

Stephen Friedman Gallery

Evening Standard

Life Between Islands at Tate Britain review: a captivating collection of cracking Caribbean art

Ben Luke

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This exploration of the relationship between the Caribbean and Britain in art across eight decades is utterly absorbing.



Image: Young Men on a Seesaw in Handsworth Park 1984, by Vanley Burke.

Tate Britain's captivating new exhibition explores the relationship between the Caribbean and Britain in art across eight decades. And within the overarching story there are countless, thrilling sub-plots. Life Between Islands: Caribbean-British Art 1950s to Now reveals deep resonances between 40 artists of multiple generations, who were either born in the Caribbean or have Caribbean heritage.

Sometimes the influence is explicit. Among the photographs that form the pattern of the wallpaper and rug in Njideka Akunyili Crosby's painting *Remain, Thriving* (2018) is an image we see earlier in the show: a young woman sitting on her living room floor by the photographer Neil Kenlock, shot in 1973. Elsewhere in the image are pictures of seminal figures including the Jamaican-born poet Linton Kwesi Johnson. Akunyili Crosby paints a gathering of the grandchildren and great-grandchildren of the Windrush generation, but by embedding images like Kenlock's around them she directly addresses their social and cultural history. A television in the painting shows a still from *Good Morning Britain*: "Developing story: Windrush scandal," the news ticker reads. A painting of family and community, then, but also of ever-present colonial and racist legacies.

Life Between Islands is broadly chronological, highlighting both shared concerns and characteristic ideas and forms of successive generations, from the distinctive voices within groups including the Caribbean Artists Movement of the 1960s and the Black Arts Movement in the 1980s to artists who have emerged in the last decade. From the beginning, the show judiciously entwines art and social history, with a crackling energy.

It begins with the work of the early post-war "arrivants", as the Barbadian poet Kamau Brathwaite called Caribbean immigrants to the UK, like Aubrey Williams and Donald Locke, both born in Guyana. They used abstraction to evoke different histories – Williams responding to Amerindian hieroglyphs and Locke using an oppressive black grid based on images of Guyanese plantations. We see the Sixties and Seventies photographs of Horace Ové and Vanley Burke, reflecting Black power events and civil disruption, with Claudette Johnson's extraordinary drawing of two women demonstrators and Denzil Forrester's painting *Death Walk*, evoking the killing of his friend Winston Rose in police custody, nearby.

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Image: Denzil Forrester's *Jah Shaka*, 1983 / Mike Newman

Consistently, history and the present collide – in Lubaina Himid's 1987 portrait of Toussaint L'Ouverture, the leader of the 18th-century Haitian revolution, with collaged bigoted newspaper headlines, or in Ingrid Pollard's *Ocean's Apart*, reflecting on the Atlantic Ocean's imperialist histories through family photographs and poetic text.

That poetry abounds from the 1990s, though the political impulse remains. In a delightful sequence, Peter Doig's Trinidad-made paintings, which inspired several Derek Walcott poems, lead to Isaac Julien's video installation *Paradise Omeros*, in which Walcott reads from his epic verse *Omeros*, in an abstract narrative of displacement and oceanic rapture. Artists reflect on Carnival and diasporic folk traditions, with underlying themes of defiance and resistance, from Chris Ofili's paintings of the Blue Devils of Trinidad, to Zak Ové's sculptural reimaginings of figures from Caribbean folklore.



Image: Ingrid Pollard

After a thrilling room of recent, hugely diverse works, the show reaches a suitably rich climax with the Barbadian-Scottish artist Alberta Whittle, whose multi-disciplinary work combines many of the exhibition's themes and languages – from the trauma of slavery to folkloric and Carnival imagery and poetic traditions – while pointing to a new African-Caribbean futurism.

Tate Britain, from December 1 to April, [tate.org.uk](https://www.tate.org.uk)