

“The Cloth that Binds:” Lubaina Himid and the Refiguring of the Black and White Atlantic

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This paper uses the theoretical paradigms labelled the “black Atlantic”, established in Caribbean Studies, Cultural Studies and Performance Studies by such luminaries as Edouard Glissant, Paul Gilroy and Joseph Roach to interpret Contemporary African Atlantic Visual Arts. These scholars have intervened to move the debate on culture away from concentration on national cultures toward exigencies based on the transnational and intercultural. As Paul Gilroy describes it, we should “take the Atlantic as one single, complex unit of analysis in (our) discussions of the modern world and use it to produce an explicitly transnational and intercultural perspective” (15). For instance, many Black British artists can be discussed in terms of a triangular series of influences: slavery and the African past, the global power of modern African American culture and contemporary Black British culture. In developing a methodology in my first monograph *Radical Narratives of the Black Atlantic* (Continuum 2003) I took on board the critique of Gilroy’s lack of a class perspective by Laura Chrisman and used a theoretical model that had a more developed intersection of race and class perspectives that I will develop further in this paper.

It will concentrate on the Preston-based, Zanzibar-born artist and curator Lubaina Himid who memorialises the slave trade in her sequence *Revenge* (1992) that has a complex and signifying relationship to the British Fine Art tradition. Her latest installation *Cotton.com* (Cube Gallery, Manchester, 2002) interrogates the symbiotic relationship between Lancashire workers and enslaved blacks in ways that reinvigorate old debates about the meaning of race and class. I will develop a multifaceted reading of her work that delineates Himid’s developing dual perspective that dramatically intersects the exploitation of working class whites and enslaved blacks using cotton and cloth as key symbolic markers. The paper will interpret her work’s relationship to these complex race and class histories using her own comments from personal interviews and written pieces to complement the reading of the works themselves.

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