


V&A



UNCOMFORTABLE TRUTHS
THE SHADOW OF SLAVE
TRADING ON CONTEMPORARY
ART AND DESIGN

20 FEBRUARY —
17 JUNE 2007

About the V&A

Founded in 1857, the V&A is the world's leading museum of art and design, with a collection unequalled in diversity and quality.

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Its permanent displays, underpinned by scholarship and expertise with a global reputation, attract a broad, multicultural and increasing audience, while its widely-praised programme of exhibitions and events devoted to design, fashion, craft, photography and architecture, attracts over 2 million visitors per year.

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The V&A today continues to pursue its original vision to inspire and educate, by making sense of the past, defining the contemporary and providing inspiration for the designers of the future.

Foreword and acknowledgements

The Board of Trustees at the Victoria and Albert Museum wish to express their sincere gratitude to the many individuals, companies and institutions who have helped make possible *Uncomfortable Truths*.

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The V&A wishes, first and foremost, to thank the artists whose creativity and vision animate every aspect of this exhibition: El Anatsui, Anissa-Jane, Michael Paul Britto, Tapfuma Gutsa, Lubaina Himid, Romuald Hazoumé, Christine Meisner, Keith Piper, Yinka Shonibare MBE, Julien Sinzogan and Fred Wilson.

The Museum would like to express its sincerest gratitude to Pélagie Gbaguidi, Christine Meisner, Gary Younge, and Benjamin Zephaniah for their contributions to this gallery guide.

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We would also like to recognise Musée des Beaux-Arts de Nantes, October Gallery, PaceWildenstein, and Stephen Friedman Gallery for their generosity in lending to the exhibition; Alan Dye; Anne Marie Eze; Rosemary Haworth-Booth; Elisabeth Lalouschek; Ulrich Lehmann; Daniel Lock; Anna Sparredahl; Dinah Winch and the many V&A staff who have been involved in all aspects of this project.

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Curator Zoé Whitley
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V&A Design Studio
Graphic Design NB: Studio

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For additional information,
please visit
www.vam.ac.uk/uncomfortabletruths

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The logo for the Victoria and Albert Museum, featuring the letters 'V&A' in a large, stylized, serif font. The letters are dark blue and set against a light blue background.

BRITAIN'S 2007 COMMEMORATION OF THE PARLIAMENTARY ABOLITION OF THE TRANS-ATLANTIC SLAVE TRADE IS IMPORTANT. BUT NOT UNPROBLEMATIC.

This exhibition raises many questions, to which there may be no definitive answers: why is slavery so often discussed as something disconnected from the present? Why is Trans-Atlantic slavery seen as a black issue rather than a human one, by blacks as well as whites? Why does it take arbitrary anniversaries to bring these issues to the fore? How do we understand the roles of the perpetrators and the victims from our standpoint in the present? What can we learn from the history of resistance to slavery? How has slavery contributed to the benefit – and detriment – of the world we live in now? And, how has this institution, like many others, profited from the wealth generated through slave trading?

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These questions all address *Uncomfortable Truths*, which are explored in this exhibition via the works of eleven international artists. Displayed throughout the V&A's permanent collection galleries and other public spaces, the interventions create a visual dialogue between historic design objects, many rooted in imperialism, and compelling, emotive examples of recent art and design. These creative expressions form a bridge between the safe and anodyne and the unspeakable and indescribable.

Disparate in perspective, execution and intent, the works in *Uncomfortable Truths* are united by a sense of resistance – not strictly to do with slave rebellion, but in that they resist conventional categorisation: no unthinking sentimentality, unilateral outlooks or easy conclusions. Displacement, moral corruption, and genocide are only part of the story. We must also speak of survival, redemption and the power of collective memory.

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A topic like this cannot be fully explored in one exhibition. On the pages that follow are the varied perspectives of a poet, an artist and a journalist. Like the works in the galleries, each of these writings illuminates part of the debate from a different vantage point. Benjamin Zephaniah's heartbreaking poem exposes the long, decimating reach of slave legacies. Pélagie Gbaguidi reveals her personal response to an oppressive historical decree that led her to explore the spectre of slavery in her own artistic practice. Gary Younge's commentary presents some of the cultural hypocrisies at the heart of today's collective memories surrounding Great Britain's achievements.

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The impact of slavery cannot be confined to history books and it is not a subject whose complexities we can ignore. It is my hope that the beautiful, stark and provocative work in this exhibition will incite ongoing scholarship, debate and creativity.

—

Zoé Whitley

MASTER

Master master drank a toast
And dreamt of easy tea,
He gave to you a Holy Ghost
Come children see.

—
From Liverpool on sinking ships
Blessed by a monarchy,
To Africa the hypocrites,
Come children see.

—
Master master worked the slave
Who ran for liberty,
The master made us perm and shave,
Come children see.

—
If slave drivers be men of words
We curse that poetry
Its roots you'll find are so absurd.
Come children see.

—
Master master's sons drill oil
It's all his legacy
They put the devil in the soil,
Come children, see.

—
Fear not his science or his gun
Just know what you can be,
And children we shall overcome,
Come children see.

Tis true that we have not now chains
Yet we were never free,
Still masters chains corrupt our brains
Come children see.

—
A word is slave for man is man
What's done is slavery,
The evils of the clan that can,
Come children see.

—
Master master worked the slave
The upright sort was he,
That boy dug master master's grave
Come children see.

—
Some now await a judgement day
To know his penalty,
It's blood and fire anyway,
Come children see.

Benjamin Zephaniah

*Benjamin Zephaniah is an internationally
acclaimed oral poet and author.*

I WAS BORN IN DAKAR IN 1965.

I AM OF BENIN ORIGIN.

I heard about The Black Code* when I was a child; it was mentioned during a lesson at school but so briefly, that it got buried in the deep crevices of my memory.

I have always been attracted to the Loire river and the surrounding region in France. In 2004, I was invited by the Centre of Contemporary Art at Nantes on an artist-in-residency programme linked to the Dakar Biennale of the same year. It was during my stay there that I discovered The Black Code by “coincidence” sitting on a shelf in a local book fair.

Nantes was a revelation to me; it felt like being in a burial ground. The city’s position in French history is crucial as the point of departure of the slave trade; it was here that the slave boats were constructed between the 17th and 19th centuries, destined to embark on their mission to export slaves from Africa into exile. I returned home with this book, which has never since left my side, and with the clear conviction that no matter how you try to escape from your past it will catch up with you.

My encounter with the Black Code has been at the very least the most metaphysical experience in my creative path. My first responses were disbelief and non-comprehension. After several re-readings, I was taken aback by the cold, methodical cutting tone underlying each phrase. My entire being rejected this information as if it were too horrible, too filthy to digest or even assimilate. Nevertheless, I felt compelled to dig deeper; I wanted to understand how fellow human beings could develop such an anti-human concept as The Black Code (bearing in mind that this was no quick afterthought but that Colbert and his commission spent three years planning and writing “legal” text of 60 articles).

It has been one hell of an internal battle trying to plunge into this book without getting soiled, but this duel was necessary and has opened up in me new channels of strength, physically, emotionally and spiritually. As the images started to flow, I have been haunted by the memories of those who can no longer testify for themselves. Faces, forms and associations began to manifest as tangible creative expressions.

After months of immersion, it has become evident to me that it is time to demystify slavery as a unique phenomenon particular to the black race, and to view it as part of universal patrimony. The Black Code has helped me to link the problems of racism and xenophobia, past and present, N/S or E/W as essentially economically based. For me, outing the “monster” of slavery from oblivion has required my taking a stand in relation to the history of Africa; and in so doing, participating in the transmission of our contemporary story.

Pélagie Gbaguidi

Pélagie Gbaguidi was born in Dakar, of Beninese origin. She lives and works in Belgium and studied at the Academy of Fine Arts in Liège. The artist has exhibited internationally, including at the 2006 Dakar Biennale.

* The statement above was written by artist Pélagie Gbaguidi, who feels an imperative impulse to create art in order to ‘better understand the cultural, social and economic issues of the world I am a part of.’ Her reading of Louis XIV’s 1685 Code Noir (Black Code) – a series of 60 articles brutally limiting the rights of blacks and non-Catholics in the French Empire – eventually led to 120 drawings and a series of frescoes.

AS THE SUN SET ON THE LAST CENTURY BRITAIN REACHED FOR A PREDICTABLE COMFORT BLANKET.

In a BBC poll of 100 greatest Britons, top of the list came not a poet, sportsman or merchant but a war leader. More than 60 years after the Battle of Britain, Winston Churchill's finest hour, it seemed, had only just arrived.

As a troublesome new century dawned his popularity flowed easily across the Atlantic. On the night of September 11th New York mayor Rudolph Giuliani read himself to a fitful sleep with Churchill's biography. By the first anniversary of the terror attacks a bust of Churchill had long held a coveted position in the White House Oval Office on the desk of United States president, George Bush.

This adulation is hardly a surprise. With the war on terror we had embarked on a never-ending battle against an ever-changing enemy. The symbolism of a leader renowned for keeping a steady nerve during such unsettled times held great value. But the timing was curious. For as both Britain and the US sought a justification for invading Iraq both dwelt on the fact that Saddam Hussein had used chemical weapons against "his own people" - namely the Kurds.

Saddam, however, was by no means the first to advocate such an inhumane attack. Back in 1919 the president of Britain's air council said of using chemical weapons against the Kurds, "I do not understand the squeamishness about the use of gas. I am strongly in favour of using poisonous gas against uncivilised tribes."

His name? Winston Churchill. When it comes to constructing mythology those things we feel the need to remember often take precedence over others we are desperate to forget. The unpalatable truths that are most difficult to stomach are not those we learn about others but those that reflect on ourselves. The fact that Churchill remains so admired tells us far more about us than it does about him.

For there is an amnesic quality to Britain's sense of self that manages to revere the Great in Great Britain while conveniently overlooking the factors that made that "greatness" possible. Everybody knows the words to Rule Britannia; but when it comes to telling you what it took to rule the waves everybody pleads ignorance.

When it comes to excelling at sport and military conflict everyone reaches back to the past to lay claim to their national identity. "We won two world wars and one world cup," chant those whose parents were not yet born when any of these events took place.

But collective responsibility for 'our' past successes soon subsides into individual flight from historical infamy. Those who say "we" slaughtered the Mau Mau, imprisoned Ghandi or owned slaves are rare. You cannot, it appears, hold anyone collectively responsible for what their ancestors did that was bad or the privileges they inherit as a result. Whoever did all that, it definitely wasn't "us". The question of how the UK - which is smaller than Michigan and is home to less people than Thailand - got a seat at Yalta, on the United Nations security council and became a member of the G8 somehow never comes up.

Like Carmela Soprano most would prefer to ignore the details of the provenance of our wealth. If we acknowledge it we might have to do something about it. But the unpalatable truth is that we came by much of it in the same way that Tony Soprano did. Stealing, pimping, pushing drugs and strong-arming the weak. Back in the seventeenth century 'we' kidnapped 1,000 Irish girls and sent them to Jamaica to service the settlers. "Concerning the younge women," wrote Henry Cromwell to John Thurloe in 1655. "Although we must use force in takeinge them up, yet it beinge so much for their owne goode and likely to be of soe great advantage to the publike, it is not in the least doubted, that you may have such nuyMBER as you shall thinke fitt."

During the nineteenth century, we were so hooked on profit from drug deals that we forced the Chinese to open their country to opium, even after Chinese Emperor Dao Guang had declared it a drug free zone. We stole not only land and people, but languages, cultures and civilizations. When people resisted we killed them.

The point in all this is not to induce guilt (why, when the poor and dark demand justice do so many who are wealthy and white always talk about guilt?). 'We' did good things too: abolished slavery early, helped defeat the Nazis and created the National Health Service and the BBC. But those facts are known. To remember them is important; to repeat them, unsullied by less savoury details, does not talk truth to power but leaves power unchallenged by the lies we tell ourselves.

"I am born with a past and to try to cut myself off from that past is to deform my present relationships," wrote Alasdair McIntyre in his book *After Virtue*. "The possession of an historical identity and the possession of a social identity coincide." For centuries when we travelled abroad we did not live integrated lives nor learn to speak the local language. Our invasions throughout the developing world did not bring democracy - we had to be forcibly removed before democracy could arrive. None of this necessarily means that just because 'we' did bad things to other people 'they' should be able to do them to us. But it does mean they are not as foreign as we might think and that the sooner we recognise these unpalatable truths for what they are the less likely we will be to swallow our mythology whole.

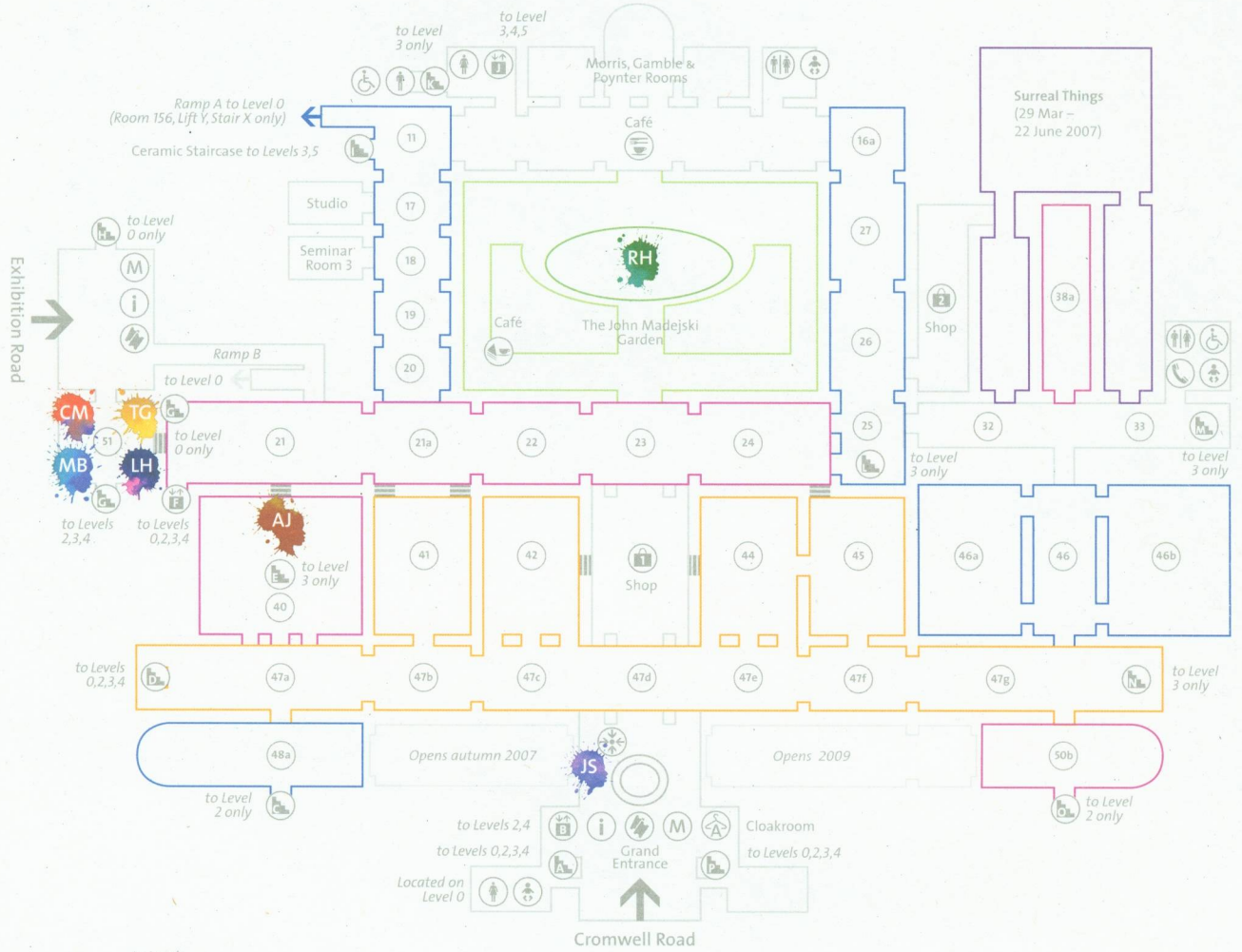
"This small island [is] dependent for our daily bread on our trade and imperial connections," said one prominent British politician. "Cut this away and at least a third of our population must vanish speedily from the face of the earth." His name? You guessed it. Winston Churchill.

Gary Younge

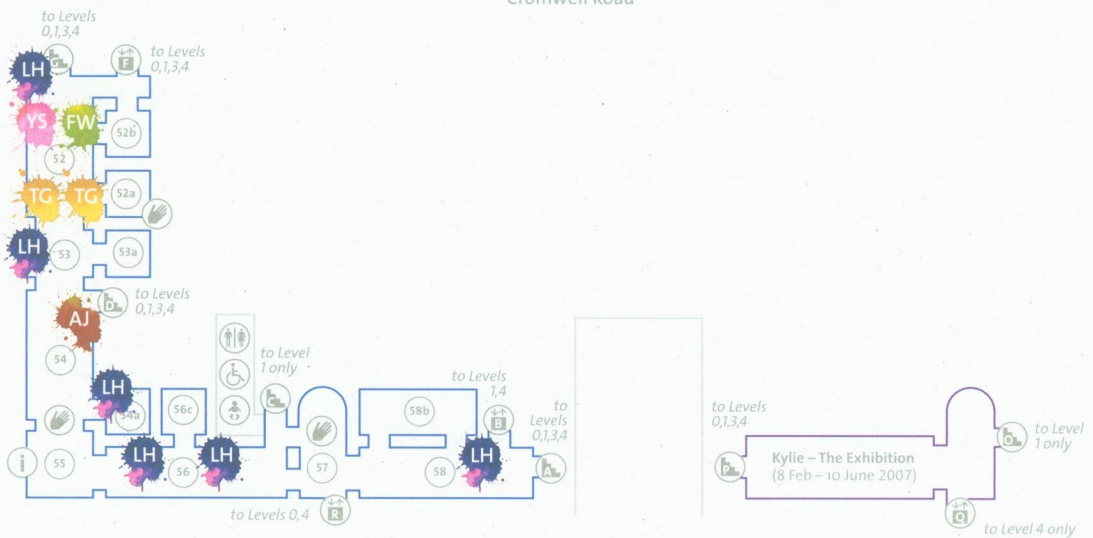
Gary Younge is a journalist and author. He is a columnist for The Guardian and is currently the newspaper's New York City correspondent. He also has a monthly column for The Nation called "Beneath the Radar." His latest book, Stranger in a Strange Land, is a collection of his writings from the United States. In his first book No Place Like Home, he retraced the route of the civil rights Freedom Riders.

MAP

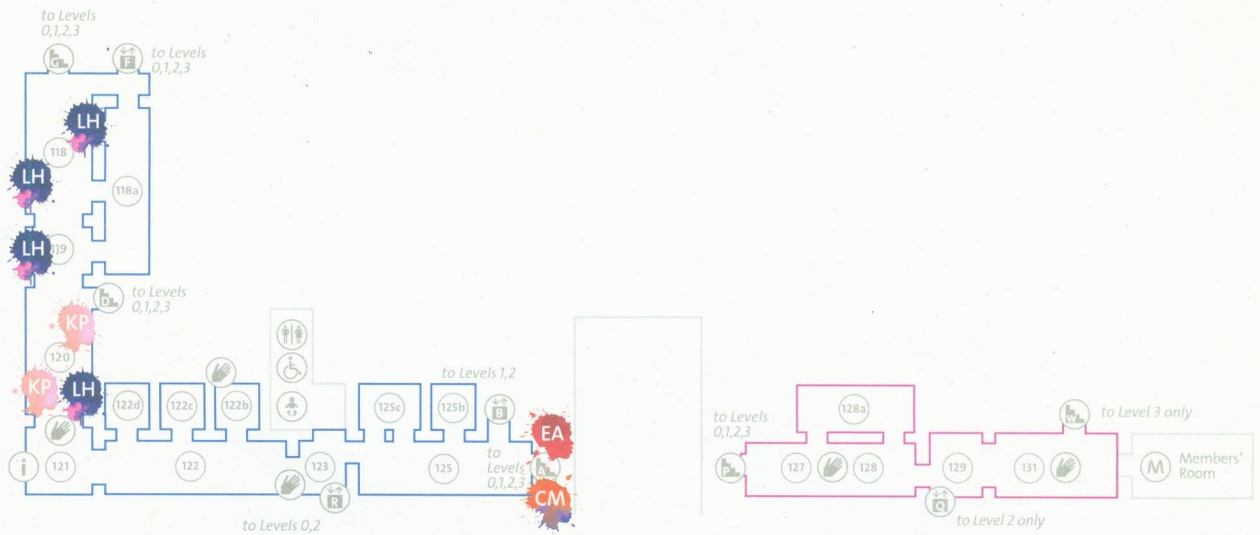
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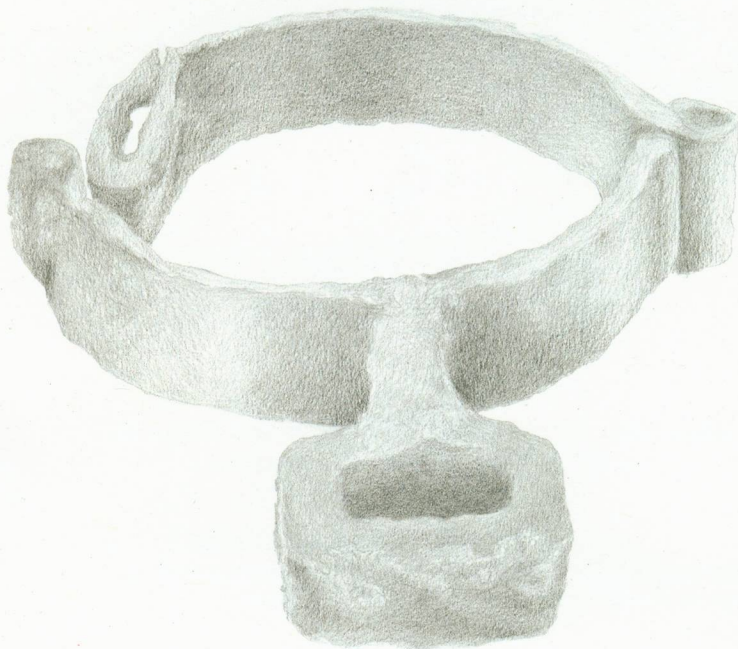


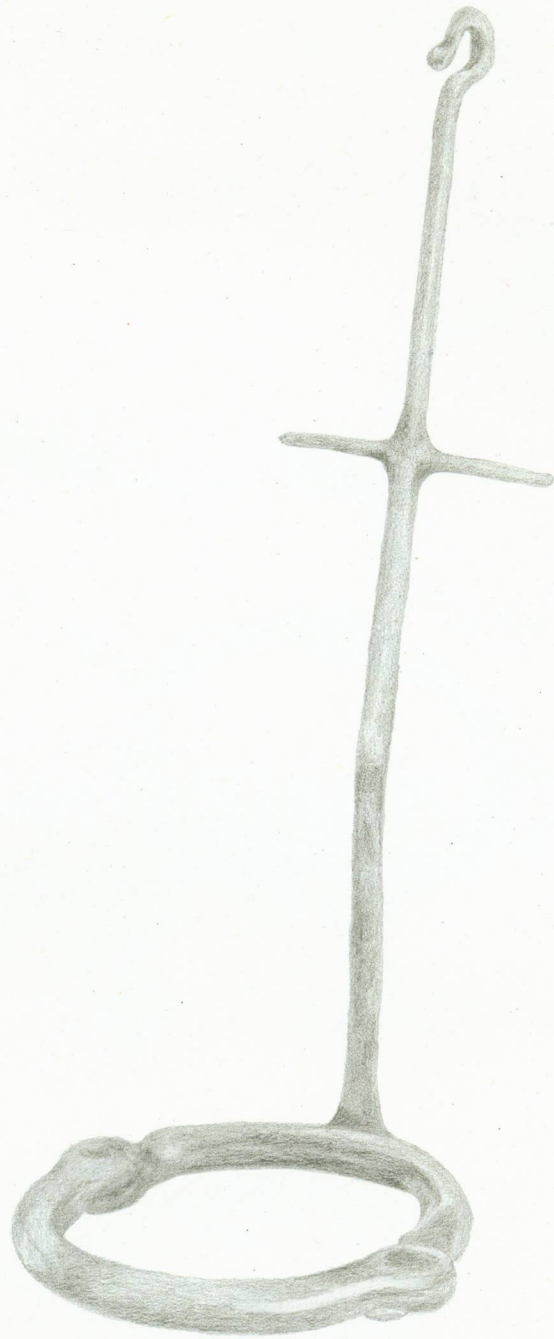
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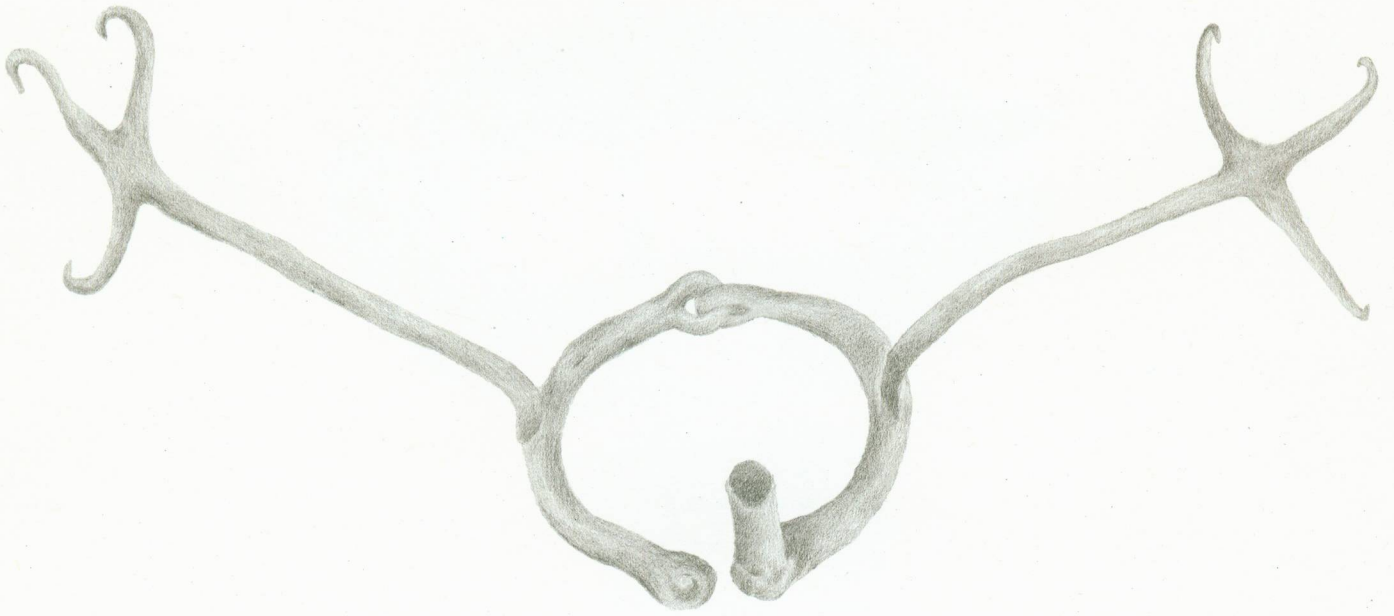


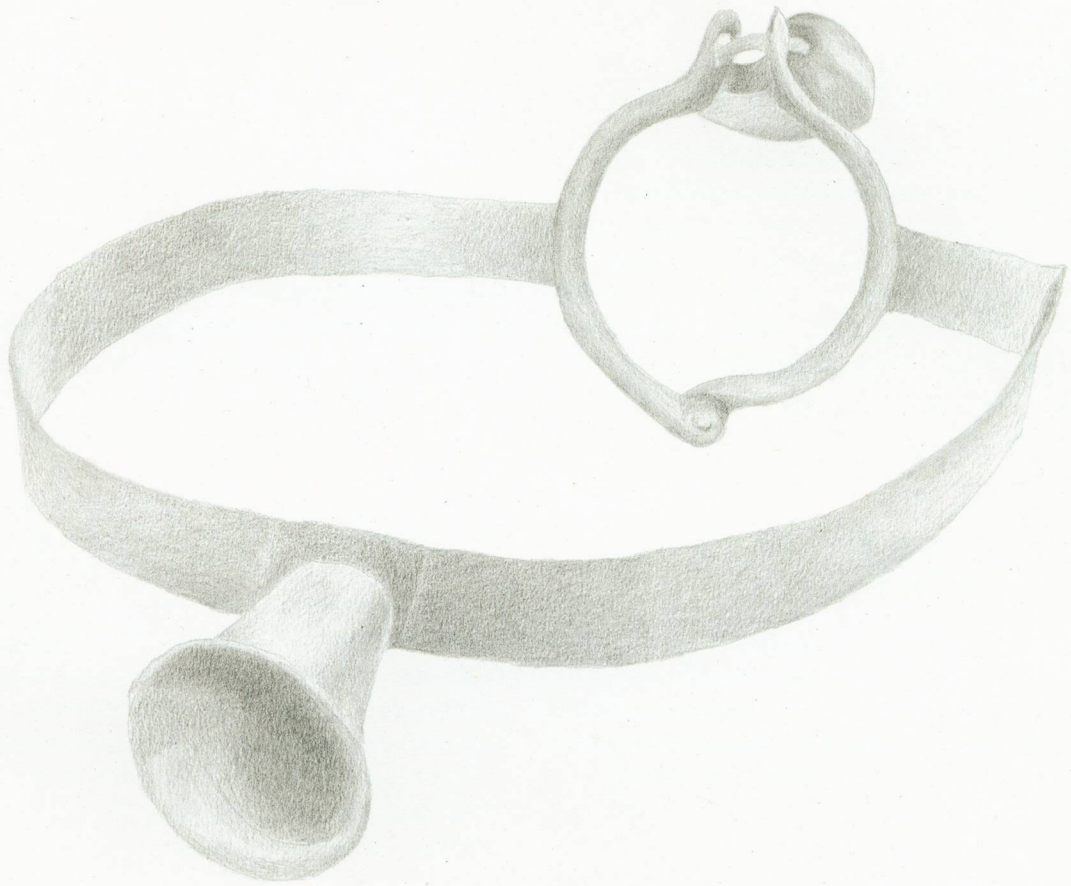
KEY –
ALPHABETICAL
BY ARTIST

- | | | | | | |
|---|--|---|---|---|--|
|  | EL ANATSUI (EA)
AKUA'S SURVIVING CHILDREN
DENMARK, 1996 |  | MICHAEL PAUL BRITTO (MB)
I'M A SLAVE 4 U
USA, 2005 |  | CHRISTINE MEISNER (CM)
(with Stefan Rummel, sound)
RECOVERY OF AN IMAGE: A VIDEO-TALE
GERMANY/BRAZIL/NIGERIA, 2005 |
|  | ANISSA-JANE (AJ)
SPIRIT OF LUCY NEGRO
UK, 2004 |  | MICHAEL PAUL BRITTO (MB)
DIRRRTY HARRIET TUBMAN
USA, 2005 |  | CHRISTINE MEISNER (CM)
QUILOMBOLISATION and PORTRAITS OF PERSONALITIES FROM RECIFE, PERNAMBUCO
GERMANY/BRAZIL, 2005 |
| | ANISSA-JANE (AJ)
LUCY
UK, 2004 |  | TAPFUMA GUTSA (TG)
TRIBUTE TO SANGO
ZIMBABWE/AUSTRIA, 2002 |  | KEITH PIPER (KP)
LOST VITRINES
UK, 2006–7 |
| | ANISSA-JANE (AJ)
MISS JANE
UK, 2002 |  | TAPFUMA GUTSA (TG)
ANCIENT VOYAGES
ZIMBABWE/AUSTRIA, 2005 |  | YINKA SHONIBARE, MBE (YS)
SIR FOSTER CUNLIFFE, PLAYING
UK, 2007 |
| | ANISSA-JANE (AJ)
WO-MANIFESTATION
UK, 2002 |  | TAPFUMA GUTSA (TG)
WATER POEM I
ZIMBABWE/AUSTRIA, 2005 |  | JULIEN SINZOGAN (JS)
THE GATES OF RETURN
FRANCE, 2006–7 |
| | ANISSA-JANE (AJ)
BRUSIED and TRANSPARENCY
UK, 2005 |  | ROMUALD HAZOUMÉ (RH)
DAN-AYIDO-HOUEDO/ARC-EN-CIEL, SYMBOLE DE PERPÉTUITÉ
BENIN, 2006–7 |  | FRED WILSON (FW)
REGINA ATRA
USA, 2006 |
| | ANISSA-JANE (AJ)
SMELL THE COFFEE
UK, 2005 |  | LUBAINA HIMID (LH)
NAMING THE MONEY (part of a series of works)
UK, 2004 |  | |









ARTIST BIOGRAPHIES

EL ANATSUI

(b. 1944, Ghana) is one of Africa's most established and celebrated contemporary artists. Embracing a diverse vocabulary of media, he has worked with materials ranging from tropical hardwoods to cassava graters and liquor bottle tops. His extraordinary work has garnered him broad international acclaim and influenced a generation of artists in Africa and beyond. Akua's *Surviving Children*, on display in this exhibition, was originally created in 1996 for the Danish Slavery Project.

ANISSA-JANE

(b. 1980, UK) seeks to explore the intricacies of identity, ancestry and cultural adaptation in her work. Her own experiences as an African British West Indian woman are integral to her creative expression. Her signature medium is to manipulate brown paper – a representation of her own skin – into sculptural forms.

MICHAEL PAUL

BRITTO

(b. 1968, USA) is a video artist living and working in New York. Britto's work immediately elicits strong reactions in the viewer by manipulating and appropriating popular culture to address notions of race and power, cultural norms and social deprivation. This exhibition is the first opportunity to view his work in the UK. A larger body of work can be viewed at www.brittofied.com

TAPFUMA GUTSA

(b. 1956, Zimbabwe) sculpts using dynamic combinations of organic materials - from the more traditional media of carved stone and wood to the unconventional shaping of paper, string, drawing pins and gourds. His methods have revolutionised Zimbabwean art practice. He lives and works in Vienna, Austria. Two of his works, *Ancient Voyages* and *Tribute to Sango* are on display as part of *Uncomfortable Truths*.

ROMUALD HAZOUMÉ

(b. 1962, Benin) transforms salvaged materials into objects of spiritual power. In the mid 1980s he began sculptural experiments with the plastic jerry cans dangerously used to transport fuel around Benin. The resulting artworks have received widespread recognition, and have been featured in numerous international exhibitions. *DAN-AYIDO-HOUEDO (Arc-en-ciel) symbole de perpétuité*, in this exhibition, was commissioned by the V&A.

LUBAINA HIMID

Professor of Contemporary Art at University of Central Lancashire and painter Lubaina Himid (b. 1954, Zanzibar, Tanzania) focuses on issues of history and identity, in particular the creative strategy needed to achieve a sense of belonging. Her work, based on exchanges of ideas and memories, is in the permanent collections of Tate and the V&A. She is represented by Peg Alston New York. The artist has chosen the particular groupings of each of the *Naming the Money figures* on display.

CHRISTINE MEISNER

(b. 1970, Germany) lives and works in Berlin between extensive international travels and artist residencies. The thrust of her artistic output, whether in film, drawing or text, is the experience of the African Diaspora and its representation in contemporary Europe. Uncomfortable Truths features Meisner's video tale Recovery of an Image and two series of delicate and powerful pencil drawings, excavating the experiences of Afro-Brazilian communities descended from slaves.

KEITH PIPER

(b. 1960, Malta) is an influential multimedia artist at the vanguard of the Black Arts movement in Britain. Imperialism and identity are important forces recurring in his oeuvre. Lost Vitrines, featured in this exhibition, was commissioned by the V&A. The works included underscore the complex relationship between 18th century advances in rational thought, commerce and the genteel liberal arts at home, and the violence of slave trading abroad.

YINKA

SHONIBARE, MBE

(b. 1962, UK) has developed an international standing for his elaborate installations of period figures in African wax print textiles. Nominated for the Turner Prize in 2004, the artist consistently merges themes of aesthetics, history and belonging. Sir Foster Cunliffe Playing, featured in this exhibition, was commissioned by the V&A.

JULIEN SINZOGAN

(b. 1957, Benin) lives and works in Paris, France. After studying architecture in Tashkent and then in Paris, he began exploring the media of drawing and painting. His technique reflects the encounter of different worlds: a 'Western' world in which pictorial representation evolves according to well-defined traditions and an African world, rich in human and psychic interest. The painting Gates of Return featured in this exhibition was commissioned by the V&A.

FRED WILSON

(b. 1954, USA) is an American artist of Caribbean descent, internationally acclaimed for his incisive and thought-provoking interpretations of the language of museum display. Wilson represented the United States at the 50th Venice Biennale in 2003. His work openly questions issues of imperialism and race. Regina Atra, a copy of the British royal crown, is displayed in the sumptuous and regal Norfolk House Music Room, British Galleries.

