Chris Ofili and the Limits of Hybridity

Aside from a typically cheeky demand to be presented with the cheque up-front, there was little surprise in Chris Ofili’s 1998 Turner Prize victory. His solo exhibition at the Serpentine Gallery, London, had been a huge success, pulling in large crowds and excellent reviews. His lush, psychedelic, highly decorative paintings have been almost universally praised, and his trademark use of dried and coated elephant dung has provided headline writers with a myriad of bad puns. Ofili’s win ought to have pleased those who think the Turner Prize has become a private club, for not only is he the first painter to win for several years, Ofili is the first black British winner, although the Indian-born Anish Kapoor received the prize in 1991. Unlike Kapoor, who went to extreme lengths to play down any connection between his cultural identity and the work he produced, Ofili has made his ethnicity the subject of his work. The elephant dung might be the most celebrated signifier of his cultural background in his work, but it is far from the only one. Almost everything in his paintings, from his use of magazine cut-outs to his more controversial appropriation of the dots used by cave-painters in the Matapos Hills in Zimbabwe, refers back to Ofili’s ethnicity. The exhibition catalogue for his Serpentine show even had an extended glossary at the back explaining such phenomena as hip-hop, the Wu-Tang Clan and the Notting Hill Carnival to those gallery-goers less than familiar with the contemporary black British scene.

From Didacticism to Irony

Ofili’s Turner Prize victory might have seemed inevitable, yet, looked at from another perspective, one might perhaps be able to argue that it

1 For example, Kapoor declined to exhibit in the 1989 Hayward Gallery exhibition ‘The Other Story’ which showcased the work of black and Asian British artists.

2 Ofili’s appropriation of the dots found in Zimbabwean hill painting has curiously attracted little comment. The most major criticism came from art critic Waldemar Januszczak who complained, in one of the few hostile reviews to Ofili’s Serpentine show, ‘And—most unforgivably—he samples thoughtlessly and glibly from the great, the important and the criminally neglected art of the San people of Zimbabwe’, ‘Ordure of No Merit’, The Times, November 1998.
was quite extraordinary. Black and Asian British artists have been making work about their ethnicity from the early 1970s onwards, reaching a climax in the mid to late 1980s, when 'Black Art' was recognized as a loose movement and the subject of a number of group exhibitions. Artists such as Rasheed Araeen, Keith Piper, Eddie Chambers, Sonia Boyce and Lubania Himid all made work whose didacticism recalled feminist strategies of the 1970s. Yet, despite the number of exhibitions, conferences and theoretical tracts written, ‘Black Art’ increasingly found itself labelled as worthy but uninteresting. As the serious 1980s art world, with its themes of AIDS, sexism and racism and its self-important movements such as German neo-expressionism, gave way to a more lightweight, ironic 1990s art world, most clearly manifested in the phenomenon of young British art, ‘Black Art’ was quietly shelved by the critics and curators. The success of Anish Kapoor, who had determinedly kept his distance from ‘Black Art’, only seemed to confirm to its advocates that they had been part of a short-lived politically correct moment which had had only a superficial impact on the art world’s structures. In light of this, that a painter such as Ofili, with his references to blaxploitation movies and hip-hop, could not only win the Turner Prize but be one of the main players in young British art, might be seen as a surprising turn-around and vindication of those 1980s black artists.

To see Ofili’s success as some sort of a return of repressed identity politics would, however, be fanciful. As Lisa Corrin notes in her catalogue essay for the Serpentine exhibition, Ofili’s work stands in marked contrast to what she terms art from ‘the era of multiculturalism’. Corrin rightly argues that multiculturalism was a mixed blessing by allowing those who had been marginalized space previously denied to them, but, at the same time, placing strict delimitations on what issues could be explored in that space; so, racism and positive images of immigrants were approved topics, pretty pictures of flowers a strict no-no. Corrin’s thesis, like that of most other commentators on Ofili, is that Ofili’s work marks a break with the era of multiculturalism and instead approaches ethnicity in a much more ambivalent mode, using ‘double-edged humour, irony, parody, the constant inter-play of opposites, their violation of taboos and their incorporation of black popular culture’. Ofili’s use of black culture is a playful one; the figures on his canvases are often crude stereotypes, from the thick-lipped, heavily-jowled Captain Shit to the series of caricatured black prostitutes. His clippings sometimes come from porn magazines, and his cut-outs of black figures are not all treated with the reverence they would have got from 1980s practitioners; in Pimpin’ Ain’t Easy (1997), the faces of Tiger Woods

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3 Ibid., p. 14.
and Michael Jordan, amongst others, are superimposed on top of splayed legs culled from black porn magazines, and Ofili has made it clear that this juxtaposition is not meant to be a compliment. Most importantly, Ofili does not treat black culture as if it is something innately his, but something to be borrowed and toyed with—everything in his work is a found object of black culture, from the Matapos Hill dots to the stereotypical figures and the elephant dung.

The Hybridity Effect

The shift from the didactic work of the late 1970s and 1980s to Ofili's more open-ended, ludic approach mirrors a shift in contemporary postcolonial theory. The single most important feature of this shift has been the rise of the concept of hybridity, in a field that had been dominated by the twin poles of anti-racism and multiculturalism. The three main British theorists of hybridity have been Homi Bhabha, Paul Gilroy and Stuart Hall, and the latter's conversion to hybridity from a more radical viewpoint was the most noteworthy indicator of this theoretical displacement. In the paper 'New Ethnicities', Hall attempted to 'to characterise a significant shift that has been going on (and is still going on) in black cultural politics'. Hall argued that there had been a move away from the umbrella term 'black', to designate a group united through the common experience of racism, to a new era marked by 'the end of the innocent notion of the essential black subject'. Hall drew on Lacanian notions of identification (or rather méconnaissance—misidentification), Frantz Fanon's stress on doubling, summed up in the self-reflexive title of Black Skin, White Masks, and Derrida's concept of différence, to articulate a 'new politics of representation', where the black experience was primarily diasporic and centred on 'the process of unsettling, recombination, hybridization and “cut-and-mix”'.

A decade later, and with the widespread reception of Paul Gilroy's work deconstructing modernity from the viewpoint of the slave-trade and Homi Bhabha's work on the intertwining of colonizer and colonized, hybridity has become the dominant idea in postcolonial theory. And not only theory—Hall's description of the diasporic

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6 In the glossary section of the Serpentine catalogue, Ofili is recorded as saying, 'I'm not gonna go all the way and say these guys are pimping their skills. The reason I hold back is a guy was over here from the States . . . and he saw this painting and he said if you show this painting in America Michael Jordan might not sue, but Nike might', ibid., unpaginated glossary.


8 Ibid., p. 254.


10 See Homi Bhabha The Location of Culture, London 1994.

experience could be a description of any work by Ofili. Such meetings of theory and practice are rare and perhaps ought to be welcomed in an art world increasingly given to shallow posturing—witness the new 'school' of neurotic realism—yet, as so often is the case, the practice serves to suggest the limits of the theory. In the case of Ofili and hybridity, one work in particular, which happened to receive the most attention during his Turner Prize victory, brings the limits of hybridity most clearly into sight. *No Woman, No Cry* was painted by Ofili specifically for the Turner Prize exhibition and was inspired by the inquest into Stephen Lawrence's death. The painting, at first sight, looks little different to Ofili's other work; it is the same size, its central figure is in the same simplified, exaggerated style of Ofili's other figures and, like his most recent paintings, it is named after a song by a black musician. The only direct reference to the murder is a photograph of Stephen Lawrence embedded in each of the tears which fall from the female figure's eyes, a feature almost small enough to miss. The series of tiny photographs are Ofili's first attempt to deal with a contemporary social issue head-on and their size perhaps reflects a certain amount of nervousness in so doing. For, whilst addressing racism and discrimination was a key strategy for the earlier generation of black artists, it has become far less frequent as hybridity theory has developed. Indeed, the question *No Woman, No Cry* poses is this: can hybridity even begin to deal with issues such as the Lawrence murder?

**Debunking Identity**

Whilst hybridity is far from a stable concept, a watered-down or weak version of it has gained currency in humanities departments and art schools. In this version of hybridity, Bhabha and Hall's basic ideas of identity are central; identity can never be whole or complete, it is never given, but endlessly re-negotiated. Authenticity and essentialism are, as ever, debunked and irony, the contingent and the liminal are celebrated. The transnational, transitional and diasporic become privileged spaces, and, whilst the old notion of the melting-pot is rightly discredited, hybridity's ability to hold together differences simultaneously without editing over specificities is proffered as its main strength. In this sense, there is no doubt that Ofili's work is paradigmatically hybrid. Ofili does not use his cultural identity in the essentialized fashion of 1970s and 1980s practitioners. Instead, his 'blackness' is a constructed, contingent identity—an early write-up on his work began, 'Born in Britain, Ofili had always *felt* African'.

This idea of situational identity is crucial to much hybridity theory—as are hyphenated identities—replacing the fixed identities postulated by anti-racism and multiculturalism with more open-ended, fluid identities dependent on changing circumstances. Ofili's self-fashioning, from his lime-green Ford Capri recalling blaxploitation movies to the photograph of him smoking a mock

\[\text{Stuart Morgan 'The Elephant Man', } \textit{frieze,} \text{ issue 15, March–April 1994, p. 40.}\]
joint in the 'Sensation' catalogue, fits in perfectly with this framework; in true hybrid fashion, the supposed authenticity of identity is there to be toyed with. It is well documented that Ofili brought back the ideas of elephant dung and dots after a British Council sponsored trip to Zimbabwe, and many commentators have noted how even these, which once would have signified authenticity, suggest the constructed nature of Ofili’s black cultural roots. He also borrows freely from African-American culture with his references to blaxploitation movies, hip-hop and the artists Jean-Michel Basquiat and David Hammons. This is a black cultural world which exists in books, magazines, tourist destinations and vinyl. Even the moments of reality which Ofili encounters have to be translated: reacting to the prostitution going on in a car-park behind his studios in King’s Cross, Ofili had to read fiction to make sense of it, before ‘translating’ it to video:

Then I read a book by Iceberg Slim called Pimp. Because it was fiction, a true account of this pimp’s life, it gave the reality here a fictional feel, allowed me to look at it through a fictional tint. And then I started to video some of the stuff going on in the car park just to translate it into something more flexible, less hard hitting, a way of off-loading it from my mind.

There is something refreshing in Ofili’s honesty about his cultural identity and something worrying in his confusion of fact and fiction (‘it was fiction, a true account . . . ’). He makes no claim to some essential core of blackness and readily admits it has all been put together like a kit. Like the literary world, which took enthusiastically to hybridity that in the 1980s, the world of visual art has realized that hybridity allows a release from dreary identity politics work and has embraced Ofili with open arms.

**Fluidity for the Few**

Critical opposition to hybridity was raised almost from its inception. Benita Parry argued in 1987 that Homi Bhabha was privileging discourse over the material reality of colonialism, and the most vituperative criticism came from Aijaz Ahmad, who criticized the privileged status within hybridity theory of the ‘exiled’ middle-class academic posing as travelling theorist of alterity. Ahmad argued that Marxism had been unwarrantedly jettisoned by the postcolonial academy and that hybridity theory represented no more than the twitterings of a bourgeois élite. More recently, and building on Ahmad, Jonathan Friedman has argued that hybridity theory is a mode of self-identification by a small group of Western intellectuals,

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1 For example see Corrin: ‘Ofili lays no more claim to an African inheritance than he does to the tradition of American and European painting’, Chris Ofili, p. 16.

14 Ibid., unpaginated glossary.


mostly born in the ex-colonies, with the ability and the wealth to live the cosmopolitan lifestyles of the truly hybrid. Unlike Ahmad, Friedman does not dismiss the whole project of hybridity but repeatedly stresses that it is an interesting, but strictly limited phenomenon, which often ignores the fact that most people in the world are either not interested in exploring their hybrid side, or simply cannot afford to. Friedman is scornful about hybridity theorists’ reliance on fiction, music and art in articulating their positions; a fair point, considering Gilroy’s nearly total reliance on music and Bhabha’s similarly heavy reliance on literature; yet both, perhaps, are indicators of hybridity’s greater use as a framework for interpreting the arts rather than social situations. Friedman is equally damning about the contingent, constructed, hyphenated identities which much hybridity theory rests on. The most pertinent question he asks is a simple one:

But for whom, one might ask, is such cultural transmigration a reality? In the works of the post-colonial border-crossers, it is always the poet, the artist, the intellectual, who sustains this displacement and objectifies it in the printed word. But who reads the poetry, and what are the other kinds of identification occurring in the lower reaches of social reality?

Or, one might ask, who sees the art? Ofili’s attempt to deal with a racist murder in South London through the visual idiom of hybridity is as naïve as Bhabha’s attempt to talk about the liberation struggle in South Africa by solely referring to the work of Nadine Gordimer. The main problem lies with hybridity’s, and Ofili’s, mode of address. Irony, contingency and ambiguity have little place in the case of a racist murder—hybridity is, quite simply, not the language of Eltham, South London. The Tate Gallery’s explanation that the painting was inspired by the tears of Doreen Lawrence at the inquiry—rather than the actual murder or botched investigation—suggests, again, that the raw, brutal facts are too much for the discourse of hybridity, that it needs something ‘less hard-hitting’. There are other related problems: using Lawrence’s photograph as a cut-out has the effect of making him just another image in the data-bank of blackness which Ofili can call on to construct his playful, ironic identity. Lawrence joins the role-call of black film-stars, hip-hop artists and porn stars who make up that fictionally tinted world of Ofili. There is also the nagging feeling that the Lawrence murder is being used in the rise of a young artist to public acclaim, and, conversely, as a shorthand way of reminding the audience that Ofili is

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18 Friedman is particularly cutting about Bhabha: ‘Applying these views to South African politics, Bhabha celebrates a hybridity that seems to miss all essential political points. But, then, it is based entirely on a passage from one of Nadine Gordimer’s novels . . . ’; ibid., p. 79.
19 Ibid.
not going to forget the street as he becomes more celebrated. Ofili is not helped here by his stress on the formal qualities of the work and his romantic notion of beauty. If, as both he and Corrin suggest, the most important element to his work is its formal properties,20 the image of Lawrence must then be secondary, an addition to the overall composition, but nothing more.

**Cosmopolitanism in Eltham?**

Underlying all of these is the charge that Ahmad, Friedman and others have levelled at hybridity theory: the theorists simply refuse to acknowledge that their notion of the transnational cosmopolitan is a socially specific one. Bhabha’s total espousal of the linguistic turn means that he cannot accommodate this position, yet it is clear that, for a majority of black British and Asian British people, and for Stephen Lawrence in particular, the option of revelling in liminal, hybrid spaces simply is not available. This is not to condemn hybridity theory altogether; it richly articulates the position of a very particular sector of black British and Asian British people, an intellectual élite if you will, for whom the constructed, self-reflexive and playful identity-formations articulated by hybridity theorists are open.

Given that the postcolonial art world, like the postcolonial literary world, is largely made up of this intellectual élite, perhaps it is no surprise that hybridity has taken off in such a major fashion. It is no coincidence that the other black artist in Charles Saatchi’s stable, Yinka Shonibare, also makes art which plays with cultural identity, so much so that one of the first studies of him was entitled ‘Art that is Ethnic with Inverted Commas’.21 Oddly, few in the art world seem to have taken on board theorists’ arguments that hybridity is far from a radical position; indeed, most seem to think the opposite. So Lisa Corrin celebrates Ofili’s lack of political correctness, but what she, alongside many others in the art and literary world, does not seem to realize is that hybridity is an utterly politically correct project. It is its antitheses—ethnic absolutism, nativism and regionality, all factors at play in the Lawrence case—which are deeply politically incorrect. Ofili’s claim, to which Corrin ascribes enough importance to use as an epigraph, also rings false: ‘My project is not a p.c. project . . . I’m trying to make things you can laugh at. It allows you to laugh about issues that are potentially serious’. Neither Corrin nor Ofili realizes that what they imply is politically correct—anti-imperialism, multiculturalism and anti-racism—have not been politically correct for quite some time now. For the art world, Ofili is the ideal black artist, his way of looking at the Lawrence case, the ideal way to look at racism, for, unlike the ‘potentially serious’ Stephen Lawrence, Ofili is only really black in inverted commas.

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Artwork page for ‘No Woman, No Cry’, Chris Ofili, 1998 on display at Tate Liverpool. Forming the pendant of her necklace is a lump of elephant dung containing map pins, and the woman’s chest bears an area of vibrant red and orange paint, with flame-like yellow forks across its top edge. A series of pale blue tears descends from each of her eyes, all of which feature at their centre a very small collaged photograph of a boy’s face. The background is painted with a mixture of pale green and bright yellow, criss-crossed by conjoined sequences of circles that each contain concentric rings and are gathered to form the rough outlines of diamond shapes.

Layered among these are dotted Chris Ofili was born in 1968, a remarkable figure of British Neo-Expressionism and Contemporary. Find more works of this artist at Wikiart.org â€” best visual art database. Ofili was established through exhibitions by Charles Saatchi at his gallery in north London and the travelling exhibition Sensation (1997), becoming recognised as one of the few British artists of African / Caribbean descent to break through as a member of the Young British Artists group. Ofili has also had numerous solo shows since the early 1990s, including at the Serpentine Gallery. In 1998, Ofili won the Turner Prize, and in 2003 he was selected to represent Britain at the Venice Biennale of that year, where his work for the British Pavilion was done in collaboration with the architect Dav A detail from Chris Ofiliâ€™s original watercolour for The Caged Birdâ€™s Song. Photograph: © Chris Ofili/courtesy the artist and Victoria Miro, London. Looking at the sketches you see Ofili as a sort of magic realist, mixing myth and the everyday in the spirit of novelists like Gabriel GarcÃ­a MÃ¡rquez. The scene he created for the tapestry, The Caged Birdâ€™s Song takes some specifics of Trinidadian life and weaves a myth from them: the title refers not only to the Maya Angelou memoir, but also to the practice among Trinidadâ€™s men of capturing songbirds for competition, and carrying them as they go about their lives in Port of Spain, to accustom. Â â€œIt just seems to be all about limiting rather than expanding. Maybe it has to go in cycles. Revisiting the Burden of Representation in the Art of Chris Ofili and Yinka Shonibare. | Find, read and cite all the research you need on ResearchGate.Â is not to say that multicultural normalisation and the burden of representation are similarly critiqued. The limits of Tate Britain may be, precisely in its insistence to approach the stories of art through the framework of national culture. However, Ofiliâ€™s work is more nuanced than it appeared to his detractors; the piece reflects on art historical precedents while addressing identity politics, religion and pop culture. To grasp its complexity, one must look beneath the surfaceâ€”as dazzling and shocking as it may be. Iconic or iconoclastic?Â Formally, the use of gold and the front-facing Virgin link the work to Medieval icons, making the vulgarity of the pornographic images all the more stark. Yet, the artist claims that the sacred and the profane are not always opposed, even in traditional religious art: As an altar boy, I was confused by the idea of a holy Virgin Mary giving birth to a young boy. Now when I go to the National Gallery and see paintings of the Virgin Mary, I see how sexually charged they are. Mine is simply a hip hop version.