

Reframing the Black Figure JA Projects designs 'The Time is Always Now' for the National Portrait Gallery



She was learning to love moments, to love moments for themselves by Amy Sherald. Courtesy of the artist and Hauser & Wirth. Photo by Joseph Hyde.

Throughout the history of Western art, the Black figure has been notable by absence, misrepresentation and distortion. In *The Time is Always Now: Reframing the Black Figure*, former ICA director Ekow Eshun presents a series of works by contemporary artists from the African diaspora that explore and illuminate the complexity of Black identity today, as well as examining the representation, misrepresentation and non-representation of the Black figure throughout art history.

Running from 22 February to 19 May 2024 at the National Portrait Gallery, the exhibition's creative direction is provided by JA Projects, the architecture practice founded by Jayden Ali. Having recently designed *Entangled Pasts* at the Royal Academy (opened earlier this month), and the V&A's landmark exhibition *Fashioning Masculinities* in 2022, among others, JA Projects has built a track record of developing considered and immersive exhibitions that narratively engage with their artworks, and which go beyond the pieces on display to interrogate and reimagine the architecture of the institutions themselves.

For *The Time is Always Now*, JA Projects has responded to the exhibition's curatorial structure as a three-stage journey through the experience of Black representation. It begins with 'Double Consciousness', an exploration of the nuanced realities of being a Black person in a white world; and concludes with 'Kinship & Connection', a reflection on collectivity and community – moving from the internalised self to wider society. Linking the two, the connective tissue of the exhibition is 'The Persistence of History', which considers the Black absence in Western art, and represents the retrieval of a people's history, places, moments and memories.

"Our work, alongside Ekow, to centre Black artists and Black figures is the most recent chapter in our ongoing commitment to celebrate the universality of beauty and the restorative justice of the imagination. Whether through visceral mark-making, the weight of vault-like rooms, or the encouragement of collective gathering, our creative direction takes its cues from work that seeks to leave indelible impressions. It is an essay on being both present and hard to shift. Our hope is that this moment is embedded into the very fabric of the National Portrait Gallery, with visitors feeling empowered to reflect, rest and return."

– Jayden Ali, founder, JA Projects

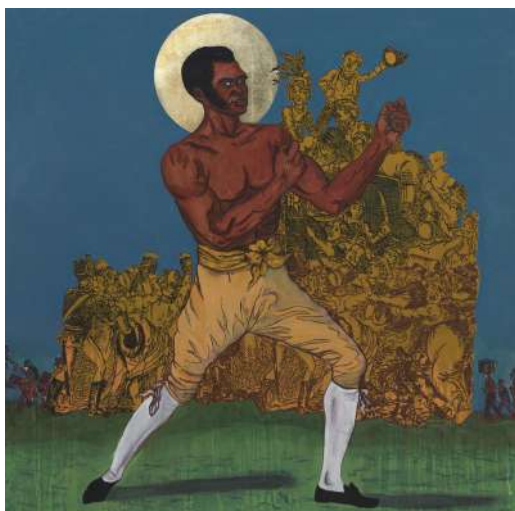
Double Consciousness

Featuring works by Noah Davis, Michael Armitage, Kerry James Marshall and Nathaniel Mary Quinn, the first part of the exhibition is framed by the literal and symbolic act of mark-making, with the gallery walls bearing the gestural and imperfect application and removal of paint as a record of Black hands – comparable to the beaten Lubugo-bark cloth of Michael Armitage or Nathaniel Mary Quinn's inscription of his mother's name on his diploma. This scenic treatment therefore literally inscribes Black people into our nation's history.

Working with long-standing collaborator and artist Issy Nanabeyin, JA Projects has responded to this idea with the use of high-contrast blues and textures, with the walls behind the artworks split between smooth painted sections at the top, and manually applied coloured textures within the natural reach of a person's hand.

The Persistence of History

The central area of the exhibition addresses the Black absence in Western art by offering an alternative perspective on the past. JA Projects' design for this section seeks to situate visitors within a vault-like space of subtly reflective materials that interweave faces and figures into and among the artworks. A flash of red throughout the section supports the works by Godfried Donkor, Kimathi Donkor, Lubaina Himid, Barbara Walker and Titus Kaphar – visceral reminders of the presence of black figures within the canon of Western Art. Barbara Walker's series *Vanishing Point* reorientates our vision towards the presence of Black subjects within historical works such as *Pierre Mignard's Portrait of the Duchess of Portsmouth, with an unknown female attendant*. Alongside, the dark chapters of European history of slavery are explored by Lubaina Himid's magisterial portraits reinterpreting historical events, such as *Le Rodeur: The Captain and the Mate*, where she represents the infamous story of the 19th-century slave ship *Le Rodeur* in glaring brightness and vivid colours while sustaining a pervading sense of anxiety.



St Bill Richmond, the black terror by Godfried Donkor.
Image courtesy of Gallery 1957 and Salim Zakhem.

Kinship & Connection

The final section, a single large space, takes inspiration from sociologist Ruha Benjamin's observation that 'cultivating kinfulness is cultivating life', and showcases works by artists Hurvin Anderson, Jordan Casteel, Njideka Akunyili Crosby, Denzil Forrester, Claudette Johnson, Toyin Ojih Odutola and Amy Sherald.

A single carpet unites the vividly colourful space, inspired by the quotidian interior scenes presented with this section, more specifically Henry Taylor's *Right hand, wing man, best friend, and all the above!* The lush verdant carpeted interior seems to spill out from the pictorial space into the gallery itself.

The room includes large-scale collective seating, inviting visitors to acknowledge and reflect on the works on display but also to acknowledge and reflect on the visitors themselves.

"In the Time is Always Now, we have strived to create an environment which truly celebrates some of the most important and exciting artists working today, and JA Projects have been wonderful collaborators in bringing this vision to life. The exhibition's thoughtful design perfectly complements the artwork on display, creating a space for visitors to reflect and engage with the exhibition's themes and curation."

– Andrew Horn, Exhibition Manager, National Portrait Gallery

For Jayden Ali and the JA Projects team, designing *The Time is Always Now* presents an important opportunity to support a major UK cultural institution on the creation of a new representation of Britishness. Actively engaging in, and with the conversation about what it means to be Black today is one of the practice's key focuses, and its work with the National Portrait Gallery is part of a wider series of cultural programming design that includes projects with the likes of the Royal Academy of Arts, the British Library, the British Pavilion at the Venice Biennale and V&A East.

For more information about JA Projects' design for *The Time is Always Now* and interviews with Jayden Ali, please contact JAProjects@zetteler.co.uk

Note for editors

The Time is Always Now: Reframing the Black Figure is at the National Portrait Gallery from 22 February to 19 May 2024.

Sun – Thu 10.30am – 5pm

Fri – Sat 10.30am – 8pm

Press view: Wednesday 21 February, 10am to 12noon

npg.org.uk/whatson/exhibitions/2024/the-time-is-always-now

JA Projects

Founded by architect Jayden Ali, JA Projects is a multidisciplinary practice working at the intersection of architecture, urban strategy, culture, art and performance. Aiming to enrich public spaces and inspire the communities that use them, the studio pursues its missions to rethink the architecture of cultural institutions through the design and curation of experiences and exhibitions – including Entangled Pasts at the Royal Academy, Fashioning Masculinities at the V&A in 2022, and Dancing Before the Moon, the British Pavilion at this year’s Venice Biennale. JA Projects’ work in urban development includes a series of interventions on London’s Low Line, a walking route connecting Bankside’s historic railway architecture; leading a team transforming key areas of Camberwell Station Road on behalf of Southwark Council; and working on the £8 billion Thamesmead Waterfront development.

ja-projects.com

National Portrait Gallery

A non-departmental public body of the Department for Culture, Media and Sport, the National Portrait Gallery tells the story of Britain through portraits, using art to bring history to life and explore living today. Its collection includes around 220,000 works, from the 16th century to the present day in a wide variety of different mediums. Its artworks reveal the inspiring and sometimes surprising personal stories that have shaped, and continue to shape a nation – from global icons to local champions, national treasures to unsung heroes.

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