

Reviews

## THE OTHER STORY AFRO-ASIAN ARTISTS IN POST-WAR BRITAIN

by Corinna Lotz

Hayward Gallery, South Bank until February 4, 1990.  
Then at Wolverhampton Art Gallery, March 10 to April  
22, and Manchester City Art Gallery and Cornerhouse  
May 5 to June 10.

"The Other Story" is the first time we have an extensive view of the contribution of Asian, Caribbean and African artists who have lived part or all of their lives in this country during the last forty years. The fact that this is taking place at all is an achievement, and overrides any criticisms there might be about the concept behind the exhibition.

The work by the 24 artists taking part demonstrates that their history and development can in no way be seen as "separate" from the historical forces that have shaped the history of art in Britain during this period.

What makes this exhibition such a rewarding experience is that it opens up new territory by presenting artists whose names and work are not so well known. The only aspect which can be said to unify work by such very different artists, both in background and in age, is the intensity of their experience. The "content" which in artists of "European" origin is so often disguised, latent, or subordinated to the research of the form, in these artists comes into the foreground.

It is the desire to communicate as directly as possible that gives the Hayward exhibition a disarmingly immediate quality, from our first encounter with **Kumiko Shimizu's** clusters of brightly painted objects, engagingly strung on the concrete jungle edifice of the South Bank's

gloomy grey structure, right through the various rooms of the Hayward.

There is plenty of life and excitement to be experienced, and this is more than can be said for many exhibitions, including the last one to be held at the same venue. This enjoyment must be emphasised, particularly because some of the controversy surrounding the nature of the exhibition may discourage some from attending. However, this of all shows is a must not only for those interested in art but anyone concerned with the struggle against imperialism in all its forms.

**Two opposite truths become clear in viewing the work and learning about the artists themselves. Whilst living in the shadow of the Empire, confronted with the difficulties that face all young artists, compounded by nationalism and racism, these 24 artists have used forms of expression which are not peculiar to them but belong to modern art in general. In using these forms to express their own particular experiences they have extended the frontiers of those forms themselves.**

The reliance of art on earlier traditions, techniques and knowledge, and the assimilation of these techniques by the artist are not a sign of cultural inferiority or subservience but a necessary stage in his or her development. The higher the degree of mastery of the technique, the more the artist can rise out of the limitations of his or her own life and become the vehicle for expressing the experiences, dreams, reality of the many, which characterises the greatest achievements in human artistic production.

The mastery of technique, not as a means of oppression but as a weapon for liberation is a necessity shared not only by artists, but by all those participating in human production. The struggle to wrest technique from the imperialist strongholds is revealed in all of the stories of the artists involved. And it is here that we find the shadow of Empire very long indeed, not only in the thoughts and actions of the imperialist oppressor and his institutions but equally in the outlook of the oppressed themselves.

To bemoan the fact that the institutions of decaying imperialism are racist and nationalist is like complaining to the scorpion that his dying sting contains poison. It is a fundamentally reformist outlook. This is revealed time and again by the exhibition's curator Rasheed Areen. And, in his closing essay in the exhibition catalogue, Gavin Jantjes, a consistently talented and impressive artist, writes, of the need to change the "mono-ethnic" orientation of British culture: "There will soon be the necessity for the government to assist the national institutions in their endeavours to sustain change."

**Does Jantjes really believe that Thatcher or her successors will bring about fundamental changes in the "national institutions" to encourage talented artists of any nationality? Perhaps he feels that his inclusion on the Arts Council will facilitate such changes. But he somewhat amazingly speaks of "governmental lethargy" at a time when subsidies to the arts are**



**being slashed to ribbons, when the world's greatest collections are being shuffled around within museums to avoid water dripping through the roof, when irreparable damage is being done not only to the art of the past but also to living and future artists by sheer philistine hatred of anything that smacks of real culture.**

The great strength of "The Other Story" lies in its wonderful assembly of sculpture, interspersed throughout the building. The exhibition opens dramatically with the monumental work of **Ronald Moody**. Moody was born in Kingston, Jamaica in 1900, and is the "oldest" artist on display. His work has an inevitability of perfection, of self-contained form and confrontation with the human figure that sets him apart. His most successful pieces include a large carving in elmwood called "John the Baptist" from 1936. This over life-sized torso and head makes wonderful use of the colour and grain of the wood to contrast with the harsh features of the face, which has a classic, totemic quality.

Moody's smaller sculpture in glass resin of 1969 called "Man ... His Universe" is a most original conception. The mask of a man's face — or it could be a woman — is encircled and contained by a curved spiral, which has a foot with a paw at its base and a bird's head at its upper end. It is a wonderfully concise metaphor for man's existence within nature. Moody is able to endow his "Horned Bird" of 1968 with the same living, perfectly balanced, tension and rest. With these works Moody, in the most natural way, restores the human being to his or her original source in nature. He presents the human being as a natural creature.

**Donald Locke**, born 30 years after Moody, in nearby Guyana, is also an extraordinary artist. His work has a similar perfection and completeness of form as Moody's, but he works in an entirely different vein. His sculptures here are made of highly polished materials. The "Three Sculptures from a Fertility Suite" (1970-72) have a primeval softness, which is a generalised metaphor for "one is many", for all reproduction, plant, animal and human. In most of his other sculptures on display we find much more threatening and aggressive qualities. In "Trophies of Empire" and the "Plantation Series", Locke presents a collection of cylindrical shapes, which do not directly represent any single idea. However, the presentation of the "Trophies of Empire" is designed to be threatening, the objects being somewhere between enormous bullets or small bombs to commemorate the victims of colonial violence. The stark, unadorned, unexplained repetition of one shape in larger and smaller sizes makes it all the more suggestive of destruction.

The techniques used by Locke reveal the development undergone by sculpture during the twentieth century, away from the creation of a single self-contained object to the idea of an installation or environment, where the spectator is confronted by a series of objects which challenge his or her perception of the meaning of a particular form and invite a considerable amount of thought through the association of those objects with their

"normal" meanings in everyday life, or in another context.

The third sculptor in this exhibition is the brilliant 50-year-old **Avtarjeet Dhanjal**. Three works from 1984 give a clear understanding of how this artist is able to turn the hard substance of black slate (graphite?) into a gentle inner landscape. The darkness of the stone is emphasised by the use of chains of small round candles. Dhanjal presents each piece of stone as a complete entity, so that its grain and infinitely black "colour" become objects of contemplation and each piece becomes a world in itself, to be explored from all sides. His work is, as one architect has remarked, "a synthesis between sculpture and landscape, art and design". The desire to make natural objects speak for themselves, to emphasise as it were, the naturalness of nature, is a concern that Dhanjal shares with artists such as Richard Long and Andrew Goldsworthy. Dhanjal's has a special ability to endow natural materials with a monumental permanence, in contrast to the more short-lived creations of his contemporaries.

In the sphere of painting the exhibition opens with the first Post-War generation of artists who came to Britain from Commonwealth countries during the 1940s and 1950s. These include **Uzo Egonu** (Nigeria), **Ivan Peries** (Sri Lanka), **Frank Bowling** and **Aubrey Williams** (Guyana), **Lubaina Himid** (Zanzibar), **Ahmed Parvez** (Pakistan), and **Francis Newton Souza**, **Anwar Jalal Shemza** and **Avinash Chandra** (India). Amongst them, Chandra, Williams, Parvez and Bowling were strongly influenced by the Abstract Expressionism which, on an international level, was the predominant art movement of the late 1950s and early 1960s.

The works on display by these artists are important in that they fill in the historical blank spot which the development of art in Britain during the Post-War period has been, but one tends to feel that the artists are still testing out techniques rather than completely mastering them. **Aubrey Williams'** work from the mid-1980s shows him introducing a new boldness of colour and more clearly defined, sometimes semi-figurative. His paintings in this selection are a strong argument for the need to organise an exhibition that would record the development of abstract painting in Britain from the late 1950s onwards.

The useful chronology by Julia Engelhardt at the back of the exhibition catalogue shows the pivotal nature of Denis Bowen's "New Vision Group" and its gallery in Seymour Place during this time. This was the only — to this reviewer's knowledge at least — independent, non-profit organisation, run by artists, which promoted young international and unknown non-figurative artists.

**Anwar Jalal Shemza's** "The Wall" of 1958, which was used for the cover of the exhibition catalogue typifies a combination of colour and texture shared by many painters during this period. Shemza endows his monochromatic texture, also developed in France by the "Tachists" as well as by artists such as Tapies in Spain, with a love of ornamental pattern typical of Islamic art. The contrast of forms and colour, shadow



and light, transparency and opacity give this work considerable depth.

**Uzo Egonu's** paintings from the 1960s are a welcome introduction to an artist who assimilated some of the discoveries of synthetic Cubism into his own work. "Gladioli" from 1956 and "The Artist's Studio" from 1969 are tightly composed and most satisfying in their calm and disciplined use of colour: browns, yellows, ivory and oxblood. His large scale paintings present semi-Utopian views in the idiom of the German "New Objectivity" painter Oskar Schlemmer. Unfortunately his three large "Stateless People" canvases appeared to be missing from the exhibition, possibly through lack of space.

**Iqbal Geoffrey** and **Rasheed Areen**, both from Pakistan, share a restless desire for experimentation and investigation. Geoffrey is clearly a man of dynamic talent, who can turn his hand to a multiplicity of techniques, from oil on canvas, ink and watercolour, mixed media, which incorporate delightful fragments of Arab calligraphy. One witty item included in his "room" at the gallery was a telegram stating the conditions for the sale of his painting, depending on the income of prospective buyers. His series of small paintings on paper are full of innovation and delightful juxtapositions.

**Areen**, also the exhibition's curator, emerged out of the Minimalist Constructivism of the mid-1960s, when he worked with painted steel in geometric formations, into "living sculpture" which merged into the environment of London's docklands. At the Hayward his "Green Painting" brings together a number of political statements, which are amplified in the commentary he has provided for the exhibition.

**Areen's** evolution as an artist, who presents political issues in his work (though not always), appears in another form in somewhat younger **David Medalla**, born in Manila in 1942. The latter's restlessness seems even greater than Geoffrey's. Medalla's key role in developing experimental art in Britain during the 1960s and 1970s is well-documented in the essay entitled "Signals" which he has contributed to the catalogue. His "Cloud Canyons No. 12 Bubble Machine", made this year in collaboration with the Irish sculptor Paul Daly, is a large fountain made from acrylic, galvanised steel, pvc, wood, a motor, water and detergent.

While "Cloud Canyons No. 12" was made this year, his first Cloud Canyons dates back to 1964, at a time when Medalla ran an art centre called "Signals London" as well as editing a news bulletin. During the early 1970s, Medalla was involved in various artistic statements and events, in opposition to both the Marcos regime and the fascist coup in Chile. His organisation "Artists For Democracy" was closed down through "lack of funds" in 1977, and since then Medalla has concentrated on performance art and painting. His exotic Post-Modern paintings are exhibited around the Cloud Canyon — one would scarcely believe they were by the same artist.

As we move further East in terms of the artist's country of birth, it would appear that the desire to transform the world, rather than simply

create an art object, becomes more and more integral to their work. **Li Yuan Chia**, born in Kwangsi province in China, but resident in Britain since the mid-1960s, presents a delicate brush painting, made with black staccato strokes, splashed and dribbled over pale washed colour, possibly the most beautiful single item in the Hayward. From this he moved to the creation of magnetic discs, suspended on their narrow edges, with small objects clinging to them, which the viewer can move at will. Yuan Chia created a museum in Cumberland over the last 20 years which is now closed because of lack of funds.

**Eddie Chambers** and **Keith Piper**, who are both 29, and with **Sonia Boyce**, are the youngest artists represented. Chambers' and Piper's work is the most directly political. They set out to expose the racist violence endemic in present day society. The sharpness of the images, which are emphasised by texts, are a cry of anger and pain. Both artists incorporate elements which seem taken directly from the kind of images that are to be found in Britain's inner-city slums — advertising hoardings, graffiti, empty cigarette packets. **Lubaina Himid** also presents similar themes, but in a less strident, often humorous way. Her watercolour and pencil "Scenes from the Life of Toussaint L'Ouverture" from 1987, are executed with precision and exquisitely contrasting colours, such as in her yellow lemons on a blue plate, counterposed to a blue fish on a yellow plate.

The most adventurous — and deeply affecting — artist of all is **Mona Hatoum**, a Palestinian, born in Beirut, but living in London since the outbreak of the civil war in Lebanon in 1975. Her work in the exhibition consists mainly of video works, and unfortunately the timing of their presentation was faulty, so that it required a considerable amount of time to view them. Hatoum's work shrinks back from nothing. She subjects herself to the most gruelling experiences and makes the viewer "participate". She is an artist who engages both in performance and in installations, often combining a variety of techniques.

In "Under Siege" the artist "incarcerates herself in a narrow rectangular perspex box, covering her naked body with wet clay. The performance lasts seven hours, during which she constantly struggles to stand up, slipping and falling again and again; she is accompanied by three different sound tapes which repeatedly blast the space from three different directions, creating a collage of revolutionary songs, news reports, etc., in English, French and Arabic." In another video called "Measures of Distance" from 1988, Hatoum superimposes Arabic script over a video film of her mother in a shower, while the daughter reads aloud the content of her correspondence. Another live work is called "The Negotiating Table". Performed in Ottawa, she forced viewers to recognise the terrible reality of what "negotiating" with people's lives really could mean.

**Saleem Arif**, **Sonia Boyce**, and **Gavin Jantjes** are all interested in painting as a two-dimensional form of representation. All three use bold colours and figurative representation, albeit in quite different styles.



Along with **Kumiko Shimizu**, whom we have mentioned above, their free deployment of colour seems to be a most positive feature of mid- to late 1980s painting, and gives all three artists a popular, immediate appeal. It must be noted that Jantjes' latest work shows him working in a monochromatic style, with muddy earth and blue sky colours. Arif and Boyce make up for what appears sometimes as excessive naivete with a bold disposition of colour.

**Although Rasheed Areen, in his text accompanying the exhibition, twice singles out Hegel for abuse, it would seem that Hegel's dialectic skill may get the better of him. As Gavin Jantjes' 'Untitled' painting of this year, showing an African sculpted mask swirling around in space with a sketch of Picasso's painting "Les Femmes d'Alger" (O.J. version O), explicitly recognises, the "Other" exists in an inextricable unity and conflict with the "First". "Modernism", or more exactly, real artistic innovation, which Areen keeps on trying to assert as the citadel of the "white bourgeois", was in reality created by men and women who thought the culture and art of Africa and Asia was possibly better than that which had been handed to them by their own imperialist cultures.**

It is because the world has become so closely integrated in the imperialist epoch that "Western" art has had of necessity to turn to the world beyond itself, from Gauguin, Van Gogh, Whistler and Degas' turn to Japanese art in the 19th century to Picasso and the Expressionists in this century, to mention only a few. These artists studied Oriental and African art as a source of new ideas and greater sophistication, not because they considered it crude or inferior. Today we have an even greater intermingling, through the migration of many hundreds of thousands of people, amongst them those who express their both painful alienation as well as dreams, and aspirations.

"The Other Story" must of necessity be an unfinished story, because so far we have been shown many talented artists who are able to express as the reality of racism and nationalism. We look forward to seeing in artistic practice the continuation of Guy Brett's enlightening essay called "Internationalism among artists in the 60s and 70s" — into the 1990s.

For those visiting the South Bank complex, there is also an exhibition of work by **Tam Joseph** in the Upper Foyer of the Royal Festival Hall until February 4, arranged by the Bedford Hill Gallery in conjunction with Rochdale Art Gallery. Tam Joseph already has a number of well-known works to his credit, including "The Spirit of the Carnival" and a major mural project in Brixton.

## INDUSTRY AND IDEOLOGY — I.G. FARBEN IN THE NAZI ERA

Peter Hayes, Cambridge University Press, Price £12.95

*Review by Andy Marshall*

Peter Hayes' book is a meticulously researched account of the contradictory relationship between I.G. Farben, Europe's biggest chemical producer between 1925 and 1945, and the German Nazi Party. It examines the development of Farben's policies and actions in the years leading up to and during the Second World War, the division of the company by the Allies after the Nazi defeat and the imprisonment of its directors on charges of spoliation in occupied territories and the use of slave labour.

The aim of the book is to correct the one-sidedness of previous examinations of the relationship between fascism and big business in Germany. Hayes criticises both what he calls "vulgar Marxist" attempts to characterise Farben as an evil empire which hired the Nazi Party to do its dirty work, and apologist attempts to say that any connection between the two was purely coincidental.

Hayes is correct in taking this starting point, but his failure to analyse the development of the world crisis of capitalism as the independent driving force of this relationship means that he perishes in the contradictions thrown up by his study. He concludes that it was not the economic crisis which produced Nazi ideology but vice versa, and inevitably seeks to find the cause of Farben's actions in the motives and "morals" of its directors.

The period 1860-1945 was one of immense innovation in the German chemical industry as part of the world development of science. One after another, natural products were synthesised in a drive to overcome Germany's poverty of natural domestic resources. This development of new processes produced recurring crises as companies internationally sought to invent more efficient and competitive methods, old ones becoming obsolete overnight. Enormous investment was needed to maintain the flow of new inventions, each of which reduced the human