

The Story of Art as it's Still Being Written

Curated by Katy Hessel

8 September–1 October 2022 · Victoria Miro · London

The Story of Art as it's Still Being Written is an exhibition based on the final chapter of my book, *The Story of Art without Men*. This book charts the last 500 years of art history, spanning from the Renaissance to the present day, and attempts to overthrow the canon as we know it. Instead of viewing women as the wife of, the muse of, the daughter of, or the sister of, *The Story of Art without Men* places women firmly at the centre of the story. It roots them in their social and political context and the time in which they lived.

This final part of the book explores art produced since the millennium. It looks at those working in collage (Wangechi Mutu, Deborah Roberts, María Berrío); interior spaces and personal histories (Njideka Akunyili Crosby); the reinvention of sculpture (Sarah Sze); identity through photography (Zanele Muholi, Khadija Saye); portraiture (Celia Paul, Amy Sutherland); figuration (Chantal Joffe); painting that teeters on the threshold between figuration and abstraction (Tracey Emin, Jadé Fadojutimi) and references the Old Masters (Somaya Critchlow, Flora Yukhnovich). This exhibition brings together artists defining the movements and styles that have been explored at the highest level in the past twenty years.

In the lower gallery of Victoria Miro we see painting, sculpture and collage executed on a colossal scale – as if to claim back an art history that so often belonged to the Old Master painters. At first, we are struck with Chantal Joffe's painting, *Prom*, 2022, of her daughter Esme in a red dress, just as she embarks on a momentous life occasion that takes her from adolescence to adulthood. Her eyes are wide, but her gaze is tense. Looking out at us, in a full-frontal stance, it's as though she is striding out into the future on her own.

Beside her is María Berrío's sensitive portrayal of a woman in a rocking chair. I like to think of this section as exploring the 'interiority' of the sitter's mind. Titled, *En La Tierra del Sol*, it takes its name from Berrío's exhibition, *The Land of the Sun*, a series centred on a woman who, after surviving a natural disaster, and finding herself in a post-apocalyptic land, descends into madness. The artist writes:

'The background of the work was intentionally abstracted as a way of portraying an overpowering sun, a sun which overwhelms all. Everything in the woman's past, everything behind her that had given her life meaning and purpose has withered and burnt

under its rays. Ahead of her is a staircase, as if the only solid, tangible thing left to her is the uphill struggle of the banal. All that clearly awaits her is the toil of survival. The Land of the Sun was also inspired by the myth of Sisyphus, as the woman is condemned to fruitless labour, and so the vantage point of places, the woman at the bottom of the staircase, resting in the unforgiving sun.'

Beside Berrío's woman is the commanding, multi-layered and multi-media *Subterranea Serval*, 2022, by Wangechi Mutu. At its centre is an African wildcat who morphs into part-human, part-plant, part-animalistic form as it connects to vein-like strands that straddle the surface. Connecting our inner and outer worlds, this piece – reflecting on sexuality, femininity, ecology, politics and the rhythms and chaos of the world – comprises photographic elements derived from the production of *My Cave Call*, a recent film by Mutu. The film features the artist in the guise of a horned mythical creature seeking wisdom from the bowels of the Suswa Cave – a holy cave in the Rift Valley of Kenya.

Opposite Mutu is Njideka Akunyili Crosby's *The Twain Shall Meet*, 2015, a large-scale, multi-media still life work centred around the artist's grandmother's table, full of both personal and cultural meaning. We see pots and other vessels evocative of family gatherings, framed pictures of loved ones, including the artist's grandmother, and mementoes from life events. It also plays host to a range of visual cues about geographical and changing socio-economic circumstances.

As if to expand the fabric of what constitutes sculpture and installation in the 21st Century, the far end of the gallery is punctuated with a laboratory-like work by Sarah Sze. Displacements and disorientations of size and scale appear in the intricately constructed *Model for a Weather Vane*, 2012. While a desk lamp affixed to the wall evokes the sun, the sculpture's multiple arms, supported by a large rock resting on a wooden base, are connected to a diverse range of natural and man-made objects including a cactus and a spirit level.

Sze's works have often referred to instruments of measure and mapping as well as the worlds they strive to measure. Preoccupied with conceptions of how we continually locate ourselves within space, they unfold as investigations of the psychological, and even emotional, understandings of our environment.

Upstairs, we are met with a small yet mightily powerful self-portrait, *Loba V, Paris*, 2019, by Zanele Muholi. A self-proclaimed 'visual activist', who identifies as non-binary, Muholi's practice memorialises the importance of Black queer lives mostly in their native South Africa. This work is part of their series, begun in 2012, of bold, commanding self-portraits that see the artist wear everyday materials (hair combs, electric cables) in the form of crowns and armour.

In conversation with Muholi is Deborah Roberts, the Austin-based artist hailed for her collages that comprise spliced features from contemporary cultural and historical figures (from James Baldwin to Rihanna). Roberts's collages of confident adolescent figures, with oversized features and excitable expressions, engage in discussions about contemporary and historical African American politics. Featured in the exhibition is a jewel-like early self-portrait, *Little Debbie*, exuding energy. The full-frontal-ness of these portraits signifies the power that these artists have, and their determination to be at the centre of the history of art.

Beside Roberts is Khadija Saye, who, like Muholi and Roberts, uses photographic tools to explore identity. Born to Gambian parents (a Christian mother and a Muslim father), the late Saye, who tragically died in the Grenfell Tower fire aged 24, utilised photography to engage with her mixed religious heritage, as well as Gambian spiritualist rituals and as an act of self-healing. She said, *'I wanted to investigate how a portrait could function as a way of announcing one's piety, virtue, soul, and prosperity'*.

On the far end is Amy Sherald's *The girl next door*, a dazzlingly luminous painting that re-evaluates the 'American portrait'. Sherald's works, which immortalise images of everyday Black people, exist in a space, as the artist has said, 'between fantasy and reality'. In conversation with Sherald is Celia Paul, who has described herself not as a 'portraitist', but as 'an autobiographer and chronicler of my life and family'. Paul paints sensitive portrayals of her sisters, mother, friends and past lovers, whom she cloaks in a hazy glow at her sparse studio-slash-apartment. Speaking about her painting, *Overshadowed*, she has said:

'In my painting Overshadowed I first of all painted Lucian Freud to the left of the canvas. I used his naked self-portrait with the raised palette knife as a template. I positioned myself seated obediently for him to the right. But the image was too illustrative so I painted Lucian out. He left a shadow, however, which mingled with my own shadow thrown on the wall behind me. My submissive pose is subverted by the directness of my gaze.'

'My inspiration for the painting came from Sofonisba Anguissola's portrait of her teacher Bernardino Campi. Lucian Freud had been my teacher and lover, too. Katy Hessel recommended that I look at Anguissola's work when we were discussing how it might be possible to unsettle the gender balance of power in the subtlest way. Anguissola has depicted herself being painted by her teacher. She is his subject but her gaze is the real focus of the painting.'

Significant paintings and works on paper by Flora Yukhnovich, Tracey Emin, Jadé Fadojutimi and Julie

Mehretu dominate the rest of the exhibition, exploring a language that is defining the present moment: painting on the precipice of abstraction and figuration that appears to gradually dissolve into colour and form. Whereas gesture takes over with Fadojutimi and Mehretu, in Emin and Yukhnovich's paintings the figures morph in and out of presence and absence, visibility and invisibility.

In Emin's painting, *Rip my heart out You Fucking Cunt*, 2022, she distorts all visibility of facial features with lines that bruise and shatter into the canvas, outlining the shape of a human body. Full of vigour, with scrubs of reds and pinks, it's as though you can feel her body move across the canvas, her innermost feelings press against the surface. Layered with strokes that seep into and drip down the canvas, it's as though she is culminating decades' worth of love, pain, death and desire into one canvas.

Beside Emin is *Watch out boy she'll chew you up*, 2022, by Flora Yukhnovich. Speaking about this work, which is inspired by Tiepolo's *Diana and Actaeon*, 1720–22, Yukhnovich has said:

'...the Tiepolo is a very beautiful painting but I don't really like how the artist is showing her completely naked – displaying her body for the viewer. Actaeon as the stag is in the distance but it's like Tiepolo is placing himself and the viewer above the law, inviting the gaze without ramification. I wanted to break it up, bring some of the violence back in – include the dogs and the dead stag in the front. All the while alluding to but hopefully not making the female bodies too explicit. Hopefully it comes across as more of a femme fatale kind of moment instead of the arranged bodies of Tiepolo's painting.'

Finally, we end with two miniatures by Somaya Critchlow, who is creating a new history where Black female nudes possess an equal nobility to figures found in Old Masters. Creating small-scale, even pocket-sized paintings of bold and triumphant women, her work has some of the commanding spirit as that of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century painters.

Critchlow, Fadojutimi and Yukhnovich feature in my final chapter, *The New Masters*. All British, all born in the 1990s, these are artists working in this upcoming generation whose influence, I believe, will be some of the most impactful on the next generation and the future of art history.