

Stephen Friedman Gallery

The Guardian

Curator of Tate Caribbean-British exhibition says UK museums must face up to past

Nadia Khomami

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Life Between Islands features artists of Windrush generation and explores Black power movement in UK.



Image: Horace Ové Stokely Carmichael giving a Black Power speech at The Dialectics of Liberation Congress, Round House, London in 1967. © Horace Ové/Courtesy Horace Ové Archives

art at Tate Britain has said.

Life Between Islands: Caribbean-British Art 1950s – Now features artists working across film, photography, painting, sculpture and fashion. They include those of Caribbean heritage as well as those inspired by the Caribbean, such as Ronald Moody, Sonia Boyce, Claudette Johnson and Steve McQueen.

David A Bailey, the exhibition's curator and a member of the British Black Arts Movement – the radical political art movement founded in 1982 – said in many ways it explored Tate Britain's own chequered past.



Image: Vanley Burke, Young Men on a Seesaw in Handsworth Park 1984. Photograph: Courtesy Vanley Burke Archives

The original Tate collection was funded in the late 19th century by the industrialist Sir Henry Tate, who made his fortune as a sugar refiner – a trade inextricably linked to slave labour in the Caribbean.

"It's trying to think about the question of the museum and its responsibilities in a 21st-century climate, particularly museums which have a very chequered history around patronage," Bailey said. "That has now resurfaced itself around the question of post-slavery and the sugar industry, which is referred to in some of the works in the show.

"For me, one of the things our institutions have to do is take responsibility around those questions, and think about what is the legacy of these elements in the future."

The exhibition begins with artists of the Windrush generation who came to Britain in the 1950s and explores the Caribbean Artists Movement, an informal group of creatives including Paul Dash and Althea McNish, whose tropical modernist textile designs were inspired by the Caribbean landscape.



Image: Black Panther school bags, by Neil Kenlock in 1970. Photograph: © Courtesy of the Neil Kenlock Archive

The rise of the Black power movement in Britain is shown in works such as Horace Ové's photographs of Stokely Carmichael and Neil Kenlock's Black Panther school bags. The exhibition also includes a new iteration of Michael McMillan's *The Front Room*, a

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reconstruction of a fictional 1970s interior, evoking the role of home as a safe space for social gatherings at a time of widespread prejudice.

Other works from the Black arts movement of the 1970s and 80s depict the social and political struggles faced by the Caribbean-British community. Isaac Julien's *Territories* shows the conflict between carnival revellers and the police, while Denzil Forrester's *Death Walk* pays tribute to Winston Rose who died in police custody, and Keith Piper's photo-collage *Go West Young Man* connects Transatlantic slavery with the media's demonisation of young Black men.

These are themes society is still grappling with today, Bailey said. "Major European powers have a postcolonial history. Different generations emerge and those baggages get taken on and they resurface. That will never go away."

The exhibition also celebrates Caribbean-British culture, from reggae and dub to annual carnivals. It features artists who have more recently emerged on the scene, like fashion designer Grace Wales Bonner and photographer Liz Johnson Artur, who charts the development of the grime music scene.



Image: *Jah Shaka*, by Denzil Forrester in 1983. Photograph: © Denzil Forrester

Bailey said the exhibition has been in the works since 2015, when Alex Farquharson, the director of Tate Britain, approached him. With conversations around anti-racism gaining momentum following the Black Lives Matter movement of 2020, and ongoing efforts to repatriate looted artefacts to their place of origin, now was the ideal time for this exhibition, he said.

"It is a moment for our national spaces to think about what it is they're trying to do."

He hoped the exhibition, co-curated by Farquharson, would attract new and diverse communities to Tate Britain, while normal visitors "will now see a different sensibility around British art.

"The Tate bookshop is flooded with books from the period," he added. "When we were going to university, we could name on one hand the amount of books [by Black writers and artists] that we could refer to. Now there are so many."