were encouraged to settle elsewhere (Thompson 1997, 153).

Political instability characterized by labour disputes, militant strikes, rising oil prices due to war, and escalating violence in Northern Ireland weakened the Conservative government. As a result, Labour won two successive general elections in 1974, although it failed to gain an effective majority in Parliament (Phillips and Phillips 1998, 265). The Labour government adopted an official stance of criticizing and prohibiting openly racist attitudes and policies. The new Race Relations Act passed in June 1976 created the Commission for Racial Equality to locate areas of discrimination and eradicate them. Following Naseem Khan's Ethnic Minority Arts Report published the same year, the government also established the Minorities Arts Advisory Service to emphasize the cultural contributions of immigrants and their

descendants to British society. In particular, Notting Hill Carnival, which had originally started with a parade and steel bands in 1964-65, became an annual event that grew annually in size and scope throughout the decade, incorporating large amounts of the Caribbean community as a celebration of black cultural expression, and attracting a wider range of participants, including many people of non-Caribbean descent (Phillips and Phillips 1998, 276).

According to the 1971 Census, over half a million of Britain's black population had been born in the UK. The 1970s witnessed the rise of the second generation in immigrant communities. Children who had been born and/or educated in Britain, and who had little if any physical experience of their parents' homelands, grew to adulthood. They defined themselves as British, even whilst experiencing the exclusion and discrimination widespread amongst public authorities and organizations representing the British government, social services, and the public majority. Members of immigrant communities began to describe themselves as "Black British" more often than "immigrant." Discourses about the rejection of Euro-centric British society emerged, and black people began to claim and celebrate their histories and cultural heritages in various ways, which also led to their further politicization.

One particular example is the way in which Rastafarianism and reggae music emerging out of Jamaica took hold in Britain. Initially this occurred amongst the Caribbean communities, but they gradually appeared on the cultural radar of the dominant mainstream. The philosophy, as well as the music, captured the interest and imagination of many Afro-Caribbean youths in the UK, who adopted some of the political and social rhetoric espoused in the ideology and song lyrics. Private clubs and discos featuring the music and dance of Jamaica counteracted their exclusion and alienation from the mainstream (Phillips and Phillips 1998, 294). For young black

Britons, reggae music and Rastafarianism proffered a statement of identity that celebrated their African roots and decried the oppression built in to the contemporary social system. A combination of African redemption and idealized pan-Africanism attempted to explain this oppression through metaphor and Biblical prophecy.

Rastas believed themselves to be descended from the ancient tribes of Israel exiled to Babylon, and that Ethiopian king Haile Selassie was the messiah who would restore them to Zion. Selassie's resistance to fascist Italy's colonial occupation and domination and his ultimate success in driving them out were interpreted as the fulfilment of Biblical prophecy. Zion was equated with Africa and goodness, whilst Babylon represented the western world and evil (Hall and Jefferson 1976, 138 and Hiro 1991, 72). According to Mike and Trevor Phillips,

[This generation's] politics became its cultural expression, or perhaps vice versa, its cultural expression became its politics. The music, the poetry, the language all spoke of the shared experience of transformation and anxiety and defiance and hope. Young black British style became the same as the content of their protest. Both reflected the same complexity, the same fragmentation, the same movement, the same disturbance. For instance, most were not Rastafarians, could not imagine being Rastafarians and never would be Rastafarians, but began to import into their daily lives different features of Rastafarianism: the dreadlocks and the language being the obvious things. The police became known as "Babylon," everything was "dread" or "righteous." We became "I and I," and that was exactly how it felt, (Phillips and Phillips 1998, 294-295)

Rastafarianism and reggae music was both a platform for black solidarity and a vehicle for expressing it (Hiro 1991, 74). In the minds of young Britons of Afro-Caribbean descent, their African heritage was reassessed as their birthright, stolen and devalued by the colonial and imperialist powers of the western world. As Paul Gilroy explains,

It's the younger generation that take the frontline in the seventies, and they are a deeply troubled generation, because they feel deeply the sense that they don't know who they are. They're not British, 'cos the British don't want them; they're not Caribbean, because they've never seen the Caribbean, nothing to do with it. They called themselves African for a long time, but, of

course, they'd never been to Africa either. They are saved, spiritually and culturally, by the advent of Rastafarianism and by Reggae. These two forces make it possible for them to construct a new form of symbolic identification for themselves. Don't ask me what it's conjured out of, you know. It's conjured out of the back end of the Bible, the Bible read upside down, myth about Haile Selassie. It's conjured out of the boogie box that plays Roots Reggae music. It's conjured out of stories coming out of Kingston, you know, the Gun Court, and Trenchtown. It's conjured out of scraps, really, bits and pieces, but they manufacture for themselves a black identity that they feel proud of. They find a space for themselves, (Phillips and Phillips 1998, 296).

For the British youth of West Indian parentage, this ideology offered an explanation for their social and historical situation, as well as membership in a pan-African community with a glorious past. Rastafarianism provided dispossessed black youths with an outlet for their frustrations and a remedy for their bleak prospects by giving them an identity, an explanation for their oppression, and a promise of future redemption (Hall and Jefferson 1976, 151).

Reggae music, and the clubs, dances, styles, and language that grew up around it, became very popular amongst the youth of Afro-Caribbean communities. This popularity eventually extended beyond black communities and moved into the mainstream. In 1977, Bob Marley's *Exodus* album remained on the top of British pop charts for fifty-six consecutive weeks (Thompson 1997, 155). Two years later, Capital Radio launched 'Roots Rockers,' which regularly broadcast reggae music throughout the country. Reggae, as it was disseminated in Britain, covered a wide spectrum of discourses and styles, from an expression of Rastafarian beliefs, social injustice, and political protest to acceptance within the popular mainstream.

Reggae was not the only black cultural phenomenon to gain mainstream popular attention in the 1970s. Black entertainers and athletes, especially those of Caribbean descent, were increasingly accepted and marketable. One of the most prominent examples of this, though by no means the first to succeed, was Lenny Henry. Born in Dudley to Jamaican parents, Henry grappled with identity in his

performances and challenged white stereotypes. In doing so, he moved away from earlier entertainers like Charlie Williams who had exploited white attitudes by mimicking them and feeding them back to the audience. In sports, black footballers became more prominent, featuring players like Cyrille Regis, Brendan Batson, Laurie Cunningham, Remi Moses and Viv Anderson. In 1978, Viv Anderson became the first black footballer to be selected for the full England team. The fact that opportunities for success emerged in entertainment and sport suggests that these were non-threatening areas for mainstream British society, and thus became the means by which black people gained force and recognition within the national popular culture.

The cultural resources of black music, dance, and style were also appropriated and redefined by youth sub-cultures that rejected the dominant ideas of British society, as in the example of Rastafarianism. The music and style of ska and reggae, for example, also appealed to some white working class youth. This represents one of a variety of sub-cultures that adapted elements of black culture, especially musical styles, to create new identities. Other examples of this phenomenon include mods in the early 1960s, and their direct descendents, the skinheads, who emerged as a collective identity from the late 1960s onwards. For young white kids from East and South London, R & B and Motown music (as in the case of the mods in the 1960s) or ska and reggae (as with the skinheads in the 1970s) provided a means of rejecting the society consigning them to low social status, and helped them to establish their own identity and sub-culture on the fringes of the mainstream (Hall and Jefferson 1976, 88 and 93-96). The mythology of the rude boy ("rudie") and his constant clash with authority, and its symbiosis with the music appealed in its aggressiveness and cult of individuality (Hall and Jefferson 1976, 143 and 148). Ultimately, however, the extent to which "hard mods" and skinheads co-mingled with West Indians in dance-hall and

clubs was limited, as they could never gain full entry into an identity and ideology with such an emphasis on African heritage and opposition to white oppression.

Despite increased visibility and acceptability in areas of sport, entertainment, and style within popular culture, Britons of African, Caribbean and Asian descent still faced significant economic and social disadvantages in the seventies. When a high rate of inflation caused recession and unemployment, these populations were amongst the hardest hit. Unemployment rates amongst blacks were up to three times as high as amongst whites, and many non-white job applicants and school-leavers felt they were being discriminated against (Hiro 1991, 69). Throughout the seventies black parents organised to provide supplementary schooling to counteract the effects of discrimination within the state education system, where children of West Indian and Asian descent encountered low expectations and lack of support. They were often labelled educationally subnormal (ESN) and put into special schools (Hiro 1991, 69). The lack of any alternative to imperial British history and culture, which ignored the achievements and contributions of black people in history, further contributed to black pupils' alienation and low self-esteem. Concerned parents, who had high expectations for their children, formed groups such as the Black Parents' Movement. An effort was also made to teach African and Caribbean history and culture through institutions such as London's West Indian Student Centre (Phillips and Phillips 1998, 258).

On a national political level, however, racist activists had lost their thin veneer of political respectability and became increasingly marginalized as violent radicals by the latter half of the 1970s. The anti-racist movement in the black and liberal communities led to the creation of Rock Against Racism in 1976 and the Anti-Nazi League in 1977 (Solomos 1993, 211-212 and Thompson 1997, 155). Also in 1977,

protestors, including the Socialist Worker's Party, clashed with police and National Front activists in Lewisham, South London. Similar demonstrations and scuffles took place in various parts of the country. In industry, Asian worker's strikes and protests became emblematic of trade union and anti-racist struggles.

Yet these advances did not signal an end to institutionalized racism. Despite government legislation, police adopted tactics of intimidation, harassment, and brutality towards black youth, who increasingly resented and protested this discrimination, criminalisation, and paranoia. Violent attacks on members of the black community, their businesses, and homes continued, as well as clashes with the police and the National Front. In 1976, the very same year that the Commission for Racial Equality and Minorities Arts Advisory Service were established, racial tensions erupted in violent clashes between black youth as well as white participants and the mostly hostile police on the last night of Notting Hill Carnival. Additional conflicts took place in 1977 and subsequent years, and the criminalization of black Carnival goers was a popular theme in press and local politics. In a 1978 television interview, Margaret Thatcher made her infamous comment that 'People are really afraid that this country might be rather swamped by people with a different culture.' Rather than alienating the British public, Thatcher enjoyed popular support. The following year, the Conservative Party won the general election, and Thatcher became Prime Minister. Once again, black citizens were seen as recently arrived interlopers, and the root of the problem. Thus, even at the end of the 1970s, the question of race relations and immigration was completely intertwined in the British mind.

### **1980s**

In the 1980s, the politics and policies of the Tory government, led by Margaret Thatcher, sanctioned restrictive legislation on nationality, immigration, and asylum.

After a campaign platform calling for a halt to immigration, the government passed the 1981 Nationality Act, which denied citizens of British dependent territories and overseas citizens the right to live in Britain and also declared that children born in the UK to non-British parents would not acquire citizenship.

During the 1980s, racially motivated violence and anti-black propaganda escalated amongst white activists and in the media. Police tactics that employed raids, riot police, and brutality were increasingly matched by violence from West Indian and Asian youth, and white participants. Riots resulted from growing frustration with mass unemployment and rage against a racist environment, especially belligerent policing. Violent confrontation broke out in the St. Paul's area of Bristol in 1980 when police raided a café known as the hangout for black teenagers, and escalated into out-of-control looting and destruction by black and white participants alike (Phillips and Phillips 1998, 357). One year later, Brixton erupted into three days of rioting, burning, and looting just days after the aggressive racial profiling of police operation Swamp '81 went into effect. Similar clashes in the Southall area of London, Toxteth area of Liverpool, Moss Side section of Manchester, and all over the country soon followed. Lord Scarman was commissioned by the government to investigate, and acknowledged in his report the need for reform in the police's relationship with the black community.

In 1981, thirteen Afro-Caribbean teenagers were killed at a private party in Deptford, south London, in a fire that the community was convinced resulted from a racially motivated attack. The government's apathy and media's silence incensed the community, which organized a march in protest. The Black People's Day of Action, as it came to be called, impressed upon the entire nation the degree of internal organization and support amongst black communities, as well as their political force.

At this time there was a rise in radical Asian youth organizations in response to institutional racism and racially motivated attacks on members of their communities, which emphasized self-help and self-defence.

Numerous social upheavals combined with the growing activism in black communities raised the consciousness of the government and the general public and forcing them to acknowledge the institutional racism and deprived environments that African, Caribbean, and Asian communities faced. At the community level, Labour politics paid increased attention to the issues and concerns of Britain's minority populations, both locally, as was the case in Liverpool, and nationally. In London, the Labour Party attempted to confront its own racism and prejudice by acting more proactively through municipal bodies like the Greater London Council. Formed in 1981 with Ken Livingstone as its head, the GLC was committed to community-based projects supporting black artists, entertainers, politicians, and leaders, as well as to assisting advocacy groups for black, feminist, and gay interests. Its Arts and Receptions Committee recognized the need to foster multiculturalism and to campaign against racism, which resulted in the commission of billboards, posters, and murals and the publication of *The Arts of Ethnic Minorities*. The GLC focused on the promotion of awareness and diversity that counteracted earlier political debate, like that of Enoch Powell, that sought to establish degrees of Englishness and resulted in increased hostilities between different racial groups. Unfortunately, Margaret Thatcher's government abolished the GLC in 1986 after a prolonged struggle because its politics and policies were in complete opposition to her own.

In the wake of racial disturbances and the Conservative government's indifference to the needs of the black community, there was renewed group activism focussing on local government. This was reflected in the 1982 local election results

and the 1983 parliamentary poll, where minorities gained forty-four council seats in Greater London and were similarly elected to local councils in Birmingham, Bradford, Leeds, and Leicester (Hiro 1991, 93). Likewise, more Africans, Caribbeans, and Asians were elected to national government, including the House of Commons. Whilst they were not fully represented in terms of their percentage of the general population, nor involved in Party leadership, the appointments of these officials empowered the black community and paved the way for change.

### **1990s to present**

In many ways, the nineties were a political turning point away from conservatism and towards the celebration of a multicultural British society. Elected officials and government policy actively promoted racial equality and equal opportunity at the local as well as national level. Margaret Thatcher was forced out of power in 1990 after eleven and a half years in office and was succeeded by her Chancellor, John Major. In 1996, the Commission for Racial Equality launched its 'Roots of the Future' campaign, emphasizing the socio-cultural contribution of the black British community. Major and the Conservative Party were defeated by Tony Blair and 'New Labour' in 1997. In 2000, Independent Ken Livingstone, the GLC's original director, became London's mayor. Also in 2000, an amended Race Relations Bill emphasized the duty of public authorities to actively promote racial equality.

The "Black British" identity promoted by the African, Caribbean, and Asian communities is diverse, contested, and flexible; it incorporates multiple racial identities and national backgrounds but its context and framing is situated resolutely within British citizenship. Despite inroads made within an increasingly sympathetic government, national acceptance of this community and its members as neighbours, leaders, co-workers, and friends has been, and continues to be, structured within

discourses of race, nationality, and class. The publication of Salman Rushdie's *Satanic Verses* in 1988 serves as a prime example Rushdie's portrayal of the prophet Muhammad incurred protest from the British Muslim community, who were supported by Islamic leaders worldwide, especially Ayatollah Khomeini in Iran. British Muslims staged book burnings in Bolton and Bradford. Rushdie's offence to Islam and Muslims' anger were treated with insensitivity in the government and met with incomprehension in the media (Hiro 1991, 183-188). In March 1989, Britain broke relations with Iran as a result of the Khomeini's *fatwa* ordering Rushdie's execution. This seemed to bring to the fore a host of Muslim grievances and frustrations with British society's lack of support for their religious beliefs and customs. The controversy highlighted their feelings of discrimination and disrespect, and galvanized their considerable efforts towards political organization and activism.

Similarly, the 1993 murder of black teenager Stephen Lawrence in a racially motivated attack in Eltham, southeast London emphasized the continued menace of racist violence in British cities. Four years later, after a long campaign by Lawrence's parents, Labour Home Secretary Jack Straw convened an inquiry into the Metropolitan Police's handling of the case; Sir William Macpherson's 1999 report condemned the Met for institutional racism and proposed seventy new reforms. In 2001 in Oldham, greater Manchester, racial violence and disturbances between white right-wingers and groups of Asian youth resulted in three days of rioting. This led to increased policing and a ban on political marches of any kind. In the general election of the same year, the far-right wing British National Party gained over 6,000 votes (16%) in the region. Black communities, especially those of African and Caribbean descent, continue to be plagued by economic hardship and disadvantage, as espoused

in debates about education, mental health, social services, and stereotypes concerning black “criminality.”

Today, government and party political leaders seem committed to an anti-racist platform, but debate and controversy continue to surround this issue. Events surrounding comments made by Tory MP John Townend ahead of the 2001 general elections were a case in point. Townend used the case of asylum-seekers to introduce the issue of immigration. He expressed alarm at the rate of ‘Commonwealth’ immigration (which he later admitted had been ‘coloured’ immigration in the original draft of his speech) and alluded to Enoch Powell’s “Rivers of Blood” speech, saying the MP’s pessimistic predictions were coming true. Townend declared the immigrants were ‘undermining Britain’s homogeneous Anglo-Saxon society.’ These statements incurred immediate criticism from the leaders of all primary political parties, not the least of which was his own. Tory party leader William Hague spoke out against this racist rhetoric, but many politicians, as well as the general public, felt Townend’s opinions were indicative of a large right wing, racist contingency in the party. All party leaders and most MPs signed a pledge drafted by the Commission for Racial Equality that called for a ‘racist-free’ campaign (Townend did not sign).

Despite the general acceptance of multiculturalism into popular culture, especially advertising and music, and despite generations of people of African, Caribbean, Asian, and other non-European descent living in the UK, these citizens continue to be perceived by some as outsiders who corrupt “traditional” English society and culture. Furthermore, the issue of racism continues to be inextricably linked politically and in the media to questions of immigration policy and asylum-seekers. Home Secretary Jack Straw criticised Townend’s 2001 remarks and accused the Tories of ‘exploiting fears’ over asylum-seekers. Shadow Social Security

Secretary David Willetts also objected, reiterating the point that asylum-seekers and questions of race in Britain are *separate issues*. Townend's speech and the ensuing debate effectively demonstrate the fragility of Britain's commitment to racial equality and celebration of multiculturalism. Decades of African, Caribbean, and Asian contributions to British society and culture continue to be downplayed, overlooked, and ignored. Whilst allowing that there have been great strides and changes since the 1940s, one must also confront the situation and acknowledge that there is still a ways to go before equal treatment and respect for all people regardless of race, ethnicity, or heritage prevails in Britain.

## APPENDIX B

### Magdalene Odundo Curriculum vitae

#### Biography

- 1950 Born Nairobi. Educated in India and Kenya
- 2001 Professor of Ceramics, The Surrey Institute of Art and Design  
University College, Farnham, UK
- 1998 Artist-in-residence, Swarthmore College, Swarthmore, Pennsylvania
- 1979-82 Royal College of Art, London, MA
- 1976-79 Teaching: Commonwealth Institute, London
- 1973-76 West Surrey College of Art and Design, UK, BA Hons, first class

#### Solo Exhibitions

- 2004 *Magdalene Odundo: Time and Again*, Crafts Study Centre, The  
Surrey Institute of Art and Design, University College, Farnham,  
UK
- 2002 *Acknowledged Sources: Magdalene Odundo*, Russell-Cotes Art  
Gallery and Museum, Bournemouth, UK
- 2001 *Magdalene Odundo—Clay Forms—A Retrospective*, Blackwell  
House, Bowness-on-Windermere, UK
- 1997-98 *New Work*, Michael Hue-Williams Gallery, London
- 1997 *Magdalene Odundo: Current Work*, Pro-Art, St. Louis, Missouri
- 1995-97 *Ceramic Gestures: New Vessels By Magdalene Odundo*, University  
Art Museum, University of California, Santa Barbara, California;

- The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, Kansas City, Missouri; The Fowler Museum of Cultural History, University of California, Los Angeles, California; The Newark Museum, Newark, New Jersey; The National Museum of African Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC; Indiana University Art Museum, Bloomington, Indiana; St. Louis Museum of Art, St. Louis, Missouri
- 1994 *Magdalene Odundo: African Beauty—A Retrospective*, Stedelijk Museum voor Hedendaagse Kunst, 's-Hertogenbosch, Netherlands
- 1993 The Sloss Furnaces, National Historic Landmark, A Museum of the City of Birmingham, Alabama
- 1992 *New Ceramics*, The Oxford Gallery, Oxford, UK  
*Magdalene Odundo—Ceramics*, Museum für Kunst und Gewerbe, Hamburg, Germany; Badisches Landesmuseum, Karlsruhe, Germany
- 1991 Anthony Ralph Gallery, New York
- 1989 Kunstformen, Jetzt, Salzburg, Austria
- 1988 Beaux Arts, Bath, UK
- 1987-88 *New Works: Magdalene Odundo*, The Glynn Vivian Art Gallery, Swansea, UK; Carmarthen Museum, Carmarthen, UK; Ruthin Craft Centre, Ruthin, UK; Aberystwyth Arts Centre, Aberystwyth, UK; Oriel Mostyn Art Gallery, Llandudno, UK
- 1987 *New Works: Magdalene Odundo*, Anne Berthoud Gallery, London
- 1986 Crafts council at the Victoria and Albert Museum, London
- 1983 Crafts Council, ICA, London  
Royal Exchange Theatre Craft, Manchester, UK

- 1982-84 Rosenthal Studio, Haus, Germany and London
- 1979 Commonwealth Institute, London
- 1977 Africa Centre, London

### **Group Exhibitions**

- 2003 *Material Differences: Artists and Identity in Africa*, Museum for African Art, New York; Hamline University Art Museum, Minneapolis, Minnesota; Crocker Art Museum, Sacramento, California; National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa, Canada
- British Ceramics: Five Artists*, Frank Lloyd Gallery: Los Angeles
- International Biennial Art Invitational 2003, Los Angeles, California
- 2002 *Pioneers to the Present* (curated by Magdalene Odundo), Foyer Gallery, The Surrey Institute of Art and Design, Farnham, UK
- Art from Africa: Long Steps Never Broke a Back*, Seattle Art Museum, Seattle, Washington
- 2000-01 *Colour and Fire: Defining Moments in Studio Ceramics, 1950-2000*, Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Los Angeles, California; Kemper Museum of Contemporary Art, Kansas City, Kansas; The Tucson Museum of Art and Historic Block, Tucson, Arizona; Memorial Art Gallery of the University of Rochester, New York
- 2000 *British Ceramics 2000*, Keramikmuseet Grimmerhus, Denmark
- Contemporary African Art: Five Artists, Diverse Trends*, Indianapolis Museum of Art, Indianapolis, Indiana

- 1999 *A Dialogue in Clay*, Artizana Gallery, Prestbury, UK
- 1998 *Contemporary Ceramics—Selections from the Metropolitan Museum of Art*, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York
- 1997 *Internchonale Glasmanifestatie*, Leerdam, Netherlands
- 1996 *New for the Nineties—The Crafts Council Collection*, Shipley Arts Gallery, Gateshead, UK
- Design of the Times—One Hundred Years of the Royal College of Art*, The Royal College of Art, London
- 1995 *Showcase Exhibitions*, Crafts Council, London
- Africa 95*, British Museum Exhibition, Museum of Mankind, London
- Contained and Uncontained: Four Clay Artists*, African American Museum, Dallas, Texas
- 1994 Art Box, Waregem, Belgium
- 1993 *The Ceramics of Europe '93'*, Westwald/Kreis, Germany
- 1992 *Columbus Drowning*, Rochdale Art Gallery, Rochdale, UK
- Faculty Invites*, University of Nebraska, Lincoln, Nebraska
- 1991-93 *Colours of the Earth—Twentieth Century British Ceramics*, British Council touring exhibition in India and Malaysia
- Africa Explores—20<sup>th</sup> Century African Art*, The Museum for African Art, New York; The New Museum of Contemporary Art, New York; The St. Louis Art Museum, St. Louis, Missouri; Mint Museum of Art, Charlotte, North Carolina; Carnegie Institute, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania; Center for Fine Arts, Miami, Florida; Ludwig Forum für Internationale Kunst, Aachen, Germany;

- Fundació Antoni Tàpies, Barcelona, Spain; Musée Art  
Contemporain, Lyon, France; Tate Gallery, Liverpool, UK
- 1991 *101 Jugs*, Candover Gallery, Arlesford, UK
- 1990 *Kunst und Antiquitätenmesse*, Galerie L (Frankfurt Art Fair),  
Frankfurt, Germany
- 1989 Candover Gallery, Arlesford, UK
- 1986 Corcoux and Corcoux, Salisbury, UK
- 1985 Bluecoat Art Centre, Liverpool, UK  
*International Women's Decade*, Africa Heritage, Nairobi, Kenya
- 1984 *Individual Eye*, Craftsmen Potters Association, London  
Anne Berthoud Gallery, London
- 1983-85 *Modern British Ceramics*, Queensbury Hunt, London  
*Fire and Smoke*, Midland Group Touring Exhibition, UK
- 1983 Craftsmen Potters Association, 25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary, Victoria and  
Albert Museum, London
- 1978 Commonwealth Arts Festival, Calgary and Edmonton, Canada

### **Selected Public Collections**

African Heritage, Nairobi, Kenya

Arkansas Arts Center, Little Rock, Arkansas

Art Box, Waregem, Belgium

The Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago, Illinois

Badisches Landesmuseum, Karlsruhe, Germany

Birmingham Museums and Art Gallery, Birmingham, Alabama

The British Museum, London

Brooklyn Museum of Art, New York

Buckinghamshire County Museum, Aylesbury, UK

Carnegie Museum of Art, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania

Cleveland Art Gallery, Cleveland, UK

The Cleveland Museum of Art, Cleveland, Ohio

Commonwealth Institute, London

The Crafts Council, London

The Detroit Institute of Art, Detroit, Michigan

Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco, M.H. de Young Museum,  
San Francisco, California

Hood Museum of Art, Hanover, New Hampshire

Indiana University Art Museum, Bloomington, Indiana

Indianapolis Museum of Art, Indianapolis, Indiana

Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Los Angeles, California

The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York

Minneapolis Institute of Art, Minneapolis, Minnesota

Museum für Kunst und Gewerbe, Hamburg, Germany

Museum für Kunsthandwerk, Frankfurt, Germany

Murumbi Collection, Nairobi

National Design Museum, Cooper-Hewitt/Smithsonian Institution,  
New York

National Museum of African Art, Smithsonian Institution,  
Washington, DC

The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, Texas

The Nelson-Atkins Museum, Kansas City, Kansas

The Newark Museum, Newark, New Jersey  
Nottingham City Gallery, Nottingham, UK  
Rosenthal Collection, Hamburg  
The St. Louis Museum of Art, St. Louis, Missouri  
Schools and Resources Museum, Wakefield, UK  
Seattle Art Museum, Seattle, Washington  
Stedelijk Museum voor Hedendaagse Kunst, 's-Hertogenbosch,  
Amsterdam, Netherlands  
Victoria and Albert Museum, London

### **Special Projects**

2001-02 Fordsburgh Artist Studios, residency invitation, Newtown, South  
Africa  
2000 The Sloss Furnace and Hope Project Fountain Design,  
collaboration with Brad Morton at Brad Morton Bronze Casting  
Workshop, Birmingham, Alabama  
1997 Het drinkglas Internationale Glasmanifestatie, Leerdam,  
Netherlands

### **Film and Videos**

1995 *Ceramic Gestures: A Conversation with Magdalene Odundo*,  
directed by Victoria Vensa, Television Studios of Instructional  
Resources, University of California, Santa Barbara, California,  
nine-minute videocassette  
1989 *Magdalene Odundo*, a video produced by East Midlands Arts, UK

1984

*Out of Africa*, Bacchanal Film, Insight Production, Channel 4  
Television, UK

## Veronica Ryan Curriculum Vitae

### Biography

- 1956 Born Plymouth, Montserrat
- 1981-83 The School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London
- 1978-80 The Slade School of Art, University College, London
- 1975-78 Bath Academy of Art, Corsham Court
- 1974-74 St. Albans College of Art and Design

### Solo Exhibitions

- 2003 *Archaeology of the Black Sun 1956-2002*, Salena Gallery, Long Island University, Brooklyn, New York
- 2000-01 *Veronica Ryan: Artist in Residence 2000*, Tate St. Ives, Cornwall, UK
- 1995 *Compartments/Apart-ments*, Camden Arts Centre, London, and Angel Row, Nottingham, UK
- 1993 *Veronica Ryan*, Wood Street Gallery, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania
- 1988-89 *Veronica Ryan*, Kettle's Yard, Cambridge; Riverside Studios, London, UK
- 1987 *Veronica Ryan*, Arnolifini Gallery, Bristol; Wolverhampton Art Gallery, Wolverhampton; Third Eye Centre, Glasgow, UK

### Selected Group Exhibitions

- 2007-08 *Infinite Island: Contemporary Caribbean Art*, Brooklyn Museum of Art, Brooklyn, New York

- 2005 Tate Britain rehang, London
- 2001-05 Open Studios, Elizabeth Foundation for the Arts, New York
- 2000 *Confluence*, Five Myles, Brooklyn, New York  
*Modern British Art*, Tate Liverpool, Liverpool, UK
- 1999 Five Myles, Brooklyn, New York
- 1998 *Artist's Projects*, Tate St. Ives, Cornwall, UK  
*Caribbean Contemporary Art*, MEIAC, Badajoz; Casa de America, Madrid; Maison de l'Amerigne Latine; Hans den Welt, Berlin
- 1997 *Transforming the Crown: African, Asian, and Caribbean Artists in Britain 1966-1996*, Caribbean Cultural Center, Studio Museum, Harlem, and Bronx Center of the Arts, New York  
Drawing Exhibition, Salena Gallery, Long Island University, Brooklyn, New York  
The Rotunda Gallery, Brooklyn, New York  
Rush Arts, New York
- 1996 *Landscape Reclaimed*, Aldrich Museum of Contemporary Art, Ridgefield, Connecticut  
*British Abstract Art, Part 3: Works on Paper*, Flowers East Gallery, London  
*Sculpture Jesus College*, Cambridge, UK  
*Swinging the Lead*, Lead Works, Bristol, UK  
*Petrona Morrison and Veronica Ryan: Sculptural Works*, The Bronx Museum of the Arts, New York
- 1995 *Six Sculptors*, Long Island University, Brooklyn, New York

- Weltkunst Foundation, Irish Museum of Modern Art, Dublin,  
Ireland
- Body as Metaphor*, Bard College, New York
- Natural Settings*, Chelsea Physic Garden, London
- British Abstract Art, Part 2: Sculpture*, Flowers East Gallery,  
London
- 1994 *Trophies from the Civil Wars*, Memorial Arch, Grand Army Plaza,  
Brooklyn, New York
- 1993 *Natural Order*, Tate Liverpool, Liverpool, UK and national tour
- 1992 *Recent Acquisitions*, Tate Britain, London
- Paula Cooper Gallery, New York
- Columbus Drowning*, Rochdale Arts Gallery, Rochdale, UK
- 1991 Pietrasanta Fine Arts, Open Studio, New York
- Virtual Realities*, Scottish Arts Council touring exhibition
- Goldsmiths College Centenary Exhibition, London
- 1990 *8<sup>th</sup> International Small Sculpture Triennial*, Palace of Exhibitions,  
Budapest, Hungary
- Sculptor's Drawing Exhibition, The New York Studio School,  
New York
- River*, Goldsmiths College, London
- A New Necessity*, Garden Festival, Gateshead, UK
- The British Art Show 1990*, McLellan Galleries, Glasgow; Leeds  
City Gallery, Leeds, Hayward Gallery, London, UK
- 1989 Contemporary Art Fair, Convent Garden, London
- 1988 *Sculpture in the Close*, Jesus College, Cambridge, UK

- Dislocations*, Kettle's Yard, Cambridge, UK
- 1987 *Vessel*, Serpentine Gallery, London
- A System of Support*, Kettle's Yard, Cambridge, UK
- 1986 Blond Fine Art, London
- From Two Worlds*, Whitechapel Art Gallery, London
- Interim Art, London
- The Minorities, Colchester, Essex, UK
- Caribbean Expressions in Britain*, Leicester Museums and Art Galleries, UK
- Garden Festival, Stoke-on-Trent, UK
- Coloured Sculpture*, Stoke-on-Trent Museum and Art Gallery, UK
- Whitechapel Open*, Whitechapel Art Gallery, London
- 1985 *Manna in the Wilderness*, Angela Flowers Gallery, London
- Beyond Appearances: Sculpture for the Visually Handicapped and Sighted to Share*, Nottingham Castle Museum and Art Gallery, Nottingham, UK
- The Thin Black Line*, Institute of Contemporary Art, London
- 1984 *Into the Open: New Painting, Prints and Sculpture by Contemporary Black Artists*, Mappin Art Gallery, Sheffield, UK
- Sculptors and Modellers*, Tate Gallery, London
- Christmas Show*, Kettle's Yard, Cambridge, UK
- 1983 *Five Black Women Artists*, The Africa Centre, London
- 6<sup>th</sup> Cleveland International Drawing Biennale, Cleveland, UK
- Creation for Liberation*, Brixton, London
- 1982 *Fine Art Staff Show*, Aspex Gallery, Portsmouth, UK

1981 *Third World Show*, London School of Economics, London

### **Collections**

2001 Tate Collection, UK  
1996 First-Site, Colchester, Essex, UK  
1993 Mellon Bank, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania  
1991-97 Tate Gallery, UK  
1990 Contemporary Arts Society, London  
1989 Weltkunst Foundation, London  
1988 Salsbury Collection, UK  
1987 The Arts Council of Great Britain  
1986 Irvin Joffe Collection, London  
1983 Cleveland County Museum, Cleveland, UK  
1981 The Boise Scholarship Collection, UK

### **Awards**

1987 Henry Moore Foundation  
1983 Great London Arts Association  
Prizewinner, 6<sup>th</sup> Cleveland International Drawing Biennale  
1980 Boise Travelling Scholarship

### **Teaching and Residencies**

2000 Yaddo, Saratoga Springs, New York  
1999 Yaddo, Saratoga Springs, New York  
1998-01 Tate St. Ives, Cornwall, UK

- 1998 Delfina Studio Trust, London
- 1994 Residency, Camden Arts Centre, London
- 1993-99 School of Visual Arts, New York
- 1991 International Symposium, *Africa Explores: 20<sup>th</sup> Century African Art*, Center for African Art, Hunter College, New York
- 1988 *Dislocations* Co-Curator, Kettle's Yard, Cambridge, UK
- 1987-88 Kettle's Yard Residency/Jesus College, Cambridge, UK
- 1987 Serpentine Gallery Workshops: *Air, Earth, Water*
- 1986 Workshops, Whitechapel Art Gallery, London
- 1984 Workshops with the blind and partially sighted, Nottingham Castle Museum and Art Gallery, Nottingham, UK
- Christmas Children's Workshops, Kettle's Yard, Cambridge, UK
- Summer Term Sculpture Residency, Templars Boy's School (ESN), London
- 1983 Panel Member of the British School of Rome
- 1982-94 Visiting Lecturer at various colleges, including: Chelsea; Slade; Farnham; Middlesex; Winchester; Newport; Portsmouth; Birmingham; Falmouth; Byam Shaw; Limerick (Ireland); Goldsmiths

#### **Art Journals and Periodicals**

- 1999 New York Arts
- 1999 The New York Times
- 1997 (Oct) The New York Times
- 1996 (July) The Guardian

1995	The New York Times
1993	Catalogue, Wood Street Gallery, Pittsburgh
1990 (May)	Artscribe
1990 (Feb 27)	Financial Times
1990	Catalogue, Sculpture Triennale, Budapest
1990	Catalogue, <i>The British Art Show 1990</i>
1989	Catalogue, Kettle's Yard/Riverside Studios, Cambridge and London
1987 (June)	The Times
1986 (Aug)	Sunday Times
1986 (Aug)	Essex County Standard
1986 (Aug)	The News Lines
1986 (Jan)	The Guardian
1986	Financial Times
1985	Artist's Newsletter
1982	Private Eye
1981, 86	Time Out
1981, 83, 86	City Limits
1980, 85	Arts Review

### **Radio and Television Interviews**

2000	Audio Tape, Modern British Art Collection, Tate Liverpool
1992 (May)	Focus on Britain, Channel 31, WNYC, PBS
1990 (Feb)	<i>Face Values</i> , 'Notes in the Margin,' Stephen Heath, Channel 4, BBC

1986	Ebony, BBC 1 Television
1985, 86	Black Londoners, BBC Radio
1984	Africa, BBC World Service
1984	Meridian, BBC World Service

**Biography**

- 1963 Born Lagos, Nigeria
- 1991-93 Rijksakademie Amsterdam – Postgraduate Work Period
- 1987-89 University of London Goldsmiths College – MA Fine Art
- 1982-85 GLOSCAT – BA (Hons) Fine Art Painting
- 1981-82 St. Helens College of Art & Design – Foundation Course

**Solo Exhibitions**

- 2001 *Scope* – Café Gallery Projects - London
- 1997 *Filter* – Leighton House Museum - London
- 1993 Art & Project – Rotterdam

**Group Exhibitions**

- 2005 *A Fiction of Authenticity* –Touring: Art Museum of the University of Houston – TX USA
- 2004 *Evelina Children's Hospital Exhibition* – RIBA - London
- 2004 *A Fiction of Authenticity* – Regina Miller Gallery – Pittsburgh PA USA
- 2004 *A Slither & a Slice* – Café Gallery Projects - London
- 2004 *Bling Bling* – London Print Studio - London
- 2003 *A Fiction of Authenticity* – Contemporary Africa Abroad Contemporary Art Museum St Louis – MO USA
- 2003 *Bow Festival* – Roman Road Revel - London

- 2001 *Station to Station* Spacex 2 – Exeter
- 2001 *Articulate* The Station - Bristol
- 2000 *5 Continents & 1 City* Museum of Mexico City – Mexico
- 2000 *Continental Shift* Bonnefanten Museum – Maastricht
- 2000 *Because a Fire was in my Head* SLG – London
- 2000 *Henry Moore Show* Byam Shaw School of Art - London
- 1999 *Littoral* Former Maritime Museum – Exeter
- 1999 *Itinerants* Tracey Liverpool Biennale – Liverpool
- 1999 *48 hours* Tablet Gallery Tabernacle – London
- 1999 *Paper* - Ikon Touring Exhibition
- 1998 *You don't know me but...* De La Warr Pavilion Bexhill  
Winchester Gallery Winchester Pitshanger Manor London
- 1996 *Mostyn Open* Oriel Mostyn Llandudno
- 1996 *Young Art 1990-96* Bonnefanten Museum Maastricht
- 1996 *Artist Book International* Waldorf Astoria Towers New York
- 1995 *The Artists Book Fair* South Bank Centre London
- 1995 *The Meaning of Drawing* Rijksakademie Amsterdam
- 1995 *47<sup>th</sup> Frankfurt Book Fair* Messe Frankfurt
- 1995 *East International* Norwich Gallery Norwich
- 1995 *Hardwork Shift Two* London
- 1993 *Open Studios* Rijksakademie Amsterdam
- 1990 *Into The Nineties 2* Mall Galleries London
- 1990 *British Airways New Artist Show* London
- 1989 *MA Show* Goldsmiths College London

### **Awards / Residencies / Commissions**

2003	Open House – Artist in Residence Angell Town Estate London
2004	Floor Commission – Look Ahead Housing & Care Slough
2001-04	Floor Commission – Evelina Children’s Hospital
2000	Henry Moore Fellowship Byam Shaw School of Art London
1997	inIVA Artist in Residence Leighton House Museum London
1995	Shave International Artists’ Workshop Bruton Somerset
1995	East International Award Winner
1994-96	Basic Stipend Ministry of Culture The Netherlands
1993	Study Bursary Dutch Institute Villa Borghese Rome
1993	Bursary Veronica Broadcasting Organisation The Netherlands
1993	Study Grant NUFFIC: Netherlands Organisation for International Cooperation
1990	British Airways New Artist Award Second Prize winner
1984	Travel Bursary Gloucestershire College of Arts & Technology

### **Shortlists/ Nominations**

2004	Decibel Visual Arts Awards – Arts Council England
2003	Art4 Project – Channel 4
2001	Beck’s Futures - ICA
2000	Paul Hamlyn Foundation – Awards for Artists
2000	The 1871 Fellowship – Ruskin School University of Oxford

### **Professional Advocacy**

2004	Digital Archive Launch, speaker - inIVA
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- 2004 Kuumba Art Centre – Artists’ Talk - Bristol
- 2003-04 Exhibition Panel, panel member – Café Gallery Projects
- 2003-04 New Audiences Advisory Panel, advisor – Café Gallery Projects
- 2003-04 Arts Council South West – Decibel mentor to Bristol based artist,  
Gloria Ojulari Sillah
- 2002 Diverse Practise Seminar, speaker, Northern Arts - Newcastle

### **Artists’ Publications / Online Projects / Websites**

- 1999 48 hours – Video: Mary Evans & Anna Best
- 1999 Filter – CD Rom: interactive teaching resource - inIVA
- 1997 Filter – inIVA Online: X-Space [www.iniva.org](http://www.iniva.org)
- 1995 Cross Sections – Artists’ Book – edition 40
- 1993 Chaingang – Artists’ Book – edition 25
- [www.iniva.org](http://www.iniva.org)
- [www.norwichgallery.co.uk](http://www.norwichgallery.co.uk)
- [www.whitechapel.org](http://www.whitechapel.org)
- [www.spacestudios.org.uk](http://www.spacestudios.org.uk)
- [www.artserver.cfa.cmu.edu](http://www.artserver.cfa.cmu.edu)

### **Publications**

- 2003 *A Fiction of Authenticity* – St Louis Catalogue
- 2003 *The Culture Game* – University of Minnesota Press USA
- 2002 *Jahresring 49* – Contemporary Art & Culture from Africa  
Oktagon Cologne
- 2002 *Transmission: Speaking & Listening* – Sheffield Hallam

University / Site Gallery

- 2000 *Fresh Cream* – Contemporary Art & Culture Phaidon
- 2000 *Continental Shift* – A Voyage Between Cultures Catalogue
- 2000 *Five Continents & One City* – Catalogue
- 1999 *Reading the Contemporary: African Art from Theory to the Marketplace* – inIVA
- 1999 *NKA Journal of Contemporary African Art* – Profile Issue 10
- 1998 *You don't know me but...* - Catalogue
- 1997 *Filter* – Leighton House Museum – Catalogue inIVA
- 1996 *Young Art 1990-96* – The Océ van der Grinten Collection
- 1995 *The Meaning of Drawing* – Rijksakademie – Catalogue
- 1995 *East International* - Norwich Gallery Catalogue
- 1995 *Hard Work Shift Two* – Catalogue
- 1995 *Once upon a national Academy of Art* – Rijksakademie
- 1990 *Into the Nineties 2* – Catalogue

**Reviews**

- 2004 *A Fiction of Authenticity* – *Flash Art* Nov/Dec Jeffrey Hughes
- 2004 *A Fiction of Authenticity* – *Artnews* Apr Alice Thorson
- 2004 *A Fiction of Authenticity* – *Contemporary* 57 Jeffrey Hughes
- 2004 *A Fiction of Authenticity* – *Art US* Feb Susan Cahan
- 2004 *A Fiction of Authenticity* – *Artforum* March David Carrier
- 2003 *A Fiction of Authenticity* – *Art South Africa* Susan Cahan
- 2000 *Continental Shift* – *Volkskrant* May [illus] Anne van Driel
- 1998 *You don't know me but...* - *Time Out* Aug 19-26 Mark Currah

- 1997 *Leighton House – The Guardian Space* Nov 7 Julia Thrift
- 1997 *Leighton House – Time Out* Nov 5 Julia Thrift
- 1995 *East International – Art Press Paris* Oct Helen Valentin
- 1995 *East – Art Monthly* Sept Mark Durden
- 1995 *East – The Times* Aug 22 [illus] Sacha Craddock
- 1995 *East – The Sunday Telegraph* Aug 6 John McEwan
- 1995 *East – The Observer Review* Aug 6 Richard Shone
- 1995 *Hard Work Shift Two – Time Out* May 17-24 Adrian Searle
- 1993 *Art & Project – Financieele Dagblad* Dec Walter Barton

### **Collections**

- Institute of International Visual Arts, London
- Johan Deumens Artists' Books – Heerlen The Netherlands
- Judith Cahen – Amsterdam The Netherlands
- Oce van der Grinten Collection – Venlo The Netherlands
- Veronica Broadcasting Organisation – Hilversum The Netherlands
- Armando – Berlin Germany
- Art & Project – Slootdorp The Netherlands
- Lakepoint Tower – Chicago U S A

### **Guest Lecturing**

- 2003 Byam Shaw School of Art - London
- 2000-04 Oaklands College – St Albans
- 2001 Ruskin School of Art University of Oxford – Oxford
- 2001 Sheffield Hallam University - Sheffield

2000	Goldsmiths College – London
1999	Exeter School of Arts & Design – Exeter
1998	Byam Shaw School of Art – London
1996	Cheltenham & Gloucester College of Higher Education, Cheltenham
1996	Glasgow School of Art – Glasgow
1996	The London Institute Chelsea School of Art & Design – London
1995	Rijksakademie – Amsterdam
1989	Byam Shaw School of Art – London
1988-89	Lina Garnade Foundation Course – London
1987	Basingstoke College of Arts & Technology – Basingstoke

### **Education/Residencies**

2004-05	Whitechapel Gallery - Creative Connections (1 year Artists' residency with year 10 pupils in Hackney)
2004	Victoria & Albert Museum – Black British Style – Lecturer
	National Gallery – Line of Vision project (Three day project with young people in care)
	National Gallery – Family Workshops (One week half-term workshops for 5-11 year olds)
	Creative Partnerships South – Charles Edward Brooke School (Six week Maths and Art project with year ten pupils)
	National Gallery Deutsche Bank Artists in Schools Programme,
	Islington Arts and Media School (Four week residency with year nine pupils in collaboration with the National Gallery)

National Gallery Deutsche Bank Artists in Schools Programme, Lilian Baylis School (Ten week residency with year seven pupils in collaboration with the National Gallery)

Turtle Key Arts (One day workshop with adolescents with special needs)

2003 Contemporary Art Museum St Louis, "A Fiction of Authenticity"  
Artists' Gallery Workshop

Café Gallery Projects Hidden Lives (Four week residency with year seven pupils at Bacons College and year five pupils from Redriff Primary School in collaboration with Anti Slavery International and artist Illur Malus Islandus)

Space Studios Public Arts: Bow Festival (Two week public art project at Bow Boys School, ending with a site-specific display in Roman Road. In collaboration with artist Alex Julyan)

2002 Chisenhale Gallery (Week long education residency with years four and five in relation to the Smith/Stewart show)

North Kensington Arts waterWorx Programme

Beautiful Port (Four week residency with year five pupils at St Mary's RC Primary School in Kensal Green London culminating in an event and exhibition on the Grand Union Canal)

Islington Festival Perceptions of Monarchy (Three week Jubilee project working with year five pupils at Blessed Sacrament RC

Primary School in King's Cross, London ending with a presentation in shop windows in Upper Street)

- Space Studios Public Arts Greetings from the Factories (One day family workshop at Space Place open day)
- Acton Housing Association Beethoven Centre (One day family workshop on annual open day in North London)
- Maritime Museum Greenwich - Black History Month (Two day project in the Trade & Empire Gallery with year six pupils)
- 2001-present Evelina Hospital School – Guy’s Hospital London
- Regular art sessions with children from the general ward, dialysis ward and Snowsfield Adolescent Psychiatric Unit
- 2001 Whitechapel Art Gallery. Access workshop (One day discussion and practical session with visually and mobility impaired visitors)
- Look Ahead Housing & Care Design for Living (10 week project with residents of a homeless peoples hostel in Earls Court London; culminating in a presentation at the Tablet gallery Notting Hill In collaboration with artist Alex Julyan)
- The V&A /Institute of Education PGCE in Art & Design Critical Interventions, Workshop Leader (One day workshop for art teachers in the Canon Photography Gallery)
- 2000 Whitechapel Art Gallery, “A Different Kind of Show” (An exhibition of work by artist educators and pupils from the Swap Programme)
- 1999-2001 Whitechapel Art Gallery Swap Programme (Three year residency programme working with year ten pupils at Clapton Girls School in Hackney)

- 1998 inIVA Artists in Schools Programme – Artist in Residence (Ten week project working with years seven and eight in the Science department at Acland Burghley School in North London)
- 1997 Southwark Summer University – The Untitled Art Project Delfina Studios (One week project working with young people from South London)

## **Maria Amidu Curriculum Vitae**

Born London, 1967.

### **Education**

1990-92

MA Ceramics & Glass, Royal College of Art, London

1989-90

Workshop Apprenticeship, Colin Reid Glass Studio, Stroud

1986-89

BA (Hons) 3D Design, Surrey Institute of Art & Design, Farnham

1985-86

Foundation Course, St. Helens College of Art & Design, St. Helens

### **Solo Exhibitions**

2001

*Transfer*, Arnolfini, Bristol

2002

*Translucent Words*, Foyer Gallery, Surrey Institute of Art & Design, Farnham

*Finders, Keepers ...* Horniman Museum & Gardens, London

## **Selected Group Exhibitions**

1999

*exchanges*, 198 Gallery, London

1997

*New Member*, Contemporary Applied Arts

*Verre*, Clara Scremini Gallery, Paris

*Contemporary Decorative Arts*, Sotheby's, London

1996

*New Light*, Solomon Gallery, Dublin

*New Faces*, Crafts Council Shop at the Victoria and Albert Museum, London

*Craftworks*, Barbican, London

1992

*Glass Show*, Crafts Council, London

1990

*Diverse Cultures*, Crafts Council, London

## **Research and Education Projects**

2001-02

Artist-in-Residence: four-month residency devising, developing and producing a series of workshops with early Years, Year 3 and Middlesex University Research Fellow Rebecca Sinker as basis the Digital Arts Resource for Education (DARE) CD

ROM for primary visual arts education. Columbia Primary School, London.

Producer: one-year residency and commission entitled *Transfer*, devising and developing workshops with patients, and making a new site-specific work based on the history of the old hospital. Arnolfini and Bristol Royal Children's Hospital, Bristol.

Producer: one-year project devising and developing an interactive website entitled *Joining the Dots* ([www.joiningthedots.co.uk](http://www.joiningthedots.co.uk)) in collaboration with Year 7,8,9,10,11 students and web designer Michael Uwemedimo, to archive a five-year visual art programme. Institute of International Visual Arts (inIVA) and Acland Burghley School, London.

2000

Producer: five-month project devising and developing an education programme for schools and adult groups, and making a new work entitled *Finders, Keepers...* based on the museum collections. Horniman Museum & Gardens, London.

Visiting Lecturer: artists' practice presentation. South East Exhibition Projects, Surrey Institute of Art and Design, Farnham.

1999

Artist-in-Residence: development and production of new work entitled *...a moment caught in three dimension(s)* as part of an international visual arts exchange programme. Goldsmiths Centre for Cultural Studies, London.

Researcher: initial research for international on-line conference entitled *Networks and Markets*. Institute of International Visual Arts (inIVA), London.

1998

Researcher: one-year, writing project entitled *air*. Space Studios, London.

1997

Researcher-in-Residence: development of transatlantic website project entitled *enTRANSit* ([www.iniva.org/entransit](http://www.iniva.org/entransit)) in collaboration with visual artist Steve Ouditt. Institute of International Visual Arts (inIVA), London and Caribbean Contemporary Arts (CCA), Trinidad.

1995

Visiting Lecturer: artists' practice presentation. South East Exhibition Projects, Rye Art Gallery, Rye.

1992

Visiting Lecturer: Tutorials with 2nd Year BA Students, Glass Department, Sunderland University, and Sunderland.

Summer Workshop Leader: two-month project devising and producing a mosaic workshop with children aged 5-11. EMACA Visual Arts, Nottingham.

Visiting Lecturer: motivational seminar discussing visual arts practice for Year 8 students. Malory High School, Kent.

1991

Workshop Leader: demonstrational glass workshops for gallery visitors. Angel Row Gallery, Nottingham.

## **Consultation and Project Management**

2002

Outreach Associate: Celebration Commonwealth Jubilee Parade, Helen Denniston Associates, London.

Advisor: Visual Arts Standing Advisory Group, London Arts.

Conference Coordinator: From Material Things, art & artefact in the 21st Century, The British Museum, London.

2001

Mentor: Visual Arts Traineeships, London Arts.

Evaluator: Schools and Whitechapel Arts Programme (SWAP)

[www.whitechapel.org/](http://www.whitechapel.org/), Whitechapel Art Gallery, London.

2001-98

Project Manager: UNESCO-ASCHBERG Bursaries for Artists Programme, Institute of International Visual Arts (inIVA), London.

2000

Recruitment Consultant: Visual Arts Traineeships, London Arts.

Administrator: One to One Bursary Scheme, Live Art Development Agency, London.

Stage Manager: Notting Hill Carnival Gala, Catherine Ugwu Ltd., London.

1999

Project Coordinator: Winter Carnival, Millennium Dome Opening Ceremony, New

Millennium Experience Company, London.

1995-97

Projects Administrator: exhibitions, publications and research projects, Institute of International Visual Arts (inIVA), London.

Curatorial Director: 198 Gallery, London.

1996

Advisor: Medium and Small Scale Visual Arts Fund, London Arts Board.

1992-95

Training & Arts Services Administrator: courses, conferences and career development programmes, Artrage Intercultural Development Agency, London.

### **Editorial**

1995

Project Manager: feasibility study (funded by London Arts Board) for Food - a pilot arts and culture publication, Provisions Collective.

### **Awards**

2001

Visual Artists Fund, London Arts

2000

Year of the Artist Award, London Arts

1996

S.G Warburg Grant, Business Link

1995

Crafts Council Setting Up Grant

Prince's Youth Business Trust Award

Award for Individual Artists, London Arts Board

1994

Scheme for Young Artists, Clerkenwell Green Association

1992

Dudley Crystal Festival Prize

1990

Eduardo Paolozzi Travel Bursary

Wingate Foundation Scholarship

### **Collections**

2001

Arnolfini Collection Trust, Bristol

1996

Pilkington Collection, Victoria & Albert Museum

National Drawing Collection, Limerick

1994

Angel Row Gallery, Nottingham

1993

Boddington, private collection

1991

Angel Row Gallery, Nottingham

Cheryl Tannen, private collection

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