

Stephen Friedman Gallery

Financial Times

British-Caribbean art at Tate Britain — a bright, buzzy and rowdy mess

Jackie Wullschläger

30 November 2021



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Life Between Islands engrossingly tracks the responses of the Windrush generation and others since the 1950s to their chillier new home.



Image: © Denzil Forrester/Collection Shane Akeroyd

Over the last year, the art world has tentatively been refinding its footing, and at long last, 'tis the season to eat, drink and be in Miami. Explore our picks for Miami Art Week 2021.

In Isaac Julien's film *Paradise Omeros*, a handsome young waiter called Achilles moves between parasols on the beach in St Lucia and a brutalist housing estate in London. He paces the sand, parties to The Paragons' "The Tide is High", hides behind a column like a shadow in a dark concrete labyrinth, drifts on waves in blinding light. The source is Homer, via Derek Walcott's "Omeros": "I sang of quiet Achilles, Afolabe's son/who never ascended an elevator/who had no passport, since the horizon needs none/never begged or borrowed, was nobody's waiter". In the film, as in the poem, the ocean ebbs and flows, like identity — hybrid, fraught, dreamy, elusive.

Achille is the everyman of Tate Britain's new multimedia show *Life Between Islands*. The subtitle is *Caribbean-British Art 1950s — Now*, and the declared themes, beginning with the "role of culture in decolonisation" and the "sociopolitical struggles that Caribbean-British people face", sound earnest, like a sociology text book. Happily, much of the art is brighter, buzzy and sometimes funnier than that.

Denzil Forrester's painting "Jah Shaka", depicting a crowd animated by a charismatic DJ, pulsates like a dub reggae nightclub. Steve McQueen's "Exodus", a one-minute, silent, grainy video following two smartly dressed Caribbean men negotiating a pair of large potted palms through the streets of Shoreditch, east London, is an affecting comedy of dislocation. "Johanaan" is a stylised elm figure with a mysterious, enormous head and exquisitely swirled wood grain surfaces by Ronald Moody, a Jamaican dentist who became a sculptor, self-taught and original, after visiting the British Museum's Egyptian antiquities.



Image: Hurvin Anderson, 'Maracas III' (2004) © Richard Ivey/DACS/Artimage

This is a big, baggy, rowdy mess of an exhibition, as diverse and sometimes confused as multicultural identity itself, full of competing voices. It's hard to read in linear fashion, the captions are heavy-going, and you really have to find your own trail, but there is plenty that is immersive and engrossing.

And on these short London winter days, the flood of tropical colour and warmth pulls you in.

In "Kaieteurtoo", Frank Bowling pours and drips amber and rose, lime and orange, wet into wet, down a two-metre canvas; the painting, evoking light catching the rush of a torrent, is named after a waterfall in Guyana. A purple sea shifts from luminous to opaque in Peter Doig's stormy "Moruga". Streaks of lush green surround a pool of deep blue sea, palm-fringed, in Hurvin Anderson's "Maracas III".

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Image: Michael McMillan, 'The Front Room' (2021) © Em Fitzgerald/Museum of the Home

Colour shrieks from floor to ceiling in Sonia Boyce's crimson vinyl print "Shaggy Bear", lining a gallery centre stage, and in Michael McMillan's intimate walk-in installation "The Front Room" — a garish glory of gold wallpaper, over-patterned carpet, crocheted doilies, velour scrolls, plastic flowers, nostalgic photographs. In the 1960s-1970s McMillan grew up in such a room, based on the Victorian parlour, which he says "caused me much aesthetic distress" but attested to the Windrush arrivals' striving for respectability, the complicated construction of diaspora identity.

It was the children of this generation who challenged in art the harsh reality that as immigrants they "walked into serious racism... into a frozen urban jungle", as photographer Armet Francis describes. He changed from "a smiling little boy" in Jamaica to a bullied south London schoolchild. Later he got a job in a commercial photography studio and in 1973 took the dynamic, upbeat picture that is Tate's catalogue cover: beneath an umbrella, a black model in mauve flared trousers and sequins lights up the grey wet street in "Fashion Shoot, Brixton Market".

"Black people never had any personality, any strength, always looking down. That's not what I wanted my subjects to look like" - Neil Kenlock.

Francis realised "there was no history of black photographers in England. I decided to do black images, to capture how black people perform in a certain vernacular." His direct, incisive portraits, and those of his colleagues — Neil Kenlock, chronicling the Black Panther movement; Charlie Phillips' crystalline close-ups of mixed race couples in Notting Hill; Horace Ové, at protest meetings in Camden — form a superb show within a show. They document routine racism — Kenlock's elegant black woman at a Balham front door daubed "Keep Britain White" — and resistance, and celebrate photography as an equaliser. "Black people never had any personality, any strength, always looking down," says Kenlock. "That's not what I wanted my subjects to look like."



Image: Armet Francis, 'Fashion Shoot, Brixton Market' (1973) © DACS/Artimage

Painting followed the same trajectory in more complex, nuanced ways; for me this is the most compelling line threading through the exhibition. It begins with Aubrey Williams, who arrived in London in 1952; his abstractions share the mostly muted palette and abstract/figurative tension in British postwar painting. But Williams' recurring form, for example in "Tribal Mark II" and "Sun and Earth II", is particular: a bonelike claw, an element in Warao Amerindian imagery that the artist knew from the Guyana rainforest. Williams called it "a strange, very tense, slightly violent shape" — it evokes birds, predators, migration.

His contemporary Bowling was meanwhile adapting colour field abstraction to include blurred maps of Africa, or in "Who's Afraid of Barney Newman", reinterpreting Barnett Newman's "zip" compositions as the African flag. And, aged 18, Paul Dash, another Windrush artist, painted black dancers, a flow of arms and legs in sprinkled hues beneath a domed ceiling, in the lovely, Sickert-ish "Dance at Reading Town Hall" (1964).

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Image: Aubrey Williams, 'Tribal Mark II' (1961) © Estate of Aubrey Williams/Tate

“Figurative art is dead” he was reprimanded at Chelsea College. Dash did not dare return to it until 1979 with the arresting “Self-portrait”, tonally dark but sparked into life by a gold fez (actually an improvised roll of yellow paper). Dash recalled how few black portraits he knew then; Gauguin was his guide for modelling in umbers, ochres and reds that “caressed” the

black body.

Twenty years later, Chris Ofili became the first black Turner Prize winner. Beauty is ravishing in Ofili, often intensified by a threatening undertow, as in the fugitive harlequin “Blue Riders” and “Blue Devils”, derived from Caribbean carnival tradition. On display alongside the exhibition, in Tate’s permanent collection, is Ofili’s masterpiece, “No Woman, No Cry” (1998), incorporating glitter and elephant dung, titled after the Bob Marley song and representing Doreen Lawrence, her tears collaged from photographs of her murdered son Stephen. This marked a breakthrough in independent language and confidence in black painting — an iconic black Weeping Woman.



Image: Njideka Akunyili Crosby, 'Remain, Thriving' (2018) © Art on the Underground

Collage — a fusion form — is potent as a layering of collective memory in paintings concerned with identity and belonging. Transfer imagery from newspaper and magazine shots of black men and women build the walls

and furnishings.

In Njideka Akunyili Crosby’s fictional interior — displayed at monumental scale in 2018 at Brixton Underground Station — imagining family and friends, relaxed, assured, in a bright modern living room. History and current injustice is not erased — on the television screen, news of the Windrush deportations unfolds — but the group’s attention is with the future: the lively toddler at the composition’s centre. The point is the comfortable ordinariness. This painting concludes the exhibition; it is called “Remain, Thriving”.