

Lubaina Himid (b.1954), *A Fashionable Marriage*



Lubaina Himid, *A Fashionable Marriage*, 1986, installation view taken in 2017 © Nottingham Contemporary Photo: Andy Keate; Digital image courtesy the artist and Hollybush Gardens

Key facts:

- **Date:** 1986
- **Size:** Larger than life-size figures, installation approximately 6m across
- **Materials:** Mixed media - acrylic on wood cut-outs with collaged newspapers, magazines and other ready-made elements
- **Nationality:** British
- **Scope of work for Pearson Edexcel A Level:** Identities in art and architecture

1. ART HISTORICAL TERMS AND CONCEPTS

Subject Matter

Himid's large-scale multi-figure installation is directly related to work by the radical English painter William Hogarth (1697-1764). In Hogarth's time within the European academic tradition there was a hierarchy of subject matter with History painting at the top, followed by portraits, and then genre scenes of everyday life. Hogarth rejected this and developed narrative scenes which he called 'modern moral subjects' to satirise the lives and social ambitions of various classes. Unlike his contemporaries he 'squarely stood for the ideals of his own class instead of representing ... the ideals of the class for which he worked' (Pevsner) and touched on both tragedy and comedy. Himid's work relates to his series of paintings addressing rank and status called *Marriage à la Mode* 1743 (now in the National Gallery), specifically Scene 4: *The Toilette* also known as *The Countess's Morning Levée*. This scene is like a theatre set packed with cultural, social, sexual, economic and political details, from the art on the walls, to the fashions and gestures of the figures and deserves a very detailed analysis. When Himid first exhibited *A Fashionable Marriage* she wrote a description of the Hogarth: "It shows a world of masquerade and illicit affairs. The Countess is in her bedroom having her hair done with her lover, Silvertongue the lawyer; her husband is away. The musical

entertainment which ‘covers’ their liason (sic) is provided by a famous castrato of the day. The audience ranges from the bored to the ridiculous. On the walls are paintings of rape scenes ‘balanced’ by a portrait of an eminent clergyman. The Black slave/servants serve refreshments, decorate the room with their presence and witness the scene.” (1986 exhibition brochure)

The inclusion and role of Black servants within the scene goes beyond how Hogarth’s contemporaries would stereotypically have represented such figures. They used them as a visual foil to ‘whiteness’, as ‘exotic’, or as an anonymous sign of the patron’s wealth, power and status. If children, they were often what Catherine Molineux described as a ‘slave-child-pet parallelism’.



Himid wrote “Hogarth loathed everyone and everything that wasn’t English, however what he bequeathed Black people, inadvertently, was some visible documentation of our contribution to and existence in British life.”

William Hogarth, *Marriage A-la-Mode: 4, The Toilette*, circa. 1743, oil on canvas, 70.5 × 90.8 cm. Digital image courtesy of The National Gallery (NG116)

Himid’s installation is a pastiche of Hogarth’s painting. Her aim ‘was a satirical attack on funders, critics, artists, politicians and the hypocrisy of an art world that mirrored the political world but was too duplicitous to admit it.’¹ Reading from the left, Hogarth’s plump *castrato* has become a vocal art critic (identified by collaged covers from *Art Monthly*), the flautist is now on top of a plank spray painted with dollar and euro signs representing the relatively new global art market which has taken over from the British art market. The ‘foppish’ patron/arts funder is literally sitting on the fence, unable to decide on art education or partnership funding – the Greater London Council had funded multicultural arts programmes but was disbanded in 1986 by the Tory government, and business sponsorship of the arts dominated. The two men with red lips embracing each other described as ‘The Angst/Complacent School of British Painting’, are a critique of the newly emerging Glasgow Boys’ figurative work, and also of ‘gay white male privilege in the art world’ from art historians to Hockney and Gilbert & George. The swooning woman in white is replaced by a white construction displaying plates painted with vulvas in reference to radical feminist Judy Chicago’s *Dinner Party* (1974-79) recently exhibited in London (2024), in which only one of the thirty-nine plates represents a woman of colour – Sojourner Truth. Perhaps the structure, as distinct from the silhouettes, refers to the separate ‘herstory’ some feminist art historians were pursuing, and the white dress a feminist rejection of traditional heterosexual marriage unchanged since Hogarth’s day. The black male servant-slave in the centre of Hogarth’s work, serving hot chocolate with sugar – all ‘products’ from the Caribbean in a capitalist economy – becomes a powerful frontal female figure. With a dress

¹ <https://lubainahimid.com/portfolio/naming-the-money/>

painted like the ocean Himid goes to the heart of slavery, the horror of the Middle Passage in the Trans-Atlantic triangular trade.



On the right hand side, Himid critiques Britain in the 1980s from a political viewpoint. The French (hated by Hogarth) hairdresser has become syncophantic Tory MP, so excited to be close to Prime Minister Mrs Thatcher he has a huge erection! The seated cardboard cut-out Thatcher explicitly outlines her policies as a 'staunch supporter of Apartheid' (text), in a pit helmet crushing the miners' strike in the 'battle' of Orgreave² and as the war-mongering (Falklands War) Iron Lady riding a Nato tank. It also references the contemporary satirical TV show Spitting Image³. She points across to US President Ronald Reagan: reclining, not on the stars and stripes, but on cruise missiles – at that time located at Greenham Common – signalling their 'special relationship' during the Cold War. The figures reference the 'most explosive love story ever', a redesigned parody poster of the racist film *Gone with Wind* used as part of a campaign to raise awareness of the threat of nuclear war. In the foreground Hogarth's very knowing turbaned boy pointing out the immorality and cuckoldry of the ruling classes has become an apparently innocent young girl (based on a childhood photo of artist Maud Sulter) but actually representing 'Ka – the Spirit of Resistance' (Himid). With a suitcase covered with evidence of migration and international travel, a handgun and a basket full of inspirational texts on ancient Black cultures and contemporary political radicals, she is clearly capable of resisting mainstream culture and making a new life and a new form of art.

Two-dimensional images in the background copy Picasso's work and comment on the foreground figures – whether a portrait of his patron Gertrude Stein between the art funders and critics, or the violent mythological rapes behind Thatcher and Reagan.

3 images above and below Lubaina Himid, *A Fashionable Marriage* (detail), 1986, installation view taken in 2017 © Nottingham Contemporary Photo: Andy Keate; Digital image courtesy the artist and Hollybush Gardens

² See Jeremy Deller's film reconstructing the Battle of Orgreave (2001) https://www.jeremydeller.org/TheBattleOfOrgreave/TheBattleOfOrgreave_Video.php
³ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=txBZ8cH1eVc>



Formal Qualities

With eleven larger than life-size cut-out figures and various three-dimensional props, as well as two-dimensional scenery, the installation changes slightly every time it is exhibited. (These images date from 'The Place is Here' Nottingham Contemporary 2017.) The exhibition space functions much like a stage on which Himid's characters are meticulously placed to act out their choreographed roles in a grand drama. The layout directly mirrors that of Hogarth's rococo style work when seen from centre front and uses all the skills Himid had learnt as a theatre designer. The silhouettes of the individualised figures, with their specific proportions, poses, gestures and expressions, speak directly and wittily. Their vivid colours animate them, whether in flat acrylic or with varied decorative patterns suggesting fabrics. Aesthetically the collaged texts might almost be graffiti, yet they contain explicit political messages from newspapers and magazines about her contemporary experience. The use of text also refers to Hogarth's contemporary British political satirists of the C18th such as Cruikshank.

At art college Himid had been influenced by dummy boards, also sometimes called 'silent companions', which were life-size, flat, wooden figures that formed part of 17th-century room decoration and were sometimes used for advertisements. She was also influenced by David Hockney's set designs, based on Hogarth's *Rake's Progress* series for Stravinsky's opera of the same name in 1975. Significantly Hockney, as a gay male artist, included his personal narrative within the subject, while Himid included a childhood portrait of her partner at the time, artist Maud Sulter, as the Black child in the foreground.

2. CULTURAL, SOCIAL, TECHNOLOGICAL AND POLITICAL FACTORS

Himid is biracial and was born on the island of Zanzibar in 1954. Shortly after her birth her African father died and her mother, a textile designer, returned to England to live in London with her sister, a musician. These early family surroundings of pattern, colour and decoration influenced her as did visits to museum and department stores.⁴ She gained a BA in Theatre Design at Wimbledon School of Art, graduating in 1976; this impacted on the theatricality and drama of her installation. Hogarth himself aimed to 'compose pictures on canvas, similar to representations on the stage... subjects which will both entertain and improve the mind.' In 1983/84 Himid wrote her MA in Cultural History

⁴<https://lubainahimid.com/portfolio/naming-the-money/>

at the Royal College of Art on 'Young Black British Artists in Britain Today' and met the founding members of the Blk Art Group from the Midlands (Marlene Smith, Claudette Johnston, Keith Piper, Eddie Chambers). Their political influence on her was profound and led to her direct engagement in her installations with the racism of British colonial history and contemporary racism, while at the same time she explored her sexuality and feminism. In the 1980s women artists were almost 'totally invisible. The only way you could see yourself was by looking in the mirror. So making ourselves visible was the purpose of our work.'⁵ Himid was establishing herself as a curator. She organised *Five Black Women* (1983) at the African Centre in Covent Garden, *Black Women Time Now* (1983) at Battersea Arts Centre, and *The Thin Black Line* at the ICA in 1985, which included the work of Marlene Smith, Sonia Boyce, and Sutapa Biswas. Art history was coming to terms with the presence and representation of Black British figures with David Dabydeen's *Hogarth's Blacks* (1985).

A Fashionable Marriage is full of youthful righteous anger at the sexism and racism of the art world (shown on the left) and the Cold War politics of war-mongering right-wing politicians - with the British PM throwing herself at the US President.

Thatcher called Nelson Mandela a terrorist and declared that the British were 'really rather afraid that this country might be swamped by people with a different culture.'⁶ In London the death of Cherry Groce - shot by police in her house in Brixton, and the death of Cynthia Jarrett - after a police raid on Broadwater Farm Estate in Tottenham - had led to uprisings in 1985, described as 'riots' in the press.

Meanwhile the white establishment art world institutions ignored the political fury and remained closed to Black artists. They had been slow to accept both Hogarth and Modernist Picasso, but in Himid's critique the white feminist artist and Black woman artist are still attempting to gain the attention of critics and funders alike. Only the child – right foreground – has the necessary weapons to make a new world. 'London in the 1980s in the midst of the hedonistic, greedy, self-serving, go-getting opportunistic mayhem was a fabulous location for me as a satirist and wit. Everyone who shook or moved in artistic semicircles or political whirlpools was a deserving dartboard. I took aim and threw.' (Himid)⁷

By 1990 the media frenzy had moved to the Young British Artists (YBAs) and Himid left the London. She only visited Zanzibar in 1997.



⁵ *ibid*

⁶ <https://lubainahimid.com/portfolio/naming-the-money/>

⁷ <https://lubainahimid.com/portfolio/a-fashionable-marriage/>

Left Lubaina Himid, *A Fashionable Marriage / Marriage à la Mode / The Countess's Morning Levée*, 1986, wash drawing with collage, 74.5 x 54 cm. Digital image courtesy of Victoria and Albert Museum, London (E.599-1996) / Lubaina Himid

Centre and right Lubaina Himid, *A Fashionable Marriage* (detail), 1986, installation view taken in 2017 © Nottingham Contemporary Photo: Andy Keate; Digital image courtesy the artist and Hollybush Gardens

3. DEVELOPMENTS IN MATERIALS, TECHNIQUES AND PROCESSES

'The reasons for making cut outs rather than paintings came from I think my training as a theatre designer and a desire to have art in the room, present, in the moment and not distant and framed within a rectangle. They were always meant to be part of the furniture the emphasis simply moved from domestic to public/political.'⁸ Himid made detailed preparatory drawings and watercolours for the figures, with the focus on silhouette and colour before making larger than life size wooden cut-outs which were then painted in acrylic and collaged. Collaged elements include newspapers (chosen for their specific texts) much like Picasso used in his Synthetic Cubist works, and magazines directly relating to critical writing on contemporary art such as *Art International*, *Art Monthly*, *Block* and *Time Out*. These are both highly decorative and politically astute. Other elements include a series of disposable gloves making up the frills on the shirt of the art critic. Ready-made objects include a basket with books by Malcolm X and Guyanese historian and activist Walter Rodney, both assassinated for their political activism.



Lubaina Himid, *A Fashionable Marriage*, 1986, installation views taken in 2017 at the Ferens Art Gallery, Hull. Digital images courtesy the artist and Hollybush Gardens

4. WAYS IT HAS BEEN USED AND INTERPRETED BY PAST AND PRESENT SOCIETIES

Himid's interest in Hogarth lay in parallels and continuities between C18th London and the 1980s. As Jacqueline Riding wrote in *Mid Georgian Britain* (2010): 'And as the century advanced, and trade and nascent empire expanded, Britain's and therefore London's wealth would be inextricably linked with another kind of human trade. Any discussion on Georgian luxury goods must be prefaced with human exploitation in general and the transatlantic slave trade in particular. It is estimated that as much as half of Britain's wealth derived directly or indirectly from the trade' (p.8).⁹

When *A Fashionable Marriage* was first shown in 1986 at the Pentonville Gallery, London, its hard-hitting satire and humour were highly controversial and critical responses came from the popular

⁸ <https://lubainahimid.com/portfolio/naming-the-money/>

⁹ See University College London database 'The Legacies of British Slavery'

press rather than the art establishment. As with white feminist art at the time, it was discussed in relation to politics rather than aesthetics. 'To the Black artist the white world clearly looks a dismal place in which everyone is conspiring to keep her out [...] what ultimately weakens the piece, though, is that Lubaina spits her rage and sprays her bullets too widely. In denouncing absolutely everyone except the Black artist she paints her own halo rather too golden.'¹⁰ Yet in 1987 Sandy Nairne presented a six-part TV series *The State of the Art* for Channel 4, the final episode of which focused on identity politics in art and featured Himid. In 1990 Himid and Sulter set up their own publishing company, Urban Fox Press, to produce *Passion: Discourses on Blackwomen's Creativity*. In 1999 writer Niru Ratnam summarised the situation: 'Black and Asian British artists have been making work about their ethnicity from the early 1970s onwards, reaching a climax in the mid to late 1980s, when Black Art was recognized as a loose movement and the subject of a number of group exhibitions. Artists such as Rasheed Araeen, Keith Piper, Eddie Chambers, Sonia Boyce and Lubaina Himid all made work whose didacticism recalled feminist strategies of the 1970s. Yet, despite the number of exhibitions, conferences and theoretical tracts written, "Black Art" increasingly found itself labelled as worthy but uninteresting. As the serious 1980s art world, with its themes of AIDS, sexism and racism and its self-important movements such as German neo-expressionism, gave way to a more lightweight, ironic 1990s art world, most clearly manifested in the phenomenon of young British art, "Black Art" was quietly shelved by the critics and curators. The success of Anish Kapoor, who had determinedly kept his distance from "Black Art", only seemed to confirm to its advocates that they had been part of a short-lived politically correct moment which had had only a superficial impact on the art world's structures.'¹¹

A Fashionable Marriage was shown as part of the exhibition *The Place is Here*, at Nottingham Contemporary in 2014, and then in Hull in 2017 when the Daily Telegraph described Himid as "the under-appreciated hero of black British art". It has been suggested that this revival of interest is due to the contemporary zeitgeist as it 'resonates as a relevant rebuke of our current leadership today'.¹²

Art historian Griselda Pollock has long championed Himid's work and suggests the breakthrough into the mainstream has taken so long because "it requires you to recognise that here is a world of experience which is a world of beauty, imagination, pain and painful history that isn't about the white person. They don't recognise themselves in it and then they say 'well I don't know if this is ok.'"¹³

Ratnam argued in 2017: 'It's a remarkable turnaround for the artist and her agenda that underscores a recent and ongoing transformation: the open, cosmopolitan world that progressives assumed would be the natural corollary of globalization has been stopped in its tracks by such lamentable phenomena as Trump and Brexit. Nationalism, trade protectionism, and even white supremacy are back in the headlines. One might argue that the return of an artist like Himid has parallels with the unanticipated rise of a politician like Jeremy Corbyn, who until quite recently was dismissed as a relic of a strident leftism surplus to the requirements of a dominant neoliberal consensus. Himid's continued insistence that nativism, racism and exploitation wouldn't go away as easily as most hoped looks now to have been correct, and as a result, her critical vision is more relevant than ever.'¹⁴

¹⁰ Kent, Sarah 'A Fashionable Marriage' *Time Out* 3rd December 1986 p. 25.

¹¹ <https://newleftreview.org/issues/i235/articles/niru-ratnam-chris-ofili-and-the-limits-of-hybridity>

¹² <https://cshockart.com/2018/02/20/artist-a-day-lubaina-himid/>

¹³ <https://blog.fabrics-store.com/2019/12/10/lubaina-himid-reclaiming-the-past/>

¹⁴ <https://www.vice.com/en/article/lubaina-himid-turner-prize/> - article by Niru Ratnam

Himid is Professor of Contemporary Art at the University of Central Lancashire in Preston, where she has worked since she was 36. She was awarded an MBE (Member of the Order of the British Empire) in 2010. In 2017 she was the first Black woman and oldest artist to win the Turner Prize. She was awarded a CBE (Commander of the Order of the British Empire) in 2018. She had a major show in 2021 at Tate Modern and remains a major influence on young Black and Asian artists today for her work, her writing and her activism.

FURTHER READING AND LINKS

- Aikens, Nick and Robles, Elizabeth (Eds) *The Place is Here: the work of Black British Artists in 1980s Britain* 2019 Sternberg Press
- Beauchamp-Byrd, Mora J. *Cut-outs and 'silent companions': theatricality and satire in Lubaina Himid's 'A Fashionable Marriage'*
<http://contemporary.burlington.org.uk/journal/journal/cut-outs-and-silent-companions-theatricality-and-satire-in-lubaina-himids-a-fashionable-marriage-35>
- Dabydeen, David *Hogarth's Blacks* 1987 Manchester University Press
- Orlando, Sophie *British Black Art: Debates on Western Art History* 2016 Dis Voir
- Sulter, Maud (Ed) *Passion: Discourse on Blackwomen's Creativity* 1990 UFP