

Tam Joseph is in many ways a fiendishly enigmatic figure, never quite in step – indeed, most often, out of step - with the dominant trends and sensibilities of the British art world. By stubbornly refusing to be typecast (and refusing - with equal fortitude - to jump on any bandwagon that might be passing) Joseph has, possibly, ended up in the curious and unenviable position of having his work known by reputation, rather than by the quantity and frequency of his opportunities to exhibit. It is my belief however, that a number of works by Joseph - produced from the early 1980s through to the mid 1990s – merit him being accorded the status of one of the most important artists of his generation.

Joseph was born in Dominica, in the Caribbean, in 1947. He came to London at the age of eight, eventually going on to fractious, unsatisfactory periods of study at London art colleges in the late 1960s. He has though, since the beginning of the 1970s, maintained and developed his practice as a painter and sculptor, supplemented by periods of work as a graphic artist.

Joseph's age is one of the most important reasons as to why he is very much his own man, his own painter. His age makes him, on the one hand, too young to be linked to major figures of Caribbean and African art who made London their home in the decades immediately following the end of World War Two. For example, Ronald Moody had been born in 1900, Aubrey Williams had been born in 1926, Frank Bowling had been born in 1936 and Uzo Egonu had been born in 1931. In time, these artists came to be respected as elder statesmen in the history of African, Asian and Caribbean Artists in Britain¹, but Tam Joseph was too young

¹ These four artists - Ronald Moody, Aubrey Williams, Frank Bowling and Uzo Egonu were included in the important 1989 exhibition 'The Other Story' curated by Rasheed Araeen for the Hayward Gallery.

to be included in their number. But Joseph's age, on the other hand, also makes him too old to be properly linked to the fiery, boisterous young Black artists, typified by Keith Piper (born 1960) and Donald Rodney (born 1961) whose brand of 'Black Art' emerged in Britain in the early 1980s. Attempts have been made to link him to this 1980s 'Black Art' movement, but Joseph calmly distances himself and his work from such a neatly identifiable arena. He does this, not because he does not like or respect the art of this period, but because he would rather not be perceived and used solely as a social commentator or political representative of his race. Even the most cursory examination of his practice reveals much evidence that he draws his subject matter from wherever he chooses, and he executes his ideas in whatever medium seems appropriate to him.

Whilst we might regard his oeuvre as being somewhat eclectic, nevertheless we should be clear and understand that in his time, Tam Joseph has contributed a number of memorable paintings that locate themselves at the centre of social and political commentary, often doing so in ways that reflect the artist's characteristic wit, humour and perceptiveness. Typical in this regard are paintings such as 'Spirit of the Carnival' and 'UK School Report' for which Joseph is widely respected. The latter piece (dating from 1983) sub-divided into three portraits, shows the passage of a Black youngster through the British education system. Though unambiguously witty, the painting effectively addresses the miserable experiences of many Black youngsters at school. Within the first portrait, the neat and tidy lad is reported as being 'good at sports'. In the second portrait, the best that his teachers can say about him is that he 'likes music'. The third report is perhaps inevitable: a few

years of under-achievement, alienation and disaffection have rendered him a problem, a youth with perceived delinquent tendencies and ambitions. As such, the sullen youth depicted now 'needs surveillance'.

For a Black boy to be prejudicially labelled 'Good at sports' links that child to that almost primeval strand of racism that frequently suggests and sometimes insists that Black people are more physical than they are mental. That whatever skills they possess lie not in any intellectual abilities, but in their physical endeavours. 'UK School Report' laments the ways in which educational aspirations have been choked off, in favour of supposedly inevitable athletic excellence. Like Tam Joseph before him, Macka B had the measure of the education system's treatment of Black youngsters when he sang:

"When a child says he wants to do O level Maths
And the teacher will say no and give that child a cricket bat
Or sen' him 'pon the field fi run a couple of lap
'Cause they know he will do better running on the race
track"²

Spirit of the Carnival is a poignant, piercing commentary on the seemingly ever-increasing, ever-conspicuous police presence at the annual Notting Hill Carnival. The painting depicts a lone masquerader being penned in on all sides by a menacing sea of riot-ready police officers. On all sides of the figure, police with riot shields advance on the carnival reveller, as if seeking not to merely contain or arrest him, but to silence and obliterate him. For good measure, a ferocious police Alsatian strains on his handler's leash, snarling at the masquerader, having previously drawn blood. And yet, the

² 'Plastic Bullets' from Macka B, 'Sign of the Times', Ariwa Sound studio, 1986.

masquerader is resilient, unbowed, unintimidated. In the face of this relentless hostility and aggression, the reveller continues to play mas. It is this spirit of resilience and fortitude that enables the masquerader to embody the spirit of the carnival.

Spirit of the Carnival is about a number of things. Chief amongst them of course, the painting celebrates Black cultural and political resistance and resilience. The body – be that body collective or individual – can be attacked and wounded, perhaps even mortally so. But the spirit, when strong, is unbreakable.

The painting also effectively functions as commentary on the ways in which Carnival (and by extension, Black people themselves) are regarded within much of the British population and mainstream media as being synonymous with criminality. Each year, media reports of Notting Hill Carnival centre on, or are accompanied by, tallies of alleged criminal incidents, unambiguously suggesting that where and when Black people gather in number, criminality, delinquent behaviour and trouble are never far away.³

³ It would require an in-depth study to properly catalogue and examine this seemingly age-old aspect of press and media reporting of Carnival. However, a couple of examples, from the supposedly liberal and self-regarding Guardian, over the course of the past decade, might serve to illustrate the point. “The total of offences committed at the annual Notting Hill carnival was said by Scotland Yard to stand at 55. These included eight robberies, 15 snatches, 15 pick-pocketing offences, one of grievous bodily harm and four of actual bodily harm”” The report continues for another paragraph, in much the same vein. [August 30, 1995]. And “Despite the worst fears of the police, the Notting Hill Carnival passed off without the robberies and murders that blighted last year’s event. Police had launched pre-emptive raids against armed gangs in a bid to stop them disrupting the event, but one senior officer in the Metropolitan police still told Radio 4 Today programme he would not take his children to Carnival.” [p.13, The Editor, September 1 2001] And “Concern over the rising cost of [policing] the carnival led the police to estimate last year’s event would cost £4m. The final bill was higher

It would however be erroneous to create the impression that Joseph's work is relentless strident in its tone. *Native Girl with Fetish* is a 1987 painting by the artist. Characteristically witty and slightly caustic, it features a young African woman, nude, reclining on her bed. It is daytime, and through the bedroom window behind her, we can see part of an urban street. Incidentally perhaps, the painting is set in Abidjan, the capital of Ivory Coast, one of the countries in West Africa. The urban street mentioned is a tree-lined boulevard, graced with modernist high-rise buildings. Within this painting, Joseph provides us with a compelling vision of this most cosmopolitan of cities⁴. The young woman reclines on her bed, partially draped in its sheets. And she reads a copy of *Elle* magazine, complete with the seemingly obligatory blonde-haired, white face on the cover. The viewer is at once drawn to the striking visual contrast between the African girl's dark and stunning complexion, and the pink-skinned, blonde-haired cover girl.

But what completes the bizarre composition of the painting is the portrait of Pope John Paul II that looks down, cheekily, at the naked girl from her bedroom wall. The scene is extraordinary. And it is this extraordinary-ness that gives the painting its impact. The *native girl* is obvious - it is she who so strikingly occupies the length of the painting. But what is the *fetish*? The Pope or the magazine? To a degree, we might consider them to be mutually exclusive, and that they are in direct competition with each other for the girl's attention. But we might also consider the magazine and the

because of the Met's determination to prevent the violence and murders that marred the 2000 event." (June 1 2002, p.9)

⁴ Abidjan has been described in the following terms: "The gleaming high-rise commercial capital of Cote d'Ivoire is undoubtedly the New York of West Africa..." Lonely Planet, Africa on a Shoestring, 1992

image of the pontiff to be illustrative of the same thing – the *Europeanisation* of Africa. It is this tension between the painting's three elements that accounts for much of the painting's impact. After all, aren't the Pope and the magazine symbols of much the same thing? In effect, the *fetish* - with all its Western implications of paganism – is not some or other African icon of superstition and primitivism. Instead, the fetish becomes the mass of largely alien sensibilities, such as Catholicism (as represented in the cheeky portrait of the Pope) and the assorted, highly problematic notions that are embodied in magazines such as Elle, with its highly racialised and prescriptive notions of beauty. And yet, within the painting, there is harmony. The painting triumphs because by irreverently and cleverly juxtaposing the cover girl with the Pope, they effectively cancel the power they would each have if they alone could claim the Native Girl's attention. The girl relaxes, contented, triumphant, embracing both Pope and cover girl, yet unwilling to surrender herself to either.

A more recent body of Joseph's work indicates another one of his unpredictable shifts in artistic direction. The work in question was collectively titled *Great White*, described by Hiroko Hagiwara as 'a series of picturesque and illusory landscapes, which induce us to quiet reflection' that signals a 'move towards a more contemplative body of work'. Hagiwara notes that 'it may seem odd...that an artist of Afro-Caribbean origin, should paint [sea]scapes of blue water and white shining icebergs'. In truth, Joseph has *always* struck out on his own course.

White House Killings is a painting from the early to mid 1990s that presents, in clear, accurate and graphic detail a map of Washington DC, complete with the Potomac river, its main arteries and of course, the location of one of the most

famous buildings in the world, the White House. Beyond the urban density of the federal capital itself, Joseph has indicated the location of the bordering commuter states of Maryland and Virginia. In his painting, peppered throughout the NW, NE, SE and SW quarters of the capital, literally surrounding the White House, are dozens of tiny figure motifs. It is only when we look closer, and reference the figure motifs that we realise each one represents the 'Location of killings in 1991'. Joseph's messages are clear: within the capital of the world's wealthiest and most powerful nation, and often within literally a stone's throw of the seat of the president, Black Americans (who comprise more than 70% of the city's population) are allowed to kill each other in barely comprehensible numbers, making Washington DC one of the murder capitals of the world.

If only one thing were to characterise Joseph's output, that one thing would be independence. Though he is clearly committed to the welfare and culture of Black people, he refuses to be typecast as a 'Black artist', or to meet comfortably with people's preconceptions of what a Black artist should be doing. Joseph jealously defends his right to paint what he chooses. We have to accept Joseph as being the artist that he is, or we maintain our prejudices against (Black) artistic independence.

**Osunwunmi would like to ask the following questions:
Under-appreciation of their work is an occupational hazard for gifted creative people of any colour; how does race factor into this, in your opinion?**

It might perhaps be worth using the word 'racism' instead of the word 'race' in this question. If we set aside all notions that creativity – and excellence in creativity – is not limited to any one type of people or group, it then follows that the art world ought to be effortlessly demonstrating and reflecting creativity and art practice on something of an equitable and comprehensive level. In other words, Black artists would be far more visible. But the art world is far from equitable. Instead, it is - in my view at least - the embodiment of racism and exclusionary practices. Unless we unpick the word 'racism' and its contemporary application, this statement about art world racism might seem harsh or melodramatic. In modern-day, New Labour Britain, the notion widely exists that 'racism' is a thing of the past and that 'discrimination against coloured people' belongs to a bygone era in which Herman's Hermits were in the charts, big shops were closed on Sundays and Bristol City Football Club were playing top flight football. 'Racism' is now taken to mean that violent, aggressive, nasty expression that had its form in 'No Coloured' notices in houses with rooms to rent, or groups of drunken white men who went 'Paki-bashing' when the pubs closed. The last vestiges of this 'racism' were seen in the killers of Stephen Lawrence, people widely regarded by the media as symbolising the very worst of what this country used to be. The notion that old-fashioned racism has been consigned to history has led all sorts of people – keeping perfectly straight faces – to publicly declare that they are 'not racist'.

Quite apart from the fact that attacks on Black people, or foreigners, or asylum-seekers, or immigrants continue to this day, old-fashioned racism has been replaced by – or joined by - an equally nasty and more insidious mind set that holds Black people to be okay, as long as their numbers are very tightly controlled and as long as they know their place, or are prepared to accept the spaces and places that have been assigned and ascribed to them. Within this thinking, Black people are not so much inferior or deserving of contempt; they are instead, just 'different' and need, with only a few problematic exceptions, to be treated as such. Within this particular scenario, the stereotype comes into its own. The notion of Black people as colourful and lively possessors of rhythm must be celebrated (as it was in the production of a set of Royal Mail stamps in 1998). Likewise, when it is harnessed under the Union Flag, the supposed sporting prowess of Black people must also be celebrated (witness the mood of national grief at Sol Campbell's disallowed goal in the crucial match against Portugal in Euro 2004, or the jubilation that greeted Kelly Holmes on her triumphant return from Athens).

Yet the notion of Black people as practicing visual artists must be tightly controlled and policed. One or two can be allowed to slip under the barbed wire, but the majority must be excluded. If Black artists were represented in gallery exhibitions proportionate to their population percentage, we would certainly see many more exhibitions of their work. As it is, regular exhibitions of Black artists' work (within regular exhibition programmes) are less common than hen's teeth. Within this context, the under-appreciation of Black artists' work takes its place alongside a consistent marginalizing of these same artists by the art world. In other words, white gifted creative people are disproportionately likely to make headway, compared to their Black counterparts. Contemporary

Black artists are victims of this 'new racism' as much as their parents may have been victims of the old variety.

How you think the working environment for artists of colour in the West has changed since you first began curating and archiving? Do you think the strategies artists of colour might be advised to use in order to get recognition for their work have changed in the past fifteen years? After all, your curatorial practice has changed, what has that been in response to?

I think I need to refer to the previous paragraphs, in order to answer these questions. Historically, one of the biggest problems facing Black artists has been the pressure to accept or go along with prescribed notions of difference and ethnicity. Their practice has at different times been described as 'ethnic arts', Black arts, multicultural arts, etc. Now, in 2004, Black artists' practice is widely regarded as being 'culturally diverse'. In this sense, precious little (within the working environment for artists of colour in the West) has changed. Consequently, the strategies that artists of colour might be advised to use in order to get recognition for their work have not – in my view - changed greatly in the past fifteen years.

Prescribed and nonsensical notions of 'cultural diversity' need to be resisted and rejected now, just as parallel nonsense about 'ethnic arts' should have been more widely resisted in the mid 1980s. The one element of consistency within the supposedly changing landscape is that white artists remain pre-eminently visible - and the hordes of white middle class women acting as their apologists within the gallery system remain in control and in charge. *[Edited to add: "to the exclusion of other people, perpetuating a value system that I don't agree with"* *Conversation with Eddie Chambers, 11 November 2004.]*

This past year has seen the unsightly spectacle of many of the country's most proficient Black artists clamouring to get their noses in the Arts Council's cultural diversity decibel's trough. If any 'strategy' can be deduced from this, it is clearly no more than one of self-seeking opportunism. When it is applied to the wider and long-term needs of Black artists, such opportunism is about as much use as the Pope's balls.

The most significant way in which my own curatorial practice has changed is that I have given up on a gallery system that is not yet prepared to accept Black people as artists, as gallery audiences or as gallery curators.

And finally, do you think the idea that the use of digital media brings a whole new set of concerns to culturally diverse arts practice is a valid one?

I think the concise answer to that is that I do not necessarily think that the use of digital media brings a whole new set of concerns to arts practice, as it relates to what Black artists do. Forms of expression change all the time. And each new and dramatically different form of expression brings with it a bewildering set of consequences and implications for visual artists and their practice. If we look back throughout the previous century, we can see that artists have consistently or regularly changed the parameters of what was considered acceptable art practice. The found object, the screen-printed image, the installation; these are just three of the distinctly different forms of expressions that artists have embraced over the course of the 20th century. Digital media is of course the most recent, but it will surely be eclipsed by other, newer forms of expression, as the current century progresses.