

Lubaina Himid: Reclaiming the Past

Description



Lubaina Himid

â??My work is a kind of handbook â?? to deal with the ghosts of what has happened.â?•

When Lubaina Himid won the Turner Prize in 2016 the world sat up and took notice. Not only was she the first black woman to be presented with the award, but at 63 years old she was the oldest artist to scoop up the world famous prize. The British history of racial politics define her practice, yet the challenging subject matter of her work has placed her on the fringes of the mainstream art world for decades. Recognition has come to her slowly and steadily; she was awarded an MBE in 2010 for her contribution to black British art since the 1980s, as artist, curator and writer, while the Daily Telegraph has called her â??the under-appreciated hero of black British art.â?• Her vibrant, sumptuous imagery has an immediate visual appeal, undercut with dark subject matter that still has a sting of truth in it today, questioning the marginalised status many black people continue to struggle with today.



Naming the Money / Lubaina Himid / 2004

Himidâ??s story began in Zanzibar, where her African father and English mother moved after falling in love as students in London. Born in 1954, Himidâ??s life was to take an unlikely new direction when her father died suddenly and unexpectedly of malaria when she was just four months old. After an enforced 40 day period of mourning in Zanzibar, Himidâ??s mother picked up the pieces and relocated to her old home in England, heading to her motherâ??s home in Blackpool for comfort and solace.

Six months later Himidâ??s mother moved to Maida Vale in London with her young daughter in tow. Trained as a textile designer, Himidâ??s mother found work producing commercial textiles for popular high street chains, producing bold, playful patterns which infiltrated the young artistâ??s eye. Himidâ??s aunt, a musician, moved in with them to help her sister with parenting duties. The two women worked hard, but they also enjoyed life, with a full, crowded house filled with regular visitors, guests and lodgers, which Himid was fascinated by. She said in an interview, â??â?¦ from the age of nothing to the age of â?¦ five or six, our house was full of wild parties, I mean fantastic partiesâ?¦ The whole house would be decorated, the garden would be decorated with â?¦ little jars with little candles in and everythingâ?¦â?• There was a theatricality to these events which became lodged in her mindâ??s eye, to be played out in her art as an adult.

Himidâ??s aunt taught her to read, while her mother took her on various outings to museums and department stores in London, not to shop, but to just look, soaking up the visual ephemera around them. The young Himid was entranced by the overwhelming sensuousness of colour and pattern she saw on these trips, recalling, â??â?¦voluminous floral tapestries, heaving with dancing, yearning bodiesâ?• and â??trailing a finger over fragile milky German crockery, lying down on a pile of soft Persian rugs, wanting to unfurl bolts of fabric.â?• Much to her dismay, when she was seven Himidâ??s aunt moved out of their home to raise her own family. Her mother remarried in the following years and a period of relatively settled calm followed. At school Himid struggled with academia but she was naturally confident, finding a flair

for the arts, appearing in several school plays and winning the *Observer Poetry Prize*.



Lubaina Himid in the 1980s

Given the liberal environment of her home, Himid chose to stay living with her mother and stepfather in her early years as a student. She studied theatre design at Wimbledon College of Arts, graduating in 1976. As a student she expressed a desire to be a hands on theatre designer, making tactile objects, as she explained â??I wanted to be a working theatre designer â?¦ rather than a glamorous theatre designer. I wanted to â?¦ actually turn my hands to making things, rather than making drawings and having someone else make things.â?• Though she would later abandon theatre design, the sense of theatricality and drama of the characters and costumes in her art has its roots

in the stage. The environment she studied in was driven by men, and even though the majority of her fellow students were women, Himid recalled, â??the stars of the course were menâ?¦ the tutors were grooming the male students to be theatre designers like them.â?•

At the age of 19 Himid moved out of her motherâ??s house to live with a much older restaurateur, much to her motherâ??s disapproval. They lived together for the next six or seven years, but cracks first began to appear when Himid realised her work was the number one love affair in her life, an issue that would recur in her personal relationships throughout her career: â??the trouble with me is that I am always incredibly in love with making work and the being an artist and finding time to do that â?¦the people I have known have always had to kind of work round that.â?• The pair also showed no desire to settle down any time soon â?? each indulged in outside affairs, while Himid openly explored her sexuality amongst male and female fellow students.



Freedom and Change / Lubaina Himid / 1984

After graduating from Wimbledon Himid studied a masters at the Royal College of Art, writing a thesis on â??Young Black Artists in Britain Todayâ??. Writing this thesis put her in direct contact with emergent black artists including Eddie Chambers, Claudette Johston, Keith Piper and Marlene Smith, founding members of the Black Art Group. Himid joined their cause, but soon became aware of sexism at play, pointing out, â??I realised we (women) were a bit behind the scenes, although we were making work that was equally as strong.â?• Raising awareness of this fact became a driving force in her practice, as both creator and curator, and one of the first exhibitions she curated was titled *Five Black Women*, staged in 1983 at the Africa Centre in London. Over the next few years she regularly organised displays aimed at raising the status and awareness of black artists, particularly women, who, as she points out, â??â?¦ in the â??80s were totally invisible. The only way you could see yourself was by looking in the mirror. So making ourselves visible was the purpose of our work.â?•

Himid graduated from the Royal College of Art in 1984, and her contact with fellow black artists cemented in her mind her own desire to follow a similar path. Her earliest artworks were what she called â??large political installationsâ?• featuring figures made from painted wooden cut-outs, displayed tilted or leaning against gallery walls, works which satirized British history and colonialism. It was a hugely prolific time for Himid as she and her fellow artists rallied against the political oppressions of Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan, a time when she established her name in what would later be referred to as the British Black Arts movement (or the BBAs).



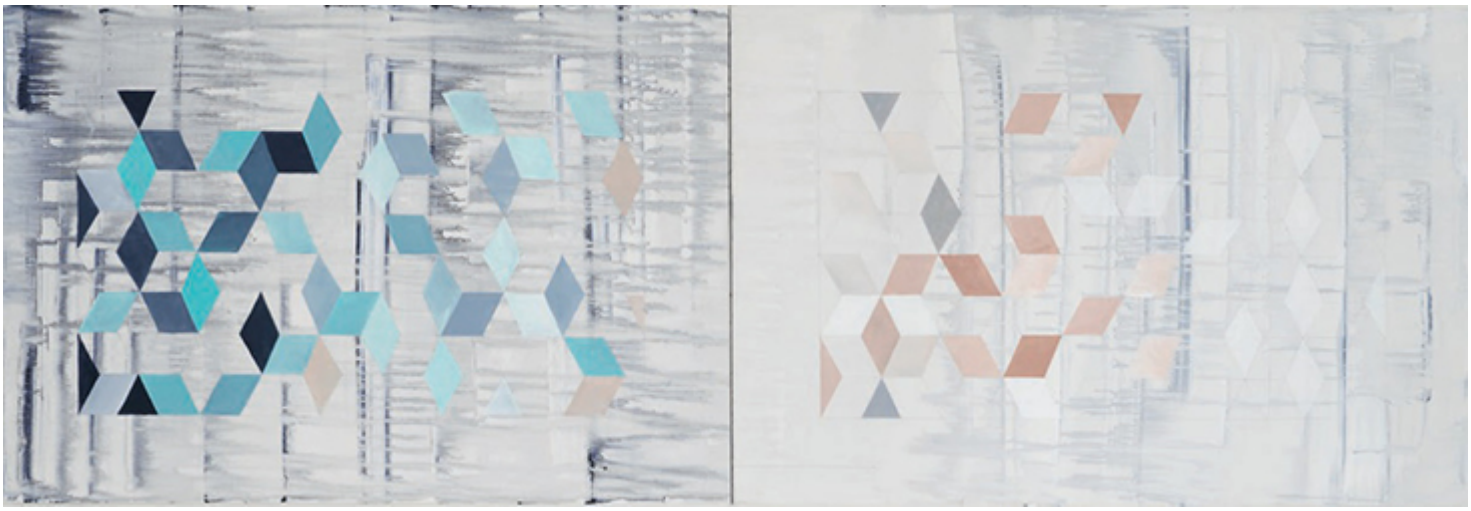
A Fashionable Marriage / Lubauna Himid / 1986



Marriage A-la-Mode is a series of six pictures painted by William Hogarth between 1743 and 1745

In one of her earliest theatrical installations *A Fashionable Marriage,* 1986, Himid creates a pastiche of William Hogarthâ??s satirical painting *Marriage A-la-Mode*, 1743. In Himidâ??s interpretation, Margaret Thatcher schmoozes with Ronald Reagan, while the black slaves from Hogarthâ??s original painting are still included here, pointing towards the culture of oppression that still dominated politics at the time.

Himid left London in the 1990s when she was 36; the political climate was shifting, while the London art world had turned its eyes towards the sensationalist, media hungry Young British Artists (YBAs) including Tracey Emin and Damien Hirst, creating a culture that Himid no longer felt at ease with. She was also increasingly frustrated with the lack of teaching work she craved, as she remembered back, â??(Londonâ??s) art schools were not employing black women to teach in 1990.â?• After finding a part-time teaching post at the University of Central Lancashire Himid relocated; fortuitously she has continued to rise the ranks here and is now Professor of Contemporary Art here, while she has lived in the same home in Lancashire for the past 20 years. Himid only returned once to her birthplace of Zanzibar in 1997, a visit she had put off for years in the fear that she would find herself lost and out of place. But the one trip she made was a profoundly moving experience, inspiring her to create a series of brightly coloured, patterned abstract works in celebration of her African heritage.



Zanzibar / Lubaina Himid / 1999

Since this time Himidâ??s practice has continued to explore biting, satirical subject matter in a wide range of media including painting, ceramics, installation and collage. One of the recurring themes in her recent work is the rich contribution black people have made to Britain today, as she explains, â??running through many of the narratives (is) a questioning of the political system in the UK and its rigid adherence to a way of being that denied the

existence of the historical and continuing contribution of black people to the wealth of the nation.â?• In *Swallow Hard: The Lancaster Dinner Service,* 2007, Himid pays tribute to the countless invisible servers who brought food to societyâ??s elite by covering crockery with intricately illustrated individual lives and stories, while in the powerful *Naming the Money*, 2004, Himid displays one hundred wooden cut-outs of slaves dressed in exotic, deliciously vibrant clothing, a tribute to those forcibly uprooted from their homes to serve in European courts.



Swallow Hard: The Lancaster Dinner Service / Lubaina Himid / 2007

Other works delve into the mediaâ??s tendency to stereotype black people, including *Negative Positives*, 2007 which highlights derogatory material from The Guardian newspaper, ripped out and decorated with African patterns, to highlight the ways these people have become â??signifiersâ??, rather than individuals. Himid commented on the work, â??(I) found that the paper, no

doubt in the interest of good design and witty narrative, used black people in a very subtle way which could be said to undermine their identity.â?•

Textile pattern and design has also infiltrated much of Himidâ??s practice since the 1980s, partly as a way of enlivening the surface of her work, yet also as a metaphorical reference to the weaving together of disparate elements in her practice. There is also a sense that she is weaving together the complexity of her own multi-racial identity. She wrote, â??I love the language of pattern, its immense potential for movement, illusion, colour experiments and subliminal political messaging.â?• In the recent project *Tailor, Striker, Singer, Dandy*, 2019, Himid produced a series of paintings depicting black men wearing clothing influenced by the West African Textiles collection at the Manchester City Gallery.



Le Rodeur: The Captain and the Mate / Lubaina Himid / 2017â??18

Since winning the Turner Prize in 2017 Himid has spoken of the â??huge, huge impactâ?• it had on her, both within art circles and in a wider, public context, jokingly commenting, â??I need a blonde wig and sunglasses because everybody knows who I am.â?• Her recognition is long overdue, but it points towards the double bind of sexism and racism that she has battled against for most of her adult life. Art historian Griselda Pollock has long been a champion of Himidâ??s work, though she suggests the breakthrough into the mainstream has taken so long because â??it requires you to recognise that here is a world of experience which is a world of beauty, imagination, pain and painful history that isnâ??t about the white person. They donâ??t recognise themselves in it and then they say â??well I donâ??t know if this is ok.â??â?•

What makes Himidâ??s story so remarkable is not just the strength of her practice, but her tireless support for her black peers, which has shaken up and reshaped the narrative of art history. Her voice has given strength and power to black artists from all around the world, including Kara Walker, Ellen Gallagher, Chris Ofili and Yinka Shonibare. Writer Niru Ratnam argues, â??Himidâ??s continued insistence that nativism, racism and exploitation wouldnâ??t go away as easily as most hoped looks now to have been correct, and as a result, her critical vision is more relevant that ever.â?•

CATEGORY

1. WOMEN IN ART

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