

Great Blackwomen Artists

Chila Kumari Burman

There Have Always Been

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We face many problems when trying to establish the very existence of Blackwomen's art, and a strong social and political base from which to develop our study of it. Firstly, we have to struggle to establish our existence, let alone our credibility as autonomous beings, in the art world. Secondly, we can only retain that credibility and survive as artists if we become fully conscious of ourselves, lest we are demoralised or weakened by the social, economic, and political constraints which the white-male art establishment imposes and will continue to impose on us.

This paper, then, is saying Blackwomen artists are here, we exist and we exist positively, despite the racial, sexual and class oppressions which we suffer, but first, however, we must point out the way in which these oppressions have operated in a wider context - not just in the art worlds, but also in the struggles for black and female liberation.

It is true to say that although Blackwomen have been the staunchest allies of black men and white women in the struggle against the oppression we all face at the hands of the capitalist and patriarchal system, we have hardly ever received either the support we need or recognition of our pivotal role in this struggle. Blackwomen now realise that because of the specific ways in which we are oppressed by white- male dominated society, we must present a new challenge to imperialism, racism and sexism from inside and outside the established black liberation movement. It is this realisation which has a lot to do with many second generation British Blackwomen reclaiming art, firstly as a legitimate area of activity for Blackwomen as a distinct group of people, secondly as a way of developing awareness (denied us by the racist, sexist, class society) of ourselves as complete human beings, and thirdly as a contribution to the black struggle in general.

Having said this, Blackwomen's ability to do any or all of these three things is restricted by

the same pressures of racism, sexism and class exclusivity which we experience in society in general. The bourgeois art establishment only acknowledges white men as truly creative and innovative artists, whilst recognising art by white women only as a homogenous expression of femininity and art by black people (or, more accurately, within the terms of reference used, black men as a static expression of the ritual experience of the daily lives of their communities, be they in the Third World or the imperialist hinterland. In this system of knowledge, Blackwomen artists, quite simply, do not exist.

Nevertheless, if we look at the way in which these assumptions have been challenged to date, particularly by white women, we can see nothing that acknowledges that Blackwomen exist. Art history is an academic subject, studied in patriarchal art institutions, and white middle-class women have used their advantageous class position to gain access to these institutions by applying pressure to them in a way which actually furthers the exclusion of

black artists in general. White women's failure to inform themselves of the obstacles faced by black artists and in particular Blackwomen artists has led to the production of an extremely Eurocentric theory and practice of 'women's art'. It seems that white feminists, as much as white women in general, either do not attempt or find it difficult to conceive of Blackwomen's experience. Some of those who do not attempt to may claim that they cannot speak for Blackwomen, but this is merely a convenient way of sidestepping their own racism. The fact remains that in a patriarchal and sexist society, all black people suffer from racism, and it is quite possible for white women to turn racism, which stems from patriarchy, to their advantage. Black men are unable to do this and, theoretically, are unable to turn sexism to their advantages, although they can do this for short-term gains which in the long term will never benefit black people as a whole. This has happened to a certain extent in the art world, where black men have failed to recognise Blackwomen artists or have put pressure

on us to produce certain kinds of work linked to a male-dominated notion of struggle. However, because of their race and class position, black men have been unable to use the resources of information in art institutions in the same way white middle-class women have.

The Struggles of Blackwomen Artists

The first stage of most Blackwomen artists' encounter with the art establishment is their entry into art college. There are hardly any Blackwomen attending art college in Britain, and those who do, according to a survey of Blackwomen artists I carried out, seem to have experienced a mixture of hostility and indifference from their college. Because their white tutors work within an imperial art tradition, using the aesthetic conventions of the dominant ideology, they are unwilling to come to terms with Blackwomen students and their work. This resistance manifests itself in many ways - some Blackwomen art students have found themselves asking why they as individuals found it easy to get into art college, only to realise that they are there purely as tokens, and in general it appears that Blackwomen's very presence in white- male art institutions is frequently called into question. Apart from denying us the support and encouragement that

white art students receive, art colleges make us feel as though we don't belong inside their walls by the way in which our work is looked at. Those of us who have done more overtly political work have made white tutors very uncomfortable and, as a result, hostile, whilst students who have done less obviously challenging work have been questioned for not producing the kind of work which tutors expect black people to produce. Class differences amongst Blackwomen are significant here, for working-class Blackwomen have generally been quicker to reject the ideology of the art establishment and have therefore found it difficult to accept any kind of token status or to produce work of a more acceptable nature. Those who have not taken such an oppositional stance have still suffered from having their work analysed within a very narrow framework because their tutors have expected them to produce 'ethnic' work which reflects their 'cultural origin' using, for example, 'bright carnival colours', and white tutors and students alike have expressed confusion when such work has

not been forthcoming. Another tendency of white tutors, irrespective of the work they are presented with, is to discuss art from the third world with Blackwomen in a patronising and racist manner.

Of course, the assumption that Blackwomen will produce work with 'ethnic' or 'primitive' associations is one that white tutors make about black men as well, but it is important to point out that male and female white tutors are more inclined to see black men as having a more prominent role in this misconceived tradition. One Blackwoman student at Bradford art college commented:

'Funny how they always refer to you as some sort of bridge or crossing point between two things. Black meets woman. That's handy. As if you don't have an experience which is your own, but borrow from the brothers and sisters in struggle.'

It seems, then, that when art colleges and universities give places to Blackwomen, which in itself is a rare event, all the forces of the dominant aesthetic ideology are brought to bear on

us. Blackwomen artists are ignored, isolated, described as 'difficult', slotted into this or that stereotype and generally discouraged in every conceivable way from expressing ourselves in the way we want to. This system of oppression and exclusion extends well beyond our time as art students. There are no full-time lecturing posts at art colleges and universities filled by Blackwomen in the entire country - instead we are offered 'freelance' work as visiting lecturers, which will never be enough to initiate a critique of contemporary art practice which is so desperately needed in every single art department in the country.

In addition, Blackwomen artists are denied the opportunity to develop their work as individuals to develop their work as individuals in the same way that white artists can through grants from sources such as the Arts Council, the Greater London Council, regional arts associations and the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation. Even through some of these sources such as the GLC and the Greater London Arts Association have

recently begun to realise how much they have neglected Black visual arts, on the only occasion that a Blackwoman had received funding from the GLC as an individual, this has still been on unsatisfactory terms which differ significantly from the terms on which the only black man in this position has been funded. The man in question has been funded without any preconditions except that he produces a certain amount of work, whilst, the woman was funded by the Arts and Recreation Department of the GLC for a year on the condition that she was attached to a community arts centre has a 'community artist', and the stipulation was made that work she produced should not reflect her desires as an individual but the interests of the 'black community' of the experience of an individual Blackwomen and had funded her on the basis of an historical notion of 'community' or 'ethnic minority' art, but when it came to applying for the Arts Council, it appeared that the role she has been pushed into was not individual enough. The rejection of her application to this body read:

'We do not think that your proposed project fits the terms of reference for this training scheme which is specifically aimed at developing the individual's skills, and is not to assist with research projects.'

If even the GLC funded a Blackwoman artist only as a 'community artist', this illustrates our position in a kind of funding no-woman's-land, because the Arts Council, racist and sexist as it is already, will continue to see our work as unfundable research projects and, as was the case with the application mentioned, refer us to bodies such as the Association of the Commonwealth Universities, further relegating us to the marginality of the 'ghetto artist', completely outside the mainstream British art world.

Blackwomen Artists Fight Back

The resilience of Blackwomen in the face of oppression has manifested itself in the art world through our ability to produce and exhibit work despite all the social, economic and political constraints described above. The first all-Blackwomen's show at the Africa Centre in 1983 was not just a beginning; Blackwomen artists have been actively involved in exhibitions with white artists and Black men artists for several years, but this all-Blackwomen's show and the ones that have taken place since then – Blackwoman Time Now, 1985 International Women's Day Show, Mirror Reflecting Darkly, etc.- represent a significant new direction which has much to do with the development of what Barbara Smith describes as 'our own intellectual traditions'. It is obvious that the majority of Black artists see their work in opposition to the establishment view of art as something that is 'above' politics, and Blackwomen artists see their work as inte-

gral to the struggles of Blackwomen and black people in general, but although Blackwomen's own culture plays a large part in determining the culture and form of our work, we often concentrate on different issues to black men, who, as one Blackwoman artist points out, often believe that 'artists who are making through their works a collective, aggressive challenge to cultural domination are "real" black artists and making Black Art. But some male artists fail to go through to assert their identity and survive'.

Alice Walker illustrates the difference between these two ideas of Black Art in 'In Search for Our Mothers' Gardens' and goes on to put forward an alternative way for the black artist to operate:

"I am impressed by people who claim they can see everything and event in strict terms of black and white but their work is not, in my long contemplated and earnestly considered opinion, either black or white, but a dull, uniform gray. It is boring because it is easy and requires only that the reader be a lazy reader and a prejudiced

one. Each story or poem has a formula usually two-thirds 'hate whitey's guts' and one third 'I am black, beautiful and almost always right'. Art is not flattery, and the work of every artist must be more difficult than that.

'My major advice to young black artists would be that they shut themselves up somewhere away from all the debates about who they are and what colour they are and just turn out paintings and poems and stories and novels. Of course the kind of artist we are required to be cannot do this (our people are waiting)'.

Alice Walker's advice is important here, for she is not suggesting that we cut ourselves off from the outside world, because we cannot forget the mark our oppression as black women have made on us, or the fact that 'our people are waiting'. The point is that what we need as artists is the opportunity to create the situation she describes so that we are allowed to develop an understanding of ourselves and of the struggle we have to wage within British society for recognition and respect. If we are able to do this by

having adequate resources put at our disposal, we hope to share our experiences with, awaken the consciousness of and impart our strength to the whole society.

