

British Art Network Seminar Revisiting Picturing Blackness

Monday 4 April 2016

Chelsea College of Arts, University of the Arts London and Tate Britain

The British Art Network brings together professionals working with British art from the 16th century to the present day. The aim of the network is to contribute to the sharing of expertise, research and ideas across cultural organisations; to enable improvements in curatorial skills and collection knowledge; and to foster greater collaboration between partners leading to enriched understanding and enjoyment of British art for audiences across the UK.

From November 1995 to March 1996 the Tate Gallery (now Tate Britain) hosted a small display called *Picturing Blackness in British Art 1700s – 1990s*. Selected by the renowned cultural studies scholar Paul Gilroy as guest curator, and Tate curator Virginia Button, it featured fourteen works of art mostly drawn from the Tate Collection, juxtaposing images from across two centuries, from Sir Joshua Reynolds (1723 – 1792) to F N Souza (1924 – 2002), Lubaina Himid (b. 1954) and Sonia Boyce (b. 1962).



F N. Souza 1924–2002, *Crucifixion*, 1959, Tate, Purchased 1993

The aim, according to Gilroy's exhibition text, was to address some of the "myths of Britishness" and show how 'racial differences have been a persistent feature of artistic expression' and that 'the complex and shifting symbolism of 'race' has been important to several generations of artists'.

Despite its modest size, the display had a significant impact, and has emerged as a key reference point for thinking about the challenges to art history, curatorial practice and exhibition histories of dealing with 'the image of the black' in British art. Twenty years on, this one day British Art Network workshop will reflect on the display, its controversial reception, and its legacy, while also addressing larger questions around the representation of 'blackness' and the black figure in British art, historically and in contemporary culture. The day will involve academic presentations, workshop sessions in Tate Britain, and a panel discussion featuring the curators of the original display, Paul Gilroy and Virginia Button.



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Programme

- 10.00 – 10.30 Registration and welcome tea and coffee at Chelsea College of Arts, University of Arts London
- 10.30 – 10.45: Welcome and introduction from Professor Paul Goodwin, Chair of Black Art and Design and Director of TrAIN (Centre for Transnational Art, Identity and Nation), Chelsea College of Arts, UAL and Dr Martin Myrone, Lead Curator, British Art pre-1800, Tate
- 10.45 – 12.30: **Session One: Perspectives on *Picturing Blackness***
Reflections on the scholarship and curation of the 20 years since the display, from different perspectives – art historian, artist, curator.
- 10.45 – 11.00: Jan Marsh, National Portrait Gallery
Blackness in British Art: Looking Back and Forwards

Jan Marsh, curator of *Black Victorians* (2006) reflects on the state of museum scholarship and practice in the past two decades.

Until fairly recently, art museum culture in Britain was overwhelmingly ‘white’ in terms of collections, exhibitions, personnel. Pioneering developments like *Picturing Blackness* paved the way for greater diversity. This paper looks at past events and raises questions regarding the future.
- 11.00 – 11.15: Temi Odomosu, Malmö University
This Material Memory: Revisiting the oil portrait of George Alexander Gratton

What is taking the place in the act of uncovering hidden histories? How do portraits signify and function as memory artefacts? In 2007, I curated the exhibition *A Visible Difference: Skin, Race and Identity 1720-1820* in collaboration with the Hunterian Museum (Royal College of Surgeons), exploring the representation of human curiosities during the long eighteenth century. At the centre of this project was a portrait of George Alexander Gratton, a child born with congenital piebaldism, to enslaved African parents in St Vincent, and then shipped to England, where he performed as the “Spotted Negro Boy”. The portrait was painted by a little-known artist, and borrowed from a quiet corner in a small church in Marlow, but our acts of recovery (archival and gestural) provided a critical opening through which histories of commerce, science, identity and daily British life could be explored. This presentation will simply return to Coventry’s portrait again, meditating on what is found, negotiated and transformed in the process of visualising the colonial past.

11.15 – 11.30: Leon Wainwright, the Open University, UK

Picturing Blackness and Phenomenal Difference: Toward a Philosophy of Black British Art

This presentation will explore the changing field of art historical perspectives and art practice since the later decades of the twentieth century, suggesting conceptual paths to and from the ‘Picturing Blackness’ display at Tate Britain. Granting new attention to the material nature of works by black British artists, it will show that social questions about the art of diaspora demand a specifically philosophical analysis centred on the dynamics of embodied experience and perception. Such a shift responds to the challenge of how to account for the social histories of artists in Britain by way of aesthetic analysis, crossing critical perspectives with a more ‘affective’ mode of inquiry. What emerges is a clearer understanding of the value of ‘phenomenal difference’: a chiasmic interworking and transformation of knowledge at the site of black British artworks themselves.

11.30 – 11.45: Kimathi Donkor, Artist

Making ‘Yaa Asantewaa inspecting the dispositions at Ejisu’

In his 1995 Picturing Blackness in British Art essay, Paul Gilroy urged us to reconsider how slavery, imperialism and colonialism contributed to modern British aesthetics. And, as an artist, I have applied that perspective to Tate’s British collection, which includes several works by the acclaimed, white-American portrait painter, John Singer Sargent (1856-1925). In fact, various incarnations of African identity played a critical role in Sargent’s career – sometimes overtly, sometimes less so. By appropriating motifs from his Study of Mme Gautreau (1884) for my twin paintings, Yaa Asantewaa inspecting the dispositions at Ejisu (2012/14), I sought to re-imagine canonical British art’s complex and coded relationship to the black body.

11.45 – 12.15: Group Discussion, chaired by Professor Paul Goodwin

12.15 – 13.15: Delegates break for lunch (provided)

13.15 – 13.15: **Session Two: *Picturing Blackness*, the artworks in focus**

13.15 – 13.25: Introduction to afternoon session by Dr Martin Myrone



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13.25 – 14.30: Breakout groups in gallery. Speakers to lead groups talking in front of pictures from the original show, currently on display.

Group 1: F.N. Souza, *Crucifixion* (1959)
Led by Sarah Turner, Paul Mellon Centre

Group 2: Rossetti, *The Beloved* (1865-6)
Led by Carol Jacobi, Tate

Group 3: Frith, *Derby Day* (1856-8)
Led by Kimathi Donkor, Artist

Group 4: John Simpson, *Head of a Man* (Ira Aldridge?) (c.1827)
Led by Martin Myrone, Tate

14.30 – 15.15: Reporting back on discussions chaired by Dr Martin Myrone

15.15 – 15.45: Break for tea and coffee (provided)

15.45 – 17.00: **Session Three: *Picturing Blackness 20 years on***

15.45 – 16.45: Panel discussion chaired by Professor Paul Goodwin, featuring Professor Paul Gilroy and Dr Virginia Button

16.45 – 17.00: Thanks and close.