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Afro Modern, Tate Liverpool, UK

by Sam Thorne



Romare Bearden, *Blue Shade*, 1972. Collage on masonite, 24 x 37cm.

In *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (1993), Yale professor Paul Gilroy argues for the Atlantic Ocean to be reconceived as a 'continent in negative'. Gilroy perceives this hybrid formation of cultures – from Western Europe, North and South America, Africa and the Caribbean – as born out of slavery's bitter history and informed by the African diasporic experience. Both bracing and startlingly ambitious, 'Afro Modern: Journeys Through the Black Atlantic' takes Gilroy's book as its inspiration, considering the impact of these transatlantic compound cultures on the art of the 20th century. In this sense, the chronological survey makes a strong case for a multiplicity of divergent Modernisms, continuing the arguments made by several major exhibitions over the last three decades for a cogent counter-model to Eurocentric versions of Modernist narratives.

Gilroy's main cultural focuses are the writings of American civil rights activist and sociologist W.E.B. Du Bois and author Richard Wright, as well as jazz and early hip-hop; curated by Tanya Barson and Peter Gorschlüter, 'Afro Modern' adds a vibrant visual parallel narrative to his thesis. (In fact, it's the second exhibition to take *The Black Atlantic* as a starting point – the first was at Berlin's Haus der Kulturen der Welt in 2004.) Spread across seven galleries of Tate Liverpool (next to what was, in the mid-18th century, the largest slave port in Europe), 'Afro Modern' gathers more than 140 works from more than 60 artists, and includes an extensive programme of parallel programmes at institutions across the city, most notably a survey of Guyanese painter Aubrey Williams at the Walker Art Gallery. Among the numerous highlights were, for me, Romare Bearden's collages, Hélio Oiticica's *parangolés* (capes), Maya Deren's posthumous film *Divine Horsemen* (1947–51) and three – three! – works by David Hammons.

The Black Atlantic extends Du Bois' well-known concept, developed in *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903), of 'double consciousness': 'One ever feels his twoness – an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts.' This idea is central to 'Afro Modern', which opens with a group of stunning paintings – of silhouetted figures, dancing or shackled – by Aaron Douglas, a key contributor to *The Crisis*, the journal which Du Bois founded in 1910. (Silhouettes bookend the show, which concludes with the shadow-play of *8 Possible Beginnings or: The Creation of African–America, a Moving Picture* by Kara E. Walker, 2005). It then moves swiftly through Brancusi, Modigliani and Picasso to a geographically broad range of Janus-faced responses to the European avant-garde: from the Harlem Renaissance to *Pau-Brasil* and Antropofagia. What begins in Europe and North America, with the myopic appropriations of Primitivism and the Surrealists' interest in ethnography, moves elsewhere, when the leading figures of the 1930s Paris-based *Négritude* movement (such as the Martinican poet Aimé Césaire, who coined the term, and poet, cultural theorist and future Senegalese president, Léopold Sédar Senghor) returned to their home countries following the outbreak of World War II. As Kobena Mercer points out in the accompanying catalogue, this migration – typified by the Natural Synthesis movement (founded in Nigeria in 1960) and *creolization* in the Caribbean – led to the very first self-consciously diasporic black Modernist practices. The central argument of these hybrid works – such as the totems of Agustín Cárdenas and paintings of Wilfredo Lam – is that, as Oiticica asserted, 'purity is a myth'.

'Dissident Identities', one of the show's strongest sections, focuses on 1960s and '70s radical political engagement. It includes both searing documentation – such as Gordon Parks' well-known photographs for *Life* magazine of the Civil Rights protests and Charles Moore's 1963 photo of the riots in Alabama (the source for Warhol's 1964 *Birmingham Race Riot*, which is shown alongside) – and angry, spectral traces. For example, in Frank Bowling's 1968 painting, *Who's Afraid of Barney Newman?* (a yellow, green and red response to Barnett Newman's *Who's Afraid of Red, Yellow & Blue, II* of the previous year), the ghostly outline of South America floats on top of a yellow zip. In Hammons' early sculpture, *The Door (Admissions Office)* (1969), a black print of the artist's naked torso is smeared – almost scorched – onto a freestanding door. And, made when she was just 23, Adrian Piper's photographic series of self-portraits, *Food for the Spirit* (1973), documents her period of fasting as she was studying the philosophy of Immanuel Kant – penumbral, almost fading away, her naked or partially clad figure stands defiant, camera in hand.

Aside from Hammons, the naked male figure is largely absent from 'Afro Modern'. A section titled 'Exhibiting Bodies' focuses exclusively on women artists' recent responses to the objectification of the female black body – we get Ana Mendieta's raw video performances; Tracey Rose posing as a naked Sarah Bartmann (a Khoikhoi woman from South Africa who was toured as a freakshow attraction in 19th-century Europe under the name 'Hottentot Venus'); Candice Breitz' (rather less compelling) shots of naked African women, their bodies blanked in with correction fluid – but there is little by way of counterbalance. This feels like an oversight given that there is no lack of work in this area – Glenn Ligon's reframing of Robert Mapplethorpe's portraits, Steve McQueen's early films or Kalup Linzy's more recent videos all come to mind – and that Gilroy notes (during a discussion about Jimi Hendrix) that, 'Sexuality and authenticity have been intertwined in the history of western culture for several hundred years'.

'Afro Modern' concludes with a gallery of works grouped under Thelma Golden and Ligon's controversial deployment of the (often misused) term 'post-black'. As defined by the curator and artist, this refers to artists who, though keen not to be labelled 'black', are invested in 'redefining complex notions of blackness'. In her catalogue essay, Courtney J. Martin notes that the term has become largely synonymous with black American artists who have received some international recognition. This is certainly borne out by a final room – which includes work by Ligon, Adam Pendleton, Lorna Simpson and Kara Walker – in which Chris Ofili is the only non-American artist. This surely cannot be indicative of the state of current work being made around these issues. Indeed, while the exhibition's breadth and anti-canonical arguments make quibblings over omissions feel churlish, there seemed to be an important place here for work by British artists including, among others, McQueen, the Black Audio Film Collective, Yinka Shonibare and The Otolith Group.

The plural 'journeys' of the exhibition's subtitle is key: if the diaspora can be called a tradition at all, it is one of ceaseless motion – a 'special mood of restlessness', as Gilroy puts it – that has been repossessed and affirmed as the basis of a privileged standpoint. Gilroy referred to his book as 'an essay about the inescapable hybridity and intermixture of ideas'; here *The Black Atlantic* is matched by a valuable addition to recently expanded histories of Modernism.