

Joy Gregory: Catching Flies with Honey (8 October 2025–1 March 2026)

By Rebecca Binns.

A major retrospective of Joy Gregory's work, which includes photography, film, installation and textiles, is on show at the Whitechapel Gallery (London) until 1st March, 2026], from where it will tour to the Arnolfini (Bristol) (17th October, 2026-7th February, 2027). While Gregory's work is well established in photography circles, (she had a 'major retrospective' as far back as 2011 at Impressions Gallery, Bradford), it is not overly London-centric to say that the Whitechapel show is significant in being her first full scale retrospective in a mainstream art gallery.

Gregory was a key figure in the Black British photography movement of the 1980s. Gregory's identification and solidarity with 'political blackness,' which emerged from excluded and marginalised Black identities in the arts, alongside political and social injustice in Britain (1970s-80s), is evident throughout her work, albeit via subtle preoccupation rather than overt statement.

The first series to greet the visitor on entrance to the gallery is perhaps Gregory's best-known, her Autoportrait series (1989-90). This features the artist's centring of herself as subject, wearing a halter neck top, oversized earrings and makeup. The series creates a mood that is subtle and introspective, with Gregory maintaining control over her depiction and shooting parts of herself - chin, neck, forehead, hands, lips and eyes - at odd angles. When her whole face is captured, she meets the camera's gaze with assuredness.



Figure 1: Joy Gregory, *Autoportrait*, 1990

The focus on fragmented parts of herself as a means of fostering intimacy is seen again with The Honeymoon Project (1990–1992), which includes close-up of portions of Gregory's face, given a soft effect through her utilisation of a 19th century photographic process, to create a Kalli type print series. The series also introduces her interest in the

theme of colonialism, and it was inspired by a contemporaneous project by the Spanish artist, Antoni Miralda (1986-92), which highlighted the symbolic 'marriage' between the Statue of Liberty (New York) and Christopher Columbus (Barcelona). In Gregory's series, a shadowy figure looks out over the water towards Ellis Island and the Statue of Liberty.

Raised by Jamaican parents in Buckinghamshire, when she first visited Jamaica while backpacking around the Caribbean as a young woman, it was a culture shock. In 1997 Gregory spent three months traveling and working in the Caribbean, documenting her time there through unguarded snapshots of herself in hotel rooms and the wider environment. Conversations and interviews that Gregory carried out informed her project, *Cinderella Tour Europe* (1998-2001) where a pair of golden slippers embark on a 'Grand Tour' of famous European landmarks, marking the privileging of such locations for the colonial class, to the exclusion of formerly colonised people.

The theme of travel is a dominant strand to the exhibition. The *Women and Space* (1987-1999) series again features self-portraits, often in anonymous hotel rooms, during her travels in Spain, exploring questions of autonomy, and the gendered politics of space. Here she uses a 19th century Liquid Light technique, which involves brushing silver gelatine emulsion onto the photographic paper, lending the images a softness suited to conveying an inner state of being.



Figure 2: Joy Gregory, *Women and Space*, 1987-97

A dominant theme in Gregory's oeuvre is social constructs of feminine identity and beauty and their hierarchical coding along lines of privilege and race. Featured in the lower Gallery are *Objects of Beauty*, (1992-1995) and *Girl Thing* (2002-2004), which both explore objects invested with meaning with regards to feminine identity and beauty. The investment of these everyday items with power in *Objects of Beauty* is

reminiscent of their symbolic role in fairy tales (e.g. the poisoned comb and apple in Snow White).

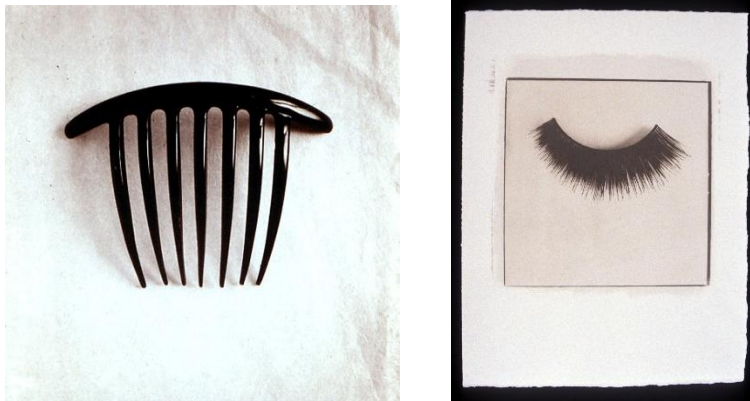


Figure 3: Joy Gregory, *Objects of Beauty*, 1992-95

A whole section upstairs in the gallery references past projects exploring the concept of 'the blonde' (1997-2010). Adapted from an interactive website project, the most striking element is a whole wall, featuring mostly black women, who've bleached their hair. Rather than seeing this as a collusion with oppressive ideals of beauty, Gregory's observation was that in the 1990s, women of colour used this as a purposeful means of self-definition.

A preoccupation with silenced voices is also prevalent, literally in projects on the disappearing languages of the Kalahari and Canary Islands, and more figuratively in a photographic study of the dynamics of the gardeners and workers on The Lunuganga Estate in Sri Lanka (2004). The project also shows her interest in plants as a form of knowledge, cultural heritage and healing for indigenous people, and how this was reclassified (by means of cultural and language erosion) by the colonial project. These concerns are reiterated in Gregory's series of Cyanotypes, *Languages of Flowers* (1986-2004), which subvert the Victorian tradition of sending coded messages through the selection of highly rated flower species by featuring underrated 'weeds' growing in the wild.

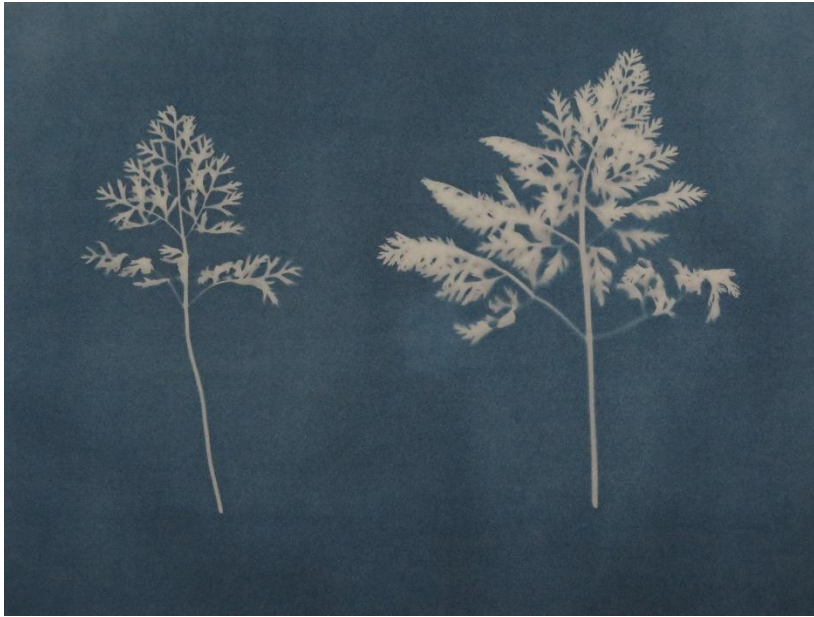


Figure 4: Joy Gregory: *Daucus Carota* (Carrot) from *The Invisible Lifeforce of Plants* series, 2020

Also investigating the imperialist appropriation of localised knowledge, culture and language, with an emphasis on botany, and its role in maintaining and providing meaning for human existence, is Gregory's project, *Seeds of Empire* (2021) that was made in collaboration with the composer, Philip Miller. Two films are on display, informed by the precise observations of the weather by 17th Century physician, collector and botanist, Sir Hans Sloane, on his voyage in the Caribbean, alongside those cataloguing his inhumane treatment of a woman, Rose, in service in the Jamaican household where he stayed.

This is a fascinating exhibition, that combines subtlety with poignancy and resonance. Gregory engages in a singular, nuanced way with themes of gender and racial identity, as well as politically and emotionally weighty subjects. While her work encompasses a range of analogue and digital techniques, it is her use of Victorian print techniques, to both pleasing aesthetic effect and to interrogate the historically loaded uses of the medium, that resonate the strongest.