Exhibition Review

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The Arrivants

A solo exhibition by Dr Christine Checinska produced in association with the Visual Identities in Art and Design Research Centre (VIAD)

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First, I feel the dark, then the cold. The underground, black-walled space below the main FADA gallery is crypt-like in midwinter. Or perhaps I am underwater. As the three acts or tableaux of Christine Checinska's *The Arrivants* unfold around me, I come to feel that I am swimming through semi-conscious and buried memories, from an individual and collective history. These surface through Checinska's trawling and deployment of cloth, stitch, text and oral testimony. A first-generation Briton and United Kingdom (UK)-based artist, designer and academic, Checinska explores the intersections of culture, race and dress by challenging the invisibility of the immigrant African diaspora and calling up the traces of these subjects and how they negotiated a racialised visual gaze. The Empire Windrush arrived in London's Tilbury Docks in 1948 carrying approximately 500 Jamaican passengers, invited by the British government to assist in rebuilding post-war Britain. How these migrants negotiated their new environment is told in the exhibition's three tableaux: the customs hall waiting area (Figure 1 & 2), the suits and stories (Figure 2), and the parlour (Figure 4). Found objects, projected photographs and oral testimonies flesh out the scenes, but it is dress that provides the narrative for these negotiations of identity.

Checinska's (2012:143) practice-led and theoretical research is directed towards, in her words, 'the absence of the African-Caribbean within the fashion theory canon'. A disrupted, displaced and 'broken' history of enslavement and colonialism is too easily constructed as a 'historyless-ness' and an 'implied cultureless-ness' (Checinska 2012:143). In this situation, Checinska (2016) considers that mobilising fashion is 'a way of pushing back against invisibility, stereotyping and the erasure of personhood'. Being

FIGURE **Nº 1**

Christine Checinska, *The Arrivants*, 2016. Detail of installation. Courtesy of Thys Dullhaard.

Anglicised colonial subjects meant that Afro-Caribbean people in the 1950s were neither English/British, yet largely lived by 'the values of [their] mother country' (Checinska 2012:146). The "Windrush Generation" of Afro-Caribbean immigrants to the UK brought widespread change to the cultural and racial dynamics of British society in the decades following the Second World War, as they established communities in major cities such as London, Birmingham, Bristol and Manchester. It was in the performance of identities in the theatre of fashion that these initial encounters would often have taken place. The importance placed upon being "well dressed" was a crucial assertion of dignity and respect for self and others, where the "only way to dress was up". Many of these creolised colonial subjects may have recognised themselves in the black South African subjects in Europeanised clothing in the early twentieth century that forms Santu Mofokeng's *Black Photo Album/Look at Me 1890-1950*. Similarly to Mofokeng's historical reclamation project, Checinska (2012:147) demonstrates that creolisation was not a process of blending, but rather one of contention. A well-cut and pressed suit served as a sartorial signifier: 'By choosing to wear a suit, paradoxically the ultimate hierarchical form of male dress apart from the military uniform, and the ultimate sartorial assimilator, these men hoped to be regarded as equals and looked on with respect' (Checinska 2016).

FIGURE **Nº 2**

Christine Checinska, *The Arrivants*, 2016. Detail of installation. Courtesy of Thys Dullhaard.

Any of these men could have been – were – Checinska's own father, who arrived in the UK in 1956, wearing his Sunday best suit, grasping a single cardboard "grip" suitcase. This arrival scene was played out many times in Southampton custom's hall and at London's Paddington and Victoria train stations. In the customs office waiting room installation, found objects including cardboard grips, recycled banana boxes, packing materials and various personal effects are collected on a platform. As Checinska (2016) explains, this part of the exhibition creates 'an archive which houses artefacts that speak to the stories of migration and the recreation of self'.

A frothy white wedding dress that spills out of an opened suitcase seemingly speaks to a bridal innocence, openness and hopeful expectation about a new life, in a new country. The audio narrative that may be accessed through headphones here is that of 'Bernice', who describes her wedding day. Here is a woman's voice, in an exhibition that is weighted to the male African diasporic experience. Describing her mother dressing her 'unruly virgin hair', the listener hears the complexities of identities that negotiate the racial politics of hair, Christian moral codes, European conventions of respectability, the historic spectre of slavery that disallowed bonds of dignity and affection, and marriage as a transition for a young woman as great as the crossing to another country. Stencilled on the exhibition entrance wall is an extract from Kumau Braithwaite's poem entitled "The Emigrants". As part of his trilogy *The Arrivants* (1967), from which Checinska's exhibition draws its title, the poet describes Afro-Caribbean people venturing out across the diaspora:

> So you have seen them
> with their cardboard grips,
> felt hats, rain-cloaks, the women
> with their plain
> or purple-tinted
> coats hiding their fatten-
> ed hips (Brathwaite 1967:50).

In her Tedx EastEnd talk, Checinska (2016) asserts that 'women, especially, shrink' and that there is 'nothing dignified in shrinking'. Bernice's preparations for her wedding day and the immigrant women whose coats 'hid[e] their fatten-/ed hips' present the negotiations that occur not only with the adoption and transformation of Europeanised cultural conventions, but also the reception and perception of these creolised people to a Britain that largely perceived of itself as culturally and racially homogenous. The photograph in dialogue with the poem extract shows immaculately dressed people

waiting with their suitcases and possessions, but also the uncertainty, vulnerability, courage and "chaos" of migration. That was replayed in tabloid newspapers as the arrival en masse of "coloured people" threatening an invasion of "difference".

I recall *my own purple coat, my new and best coat, its lukewarm protection against the liquid cold I am seeped in. I wait on train platforms, in a place both familiar and alien. For the first time, I see white men sweeping the streets; I realise that, here, white men are street cleaners*. My own long-ago and short-lived experience of transplanting myself to London shares only a few common elements with these subjects. But in conversation with the artist, she says that she hopes that the exhibition fosters an introspective environment, one that draws the viewer into the experience of others through a delving into the self. The fragments and extracts of verse and text stencilled on floors and walls contextualise and theorise the specific history of Afro-Caribbean migration, with quotes from, amongst others, Homi K Bhabha, Braithwaite and Ralph Waldo Emerson. Their placement seems to acknowledge and enact dispersal as well as a threading together of a frame for understanding experience. They also seem like fragments of memory, recalled.

I would have found it more powerful and evocative to have heard all the stories rippling through the whole space, in a low interweaving murmur, while still allowing the visitor to bring one story into focus at a time by donning the headphones provided. As it was, the headphones slung over individual chairs encouraged the visitor to sit down and spend time with each person's story, as Checinska did when she interviewed the subjects. From 2003 to 2006, Checinska conducted a series of interviews and focus groups with African-Caribbean elders and local, white Hackney Londoners. The stories here are the reminiscences of five Afro-Caribbean men, focusing on the role that personalised fashion choices played for them. Listening to the stories between the suspended suits, with flickering ionic projections of historic photographs playing over them and my own body, the presences of these suits grew cathedral or monument-like, subjects claiming their place in a national fabric.

I became particularly interested in Checinska's choice to display the suits folded precisely in full-length profile, suspended upright, pinned invisibly to pieces of white board. While her research focuses on analysing the dressed body (Checinska 2012:141), these suits do not create the illusion of a body within. Clothing is frequently used as a skin substitute or surrogate, and often comes to be seen primarily for the whole body that the skin enfolds, as well as the perceived shade or spirit of the person. Displaying wearable items bulked out by wiring or mannequins to hold space for a body is a practice I have been accustomed to see, to good effect, in the work of numerous South African artists, including Hentie van der Merwe, Nandipha Mntambo, Mary Sibande or Nicholas Hlobo. The (human) body is present despite its physical absence. The presentation of Checinska's

FIGURE **Nº 3**

Christine Checinska, *The Arrivants*, 2016. Detail of installation. Courtesy of Thys Dullhaard.

suits struck me because they present the possibility that they need not be conceived of as held finitely within the terms of the bodies and subjectivities that they may have clothed. These suits seem to foreground and validate the act of archiving and documenting. It is as if they were drawn out of drawers in the stores of the National Fashion Museum or the Victoria and Albert Museum where they should be (and, I hope, are) maintained as part of the nation's history.

The suits dominate the exhibition visually: pinstriped, double-breasted, tapered trousers, boldly patterned ties, sharp accessories like the folded handkerchief in the breast pocket, the rolled London newspaper, the service medals. With all these details, the "British" suit is creolised. The Afro-Caribbean influence on the 1950s English "Rude Boy" suit is an example of how the Afro-Caribbean came to be the trend-maker. These visual cues embody and express 'a principled clash of patterns' as cultures collide, co-exist and coalesce (Checinska 2012:149).

The final tableau mocks up a modest 1950's parlour with two settees and the centre-piece television in its period stand. Here the empire has literally come home; here is the space where the immigrants sit and watch the nation, watching them. On the television, black and white reruns of "black" and "white" interaction apparently on news and current

FIGURE **Nº 4**

Christine Checinska, *The Arrivants*, 2016. Detail of installation. Courtesy of Thys Dullhaard.

affairs programmes and sitcoms roll on. This scene spoke to Michael McMillan's exhibition entitled *The Front Room 'Inna Jo'burg'*, which was installed above it in the FADA gallery. Yet Checinska's room appeared to me to present an experience more intentionally destabilising. She dives down into the memory bank of a community and a nation, taking with her a sketch pad, notepad, tape measure and sound recorder to detail and sensitively interpret the acts of representation and self-representation that she finds there.

This exhibition also resonates with its place here in Johannesburg. The destination for many migrants and refugees from other parts of Africa, the city's creolised and assimilatory behaviour, fashions, and cultures is diversely reflective of the welcome, as well as the xenophobic rejection and subtly institutionalised discrimination, that the city affords newcomers. Lolo Veleko has documented vibrant and sartorial fashion expressions of young, black, contemporary, South African urbanites. With Checinska's historical project, the losses that time must bring, and the now iconic, even mythical, associations of the Windrush Generation, could have resulted in this exhibition sinking into sentimentalised nostalgia. But it is not only the deep sea cold of the exhibition space that disallows nostalgia as a cosy force. Checinska has produced an exhibition that performs as well as documents the sartorial wit, the sharp pain, the warm courage, and the fuzzy emotional negotiations

and compromises that informed immigrant Afro-Caribbean identities, which continue to ripple out to the artist herself, and to many others in Britain and around the world. The atmosphere seems to warn me equally not to stay too long and not to fear descending.

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