

Visit to Lubaina Himid Exhibition.

On March 30th 2022 a group of members ventured to London for a first gallery visit post pandemic. A brisk walk along the river enjoying familiar sites brought us to Tate Modern in good time for coffee and our date with lecturer Frank Woodgate.

Frank was to introduce us to the somewhat unfamiliar work of Turner prize winning artist, Lubaina Himid. Born in Zanzibar in 1954 and raised in England by her mother a textile designer. As a teenager she 'shopped' seeking out textiles and fashion before studying Theatre Design at Wimbledon College of Art. During the 1980's she played a pivotal role in the British Black arts movement as she explored her interests in opera and architecture. In interviews she appears softly spoken, measured and self effacing, qualities that inform her work.

Frank continued by explaining the aims of the show. Himid as painter and story teller wants to draw attention to history and extraordinary moments of every day life. We should expect paintings on canvas, furniture and textiles brought to life with sound and poetry. But labelling is sparse, Himid creates a stage set, asks questions and we as participants must continue the narrative and provide our own solutions.

Frank was canny. He suggested themes we might consider. Gender, the African diaspora, Europe's economy, structural rules and regulations, but also personal thoughts and memories. He offered clues for interpreting the works. Notice the leitmotifs, well-dressed figures, confined spaces, empty chairs, joyfully patterned textiles and endless sea. Hear music and the human voices repeated. Observe deliberate quotations of historic artists, Hogarth, Picasso, Tissot and Matisse, and make connections. But Frank kept his own conclusions to himself.

Fortified by an excellent Tate lunch and some puzzled chat we made our way to the exhibition.

At the entrance a series of cloth flags inspired by east African kanga textiles featuring evocative lines of poetry entitled, 'How do you spell change?' served as a prelude for what was to come.

Here are a few works that interested me.

Metal Handkerchiefs, a series of nine vibrantly painted sheets of metal depicting tools, accompanied by spoken quotations from health and safety guides, questioning the kind of buildings women want to live and work in.

Jelly Mould Pavilions from Liverpool, a joyful installation of ceramic vessels, imagined as an architectural competition to design public monuments for the city. Himid is compelling us to relate sugar production not only to the appalling transatlantic trade in captured Africans, but to Liverpool's wealth, history and culture. She asks 'What are Monuments For?'.

Between The Two My Heart Is Balanced, a stunning canvas referencing the African Diaspora, whilst celebrating the power of women as decision makers, who, as Himid says, are 'working out complicated futures together'.

Old Boat/New Money, an arrangement of upended spars painted in marine blue with cowrie shells at the base. The shells represent currency and reference the beach, a place of pleasure and trauma. It's intended to be ambiguous, but for me the undulating ripples of the arrangement evoke rhythm and harmony, interacting with and connecting the pictorial themes of the surrounding canvases.

A Fashionable Marriage, a well known parade of life-size cut-outs satirising Thatcherite Britain. References to Hogarth, Picasso and others (thank you Frank) serve to emphasise the universality of the narrative; art, sex, greed and moral corruption. Close by, Himid's parody of Picasso's *Le Train Bleu* is a gem. Two black women dressed in airmail envelopes strut along a bedsheet that serves as a canvas. Visions in pink, my favourite.

Le Rodeur, a disturbing composition featuring multiple figures in ambiguous reactions. Referencing an horrific event in Europe's economic history, Himid explains her intention to create an image that 'conveys a sense of absolute inability to understand what was happening'.

Men's Drawers, poignant portraits of men within furniture. Displaced they have moved on and we are left to consider 'memories of people whose names no one had bothered to write down'.

Himid addresses difficult political and social issues. But her work is a joy to look at. The diversity of her subject matter underscored by her varied choice of medium is cleverly brought together through her technique. Monumental figures, bold lines, a vibrant palette, strong patterning and intense handling of paint feature in all her works, contributing to the interweaving of her themes over time and place. Himid's works are softly spoken, grounded and self effacing, Despite their disturbing subjects they do not repulse but engage you in the debate. Critics have been critical, it's their job, but I thoroughly enjoyed the show. If you didn't join us I recommend you go. The exhibition ends on July 3rd 2022.

Helen Thorne, April 2022.

