

## Surface Depths

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CHRIS OFILI. Tate Britain.

GARY HUME: NEW WORK. New Art Centre, Salisbury.

For a large part of Chris Ofili's short career it has been difficult to see his paintings clearly: they have been greeted with a myopic, monochromatic glare which has traduced their inherent sensitivity and thoughtfulness, let alone their sense of fun and often radiant beauty. What the detractors have most commonly seen is an outrage of their own creation: the elephant dung was taken as both subject and verdict at the Turner Prize in 1998; Rudolph Giuliani demanded the removal of *The Holy Virgin Mary*, without ever having seen it, when *Sensation* arrived in New York in 1999. During the show, in a literal act of censorship, a visitor smeared white paint over the representations of black skin, making manifest the racial and religious insecurity Ofili's work could engender. Then, in 2005, when Ofili was pursuing a more introspective style, scandal erupted over the Tate's acquisition of *The Upper Room*, as it emerged that the artist was a trustee at the time of purchase: the postcolonial icon had apparently turned cultural imperialist.

Now, brought together in this superbly curated exhibition, there is the chance to see the paintings on their own terms. The early works tell the story of how those contentious juxtapositions arose. Having experimented with expressionist and abstract forms, Ofili felt that his art lacked conceptual force; a trip to Zimbabwe gave him the inspiration he needed, from animal dung seen in the wild, to cave paintings of abstract dots, said to have been made in a trance. The decorative and the disgusting first meet in *Painting with Shit on it*, where the excrement is smeared over abstract fields of orange and blue dots, the canvas leant against the wall, standing on two globes of resin-coated dung. Hereafter the dung on the canvas likewise becomes ritualised balls, that are variously heads, breasts, totems, and, in the *Captain Shit* series, emblems of a debased blackness. Collaged cut-outs of celebrities, pornography, and blaxploitation iconography become focal points amidst the psychedelic pointillism, in a collision of past with present, pop with high culture, and the sacred with the profane.

A surface play with stereotypes rapidly unfurls, not least in the pullulating ornamentation, which taps into the association of gaudiness with black culture that runs from the early minstrel shows to hip-hop bling, and which is found in both racist caricatures and anthropological studies. It is perhaps with a nod to Zora Neale Hurston's suggestion that black people have historically imitated dominant white cultures, adding embellishments that fit their needs, that Ofili borrows from Renaissance portraiture, Francis Picabia, and William Blake. In the latter he finds a spiritual reality that can metamorphose into mystical sexuality, within an aura of 90s drugs culture. Characters begin to enter this tacky and tactile world: glittered and glowing, they are like kitsch Klimt, the decadence of empire meeting with subversive primitivistic forces.

Encountering *The Holy Virgin Mary* in this context the violent contradictions are justified as part of a sustained investigation into questions of appropriation, and the connections between spirituality and sex. This is no simple act of defilement: the dungball for an exposed breast suggests an Earth Mother, a reminder too of the humility of the stable, while the skin-colour may relate to the Rastafari belief in a black Jesus Christ – the recent print series *The Agony in the Garden* develops this idea in presenting the disciples' eleven perspectives on Christ's betrayal, the differences highlighted by the incorporation of his trademark 'afro heads'. It proves easy to give oneself up to the gorgeousness of Ofili's surfaces, here to the shimmering folds of dress and Byzantine halo of gilt; but closer inspection reveals the collaged photographic female backsides and genitalia that flutter all about like seraphim. Clearly this is provocation, but it also heightens the work's fertility symbolism. From an autobiographical stance the painting tells the story of the artist's changing contexts, from his Catholic upbringing to working in a King's Cross studio.

In the latest edition of *TATE ETC*, asked repeatedly for his 'stance' on women, Ofili rightly dismisses the need for one position, suggesting that if he arouses controversy it is merely a by-product of probing 'what can and can't work in relation to what should and shouldn't'. He is never polemical, and has a horror of didacticism; so too he refuses to be confined by fixed representations, and the highly sexualised women are counterbalanced by images of female grace, notably the watercolour *Afromuses*. *No Woman, No Cry*, an impassioned response to the murder of Stephen Lawrence, is a rare example of specific topicality; it speaks with quiet dignity, not with confrontation.

Inspired by visits to Trinidad, the 'Red, Green and Black Paintings' mark the final flourishing of the dots, coruscating over the entire canvass in *Afro Love and Unity*, in the colours of Marcus Garvey's Pan-African flag. Far less subtle, however, is *The Union Black*, Ofili's reconfiguration of that flag for Black Britain, which is flying above the Tate; the spirit of allusion, on which the paintings thrive, comes dangerously close here to imposition, strongly bringing to mind the separatist and essentialist aspects of Garvey's ideology.

Feeling that his work was in danger of stagnating in London, Ofili moved to Trinidad permanently in 2005, and abandoned his old techniques, flattening his surfaces and painting almost exclusively in oil. Narrative possibilities emerge through the engagement with island life and mythology, but there is always a veil of mystery. In the catalogue interview Ofili protests against Ekow Eshun's assumption that, on 'a non-white island', the black artist is automatically an insider: rather, Ofili speaks of his 'camouflage' which disguises an outsider's gaze. He has brought about his own deracination, adding another dimension to his multifaceted consciousness. Indeed, that gaze is often mediated by European modernism, tinted with the coloration, and refracted through the formal experimentation, of *Les Fauves* and *Der Blaue Reiter*.

The Blue Rider series, referencing that latter influence, is a haunting exploration of twilight and shadows; we grope for images in the layered blue and black gradations, which invite the imagination to come alive. There are also nightmares to be uncovered here: *Iscariot Blues* shows a man hanging while a band plays on, ostensibly Judas but inescapably a potent reminder of lynchings; so too the disruptions of space, the mergers and disappearances, recall a colonial past in which identities are disturbingly

compromised. The latest work is vibrantly coloured, strongly evoking Matisse. These are the biggest pieces yet, and it takes a while to adjust to the vast bare spaces. In *The Raising of Lazarus* the restless reconfiguration of forms, as an emblem of resurrection, shows how process is still as important as finished product. In others, the confident contours are being replaced by more searching forms, the brush more open to spontaneous exploration. These epic spaces may be mastered formally, but there are occasional uneven moments of execution. At this scale it is easy to spoil the spell: any failures of technique are exposed, and can no longer be disguised by the neo-Primitivist impulse. This is very much work in progress, and it will be fascinating to see how it evolves.

Gary Hume, who is showing at the New Art Centre, has like Ofili demonstrated an ability to adapt and grow that is uncommon among the Young British Artists. In 1992 he bravely abandoned the limiting geometric minimalism of the 'door paintings' that had made him famous, and set about engaging with found images. What has remained continuous is the investigation of the relations between the literal and the abstract, and the pure gloss surfaces: the subject is always unstable, both in the questioning contours and in the continually changing experience of viewing.

Though there is nothing especially new about this 'new work', it amounts to a microcosmic survey, taking in his principal subjects and media in just eight works. Each of the three paintings is perceptually disruptive: the reflective aluminium ground exposed to form one of the disembodied legs, framed in an ambiguous perspective, in *View from a Balcony*; the missing pieces of a fashion portrait showing through when the light refracts off buried contours in *Orange Glove*; the subject enlarged and reduced to the point of abstraction in *Yellow Bird*.

The gallery's combination of skylights, plate glass walls, and artificial lighting splendidly animates these surfaces. Two curves, painted by the artist in red and yellow on the side walls, invite the garden light in; the space is narrow, the paintings large, but one can also view from the outside, with the glass providing another stimulating layer of reflection. This selection also works particularly well with the current installation in the Centre's 'Artists' House', of Richard Hamilton's prints of shiny toasters, along with various craft and design pieces which subvert their traditional functions. In this context Hume's work becomes particularly responsive to the manmade world, reminding us how thoughtfully he brings to fine art the colours and finishes one would expect to find on a bus or train.

The charcoal and chalk drawings on canvas are of a quieter temper. The influence of Japanese art, latent in the flattened surfaces and spatial mergers of the paintings, here becomes explicit in the stylized floral contours of *Odour of Chrysanthemums*, its tiny magenta rectangular corner an abstracted version of the seals on Japanese prints; whereas *Wild Figs* exploits a more wandering, calligraphic line, suggestive of Japanese ceramic decoration. But they suffer in comparison with the ineffably subtle, fully synthesized *japoniserie* of the Mary Potters in the adjoining main house. So too, Hume's sculpture, though always fun, never quite lives up to the paintings, missing above all the play with dimensionality; but the contrast here in *Winterberry*, between natural and artificial, is striking, and nicely links the other media: its bright blue berries echo the enamel of the paintings, and are set against the rhyming textures of the bronze and charcoal.

Together, Ofili and Hume show that the exploration of surfaces and space unleashed by Cubism remains a vital aspect of painterly enquiry today. These artists typify the vigour that has placed Britain at the forefront of the contemporary art scene, and their adaptability and absolute integrity are the means by which this status will be secured.