

# FINANCIAL TIMES

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## Claudette Johnson, Courtauld Gallery review – rich portraits of black lives draw on centuries of tradition

The artist has spent four decades painting black women into visibility



'Blues Dance' (2023) © Courtesy the artist/Hollybush Gardens

The woman is dancing. Eyes down, arms raised, torso tilted, she is tuned outwards – to melody, or another dancer – and inward to the rhythm pulsing through her.

Painted in unmixed strokes, with lavish white and cerulean blue especially on her cobalt dress, the dancer seems to spill her very soul through rivulets of colour and motion. At once plugged into her surroundings and existentially separate, on one side her sleeved arm fragments into the salmon-pink panel behind her, while on the other an intransigent oblong of greys and whites drives her back into her own limbs. A taut red thread-thin line slices through the space behind her neck and shoulders and beyond.

As the most recent work by Claudette Johnson in her retrospective *Presence* at London's Courtauld Gallery, the painting, "Blues Dance" (2023), is in synergy with her work over four decades dedicated to painting black women into visibility or, as Johnson puts it, away from a "sense of having to create oneself out of the dregs of history".



'And I Have My Own Business in This Skin' (1982) © Claudette Johnson/Modern Art Oxford

The Courtauld's show opens with an early example. "And I Have My Own Business in This Skin" (1982) — in pastel, gouache and mixed-media — depicts a naked woman, her body flexed in *contrapunto*, muscular limbs moulded from graphic curves, her arms raised so that her hands disappear beyond the frame. In dappled terracotta, gold, biscuit, claret and brownish-black, one ornate earring dangling above her shoulder, she embodies the metaphorical light and shade out of which Johnson was herself working. Set against a quirky puzzle of shape and pattern, the painting's blanks and cavities threaten its precarious structure. As Johnson puts it: "The entire work is balanced between absence and presence."

That tension is coiled in a key predecessor, Picasso's "Les Femmes d'Alger (O. J.)" (1911-12), which Johnson first saw in reproduction. Borrowing from African masks and scenes in a Parisian brothel, Picasso's painting shows five naked sex workers of indeterminate race glaring at the viewer with a spiky ferocity. A man's fantasy of women as at once sexually vulnerable and voracious, it inspired Johnson to rescue the subjects from, as she puts it, "their fetishised otherness and use . . . cubism to create my own language".

Over the decades Johnson let go of cubism while forging her own crystalline vocabulary, delicate in its execution and mighty in its impact. With just 17 works at the Courtauld, her journey is riveting.



'Reclining Figure' (2017) © Courtesy the artist/Hollybush Gardens



As evidenced by those various hands breaking out of the frame, one concern is to capture black women refusing to be confined by their allotted space. This determination fuels works such as “Reclining Figure” (2017). Based partly on Johnson’s memories of her mother resting, the painting shows a woman asleep on her side, arms folded beneath her cheek, face and arms evoked with tender, scrupulous attention to skin tone and texture. Her dress is conjured in frail grey lines on uncoloured paper, so that her contours appear weightless as they billow over a deep-blue band that suggests her horizon may be melancholy but is also infinitely rich.

Another preoccupation is drawing. Working on paper, mainly in pastel, gouache, sometimes with watercolour and occasionally in acrylic, the urge to discover, as Johnson puts it, “how light and shade sit together” and “line breaks into space” animates the glorious “Kind of Blue” (2020). A young man reclines on a spartan pallet, his cheek on his elbow, skin luminous with charcoal, black, grey and white highlights that echo his plain white vest and cap, while his blue background is bisected by a triangle, like a shark’s fin, crossing a perpendicular line.



'Kind of Blue' (2020) © Courtesy the artist/Hollybush Gardens



What does that fin serve? Our questions are the painter's. Johnson has described making art as "a step into the unknown". Generously, she takes us on this unmapped journey with her. Her painstaking cartography of her subjects' bodies — "each line taking us across the body's terrain by a different route", she has said — suggests an artist who reads bodies as human landscapes. In "Figure in Blue" (2018), a woman sits in profile, elbow on her knee, her arm and flank flowing in blue, black and grey tributaries, here a cascade, there a trickle, as if her body were an estuary or delta.

Such assiduous studies are rooted in centuries of draughtsmanship. Johnson has said a small brown ink drawing by Rembrandt, "A Young Woman Sleeping (Hendrickje Stoffels)" (c1654), "does everything I want my drawings to do". Like Johnson, Rembrandt has a gift for summoning the intimate, unguarded kernel of his sitters. Stoffels, his wife, is captured in fleet, spare lines as she dozes over a bolster, exhausted, like Johnson's mother, after a day's work.



The artist, with works in progress © Fergus Carmichael

Johnson's own road has been arduous. Her labour to make and remake images of black women with few examples behind her, and often little encouragement from arts institutions, is a shimmering example of keeping on. In the past decade, she has turned to male sitters perhaps, as co-curator Dorothy Price writes, because of her "fears, hopes and desires" for men in her own family. Johnson has spoken movingly of the tension between child-rearing and career. Just as the latter was burgeoning, she took time out to raise her sons.

That effortful passion flows through "Figure with Raised Arms" (2017), a portrait of Johnson's son Laurie as a grown man. Through the play of light on his skin, the tangible wiriness of his beard, his mood of laconic alertness as he rests his neck against his clasped hands, he is briefly poised in repose, on the verge of opening those sleepy eyes and enjoying a long stretch.



'Figure with Raised Arms' (2017) © Courtesy the artist/Hollybush Gardens

At a time when we desperately need to rediscover ways to thrive, Johnson's figures, as she hopes, "exist beyond this moment . . . speak of some other future". That future is down to us.

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