

ELLE

Into The Frame: Pioneering Women In The Art Industry

From the pioneering artist nominated for a Turner Prize to the Frieze director set on promoting rising talents in her community, these are the women injecting the art world with a fresh perspective.

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Claudette Johnson

Artist



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At a glitzy award ceremony at Tate Britain in December, the winner of one of the best-known prizes in visual arts will be announced, and Claudette Johnson is one of four artists in the running. When she received the Turner Prize nomination – for her solo exhibition ‘Presence’ at the Courtauld Gallery – Johnson said, humbly: ‘I was really surprised but delighted. I had not expected that to happen! It’s a special kind of acknowledgement, and it’s exciting to know the show had an impact, so I’m very happy.’ This year, Johnson was also elected to the Royal Academy of Arts, one of Britain’s most historic and prestigious institutions.

Johnson’s humility belies the magnitude and force of her work, though recognition for those contributions has been more recent. In 1983, while still a student at the University of Wolverhampton, Johnson became a founding member of the Blk Art Group, an association of Black British artists that included Lubaina Himid, Wenda Leslie and Marlene Smith. Galvanised by anti-racist discourse and feminist critique of the time, the group tackled the representation of Black artists, rewriting their history and importance in Britain. ‘It was such a difficult time, we had to work hard to get together to form a support network that became crucial to our development as artists,’ she says.



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Johnson’s figurative paintings and drawings almost exclusively feature Black women, and she captures them with sinewy, silky lines in ink, gouache, pastel and charcoal that soar with emotion. There’s always a feeling of space around her figures, which allows them room for possibilities, the potential to expand out of the image, for the viewer to invent. Many of Johnson’s works take up large amounts of space, too. ‘I have always had some attraction to a certain type of monumentalism in Black figuration – because we have been minor figures, obscured and invisible,’ Johnson says.

Sometimes the most ordinary moments are the most poignant. A giant gouache painting titled Reclining Figure, stretching to more than two metres wide, portrays a woman simply lying down a depiction of tender quiet made massive. It subtly questions who is allowed to rest, and how that rest is perceived.

Johnson's sitters don't always have an easy time, not least because the artist sometimes demands difficult poses that give the final portraits their dynamic tension. 'It takes a lot of trust and almost faith for the sitter to allow me to really see them – to spend that time looking and getting to know their features,' she says. 'It's not an easy experience, meeting who they are, and who I want them to be for the moment.'