"Developing more representative art collections could not be more urgent": Dr Anjalie Dalal-Clayton on the need to diversify the narrative.

(published on 14 October 2020 on The Double Negative online culture magazine, as part of the series 'New Critical Writing North West: Voices on Lancashire & Cumbria', commissioned nu Contemporary Visual Arts Network North-by-NorthWest)

Art institutions in the North-West of England have been pivotal in exhibiting Black British artists over the decades, writes Dr Anjalie Dalal-Clayton. So why do our public art collections remain so white? It's time for action, not mealy-mouthed statements, she says, so that museums and galleries better represent the communities they exist to serve…

Black artists and other artists 'of colour' are not well-represented in our public museums and galleries. For decades, such artists have contested their marginalisation in and by the cultural institutions that were established to serve and reflect British society; by interrogating their structures and processes, and by finding innovative ways to claim spaces for their work and to make themselves visible, often with support from cultural organisations and galleries outside the capital.

It is a critical and complex history, and one that I've been learning about and researching for twenty years. The degree of underrepresentation became starkly apparent to me when, between 2015 and 2018, I led the first nation-wide audit of works by British born or based artists of African, Asian and Middle-East and North Africa descent in UK public collections, as part of University of the Arts London's Black Artists & Modernism project. Data gathered from thirty national and regional civic collections across England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland revealed that these artists account for at best 4% and at worst less than 1% of all artists represented by public collections. These are an embarrassingly inadequate set of figures, especially now, amidst calls to 'decolonise' public art collections and to make commitments towards anti-racism that have been amplified by the Rhodes Must Fall and Black Lives Matter movements.

How do museums and galleries in the North-West of England figure in this context? London and the Midlands tend to feature as the hot spots of activity in most narratives of Black British art history. Indeed, some of the key protagonists of the British Black Arts Movement of the 1980s – Sonia Boyce, Lubaina Himid, Keith Piper, for example – were born or studied in these two areas of the country, and several ground-breaking exhibitions showcasing work by Black artists took place in Wolverhampton (Black Art An Done, 1981), Nottingham and Coventry (The Pan-Afrikan Connection, 1983) and London (From Two Worlds, 1986, and The Other Story, 1989). However, a lesser-known but just as rich and vital programme of artistic activity and exhibitions also took place across the North-West of England in the final decades of the twentieth century in rural Cumbria, in the cities of Manchester, Preston and Liverpool and in towns such as Oldham and Rochdale. This programming brought attention to and supported the careers of a whole host of African and Asian descent artists, and drove forward the agenda for a more representative and politically and socially-engaged approach to programming and curating in civic museums and galleries.

Some of the earliest exhibition activity was initiated in the late 1960s by the Chinese-born, British-based artist Li Yuan-chia. Li moved from London to the Cumbrian village of Banks to buy and convert an old farmhouse (once owned by the artist Winifred Nicholson) into a highly innovative and thriving museum and art gallery, which included a sculpture garden and children's arts space. Known as the LYC Museum and Art Gallery, it supported hundreds of artists, many of whom were white (British and international), but also included the Black British artist John Lyons and several Chinese and

Chinese-descent artists, such as Wu Hsueh-Jang, thus bringing a truly diverse cultural programme to rural Cumbria through the 1970s and 1980s.

By this time, the first appreciable British-born generation of Black artists were graduating from UK art schools, and through a variety of channels, were claiming space for themselves in civic art galleries around the country. Inspired by exhibitions in London and Sheffield, Bluecoat in Liverpool was probably the first arts venue in the North-West to stage an exhibition that specifically focussed on work by Black British artists with its 1985 show Black Skin/Bluecoat, which featured work by Sonia Boyce, Eddie Chambers, Tam Joseph and Keith Piper. Close relationships were developed with some of these artists, which became a catalyst for a rich, multi-ethnic programme at Bluecoat in the decades that followed. This included important exhibitions such as Trophies of Empire (1992) and Independent Thoughts (1997), and solo shows for artists of African and Asian descent too numerous to list here, but included local artists such as Chila Burman and Nina Edge, and artists from other regions of the country, such as Permindar Kaur, Boyce and Piper. Bluecoat's impressive programme history and regular focus on the individual practices of Black artists over the past forty years has arguably been more consistent and nuanced in its approach than many of the more prominent art institutions situated further south and in the Capital, and has been an exemplar of good curatorial practice, especially in relation to Black British art.

Bluecoat was not the only arts venue in the North-West to play a significant role in this history; Rochdale Art Gallery (now Touchstones Rochdale) was just as vital between the late 1980s and early 1990s, particularly in its support of Black women artists and Black feminist art practice. In 1987, Lubaina Himid, who was based in London at that time, was invited by Rochdale to present a solo show of her work there. Titled New Robes for MaShulan, the exhibition was accompanied by another exhibition in the gallery involving a collaboration with the artist Maud Sulter (A Room for Mashulan). As had happened at Bluecoat, these two exhibitions prompted a long relationship between Rochdale Art Gallery and the two artists. Sulter subsequently became Assistant Arts and Exhibitions Officer there in 1992, and organised several exhibitions, including The Fortune Teller (1992), Columbus Drowning (1992), Borderless Print (1993), and Voyager (1994). But even before Sulter's appointment, she and Himid were involved in many other exhibitions at Rochdale that showcased work by Black women artists, such as Once Upon a Time: An exhibition of Pictures and Words by Black Women Artists (1988), Along the Lines of Resistance: An Exhibition of Contemporary Feminist Art (1989), Passion: Black Women's Creativity of the African Diaspora (1989) and Black Women's Creativity Project IV: Ingrid Pollard (1989). Like Bluecoat, Rochdale Art Gallery was an essential hub for Black British creativity in this period, supporting the careers of many women artists who would later become major players in British art, not least Himid herself, who went on to win the Turner Prize in 2017.

Himid made the North-West her home in 1991, moving to Preston to take up a position at the University of Central Lancashire (UCLan). It is perhaps no coincidence, given her impact in Rochdale, that Preston's Harris Museum also became a significant arts venue for showcasing work by artists of African and Asian descent in the 1980s and 1990s. The Harris had staged Graven Images: Art, Religion and Politics in 1988, which displayed work by Rasheed Araeen, Saleem Arif, Sutapa Biswas, Arpana Kaur and Dhruva Mistry. In 1991, Eddie Chambers (who had shown work at Bluecoat six years earlier, and whose group show Black Art: Plotting The Course had travelled to Oldham Art Gallery in 1988) took his touring show, Four x 4, to the Harris. The following year, the not-so-snappily-named exhibition Fine Material for a Dream…? A Reappraisal of Orientalism: 19th and 20th Century Fine Art and Popular Culture: Juxtaposed with Paintings, Video and Photography by Contemporary Artists (1992) was staged there, bringing work by sixteen British artists of South Asian and Middle-Eastern descent to

Preston. Then in 1993, Zarina Bhimji, Permindar Kaur and Josephine Thom showed their work in the exhibition Embers. This series of exhibitions at the Harris, combined with Himid's subsequent work at UCLan, including her Making Histories Visible archive and co-directorship of the University's Institute for Black Atlantic Research, have made Preston an important site for Black British art history.

The city of Manchester has been similarly important in this respect. Several exhibitions took place at Cornerhouse (now HOME) in the 1980s and 1990s, in parallel with exhibitions in Liverpool, Rochdale and Preston. Keith Piper and Marlene Smith showcased work by 17 artists in the exhibition The Image Employed: The Use of Narrative in Black Art (1987). This was followed in 1990 by Black People and the British Flag in 1993 – another of Chambers' touring group exhibitions – and Black Markets: Images of Black People in Advertising and Packaging in Britain (1880-1990) which displayed work by David A. Bailey, Zarina Bhimji, Sonia Boyce, Roshini Kempadoo, Keith Piper and Donald Rodney. The Other Story: Afro-Asian Artists in Post-War Britain – arguably one of the largest and better known exhibitions in this history – also featured in Cornerhouse's programme. This ground-breaking exhibition devised by artist Rasheed Araeen was initially staged at the Hayward Gallery in London in 1989 and sought to present a new narrative of British modernism through its focus on African and Asian-descent artists. It toured to Manchester in 1990, taking place across both Cornerhouse and Manchester Art Gallery. Unfortunately, there is very little archival material on the show's iteration in either Manchester venue, meaning that the city's role in this important exhibition history is at risk of being forgotten. However, like several other arts venues in the region, both HOME and Manchester Art Gallery have continued to stage and host innovative exhibitions that shine a light on practices of African and Asian descent, such as the 2018 exhibition Speech Acts: Reflection-Imagination-Repetition which took place at Manchester Art Gallery in partnership with University of the Arts London's Back Artists & Modernism project, which was partly selected from the gallery's collection.

Evidently, art institutions in the North-West of England have been pivotal in supporting Black British artists through exhibitions. But what parallel work has been done to ensure that the work of the Black artists who featured in these exhibitions is cemented into local cultural history – through acquisitions into the region's permanent collections – so that future generations in the area can learn about, and be inspired by, them?

Thankfully, and perhaps unsurprisingly, Lubaina Himid is relatively well represented by collections in the region, with seven collections holding thirteen of her works, including the beautiful and expansive Naming the Money (2004) which she gifted to Liverpool's International Slavery Museum in 2017. The installation features almost one hundred life-sized cut-outs portraying African servants that were depicted in European court paintings of the 17th and 18th centuries, and in it, Himid gives each figure a name and identity, and thereby a backstory and humanity that is typically erased in historical narratives.

Another relatively well-collected artist in the North-West is the sculptor Halima Cassell. Born in Pakistan and raised in Lancashire, she creates large scale geometric pieces in bronze and clay that are inspired by Islamic architecture and North African surface design. Her works can be found in at least eight civic collections in the region, including Bolton Museum and Blackburn Museum and Art Gallery. The Indian-born sculptor Dhruva Mistry is similarly well-represented. A Royal Academician, his celebrated small-scale domestic sculptures and his enormous public commissions led him to represent Britain at the Third Rodin Grand Prize Exhibition in Japan in 1990, and seven of his sculptures can be found in the collections of The Harris, Walker Art Gallery and Manchester Art Gallery. Alongside these three artists there are several other works that North-Western collections will undoubtedly be proud

to own: Walker Art Gallery owns works by Araeen, Anish Kapoor, Yoko Ono and Yinka Shonibare; The Harris has works by Sulter and Saleem Arif; Manchester Art Gallery holds works by Keith Piper and Mona Hatoum; and Rochdale obtained works by Sutapa Biswas and Veronica Ryan.

Despite the acquisition of these select 'gems', and the fact that Himid, Cassell and Mistry each appear in more than one collection in the North-West, artists with African and Asian heritage still make up only a very small percentage of the artists that are represented by the museum and gallery collections mentioned here.

The data collected from Manchester Art Gallery, The Harris and Walker Art Gallery for the Black Artists & Modernism project's audit of UK public collections indicated that less than 2% of the artists represented in each of the three collections were from these ethnic backgrounds, and works made by such artists represented less than 3% of the artworks held in each collection. Now, according to recent census data, around 9% of people in the North-West of England self-identify as Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic; in Liverpool this rises to 10%, in Preston to 20%, and in Manchester to 32%. This means that despite the region's support of African and Asian descent artists through exhibitions since the 1980s, communities in the North-West are not even close to being proportionally represented by their local public art collections.

Government directives and arts funding bodies have never stipulated or even encouraged museum and gallery collections to work towards national or local proportional representation of particular ethnic groups, so perhaps it is unfair to scrutinise the content of public art collections in this way. However, there are examples elsewhere in the country (such as at Cartwright Hall in Bradford) of proportional, or at least strong, representation of local communities being achieved through targeted acquisitions policies and initiatives. If museums and galleries in the North-West were to adopt the same approach with their collections, they could develop a region-wide store of works by artists of African and Asian descent equivalent to the area's important exhibitions history, from which a more representative and empowering cultural programme could be drawn.

In the context of the recent re-ignition of the Black Lives Matter movement, the cultural and ethnic diversity of the region, and its historical roots in the Transatlantic Slave Trade, developing more representative art collections could not be more urgent. Many museums and galleries have remained disappointingly silent on the issue, whilst others have offered only mealy-mouthed statements of solidarity and have yet to explain in clear and concrete terms how they intend to address their complicity in upholding structural and institutional racism. At the time of writing, no museums and galleries with collections in the North-West have announced a change to their collections development policies in light of Black Lives Matter. But there are, nonetheless, committed individuals working behind the scenes in these museums and galleries, and practical work is beginning, in earnest, in some.

Some councils, including Oldham and Blackburn, are reviewing their public statues and their links to colonial oppression, racism and slavery. Meanwhile at the Harris, involvement in the Black Artists & Modernism audit and work on a National Lottery Heritage Fund bid has encouraged the museum to critically reflect on its collection and to ask its local communities to help it to identify gaps. Similarly, at the Walker Art Gallery a new project is underway that seeks to grow the gallery's collection and address its 'blind spots'.

Manchester Art Gallery has also been reviewing its collecting history and considering how to open up its acquisition decision-making process. In 2019, the gallery began a partnership with the Institute of

International Visual Arts (Iniva) on its Future Collect initiative – a three-year programme funded by Arts Council England and Art Fund, that partners with national and civic museums and galleries to commission and collect work by British artists of African and/or Asian descent. Artist Jade Montserrat is now working with Manchester Art Gallery, along with curatorial trainee Nikita Gill, as part of this initiative and Monserrat's new commission will be displayed at the gallery this autumn.

As museums and galleries in the North-West cautiously re-open after months of closure and begin to grapple with the longer-term fallout of the global pandemic, they must all begin to tackle gaps and deficiencies in their collections as part of a longer-term commitment to the communities they exist to serve. But they must also be mindful that this commitment does not begin and end with improved representation. The frequency with which, and the ways in which those increased numbers of artworks by underrepresented or marginalised artists are exhibited and displayed is also vitally important. Questions of equity, decolonisation and anti-racism must be placed (and remain) at the top of the agenda, and become embedded throughout museum practice – from curating and interpretation, to collections care and cataloguing, learning and engagement, to funding and patronage, and most crucially, leadership and governance.