

HEW LOCKE

Rianna Jade Parker, All things bright and beautiful, The Guardian, 6 November 2021

CULTURE

VISUAL ARTS



GALLERY VIEW

All things bright and beautiful

Recent hit exhibitions have stoked interest in Black British artists, shining a spotlight on overlooked works and movements

Words: Rianna Jade Parker

When asked about Black British Art in 1988, curator and historian Eddie Chambers said that its function “was to confront the white establishment for its racism, as much as to address the Black community in its struggle for human equality”. With my book on the history of Black British art, more than 30 years later, I would assert that work by Black artists still has that function, and the responsibility to assist in that struggle. First, second or third generations of Afro-descended immigrants have used their art-making not only to independently forge their identities, but as an outlet to navigate the experience of “Britishness” that has always been unstable for Black people. In 1966 the writers John La Rose, Kamau Brathwaite and Andrew Salkey

founded the Caribbean Artists Movement (CAM), who sought to promote the work of postwar migrants from British colonies. Active until the early 70s, CAM’s surviving legacy was the activation of a sense of shared Caribbean nationhood outside their home countries, counteracting their reception as unwelcome guests in Britain. These cultural producers exchanged ideas that forged a new Caribbean aesthetic in the arts, setting the stage for a generation of Black artists in Britain to build on.

On Thursday 28 October 1982, the First National Black Art Convention was held, accompanied by a four-week exhibition about “the form, function, and future of black art”. It was facilitated by a group of determined Black art students at Wolverhampton Polytechnic, known as the Wolverhampton Young Black Artists. They then became the Pan-Afrikan

'The value and necessity of Black art should, by now, be a moot point'

↓ You can ask me all the questions and I'll tell you the truth about the boys in blue, 2021
Joy Labinjo
 Labinjo's mammoth paintings are depictions of family members or

interesting strangers discovered through photographs. This month, Art on the Underground presents 5 More Minutes, a new public commission at Brixton underground station inspired by Black female subjectivity.

← **Nothing Can Separate Us**

Lakwena Maciver
 In her domineering graphic design of brightly contrasting shapes and colours, London-based Maciver uses pleas and devotions to command the viewer's attention. The visual language in her installations is now taking over train stations, public parks and art fairs internationally, stirring joyous and hopeful emotions in the viewer.



↓ **Vanishing Point 3 (Van den Eeckhout)**

Barbara Walker
 Birmingham-based Walker has sustained her varied artistic practice since the 1990s but her most striking artworks are large-scale charcoal portraits. She typically draws her local African-Caribbean community on paper except on her 2019 Turner Contemporary residency where she drew her chosen Black female sitters directly on to the walls of the gallery.



LAKWENA MACIVER/VIGO GALLERY; HEW LOCKE/DACS 2021; BARBARA WALKER/CRISTEA ROBERT'S GALLERY; TIWANI CONTEMPORARY

Connection, and eventually the BLK Art Group, and were both inspired and promoted by the cultural theorist Stuart Hall. Artists associated with the group included Lubaina Himid, Keith Piper, Sonia Boyce, Maud Sulter, Chambers, Marlene Smith, Donald Rodney, Claudette Johnson, Andrew Hazel, Ian Palmer and Dominic Dawes. Together they went on to be key players in the 80s Black Arts Movement (BAM) in the UK, at a time of social and political upheaval in Thatcherite Britain.

Slowly, and in small doses, some Black artists became more visible over the years: their work was acquired in museum collections, and they transitioned to galleries and auction house showcases. But insufficient comprehension of their work by critics and historians does not encourage any serious or lasting dialogue. In the absence of a relationship with the mainstream art world, Black artists

often had to exhibit their work in alternative spaces, not specifically dedicated to contemporary art.

In more recent times, the hugely popular exhibitions *Soul of a Nation: Art in the Age of Black Power* (2017), *The Place Is Here* (2017), and *Get Up, Stand Up Now: Generations of Black Creative Pioneers* (2019) have galvanised a new audience, generating an overwhelming interest in art by Black artists from the general public, students, institutions and the private art sector. The value and necessity of Black art should, by now, be a moot point, and instead the weight and responsibility should remain on those who ignore Black artists and are reluctant to engage with charged personal histories that are uncomfortable to them.

Rianna Jade Parker is a critic, curator and researcher. A Brief History of Black British Art is published by Tate on 9 December.

→ **Crédit Foncier d'Afrique 1 Hew Locke**

Having spent his formative years in newly independent Guyana, Edinburgh-born Locke is deeply invested in deciphering and repurposing the iconography of the British Crown using metal assemblages and textiles. In March 2020, Tate Britain will reveal Locke's Britain Commission in the Duveen Galleries, the first public galleries in England designed specifically for the display of sculpture.

