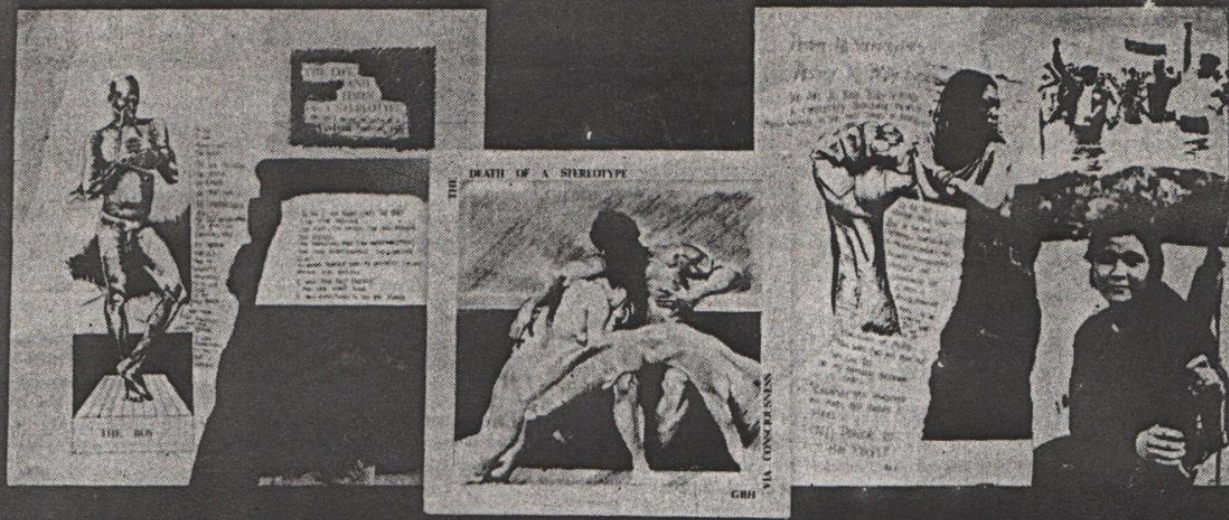




Keith Piper's 'Death Of A Stereotype'.

Paint It Black

Politics and art, like politics and sport, is an unpopular mix in this country. The implication is that artists have their minds on higher things than jobs, housing, self-respect. Black artists in Britain think it's time for change, as **RASHEED ARAEEN** reports.

'Britain is not South Africa or Nazi Germany, whatever some of the artists represented here may believe. They should be thankful that it is not.'

'Art is inspired by love. Propaganda is fired by hate. Choose.'

These two remarks come from an unusually animated visitors' book to a recent exhibition of the work of five black artists. The artists were born in Britain, but describe themselves as descendants 'from Africans dispersed during the Atlantic Slave Trade'. The remarks could be seen as just two people's personal opinions. But they represent a kind of complacency (both towards what happens in this society, and towards art) already anticipated by the artists: They say: 'We feel for our brothers and sisters throughout the world who are victims of racial injustice. "Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere"—Martin Luther King... In developing our sense of "some bodiness", we are trying to avoid blind mimicry. We are trying to recreate and develop our humanity.' The artists were Eddie A Chambers, Dominic Dawes, Claudette Johnson, Wenda Leslie and Keith Piper.

Take a work by Eddie Chambers. It comprises four collage sequences in which Union Jack is seen as Swastika. But this vision is not consolidated or presented as an affront to anybody, but reflects a fear that is transformed into a hope by a radical action. As one's eyes move from one sequence to another, more and more

cracks appear in the unified Union Jack/Swastika image, till finally the whole thing falls into small pieces. This may look like propaganda to people like Mrs Thatcher who apparently thinks that British people are 'still the same people who had built an Empire, and ruled a quarter of the world' (*Guardian*, July 5 1982). But, then, in that vision there is no equal or dignified place for all the people.

These artists are still in art school. How can they achieve the sense of 'some bodiness' in an educational context dominated by European artists? The stamp is there. The visual quality of the work is no different from what one would see in diploma shows. But there is a difference that separates them significantly from the rest. They use the available knowledge not in order to pay homage to 'their' predecessors or identify with prevailing perceptions, but to challenge what to them has become a 'blind mimicry'. Behind what may appear to be art school exercises, mixed with political slogans, there is evidence of a subtlety with which it attempts to turn the whole prevailing notion of art upside down.

John Berger once wrote about the difficulty of being a good artist in a post-war period, when the humanist values of Europe lay shattered in the rubble of its ruined cities. But the devastation did not stop. It continued somewhere else. And the difficulty of being a good artist is still there, and more so if you are a black person (i.e. Afro/Asian)

living in a white society such as Britain. You not only encounter what goes on every day in a racist society, but your role as an artist is also prescribed and limited. These artists know very well that they will never be accepted as blue-eyed boys of the Bond Street gallery circuit. Can we really forget what we encounter in our daily lives, and then try to make art which has no relation to our own experience? How can we be insensitive to a social environment such as Dominic Dawes points out:

Angry Rhetoric

'In your town and cities, on your subway walls, etc. and just as much in your mind, there is racial abuse: WOGS GO HOME, NF RULES, BLACK BASTARDS, PISS OFF NIGGERS, etc. But who made us the so-called bastards? Just the National Front? On May 23, Lord Denning, Master of the Rolls, was quoted in the *Observer* as claiming that "black, coloured and brown" people have lower moral standards.

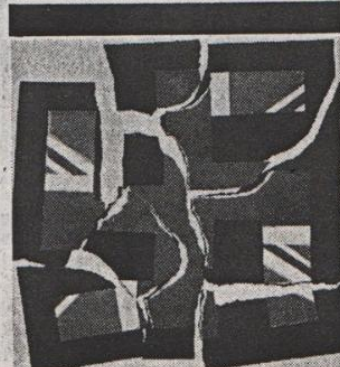
It would be easier if we adopted the standpoint of the two visitors, and didn't look at the work in relation to the culture in which it was produced. We could then look for the 'aesthetic dimension' without

worrying too much about the real world. But even that might not be necessary: after a quick glance the whole thing could be dismissed as just angry rhetoric, without much substance or positive vision. But where would that lead us? To hack criticism. Seriousness of the matter demands we try to penetrate what to me is a rhetorical mask, for the work concerned questions the very foundation on which we normally based our critical judgements.

We are still trapped in the myth of the artist who transcends all hostile social conditions to produce masterpieces, without the sense of belonging to a continuity of history or without a history being sympathetic to one's role as a producer of ideas. Even radical aesthetics often presupposes that there is a history common to all and different people living in the same society. In fact, the language which was developed during the colonial period is still very much with us as part of art criticism. We have not yet developed a radical approach which comes to terms with what McLuhan calls 'a global village' or/and look at the conflicts and tensions of racially heterogeneous societies of postwar period.

If the world has now become one, it is considered to be the West's world, and therefore its dominant perspective remains Eurocentric. There is no significant place in it for anybody other than European people, for it ignores the fact that African and Asian people now form an essential part of postwar Europe. This attitude is not though new: non-European peoples have been treated in a similar—if not more brutal—manner for centuries in the new world. Multiracialism is seen merely as an aberration to be put up with or is dismissed as marginal to the main struggle.

The position of black people can't be seen purely from the point of view of class analysis. There are ideas, values and attitudes which are inher-



Eddie Chambers' 'Destruction of the NF'.

general make-up of this which often escape question- en by those on the left. The gle for a more equal society t remove this stumbling block out the critical perspective- of red by black radical self- awareness.

This white society in fact remains stubborn in its attitude, rejecting any idea that its Afro/Asian minority does actually have an important contribution to make to its humanising process.

Black woman living in a white society such as ours is doubly vulnerable. She stands opposite and exposed to what represents power and authority: white male. Claudette Johnson expresses this anxiety: 'My work is about the conflict and growth that has been the experience of the African woman born and raised in the West... It attempts to express the myriad aspects of oppression, racist and sexist, that have shaped us. It deals not with specific events but with our responses: anger, frustration, fear and depression... It charts the move towards relating to one another that we have devised for our survival...'

The issue here is not of alienation, as we understand it in the Western context. The alienation of a white person vis-à-vis contemporary Western culture may create similar psychological conditions or symptoms, but then there is no rupture between the individual and his/her own history. The rootlessness of a black person on European soil creates an entirely different condition, which is like being in a total void, cultural and historical. You are inside a space and the space is inside you, but without any mutual recognition.

This rootlessness has positive as well as negative aspects. Outside the culture, you are at the same time part of it. This gives you a broader perspective, beyond parochial and national interests. You become international. Alternately, you can escape into the nostalgia of your own past or far-away culture; which would amount to your shutting your eyes to reality.

To Belong, Or Not?

It is this dilemma of belonging and not belonging to the same reality to which these artists address themselves, not through a mythical level or some phoney spiritual stance but with an awareness of their place and responsibility in the present world. They know that our present predicament is not the result of a natural process. It is a dire consequence of a global economic and cultural system commonly called Western civilisation.

Kenneth Courtts-Smith, an English critic and historian: 'the Fine Arts have, historically, fallen victim to a myth concerning the absolute and metaphysical nature of its activity, as a result of which its actions and its products have been used to justify not merely a criminal structure of social relations but also the world-wide edifice of imperialism upon which this structure still depends.'

What we see in Britain now is the increasing development of a kind of neo-colonial situation, with all its paraphernalia of Afro-Caribbean and Asian intermediaries and ethnic

/exotic cultural activities.

Loud And Noisy

Liberalism is desperately trying to resolve its dilemma, but without actually shifting its ground. It likes to think that the issue here is that of our culture looking nostalgically back to Africa, Asia or the Caribbean. Unfortunately this view is shared by many black people who find no other way but to accept ethnic categories in order to survive. But these black artists can't be put into ethnic bags. They have the integrity to resist all impositions. They are in fact quite scornful of those who are now going around the establishment's table with ethnic bowls in their hands and LOVE & PEACE on their lips in the hope of getting some crumbs. Art is now being reduced to an instrument of the race-relations industry whereby it is turned into an exotic entertainment for the sake of phoney racial harmony.

The seriousness with which these artists take their role deserves our utmost admiration. There is an acute sense of purpose generally lacking in the professional art world. It is significant that they are not worried about individual styles—although each one shows a distinct personality in the work. They use all kinds of material—paper collage, paint, photographs, plaster, images and words, either used individually or juxtaposed, in a genuine spirit of experimentation, exploration and reflection. The present result may be crude and rough, and even hybrid, but that is not important at the moment. What is really significant is the presence of tremendous energy, the sense of full commitment and definite direction which, it is hoped, will in time develop into a more significant visual articulation.

The work may be loud and noisy. But, then, it is partly deliberate: the attempt is to express anger and frustration. The situation is such that any sensitive human being would be angry. The furiousness is about the world in which hypocrisy, smugness, cynicism, self-exaltation, self-righteousness have become norms. While I'm writing this more than ten thousand men, women and children have been brutally massacred within a week in Lebanon. Where is the conscience of the civilised world? Why so much helplessness?... Are we to believe that there is no relationship between Apartheid and racism in the West? When South African troops kill and plunder in Namibia, when white soldiers rape young black women in front of their captured men, what do we do in the West? Is it difficult to believe that the daily suffering of millions of people in Southern Africa is being perpetrated not without the help of those who would send almost a full naval force to 'liberate' two thousand people?

The work of these young black artists represents not only an authentic black voice, but it is also a voice of humanity that refuses to be brutalised and insensitised. No masterpieces are being offered here, since conditions to make masterpieces do not exist. What is being expressed is more important and urgent. It is a critical consciousness, if not conscience, of our time. And we ought to pay a serious attention to it.

LETTERS

Send your letters for publication to Letters, City Limits, 313-314 Upper St, London N1 2XQ. Please enclose your name and address and keep them short. All letters are edited. Whether published or not, all complaints/compliments are passed to the relevant section.

THE CORRECT LINE...

Several contributors to the Letters column (eg CL43) have mentioned the 'macho' nature of your layout. Heavy black lines, 'aggressive' cover etc. As a woman I'm troubled (and haven't I enough troubles already?). Why are heavy black lines 'macho'? Is a thin line an anti-sexist line? (what?). Is black synonymous with repression? (what??). I find the layout helps me read the bits in between like the articles. And I don't find red stars on the front cover oppress me. My God, if that was my only problem! Fewer women read City Limits than men because women are poorer, with less to spend, less social mobility and therefore less use for a magazine concerned with public events and entertainments. As a woman I would like to change this, and could do with some help, but not on 'aesthetic' layout arguments. Jenny Armitage, St Margaret Rd, Twickenham.

JAZZ: MEANING OF

Dave Hill in 'What Do You Think About Art?' (CL43) seems to be frenetically casting around for, and pillaging, all possible (and some impossible) readings of the meaning of jazz, lumping them together and calling them so-called 'new jazz'.

His collection of the 'free jazz' of Rip, Rig and Panic, the authentic Wimpy Bar sound of Vic Godard and the pop sensibility of Design For Living stretches credulity. His attempt to construct a somewhat unwieldy bandwagon, upon which he expects the groups he mentions to ride, is at best naive and at worst follows the music journalist tradition of packaging music for consumption. It is not what is hoped for from a 'critical' journal like CL. Eileen O'Grady, Frostic Walk, E1.



Vic Godard: square singer in a round bun?

The Music Section: Dave Hill is on holiday but we can point out that his piece clearly offered nothing more than a loosely chronological collation of events which have undeniably changed the young listener's and concertgoer's scene in London. Opinion in the section differs over whether this outburst of allusions to jazz constitutes or doesn't constitute

'more than just a numbskull tribal revival', as Hill contended. But it is you who have here disposed of musicians ('the authentic Wimpy Bar sound of Vic Godard') in a neat lump rather than interview them and explain the feelings their work evokes in you, as Hill did.

SLINGS AND ARROWS

Reviewing 'Writer Inc' (Theatre: New Reviews, CL43) Julia Pascal wrote: '... In a time of high unemployment, racial discrimination and post-war fever it is extraordinary that this group should ignore major political issues in order to focus on stereotypes of homosexuals and working class women and men.'

Her assumption that all revue should be political is ludicrous, but her attack on the show as racist and sexist is far more damaging. During the course of the show we make no reference to, or representation of, any homosexuals, let alone stereotyped homosexuals. By the same token the one and only sketch which deals deliberately with stereotyped working class women and men is a parody of the song 'Rabbit, Rabbit, Rabbit' from the beer advertisement. Since the original uses the stereotype as the basis for the conflict in the song, it is reasonable that we should adopt a similar format. What then is the justification for Julia Pascal's blanket criticism? Unless, of course, she sees a future for herself as a professional comedy writer, and seeks to provide us with material for a sketch we have yet to write about stereotype fringe reviews. We look forward to more of Pascal's Pensées. Jamie Rix (for Writers Inc.), Sistova Rd, SW12.

Julia Pascal: All art is political—whether Mr Rix finds it ludicrous or not. And stereotyped representations of the working class endorse political attitudes of those who watch—consciously or unconsciously. To claim that presentation of 'a stereotype of a stereotype' is 'reasonable' is rather a dangerous argument. Does this mean then that a production of The Black and White Minstrels is 'reasonable'?

LATE STARTER...

Steve Pinder (Books, CL40) is wrong to describe 'Little Big' as John Crowley's 'much-hyped first novel'. It is his fourth, following 'The Deep', 'Beasts' and 'Engine Summer', all of which were very good. John Crowley is one of the better new American science fiction writers, and deserves better than Pinder's uninformed and dismissive treatment. My earnest recommendation is to read Crowley and not be put off by Pinder. Chris Price, Knapp Rd, E3.

GOING WIGGY

Hello and thank you for the witty prominence you give (CL42) to the clearing of my name with regard to the excellent Piccoli's ~~cock~~ ^{cock} ~~to~~ ^{to} ~~shown~~ ^{shown} to me today, and much appreciated. It would be a sad day for Thespis if word got about that bald foreign actors were now into filching each other's ~~trugs~~ ^{trugs} ~~not that~~ ^{not that} I have one... Best wishes, Vernon Dobtcheff, Hotel de la Ville, Rome.

In response to 'ethnic art'

In this article written six years back, and unpublished, yet still relevant in response to a report on ethnic arts in Britain RASHEED ARAEEN exposing the concept of ethnic art asserts that it is a white liberal bid to keep coloured people's position marginal in society; whereas 'black' art should be judged according to its actual standards and as a component of mainstream art.

One cannot perhaps deny Naseem Khan's report some usefulness regarding its various information and recommendations vis-a-vis some cultural and educational needs of what she calls 'ethnic minorities' in Britain. But seen from a different angle, which in my view is extremely important in the understanding of the actual issue, it is grossly simplistic and misleading. The very use of the word 'ethnic' to define black people (by which I mean people of Afro-Asian origins living in Britain) and thus their creative potential in the field of art and culture is alarming, if we are to take the meaning of this word seriously rather than using it as a convenient liberalist ploy.

Considering visual arts in Britain, which is my main concern here, and the actual contribution made by black artists in this field, the report is nothing but a document of inexcusable ignorance and misrepresentation. It seems that it has not even bothered to look at the actual situation, let alone evaluate it. Whatever the reasons for this disregard for reality, though understandable within the report's overall perspective, it is going to create a great confusion as far as the actual issue is concerned. But what actually the report has missed or deliberately ignored is the picture that would have clearly shown that the line which supposedly separates the art activity of black people from the mainstream is not the line actually drawn by its practitioners themselves.

Why then this emphasis on something which does not exist? Why these ethnic divisions? It is my purpose here to show that this report could divert our attention from the real issue black people are facing in this country.

Presumptions have obviously played an important part in the way the report has perceived the whole thing. The perspective through which no art activity by black people is seen to be possible, even for the present moment in time, outside the boundaries of their own cultural traditions is based solely on an assumption, the full meaning of which can only be grasped within the context of the prevailing attitude of this society towards its non-white population. The question here is not only of the presence



of foreign cultures here, although they do present some problems, and their potential role in the society. It has much to do with the question of recognition of those who are involved in the production of art and have actually produced something significant, irrespective of their cultural or racial backgrounds. And, therefore, the argument of multiculturalism, and thus to allocate specific cultural roles to those whose very equal status the society is reluctant to recognise, looks very dubious.

It should make no difference whether this represents Khan's own view or not. The fact remains that what she is presenting here is no more than the perspective of (white) liberalism, which by its own inherent characteristics is paternalistic: even when it is genuinely sympathetic to the predicament of others, it does not and cannot comprehend its underlying causes. It cannot therefore be an instrument of any real change. It can though indulge in a cosmetic exercise or create diversions. It is no wonder that the report has ended up by defining black people in terms of their differences in cultural terms, thus classifying and pigeonholing them, and then entitling them for some recognition within specified cultural limits.

Presumptions cannot contribute towards mutual discovery and understanding. The view that all black people must necessarily be active artistically only at a level different from and by implication below the mainstream, is in fact the prevailing predominant view of this (white) society. But if we ourselves also accept this view, which some of us may do so for some innocent or ulterior motives, this would further harm our position in this society, irrespective of whether we are artists, musicians, poets, actors, etc.

In view of the fact that our cultural traditions are now being seen and offered

to us as the limits of our artistic potential, it is imperative that we ourselves do not lose the true focus of our reality. In other words, we must not do anything to change this focus in order to accommodate those who do not wish to see beyond their limited and deformed vision. What is actually being offered here is not a true picture of our 'actual and potential contribution to contemporary British culture', but merely a reflection of those who would like us to develop our artistic ability in some predetermined specific way so that it will fulfill their own expectations of us, and for which they would be prepared to offer us some crumbs.

Before I go further to put this report in its right perspective and deal briefly with its various implications by showing how and where it has gone wrong, it would be important to remember that this report has come out at a time when the (white) establishment is looking for a solution to what it calls the 'black problem'. This has now been turned into the problem of so-called ethnic cultures in Britain. Not a strange coincidence!

The so-called 'black problem' is being further confused here (and we must not forget that the establishment is notorious in creating confusions) by the inclusion in the report of some European minorities and treating their situation in exactly the same way as that of black people. However, the nature of the problem some European minorities face here in this predominantly Anglo-Saxon society is very different.

The question is not entirely of cultural differences, but of the different ways the people of different races are seen in their creative abilities.

If it were a question of the situation of foreign workers in Germany or in some other European country where European as well as Afro-Asian people work side by side as 'migrant labour', then to treat them separately at different levels according to their differences in the European and non-European racial origins would perhaps be wrong. The Greeks, Turks, as well as people from North Africa, are more or less treated in a similar way. As John Berger has shown in *A Seventh man*, they all have become what Western capitalism has turned them into: 'niggers of Europe'.

The situation in Britain is very different in the sense that the problems which the Poles, Greeks and Ukrainians face, whether they are social, economic, cultural or artistic, are not necessarily the same as those of black people. It is therefore, important, while recognising the specific nature of the cultural problems of European minorities, to highlight this difference instead of sweeping it under a carpet of ethnic variety.

What really separates us black people from the Poles, Greeks or Ukrainians, is not and should not be the 'ethnic' or racial differences. The difference is however there; and it is due to the difference between our and their relationship with the so-called host population. It is this difference which actually underlines our position in this society, and thus our creative potential as artists or whatever we do.

While the Poles, Greeks or Ukrainians have their own problems regarding their own cultures and their efforts to preserve the essentials of their cultural heritage in an Anglo-saxon society, they are not necessarily barred from entering into the mainstream.

In other words, there is nothing visible or invisible which should prevent them from becoming an integral part of British society (except for obvious difficulties one would face in a new country) and receiving due recognition for their contributions to British art and culture. Can we say the same thing regarding Asian, African or the Caribbean people in Britain?

The question here therefore should not be one of 'ethnicity' since one's creative ability is not necessarily determined by the cultural knowledge or tradition of one particular country or the country of one's origin. How do we then really deal with the specific situation of black people in Britain? Shall we go along with the report and accept its view? That is, accept its erroneous and dangerous view that somehow the sensibility in the art activity of black people is inherently related to their 'ethnicity' and is necessarily different from the alien to the mainstream.

Perpetuating ignorance

Is it not a well-known historical fact that without the availability of knowledge in Europe of the art and culture of the non-European world, the development of European art in the 20th Century would have perhaps taken a different course? In other words, Western art, of which British mainstream is a part, is no longer ethnocentric. It has in its modern development appropriated and absorbed

the ideas and sensibilities from non-European cultures. In turn this modern development in the West had enormous influence, though not always a healthy one, on the development of contemporary art in Asia, Africa and the Caribbean. Consequently, we cannot today define most of the art produced by black artists in Britain, or for that matter in what is called the Third World, in terms of ethnic categories.

It can in fact be categorically stated in all seriousness that there is no such thing as 'ethnic arts'. What is being presented here is no more than the figment of a muddled imagination. Or perhaps an attempt to keep black people in their place, by institutionalising their present position in British society. It is paradoxical that a report which was meant to investigate the prevailing ignorance about the actual contribution of black people to the contemporary British culture should itself end up perpetuating that very ignorance.

The actual picture is really very different from what Naseem Khan has tried to paint. The picture is either of a successful synthesis or an attempt to come to terms with the dominant mainstream. It contains the subjective black experience in the white society, the 'inherited' sensibility of the artist, and more significantly it shows consciousness with which it attempts to challenge the status quo. The real issue here, therefore, is not that of official disregard or lack of understanding for certain art because of its 'ethnic nature', but a consistent refusal by the mainstream to accept among its ranks the presence of black artists. In other words, it is more to do with the establishment's rejection of the full creative potential of

black people to participate in art activity at all levels. There would in fact not be many problems if we accepted the so-called ethnic categories, as proposed by the report, as the limitations on our creative potential and did not endeavour to tread beyond the exotic to reflect upon the society/world at large.

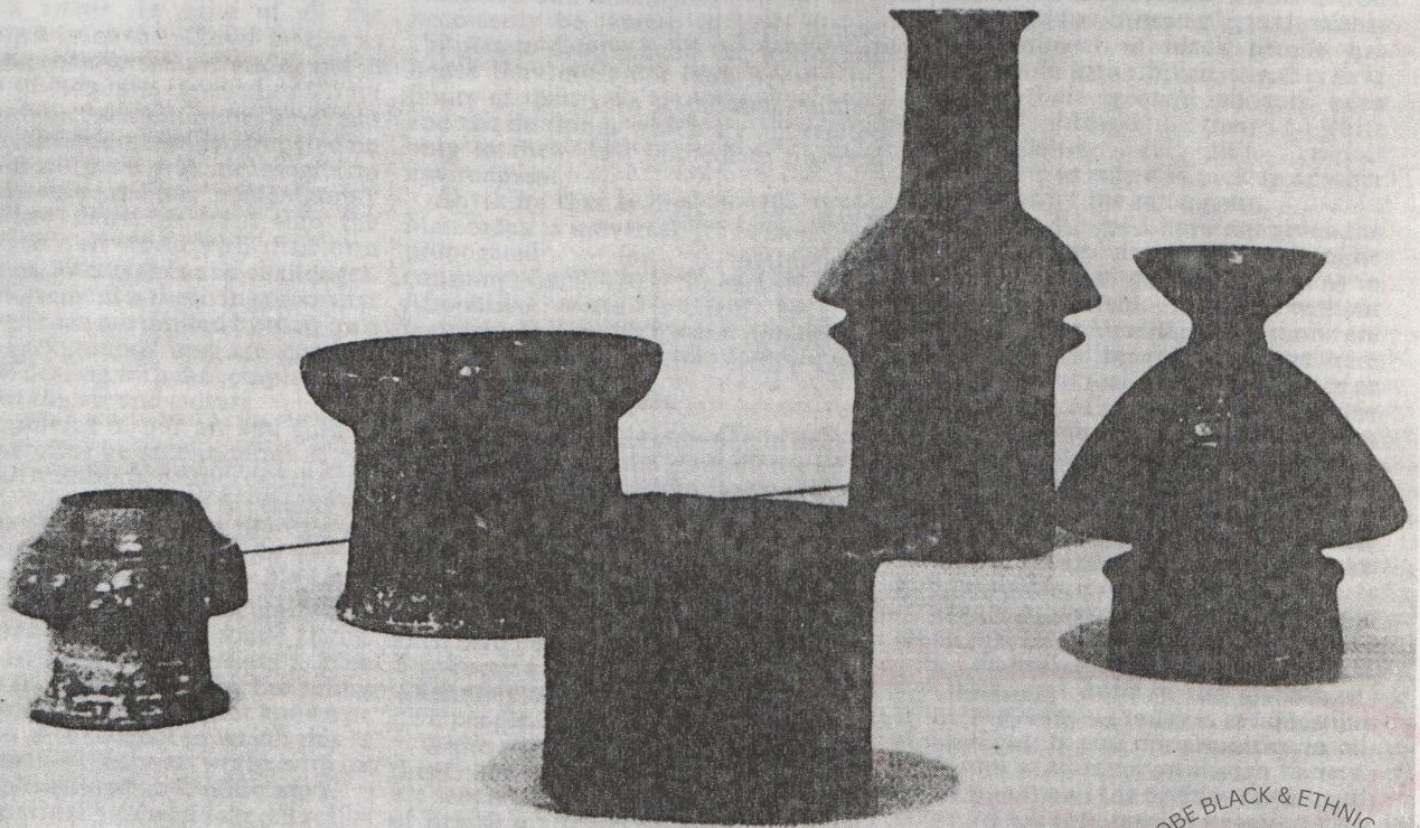
It may be said here that my criticism is misplaced. The present investigation is not really concerned with anything other than the traditional arts of the various minorities in Britain. If this is true, then it has not made it clear. It has though clarified the exclusion of Jewish people from the consideration of the report on the ground that 'Jewish sensibilities have been drawn into the mainstream of art'.

If it were really the question of different sensibilities, whether they have been drawn into the mainstream or not, then the report should never have been sponsored or written.

It would perhaps be useful, therefore, to quote here what the sponsors themselves have to say in this regard, as printed inside the cover of the report: 'Migration into Britain has introduced cultures new to our society, but we have paid little attention to the contribution they are making to our artistic life: because of this we asked Naseem Khan to investigate the actual and potential contribution of ethnic minorities to contemporary British culture'.

What a confession of guilt and innocence! The Establishment is very good at shedding crocodile tears. However, the point here is that the words used above are 'actual' and 'potential', not ethnic or traditional, as far as art and culture is concerned. Why then this total emphasis on 'ethnic' or 'traditional'.

The reason for this is not difficult to



Group of Ceramic Pots by M.A. Abdalla

Understand, the actuality poses an irresolvable difficulty, since the ideology behind 'ethnic arts', or the concept of Afro-Asian people are nothing but merely the manifestations of their own traditions, will not hold together if the reality is allowed to enter into it. The purpose of the specific image being projected here to serve that dominant ideology, since it denies people the right to develop their own options in the contemporary world.

Nobody is denying here that there does not exist community-based cultural activities which are traditional and which clearly display sensibilities and values different from those indigenous British; and I believe they should be recognised and supported. But to base the development of a multi-racial culture only on this difference does not 'look right', particularly when there is evidence that this difference has not been fundamental to professional art practice vis a vis black people.

The concept of separate 'ethnic arts' can therefore only serve one purpose. Beside providing the white society with an exotic entertainment, it is imposing a specific cultural role upon the black community, the result of which could limit its ability to express its reality in the contemporary context. Moreover, it could also help cover up the past ignorance by the art establishment of what I consider to be an important work but which could not be defined or categorised ethnically.

This is particularly the case in the field of visual arts. It has not been an easy time for black artists. In spite of all the indifference from the official bodies as well as the commercial art world, and in defiance of common expectations from them to produce something exotic or/and mediocre, they persistently struggled on and produced what was meaningful to their existence in the contemporary world. They dared to tread into the contemporary art world with their own perceptions, alternatives and challenges. Their achievement is the living proof that black people are not limited by their own cultural backgrounds and are not less capable of dealing with the complexity of modern world, art and culture.

The problems of our art and culture cannot therefore be seen in terms of our Afro-Asian traditions, neither can they be dealt with in isolation from the reality we encounter in our everyday life. We all know about racial discrimination, and we know that this is acute in the field that requires mental activity, particularly that which gives one a higher social status. That we live in a racist society is now generally recognised even by the ruling establishment. But what is not known or recognised is the extent to which this is institutionalised in the art world, with its highly sophisticated and subtle ways.

The doors of the art world are not really open to black people as they are to European minorities. It would therefore be more important to look at the actual world in which we live today rather than what we have left behind. It is the world which is conceived and dominated by the West; it is the world which is divided, into rich and poor, into developed and underdeveloped, into civilised and

primitive, into universal and ethnic etc., etc.,... It is the world which belongs to the West, and the rest must necessarily be content with what is sanctioned by the West... It is the world in which white people have all the rights. They can explore any part of the world and live wherever they please; they can engage themselves in any activity and at any level, whether it has to do with a small



community or the world at large. But black people (here I'm using the word 'black' in a broader sense to represent all colonised and dominated people) must necessarily be limited in their mental abilities to comprehend the world, and hence they must not look beyond the limits of their own traditional cultures and not do things which are not related only to their own immediate physical environment.

Anything that is done by the White Man today is universal. It is extensively propagated for international consumption. While at the same time the Afro-Asian world is held back to maintain the unchallenged domination and supremacy of Western civilisation.

Degrading roles

Now let us look at the situation in Britain. While white actors are given all the roles, from top to bottom, even those of black people, a black actor cannot get the part unless there are specific roles stereotyping blacks as bus-conductors, waiters, sweepers, nurses, happy-go-lucky niggers, criminals, exploiters of their own people etc. etc. In other words black actors are considered suitable only when they can be used to degrade their own people.

White painters and sculptors (among them many third-rate mediocres) are sent around the world to keep the flag of British art achievement flying, black artists, no matter what they have achieved in their work and no matter how important they are historically, cannot even get into mixed shows here in Britain.

There is no harm in looking into our Afro-Asian traditions. But at the same time we cannot afford to ignore, given the nature of this society today, the actual perspective in which we are thus being

placed. Why are we really being looked at ethnically, instead of being judged according to our actual abilities and contributions? To imply or accept that black people have not yet produced anything worthwhile or outstanding outside their traditional cultures or which is related to the mainstream, is to perpetuate not only prevailing ignorance but our present status in this society, which in fact is defined in such a way as to preserve the myth of white superiority.

The work of black artists is not really unknown to the art establishment, and yet no attention is paid to its importance. Is it because the art establishment is run by incompetent philistine bureaucrats? Not wholly so. Why then are black artists ignored, so much so that they are excluded from all levels of British art world, from art shows, art discussions, art, history, and the art education systems etc. etc.? The reason for this can only be that it has not been in the interest of the art world to come to terms with what it could offer a challenge to its values, attitudes and prejudices. As a result, black artists have remained invisible, or on the margins of society. And now we are being asked to accept this under the guise of multiculturalism.

If I seem to be particularly concerned about the predicament of black artists, it is not because I consider the question of visual arts more important than other fields of human expression. It is only because, first of all, visual arts have been particularly ignored and, secondly, I know this field well.

And therefore I have been able to deal with this field as an example, to show that the art activity of black people has nothing to do with ethnicity; neither have they, in their creative pursuits been trailing behind their white contemporaries. In this respect somebody else may also pick up another area and prove the same point.

However, I hope I have not given the impression that I'm trying to undermine the importance of cultural traditions in one's development. It goes without saying that our Afro/Asian traditions are part of our existence. The issue here therefore is not really of the ignorance or preservations of these traditions in this country but of the level we manifest them at. A deliberate revival of the past, as a manifestation of nostalgia, or for the sake of preserving old traditions, or for providing an exotic colour to the present society, can only distract us away from the present reality.

What is at stake here, therefore, is not really our Afro/Asian traditional cultures. They can be better looked after in Africa and Asia, and even in the Caribbean. What we are facing today is the question of equal rights and opportunities in all fields and at all levels of British society. We must have all the options open to us. There must be a recognition that it is also our right to look at this society in whatever way we choose to look at it. Only then can we be expected to contribute creatively to this society's cultural life.

The Arts Britain ignores Naseem Khan, sponsored by Arts Council of Great Britain, Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation and Community Relations Commission, 1976. 1-1986

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