

Life Between Islands: Caribbean-British art 1950s-Now

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Hew Locke is part of *Life Between Islands*, at Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto, Canada.

Tracing the extraordinary impact of Caribbean art and thought on British art history over seven decades this poetic and powerful exhibition crosses the Atlantic for the first time, making its North American debut in Toronto. Co-curated by David A. Bailey, Director, Artistic Director of the International Curators Forum, and Alex Farquharson, Director, Tate Britain, *Life Between Islands* at the AGO is overseen by Julie Crooks, Curator, Arts of Global Africa, and the Diaspora.

Referencing poetry, film, activism and music, the exhibition reflects through art how Caribbean-British artists forged new identities, communities, and cultures in Britain, often in the face of hostility and discrimination. *Life Between Islands* features artwork by more than 30 artists – from the Caribbean and those influenced by it – including Aubrey Williams, Donald Locke, Horace Ové, Isaac Julien, Sonia Boyce, Claudette Johnson, Peter Doig, Hurvin Anderson, Barbara Walker and Alberta Whittle.

“It is a great pleasure to welcome these artworks and artists to Toronto – many of whom for the first time. This exhibition was a hugely important event in Britain. It invites us to continue the conversations the AGO began in 2021 with *Fragments of Epic Memory*, to share great art often unseen here in Canada and to consider the extraordinary impact that the Caribbean diaspora has had in Britain and globally,” says Julie Crooks, AGO Curator, Arts of Global Africa, and the Diaspora. “I’m confident that Toronto audiences – particularly those with personal connections to the Caribbean – will see aspects of their own experience in these histories. The scale, richness and power of these artworks defy easy categorization and need to be seen.”

The first exhibition of its kind in Britain, *Life Between Islands* takes its title from the Jamaican-British writer Stuart Hall’s memoir, *Familiar Stranger: A Life Between Two Islands*.

“In mounting *Life Between Islands*, we undertook what no major British museum had done to date, which is to tell the history of British art from a Caribbean vantage point,” said co-curators David A. Bailey, Artistic Director of the International Curators Forum, and Alex Farquharson, Director of Tate Britain. “But we did that knowing the impact of the Caribbean Diaspora is truly global and that the experiences and ideas that fuel these artworks resonate far beyond Britain’s shores. Seeing this exhibition reborn in Toronto has been inspiring, and we eagerly look forward to seeing what audiences here bring to it.”

A story reverberating with many voices and told in four parts, *Life Between Islands* at the AGO is dedicated to the memory of the influential Trinidadian artist Horace Ové (1939-2023), and features artworks by the following artists: Hurvin Anderson, Frank Bowling, Sonia Boyce, Vanley Burke, Pogus Caesar, Blue Curry, Paul Dash, Peter Doig, Denzil Forrester, Claudette Johnson, Liz Johnson Artur, Rachel Jones, Tam Joseph, Isaac Julien, Roshini Kempadoo, Neil Kenlock, Donald Lock, 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.

Large-scale immigration from the Caribbean to Britain recommenced in 1948, and the starting place for this survey of Caribbean British art is the so-called ‘Windrush generation’ and the modernist engagements of Aubrey Williams, Frank Bowling, and Ronald Moody. Works by Vanley Burke, Tam Joseph, and Vron Ware document the police violence, poverty, and activism that gripped Britain in the 1970s and 1980s, as a second generation of Caribbean British artists came of age.

The reclamation of Carnival, begun in the 1960s in Notting Hill, comes alive in films by Isaac Julien and Sonia Boyce, and in the work of John Lyons and Chris Ofili. Tam Joseph’s paintings of carnival juxtapose the spiritual legacies of slavery in Africa and the New World, against a backdrop of institutional discrimination.

The political urgency of the Black Arts Movement in the 1980s, with its focus on anti-racism and feminism, comes alive in the photographic works of Ingrid Pollard, as well as in paintings Claudette Johnson and Denzil Forrester.

The exhibition concludes with a selection of recent works by a new generation of artists, whose works invoke materiality, place, and identity in new ways, among them Blue Curry, Rachel Jones, and Marcia Michael.

Unique to the AGO’s presentation is a new immersive installation by artist and playwright Michael McMillan, entitled *The Front Room: Inna Toronto/6ix*. The latest in a series of installations designed to expose the social underpinnings of our domestic spaces – class, religion, gender, or alienation - in this new work, McMillan invites visitors to make themselves at home in the front room of a Caribbean immigrant family in suburban Toronto in the 1980s. The images on the walls of this front room were provided by the Vintage Black Canada Archive.