Interview with Lubaina Himid

Maroua Mannai, Lubaina Himid

Interview with Lubaina Himid: *Naming the Money*

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1. In one of your interviews, you mentioned that "there are stories that aren't been told, there are gaps in history, that aren't been served by the system. Could you explain further? what specific histories do you want to transmit?

Okay, well, of course, primarily, especially from the beginning, I was trying to make some kind of contribution to the museum and the museum's history. Many children and everyday people spend time in museums, not necessarily reading history books or engaging with the history of Britain in a very formal way. However, they often take their children or have a day out because, in Britain, museums are free. So, it is a place where, though not everybody has it at the forefront of their minds, we, the people of Britain, own those buildings and the contents inside them because we pay taxes. They are public buildings and are free to enter.

So, this is all very good, and it means that the autodidact can actually engage with histories without a formal education. However, what I found over the years is that these histories, while beautifully presented and free, have gaps. There are places where the real story of how Britain became wealthy and the country that it is today is skipped over. There is not enough detail, and we know we know because of the way that the British keep archives, and keep records that those histories are there. We know exactly from church records and aristocratic archives of aristocratic families, who meticulously itemize everything they spent on food, clothes, and building houses, palaces, and castles dating back to the 1500s. So, that information is there, the church keeps very strict records from hundreds and hundreds of years in Britain, so we know this is very well documented, but it is not something that necessarily is translated into the free accessible history of Britain in museums.

For instance, we might have marvelous objects owned by aristocratic families in the 1700s, and the museum might not mention that their wealth was acquired through owning people in the Caribbean, owning slaves, and running huge plantations. It does not say that. The museum might simply state that these are lovely objects owned by Lady somebody who had a house in some place with a huge estate in Britain, end of the story. And I felt and still feel that it is important to highlight how this country that I am living in, that I belong to is what it is. I sometimes devise exhibitions and projects that I have offered to museums to animate the existing objects. The beautiful dining set owned by Lady someone is still there, but I display my dining set alongside it in the next room and you compare the history you see to the contemporary history that I am presenting.

Throughout my career, I have tried to do this by negotiating with curators and offering almost a service. Many curators are interested because it doesn't cost them much, but it opens up a conversation with audiences, schools, or scholars who then find connections and much deeper histories than I know about. That's what I mean by filling the gaps.

2. *A Fashionable Marriage* is inspired by Hogarth's series of paintings, "Marriage à la Mode", which portrays the upper class in the 18th century. Why did you choose Hogarth as a reference?

Well, Hogarth has done Black people and Britain a great favor. Although almost every image he presents of the black figure is derogatory and disgusting in many ways, he did us a favor of giving us evidence of our belonging in Britain for many hundreds of years. In those discussions where the right wing will talk about our presence in those countries as something that happened from the 1960's, this accidental inclusion, his obsession with degrading everybody including the French (whom he is critical and very satiric about). We were here, so the British must have been over there, and the pictorial evidence, along with the clever but vicious nature of his works, allows me to do the same thing. While referring to somebody who is quintessentially British, I was able to inhabit British art history by using that work.

3. *A Fashionable Marriage* satirizes Hogarth's work and serves as a critique of white archives. Do you perceive your art as a reaction to white art or white history?

Oh well, the use of the word "white" is somewhat problematic because I am not that interested in whiteness. I am interested in having conversations with black audiences: How do we see ourselves, how do we look like in the museum, how is our story being told. When we visit can we see our families and sisters, if you go to an art gallery, can you see your sister, so that's my primary thinking. Of course, an extension of that is the art, especially in 1980's. Rather than think about how to react to whiteness. I am trying to take the conversations about the everyday life of people in the African diaspora forward rather than respond to a white agenda. Of course, I am responding to a white agenda but not in opposition to it. I am trying to bring them in into filling the gaps, that's the point about this show here- it is not oppositional. we are telling each other ours stories, you can listen to those stories, but in the listening to them we all then have to take actions, because we all took part in the first place, but now we are calling the agenda, we are telling our stories, so the museum has to re-look at their archives, their holdings, the histories they are telling and help in the filling of those gaps, but it is not an opposition, it has to be a dialogue, and it is slow of course, and it is organic. But, opposition produces a short term aim , and then you are two steps forward and eight steps backward and I need for us to be steadily moving forward , so it is a dialogue and really is.

4. *A Fashionable Marriage* is based on plate 4 "The Countess's Levee", from Hogarth's painting. Is there any particular reason behind choosing this plate?

Yes, because at the time, I was talking about the similarity between the British art world and the political world of Britain. So, the British art in the 1980's was very much putting forward itself as something much more liberal than the right-wing agenda of Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan. It putted so forward as something else above that and I was trying to say no, you think that's what you are doing, but this is not what you are doing. But what is interesting in that in those two scenarios playing out, how the British art world worked in the 1980's and how the political scenario played itself out of the 1980's is that Black people was central to both of those scenarios, they played a different role in those scenarios but we are not going away from either of those sets of things that were happening, and everybody globally was going to have to deal with that.
The artists became more visible, but very political. They were able to speak to the political agendas of black activists at that time, so the artists and black activists were having real conversations, and theoretical and hypothetical conversations with actual black activists. So, it was showing in a naive way in some ways, you can't show it in a painting, but in one installation. But I tried, I probably would never try that now, I realize that in hand side more than I realized it at that time, but I thought it was taking a moment with. In fact, it was more than that because it was a kind of marking a moment in history, but I didn't really realize that only after I was making fun.

5. Could you talk more about what kind of things and materials did you use and what specific aspects did you focus on during the creative process?

A lot of the time I was using those materials because I didn't have any money, so I was using whatever I found in the streets, so that's easy to use, I would make things from that; the collage is easy in that way, because you have especially then newspapers and magazines are just there, old wood, old bits of plastic, you can make things out of staff that are lying around, but that's really because I didn't have the money to buy.
I didn't have the money to buy materials. Since then, I have become very interested to use found materials, but I would more buy those objects, cheaply. I would buy a hundred old plates and jugs, and then paint on those. The use of found objects is a little bit much more structured now because I have the money to buy those things.

6. Which colonial texts and archives do you consider most significant art historical influences? Where you inspired by any?

Not really. Those early works were influenced by my reading of African American novels—authors like Toni Cad Bambara, Toni Morrison, Alice Walker. I delved into the works of these women, African American writers, and also explored poems by Essex Hemphill, Audre Lorde, and essays. The influences were more literary than theoretical.

7. Can you elaborate on the statement "my work carries a political message"? What does that mean to you, and could you provide more context?

Sometimes, mostly yes, even when I am talking about something like love or loss, I frame it quite often within the political context. I am quite interested in how the political crushes into one's personal life, those things are not separate. I think there are many ways of living one's life and there are many parts, strategies, and roads that you can travel. And to think that there is only one way is not possible. And yet seeing things as binary opposites is not useful in anyways but quite often that is the nature of political art. Right or wrong and I suppose what I am trying to say is rather more complicated than that. The way that it impacts one's personal life is what is interesting rather than great moments in history which are thoughts and concepts.

8. How can you position your art among other contemporary artists dealing with slavery?

Well, I tend especially recently, rather than say it with « Naming the Money », but even that I tend to come at it obliquely, so I don't have the tough kind of stands of kiff Pipa or Eddie Chambers or Donald Rodney who depict the enslaved person in chains, in irons, on the ship. I am more interested in opening up a space where audiences can bring their own trauma into the painting or installation and animate that trauma. I am not interested in depicting the suffering because, as an audience member myself, I am then debilitated by confrontations with that. What can I do with that? Also, as European white audiences, are then repelled and also not able to dialogue.
However, without those men, Kiff Pipa, Eddie Chambers, Donald Rodney doing that in the first stage, I am not sure I would have had a space to do it. I am utterly grateful for their visual leap because they lept into that arena and made a space for me not to have to approach it that way if I didn't want to. So, that's the kind of distinction I am always making work which is a presupposing that there is a possibility for dialogue. And I think some of those people dealing with the subjects still fill the need to show what it was like, and I have no argument with that. However, it is simply not what I can do, and that's the sort of distinction I think between the two.

9. In the walker gallery, you have chosen to place your figures within 17th and 18th century. Is there any particular reason behind such exposure? Was your art a kind of response?

There are two ways to show "Naming the Money". The best way is when you see it at APC or Spike Island, or when it was first shown at the Hatten Gallery, that is the way to show it. But because I am also interested in this gap filling, there is another way to show it. It is to show the figures alongside the objects that were bought because of their existences resulting from slavery and the British slave trade. Wealthy people became wealthier and were able to commission artworks, houses, furniture, etc for hundreds of years, and so these figures are signifiers for that. But what is conversely then lies in what that does because they have to be exhibited in ones and twos, it puts them back to the place where they were originally placed, in those stately homes. That is the opposite of what I am really trying to do,

which is take them out of these stately homes and the ground European paintings and bring them all together in a space to engage in dialogue with each other. So, that way of showing them in amongst the collections has its disadvantages but sometimes I do it because it's much more complex to have it.

And whatever museum has the courage to do it sometimes you think, "Okay, I will go along with that" because they do genuinely want to try it, to put a cutter next to a Rembrandt. It is like outrageous because the people that come to see the Rembrandt do not want the politics of black representations interrupting their dialogue. So, if the museum will do it sometimes it is good but it's sort of not really what the piece was made for.

10. In *Naming the Money*, I would like to know where the names came from and why naming is important to you. Where did the title come from?

Well, the names came from everywhere I could find them. So, I asked everyone I knew, "What's your uncle's name? What's your cousin's name?" People would say, "I have this auntie who lives in Accra." I read lots of African folktales, and I took names from there—Heinemann African Writers Series; I took names from there. Some of them were unfamiliar to me, but I needed 100 names. I looked at baby names. Everybody has a real African name. "My name is Vuka; they call me Sam. They are my owner, and my owner called me that" because they only could be bothered. In the States homes, very often, when there were white or black servants, there were people looking after the horses, people cleaning, people mending, the grooms, chambermaids. For instance, you would call all the grooms John, so when you wanted your horse, you only had to shout John. Even if they came and went and years went by, if you wanted a horse, you always shouted JOHN, and the grooms would come. All the people in there, these are their real names, their actual names. But they give them another name, another identity. The names are repetitive because there are 10 Jacks, 10 Sallies, 10 Dans.

11. *Naming the Money* has a poetic dimension. Where did that come from and why was that important to you?

I have been writing for many years, and I don't think what I write is poetry. I see it as a text, but many of my writings have poetic texts in them, it is a kind of call and response to yourself. But yes, I just decided that's how I would make this installation work, how I would animate it in the sense. Since I incorporated all those texts into the soundtrack with the music going through, then if you didn't know how to read English but you understood English, as lots of people in Britain and small children in Britain do, whatever people who wants to go to an art gallery to look not read can hear it. The text is important.

12. In “Le Rodeur”, there is a refiguration of The *Zong* Massacre through 100 paintings, through which you are trying to convey the ghost of it all. Could you explain the notion of the ghost a bit further?

“Le Rodeur” is a series of 6 Canvas paintings made around 2016,2017, 2018 across those three or four years. They are based on the story of “le Rodeur”, the French ship that set sail on a root to Guadeloupe and on the way every single captured African went blind and almost every member of the French crew went blind, so two men sailed this ship across the Atlantic alone but with a whole ship worth with blind people. So, I wanted to evoke the horror of that situation without painting a picture of that. This series of “Le Rodeur” paintings show people in dramatic situations, but in a state of the unknown; they don’t know where they are, they don’t know who they are, they don’t know why they are there and they don’t know who else is there. A state of an absolute anxiety and trauma; for instance, if the two of us were suddenly blind, we wouldn’t know where we were, we wouldn’t know who else was in the room and we wouldn’t even know in some sense whether anyone else was aware of us in the room.

So that was the kind of mirror but only slightly the experience of being among hundreds of other people in the hold of a ship. You don’t understand what a ship is, you don’t understand where you are going, Nobody told you where you were going and you are blind, you don’t understand what’s the sea is because you have never seen the sea and you are Blind. A total trauma that’s those six canvases of “The Rodeur”.

And the *Zong* discussions are within the exhibition *Revenge,* so in the *Zong* what’s happening is the ship sets out and there is a worry on the part of the captain that they are going to run out of fresh water before reaching the Caribbean. So what is the premise? What actually is happening is that the captured Africans are beginning to revolt and being disruptive and they have enough strength of mind to try to gather the other captured Africans on the ship to mutiny to rebel so the captain threw them overboard while they still alive. And the excuse that he uses is that if he hadn’t done that they would run out of fresh water before they reached the Caribbean, although records show there was plenty on board. However, the captain was throwing them overboard because they were disruptive, but he got into trouble for that because they worth a lot of money so he needs to explain why he actually threw money away. They took him to court in America, he went through the legal system and he was severely reprimanded for this because he threw away good money but not because he’d thrown away people’s lives, and he argued that if they had run out of fresh water even more would have been lost because more slaves would have died. But of course, the reason it’s not a water issues, he didn’t miscalculate, it was if he did allow this rebel, he would have lost everything. These are two distinct narratives presented in two different exhibitions in two different ships, doing two different things.