The Guardian
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Adrian Searle
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Resistance and defiance and celebrations, arrivals, departures and returns: from photographs of protests to a Union Black flag, this timely show is an unmissable testament to creativity.

Image: Tremors and violences are present throughout, The Spirit of the Carnival, 1982. © Tam Joseph

Life Between Islands is an exhibition of protests and pleasures, celebrations and insurrections. Several years in the making, and as important as it is timely – as well as long overdue – it is also an exhibition of arrivals, departures and returns. Filled with variety and complexity, the well- and lesser-known, the overlooked or rarely shown in this country, it takes us from pre-war London and the carved figures of Ronald Moody, to digital animation and an examination of successive regimes of punitive and restrictive immigration law from the 1800s to the present government's hostile environment policies, in a work by the Otolith Group.

Image: Artist Michael McMillan's installation in Life Between Islands: Caribbean-British Art 1950s – Now, Tate Britain. Guy Bell/Rex/Shutterstock

An extensive catalogue fleshes out this milestone exhibition of around 50 artists. We visit the home of fictional political activist Joyce, in Michael McMillan's simulacra of a 1970s West Indian front room. On the TV, Horace Ové's 1976 film Pressure plays. The first UK feature by a black director, it is a gritty appraisal of lives of the Windrush generation, and the difficulties faced by their British-born children.

Ové's photographs of the rise of the black power movement, as well as Neil Kenlock's images of riot shields and racist graffiti, and Vron Ware's photographs for the anti-fascist Searchlight magazine, documenting the Black People's Day of Action in 1981, following the New Cross arson attack, which left 13 young people dead, are sobering reminders of a period of casual racism, bleak prospects of resistance and defiance and pleasures taken against the odds.

In a painting by Denzil Forrester, Winston Rose is dragged and half-carried through the street by uniformed police, hurried to his death in custody in 1981. Rose was a family friend. In Tam Joseph's painting of the night following the death of Cynthia Jarrett during a police raid on her flat in 1985, we see figures at the lighted windows, and protesters silhouetted against a fire beneath the buildings. Joseph's The Sky at Night is as much reportage as history painting, an event seen and grasped, as redolent as any documentary film or photography.

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

Another young man is beaten on a bed by his father, for speaking Creole rather than English, during a wonderfully evoked 1960s London house party, in a vertiginous scene from Isaac Julien's three-screen 2002 Paradise Omeros. With its scenes of the heavily policed Notting Hill carnivals of 1976

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and 84, of riot and surveillance, with its voiceover and heavily mixed sound-system dub, Julien's earlier Territories, made in 1984 while he was still a student, is still haunting and filled with memorable images, more than 35 years since I first saw it.

Protest and resilience, anger and pleasure come together throughout the exhibition. The paintings by Aubrey Williams are filled with broken things, dismembered vertebrae and burned-out nature. Here, even the abstractions are deceptive – the maps of Guyana and South America barely surface in Frank Bowling's paintings, and an entirely black, impassive painting by Donald Locke turns out to be an abstracted view of regular gridded fields in Guyana, part of the plantation structure imposed by Dutch and then British colonial rule. This is a geometry of oppression.

Tremors and violences are present throughout, although the exhibition is not without humour. In Lookalook, queer Barbadian artist Ada M Patterson stalks the streets of Bridgetown, dressed as a kind of mythological creature draped in black, their head-dress decorated with shells, inviting stares and comments, insults and laughter. This public masquerade is a taunt, in a deeply conservative society where colonial-era, anti-LGBTQ+ laws are still in place. In another work, they pose as a sea urchin, or possibly an echidna. It looks painful either way.

Image: Blue Curry's artwork in Life Between Islands at Tate Britain. Photograph: Guy Bell/Rex/Shutterstock

Blue Curry plays on the stereotypes of the Caribbean as a dumbed-down "site for leisure and consumption". Curry's row of airline seats soiled with spews of beach sand and shells, the fanciful headrests adorned with braided synthetic hair, is a giddy transport to a fantasy destination. Zak Ové's carnivalesque faces and figures, constructed from beached rope, mops and antique masks, play on the transgressive figures of Junkanoo carnival, as do Hew Locke's decorated busts – one has the head of King Edward VII festooned in masonic regalia, almost to the point of smothering the monarch entirely in his decorations. Chris Ofili's taunting blue men, and his Napoleonic-era horsemen who morph into uniformed cops populate a threatening, saturated blue world. Both Ofili and Peter Doig have lived in Trinidad for well over a decade, and there's a beautiful section of the show highlighting Doig's creative dialogue with Derek Walcott, whose poems also inspired Julien's Paradise Omeros, and appears in the film.

Dialogues with the Caribbean are increasingly two-way. Throughout the exhibition's run, Ofili's 2003 Union Black flag, with the union colours replaced by the Pan-African red, black and green, will hang over Tate Britain. In part, it is a reminder of what has been called the "Caribbeanisation" of British culture and society, a society that grew out of an empire whose riches were derived from slavery to the Caribbean, which curator Alex Farquharson calls the economic and military centre of Britain's first age of empire. Salutary, sobering, rich and rewarding, what a great and necessary show this is.