

Exhibitions

Turner Prize

Hull

Frieze

London

by MARTHA BARRATT

ALL FOUR ARTISTS nominated for this year's Turner Prize, whose work is on view at the **Ferens Art Gallery, Hull** (to 7th January 2018), are painters in some form.¹ Hurvin Anderson makes saturated landscapes and interiors comparable to those of Peter Doig; Lubaina Himid paints black figures onto crockery, newspapers and canvas to create an alternative and more equitable cultural history; and Andrea Büttner is a printmaker whose installation combines her iPad paintings with reappropriated German educational boards devoted to Simone Weil. Only Rosalind Nashashibi, formerly a painter and collaborator with Lucy Skaer, bucks the trend and presents two – near-perfect – films. For an exhibition that has come to represent the new, and especially the shocking or controversial, this year's offering feels strangely anachronistic. We could almost be in the 1980s – an art world dominated by figurative painting and identity politics.

It is fitting, therefore, that perhaps the strongest single work in the show, Himid's *A fashionable marriage* (Fig.51), was made in that decade. In this life-size satire after Hogarth, made of painted paper cut-outs, a jeering Margaret Thatcher takes the place of the fallen woman, while a slippery Silvertongue – Ronald Reagan – lurches towards her with a love note, among a bastardised high-society chorus that includes a bloated, squawking art critic. At the centre, the black male servant from Hogarth's painting (*The toilette*, in the series *Marriage A-la-Mode*) is reimaged as a female artist. Despite its ageing references, the work feels contemporary in aesthetic, in both its theatricality (Himid trained as a set designer) and its humour.

Born in 1954, Himid is the oldest nominee for the Turner Prize, following this year's welcome removal of the under-forty age cap. A founder member of the British Black Arts Movement in 1982, she has for more than thirty years put identity politics – specifically that of the Afro-Caribbean diaspora – at the centre of a practice that offers both a deconstructive and constructive approach. She takes from Hogarth his 'use of the black person to expose the shady morals of the white main protagonists', while in another work on show, *Swallow hard: the Lancaster dinner service* (2007), she creates her own narrative of Abolition by painting its char-



49. *Study for Ascension I*, by Hurvin Anderson. 2017. Acrylic on drafting film. (Courtesy the artist; photograph Richard Ivey; exh. Ferens Art Gallery, Hull).

acters onto dinner plates, jugs and tureens: an alternative history in ceramics. She has been remarkably consistent about her intentions. In the 1980s, 'making ourselves [black artists] visible was the purpose' of her art, while more recent work is 'about attempting to belong, about understanding who we are as black people in the diaspora, how much we have contributed across Europe'.² The immense institutional and public interest in Himid this year, with exhibitions at Oxford, Colchester and Bristol,³ suggests such an approach to painting identity is still vital. At a time of increasing reports of racism and xenophobia in the United Kingdom as well as in America, Himid's portraits celebrate Black British identity by refusing to take the position of the exiled and alienated Postcolonial subject, and instead offer a defiantly inclusive, yet still radical, vision of the country and its history.

Anderson's relative unease around the representation of black people is linked less to politics and more to the process of making a picture, and representation in general. His is 'difficult painting' – a phrase used increasingly to discuss a contemporary mode

of formalism. These works fuse a modernist language of grids and planes with figuration, but often cannot be united by the viewer into a fully readable composition – they do not 'hold as shape'. The larger and more finished looking paintings on display, such as *Ascension* (2017), an image of Anderson's brother climbing a tree, ooze frustration, the centre increasingly indecipherable as pictorial space seems to fall in on itself. Similarly, in *Last house* (2013), composed in paint so thin that each layer drips to pool at the bottom, colour will not settle where it is placed. In *Ascension* the tree's branches fill the canvas, fragmented into jewel-like shards of green, pink and blue, the figure lost among these shapes as they converge. He can be seen, however, in the studies on display, gridded up by string or made on squared drafting film (Fig.49). Anderson's skills both as a draughtsman and in composition are evident in these works on paper and film, which have a confidence absent from the works on canvas.

More comfortable in the process than with the product of painting, Anderson is similarly careful to avoid defining too explicitly the politics in his work. His most direct address to

race, *Is it OK to be Black?* (2016), shows a shelf in a barber's shop (a recurring subject) stacked with products, against a turquoise wall pinned with photographs of portrait heads. The two identifiable figures are Martin Luther King Jr and Malcolm X; the others are ghost-white shadows against black grounds. Not only does Anderson choose not to identify most of the figures, but in an interview given when he first exhibited the work he expressed anxiety that the association these figures brought to the painting was 'too strong', and especially 'too American'.⁴

The German artist Andrea Büttner also makes what might be described as difficult work, simply because it is hard to grasp. The prints and objects are often beautiful but the conceptual leaps they require are challenging. Among them are pieces of Klein-blue silk (hand-stitched by nuns) stretched over canvas with a seam or 'zip' (recalling Barnett Newman) down the middle. These are paired with quotations from Simone Weil and simple woodcuts of kneeling homeless people to present the themes of 'labour, poverty and shame'. Such abstruse references, with imagery often based on personal anecdote and without supporting information, make for an inaccessible and at times stifling display, at odds with the rest of the work on view.

Nashashibi's two films, by contrast, present ambitious concepts, war and art, through human stories and on a human scale – both are filmed at eye level throughout. *Electric Gaza* (2015), commissioned by the Imperial War Museum, London, focuses on quotidian aspects of the conflict in Gaza and uses animation to complete scenes cut short when Nashashibi was forced to leave the territory



50. Still from *Vivian's Garden*, by Rosalind Nashashibi. 2017. Video. (courtesy the artist; exh. Ferens Art Gallery, Hull).

prematurely. And yet it is the newest film, *Vivian's Garden* (2017; Fig.50), which follows Vivian Suter and her mother, Elisabeth Wild, making art in their home in Venezuela, that reveals Nashashibi's profound talent for storytelling. Behind heavy metal gates, the elderly Wild makes small bright paper collages, while Suter, herself in her sixties, drags large canvases brusquely through the jungle garden between home and studio. Motifs of domestic staff and dogs stress both the privilege and vulnerability of the two women. Wild talks

foremost of fear: of past and potential political violence outside the gates; of her ex-husband's abuse; and of the rain. Suter, an ever-competent carer and energetic painter, becomes teary in anticipation of a two-week holiday: 'I cherish every day with my mother'. The compound is at once a sanctuary for art and the complex and scary space of the mind. Both films offer a thoroughly modern approach to identity politics: through empathy and a very human connection with others, Nashashibi addresses her Palestinian heritage



51. *A fashionable marriage*, by Lubaina Himid. 1987. Acrylic on wood cut-outs with mixed media, dimensions variable. (Hollybush Gardens, London; exh. Ferens Art Gallery, Hull).



52. *Selected wall collages*, by Mary Beth Edelson. 1972–2011. Ink, marker and paper mounted on canvas, dimensions variable. (Acquired from David Lewis, New York, by Tate, London; exh. Frieze London 2017).

as well as her identity as a female artist.

If the Turner Prize represents an institutional measure of contemporary art in Britain, then **Frieze London** (4th–8th October) is the dizzying contribution of the market to that world. Art fairs such as Frieze present a challenging and often dispiriting viewing environment, an occasion not so much for appreciating art as for observing trends, many of which are established in other arenas, notably the Venice Biennale and *documenta*. This year they included fabric and needlework, the use of text or type as form in painting, and the flattening of media, in hyper-realistic pencil drawings of collages and photomontages drawn in an almost *trompe l'œil* manner on paper. The *Focus* section of the fair, which features galleries under twelve years old, was the most vibrant, with new work that better reflects the concerns of younger or emerging artists. Noteworthy here were the flamboyant ceramic satellite dishes by Emma Hart for The Sunday Painter in London, and the boisterous technicolour paintings of volcanoes by Dickon Drury for Koppe Astner, Glasgow.

Of the more established galleries, most presented large works from their best-known names, but Hauser and Wirth instead teamed up with the classicist Mary Beard for some welcome levity. Their stand *Bronze Age c.3500 BC – AD 2017* presented a faux-archaeological museum display of works in bronze by artists including Martin Creed and Fausto

Melotti, together with ancient artefacts as well as several items used to bulk up the display, simply bought from eBay (and labelled with their eBay number and original sellers' descriptions). Equally surprising was *Sex Works*, a collaborative exhibition of sorts between ten galleries, each presenting the work of one radical feminist artist working in the 1960s and 1970s. This (all white) selection included a display by the Austrian artist Renate Bertlmann (b.1943) of pink double-headed dildos perched atop cacti (1999) and photographs of inflated candy-coloured condoms appearing to caress one another (*Tender touches*; 1976), presented by Richard Saltoun, a longtime champion of feminist and other radical work from that period. Nearby, wall collages by Mary Beth Edelson (b.1933) comprised dozens of cut-outs of feminist symbols, from sheela-na-gigs to mermaids, arranged in a Bosch-like menagerie of a pyramid (Fig.52). Presumably this was a ferocious army for feminist and civil rights, a threatening picture of female power through history, but the sheer incongruity of the setting disarms these symbols, along with any political content.

Selected wall collages was one of four works purchased at Frieze by Tate, adding public legitimacy to that conferred by the market – both of which had initially rejected, censored or simply ignored such work. The contemporary art market at Frieze and the public institutions that organise or contribute

to the Turner Prize are now reviving politically radical art from the past and presenting it alongside the new. Himid and Edelson share in their politics a belief that the change needed is structural, that it is not primarily the art, but the people who make it and the system in which it exists, that need to change. Bringing their work into the fold of these establishments prompts consideration of how the art world so often fails to support the aims of such artists at the outset, and how far it still has to go in ensuring equal representation.

¹ Booklet: *Turner Prize 2017*, by Sacha Craddock and George Vasey. 46 pp. incl. numerous col. ills. (2017), £5. ISBN 978-1-902039-29-9.

² K. Kellaway: 'Lubaina Himid: the Turner prize nominee making black lives visible', *The Guardian* (24th September 2017), www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2017/sep/24/lubaina-himid-turner-prize-2017-interview, accessed 8th October 2017.

³ *Navigation Charts* at Spike Island, Bristol (20th January–26th March 2017); *Invisible Strategies* at Modern Art Oxford (21 January–30th April 2017); and *Warp and Weft* (1st July–1st October 2017) at Firstsite, Colchester.

⁴ 'Humin Anderson Exhibition Tour: Dub Versions at New Art Exchange', New Art Exchange, Nottingham, available online: www.youtube.com/watch?v=naMOR6b68Zk, accessed 12th October 2017.

Henri Matisse

London

by SARAH WHITFIELD

THE EXHIBITION *Matisse in the Studio* at the **Royal Academy of Arts, London** (to 12th November), follows on from *Matisse: His Art and his Textiles, The Fabric of Dreams*, shown there in 2005.¹ This latest reflection on Matisse's carefully choreographed studio spaces has been organised in collaboration with the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, where the exhibition was first shown (9th April–9th July).²

From the start of his career Matisse surrounded himself with fragments of textiles and 'trinkets', the word used by his fellow student Henri Evenpoel when describing a visit to Matisse's studio in early 1897, where he was shown *The dinner table* (private collection), a major work that announced Matisse's fascination with the simple shapes and sparkling surfaces of household china and glass. The following year Albert Marquet presented Matisse with a handsome silver chocolate pot as a wedding present (cat. no.33). His choice showed how well he understood his friend's need to be surrounded with objects infused with a life and vitality all their own. The large silver pot with its slightly parted spout is like a character imagined by Honoré Daumier; solid, portly, the belly weighing a little heavily on three short legs. Moreover, the polished surface, so alive to the vagaries of light, was well suited to Matisse's applica-