

Artist, writer and curator Lubaina Himid (born 1954 in Zanzibar, Tanzania) works in painting, installation and printmaking. A pioneer of the 1980s Black Arts Movement in Britain, her work is politically charged, tackling questions of race, gender and class. Invisible cultural histories, forgotten diasporic and/or female voices and reclaiming identities are ever-present themes in her practice, as is the representation of cloth. *Kangas from the Lost Sample Book* (2012) is just one example of her use of cloth as a non-verbal language.

The power of her practice in my view lies in her ability to seduce her audience often through a play of pattern and the juxtaposition of colours that should clash but somehow work. There is a haptic quality that draws the viewer in, yet there is an unease that occurs when one fully engages with the work. Himid's at times, playful aesthetic invites us to re-examine uncomfortable subject matters such as the traces of slavery and colonisation that remain present in everyday life. She states:

There's a necessity to make work that will stop people in their tracks and allow them to feel that they can have a conversation... I think one can have really interesting conversations with and about textiles and the way they thread, if you like, through the everyday (Himid, 2015, pp 190-205).

In the below Q&A Himid reflects on the appeal of cloth, the place of cloth in the contemporary art world and the under-representation of Black women artists.

Q&A: Lubaina Himid

The 2017 exhibitions at *Navigation Charts*, Spike Island, Bristol, *Invisible Strategies*, Modern Art Oxford, and *The Place is Here*, Nottingham

Contemporary equate to your first major retrospective in Britain. 2017 has also seen you nominated for the Turner Prize – another first. It is interesting to me to see how your work has evolved over the years, yet in spite of your expanding creative vocabulary, textiles remain a constant.

What for you is the appeal of textiles?

Painstaking execution; optical possibilities; audience participation; the secret language of women.

How did your love of textiles begin?

My mother trained as a textile designer at the Royal College of Art. She then went on to work for commercial textile printers and toured Europe looking for and buying designs. My mother spent 30 years running their textile studio. She made her own clothes as a young woman and bought stylish well-made clothes as she got older.

My mother and I spent every other weekend in the best London department stores looking at clothes furnishings accessories. Other weekends we spent in art galleries and museums.

You have previously spoken about the ‘language’ of textiles. Could you expand on this?

I am not a textile historian but I do know that many African cloths and patterns have significance in a political or ritual context, though of course specific meanings vary from one set of people to another. I was aware of East African Kangas from an early age (my mother brought them back from Zanzibar) and loved the colour and variety. Later I understood their potential as a secret language between women. Their status as everyday wear and the fact that women mix and match top and bottom in whatever way seems appropriate counterbalances to the oppressive weight of the so-called traditional order of dress.

I began my adult life as an artist training to be a theatre designer using clothes to convey personality within a theatrical setting. As years went by I have found solace, peace and a sense of belonging and joy in the invention of pattern and use of colour.

***The Subversive Stitch* (Angel Row, 1988) was staged within years of the *Five Black Women* (Africa Centre, 1983) and *The Thin Black Line* (ICA, 1985) exhibitions – how has the place of women in the art world shifted, if indeed it has shifted at all?**

As artists, we are more visible than before, slightly more collected than before, marginally more influential than before but as Griselda Pollock has said – we have not yet rewritten the history of the history of art.

What of the place of black women artists specifically?

It's impossible now to say that there are no black women artists – we have always been here; but now as an historian or critic you would simply look stupid if you tried to deny our existence. If a real change in the landscape is marked by a true respect for the quality of what we do and who we are then little has changed however, I've learned to be patient during the past 40 years.

And textiles? What is the place of textiles in today's artworld?

Distinctly 'other'.

It's not the same thing. Who would want it to be? Does there need to be an order or a hierarchy? Does it matter?

As I've said I'm not a textile historian or an art historian but the love for mid 20th century European pattern endures in furnishing and the passion for the exotic recurs regularly in the fashion houses; but all this is viewed from a cool distance by the art museum.

What for you is the significance of *Carte de Visite (Hollybush Gardens, 2015)*, i.e. your ongoing relationship/work with female artists?

This is a continuing project about chance encounters between a partly forgotten past, a rapidly changing present and a potentially serendipitous future, not completely lost nor entirely found. What to keep and what to throw away; what remains private whilst being on public display.

I have always been drawn to *Freedom and Change (1984)* – Seeing it in a gallery space for the first time at Modern Art Oxford I was filled with utter joy at witnessing the energy bursting from these two figures. I was particularly moved by the figure on the left whose dress is made up of collaged fragments of airmail envelopes – is that significant? Were these envelopes received from relatives back home I wonder? Can you talk about what this work means to you?

Yes – the airmail letters do refer to my childhood memories of correspondence sent from my relatives in Zanzibar to us in London. The piece is a rewriting of history across the masculine energy of Picasso – a dash across the beach of invisibility.

You have been described as a history painter. Is this how you see yourself?

Not so grand. Now I do my best to fill in some of the gaps in ways that open up difficult dialogues and attempt to broker more useful conversation.

The artist El Anatsui has suggested that ‘textiles are to Africans what monuments are to westerners’. How would you react to this assertion?

Most Europeans think of monuments as redundant and irrelevant, if they regard them at all.

They constantly complain about the cost of building them, usually ignore them, have certainly forgotten what most of them were there for in the first place. Some

are sentimentalised and revered in a conservative misguided love for tradition but most people are ambivalent at best. I cannot say much about what the relationship between Africans and the textile could be but I imagine that its generally pragmatic, necessarily practical, and occasionally hierarchical through a similarly conservative misguided love for tradition.

Interview with Dr Christine Checinska

25th May 2017

Himid, L (2015) '*A post-slavery reading of cotton: Lubaina Himid in conversation with Sabine Broek and Alice Schmid*' in 'Cultural Threads: Transnational Textiles Today', Hemmings J, (eds.), Bloomsbury Publications