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***‘How the political world crashes in on my personal everyday’:  
Lubaina Himid’s Conversations and Voices:  
Towards an essay about *Cotton.com****

*Griselda Pollock*

***Patterns are not neutral.  
They are words,  
signals and whole sentences,  
signing different moods,  
saying different periods.***

**Lubaina Himid, 2016<sup>1</sup>**

The language of Lubaina Himid is a language of conversations, interventions, repositionings and patterns; negotiations of pasts and presents. Her work balances the mournful recognition of the annihilating force of racism in its everyday-but-relentless work of effacement and non-recognition, and the indomitable but tender evocations of the presence and agency of Black women. Himid entered my consciousness around 1984–85, when Rozsika Parker and I were writing our book *Framing Feminism: Art and the Women’s Movement 1970–85* (1987). She had just curated two exhibitions of contemporary British artists: ‘Five Black Women’ (Africa Centre, London, 1983) and ‘Black Women Time Now’ (Battersea Arts Centre, 1984–85). In 1985, the artist Sutapa Biswas, then a lone Indian fine art student at the University of Leeds, asked if I would invite Himid and Sonia Boyce to our school for a talk, to thus succour her creativity in a postcolonial situation. Both artists came to Leeds and spoke to a packed room. At the time, Himid had been given a ‘corridor’ of the Institute of Contemporary Arts (ICA), London as the ‘space’ in which to present the work of her contemporaries. The show, ‘The Thin Black Line’ (1985), which included Biswas’s work, laid down a thread that demanded I follow it.

Following Himid during the 1980s meant travelling a lot, to installations such as *A Fashionable Marriage* (Pentonville Gallery, London, 1986), *New Robes for Mashulan* (Rochdale Art Gallery, Greater Manchester, 1987) and *The Ballad of the Wing* (Chisenhale Gallery, London, 1989). *A Fashionable Marriage* drew upon the political imagination of William Hogarth to create a contemporary history painting, knowingly referencing Hogarth's place in the history of artists' struggle for visibility in the face of official gatekeeping.<sup>2</sup> With cardboard cut-outs Margaret Thatcher entertaining Ronald Reagan in a deadly love-in that could lead to a third world war, on the political side, and the 'white feminist artist' taking the place of Hogarth's 'eager listener', seeking pearls of wisdom from the massive art critic (in place of Hogarth's castrato singer, while the Funder sits on the fence), on the art side, Himid reclaimed, across art and politics, the agency of the two African figures in Hogarth's paintings and prints.

Himid's *A Fashionable Marriage* choreographed the staging of the doubled scene of the politics of war and of art, with the artist using her signature cut-outs as both carved, semi-sculptural presences and flat, painted surfaces on which colour operated at its own doubled scale. Colour signified both the signature of the colonialist's imposition of a 'racial epidermal schema', in the words of Frantz Fanon, and the reclaimed language of a rich heritage of places, memories, cultures and a modernism that was renewed in Europe by its distorting discovery of Africa's multiple sculptural, performative and textile cultural-aesthetic resources.<sup>3</sup> The nine-foot-tall, six-foot wide figure of the Black woman artist, made of the hardest of building-quality birch plywood, loomed up as the central character of the work (no longer Hogarth's invisibilised African man serving hot chocolate in a cup, with a suggestively placed phallic biscuit). She carried a bowl of limitless energy and ideas

to revitalise the ‘white feminist artist’, inclined towards official acceptance, in need of this injection from the Black woman/women artists to keep the feminist project moving forward. On the politicians’ side, a young Black activist in the foreground replaced the boy-child with looted African sculptures; she knowingly opened the box of deadly weapons.

I did not get this when I first saw it. What I did see was what I was trained to home in on: me, or my alter ego in the form of the ‘white feminist artist’ who seemed a composite figure of Susan Hiller, Mary Kelly and Judy Chicago. I had little experience to bring to understanding the urgency with which the reconfiguration of the two Black women in the work was speaking back as much to a feminist as to the dominant cultural establishment. I recently interviewed Himid about the work, prompted by an earlier discussion with her about the cloak of invisibility that had veiled from white eyes the prominent, tall, strong and clearly central figure of the Black woman artist who articulated the artist’s own presence and her singularity: I am here, I am an artist. She spoke of the tone of the piece and how, despite the massive force of the Black woman artist’s presence, the citation of Hogarth kept *her* in the background – even the size and scale of her avatar could not interrupt the dominant field of meaning. Himid’s created conversation, both with British art history and with the contemporary feminist scene, left the Black women in an oblique relation, isolated from each other as they both faced the viewer, questioning her, but not yet from their own space.

*Revenge: A Masque in Five Tableaux* (1992) marked a major strategic change.<sup>4</sup> It created the space for Black women to be visible as the only subjects in the paintings, and, as importantly, pictured talking to each other. They were not a crowd, but two, each an individual in her own right while sharing a joint project of radical

challenge and change. I bought *Five*, from this series, and placed it in the Leeds City Art Gallery on permanent loan.<sup>5</sup> I did so to make sure that *Lubaina Himid* was visible in a public gallery, in order to start conversations with those who might recognise themselves in the images of two Black women talking across a table about the future of the world and the dark histories they had inherited. Such viewers might come to feel at home in the gallery, and be inspired to be like the artist to become an artist. The painting is often hung by the curators in conversation with abstract paintings, namely, *Winter Palace* (1996) by Bridget Riley, an artist with whom Himid feels herself to be in conversation, and *Helios* (1990) by Gillian Ayres. As a frame, such conversations work insofar as they acknowledge Himid's rightful place alongside her British contemporaries in painting, and specifically in terms of colour. The gallery itself, however, has not acquired further works by Himid and other Black women to extend the conversation between Black artists on its walls. As Sutapa Biswas was during her studies at Leeds, *Five* is lonely. It cannot speak all its languages, or mobilise all its concerns. The painting 'says' so much about its own situation, about the politics of the gallery space as much as of the condition of artists who are women and Black in contemporary Britain.

Himid's conversations have also been with place; with specific sites her work occupies. I travelled to St Ives specially to see *Plan B* (2000) installed at Tate there, with painter Alison Rowley and my daughter. Having stayed in a bed and breakfast from which I could see the famous lighthouse of Virginia Woolf's childhood (and her novel that mourns her mother), we walked to see *Plan B* by taking a path that led us around the coast and across the sandy flats with the tide out. As we turned back to look out to see we noticed the reflections of the sun on the rippled sand and trapped pools of water. We saw the colours. We saw a Bridget Riley there before us.

*Plan B* was a striking installation, without figures; full of rooms, waves, empty chairs, fabrics, objects, and peepholes breaking through blank walls to provide a glimpse of distant seas; and then ‘a voice’ created in painted writing that inscribed the terror of a group, of ‘we’ escaping to the safety of mountains. The installation placed the paintings in conversation with each other to form a rhythm of double canvases on the vertical axis and the horizontal. Both axes thus extended a severe and tall modernist white-cube gallery space lit overhead by natural light. In references to the sea and a coastline, to the echo of Zanzibar – and perhaps what I have called, in relation to my own formative memories of African space and place, ‘natal memory’<sup>6</sup> – the historical voice of terror breaks through in one painting. Are these enslaved Africans who speak in and to this space of art, memory, war? Are they other kinds of refugees from violence? It is their fear that haunts this brilliant scene that knowingly claims its place in the history of British modernism and its ‘spaces’.

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I want to jump now to *Naming the Money* (2004), a massive installation that reprised the cut-out after many years of painting. It was comprised of one hundred figures, each representing an activity undertaken by enslaved African men and women stolen from their own worlds and traded, renamed and reclothed to serve Europeans who did not see them as anything but instruments of types of required service and labour. Ceramicists, herbalists, toymakers, dog trainers, viola da gamba players, drummers, dancers, shoemakers, map-makers and painters formed a colorful and exuberantly creative company while music from different centuries – dating from the moment the first Europeans took people from the African continent – played throughout the space,

marking four long centuries of servitude and oppression. On the back of each figure was a label-like bill of sale; in four lines the writing invoked the voice of the now reclothed and retrained personage by speaking of an original name, a given name, a former activity and a current task. The back of the figure became the fragile space of each subject's individual memory and agency, the place where *I* speaks back to *they*, reclaiming *my* name from what *they* renamed *me*, remembering *my* skills back *there* and showing how even in *their* imposition of new tasks '*I*' keep a trace of *who I am*, still a person.

Conversations inside a single work, conversations between the figures in her installations, conversations between paintings and places, conversations between the artist and other painters, and now a chorus of voices speaking back *in the first person*. This last feature emerged in *Inside the Invisible* (2002), a site-specific installation in a former leprosy hospital, St Jørgen's in Bergen, Norway, of one hundred painted works on raw linen. The paintings, each five-inches-square on an eight-inch-square support, were placed in the small rooms the sufferers had once inhabited, cut off from the world by a disease that eats away at the body. To be a leper is to be cast out from a fearful, *abjecting* society, and to suffer unimaginable psychic anguish. Each painting had a small luggage label attached to it with string and bearing a phrase written in Norwegian and English; each spoke of the person's past via an object ('I used this tureen on Sundays') or of the precious objects that related to that past ('This is a special hook for mending nets'). Himid has written:

*I wanted to make a series of works that might give these people a voice. They were individuals, real, idiosyncratic, sexual, thinking people. They had memories, hopes, families. In the same way that slaves were more than slaves, lepers are more than just people with bits of their bodies missing through disease.<sup>7</sup>*

This work reminded me of Himid's deep interest in workers, doers and makers, and in the rhythms of daily lives of those who cooked, nursed, mended, washed, grew food, made babies, prayed, built and farmed. I also sensed a resonance she found in the sea people of Bergen, for many leprosy sufferers were fishermen. The sea has made its claim on her imagination again and again. One work that I had not known until recently is *Zanzibar* (1999) shown in Oriel Mostyn Gallery, Llandudno. The most abstract of all the artist's works, fields of pulsating colour applied with a wide range of painterly processes float abstract patterns suggesting trace memories of buildings while their shaded or highlighted facets evoke a brilliant sun reflecting off their surfaces. *Zanzibar* is a monument to the *natal memory* of place and of her journeys back to reconnect. The inchoate impressions of a first childhood home and feelings associated with its inexplicable loss now find a language in the processes of painting, and the dance of lively pattern shapes in its worked surfaces.

The relay between *Inside the Invisible* and *Naming the Money* becomes apparent through pattern: the function of painting took over the colorfully personalised surfaces of the hundred later cut-outs, offering an evocation of a visual imagination. The word *pattern* has many meanings in English: 'repeated decorative design', 'a regular and intelligible form or sequence discernible in the way in which something happens or is done', a 'model', and 'an excellent example for others to follow'. (OED) It comes from the old French word *patron*. It was originally what was set out by those who were directing others to make things. Pattern thus has involved the imaginative project to make a form through which something becomes intelligible, to show that there is a form to the world. It is deep, structural and formal. *Repeated* and *decorative* are terms that acquired their negative connotations with regard to



pattern-making and pattern-thinking at the moment of Western colonisation and as the gender hierarchy in early capitalist Western art established its hierarchies and codes. These terms become the negative of what is valued as original and singular as well as of whatever Western art has decided it wants to be when it is being tough, rigorous and *white-manly*.

It is, I would argue, Western art that should be understood as the brief aberration in world cultures because it does not delight in either the forms and shapes of living things in the world, or the capacity of our imaginations to create forms and to fill fields of colour that we wrap around our moving bodies, hang up to make walls and partitions, use to decorate and make vivid our living spaces, place beneath our feet, or make brilliant and awesome our sacred buildings. Pattern and its decorative use on surfaces and fabrics, in either its naturalistic joy or its symbolic abstract forms, is a worldwide language capable of as many layers of reference, association, symbolism and invention as any of the pictorial representationalism or human figuration that the West has so privileged even while remaining arrogantly dismissive of the deep fascination with pattern that has always exercised the imaginations of its own illuminators or stonemasons.

Pattern and painting have a long history in Himid's artistic language. *Inside the Invisible* went further. Her multiple paintings became objects. Not just images of cherished things that she imagined might reforge for the leprosy sufferers affecting links to the everyday social world from which their disease had exiled them, her paintings on linen stood in for cloths and objects the inmates might have held close to their disintegrating bodies as talismans of healthier pasts. The borders of raw, un-dyed linen around the painted areas were also part of making a new form: a single entity composed of many elements, each one becoming a little world of memory and

meaning, while combining to become a composite work of many utterances, some visual and others the loving traces of lost speech. *Inside the Invisible* speaks to the subjectivity of the unseen, the non-recognized. The work produces both an absence—the people whose incarceration because of disease made them feel disappeared—and a presence—rehumanised, re-subjectivised persons to haunt these rooms in Bergen that are now a museum of ghosts.

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Between *Inside the Invisible* and *Naming the Money* Himid made *Cotton.com* (2002), first shown in ‘Fabrications’ at CUBE (Centre for Understanding the Built Environment) in Manchester, in a building that had been part of the city’s history as a capital of textile manufacturing and commerce.<sup>8</sup> For *Cotton.com* the artist set herself the task of creating one hundred paintings at what she has called ‘specimen’ size, slightly smaller than those in *Inside the Invisible*. It was no mean feat to paint so many paintings while working full time as university professor of fine art, to create one hundred visual events of varied internal rhythms, never repeating a motif over the hundred works. Himid told me that the labour involved in such detailed, close and careful painting performed a deep connection as a kind of physical mirroring to the piecework of the past, or the unpaid labour of enslaved workers. She does not image labour but performs it, in her own gestures and exhausted body. Its traces are her paintings.

The title *Cotton.com* combines a plant that is made into a fabric and an Internet handle, shorthand for commerce and business. As a result the former, a plant

or a woven cloth becomes a commodity – as did those forced to pick cotton under specific historical conditions. It is against the human violence and violation inscribed in this brevity that a beautiful, elaborate and profound work unfurls.<sup>9</sup>

In the latter part of the nineteenth century, textile workers living in the northwest of England were affected by the American Civil War (1861-64) due to their links with the provision of slave-grown cotton. During that war, the Confederate States of America, seeking to hold on to slavery, thought to pressure European countries to enter the war on their side by cutting off the supply of cotton. The resulting cotton famine immiserated and starved the textile workers of the Manchester region for a two-year period. At the point at which President Abraham Lincoln was about to deliver the Emancipation Proclamation of 1863, the Manchester trade unions held rallies and wrote to President Lincoln of the solidarity of the suffering factory workers of the North in supporting the humanitarian project to end slavery in the United States. The bronze statue of Lincoln by American sculptor George Grey Barnard created for London now stands in Manchester, bearing a plaque with the words of Lincoln's grateful reply to the Manchester unions, carefully edited to replace 'workingmen' with 'working people'. This too brief summary of an extraordinary episode sets the scene for a reading of Himid's reflection on two worlds and how they *touched* via the threads of raw and spun cotton.

Himid is interested neither in the trade union leaders nor Lincoln. In making *Cotton.com*, she wanted to make the everyday workers linked across the Atlantic by cotton touch via a very different gesture. She thought about the simple fact of the great bales of cotton coming into Manchester on barges from the seaport of Liverpool. She imagined the Manchester workers unloading, unpacking and sorting the compressed bolls; finding hairs, bits of fabric, fingernails, toenails, blood, skin and so

many tangible traces of real bodies on the other side of the Atlantic. ‘Cloth’, she has noted, is not just a message from another set of workers. The cotton carried a *human* trace, from the set of bleeding hands that had picked it in scorching heat, to the hands that sorted it prior to its arrival in yet more hands, some children’s, for spinning and weaving.

For *Cotton.com* Himid colour played a rhetorical role. She installed black and white paintings – sometimes white motifs on black grounds, sometimes the reverse. Each was painted with detailed care, in small strokes, with fine marks; errors could not be covered up. Each movement of the brush had to be sure, clear, complete. The black and white avoids the literalness of direct historical reference to the transatlantic exchanges between union officials and the President of the United States. The artist had translated another kind of meeting mediated by materiality: cotton. That thread-talk was transformed into units of creative meaning in paintings that had the liveliness of both the symbolic-aesthetic practices of West African block-print fabrics and the energy and dynamic of European Wiener Werkstätte designs, pointing to the capital of Art Nouveau and a European design revolution at the beginning of the twentieth century. Looking at the works, I listed buttons, bows, stitches, combs, loops, stars, pears, apples, pineapples, shells, fishes, chains, birdcages, whales, tadpoles, cones, buttonholes, rays of light, wheels. On a brass plaque, set behind the viewer confronting the cascade of paintings, was a single monumental statement: ‘He said I looked like a painting by [Bartolomé Esteban] Murillo as I carried water to the hoe-gang just because I balanced the bucket on my head.’ This was in reference to an inspector’s report on the plantation system that noted how the workers slept and what they ate; the inspector included mention of an African woman carrying water to a gang of fieldworkers.

The art historian in me searches for the painting. I do not think such a Murillo actually exists. Murillo stands for the nineteenth-century British taste for bad Spanish art and for exoticism. Himid's plaque served to interrupt, undo and radically change the violence and the envy, the exoticisation and the blindness encoded in this passing comment. Consider the scene of the exchange: the African woman is surprised, and worse, at being compared to a painting; the slave owners are astonished that anyone might imagine such a comparison. No longer disappeared as an enslaved worker or a momentarily eroticised image conjured by a passing white man making notes on systems of dehumanising labour, an African woman was brought forth by Himid's monumental plaque grammatically, from the page, as the subject of historical experience. Himid transformed history by making the African woman the speaker – neither a picture nor in the background, but written in words on hard shiny bronze. It was not enough to denounce the inspector's casually announced sexism and racism, his not seeing anything animate and human, just a pretty picture. His exoticism of 'her' was wiped out by Himid's 'He says I...'. The use of the first person makes visible, and legible, that the African subject is not imprisoned in the gaze of the white man, and is not entirely abolished by his words. She is a subject. She speaks back. She articulates her astonishment but also her rebuke and her resistance.

Himid does not imagine she can – or certainly not that 'we' can – enter into the subjectivity of the women and men deprived of their conditions of humanity while preserving it in the face of that daily, structural violence. She tells me that, nonetheless, the struggle to be seen as an agent of creative singularity as experienced by Black women today – the daily battle to be seen, to establish *who*, not *what*, you are – shares something with the distant woman who was glimpsed and *mis*-seen in a cold, factual report on the *.com* of plantation economies, built on the chattel

enslavement of fellow human beings, on lives spent in the thankless and painful task of picking cotton.

When Himid says that her work touches again and again on the way the political world crashes in on her personal everyday, she refuses the split and speaks directly, in her own first person. Her extraordinary creativity over forty years has been a sustained battle to find her own forms, through which to speak in the first person; and more, to be seen and heard in that singularity as this artist. The power of her work resides, however, in the specific threads she weaves with the labour of the studio: the making, the painting, the poetic phrasing, the endless care with materials, all infused with the memories of places and a sense of a historical obligation to remember. Threaded through the dire histories delivered by political and economic violence is the counter force of the sheer brilliance of a sustained, resilient, inventive, incredibly knowledgeable, sharp and generous creativity. The dialectic of mournfulness and the relentless refusal to be effaced arises from her work's affective attunement to the human – to thinking, feeling, making, doing; to being ever-vulnerable and always resisting – dimensions of the places, stories and histories of Black experience. Even this journey to see *Cotton.com* has revealed the aesthetic and historical complexity this artist creates, work by work, making space and giving voice.

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<sup>1</sup> Except where noted, quotations from Lubaina Himid are taken from my own conversations with the artist August 2016.

<sup>2</sup> Hogarth painted a series of six pictures between 1743–45 titled *Marriage à-la-mode* (A Fashionable Marriage), depicting the upper class during the eighteenth century.

<sup>3</sup> Frantz Fanon, 'The act of Blackness', *Black Skin: White Masks*, [1952] trans Charles Lam Markmann (London: Pluto Press, 1986) p.112

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<sup>4</sup> First installed in Rochdale Art Gallery in 1992 and at the Southbank Centre in London.

<sup>5</sup> It first came to Leeds in 1995, where it was the centerpiece of the first Feminist Arts and Histories Network Conference at the University of Leeds.

<sup>6</sup> Griselda Pollock, 'Back to Africa: From Natal to natal in the locations of Memory', *Journal of Visual Arts Practice*, vol.5, no.1-2, 2006, pp.49–72.

<sup>7</sup> See <http://lubainahimid.uk/portfolio/inside-the-invisible/> (last accessed on 13 December 2016).

<sup>8</sup> *Cotton.com* was commissioned by an academic group of historians of Manchester as part of an interdisciplinary AHRC project on urban history and memory. The CUBE building had been a textile showroom, probably displaying rolls of fabric, hanging in great flows or broken into samples. That memory was invoked in the formation of Himid's installed paintings.

<sup>9</sup> This work has been carefully and deeply studied in terms of its textiles' meanings and its visuality by Claire Pajaczkowska. Alan Rice has written fully on its complex relationship to the political and social history of Manchester, King Cotton and the suffering of the Manchester millworkers during the Cotton Famine. Both offer profound analyses which I will not rehearse here. See C. Pajaczkowska, 'Urban Memory/Suburban Oblivion', in Mark Crinson et al., *Urban Memory: History and Amnesia in the Modern City*, London: Routledge, 2005, pp.23–45; and A. Rice, 'The Cotton that Connects the Cloth that Binds: Memorializing Manchester's Civil War from Abe's statue to Lubaina Himid's Cotton.com', in *Creating Memorials, Building Identities: The Politics of Memory in the Black Atlantic*, Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2010, pp.81–101.