

# The Unbearable Whiteness of Being

Life between Islands: Caribbean-British Art, 1940s - now  
Tate Britain

Robin Richmond, December 1st, 2021



*Dennis Morris: Bob Marley shopping for Trenchtown kids, Leeds, 1974*



*Michael McMillan: Joyce's Front Room, 2021*



*Zak Ové: La Jablesse, 2013*

There must be something in the stars. In the very week that this landmark show opens in London, Barbados has become a Republic. In handing over the keys to the Kingdom, Prince Charles has spoken of the “appalling atrocity of slavery” – a shocking and welcome acknowledgment of the brutality of Empire and the island’s devastating colonial history. So, we must assume the toppling of statues has had an effect even on the Heir Apparent. For once, the royal family is not virtue signalling. Prince Charles’s speech sounded like a real apology. Extraordinary.

Rihanna has been named a national hero of Barbados, which is lovely, but the induction this week of the divine Josephine Baker, civil rights activist, superstar and Resistance hero,

into the Panthéon, France's mausoleum of its most significant historical figures is much more momentous. Long overdue. She is the first Black woman to be so honoured and her coffin now lies alongside Voltaire, Rousseau, Hugo, Zola, Simone Weil, and another great Resistance hero, Jean Moulin.

And this week the august Royal Society of Literature has elected as President its first person of colour (and only second woman in its 200-year-old history), the amazing Bernadine Evaristo. There has been sad news too. The fashion designer Virgil Abloh has died of cancer. I'm not sure in times gone by his passing would have made the front pages, and I'm not sure this would have even been on my radar. But times have changed and I have changed. I am more awake. Perhaps even woke. I am sensitised. Yes, statue toppling and exposure to the history of the African diaspora has made me aware of my privileged entitled ignorance, and Covid has had a lot to do with this. The disproportionately severe effect on people of colour has been tragic. All too hard and all too easy to explain.

So, having good things to celebrate is so precious and above all things this show is a celebration like no other I have seen. Visionary paintings and photographs, textiles, totemistic sculpture, installations, drawings, performance art, films, conceptual art, print making. The riches here on Millbank by the Thames are bountiful and boundless. And the Tate looks wonderful to me for the first time in years. When I came out into weak winter sunshine a few days ago I started thinking about the Tate itself. I was educated, stimulated, inspired and humbled by my own ignorance about the forty artists of Caribbean British origin that are included in its storied halls. I had no black teachers at my London art school. Very few black fellow students. This show made me think hard about the Britain that I thought I knew. I arrived in London in 1968, bright-eyed and bushy-tailed, head band round my forehead and sporting a phony Afro. This was the year of Woodstock. But it was also the year that the Conservative Member of Parliament for Wolverhampton West infamously quoted Virgil: "As I look ahead, I am filled with foreboding; like the Roman, I seem to see the river foaming with much blood."

Seeing this show at the Tate in the context of the refugee crisis and the hostile environment we, in Britain, present to the world, xenophobia rampant and migrants dying in our waters I found myself thinking about old Henry Tate. When, in 1897, the 1st Baronet, endowed the country with his personal collection of 65 art works – mainly Pre-Raphaelite paintings – and with £80,000 of his own personal fortune (worth over a hundred times that sum today) his money came from his sugar refinery in the West Indies. The slave trade had been abolished over 50 years before, but his wealth was dependant on the labour of African slaves and their descendants in the Caribbean. This is an irony not lost upon the Tate today, nor is it ignored or side-lined. Winston Churchill, as much of a white Englishman as Henry Tate, once said that history is written by the victors.

This show shows us that he was not entirely right.