

## HEW LOCKE

Farah Nayeri, *Untangling the Pasts of Slavery, Colonialism and Art*, The New York Times, 07 February 2024



Hew Locke: *Here's the Thing* at Ikon Gallery, Birmingham UK, 2019. Courtesy the artist and Ikon

Two and a half centuries after its creation, the Royal Academy of Arts in London — an artist-and-architect-led institution that is a bastion of the British establishment — is embracing inclusivity.

Last year, for the first time, it dedicated a major solo show to a woman, Marina Abramovic. Now comes “*Entangled Pasts, 1768-Now: Art, Colonialism and Change*,” an exhibition on how British art was implicated by slavery, with historic depictions of enslaved people displayed alongside contemporary works by artists of African and Caribbean origin.

The show is part of a reassessment of Britain’s colonial past by museums and cultural institutions, including the 129-year-old National Trust, a charity that runs historic houses and heritage sites across the country, and a few owners of stately homes. It is also a notable moment for the Royal Academy, which did not admit a Black artist to its membership until 2005.

Dorothy Price, the lead curator, stressed that the show was not “trawling back over a long-dead” past, but rather juxtaposing old and new art to give a more accurate picture of “multicultural, multiracial Britain.”

Squabbles over Britain’s legacy of slavery have flared up since the death of George Floyd at the hands of the Minneapolis police in May 2020. Two weeks later, as Black Lives Matter protests spread across the United States and beyond, a statue of Edward Colston, a 17th-century slave trader and philanthropist, was torn down in Bristol, in southwestern England.

A wave of other vandalism acts and plans for statue removals followed in Britain. Later that year, a National Trust report listed 93 of its properties as having links to colonialism and, in some cases, slavery.

That sequence of events was also the inspiration for “*Entangled Pasts*.”

Price, an art history professor at the Courtauld Institute in London, said that when the Royal Academy approached her about putting on a show about slavery, she decided to hold a mirror up to the institution itself. It, too, had been established at a historical turning point: India was under British control, slavery was at a peak and abolition debates were starting to percolate.

Cultural institutions that critique Empire have been accused by some commentators of attacking Britain’s

national identity as part of a culture war. But Price said, “I don’t see it in binary terms as a war: I see it as a conversation and a dialogue, and I would rather have a dialogue with people who are suspicious of exhibitions like this.”

“This is history,” she added. “This is what happened.”

In the show, whose 100 or so works are by 33 historic artists and 25 contemporary ones, the older pieces obscure Black subjects even as they portray them. In 18th- and 19th-century paintings, for example, Black figures often have disputed or unknown identities, even when they’re the only person represented.

An oil painting of a Black man by Joshua Reynolds, a Royal Academy founder and its first president, is titled “Portrait of a Man, Probably Francis Barber” — a label given to it by scholars, since the portrait’s subject remains a mystery. Nor does Reynolds ever identify the young Black attendant who is dressing royalty in “Portrait of George, Prince of Wales, Later King George IV,” painted around 1787, even though the attendant takes up nearly half the canvas.

Artists like Reynolds were sympathetic to abolition, Price said — “yet they still have people in their employ who they don’t name. And they don’t name their Black sitters.”

The living artists in the show, on the other hand, give their Black subjects prominent visibility and voice. Isaac Julien’s “Lessons of the Hour,” a 2019 film installation, depicts Frederick Douglass, the Black American abolitionist, who also campaigned against slavery in Britain. In one scene, the actor playing Douglass addresses a contemporary audience inside the Royal Academy’s present-day auditorium, a juxtaposition that aptly encapsulates the show’s overall purpose.

“I wanted to make a comment about this institution, 250 years old, coming about at the time of Empire,” Julien said, “and to give voice to someone who, in the middle of that period, was articulating a message that I thought needed re-articulating today.”

The first Black artist elected to the Royal Academy, Frank Bowling, appears in a vast contemplative section titled “Crossing Waters” that evokes the tragedy of enslavement. His blazing red 1970 abstract “Middle Passage” — a phrase that defines the forced trans-Atlantic voyage — has faint maps of Africa and the Americas stenciled on the canvas.

Next door is “Naming the Money,” a 2004 installation by Lubaina Himid in which dozens of enslaved people,

represented in colorful cutouts, provide their birth names and the names given by their proprietors, and describe their lives before and after enslavement.

“It’s all of those people from all of those paintings stepping out of the paintings into the room together, not as marginalized figures in the corner,” Himid said, in a “celebration of actually being a named human being.”

Although most Royal Academy artists did not partake in slavery, they were supported by patrons who enslaved workers on their Caribbean sugar plantations and otherwise profited from the trans-Atlantic slave trade.

And while the scrutiny of this troubled past has been led principally by institutions, one aristocrat — David Lascelles, the Earl of Harewood — is personally working to atone for his ancestors’ activities.

Lascelles, whose father was a first cousin of Queen Elizabeth II, lives in the ornate 18th-century Harewood estate, which was built with proceeds of the West Indian sugar trade. He has launched a series called “Missing Portraits” in which he commissions portraits of people of Afro-Caribbean descent with links to his family.

The latest sitter is the actor David Harewood, whose ancestors were enslaved on Harewood plantations and took the family name.

“It’s not enough simply not to be racist,” said Darren Pih, Harewood’s chief curator. “You have to be active, somehow, make choices, and be part of a change.”