# EXHIBITIONS

## The Other Story

Ron Moody, *John The Baptist*, 1936

It is significant that, for the artists of the Afro-Asian diaspora, the closing of the decade, should be marked by the victory of successfully occupying the Hayward Gallery. By seizing the time and acting on the current wave of pro-black liberal sentiment, they have, under the astute guidance of curator/artist Rasheed Araeen, postulated 'another story' of modernist art development in post-war Britain and challenged the institutionalised fiction of the white hero artist.

The exhibition is well constructed and thematically sound, indicative of the decade of battling and planning which has gone into its presentation. It represents a marked victory over the diseases of apathy and virulent racism which have crippled both black and white artist communities in Britain over the fifty year period spanned by this historically based exhibition. Yet for all its radical rhetoric and defiant posturing, 'The Other Story' is still a visually tame representation of an immigrant culture entering a new era of popularity. In the decade of the nineties, when black street culture is poised to dominate the fashion and cultural centres of Paris, New York and London, 'The Other Story' is disconnected from these developments. It smacks of black liberal intellectualism and fails to fulfill its own manifesto of avant-gardism.

The visual agenda of the exhibition is presented to the viewer under the title, 'The Other Story', a subtle offensive strategy. 'Otherness' has become a fashionable concept amongst contemporary black intellectuals. Whereas the 'Other' was once a label employed by colonialists to demarcate the savage from the civilised, more recently it has been assumed by blacks themselves in an inverse attempt to exploit the history of guilt and differentiation inherent within it. Their present exclusive use of the term declaims the fact that historically its usage went beyond the boundaries of race to include issues of class and gender. It was a term which implied degeneracy. Further, the exploitation of 'Otherness' in art is no new notion; rather, it has characterised the promotion of Western art since the establishment of a *refusé* tradition and has been part and parcel of an heroic avant-garde lineage. To-day, identification with this grand narrative of differentiation has become essential to the process of making oneself visible, given the increasing blandness of Western material culture.

Hence there exist discreet parallels between the 'otherness' of the Western avant-garde lineage and 'The Other Story' as presented by Araeen. Despite his intention to maintain a purely historical approach, his indulgence in myth-making seems implicit within his choice of presenting 'a Story'. This also begs the question of the extent to which one can challenge modernism's exclusivity while using the same tools which have engendered it.

Integral to the narrative of an immigrant avant-garde is the conspiracy of the twenty-four artists who through their lives and their work provide the putty which reinforces this notion of 'otherness'. Araeen's written account attests to their individual experiences of isolation and alienation as artists within British society. Perhaps overly conscious of the tradition of the misunderstood artist in the manner of Van Gogh, we are offered their own anecdotes of self-hate and destruction of work. Their fragility is held up as a testament of their worth and one senses that the option to paint becomes both explanation for, and absolution from, the painful rigours of immigrant life. It is their pain which Araeen exploits best and uses to harness his four chronologically ordered thematic groupings: 'In the Citadel of Modernism'; 'Taking the Bull by the Horns'; 'Confronting the System' and 'Recovering Cultural Metaphors'. However, whereas these sections are apt, the supporting visual and written account proves weakest in its formative stages when essentially apolitical works are employed to support contemporary political needs. Araeen must have been hard-pressed to maintain a balance between myth and reality when selecting work for each segment of the presentation.

However, areas of contention and contradiction are still apparent. For instance, the present day unwritten but nevertheless verbalised requirement for proportionate female representation in such a group exhibition proves problematic. 'The Other Story' has a decided lack of female artists' work on display, particularly in its earliest segment, because fewer women chose to reside and practise in Britain during that period. Araeen could not have been expected to conjure up work in order to have the exhibition appear more balanced. Secondly, there is the debate regarding the validity of an Afro-Asian lineage. The 'Afro Asian' represents a type of categorisation which has only recently evolved, developing out of issues of 'blackness' and appropriate labelling of immigrant groupings. It is a label which would have been invalid in past decades.

The privileging of a political agenda over an aesthetic one works more comfortably with the more recent sections devoted to the sixties, seventies and eighties, in line with the growing self-consciousness of the painters as being combatants of political and racial oppression. In this respect the preference for being seen as 'an artist who happens to be black' is subsumed by 'the black artist who paints'. This reordering of the priorities of political content over aesthetic considerations more clearly underlines 'The Other' artist as being opposed to a Greenbergian modernist tradition.

These debates form part of contemporary critical analysis and modern artspeak. For the most part artists such as Ronald Moody, Ivan Peries, Francis Newton Souza and Avanish Chandra appear blissfully unaware of it within the context of the fifties. However, this is not to say that they were not political, but rather that they perceived their position in the narrower terms of the coloniser-colonised syndrome. Self recognition is transcended by an exploration of the ideal as perceived in the meditative and monumental heads of Ronald Moody and Avinash Chandra's idyllic scenes. Rather than being considered political there is an underlying strain of universalism which runs through the works of the fifties and sixties. Even in the abstact works of artists such as Aubrey Williams, Ahmed Parvez, Frank Bowling, Balraj Khanna and Avtarjeet Dhanjal the work remains represen-

tational in the sense that it strives to mirror the human condition. There is a sameness to the manner in which the surfaces are handled, with forms dispersed over all the canvas. Shapes are predominantly organic and evocative of life in its microcosmic form; the human form stripped of its skin, denying colour and race. This surface denial of difference is maintained in the section 'Taking the Bull by the Horns'. The conceptual nature of the works again denies authorship and more easily places the artist within a modernist groove. Although political in content, the means of creating these statements and the thought processes involved fall entirely within the larger framework of international modernism. It is in this section that the challenge to the western avant-garde and the notion of the black artist as a frontrunner within the British art scene, are at their strongest. Certainly the work of David Medalla, Li Yuan Chia and Rasheed Araeen in this section manifest, and may even have heralded, the conceptual trends of the sixties in Britain.

By contrast, the work of the later period, 'Confronting the System', becomes increasingly political and separatist in content. The cohesion and subtle uniformity of the more abstract works of the '60s are subverted by the anarchic anti-art trends which exploit and deny the value of artists' tools and materials. It is Gavin Jantjes who sets the pace, with artists like Keith Piper and Eddie Chambers following. It is at this point in the story that the visual cohesion of the narrative is at its weakest. The dominance of the political statement relegates involvement with materials to the minimum. Surfaces, though radical in content, lose their power because of their fragmented nature and the anti-racist message, although clearly communicated, is only effective as a result of the literary and graphic nature of the work. Precision of thought is dulled by an over-reliance on clichéd statements and metaphors; obvious visual puns and icons are employed and the conceptual power and strength of work such as Rasheed Araeen's *Green Painting* or Mona Hatoum's *Live Work Series* is lost in the bedlam of poster rhetoric.

Some semblance of balance is achieved in the final section, 'Recovering Cultural Metaphors'. In certain respects this section offers a resolution to the sense of exploration and search for identity discerned in the earliest works of Ronald Moody, Ivan Peries and Avinash Chandra without necessarily reverting to the erotic or utopian. Such is the case with the work of Anwar Shemza, Donald Locke and Saleem Arif. Of the four women participating two, Kumiko Shimizu and Sonia Boyce, are represented here. The contrast between their work is striking; the former, working with the found object in a deliberately *ad hoc* way consciously fragments the viewer's understanding of the placement of people and objects, while Sonia Boyce's essentially flat works strive to communicate a narrative and context in painstaking detail. Her work is powerful because of its exploitation of the stereotypical though at the same time its transparency leaves it open to being viewed as naïve.

The necessity to be didactic about the black condition as glimpsed in the paintings of Sonia Boyce or Gavin Jantjes is the most disconcerting aspect of the exhibition. That definition is approached via the cliché which suggest that black artists are still struggling to form a broader and more lucid definition of themselves and their culture and that they are speaking to, and seeking the approval of, white audiences. It is this self-consciousness of speaking to a white audience which takes the bite out of the exhibition. Today, black popular culture has the confidence to explore itself and speak to itself with greater validity. Those involved in Rap, Hip-Hop and Reggae have long since abondoned attempts to justify themselves in white terms. It is their concern for a black audience which is most important for black and white audiences - it demonstrates how blacks can subvert the system by their very existence without contrived and self-conscious attempts to challenge it. As an exhibition, 'The Other Story' succeeds in terms of presentation and theme, but fails on the question of its relationship to avant-gardism as a whole. This criterion for assessment is not Western in orientation, but based on the question of who and what these artists represent in terms of their own culture in addition to British culture. They are feeding off mainstream modernism rather than tapping into the essential life force of black immigrant culture. The 'story' as told here represents that of an essentially élitist black intelligentsia which is now wise to the British art system and intent on succeeding by using it, while at the some time confronting and challenging it. Yet it is a far cry from the raw energy in rap, house and street culture, which have become vehicles for political activism. In this sense 'The Other Story' is hybrid, anaesthetised and wholly appropriate for the Hayward to tell.

**Petrine Archer-Straw**

**'The Other Story'**, was at the Hayward Gallery to February 4.

# Krasner & Pollock: Artistic Dialogues of the Self and the Social

'If the picture is an act, it cannot be justified *as an act of genius* in a field whose apparatus has been sent to the devil. Its value must be found apart from art'. Harold Rosenberg, *The American Action Painters*, 1952

The artistic identities of Lee Krasner and Jackson Pollock were not, and are not, constituted solely by their work. A cultural and social apparatus, within which the retrospective exhibition and particular critical assessments are major levers, acts as a determinant for the production of the 'self' in public. This large exhibition of works by Krasner and Pollock signals a possible re-assessment not only of the status and meanings of their works but also of the context within which they were produced. That is, it provides material for arguing that each individual's artistic projects, of which particular works are *forms*, cannot be understood without also understanding the social space of their *formations*. Importantly, this includes gender.

The conventional view of Krasner's and Pollock's identities is represented by the cover to the exhibition catalogue (the same as the poster for the show). Whilst both artists are given equal typographical billing, the background image is one of Hans Namuth's famous photographs of them taken in 1950. Viewed from a low angle, Pollock is in the act of drip painting, watched by Krasner who is perched on a high stool in the distance. She is a passive spectator to the 'creative act' being recorded in Pollock's studio, which was the large renovated barn to the side of their farmhouse, The Springs, East Hampton. Her studio was a much more modest bedroom in the house (in fact the one Pollock used as a studio whilst they renovated the barn in early 1946). Such difference in material conditions has to be taken into account with respect both to technical possibilities (size, scale, application of medium etc.) and to the relative status accorded to each artist.

The six gallery rooms are divided up, roughly chronologically, with the first four charting *both* artists' careers until Pollock's death in 1956. Rooms five and six display examples of Krasner's work from the 1950's until her death in 1984, with the exception of *Image Surfacing*, painted in 1945. Whilst there are seventy-eight works in the show overall (forty-one Krasners to thirty-seven Pollocks), there are thirty-seven Pollocks to twenty-six Krasners in