

BA Fine Art: Studio, Site and Context

Ways of perceiving (ADAD4019)
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Essay: Curating an Imagined Exhibition

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Word count: 1642 + bibliography
14 March 2022

Curating an Imaginary Exhibition:

Reversing the Gaze

Public debate in the UK is increasingly concerned with race and the legacies of slavery and colonialism. Two opposed sets of forces configure the debate. First, unprecedented public interest stems from the murder of George Floyd in 2020, subsequent Black Lives Matter protests and the toppling of the Edward Colston statue in Bristol (Gayle 2022). Second is a conservative government actively seeking to silence criticism of Britain's colonial history through interventions in cultural institutions and guidance for teachers (Adams 2022; Savage 2021). Responding to this moment, this exhibition assembles works which elaborate a critique of colonialism. This comes after decades of effort on the part of artists and curators to contest the art world's marginalisation of artists of colour. For a person with a census category 'White British' to curate an exhibition organised around race would be seen as trying to speak for others (Reilly 2018: 99). This exhibition therefore focuses attention on the shared history of colonialism, an important curatorial approach for all people regardless of race.

For an exhibition to make a critical intervention the curatorial strategy requires research and reflection (Wells 2007: 30). Anticolonial curatorial activism must heed the long history of struggles waged to contest the narrowness and whiteness of the art establishment and art history. In a seminal essay Stuart Hall (2006) identified three generations of diaspora artists who have worked to reconfigure the British art world. First were the 'last colonials', artists arriving in the UK in the 1950s and 60s from former colonies who believed in the internationalist promise of modernism but were disappointed to encounter racism and institutional indifference (Hall 2006; Araeen 2001). Second was the generation of 'post-colonials' born in Britain to immigrant parents. Studying in British art schools in the 1980s, in a nation wracked by race riots, these artists articulated an explicitly political struggle against their experiences of a white art education and everyday racism in the streets. Hall (2006: 17) situated their struggles: 'In the place of anti-

colonialism, *race* had become the determining category. This changed conjuncture reshaped the experience, the political outlook and the visual imaginary of the first black generation to be born in the diaspora'. Artists such as Keith Piper, Eddie Chambers, Lubaina Himid and Sonia Boyce made work challenging racism and organised exhibitions, carving space for themselves in a hostile art world (Chambers 1999; Bailey et al. 2005; Aikens and Robles 2019). The third generation of artists working in the 'multicultural normalisation' of the 1990s and 2000s moved beyond the agitational politics of the 1980s (Mercer 1999; Mercer 2021). Hall (2006: 22) observed that by this point "'black' by itself – in the age of refugees, asylum seekers and global dispersal – will no longer do', while noting institutional changes brought about in part by these earlier struggles: 'the art world itself has been obliged to become more 'global''.

Hall's Gramscian-Althusserian analysis of the 'conjuncture' of art-making can be extended to reflect on the current moment (Hall 2006; Gramsci 1971: 177-185; Althusser 1979). Artists of the 'post-colonial' generation are finally being embraced by the art establishment: Lubaina Himid won the Turner Prize in 2017 and has an exhibition in Tate Modern (Price 2021); Sonia Boyce was elected to the Royal Academy in 2016 and will represent the UK at the 2022 Venice Biennale (Harris 2020); Sutapa Biswas and Keith Piper currently have solo exhibitions (*Sutapa Biswas: Lumen*, 2022; *Keith Piper: Jet Black Futures*, 2022). This indicates a movement of diversification, but not necessarily an institutionalisation of more committed postcolonial critique. In 2015 Tate Britain presented the exhibition *Artist and Empire* which aimed to correct institutional amnesia regarding Britain's imperial past (Smith et al 2015). While receiving praise (Jones 2015), some found that though foregrounding themes of hybridity and exposing the myth of 'white heroism', the exhibition was relatively safe, giving 'limited attention to colonization as a maximally coercive system built on racist imaginings and abuse' (Hahn 2017: 26; Allday 2016; Dohmen 2016).

A more honest and critical approach to Britain's colonial past is required in the present conjuncture which, defined by glaring racial inequalities, terrible miscarriages of justice inflicted on the 'Windrush generation', ever-growing use of racialised 'stop and search' and official denial of 'institutional racism' (Younge 2020), has more in common with the 1980s than with the official multiculturalism of the 1990s-2000s. The works in this exhibition span several decades, and are made by artists hailing from across the former spaces of the British empire. Together they articulate a powerful critique of slavery and colonialism. Diverse in form, all embody some mode of 'reversing the gaze' (Hall 2005: 2) or 'counter-memory' (Reilly 2018: 123; Wallis 1997: 620), turning the tropes of the colonial imagination onto the metropole and disrupting dominant temporalities of hegemonic historical narrative which obfuscate the past.



Fig 1. Mission Gallery, Swansea.
Source: author's photograph

The exhibition is located in the Mission Gallery in Swansea, which was founded by artists as an exhibition and workshop space in 1977 and established as an independent gallery in 1992 (Mission Gallery 2022). It is housed in a former chapel built in 1868 which served the Seamen's

Mission until 1919. This building resonates with the themes of the exhibition in complex ways.

The gallery's name evokes the role of missionaries in the British empire (Darch and Yates 2009), while the function of the Seamen's Mission reminds us of the ordinary people who worked in Swansea's docks, and the need for solidarity.

Horace Ové *The Black Safari* (1972)

Horace Ové (b. Trinidad and Tobago 1939) came to Britain in 1960 where he studied painting and then film at the London School of Film Technique. He is most well known as the first black British director of a feature film, *Pressure* (1975), about the trials of black British youth in the 1970s. *Pressure* was censored until 1978 by the Race Relations Board for its depictions of police violence (Williams 2018: 26). Ové's film *The Black Safari* (1972) presents a group of African explorers setting sail and landing in 'Darkest Britain' to 'discover' the centre of the island. With this apparently light-hearted device of reversal Ové exposes the racializing, anthropologising attitude at the heart of colonial violence.



Fig 2. Horace Ové, *The Black Safari*, 1972 (film 60 mins). Film stills.

Source: LearningonScreen.ac.uk <https://learningonscreen.ac.uk/ondemand/index.php/prog/RT3A6580?bcast=119211901>

Sutapa Biswas *Housewives with Steak-Knives* (1985)

Sutapa Biswas (b. India 1962) moved with her mother to the UK in 1966 when she was a child. During her undergraduate studies in Fine Art and Art History at the University of Leeds she was ‘deeply immersed’ in elaborating a critique of the white art history she encountered, and the failure to acknowledge its relationships with racial capitalism (Pollock 2004). Biswas explains: ‘it became evident that aesthetics played a huge part in the ordering of this world, and that to subvert it I must engage in a battle with the discipline of art history itself’ (Biswas and Sandhu 2021: 4). Her painting *Housewives with Steak-Knives* (1985) was part of that battle (Baucom et al. 2004). Depicting the deity Kali with a string of dictators’ heads around her neck, the work challenges both the violence of colonialism and the eurocentrism of art history. In this exhibition it can also be understood as expressing horror at the bloody colonial histories recalled in the works by Ové, Himid, Wilson, and Shonibare, while the title ‘Housewives...’ engages ironically with Himid’s crockery and Wilson’s silverware.



Fig 3. Sutapa Biswas *Housewives With Steak-Knives*, 1985
acrylic, pastel & xerox collage on paper mounted on canvas H 274 x W 244 cm
Source: <https://artuk.org/discover/artworks/housewives-with-steak-knives-26532>

Lubaina Himid *Swallow Hard: The Lancaster Dinner Service* (2007)

Lubaina Himid (b. Zanzibar 1954) grew up in London and studied theatre design at Wimbledon College of Art (Price 2021). In 2007, she was commissioned by Lancaster Museums to make work for the Judges' Lodgings. She created a 100-piece dinner service, buying plates, jugs and tureens from shops of Lancaster, Preston and Whitehaven and overpainting the ornate crockery with diverse images of people, places and documents of the slave trade. Himid (2007) described the work as 'an intervention, a mapping and an excavation. ... It remembers slave servants, sugary food, mahogany furniture, greedy families, tobacco and cotton fabrics but then mixes them with British wild flowers, elegant architecture and African patterns'. Designed for the Lodgings' mahogany dinner table, this dinner service resonates with both the silver dinnerware of Wilson's *Metalwork 1793-1880* and the large board table of Shonibare's *Scramble for Africa*.



Fig 4. Lubaina Himid *Swallow Hard: The Lancaster Dinner Service*, 2007
Source: <https://lubainahimid.uk/portfolio/swallow-hard/>

Fred Wilson *Metalwork 1793-1880* (1993)

Fred Wilson (b. 1954 US) is an African American artist known for his practice of institutional critique which reveals racialised histories and assumptions hidden by conventional narratives and modes of display (Correia 2011). In 1992 he was commissioned by The Contemporary, Baltimore to investigate the collection of the Maryland Historical Society. His exhibition *Mining the Museum* (1992-3) consisted of a series of interventions which repositioned works from the collection, bringing objects usually buried in the basement to sit beside those usually on proud display (Corrin 1994). His rearranging exposed ‘how meaning is produced when ‘framed’ by the museum environment’ (Reilly 2018: 121). *Metalwork 1793-1880* presents luxurious 18th century silver dinnerware alongside iron slave shackles of the same period, bringing the opulence of wealth into jarring juxtaposition with the brutality of its slave-based conditions. ‘By adding the explosive element of racism’, Howard Halle observed, ‘Wilson crafts a cold populist fury onto a now-familiar subgenre of conceptualism’ (in Wilson and Halle 1993: 170).



Fig 5. Fred Wilson *Metalwork 1793-1880*, 1993

Source: Maryland Historical Society Museum. <https://www.mdhistory.org/resources/mining-the-museum-metalwork-1793-1880/>

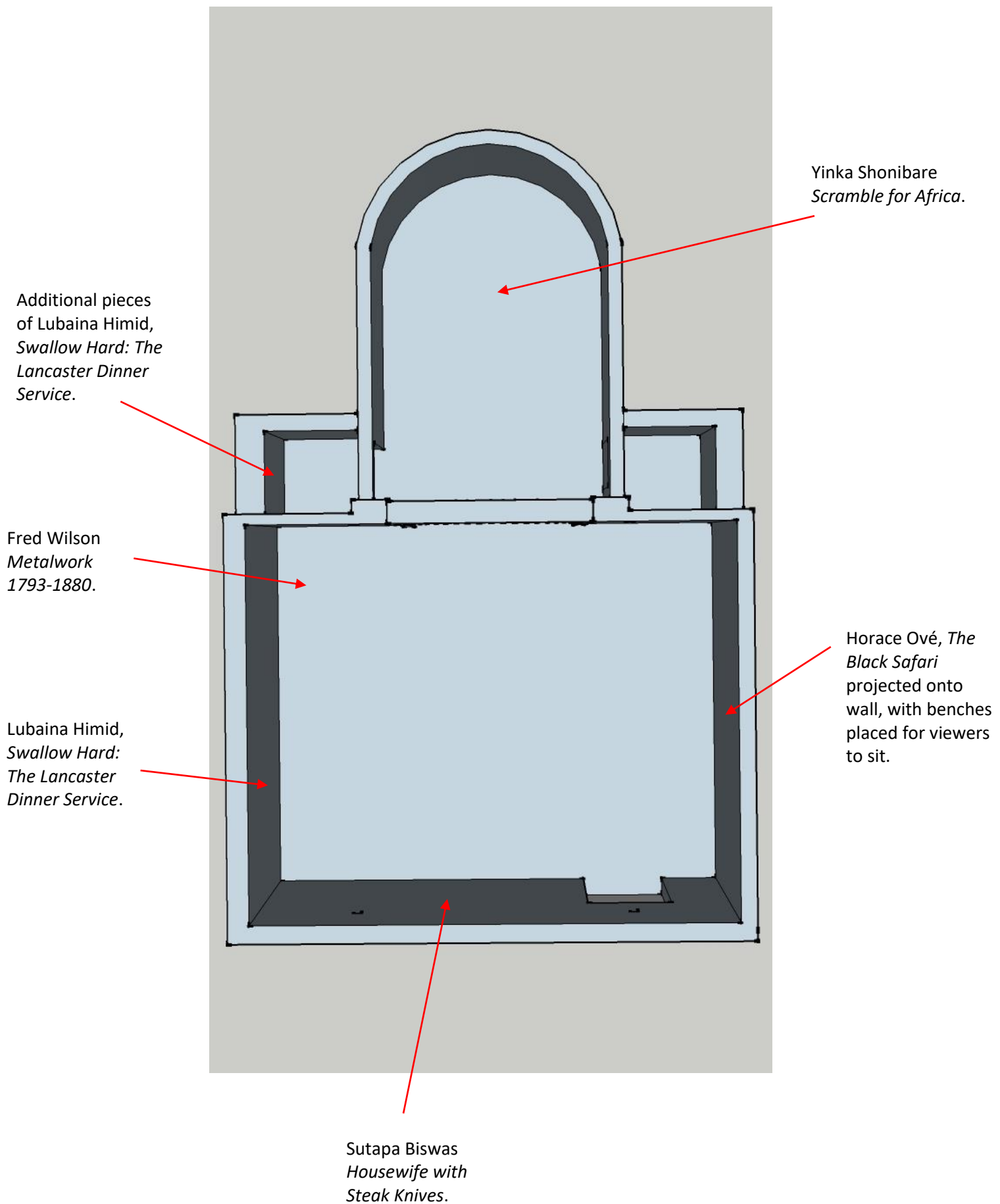
Yinka Shonibare *Scramble for Africa* (2003)

Yinka Shonibare is a British Nigerian artist, born in London (1962) and educated in Nigeria. Rising to prominence with the generation of so-called Young British Artists of the 1990s, his work is often considered less overtly political than the generation of black artists of the 1980s (Mercer 1999: 57). He articulates a humorous but sharp critique of British colonial histories and their depictions in art, staging well known figures, scenes or artworks with headless brown mannequins dressed in European style but using wax-print fabric. Seeming to evoke ‘authentic African tradition’, this fabric subverts such stereotypes with its complex colonial roots originating in Indonesian batik and manufactured in Dutch and English factories (Hynes 2001: 60). *Scramble for Africa* (2003) presents the finery of the European ruling classes as they sit together at the Berlin Conference to agree their rules for violent colonial occupation (Harlow and Carter 2003).



Fig 6. Yinka Shonibare *Scramble for Africa*, 2003
14 life-size fiberglass mannequins, 14 chairs, table, Dutch wax printed cotton
Source: Smithsonian National Museum of African Art. <https://africa.si.edu/exhibits/shonibare/scramble.html>

Reversing the Gaze: Exhibition plan.



Reversing The Gaze: Images of exhibition scale model.

Images of scale model of the exhibition showing various views of the works, in sequence as a visitor walks around the exhibition, entering and turning to the right.



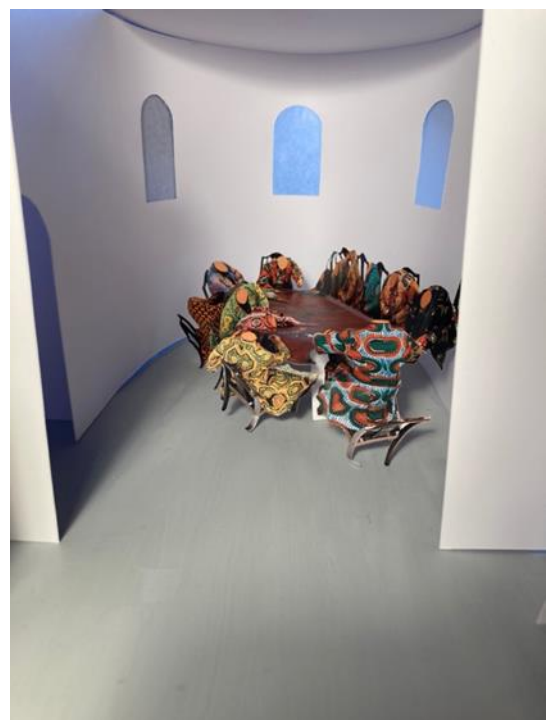
View of exhibition from doorway between shop and main gallery



Sutapa Biswas *Housewives With Steak Knives* 1985 and Lubaina Himid *Swallow Hard: The Lancaster Dinner Service* 2007
Model installation view



Lubaina Himid *Swallow Hard: The Lancaster Dinner Service* 2007 and Fred Wilson *Metalwork 1793-1880* 1993
Model installation view



Model installation views showing position of and relationship between works



Yinka Shonibare *Scramble for Africa* 2003
Model Installation view.



Installation view showing relationship between works by Himid and Shonibare



Additional pieces of Lubaina Himid *Swallow Hard: The Lancaster Dinner Service* 2007 in the small alcove
Model installation view



Horace Ové, *The Black Safari* 1972 projected onto wall, with benches placed for viewers to sit
Model installation view

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Source: LearningonScreen.ac.uk

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