

1. *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 Sulter, 1990

Freedom and Change is a bold example of Himid’s ‘rewriting of history’, as proposed by the poet, curator and artist Maud Sulter, via the reference to Picasso – the epitome of masculine painterly energy. These 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.

Plan B, 1999/2000

11. *Everybody Is*

12. *The Glare 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 spatial 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.

2. *Le Rodeur: The Lock*, 2016

3. *Le Rodeur: Exchange*, 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.’

14. *Metal/Paper, Beach House*, 1995

The *Beach House* paintings, first exhibited at Wrexham Library Arts Centre in 1995, are a biographical fusion of many experiences, journeys and places, including Ghana, Zanzibar, Lytham St Annes, Los Angeles and Cuba. In the artist’s text *Beach House* she writes: ‘I was born on an island in the Indian Ocean and lived for the first four months of my life two hundred yards from the beach in a house at Beit el Ras in Zanzibar. When my mother and I arrived in England on Christmas Eve, 1954, we flew into Blackpool Airport. One grandmother had waved good-bye with the sound of the warm sea around her; another welcomed me to her seaside home in the chilly north of England.’

Revenge – A Masque in Five Tableaux

4. *Ankledeep*, 1991

5. *Five*, 1991

6. *Carpet*, 1992

8. *Unwrapped but not Untied*, 1991

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

Kangas

15. *Shelter in the Shade of Deep Friendship*, 2011

16. *Safety is the Lost Territory*, 2011

17. *Reminder of an Ancient Fetish*, 2016

18. *Freedom and Change*, 2016

19. *Have Courage in the Crisis/Set Yourself Free*, 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.

7. *Fishing*, 1987

Fishing was originally part of a larger installation: a cast of cutout painted characters roaming across gallery walls. Collectively titled *Restoring the Balance*, these figures appeared within the artist’s first retrospective exhibition *New Robes for MaShulan*, a collaboration with Maud Sulter held at Rochdale Art Gallery in 1987. In Sulter’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 will 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.’

21. *Zanzibar – Sea: Wave Goodbye Say Hello*, 1999

Painted at the same time as *Plan B*, the *Zanzibar* canvases are diaphanous, light-filled works whose abstraction belies a very emotional and personal story. Himid’s father died of malaria in Zanzibar, her birthplace, when she was just four months old. In respect of his family’s traditions, her mother spent a period of 40 days and 40 nights alone, mourning. The interlocking diamond-shaped patterns evoke the mosquito nets and shutters of the room in which her mother spent that time. The memories and sounds of the island infuse the abstract shapes and liquid colours of blue, green, white, grey and turquoise. Himid has described the making of these paintings as ‘an exercise in speed, daring, calm and panic.’

9. *Mr Salt’s Collection – The Ballad of the Wing* series, 1989

This work was first shown as part of Himid’s solo exhibition *The Ballad of the Wing* at Chisenhale Gallery, London, in 1989. It displays the influence on her practice of caricature, particularly eighteenth-century satirical cartoonists such as James Gillray, George Cruikshank and William Hogarth. The painting references the vast collection of antiquities amassed by the renowned British Egyptologist Henry Salt (1780–1827), and with its numbered objects alludes to British colonial trading routes, overseas excavations, collecting and connoisseurship. As Maud Sulter wrote in 1992 of this series: ‘the paintings playfully illuminate the role museology plays in contemporary cultural consumption. Historical “truths” are questioned and ancient fables reworked.’

Negative Positives, 2007–ongoing

22. *Negative Positives* (x20)

23. *Negative Positives* (x14)

24. *Negative Positives* (x27)

For ten years, Himid has over-painted her regular newspaper to highlight images of black people that she feels are implicitly prejudicial. It is a form of visual research, examining visual culture through artistic means, to provoke a conversation about how racial biases (subconscious or conscious) persist in maintaining out-dated power relations. Acknowledging the profound feelings of anger and frustration that underline this daily process of reading, selecting and making visible, Himid explains: ‘The invented and borrowed patterns on each page are painted to highlight this strange and inappropriate use of people as signifiers and finally to vent my spleen. Everyday in Britain even the “liberal” press is simultaneously visualising and making invisible black peoples’ lives.’

10. *Bone in the China: Success to the Africa Trade*, c.1985

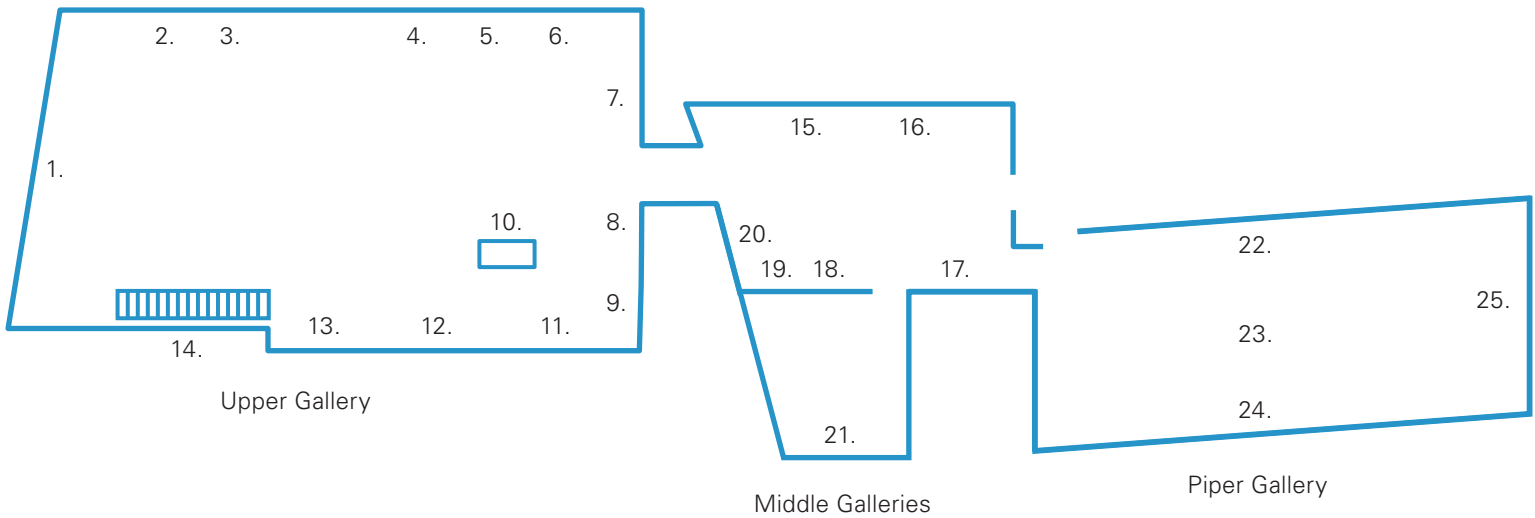
This work was included in the group exhibition *Palaces of Culture: The Great Museum Exhibition* at Stoke-on-Trent City Museum and Art Gallery in 1987. It depicts various items referencing the museum’s collections. The words ‘Success to the Africa Trade’ are taken from an eighteenth-century Liverpool-produced punchbowl, on display in the Stoke-on-Trent ceramics gallery at the time of the exhibition. Part of the text inscription reads: ‘Our memories/our heroines/our contributions/our creativity’. It is a declaration of ownership and of reclamation, an intensely personal quest for some kind of reparative justice.

25. *Swallow Hard: The Lancaster Dinner Service*, 2007

Himid defines *Swallow Hard: The Lancaster Dinner Service* as ‘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 incentive for everyone committed to restoring the balance, revealing the truths and continuing the dialogues.’

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EXHIBITION NOTES

MODERN ART OXFORD



Lubaina Himid, Zanzibar – Sea: Wave Goodbye Say Hello, 1999. Courtesy the artist & Hollybush Gardens.



Cover images: Lubaina Himid, (Top) Freedom and Change, 1984. (Bottom) Swallow Hard: The Lancaster Dinner Service, 2007. Courtesy the artist & Hollybush Gardens.

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.

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LUBAINA HIMID: INVISIBLE STRATEGIES

At the heart of this exhibition are works from Himid’s sequence of paintings *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

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 outside and inside 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.

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.



Lubaina Himid, Freedom and Change, (detail), 1984. Courtesy the artist & Hollybush Gardens.

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.

Lubaina Himid, Swallow Hard: The Lancaster Dinner Service, (detail), 2007. Courtesy the artist & Hollybush Gardens.



Asserting political action through the medium of paint, Himid’s work speaks out against the erasure of black women (as artists and as subjects) from public exhibitions and collections. Artists that are not talked about, who are not shown in galleries and museums, Himid argues, are made invisible. Over the course of more than thirty years, her artistic and exhibition-making practice has sought to engage with the often-overlooked histories of museums and galleries in the United Kingdom, while retrieving the hidden contributions, skills and stories of black historical figures and their contemporary counterparts.

I am not a painter in the strictest sense ... I am a political strategist who uses a visual language to encourage conversation, argument, change – Lubaina Himid

▲ #LubainaHimid