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## Out of the Shadows

Colin Grant

# Reflections on the Year 3 Project

This essay is one of nine commissioned by A New Direction to reflect on the Tate Year 3 Project and provoke thinking about future projects. For the full set go to [www.anewdirection.org.uk/year-3-reflections](http://www.anewdirection.org.uk/year-3-reflections)

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The term *Tate Year 3 Project* in the first instance and *Year 3* thereafter refers to the whole project including planning and production stages.

*Steve McQueen Year 3* refers to the artwork and exhibition.

For clarity, we have referred to the school year of Year 3 as Y3.

# Out of the Shadows

*The representation of people of colour in British culture has alternated between near invisibility and hyper visibility; even though historians such as Peter Fryer tell us that, there were Africans in Britain before the English came here. For long stretches of our shared history, black people may have figured only as an afterthought or footnote in museums or galleries, but they've more often been demonised as feckless, dangerous wastrels on the front pages of British tabloids.*

## Colin Grant

The yearning to be integrated, included as part of the majority consciousness, going about your business without incident, is offset by the anxiety of being subjected to surveillance, banished to the margins of society, as an unwanted presence. This tension has played out in all facets of our society, perhaps dramatically so in those public spaces previously perceived as white places of privilege; arguably class is as much a factor as race. That combination can be seen in many working-class people of colour who have felt excluded from art institutions

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or have excused and excluded themselves.

Visiting art galleries in the 1970s, my siblings and I (the children of black Jamaicans of the Windrush generation) used to play a game we called 'black people alert' when spotting fellow black and brown punters who'd breached these bastions of Britishness. We may have felt entitled to be in the museums but that didn't preclude discomfort. But that was the 1970s, things have changed, surely?

*Make Life Beautiful! - The Dandy in Photography*, an exhibition in Brighton in 2004 was shaping up as it purported to be: camp, aesthetically pleasing and dandyish. By the halfway point, walking round the show with my two daughters (then aged twelve and eight) we'd been exposed to the usual suspects - Cecil Beaton, Valentino, Noel Coward, Oscar Wilde. Finally, we came across the welcome sight of a black subject (for the first time), the photo in sepia of

a handsome, suited-man wearing a fedora, taken by F. Holland Day in 1897.

Underneath the portrait was the simple caption: 'Negro in Hat'. I was taken aback, immediately flushed with heat and embarrassment; I could see my daughters looked bemused as well. We stepped back and across to the next photo, also taken by the same photographer. Here now was a theatrical-looking white man from the same period in what appeared to be a fancy-dress turban. Its caption said: 'Man in Hat'. Our eyes flicked between the two portraits - 'Negro in Hat'; 'Man in Hat'; 'Negro in Hat'; 'Man in Hat'.

So, was a Negro not a man? My daughters and I were equally dismayed and dispirited. The next day I wrote an angry email to the curator; I included my phone number. He rang me straight away and defended the inclusion of the caption saying it was historically specific, and that, in any event, it had been given by the photographer. Fine, but



what, I asked the curator, would he have done if Holland Day had captioned the photo 'N\*\*\*\*r in Hat'? There was silence down the line. Eventually the curator and I reached a compromise; he would not amend the wording but would insert below it the phrase 'original caption'.

Other works such as *Ebony and Ivory*, a 'majestic countenance and muscled torso of an Ethiopian Chief,' according to the Metropolitan Museum of Art, demonstrated Holland Day's 'genuine delectation for his subject.' Day was an American gentleman photographer (though much more than a dilettante) from the late 19th and early 20th century whose 'fascination' (veiled infatuation) with black models calls to mind Robert Mapplethorpe's *The Black Book*. Mapplethorpe's lascivious delectation in his naked African American models was evident in his photography of the body parts he considered 'the most perfect'. His aesthetic was anatomical; the projection of a hyper-sexualised fantasy of the black male, reduced to sex, to an object. Take for instance Mapplethorpe's *Man in a Polyester Suit*. Aside from the model's hands, the camera's focus is on the black man's penis, as if it somehow signified his essence.

Arguably, the fact that these black models were the subject of a white artist's attention was an upgrade, at least as far as Western art was concerned. Mapplethorpe's male nudes and Holland Day's *Negro in Hat* were an evolution from the role that models might have played in earlier decades and centuries. Then

they were appendages - the asexualised handmaiden in Manet's *Olympia* or the unnamed black servant (most likely Francis Barber), in Doyle's *A Literary Party at Sir Joshua Reynolds*. In that painting Barber, the 'faithful negro servant' of the great lexicographer Samuel Johnson, carries a salver laden with decanters of wine, attending to his master and eight other luminaries.

The revellers do not include Ignatius Sancho, but, had he survived beyond his death in 1780, you could imagine Sancho, the fabled 'African man of Letters' invited to such a gathering. It's possible. Sancho, who at times described himself as a 'black Falstaff', was a London celebrity deemed important enough in 1768 to sit for Thomas Gainsborough, the most famous portraitist of his time.

Gainsborough renders Sancho as a portly figure of sartorial elegance in fine clothes, a hand in his waistcoat; an erudite gentleman (far removed from his inauspicious beginnings as the orphaned child of enslaved African parents and later as a grocer; his actual profession). Apart from his dark skin there's no difference between Sancho and a white gentleman; his capacity for high culture is further demonstrated by his sensuous face.

Trawling through British art history Gainsborough's elegant depiction seems complimented by the high society portrait of Dido Elizabeth Belle, the great niece of Lord Mansfield. Together with her white cousin and in the flush

of youth, Dido is painted almost as an African princess in satin, privileged, wealthy and care-free. Her and Sancho's portraits serve as a rebuttal of the stereotypical depiction of black people, at the time, as grotesque, uncivilised, licentious drunkards.

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But there's a catch. To see Sancho's portrait you must first venture to the National Portrait Gallery and make your peace with the past and the knowledge that, as with the Tate (which takes its name from the sugar baron Henry Tate of Tate & Lyle), such institutions came into being in part from the wealth Britain accrued through the plunder of black bodies during the transatlantic slave trade. Henry Tate, the gallery argues, was not a slave-owner or slave-trader, but concedes that it's 'not possible to separate the Tate galleries from the history of colonial slavery from which in part they derive their existence.'<sup>1</sup>

Given their past, how can such places make life beautiful? Many works depict scenes of

wealthy white aristocrats (emblematic of the privileges and exploitation of colonialism and empire) with black servants portrayed almost as pets. In the 1980s, I recall peers who boycotted the Tate and National Gallery, arguing that to venture into such contaminated places was to surrender moral surety and to indulge in an act of complicity; a great wrong, captured in paint without censure, should not be normalized. Conscious of such criticism, the Tate has at least begun the conversation on inclusivity with a number of outreach projects.

There must be a reckoning but also reconciliation. We're not alone. Numerous countries have engaged with a difficult past to reimagine a better future. What can we learn from the Germans? Two decades ago at the Venice Biennale, the artist Hans Haake with his work *Germania* critiqued the building and purpose of his country's pavilion (inaugurated by the Nazi government in 1938) by taking a sledgehammer and bulldozer to the slabs of its marble floor and reducing it to rubble. Its destruction was exhilarating and liberating. That sense of freeing is important. No one would advocate dismantling the Tate, but the institution needs to be liberated and repurposed. *Steve McQueen Year 3* is yet another step towards that eventuality.

It was a delight to see so many brown faces (76,000 youngsters, aged 7 and 8, from two thirds of the capital's primary schools) peering out from the walls of the Tate's Duveen Galleries at Steve McQueen's show.

Observing not just punters of colour but the subjects on the wall, it was as if my younger self was staring back at me from the 3,000 group portraits of school kids in their uniforms, arranged in columns and rows from the floor to the thirty-foot-high ceiling.

We look at school and class photos in awe and wonder but with ambivalence, too. If these portraits of childhood are celebrations of youth and a snapshot of the present, they're also heralds of what is to come. Poring over the fading images years later, we reconstruct narratives of the past, increasingly aware that the photos were always predictors of the future. Similarly, in decades to come, historians will look back to *Steve McQueen Year 3* as an indicator of a changing demographic where punters inside the gallery and the portraits on the walls began to more closely resemble the people outside who might ordinarily have walked on by.

Exhibitions like *Steve McQueen Year 3* and *Get Up Stand Up, Now* (at Somerset House in 2019) are the axis on which British art history is turning; away from the received notion of a canon, towards the representation of the lives and experiences of people of colour. They echo the chant, "We are here!" that children who attended the exhibition were encouraged to voice.

In the 1970s the same cry was heard from black households throughout the UK whenever a person of colour appeared on television screens; and my gallery-going siblings and I experienced a similar thrilling sensation when we nodded furtively at people of colour who'd braved the

same recognised white spaces. We need no longer nod now; and no longer will there be a need for such shows as *Steve McQueen Year 3* and *Get Up Stand Up, Now* to be advertised and heralded with the preface 'the first black...'

Reflecting on McQueen's show for *The Times Literary Supplement* I'd have found it hard to criticise it; I suspect that, had I not believed it worthy of merit, I'd have declined to review it. You don't want to kill the dream of inclusion before it's had time to blossom. For, make no mistake, we are in the midst of culture wars, and there comes a time when you cannot remain on the fence, or inadvertently align yourself with revisionist forces.

Organisers of the *Uncomfortable Art Tour*, focusing on cultural institutions such as the National Gallery and Tate Britain 'seek to resist triumphalist nostalgia with art history.' Their approach - evident in portraits on their website, for example, of Lord Nelson with 'White Supremacist' scrawled over it in red paint - seems polemical and provocative, but it is necessarily so. Artists of colour (such as McQueen, even though he might squirm at the description) have an obligation to interrogate the uncomfortable truths illuminated on such tours; to connect with other people of colour, in the act of rebellion, challenging the very seductive nature of nostalgic narratives, by stepping into the atrium of Tate Britain and shouting, "We are here. We reach." ■

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1. Tate, 'The Tate Galleries and Slavery', [Tate.org.uk, About us, History of Tate, www.tate.org.uk/about-us/history-tate/tate-galleries-and-slavery#:~:text=While%20it%20is%20important%20to,part%20they%20derive%20their%20existence,](https://www.tate.org.uk/about-us/history-tate/tate-galleries-and-slavery#:~:text=While%20it%20is%20important%20to,part%20they%20derive%20their%20existence,) accessed 26 April 2021.

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**A New Direction** is an award-winning non-profit organisation working to enhance the capacity and agency of children and young people in London to own their creativity, shape culture, and achieve their creative potential.

We do this by working with a diverse range of partners, making connections, sharing practice, influencing change, improving the ecology that surrounds children and young people, and by providing real and transformative opportunities - from childhood, through school years and into employment.

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*Image: Steve McQueen Year 3 ©Tate*