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## ‘I Am Part of the Story of Art’

A pioneer of the Black Arts Movement in Britain, Claudette Johnson now has her first solo show at a major museum in London — steps away from Gauguin.



Claudette Johnson at her studio in London. Ms. Johnson found inspiration in Toni Morrison’s work. “The experiences of the characters spoke directly to me, and I’d never been addressed so directly before.” Anne Tetzlaff, via the artist and Hollybush Gardens, London



By **Farah Nayeri**  
Reporting from London

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“Nevermore” is one of Paul Gauguin’s most celebrated paintings — and a pride of the [Courtauld Gallery](#) in London. A naked young Tahitian woman reclines across the canvas as strange figures lurk in the background.

From now until mid-January, that Gauguin has a new next-door neighbor: the artist Claudette Johnson, who is the guest of the art museum in the grand Somerset House with her show [“Presence.”](#) A pioneer of the Black Arts Movement in Britain, Ms. Johnson creates large, delicately drawn works on paper with pastels and gouache and acrylic paint that have the scale and potency of paintings.

The first works of the 15 in her show are actually a riposte to Gauguin and that other giant of the turn of the 20th century, Pablo Picasso: portraits and self-portraits that show Black women as they are and that reject the sexualized and exoticized images made by white male artists who appropriated Polynesian or African imagery in the process.

Ms. Johnson grew up in Manchester, England, with Jamaican parents, and was noticed at school for her prowess at drawing. She studied fine art at university and, after seeing an exhibition of Black contemporary artists for the first time, became a founding member of the Black Arts Movement in Britain herself — alongside Sonia Boyce, who [won the Golden Lion](#) award for best national participation at the Venice Art Biennale last year.

After a series of shows in the 1980s, she and many other Black British artists were kept out of the spotlight until their re-emergence about a decade ago. Ms. Johnson’s exhibition at the Courtauld is her first solo show at a major museum in London. (Her first solo show in the United States, at Ortuzar Projects in New York, took place in the spring.)

During a recent walk-through of her show at the Courtauld, Ms. Johnson, 64, spoke about Gauguin, her career trajectory and her hopes for the future. The following conversation has been edited and condensed.



“Presence,” a show of Ms. Johnson’s work, on view at the Courtauld Gallery in London. Fergus Carmichael

**How does it feel to have an exhibition at the Courtauld Gallery, steps away from Gauguin?**

It's gratifying, because I feel I am part of the story of art: I'm part of this history. And it's good to know that there will be another story being told about women, Black women, Black people, that counters some of the stories that Gauguin, for example, told. He was working from the perspective of privilege and power, and that inevitably had a kind of diminishing effect on his subjects.

As the exhibition co-curator Dorothy Price said, it's as if Gauguin's figure, the woman in "Nevermore," has found her voice in these works.

**You studied fine art, so you would have studied Gauguin.**

Yes, and of course I loved his work. But in terms of the colonial narrative, he's problematic. Ever since I started looking at the history of art and our absence within it, and what that tells us about whose perspective on the world has been dominant, it creates a very difficult relationship.



"Kind of Blue" (2020), a piece that Ms. Johnson made using gouache and pastel. Via the artist and Hollybush Gardens, London. Photo by Andy Keate

**What were you like as a child? Artistic?**

As a very young girl, I always had my head in a book. My mother would say, “Go out and play!” I was drawing from very early on and enjoying drawing. I had a lot of aspirations for the work. I would be mortified if something didn’t work out, and I couldn’t bear any criticism of it. So sometimes I would make all these drawings and hide them until I was ready to show one — see if anyone liked it.

Drawing very quickly turned into a personal space where I could explore things I probably couldn’t talk about very easily.

**Can you talk about the influence that the Nobel Prize-winning author Toni Morrison had on you early on?**

When I read her first novel, “The Bluest Eye,” those words were very impactful: transformative, really, because she had foregrounded Black people in a way that I hadn’t seen before. I am not American, of course, but the experiences of the characters spoke directly to me, and I’d never been addressed so directly before.

When I went to do my own work, I found myself wanting to bring Black people into the foreground in a way that I hadn’t seen before, and hopefully would speak as directly as she did to me.



“Woman in Black,” 1982. Ms. Johnson’s work was shown often during the early 1980s, including in a show at the Institute of Contemporary Arts in London. via the artist

**Can you discuss the ups and downs in your career?**

In that early, feverish 1980s period, there were a lot of shows very close together, culminating in the “Thin Black Line” exhibition of work by Black women at the Institute of Contemporary Arts in London in 1985. It was held in the corridor spaces, not in one of the main gallery spaces. But when it opened, it seemed as if we had broken through. The ICA was a well-regarded contemporary art space. We thought this was a very important moment.

But as soon as that show ended, the door closed. It was as if the art world was saying: “We’re not interested anymore. We’ve seen it, we’ve given you a bit of space, now go away. You’re not part of this.”

There were many years when I was making very little to no work. It seemed like there was no place for it, so why make more work that wasn’t going out and being seen?

**You use the expression “unbelongingness” to refer to the experience of Black Britons. What do you mean by it?**

I was born in Manchester in an area that had a lot of immigrant communities. Then we moved to a more affluent area. My parents got a lovely house with a big garden. A few weeks after we moved in, on a sunny day when I was skipping up the road as a girl of 8 or 9, a little white boy ran past and spat at me. I knew why: to tell me “I don’t want you here.”

So this “unbelongingness” is one of the earliest feelings I have about being in this country. I was born here, and I feel I belong. But I wasn’t allowed to fully inhabit that feeling.



“Standing Figure with African Masks,” 2018. Ms. Johnson created some of the works in her show at the Courtauld Gallery as a riposte to Gauguin and Picasso. via the artist and Tate, London

**Throughout your career, you have focused a lot on the representation of Black women in art. What was the problem with it?**

The problem was, firstly, that we often weren't represented. And when we were represented, we were minor figures: We were in the background. To use [Manet's "Olympia"](#) as an example, the Black woman who's offering the flowers is there, to my mind, to highlight the whiteness of Olympia herself. She's in the shadows. She's a thing that is either feared or ignored, or both.

**Today, we're in a period of strong visibility for Black artists, on both sides of the Atlantic. Is this a transient moment, or are we here to stay?**

I really hope we're here to stay. There is a cynical part of me that thinks it could all go away again, as it did before. But I think there has been a shift. We're slightly more solidly rooted this time. The visibility of Sonia's Golden Lion win in Venice, and exhibitions of the artists Lubaina Himid at Tate Modern and Isaac Julien at Tate Britain: These things are documented and present in a way that the early shows were not. So I think it's the beginning. But it will take work and commitment for it to be sustained.

**Farah Nayeri** writes on art and culture in Europe. She is the author of "Takedown: Art and Power in the Digital Age." [More about Farah Nayeri](#)