

## GAGOSIAN GALLERY

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### Afro Modern at Tate Liverpool: Voyage of rediscovery

This journey through the culture of the Black Atlantic – from Primitivist modernism through to postmodern video work – is full of startling insights, even if it eventually loses its way



Jacob Lawrence's *Street to Mbari* (1964) at Afro Modern, Tate Liverpool. Photograph: National Gallery of Art, Washington

Jacob Lawrence's *Street to Mbari*, a picture in pencil, tempera and gouache of a crowded market in Nigeria in 1964, is the kind of work that curators put into a group exhibition at their peril. It is so good, so convincing, that it almost blinds you to the merits of every other artist in *Afro Modern: Journeys through the Black Atlantic*, which

opens today at [Tate Liverpool](#). And yet *Street to Mbari* – a portrait of Africa by a great African American artist – is also an argument in favour of this exhibition, and a way to penetrate its complex ideas.

Tate Liverpool seems an apposite place to explore the bleaker aspects of the Atlantic. The museum is contained within the forbidding 19th-century warehouses of the Albert Dock, which speaks more lucidly than any other British setting of the history of the slave trade, documented in detail at the [International Slavery Museum](#) nearby.

But *Afro Modern* is more complex than that. It is inspired by a book, [The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness](#), first published in 1993 by the British cultural critic Paul Gilroy. Gilroy's thesis, reacting against essentialist Afrocentrism, is that black culture's response to the modern world, into which Africans were transported so violently, has been ambivalent. As I understand it – and it is a difficult book – Gilroy believes that although African migration in the 18th century was brutally enforced, the development of black consciousness in the Americas and Britain was never just a rejection of "white" culture, but an engagement with it. Black culture, in other words, has crossed and re-crossed the Atlantic – at first in chains, but then willfully and creatively.

Those journeys are well captured by the work of Jacob Lawrence, who was born in Atlantic City in 1917 and in the aftermath of the Great Depression, created the most important American history painting cycle of the 20th century, *The Migration Series*. It portrays the journeys of black people from the oppressive south to the northern industrial cities in search of work and freedom. Lawrence's *Street to Mbari* is the exhilarated, ecstatic, yet composed and detailed record of an outsider's response to Africa. In Lawrence's eyes, Africa is the new world. It is a painting that travels; not a document of "homecoming", but as a record of complex perspectives, of what was gained as well as lost.

The show is more subversive than it first appears. Yes, there are nods to the Harlem Renaissance – notably poems by Langston Hughes illustrated by Aaron Douglas – and documents from the civil rights era, including a telling work by David Hammons in which

black faces and hands press desperately at the glass panel of the door to a university admissions office. But here too are works by white artists who were entranced by "the primitive". Picasso's 1909 *Bust of a Woman* comes from the same period as *Les Femmes d'Alger (O. J. R. Version O)* and shares its deliberately jarring, shocking transformation of a face into a carved wooden African mask.

Man Ray's photograph *Noir et Blanche* (1926) portrays the famous Parisian avant garde muse Kiki of Montmartre resting her pearl-complexioned face next to a mask from Africa. The picture finds a similarity in the almond shapes of their faces that, too, echoes *Les Femmes d'Alger*. These images take us to the very heart of the fascination with African art that so inspired European modernists a century ago.

These are artists whose views on race would probably seem highly offensive to us. And not so long ago, an exhibition such as this would have felt obliged to point this out, to provide long wall texts explaining that modern art's "primitivism" was the racist culture of an age of empire. But this exhibition is far more ambivalent: it documents the jazz age dances of Josephine Baker as comic, self-conscious, dramatisations of the kind of fantasy Picasso indulges in *Les Femmes d'Alger*, with watercolours and magazine photographs that reveal how she became an icon for Parisian artists. It sets a painting of Harlem by the strange British painter Edward Burra alongside jazzy works by the Harlem Renaissance painter Aaron Douglas – the pure shapes of Douglas's murals contrasting with Burra's meaty caricatures.

Near Lawrence's street scene is Constantin Brancusi's abstract sculpture *The Blonde Negress* (1926): a shining metallic vision of a futurist head that resembles a cross between yet another African mask and a design for a beautiful robot. Brancusi's eroticised, idolised visions of an abstract human form indicate how modernists drew on Africa to invent a utopian model for a new humanity. Elsewhere, a film by the surrealist Maya Deren records Voodoo rituals in 1940s Haiti – the very appearance of which reminds us that no history of the Black Atlantic world can just be aesthetic or art-historical.

One of the best things about Gilroy's book was the way in which it broke up the distinctions between high art and popular culture, and between history and the new, that limit conventional views of modernism. The Black Atlantic discusses JMW Turner's 1840 painting of a slave ship and tells how its bloody sky and sea scattered with flailing African bodies so upset its first owner, John Ruskin, that he sold it. Yet it also discusses how Quincy Jones was influenced by a stay in Sweden in what Gilroy sees as his pivotal role in the reinvention of jazz. Gilroy sees such music as one of the fundamental black contributions to a "counter-culture of modernity".

In the early galleries of Afro Modern, the curators follow this principle, mixing jazz culture and art together – Langston Hughes's poems are modelled on blues lyrics and eerily evoke Robert Johnson, but read with enormous weight and clarity on the page. Yet in the later rooms of the show, recent art is treated in isolation from that kind of larger cultural history. The least impressive room is the 1960s display, whose protest art seems narrow in comparison with the possibilities of 1920s modernism: you simply don't get the same sense of creative dialogue between black and white artists, although Frank Bowling's painting *Who's Afraid of Barney Newman?*, which reinvents Newman's abstract vertical bands in tropical colours and places on them a spectral map of South America, is a highly honourable exception. The last room presents Chris Ofili's painting *Captain Shit*, with its psychedelic black superhero, whose powerful features suggest Japanese comics. But offering the work in isolation from 1990s hip-hop, whose aesthetic it so clearly shares, is surely a bit po-faced.

In fact, the entire argument about the Black Atlantic seems to dissipate as the show goes on. Only fleetingly does its big themes surface in the contemporary work on display. In Ellen Gallagher's spooky painting *Bird in Hand* (2006), for instance, which resembles a design for a crazed countercultural remake of *Pirates of the Caribbean*. And there is a hypnotically horrible film by American artist Kara Walker, *Eight Possible Beginnings*; or the *Creation of African-America*, in which the history of the US is told by puppets in black-and-white silhouette. They begin in folksy, sickly-sweet nostalgia, but rapidly degenerate into scenes of rape and abuse. I can't count the number of times I

have encountered films by Walker in group shows; each time they grow to consume surrounding works. Here is an artist whose sense of history seems to be choking her, and threatens to swallow us.

Outside, rain lashes the pool at the heart of the Albert Dock, out towards the Mersey and the Atlantic beyond. This exhibition is a brave, intelligent – and at its best – transformative encounter with that melancholy ocean and its voyagers.