

Stephen Friedman Gallery

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The Windrush generation's artwork shaped modern Britain

Oliver Franklin-Wallis

26 November 2021



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The cultural contribution of the Windrush generation and their descendants is, at last, being displayed on its own terms in a new exhibition at Tate Britain



Image: Denzil Forrester, 'Jah Shaka', 1983.

Between 1947 and 1970, more than half a million people migrated from the Caribbean to the UK. The Windrush generation, invited as a response to post-War labour shortages, brought with them arts and culture that transformed British society, even as that society marginalised their voices. When the Windrush scandal exploded in 2018, revealing that thousands of British citizens of Caribbean heritage had been wrongly detained and even deported because of the government's "hostile environment" policy, it only emphasised how the Establishment had cast the Windrush generation aside, along with their arrival papers.



Image: Ingrid Pollard, 'Oceans Apart', 1989

The same is true of the art world, where artists of Caribbean-British descent are only now receiving recognition long past due. "In their time, they were overlooked by the mainstream art world and one could include Tate in that," says Alex Farquharson, director of Tate Britain. *Life Between Islands: Caribbean-British Art 1950s - Now*, opening this month, re-examines the vital artistic contribution of the Windrush generation and artists of Caribbean descent in order to start correcting the record.

The show, which includes 40 artists, from the Jamaican-born sculptor Ronald Moody to contemporary artists such as Steve McQueen and Alberta Whittle, spans more than six decades and four generations, exploring themes from slavery and police brutality to carnival and dub music. At its core are complex questions about identity: what it means to be Caribbean and what it means to be British. "The show really circulates around four different generations," says curator David A Bailey. "We have the first generation, of the 1950s, which kind of see themselves as West Indian – they saw themselves coming to Britain and establishing a kind of British-Caribbean canon. By the time you get to my generation, which I would say is the second generation – I'm born here and my parents are from the Caribbean – it was a case of trying to establish a kind of British Blackness in all its diversity. It wasn't until this century that a lot of my generation started to make work that reflects their multiple Caribbean identity."

Among the highlights of *Life Between Islands*, Farquharson says, is an opportunity to revisit works by artists who are only now being recognised. "An obvious name that comes to mind is Denis Williams. He's this fascinating figure who's been largely lost to art history," Farquharson says. "Another who I think is really fascinating for this exhibition is Denzil Forrester and particularly the paintings he was making in the 1980s in dub reggae clubs in Hackney. He would make these very forceful paintings – the equivalent of the sounds, the music, that they are related to."

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Life Between Islands has been in the planning since 2016. Meanwhile, public debates over the telling of British colonial history within museums and cultural institutions have imbued the show with an even greater significance. A 2018 audit found only four per cent of works in British public collections were by British BAME artists. "These are issues and questions that I've felt for a long time – and certainly since coming to the Tate – that are essential for us to grapple with, to tease out through how we curate and present British art history," says Farquharson. "When we rehang the collection in a couple of years' time, this will be very evident."



Image: Denzil Forrester, 'The Wicked Men' (1982)

For Bailey, Life Between Islands reflects a deeper shift, a broadening of who is curating art and for whom. "We could have never done this show 20 years ago, or even ten years ago, because there was a sense of a genre in terms of what the shows would look like. That has now changed," Bailey says. Life Between Islands, with its multiple mediums – paintings, but also music and video, installations – brings a fresh take to how these themes are discussed and presented. "It reflects how we want to come and see art within institutions such as the Tate, which, most importantly, are now beginning to change the ways in which they display some of these ideas."

Life Between Islands - Caribbean-British Art 1950s - Now is at Tate Britain from 1 December 2021 - 3 April 2022.