

Stephen Friedman Gallery

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 In Living Colour
 Lauren Cochrane
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A Long-Overdue Celebration Of Black British Pioneers Is Set To Open. Lauren Cochrane Meets Its Makers.



Images by (clockwise from top left) Horace Ové, Jenn Nkiru, Aubrey Williams, Ajamu, Anneé Francis, Richard Rawlins, Benji Reid; and (far right, inset) Deborah Roberts

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Zak Ové, the curator of Somerset House's Get Up, Stand Up Now, describes the exhibition as "a review and a celebration of our Caribbean and African culture that has permeated and contributed to British society, and reveals how we are all the richer for it." If that description verges on the academic, the content of this showcase - which features more than 100 different artists across photography, painting, music and film - is more like an immersive portrait of black British life over the last 50 years, and the influence of this creativity across UK culture.

The predominantly black contributors include artists from the Windrush generation such as Dennis Forrester, whose paintings portray life in 80s London, to Steve McQueen, Betye Saar, Zedie Smith and seminal music producer Dennis Bovell. The young talent featured includes photographer Rhea Storr, whose work looks at mixed-race identity growing up in Yorkshire; Scots band Young Fathers; fashion designers Martine Rose and Grace Wales Bonner; and Jenn Nkiru, who worked on Beyoncé and Jay-Z's *Ape Shit* video. It all begins with Zak's father, Horace Ové, who was the first black British person to direct a feature film, 1975's *Pressure*, about a black British teenager and the racism he experiences. Zak hopes this exhibition - which includes some work never seen by the public before - will provide a reassessment of his father's legacy. "I'm really excited that the public will be able to see my father's work again or perhaps discover it," he says. "He was such a pioneer of his time."

The fact that Ové is not more widely known is symptomatic of the endemic lack of diversity in the arts, something that may now be changing. This exhibition follows Tate Modern's *Soul of a Nation* last year, about art in the United States's "black power" era, and Wales Bonner's *A Time for New Dreams* showcase at the Serpentine Sackler gallery in January, which featured the work of black creatives including Liz Johnson Artur and Ben Okri. Forrester, who began making art in the mid-1970s, acknowledges that there has been a shift from his experience as a young artist. "When I was a student at Central Art School and the Royal College of Art, there were no black students in my year, and few black artists in the college

as a whole," he says. "There was also no evidence of black artists in commercial galleries. This is beginning to change."

Music has been a world where black British artists have had more freedom. Producer Bovell is contributing pieces he has collected over a 45-year career, working with the Slickee Boys and poet Linton Kwesi Johnson. He says that working on the exhibition made him reassess his achievements. "It made me think about how important my work is and what a journey I have had," he says, "and it made me think that everything I have done is good." Bovell was born in Barbados in 1953 when it was still a British colony, but settled in London, making music from the late 60s. "The expression of black Britishness is seen in many walks of life," he says. "I am one of the statistics that made something of the last 40 years." Bovell is curious about the next generation in his lineage. "There are some exciting youngsters coming through," he says. "I can only be proud to think that I'm maybe one of the giants upon whose shoulders they stand."

With so many contributors, there is space for myriad expressions of black Britishness. Ajamu provides a different point of view. The photographer is best known for his *Fierce* series, portraits of "young LGBT people from second-generation black British backgrounds, and those born and raised in the Caribbean and Africa." He says: "Black British identity is multidimensional. It's not just about the usual suspects: race, sexuality and gender, it's place, class and much more besides. I was born and raised in Huddersfield; that would be a very different experience from Halifax, Leeds or Dewsbury."

Ajama has shown his *Fierce* images in London's 800-year-old Guildhall. "It is an amazing space, with pre-Raphaelite paintings everywhere, very British," he says. "This puts young black and brown people, not generally seen as part of that conversation, in the dialogue." Arguably, this exhibition's Somerset House venue, another rarified address, has a similar resonance. "This exhibition reflects unadulterated black pride," says Ové, "with the freedom to fill in all the blanks, where we didn't exist before."

Get Up, Stand Up Now is at Somerset House, WC2, Wed to 15 Sep