

artist makes direct reference to such an item in *Swarming Song*, 2021. Around one side of a small circular room are four speakers on upright stands emitting a steady choral pulse. In the next room is the source on which the sound is based, a copy of the beekeeper and musicologist Charles Butler's *The Feminine Monarchie: Or the Historie of Bees*, 1634, open at 'Melissomelos, or, Bee's madrigal'. The score is printed in four sections across a double-page spread, the top two of which are upside down so that it can be read by four singers stood around a table. The music being played focuses on the section imitating the queen bee's 'piping'. As a work of ecomimesis, therefore, *Swarming Song* conjures the imaginary ambience of the 17th-century music room (and royal court), which is rendered inextricable from any sense of the hive.

ASSEMBLY, 2019, is especially powerful in how it engages with its exhibition context; that it was originally intended for another one probably adds to its efficacy as a work of translation across media. The domineering interiors of the Italian and Australian senate buildings, projected on four video screens arranged around the viewer, resonate with the ionic-columned Georgian Gallery (fittingly located above the university's law library). In the videos, the buildings are empty of their usual activity, eliciting a sense of expectancy and heightened awareness in a manner akin to John Cage's *4'33"*. This effect prevails despite the inclusion of audible music, performed throughout the buildings by musicians using instruments from various global traditions. Like the choral components of the above-mentioned works, in *ASSEMBLY*, the sounds - based on a stenographic translation of David Malouf's 1976 poem 'To be written in another tongue' - infuse the ambience with a tone that remains unresolved, and in this work painfully so. If the drummers dancing through Canberra's Old Parliament House are exhilarating, the unyielding stiffness and unresponsiveness of their surroundings is suggestive of bureaucratic obfuscation. If there is a message in the drumming, I'm compelled to ask if it is heard. The shots of a woman re-enacting protest gestures on her own, her almost timid, staccato movements bordering on the absurd, suggest that it is not. Communication struggles to be achieved and perpetually falls flat, highlighting the wilful deafness that pervades the ecology of power.

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Larry Achiampong and David Blandy, *Finding Fanon*, 2015, video installation

Untitled: Art on the conditions of our times

Kettle's Yard, Cambridge, 10 July to 3 October

According to curator Paul Goodwin, the title of this group exhibition, presenting work by ten British African diaspora artists, 'refers to the longstanding art-historical convention of leaving artworks "untitled" in order to encourage attention onto the works themselves'. By avoiding 'over-contextualisation' - the reduction of the work on display 'solely to an exploration of Black British identity' - the theme of race should be placed in relation to wider issues of technology and media, migration and conflict, commemoration and memory.

If there is a criticism to be made of the show, it's that this curatorial approach is almost too successful. Here is a cross-section of contemporary art highly varied in its means of delivery and its objects of attention, such that it can be tricky to thread affinities between the different pieces on display. This, of course, might well be the idea. Why would a selection of works by a (relatively small) number of black British artists yield up a neat set of interlocking concerns?

What's left to the reviewer is to pick out some highlights and smaller thematic clusters from an undoubtedly engaging sample of work. On which point, Larry Achiampong and David Blandy's films *Finding Fanon Parts 1, 2, and 3*, 2015-17, and *A Terrible Fiction*, 2019, are arguably the showstoppers. Rather than offering easy celebratory expressions of black cultural prestige, of the kind found here and there across Kettle's Yard's recently expanded spaces, these films pose more nuanced questions about the difference-based racism implicit in contemporary identitarian politics, a logic that has pursued us into online and virtual worlds once envisaged as utopian alternative dimensions.

In the *Finding Fanon* sequence, a neat cyberpunk conceit transports the film's protagonists - the artists themselves - into a virtual world based on hacked



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footage from the *Grand Theft Auto 5* platform. Racing across hillsides and highways in a set of surprisingly moving scenes – redolent of displaced political and emotional yearning – their avatars enact a symbolic search for traces of the humanist, post-racial society envisaged in Frantz Fanon’s writing. But all that can be unearthed in this ‘virtual space’ is ‘yet another construct. The settler continues his sport as he hunts for us across the grid.’

Whereas Achiampong and Blandy start from materialist analysis, Evan Ifekoya’s and Barby Asante’s sound-based works are invested in collective oral ritual as means of expressing shared identity. Both artists have worked with close friends and family members to create the pieces on display, which combine voice-led performance or composition with elements of object-based bricolage. In Ifekoya’s case, physical intervention in the walls and floors of the gallery is also involved.

The latter artist’s consistently engaging practice here touches on familiar themes of queer, black and POC identity, incorporating a characteristic, soft-pedalled new-age mysticism with its auditory motifs of meditation and spiritual healing. The alteration of a tucked-away room to create *Ritual Without Belief*, 2018, offers a suitably transportive *mise en scène*. Asante’s *To make love is to create...*, 2020–21, is strung across a series of rooms stretching up into the domestic spaces of Kettle’s Yard House, and echoing out onto Castle Street. The work features a collective of women reciting Audre Lorde’s 1977 essay ‘Poetry Is Not A Luxury’, a gesture suggesting simultaneous states of isolation and community, an apposite gesture in the context of the Covid lockdown (with all its racially stratified effects).

Cedar Lewisohn’s brilliant abstract graphic novel *The Marduk Prophecy*, 2020, was one of this reviewer’s highlights of small-press publishing at the nexus of text and image over the past year. Combining woodblock images of artefacts from African and Mesopotamian civilisations – many of them purloined for colonial collections – with symbols of contemporary British youth culture such as drill music, the comic and its accompanying project, *Untitled (Red Woodprints, Lewisham Series)*, 2020, forms the basis of part of Lewisohn’s exhibited selection here.

Elsewhere in the show, themes of migration and anti-colonial uprising are explored with varying degrees of invention, while Harold Offeh’s recreation of iconic funk, soul and dance album covers for *Covers Playlist*, 2016, is brilliantly witty while lithely suggesting the constraints placed on queer black bodies by white pop culture.

This exhibition almost inadvertently raises various questions through its very diversity, perhaps especially: how do practices invested in ritual and spirituality run up against the materialist analysis required to dissect ingrained structural racism (in a culture in which, as Achiampong and Blandy put it, ‘the strongest fictions are winning’)? It’s in exploring such points of tension that makes ‘Untitled’ so engaging.

Greg Thomas is a critic and editor based in Glasgow.



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