Freedom and Change, 1984

‘Discourse is a primary tool against the weapons used to marginalise and write out of history our contribution / she who writes herstory rewrites history.’

Maud Suler, 1990

Freedom and Change is a bold example of Himid’s ‘rewriting of history’, as proposed by the poet, curator and artist Maud Suler, via the reference to Picasso – the epitome of masculine painterly energy. Those women are personifications of freedom and change: they look to the future by embracing the past, yet overturning oppressive colonial histories. By quoting a painting from Picasso’s ‘return to order’ neoclassical period (1918–25), Himid comments on the rampant political conservatism at the height of the Thatcher era.

Himid asserts: ‘After the mourning comes revenge.’ Revenge is at once a monument to the victims of the transatlantic slave trade, a critique of the patriarchy, and a space for dialogue. This series is a lamentation, an act of mourning transfigured into a new phase. ‘The women are always talking, sometimes to each other. [...] They have several strategies, they expand to fill the situation. The women take revenge; their revenge is that they are still here, they are still artists, that their creativity is still political and committed to change, to change for the good.’ – Artist’s statement, 1992

Himid’s series was produced as the result of two month-long residencies in St Ives, where Himid used a lifeguard hut as her studio. Looking out to the beach and sea, she completed hundreds of preparatory works on paper. The resulting paintings depict imaginary spaces that contain echoes of real places, contorted by multiple perspectives and postcolonial distortions. The initial impression of peace, stillness and tranquillity in these paintings masks the creeping incursion of war and trauma. With this series, Himid has claimed: ‘Everything shifted; the safe ideas became more dangerous and the risky strategy became the blueprint.’ Despite a preoccupation with the sea, the composition of Yellow Pool focuses on sharp angles, illusionary space, illogical perspectives, and a room empty of people.

Himid’s ‘Swallow Hard’ series was originally part of a larger installation: a cast of cutout painted figures appeared within the artist’s first retrospective exhibition, ‘New Robes for Msuhan’, a collaboration with Maud Suler held at Rochdale Art Gallery in 1987. In Suler’s curatorial text, ‘Surveying the Scene’, she declared: ‘The show does not stand in isolation. Its roots are in the collective Black struggle of our history. [...] We will remember those who are seen to die at the hands of the state but also bear witness and testify to the lives and the deaths of so many others whose lives touch ours. The warrior takes many guises. The educator uses many tools.’

11. Everybody Is

12. The Giare of the Sun

13. Yellow Pool

The Plan B series was produced as the result of two month-long residencies in St Ives, where Himid used a lifeguard hut as her studio. Looking out to the beach and sea, she completed hundreds of preparatory works on paper. The resulting paintings depict imaginary spaces that contain echoes of real places, contorted by multiple perspectives and postcolonial distortions. The initial impression of peace, stillness and tranquillity in these paintings masks the creeping incursion of war and trauma. With this series, Himid has claimed: ‘Everything shifted; the safe ideas became more dangerous and the risky strategy became the blueprint.’ Despite a preoccupation with the sea, the composition of Yellow Pool focuses on sharp angles, illusionary space, illogical perspectives, and a room empty of people.

Kangas


16. Safety-Is the Lost Territory, 2011

17. Reminder of an Ancient Fetish, 2016


20. The Source of the Tears is Long Run Dry, 2016

This series of works on paper is named after the everyday cotton garments long manufactured and worn by women in East Africa. Their influence reached the nineteenth century textile production in the north of England, an industry that relied heavily upon cotton from slave plantations in the southern United States. Himid’s painted Kangas feature thought-provoking aphorisms devised by the artist or taken from the abolition and civil rights movements, echoing the Swahili sayings often incorporated into the printed fabric designs.

Fishing

1. Revenge – A Masque in Five Tableaux

2. Le Rodeur: The Lock, 2016


After completing this most recent series, the artist realised that these interiors were the odd, empty rooms of her earlier Plan B paintings, now populated with a full cast of characters, and always with a glimpsed view of the sea. They reflect Himid’s complex personal relationship to water and the sea. ‘I have never been able to swim properly and am very frightened of the sea and of drowning. I used to constantly look at new ways of painting it as if it had never been painted. The reading of narratives about/by people being taken forcibly from west-coast Africa to the coasts of America in trading ships to be later used as slaves made an impact during the early part of my painting career.’ – Arthur’s statement, 1992

22. Negative Positives, 2007–ongoing

23. Negative Positives (x20)

24. Negative Positives (x14)

25. Negative Positives (x27)

For ten years, Himid has over-painted her regular newspaper to highlight racial biases (subconscious or overt) present in the press. Her newspaper is not merely an intervention, a mapping and an excavation: it is a fragile monument to an invisible engine working for nothing in an amazingly greedy machine. 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. [...] This work is not a memorial but more an encouraging pattern. It is a declaration of ownership and of reclamation, an intensely personal quest for some kind of reparative justice.

Please ask our Visitor Assistants if you have any questions.

This exhibition guide is available in a large print format. Please ask at the Information Desk located in the cafe.

Invisible Strategies is supported by Arts Council England Strategic Touring Fund.
The exhibition features numerous paintings that explore Himid’s expansive and vibrant palette, including Metal/Paper, Beach House (1995), where the fiery hues and foreboding views of water speak to a sense of danger on the horizon; Zanzibar – Sea: Wave Goodbye Say Hello (1999), where the experience of the artist’s homecoming is rhythmically abstracted; and Plan B (1999), which imagines peculiar interior spaces of refuge and escape, poised halfway between safety and peril. These evocative sites are revisited in a new painting series, Le Rodeur (2016), named after a nineteenth-century slave ship. Mysterious rooms are populated with theatrically staged figures in dramatic, ambiguous settings that invoke Himid’s recurring iconography of vessels, classical architecture, blocks of abstract pattern and choppy waters.

The sea and poetic abstractions of it are woven throughout Himid’s work over the last two decades. It is a near constant presence, often observed from a watchful distance, its dangers respected and feared. These series of paintings are also connected by acts of journey making: a biographical echo of the artist’s own formative journey, aged four months, from her birthplace in Zanzibar to her mother’s home in England.

Lubaina Himid’s work is also presented at Spike Island, Bristol, and Nottingham Contemporary.

Explore our social channels: Facebook: Modern Art Oxford, Twitter/Instagram: @mao_gallery, YouTube: Modern Art Oxford

LUBAINA HIMID: INVISIBLE STRATEGIES

At the heart of this exhibition are works from Himid’s sequence Revenge – A Masque in Five Tableaux (1991–92). Originally exhibited as a 12-part installation, this series addresses historical narratives of the trauma and survival of African peoples by depicting monuments, vessels and fabrics in vivid colours and patterns. Revenge retells the history of European painting, sculpture and architecture from the perspective of two black women, who time travel across different historical periods – always talking, always strategising. This new form of history painting is seen in the intense dialogue taking place in the 1920s Parisian bistro scene of Five. For Himid, these characters take action in response to their experiences of oppression, not through violence but by continuing to survive and by making possible new conversations.

By reinserting forgotten black figures into this arena of colonial power and prestige, Himid tackles the cultural imperialism of history painting and the white male territory of twentieth-century modernism. Her reclamation of grand, painterly traditions proposes alternative forms of representation, and new readings of history, to use painting as a weapon against Western ‘canon’ formation – ‘the symbolic and aesthetic support of a too selective and always selecting history’, as the art historian Griselda Pollock defines it.

As Himid explained in 1991: ‘Paintings are at the centre of the dialogues about art, they are the tool with which the artist can enter the arena of illusion and prophecy. Why then should women not enter the arena wielding this weapon. … Paint is ours, we have always used pigment and colour on surfaces. On the inside and outside of our homes on our bodies on fabric.’

This recovery of painting for women, artists and non-artists alike, is located in the power of colour: the emotions, sense of identity, and seductive attraction that colour provokes. As Himid explained, ‘the emotions are the only genuine Proust effect in a painting – the symbol of the hidden figure – and serve to transport the viewer on a journey to new conversations, new territory of representation and new readings of history. By reinserting forgotten black figures into this arena of colour, and evoking conversations ... women can enter the arena of illusion and prophecy through the medium of paint. This is a political strategy. In the strictest sense, I am not a painter in the strictest sense... I am a political strategist who uses a visual language to encourage conversation, argument and change – Lubaina Himid.

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