

Life Between Islands: Caribbean-British Art 1950s–Now

Life Between Islands explores the relationship between the Caribbean region and Britain in art from the 1950s to today. Crisscrossing the Atlantic Ocean, it reconsiders British art history in the 20th and 21st centuries from a Caribbean perspective.

The majority of artists represented are of Caribbean heritage: they were born in the Caribbean and migrated to Britain either as adults or children; or they were born to parents who settled in Britain. All the artworks on display address the Caribbean by examining themes such as the role of culture in decolonization, the sociopolitical struggles that Caribbean-British people face, the social and cultural significance of home, the reclaiming of ancestral cultures, and the cross-cultural nature of Caribbean and diasporic identity.

Organized by the AGO and originated by Tate Britain

Co-Curated by David A. Bailey, Director, International Curators Forum, and Alex Farquharson, Director, Tate Britain

The AGO presentation is overseen by Julie Crooks, Curator, Arts of Global Africa and the Diaspora

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Generous Support: Gail Drummond and Bob Dorrance; Jack Weinbaum Family Foundation

Contemporary programming at the AGO is supported by the Canada Council for the Arts

Artists featured in the exhibition:

Hurvin Anderson

Frank Bowling

Sonia Boyce

Vanley Burke

Pogus Caesar

Blue Curry

Paul Dash

Peter Doig

Denzil Forrester

Claudette Johnson

Rachel Jones

Tam Joseph

Isaac Julien

Roshini Kempadoo

Neil Kenlock

Donald Locke

Hew Locke

John Lyons

Michael McMillan

Althea McNish

Steve McQueen

Marcia Michael

Ronald Moody

Dennis Morris

Chris Ofili

Horace Ové

Charlie Phillips

Keith Piper

Ingrid Pollard

Barbara Walker

Vron Ware

Alberta Whittle

Aubrey Williams

Denis Williams

Room 500

Arrivals

Most artists who travelled to the UK from the Caribbean arrived between the late 1940s and the early 1960s. Many took advantage of the 1948 British Nationality Act inviting “Citizens of the United Kingdom and Colonies” to “return to the mother country.” They joined the nearly half-million people leaving the British West Indies for Britain. The ship HMT *Empire Windrush* carried one of the first large groups from Jamaica to London in 1948 and gave its name to the Windrush generation of Caribbean immigrants.

Hailing from Guyana (then British Guiana) on the South American mainland, Barbados, Jamaica, Trinidad and Tobago, and various other islands, the newcomers discovered a common identity in

Britain. Barbadian writer George Lamming remarked, “we became West Indian” in London. Many Caribbean artists challenged the British colonial systems in which they had been born and raised, and questioned the dominance of British cultural values. Artists referred to African and Indigenous Caribbean cultures through new abstract and symbolic forms. They consciously reclaimed a heritage that had been fragmented and erased by centuries of slavery and colonization.

AUBREY WILLIAMS

born Georgetown, Guyana, 1926

died London, England, 1990

Tribal Mark II

1961

oil on canvas

Tate Britain

Aubrey Williams moved from Guyana to the United Kingdom in 1952 and trained at London’s Saint Martin’s School of Art in (now Central Saint Martins). Before leaving Guyana, he had worked as an agricultural officer for the government and moved to a remote

station amongst the Warao people. The central, bonelike form that appears in this painting was inspired by rock carvings Williams saw there, which provided instructions such as how to live sustainably in the forest. By positioning this against an abstract background, Williams presents a fusion of modernist abstract art and the visual culture of the Indigenous people of the Americas. He saw this form as violent, reflecting the history of colonization in Guyana.

RONALD MOODY

born Kingston, Jamaica, 1900

died London, England, 1984

Midonz

1937

elm

Tate: Purchased 2010

Ronald Moody was born in Jamaica in 1900 and went to Britain in 1923 to train as a dentist. After a visit to the British Museum in London, he was so inspired by the Egyptian art that he changed careers and became a sculptor. *Midonz* is an example of one of

three sculptures he made in this style, carving the female head from a single piece of elm.

Room 506

Artists and Writers

Some artists had multidisciplinary practices, drawing particularly on the relationship between art and writing. Frank Bowling wrote poetry before turning to painting. Denis Williams wrote two novels and later became an art historian, archaeologist, and anthropologist. John Lyons is both an artist and poet. These cross-cultural interests are something the Caribbean Artists Movement (CAM) also encompassed.

CAM was an ambitious alliance of writers, critics, and artists. They came together in London in 1966 under the leadership of writers Kamau (Edward) Brathwaite, John La Rose, and Andrew Salkey. They pursued a modern and decolonial Caribbean outlook across literature, painting, and other art forms. Artists who participated included Aubrey Williams, Althea McNish, Ronald Moody, Errol Lloyd, Winston Branch, and Paul Dash.

Many of CAM's participants intended to return to the Caribbean to participate in the cultural project of decolonization and nation-

building. Most stayed in Britain where debates shifted to developing a Black and British sense of community, highlighting struggles against racism and discrimination. CAM dissolved in 1972 but its influence was lasting.

SIR FRANK BOWLING

born Bartica, Guyana, 1934

Who's Afraid of Barney Newman

1968

acrylic paint on canvas

Tate: Presented by Rachel Scott 2006

Shortly after moving to New York in 1966, Frank Bowling created a series of paintings consisting of flat fields of colour. The works are like other American colour field paintings of the time. Here, Bowling references one such painter, Barnett Newman, and his work *Who's Afraid of Red, Yellow and Blue II* (1967). However, unlike other field artists, many of Bowling's works include stenciled outlines of continents—here South America, with Guyana enlarged. The series became known as map paintings.

PAUL DASH

born Bridgetown, Barbados, 1946

Talking Music

1963

oil on hardboard

Tate: Purchased with funds provided by the Nicholas Themans Trust 2022

Dash painted *Talking Music* while he was a student at the Oxford College of Education, and it shows his family home in Oxford. The family's living room, dining room, and rehearsal room was situated at the back of the house, away from the prying eyes of neighbours and passersby. It is populated by six figures: the artist, his father, three brothers, and a family friend. At the centre of the painting, the artist's father, seated with a guitar in his lap, is seen "arguing the point about a musical matter—chord progression." Dash's father, who had been a choir master in Barbados, continued the tradition of making and talking music as a form of cultural production and preservation. This domestic interior scene of family life is an important representation of Caribbean diasporic experience.

ALTHEA MCNISH

born Port-of-Spain, Trinidad and Tobago, 1924

died London, England, 2020

Painted Desert (Purple)

1959

cotton, plain weave; screen printed

Van Gogh (Red)

1959

screen-printed cotton

Trinidad (Red)

1961

screen printed; cotton crepe

Althea McNish moved to London from Trinidad at the age of 27. While studying at the Central School of Arts and Crafts (now Central Saint Martins) she was encouraged to focus on textiles, and she graduated from the Royal College of Art in 1958. McNish immediately received commissions from London's renowned Liberty department store, and her designs appeared in collections

for Christian Dior and on the pages of *Vogue* and *Harper's Bazaar*. Her bold, self-described “tropical” motifs and bright colour palette appealed to consumers during the gloom and austerity of postwar Britain. *Trinidad* features a tropical forest of palm leaves and was produced as furniture fabric. McNish was a key figure—and the only female artist—in the Caribbean Artists Movement.

Black Power

The British Black Panther Party (BBPP) was formed in 1968, two years after activists Huey P. Newton and Bobby Seale founded the Black Panther Party in the US. The UK group united people of African, South Asian, and Caribbean heritage. Photographer Neil Kenlock captured their activities and documented the wider community. Many BBPP members became engaged with other anti-racist activism throughout the 1970s and 1980s.

Black Power uprisings also took place in the Caribbean itself, notably in Jamaica in 1968 and Trinidad in 1970.

NEIL KENLOCK

born Port Antonio, Jamaica, 1950

Demonstration outside Brixton Library

1972, printed 2023

Abdul the British Black Panther Flag Bearer Leading a March, London

about 1970, printed 2023

Black Panther School bags

1970, printed 2023

archival pigment prints

Courtesy of the Neil Kenlock Archive

In the late 1960s, Kenlock joined the British Black Panther Party, becoming the group's official photographer. He photographed their activism against racism and discrimination. These photographs show key figures within the movement.

HORACE OVÉ

born Port-of-Spain, Trinidad and Tobago, 1939

died London, England, 2023

Darcus Howe Addressing the Mangrove 9 demonstration

1970, printed 2023

Dick Gregory and James Baldwin at the West Indians Students' Centre, Earl's Court, London

1969, printed 2023

Yesterday's Dream, Tomorrow's Reality: Barbara Beese Leading Demonstration, London

1970, printed 2023

The Lime: Sam Selvon, John La Rose and Andrew Salkey

1974, printed 2023

archival pigment prints

All works Courtesy of Horace Ové Archives

Horace Ové was a photographer, writer, and painter known for documenting Britain's Black diaspora. He is also considered the first Black British feature filmmaker, and his early work chronicles the radical counterculture of late-1960s London. Here, writers Sam Selvon, John La Rose, and Andrew Salkey are shown "liming," a Caribbean term for hanging out with friends. La Rose, Salkey, and writer Kamau (Edward) Braithwaite co-founded the Caribbean Artists Movement in 1966; it continued until 1972.

Selvon's book *The Lonely Londoners* (1956) was one of the first novels to detail the experiences of the Windrush generation. At the time of this photograph, Ové was working with Selvon on the screenplay for *Pressure* (1975), the first feature-length film by a Black British filmmaker.

Room 505

Pressure

The artists in this section were either born in Britain or arrived as children. Many of their works confront racism head-on. They reflect the Black British experience in the 1970s and 1980s: high unemployment, hostile media, police harassment, and violence and intimidation by far-right groups. However, like the large-scale uprisings of the 1980s, these works highlight more than the brutality and inequalities Black British communities faced. They signify collective power, community spirit, and solidarity. They document the spaces in which Caribbean culture and people thrived.

Sound systems provided the soundtrack to the period. DJs, engineers, and MCs set up in homes, on the streets, and in community centres. They offered a way to connect with culture

coming out of the Caribbean, especially Jamaica. For young Black Britons, music created opportunities for collectivity and celebration but also a means to address hostility and racism with a spirit of defiance. Dub poet Linton Kwesi Johnson named them the Rebel Generation.

VRON WARE

active London, England, 1970s–present

Black People’s Day of Action, 2nd March 1981

1981, printed 2023

archival pigment prints

Courtesy of the artist

On March 2, 1981, Ware attended the Black People’s Day of Action, documenting the event for the anti-fascist magazine *Searchlight*. On January 18, an arson attack had killed 13 young Black Londoners. The crime remained unsolved and was overlooked by the media and government. In response, the New Cross Massacre Action Committee was formed. The Committee planned the Black People’s Day of Action, marching to deliver “The Declaration of New Cross” to 10 Downing Street. As a result

of this activism, the call for justice took centre stage in British politics.

DENZIL FORRESTER

born Saint George, Grenada, 1956

Jah Shaka

1983

oil on canvas

Collection Shane Akeroyd

In the 1980s, Forrester captured London's dub reggae scene in large oil paintings, exploring its African cultural roots. His work considers how Rastafarianism—an Afrocentric religion developed in Jamaica in the 1930s—and dub music echo West African oral history traditions through storytelling and music. Forrester painted this work while studying at the Royal College of Art in London. It depicts Jah Shaka (c. 1948–2023), also known as the Zulu Warrior, a Jamaican sound system operator based in Southeast London. Forrester's gestural style and carnivalesque colours evoke the energy of the crowd. He made preliminary drawings in clubs to the length of the song, before painting in his studio.

ISAAC JULIEN

born London, England, 1960

Who Killed Colin Roach?

1983

U-matic video, colour, sound

Courtesy of the artist

Isaac Julien's first film is about the death of Colin Roach, aged 23, who was shot at the entrance of a police station in East London in 1982. Even though the police claimed Roach had taken his own life, evidence showed otherwise.

On seeing photographs of the demonstrations that followed, Julian said: "Whenever I see the photos I slightly gulp; I think 'Oh my god, that could be my mother,' because they were ordinary working-class Black people. There was no political agenda; they were just trying to find out what happened to their son. I was so moved by the demonstration that I decided it would be important

to document it, at least try and make a work which could be used by his family.”

Black Arts Movement

The First National Black Art Convention was held at Wolverhampton Polytechnic, in the Midlands of England, in 1982. Organized by the Blk Art Group, which was founded by Eddie Chambers, Claudette Johnson, Keith Piper, Donald Rodney, and Marlene Smith, it set out to debate “the form, function and future of Black art.” The event was a pivotal moment in what is now known as the British Black Arts Movement.

The artists associated with the movement engaged with pressing political and cultural topics, often coming together through various collectives and networks. Their work explores Black Britishness, diasporic identities, legacies of colonialism and slavery, systemic racism, and the intersections of race, gender, and sexuality. Working across a range of media and disciplines, they produced artworks, developed activist and community-oriented practices, and engaged with cultural theory.

The Black Arts Movement is now recognized as one of the most influential dimensions of British art in the 1980s.

VANLEY BURKE

born St. Thomas Parish, Jamaica, 1951

Dominoes at The Bulls Head, Lozells Road

1988, printed 2023

Mrs. Walker and her customers at her hairdresser's shop, Rookery Road

1979, printed 2023

Siffa Sound System, Playing the Carnival, Handsworth Park

1983, printed 2023

Professor Stuart Hall in his Office at Birmingham University, School of Cultural Studies

1975, printed 2023

archival pigment prints

Courtesy of the artist

Stuart Hall, a cultural theorist and political activist, was one of the founding members of the Birmingham School of Cultural Studies. He was born in Kingston, Jamaica, and moved to the UK to study at Oxford University. Hall referred to Burke's photographs as "histographs," which he defined as capturing "the personal, social and economic life of Black people as they arrived, settled, and became established in British society."

SONIA BOYCE

born London, England, 1962

She Ain't Holding Them Up, She's Holding On (Some English Rose)

1986

oil pastel and pastel on paper

Middlesbrough Collection at Middlesbrough Institute of Modern Art

Boyce's pastel drawing recalls the complex generational and gender dynamics of the Caribbean home in 1960s and '70s Britain. Here Boyce situates herself as a "strong" Black woman supporting a family, balanced in her hands. The work challenges

the idea of strength often expected of Black women and suggests the risks involved in holding on to parts of your heritage while forging your own identity. The introduction of the black rose as a decorative motif on the main figure's dress throws into question ideas about the English rose as a symbol of white femininity.

Room 503

Caribbean Regained: Carnival and Creolization

Creolization refers to the mixing of cultural influences and is a marker of Caribbean culture. It is closely related to the act of combining different languages, beliefs, and cultural practices, which is fundamental to African-based Caribbean religions. Many of the artworks in this exhibition reflect on this mixing as the result of prolonged conflict between African, Asian, and Indigenous societies and then-dominant European colonial powers. However, they also demonstrate the dynamic and generative nature of these cross-cultural exchanges.

Carnival is perhaps the most well-known example of creolization. Every Caribbean nation has its own version, whether it's called Carnival, Junkanoo, Jonkonnu, or Crop Over. Caribbean Carnival's origins lie in enslaved people mocking the luxurious excesses of their enslavers. It has evolved over time, maintaining

social significance. The actions of Carnival—masquerade, procession, making music, occupying space—are a means of affirmation.

JOHN LYONS

born Port-of-Spain, Trinidad and Tobago, 1933

Carnival Jouvert

2005

oil on canvas

Halamish collection, London (Courtesy of Felix & Spear Gallery)

Lyons moved to England to study art in 1959, but his childhood in Trinidad had an enduring impact on his work. His bold colours and expressionistic handling of paint capture the energy of this Trinidad carnival scene. “J’Oouvert,” or “jouvay,” the festival that marks the unofficial start of Carnival, means “break of day” in French creole. Lyons comments: “After the all-night dancing on Carnival Sunday, on the Monday morning when church bells ring and cocks crow signalling the dawn, dancehall revellers spill out onto the streets gyrating to the compulsive rhythm of the music.

They are soon joined by motley crowds, some parading miscellaneous fragments of last year's costumes."

Room 504

KEITH PIPER

born Mtarfa, Malta, 1960

Trade Winds

1992

computer-generated animation shown as digital video, four monitors, colour and ambient sound (stereo), four wooden crates

Courtesy of the artist

Piper's work is concerned with colonial history and its contemporary legacies. In *Trade Winds*, he uses digital media to transpose his own body to the Middle Passage and the Atlantic Ocean. Fragments of the history of the transatlantic slave trade are referenced on the soundtrack. The crates reference both the

commodities that enslaved Africans produced and the brutal way in which enslavement reduced people into commodities.

Room 509

SONIA BOYCE

born London, England, 1962

Crop Over

2007–2020

two-channel video (colour, sound, stereo, 15 min.), with Shaggy Bear wall vinyl

Courtesy of the artist and APALAZZOGALLERY

Barbadian festival Crop Over originates from enslaved plantation labourers' celebration of the end of the sugarcane season. Setting this work in the "great houses" associated with enslavement, Boyce presents festival characters Stiltman, Donkey Man, Mother Sally, and Shaggy Bear, together with a tuk band blending African and British folk traditions. She filmed the scenes in plantation houses in Barbados and at Harewood House in West Yorkshire, owned by enslaver Henry Lascelles in the 1700s and 1800s. In the film, folk characters transgress social hierarchies, much as the

rituals and revelries of carnival have done throughout the Caribbean. The video ends with scenes of Crop Over today, where the tourism industry, rather than sugar, has come to dominate.

Room 503

Past, Present, Future

The works in this final gallery were created over the last few years. They speak to the complex relationship between the past, present, and future, a theme that recurs throughout the exhibition. Stuart Hall, a Jamaican British cultural theorist, wrote that “detours through the past” are necessary “to make ourselves anew.” These recent works, while reflecting the period in which they were made, also draw on histories as sources of knowledge and inspiration.

The relationship between Britain and the Caribbean is often contradictory. On one hand, Caribbean music, food, literature, and art with Caribbean roots are embedded within British culture and have changed British society. On the other hand, changes to

immigration laws have severely limited migration from the Caribbean, and the government's hostile environment policies—aimed at making it as difficult as possible for temporary migrants to extend their stay—continue to impact communities across the UK.

The artists in this section explore these contradictions, building on the foundations laid by previous generations. They remain committed to critiquing and overcoming the consequences of centuries of colonization and discrimination.

Room 508

MICHAEL MCMILLAN

born 1962, High Wycombe, England

The Front Room: Inna Toronto/6ix

2023

Michael McMillan's *The Front Room* is an ongoing, site-specific installation. McMillan builds a narrative around fictional individuals who inhabit the homes and settings. This version, *The Front Room: Inna Toronto/6ix*, speaks to diaspora in the ways migrant communities expressed being Caribbean and becoming Canadian

through material culture in their homes (i.e., objects, photographs, music).

Gloria's Front Room

This front room belongs to Gloria, who stayed behind in the Caribbean as a child when her family emigrated to the UK as part of the Windrush generation in the early 1950s. Gloria rejoins her parents, Carmen and Bally, and siblings Henley, Marvin, and Paulette in Toronto in the 1960s. They visit relatives in the UK, where Carmen trained as a nurse with the National Health Service. Gloria also becomes a nurse, in Scarborough, Ontario, where she meets and marries Marcus, a teacher from the Caribbean. They have two children: a son, Marcus Jr., and a daughter, Michelle. We encounter Gloria's front room during the 1980s, with its evidence of her family's everyday lives: watching home movies on VHS, reading books and magazines, and listening and dancing to music. Gloria is always telling Marcus Jr. and Michelle that the front room is not their bedroom, and not to sit in their father's armchair.

The Front Room: Inna Toronto/6ix features a selection of images and video footage from the Vintage Black Canada archive, founded in 2019 by curator, writer, and doctoral researcher Aaron T. Francis.

Additional video from Keith Brown, alias Jerry Brown, record producer and founder of Summer Records. Footage from Mr. Jane and Finch courtesy of OYA Media Group and Mr. Winston LaRose. Furniture sourcing and set-decoration assistance by Dexter Bonaparte.

Room 502

BLUE CURRY

born Nassau, Bahamas, 1974

Islands, nos. 1–4

2022

conch shells, flashing LED lights, beach sand, dice, braided synthetic hair, plastic beads, plastic palm leaves, golf balls

Collection of the artist/TERN Gallery

These four works are part of an ongoing series of sculptures inspired by the chain of islands that make up the Caribbean. Each “island” incorporates materials associated with the touristic consumption of the region as a leisure space. In this work, Blue

Curry—who grew up in the Bahamas and lives in London—uses the visual language of late-20th-century minimalist art.

The artist comments: “So much of the Caribbean space depends economically on tourism. Its very survival still relies on centuries-old colonial fantasies; the exotic paradisiacal backwater untouched by modernity for others to escape to. As a person from the Caribbean, there is no escape from this deafening echo chamber of clichés and stereotypes.”

HEW LOCKE

born Edinburgh, Scotland, 1959

Jumbie House 2

2022

acrylic on wood with metal and textile additions

Courtesy the Artist, Hales Gallery, and P.P.O.W, New York

Based on an abandoned plantation house, Hew Locke’s newest sculpture, *Jumbie House 2*, features a sculptural dwelling on stilts, with marigold siding and a purple corrugated roof. It’s based on an abandoned plantation house in Guyana, the country where Locke spent his childhood. Constantly under threat of being

washed away by storms or rising sea levels, these crumbling structures echo anxieties surrounding climate change and historical erasure.

Room 501

ALBERTA WHITTLE

born Bridgetown, Barbados, 1980

We Remain With You

2022

raffia, acrylic, cotton, synthetic braiding hair, doilies, wool, felt, and cowrie shells on linen

Courtesy of the artist and Nicola Vassell Gallery, New York

Alberta Whittle sees collective care and compassion as a means of resisting racism and anti-Blackness. With its open arms, the figure in this work is a symbol of protection and guidance. The imagery and materials, such as raffia and clothing, reference performance and the culture of the Caribbean carnival, tuk bands—music from Barbados, where the artist was born—and masquerades. These traditions often fuse together elements from

West African and Indigenous and some aspects of European culture.

Alberta studied tapestry at Edinburgh College of Art in Scotland; textiles and textile art hold a special place in her work. Featuring imagery of water, birds, and masks, she created the woven backdrops in this work using a tufting tool. Over this she has collaged fabrics taken from her family archive.

Room 507

ISAAC JULIEN

born London, England, 1960

Paradise Omeros

2002

16 mm film shown as video, 3 projections, colour and sound (20 min. 29 sec.)

Courtesy of the artist

Paradise Omeros is an enquiry into “Creoleness”— the mixing of cultural influences. Julien’s mysterious narrative explores the blending of languages, attitudes, and landscapes to convey a sense of the experience of living between cultures. Achille, the young central character, first appears as a waiter in a beach hotel. He meets a trickster-like character who presents a choice of fates: “love” or “hate.”

Achille walks into the ocean, seeming to drown as so many did during the time of the Middle Passage, but resurfaces in a bleak concrete estate in 1960s London. Achille’s fate, as the trickster suggests, is mixed. A joyous Caribbean house party is interrupted by violence; meditative scenes of the sea cut to burning buildings; a potentially hostile encounter with a young white man ends in an amorous embrace. The film takes its title from Derek Walcott’s epic poem *Omeros* (1990). Walcott is heard reciting the poem and seen gazing over the ocean in his native St. Lucia, where Julien’s parents are from.