

Von Goetz

A British Blues Formations of black joy expanded *Lisa Anderson*

As an art student in Brighton, Brixton-bred Sola Olulode often yearned for the solace of the dancefloor; the joys of authentic, safe communion through bodies surrendering to music; the experience of seeing and being seen whilst being understood by a community she understood. Embattled by a Eurocentric art curriculum full of black holes that should have been filled by the exceptional light of artists like Sonia Boyce or Kerry James Marshall - a certain Nigerian-British blues set in that steadily soaked its way into the background of her final year paintings.

'Moving in the bluish light' is a gathering of new paintings that intimately portray imagined or embellished snapshots of Olulode's twilight escapades; from clubbing with QTIPOC¹ collective BBZ², to music nights-in with loved ones. Each work is a scintillating formation of black, queer, womxn's joy, juxtaposed with blue. Her figures, caught in the midst of reverie, hold us in their self-possessed gaze, whether facing forwards in a tight lovers embrace, squatting akimbo; arms outstretched over open knees, or bending over with hips engaged in a close wine. Each scene is a distilled interruption of movement - you can virtually sense the characters returning to the business of enjoyment after you look away.

After all, perhaps the sounds of Solange or Little Simz, are still playing wherever they are, and whilst her figures are often cast under a spotlight in their portraits, it's Olulode's purposeful act of visual documentation that brings them out of the darkness. Charged with the promise of movement and centralised in her frame, her dancers, lovers, friends are given a sensual power and visibility that Olulode admits is important to her. They also highlight the importance of these social settings as sites of emotional refuge, healing and affirmation, which for many years were hidden from wider public view.

" Often when we talk about the wonderful Black women in our lives, their valour their emotional strength, their psychic endurance overwhelm our texts so much so that we forget that apart from learning the elegant art of survival from them, we also learn in their gestures the fine art of sensuality, the fleshy art of pleasure and desire"³

¹ The initialism QTIPOC is commonly used to highlight the varied experiences of queer and non-binary people of colour

² BBZ is a club night and curatorial collective from South East London, prioritising the experiences of queer womxn, trans and non-binary people of colour

³ Dionne Brand, 'Bread Out of Stone: Recollections, Sex, Recognitions, Race, Dreaming, Politics' (Toronto: Coach House Press, 1994, p27-28)

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When questioned on it she shyly claims 'I wouldn't call my works political but is my form of activism', wary perhaps of the over simplified reading of political representation commonly foisted onto works by black artists. Yet, it's clear that her practice is an expression of Olulode's own softly spoken rebellion against the silencing effects of distorted ideas about being black and second generation British, let alone about being a happy go lucky queer femme of Nigerian heritage. Her flavour of politics is distinctly personal, rooted by an intersectional black feminist perspective committed to the expansion of ideas about black womxnhood, similarly explored by British artists like Lubaina Himid and Ingrid Pollard before her.

Olulode, who was born in 1996, is certainly channelling broader conversations in art history than she was availed through her paid-for art education. Not least, the increasingly dynamic dialectic around black British art; the phenomenally varied works produced by artists from the African diaspora in Britain, especially through figuration and portraiture⁴. For example, her works summon an energy and approach reminiscent of the 1980s reggae 'blues' dance scenes captured by the artist Denzel Forrester, who born in 1956, is forty years her senior.

Buoyed not only by the commercial success and critical acclaim of artists such as Anthea Hamilton and Lynette Yiadom Boakye, as well as the landmark research project 'Black Artists and Modernism'⁵, there has been a growing recognition and increase in the institutional acquisition of contemporary works that bring black British experiences out of the margins in recent years. Claudette Johnson, a member of the British Black Art Movement recently had a new work acquired by the Tate⁶ and Kimathi Donkor's 'Yaa Asantewaa Inspecting The Dispositions at Ejisu' from 2014 was recently added to the collection of the British museum. Both figurative works centre the image of black women, bringing into question not only their aesthetic value, but also their agency, the particular quality of their being.

Olulode's approach to this is intriguing, particularly because of the entanglement between imagination and reality that her figurative style evokes – there's a vague, indeterminate quality to the faces of her figures – but also thanks to her idiosyncratic technical approach. Many of her figures take their form through the traditional wax-resistant dye technique used in creating her batik canvases. Their white

⁴ Leon Wainwright 'Phenomenal Difference: A Philosophy of Black British Art' Liverpool University Press, 2017, p45

⁵ Black Artists and Modernism (BAM), is a three-year research project led by University of the Arts London (UAL) in partnership with Middlesex University, funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC). BAM investigateS the artworks of Black-British artists and the works' relationship to modernism.

⁶ The Tate acquired Claudette Johnson's Standing Figure with African Masks (2018) after viewing it in Frieze London October 2018

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outlines are painted in wax with a studied freedom less concerned with accuracy than conveying the feeling or presence of their personality. In this vein she echoes Lynette Yiadom-Boakye's perspective on one of her favourite paintings:

*"It is possible to achieve movement, elegance, heat...with very little and it doesn't need to look real to feel it. Feeling rather than knowing. Feeling as believing, Painting as sensuality"*⁷

She admits a resistance to formalism, rooted in playful abstraction that stretches the potential of their possibilities. Sometimes the outlines are left visible whilst others are painted through, creating an illustrative quality with a depth amplified by the rich palette used to flesh out her figures.

Chestnut, cocoa, tan and ochre infused browns are conjured and brushed into arms, midribs and legs in celebration of the chromatic scale of black skin tones. Their voluminous density brought further into relief by the foregrounding hue. That British-Nigerian, Yoruba Adire-indigo inspired blue, that seems to sit so comfortably in its deceptively intense frequency. "I was interested in tapping into that blue thing, that so many black artists have" she explains. However, when I ask her to be more specific, Olulode confesses that the choice of colour was initially the result of experimentation that ignited an attachment she's since been unable to shake.

So, what is it about blue? At the end of one of our interviews, Olulode handed me her treasured personal scrap-book, packed with printed cut-outs of inspirational works including Ofili's 'Blue Rider' series, Yusuf Grillo's 'Kabiyesi And Olori', the 'Diamonds' dancing scene from French teenage coming of age film 'Girlhood' and of course the movie art for the Oscar winning 'Moonlight'. These artistic renditions of black skins set against or in blue channel the colour's poetic capacity to summon emotion and transform conversations about race within the composition of personal identity.

Olulode's blue portraits are partly expressionist depictions of darkened dance spaces, but perhaps as Fred Moten might agree, the tonal blur between the blackness of her subject's skin and the liberating atmosphere of free sexual desire and self-expression that carries their shine.

*"Blue is something (not) (in) between things—a medium, the material within which the pigment is suspended, through which it's transferred, in both reflection and absorption"*⁸ Fred Moten

An atmosphere although saturated with activity, is also washed loose through her creation of patterned light in the angled linear designs in some of her backgrounds, or though the naturally uneven diffusion

⁷ Lynette Yiadom-Boakye, 'Artist's Artists' frieze masters, no.1, 2012 p75

⁸ Fred Moten 'Black and Blur', Duke University Press, 2017, p.237

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of the indigo dye into cloth as it dries. With that there's also an ease that her blues are able to hold, especially in those areas where excess moisture has settled to leave lighter faded areas.

A meditation on the undulating shades of Olulode's blue backgrounds, enhanced by the crinkles and creases in their materiality may also invoke the dampened spacy static that soaks the lyrics of RnB classic 'Be Your Girl' by Teedra Moses, or the sultry vibes of SZA's 'Doves in the Wind' which serve to remind me that her blue-scapes also operate on a perceptively sonic level to complement the gesture or movement of her figures.

The rhythms they respond to are also echoed by the layers of repeated circles, coils, or half-moon patterns used to energise the ebullient hairstyles of some of her figures, or the dots, zig-zags and stripes used to decorate their outfits. On some works, this effect is further enhanced by a material layering; wax used to give height and structure to hair, and elsewhere oil bar, pastels and charcoal, adds textural definition. This tactile, impassioned approach to layering texture and movement into her canvases is an expression, that not only summons some of the works of early black British artists, but also traditional Yoruba Adire cloth making practices that Olulode hopes to explore further in the future.

Which brings us full circle to consider the source of her blue phase. When I first met Olulode, I was struck by the circularity of her story. Alienated by a restrictive social and educational setting in Brighton she was drawn towards the 'make it happen' DIY energy of the BBZ collectives and their championing of creative self-expression. This same determined, care-free energy empowered her to defy her teachers advice to make her subjects look more realistic, rather she chose to experiment with a self-fashioned Adire dyeing kit upon which she would ultimately create her own formations of black joy, in blue.