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Life Between Islands, Tate Britain, review: an exhilarating, ambitious look at the British Caribbean story
Hettie Judah
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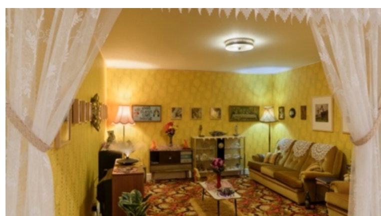

Image: Michael McMillan's The Front Room (Photo: Tate/Jaiwana Monaghan)

Sometimes an exhibition is just a collection of exciting art, and sometimes it's a collection of exciting art bound together by big, important ideas. Life Between Islands at Tate Britain is very much the latter – a survey of Caribbean-British art since the 50s that really keeps you on your toes.

The show opens with four artists who came to Britain from Guyana in the post war period – Donald Moody, Denis Williams, Frank Bowling and Aubrey Williams. Although very different, their work is at once in dialogue with art of its time – geometric minimalism, big fields of colour, mystical abstraction – but also distinctly influenced by Guyana, its geography and indigenous (Amazonian) peoples. Underlying everything is the connection to place, and the sense that influence always works in multiple directions.

Within the great expanses of colour in Bowling's paintings are ghostly traces of maps showing the outline of South America or Guyana itself. His waterfall-like poured paintings and mottled, resinous assemblages evoke river, sea and light. Denis Williams's drawings and Aubrey Williams's paintings writhe with otherworldly energy – the living spirit of the rainforest and the animating beliefs of those who inhabit it.

John Lyons' painting Folklore Convention (2008) makes this mingling of the spirits more explicit: a night time encounter between supernatural entities of the African diaspora under the moon in Trinidad. Lyons' scenes of carnival evoke a radical period of transformation, in which humans take on otherworldly guises, and the distinction between spectator and performer breaks down: all are in some way changed by it.

The Caribbean Arts Movement was founded in 1966, as artists and writers forged (or had forced upon them) a common identity in the UK. As writer George Lamming put it, "we became West Indian in London". Althea McNish – an active participant – created gorgeous textile designs which suggest a celebratory Caribbean aesthetic of rich colours, bold pattern and abundant flora.

Image: Denzil Forrester's Jah Shaka (Photo: Mike Newman/Collection of Shane Akeroyd, London)

Meanwhile, Paul Dash's paintings offer intimate views into domestic life, in which generations are brought together by music. In Dash's intense self-portrait, the artist looks hemmed-in. He seems to be working in private with little light, but his pendant, bright scarf and box-like yellow hat also proudly assert a hybrid identity.

The centuries-long history of exploitation that preceded the arrival of the Windrush Generation makes a forceful appearance in works by Donald Locke. In Trophies of Empire (1972-4) a wooden shelving unit is arranged with black ceramic objects, all more or less phallic, some explicitly penis-like. Their presentation is variously celebratory and oppressive: some are shackled, others on decorative plinths. The black body appears reduced to raw material, a set of limbs and sexual organs, dehumanised, fetishised, demonised and profitable.

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Political shifts of the 60s and 70s come to the fore in photographs by Horace Ové and Neil Kenlock. The US civil rights activist Stokely Carmichael addresses a Black Power congress at the Roundhouse in Camden in 1968. Darcus Howe talks to a crowd demonstrating heavy-handed policing in Notting Hill, west London, in 1970. A line of schoolgirls photographed by Kenlock proudly show off Black Panther emblems stitched onto their school bags.

Work from years that followed was made against a background of unrest: the rise of the National Front and violent attacks against Black and South Asian communities; police stop-and-search operations and the use of undue force; demonstrations and uprisings. Barbara Walker's tender drawings of her son are made on yellowing forms he was handed by police each of the depressingly many times he was stopped. Claudette Johnson's female figures are so substantial that they fill the canvas to its edges, but their faces are etched with worry. Denzel Forrester's Death Walk (1983) presents the limp figure of a man stretched and borne as though on a crucifix, carried by police toward a waiting van.

Michael McMillan's installation The Front Room (2021) is a portrait in absentia of a politically active young woman of Caribbean heritage in the 70s, which takes the form of a fully furnished living space. Between the mementoes and religious trinkets are photo frames carrying staged and documentary photographs by other artists. Harold Ové's film Pressure (1975) plays on the TV.

Image: Oceans Apart by Ingrid Pollard (Photo: Ingrid Pollard/Tate)

While acknowledging hostility and tension, what really animates this show is its exploration of creolisation: the development of new aesthetics, spectacles, musical forms, language and art practices that arise from diverse influences rubbing up against one another. Isaac Julien's lush, disquieting Paradise Omeros (2002) dives between places and periods, from Derek Walcott's "gold sea/ flat as a credit-card" in St Lucia to a Brutalist estate in North London. Walcott, who won the Nobel Prize for literature in 1992, makes an appearance in the work, and his poetry also appears on the wall beside huge, watery, dreamlike paintings by Peter Doig.

Doig moved to Trinidad from London in 2003, and his presence (alongside that of Lisa Brice, Njideka Akunyili Crosby and Liz Johnson Artur, among others) is part of this show's exploration of multi-directional influence. This is not just an exhibition of work by British artists of Caribbean heritage: it's a dive through art into the deep impact that each group of islands has had on the other.

Thanks to Julien's films, the whole space reverberates with music and the sounds of carnival. Paintings by Chris Offili and Lisa Brice feature blue figures inspired by the Blue Devils of Trinidadian carnival. As Sonia Boyce's work reminds us, the popular spectacle has its routes in a subversive power flip, in which, for a sanctioned period, the oppressed had the upper hand.

Boyce films Stiltman, Shaggy Bear and other stock characters from Crop Over (the Barbadian carnival) in grand houses built on sugar money. The streamer-covered figure of Shaggy Bear is transformed into a wallpaper pattern – an emblem of resistance fading barely noticed into the background.

The final gallery takes us into the present day. The Windrush scandal appears on the TV screen of Njideka Akunyili Crosby's domestic interior Remain, Thriving (2018.) Hackney artist Blue Curry suggests the re-packaging of Caribbean culture for the tourism industry with a set of airline seats floating on a bamboo raft and strung with blonde, beaded braids. Marcia Michael's rainforest photographs remind us of archipelagos' vulnerability to climate change.

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Image: Hew Locke's Souvenir 2 (Edward VII in Masonic Regalia) (Photo: Hew Locke/Hales Gallery)

The French philosopher Édouard Glissant took clustered islands like the Caribbean as a metaphor for a worldview: rather than having the solid expanse of a continent supporting them, island people live at the coastal margins: they are diverse, networked, responsive, alive to detail, and to the fragility of existence.

Rather than cramming every appropriate artist and work in, Life Between Islands keeps its focus tight, revisiting various artists at different points in their careers. They have all changed with the passage of years, encounters and influences. Which is the point here, really: what we gain by allowing ourselves to be transformed, yet stay distinct.
Glissant once said, "I can change through exchanging with others, without losing or diluting my sense of self."