

Claudette Johnson: Drawn Out **March 9–April 22, 2023**

Ortuzar Projects is pleased to present *Claudette Johnson: Drawn Out*, an exhibition of new works by London-based artist Claudette Johnson (b.1959, Manchester, UK). The exhibition is the artist's first solo presentation in the United States.

Since beginning her career in the early 1980s, Johnson has challenged traditional representations of gender and Blackness in Western art history. Johnson's studies of women, and, more recently, men, insist on demanding the acknowledgement of the Black body through often life-sized portraits—a presence that is, in the artist's words, historically “distorted, hidden, and denied.” Often free-floating within fields of flat color or the white of the page, Johnson imbues her figures with power and subjectivity as she invites them to “take up space in a way that is reflective of who they are.”

In this new body of work, Johnson continues her exploration of portraiture. Many of her works are drawn from life, including friends and fellow artists, as well as self portraits of Johnson herself. Photographs and found media inform other works. Through a balance of carefully rendered faces, hands, and clothing, contrasted with sketchier and more gestural mark-making, Johnson's compositions grasp disposition, personality, and mood. Many of Johnson's subjects look directly at the viewer, recreating an intimate encounter with the artist. In a departure from her usual solo portraits, the exhibition includes three double portraits of friends or historical figures. Through the depiction of two friends posing together, Johnson introduces an additional layer of intimacy within the work: the intimacy and vulnerability of sitting for an artist, as well as the intimacy shared between the subjects. The negative space in-between bodies also introduces a new formal dynamic to the work. Johnson intends for her viewers to encounter the sitters on their own terms as strangers, rarely naming them or revealing biographical information. Her interest, to quote the artist, is stimulated by “what the image shows of their relationship rather than their relative celebrity.”

While traditionally working with pastel, watercolor and gouache, Johnson's recent works have increasingly explored oil, oil stick, and egg tempera. This expanded repertoire has allowed Johnson to move fluidly between the acts of drawing and painting, as well as to work her compositions over a longer duration. These new mediums introduce a vibrancy and material density that sits in stark contrast to the fields of unpainted white ground. In the tension of positive and negative space is a sense of incompleteness that recreates the feeling of the live session. In an exploration of vulnerability, comfort, candidness, and ease, Johnson foregrounds the complexity of humanity in any shared encounter, granting her subjects their right to selfhood in the experience of being seen.

Johnson was an early member of the BLK Art Group, an association of young Black artists who examined, through their work, issues of race, gender, and the politics of representation. In an effort to bring young Black artists from Wolverhampton University together, the BLK Art Group organized the historic First National Black Art Convention in 1982, attended by several influential contemporary Black artists like Frank Bowling, Lubiana Himid, Rasheed Araeen, and Sonia Boyce. The lecture that Johnson delivered at the convention on the depiction of Black female figures within Western art history—notably the only presentation by a female artist—erupted into a heated dialogue. The discussion catalyzed the formation of a network of women artists at the forefront of the British Black Art Movement.

Claudette Johnson's recent solo exhibitions include *Still Here*, Hollybush Gardens, London (2021); *Claudette Johnson: I Came to Dance*, Modern Art Oxford (2019); and *Claudette Johnson*, Hollybush Gardens, London, (2017). She has participated in numerous group exhibitions including *Courtauld Connections: Works from our National Partners*, The Courtauld Gallery, London (2022); *Drawing Closer*, RISD Museum, Providence, Rhode Island (2022); *Life Between*

Islands: Caribbean-British Art 50s — Now, Tate Britain, London (2021); *From Hockney to Himid: Sixty Years of British Printmaking*, Pallant House Gallery, Chichester, England (2021); *Close: Drawn Portraits*, The Drawing Room, London, (2018); *The Place is Here*, South London Gallery and Nottingham Contemporary, London (2017); *No Colour Bar: Black British Art in Action 1960–1990*, Guildhall Art Gallery, London (2015–2016); and *Thin Black Line(s)*, Tate Britain, London (2012). Her work is held in numerous public collections, including Tate, British Council Collection, Manchester Art Gallery, and Wolverhampton Art Gallery.