

Diaspora Artists and British Art History: Intervention–integration–expansion

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To date, mainstream surveys of 20th-century British Art have been so narrowly focused as to narrate only a select story of the artistic practices and activities being undertaken. But what happens when accounts of British Art stray from these orthodoxies to reveal its other, hitherto marginalised, practitioners – their diverse motivations and multivalent strategies?

This session seeks to add to and enlarge this hitherto constricted field of art historical enquiry by paying specific attention to the work of African, Asian, Caribbean, and other diasporic artists active in Britain since 1900. Building on a number of recent publications (Chambers, 2014; Orlando, 2016; Wainwright, 2017; Kerman, 2017), and exhibitions, including 'Migrations: Journeys into British Art' (Tate Britain, 2012) and 'Speech Acts: Reflection–Imagination–Repetition' (Manchester Art Gallery, 2018–19) can we expand the knowledge-base of, and range of historiographic and theoretical approaches to, the work of diaspora artists? And what does such scholarship do to the field of British art? Will the study of practitioners as varied as Kim Lim, F N Souza and Denis Williams remain as an appendix or supplement to 'mainstream' narratives? Can real integration take place? Can a critical engagement with the work of diaspora artists achieve an arguably more important goal of changing the parameters of what counts as British, and thereby propel British art into conversations regarding the transnational and the intrinsicity of diversity to Britishness itself?

Speakers and Abstracts

Black, Brown or British? The dark arts of F N Souza

Zehra Jumabhoj (*The Courtauld Institute of Art*)

F N Souza is as divisive in death as he was in life: his legacy is fought over by Britain and India. As a founder-member of Bombay's Progressive Artists' Group in 1947 – formed in the immediate aftermath of Indian independence from British rule – Souza is feted as a Father of Indian Modernism, and is increasingly prominent in India's nation-building narratives. Meanwhile, shows like 'Migrations: Journeys into British Art' (2012) and 'All Too Human: Bacon, Freud and a century of painting life' (2018) at Tate Britain, hail him as 'Black' and British; exemplifying an inclusive version of British-ness. Do Souza's viciously contorted forms epitomise a plural Britain or an ascendant India? Do these posthumous accolades serve to right art historical wrongs or propagate new injustices? Moreover, do they travel against the grain of Souza's paintings?

Certainly, during his lifetime, neither nation was keen to embrace Souza within its fold. In 1949, Souza had a run-in with conservative Bombay-*wallahs* when he displayed a nude self-portrait. Furious, he decided to leave Bombay for London. From the 1950s to the 1960s, he achieved success in England. Yet, he left for New York under a cloud in 1967 – after the critical and commercial failure of his solo *Black Art & Other Paintings* (1966) at London's Grosvenor Gallery. What does Souza's pariah past mean for his British-ness vis-a-vis his Indian-ness? Does his status as a Goan Roman Catholic complicate this debate? This paper will examine Souza's relevance for both India and Britain's current self-fashioning. Concentrating on his dark crucifixions and nudes from the 1950s and 1960s, the presentation will analyse how Souza's art simultaneously cements and *contravenes* nation-pushing agendas – however 'inclusive' they purport to be.

Kim Lim Reconsidered: Decentring narratives in post-war Britain and Singapore

Joleen Loh (*National Gallery Singapore*)

Despite receiving considerable acclaim in the 1960s and 1970s, today the practice of Kim Lim (b. 1936, Singapore; d. 1997, UK) remains absent from the discourses of sculpture in post-war Britain and Singapore. During her lifetime, Lim received significant exposure: she participated in survey exhibitions, including *British Sculpture out of the Sixties* (1970) and was 'included' as the only woman artist in the first *Hayward Annual* (1977), before joining the all-female committee of the second *Hayward Annual* (1978).

Concurrently, Lim maintained her networks in Singapore and gained visibility through exhibitions at the National Museum Art Gallery (1976, 1984) and the seminal artist-organised Alpha Gallery (1974). Yet, the ethno-nationalist frameworks used to narrate modernity have meant that many artists like Lim who do not fit into straightforward identitarian terms have yet to find a place in any art history.

This paper re-examines Lim's critical positioning in London's art world in relation to other cosmopolitan artists of non-European heritage who chose to work in Britain from the 1960s onwards. Comparisons between the practices of Rasheed Araeen, Li Yuan-Chia and David Medalla are brought to bear to enlarge the field of witnessing beyond available historical sightlines. I consider the patterns of continuity between these artists as a set of interconnected micro-histories or 'narrative tangents' (Tomii, 2006), which allow us to decentre and complicate dominant narratives of sculptural development in and outside the field of British art. Precarious, unstable and resisting easy categorisation, these 'narrative tangents' compel us to regard the multiple, transnational correspondences and travelling of ideas that defined cosmopolitan London.

'This is Tomorrow': Denis Williams and the Commonwealth of abstraction

Maryam Ohadi-Hamadani (University of Texas at Austin)

The Whitechapel Gallery's 1956 exhibition 'This is Tomorrow' remains canonised as a watershed moment within histories of modern British art. Richard Hamilton's collage *Just what is it that makes today's homes so different, so appealing?* became emblematic of an emergent proto-Pop, reverberating within art-historical surveys as a singular artwork that continues to define a national school of post-war art in Britain. The iconic status of Hamilton and the Independent Group supersedes the involvement of other artists within 'This is Tomorrow', particularly Denis Williams. Living in London, but originally from British Guiana, Williams participated in seminal exhibitions during this period, including Adrian Heath's Constructivist exhibitions and the ICA's 'Aspects of British Art' – an extraordinary inclusion, considering the limiting parameters of a constitutive Britishness which excludes Black artists. 1956 is heralded in canonical narratives as the year British art widened its borders in favour of a new internationalism, engendered by Tate's exhibition 'Modern Art of the United States'. Yet, 1956 was also significant in terms of politics, including the Mau Mau resistance in Kenya and the Suez Crisis. Formalist and nationalistic interpretations have sidelined the impact of decolonisation, burgeoning immigration from the Empire/Commonwealth, and the socio-political discourse pervading post-war discussions of art in Britain. Drawing from archival and primary sources, my paper resituates 'This is Tomorrow' within the socio-political frameworks of decolonisation and anticolonial resistance, while tracing expanded categorisations of Britishness and belongingness within Williams's artworks and texts, and that of his contemporaries, including writer Wilson Harris and the Independent Group.

Expanding Britishness: Curatorial interventions in re-entangling histories

Hammad Nasar (Paul Mellon Centre)

This presentation will reflect on two ongoing projects, attempting to expand the 'British' in British Art History: the collaborative research project 'London, Asia' (Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art, 2016–19), and the exhibition 'Speech Acts: Reflection-imagination- repetition' (Manchester Art Gallery, 2018-19).

'Speech Acts: Reflection-imagination-repetition' (curated by Hammad Nasar, with Kate Jesson) developed from the three-year AHRC-funded research project, Black Artist & Modernism. By placing works typically considered 'collection highlights' alongside works principally seen through lenses of biography and difference, it examines, and seeks to disrupt the role of museums in constructing and circulating collective stories.

Through an examination of specific strands of both projects, this paper stakes out the claim for the possibility of seeding open-ended collaborative research to expand existing narrow national framings of art-historical narratives, rather than 'integrate' or 'fit into' them. It makes the case for a propositional (and generous) mode of curating and art historical research.