

## Soulscapes: diasporic & emotional connections to landscape

Several exhibitions across London are currently exploring issues around colonial history in relation to art collections, activism & Black British histories, with the Dulwich Picture Gallery presenting *Soulscapes*, a study of Black Britishness & landscape art. Jelena Sofronjevic visited to find connections between it & all the other visual art areas of research going on at the moment.

A clear horizon line runs along the walls of *Soulscapes*, connecting works around belonging, memory, joy, and transformation, in the context of South London's Dulwich Picture Gallery. Guest curated by Lisa Anderson, director of London's Black Cultural Archives and founder of Black British Art, gathers around thirty contemporary Black artists whose practice relates to landscape, all working within the *African Diaspora* – a tellingly singular choice of words. But within these works we find many different layers of experience and common ground between plural, global diasporic communities.

It commences with Mónica de Miranda's fragmented *Sun Rise*, from *The Sun Does Not Rise in the North* (2023) and another work by the artist, who is deservedly well-represented. As with her multimedia project, *The Island* (2022) – most recently on view at *RE/SISTERS* at the Barbican (see 00150) – de Miranda deftly plays with form. In this panorama, divided into three, she also features three individuals, but stands them together in solidarity, in the central panel. A human, anti-triptych of the politics of migration, it also speaks to the concept of borders, particularly between the land and sea, and her heritages from Portugal and Angola.



The curation hints at connections between landscapes and artists. De Miranda's neighbouring rendering of the Floresta da Ilha (Island Forest) in Luanda sits in conversation with Hurvin Anderson's *Limestone Wall* (2020), a large-scale painting which depicts the tropical foliage of Jamaica, and his own relationship to his ancestral homeland. Born and first practicing in Birmingham – a city whose barbershops remain an ongoing source of inspiration to the artist (see 00107) – Anderson's studio is based in southern England, though this was one of many local links brushed over in the main gallery space, along with the fact that Anderson undertook a residency at the Dulwich Picture Gallery in 2006 and, like many of the artists here, concurrently has work on display at the National Portrait Gallery's *The Time is Always Now*.

Visual similarities between the works of Hurvin Anderson and de Miranda make for fruitful conversation between two artists for whom the ongoing return to ideas, and relationality, matters. "I wish we *were* related," remarks curator Lisa Anderson, in response to a question about her and Hurvin's shared last name, a reminder that this exhibition is guided by her personal and aesthetic preferences.

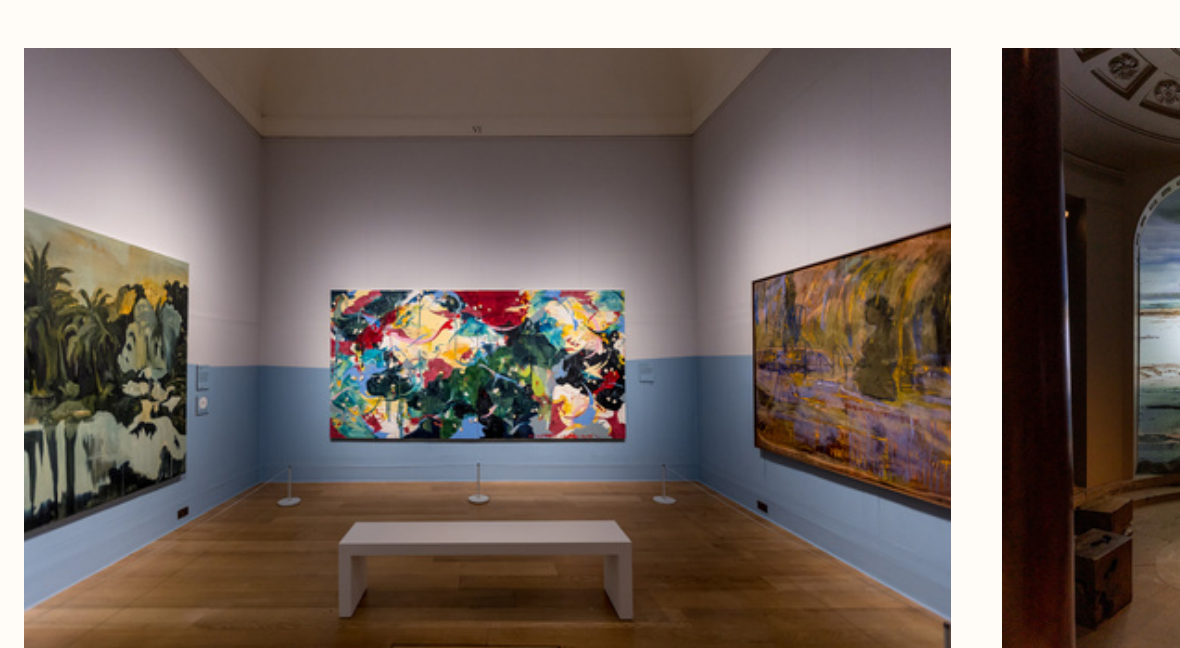
The working title of *Soulscapes* was *Body and Landscape*, and whilst the exhibition leans towards figuration, Lisa Anderson soon realised that all the artists were interrogating more spiritual and emotional, rather than physical, connections with land. She claims the premise of landscape art was a *trick or foil* to attract Dulwich's regular audience, and to push an imagination beyond the conventions of landscape painting.



The landscape works are placed in dialogue with the permanent collection from the very start – the gallery's open, arched doorways allow a clear line of vision between the Dutch and Old Masters paintings with these contemporary artists, many of whom reference the art historical traditions on display. Isaac Julien's *Onyx Cave (Stones Against Diamonds)* (2015) considers the sublime in Iceland, a small still image from a typically grand installation that again invites connections beyond Dulwich, recalling Kehinde Wiley's dramatic six-channel film *The Prelude* (2021), staged in the round at the National Gallery in London over 2021 and 2022.

Others, like Sikeleka Owen's *The Knitter* (2018) directly reference the influence of artists as Thomas Gainsborough, nearby in the permanent collection. Lisa Anderson also acknowledges the ubiquity of 18th century landscape paintings in her own family home whilst growing up, though doesn't interrogate this line of thoughts – as a whole. *Soulscapes* is less a radical intervention and more of a conversation with the dominant, often romanticised, historical and visual narratives on permanent display.

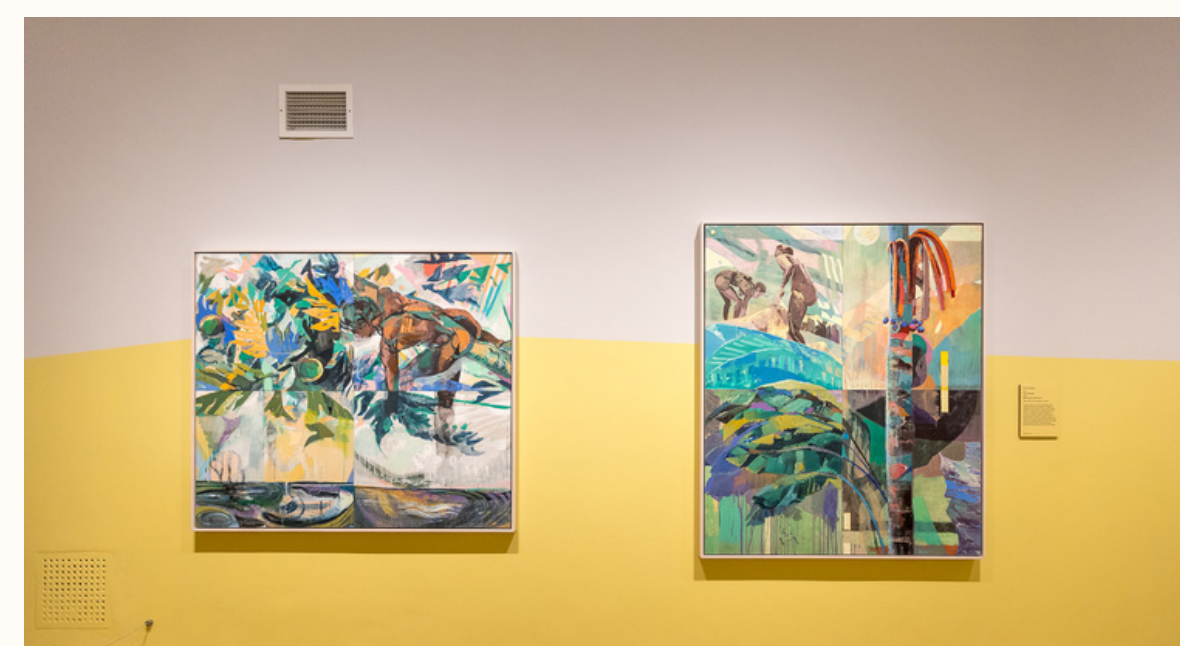
Certain works disrupt that through line. In *A Pleasant Land. J. Samuel Johnson, & the Spectre of Unrecognised Black Figures* (2023), Jermaine Francis draws on archive photographs from Pembroke College in Cambridge, highlighting the titular figure's ambiguous status as both an opponent of slavery and representative of the English Establishment in the 18th century. Francis intervenes, glitching and collaging these images with visions of modern *hoodies*, a comment on the picturesque and presence of contemporary Black figures in English landscapes. Overlaps can be found with the practice of photographer Ingrid Pollard (see 00042), as well as EVEWRIGHT, whose *Walking Drawings* series (2012) sit opposite, tracing journeys and travels in the sand of Silcroft Beach in Cumbria.



Those who walk to Dulwich may pass through Brixton where, at 1 Windrush Square, they'll find the Black Cultural Archives [BCA] devoted to the histories of people of African and Caribbean descent in London and Britain. Since (re)opening in 2014, the heritage centre has subtly focussed on women first, beginning with *Re-imagine* (2014) – a landmark exhibition devoted to the likes of Mary Seacole and Olive Morris, the young activist and subject of *Soulscapes* artist Harold Offeh's recent installation at Van Gogh House in Brixton. At Dulwich, he re-presents *Body Landscape Memory. Symphonic Variations on an African Air* (2019), a video performance accompanied by the music of Black British composer Samuel Coleridge-Taylor, displayed in a sculptural context at MK Gallery in 2023.

Indeed, there are numerous elements of *Soulscapes* which particularly speak to a local context, but any question of *belonging* with respect to Dulwich Picture Gallery and its surrounding communities is overlooked, which might limit its appeal for less-regular visitors from the local area. Lisa Anderson is no doubt aware of these connections, but stays independent, and withholds them from the main curation. Previous exhibitions at the BCA have focussed on Olaudah Equiano, Haiti Selassie, and the Rastafarian Movement, Black British histories which continue to be interrogated in exhibitions like the current *Entangled Pasts* at the Royal Academy, with some projects comprising direct archival interventions in the likes of the V&A. Indeed, Che Lovelace, another *Soulscapes* artist, has recently been commissioned by St James's Church in Piccadilly to paint a series of murals marking the 250th anniversary of the baptism of Quobna Ottobah Cigoana, intersecting his own Trinidadian heritage with that of the 18th century abolitionist, trafficked from West Africa to Grenada and England. Dulwich does add a new commission by Michaela Yearwood-Dan, but it feels additional, rather than foundational or enduring, unlike recent Dulwich projects by Sinta Tantra and Sara Shamma on concurrent display.

Implicit in this exhibition is the unique position of diaspora artists, and power to speak to shared histories. Alberta Whittle's porthole like works, referred to by the artist as "Caribbean gothic" are carnivalesque roundels of acrylic and raffia, acting as windows into the transatlantic slave trade and colonialisms impact on land and collective memory in both Scotland and Barbados. Nairobi-born and London-based Phoebe Boswell's *I Dream of a Home I Cannot Know* (2019) is a meditative video work created over the course of six years that documents daily life in Zanzibar.



Water runs throughout many of the works, whilst others expand the idea of natural landscapes to include cultural ones. Njideka Akunyili Crosby's lush multimedia piece, *Cassava Garden* (2015), is a collage that layers images from fashion magazines, pictures of Nigerian pop stars, and samplings from family photo albums, representing the artist's hybrid cultural identity.

Many artists incorporate natural media, including fabrics and textiles to explore the materiality of memory. Nengi Omuku's *Star Gazers* (2017) is a work in found sanyan, a tightly-woven silk-moth fabric crafted by Yoruba people in Nigeria. With a recent wave of shows with Kristin Hjellegjerde and Pippy Houldsworth, Omuku also recently exhibited concurrently with Hurvin Anderson at Hastings Contemporary, her first major UK solo exhibition. Using lubugo bark cloth, Michael Armitage reconstructs an anthill embedded with the faces of women, in a work which draws on Tanzanian myths of witchcraft. In Kimathi Mafafo's *Unforeseen Journey of Self-Discovery* (2020), a woman emerges from a cocooned veil of white muslin, finding her way into the vibrant healing space of the natural world. For five years Lisa Anderson used an image of this work as her screensaver, its themes of renewal and rebirth a reminder of this exhibition's inception during the COVID pandemic.

As millions shared the experience of Black Lives lockdown, the state of racial inequality made clear in the wake of George Floyd's murder, and the resurgence of the Black Lives Matter movement, also reignited questions of social justice. In this context, the closing rooms of *Soulscapes* consider Black Joy, a term which Lisa Anderson acknowledges has contested, plural understandings and receptions amongst Black communities. Her intent is to show how landscape and art can serve as a source of respite, as well as resistance – she herself has been "activated" by nature from a young age.



This ambiguity is central to Kimathi Donkor's leisurely *Idyll* series (2020), which indulges in the pleasure of public, green spaces in and of themselves, and claims such spaces for Black communities often "excluded, silenced or classed as victims" from them. Curating them in the latter context could simply reinforce the politicisation of the landscape, a double marginalisation. But as Bolanle Tajudeen of Black Blossoms suggested in a recent Tate Modern talk, their reception exposes how pervasive such stereotypical representations are. "It feels like something bad is about to happen," a nearby visitor remarked while looking at Donkor's series, suggesting how Black people and bodies are scarcely permitted to be left to be.

From here, it concludes too quickly, with works of the boldest colour addressing some of the darkest pasts. It's a fitting end for an exhibition which treads lightly towards subversion within the curatorial limits of Dulwich Picture Gallery.

In both Ravelle Pillay's moody *There is Water At The Bottom of the Ocean* (2023), and Christina Kimeze's *Interior I* (2022), human figures blend into the background, challenging the binary of private and public spaces, and the visibility of Black people and experiences in them. *Soulscapes* may tiptoe into these discussions but for many the potential of these deeper contexts will be missing, and treated as a lighter, surface presentation it might be experienced as something designed to lift Dulwich from a dark and rainy winter through colour & vitality. Some sublime works aside, this is a landscape show, but not a landmark show.

Jelena Sofronjevic is an audio producer & freelance journalist who creates content at the intersections of cultural and political history. They are the producer of *EMPIRE LINES*, a podcast which uncovers the unexpected flows of empires through art, and historicity, a new series of audio walking tours, exploring how cities got to be the way they are.

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Soulscapes is on at Dulwich Picture Gallery until 02 June. More information available at: [www.dulwichpicturegallery.org.uk/whats-on/exhibitions/2024/february/soulscapes](http://www.dulwichpicturegallery.org.uk/whats-on/exhibitions/2024/february/soulscapes)

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