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Claudette Johnson's New Mural Recasts Picasso's Famed 'Demoiselles' With Powerful Black Women

The Turner Prize nominee installed her triptych as part of Art on the Underground.



Claudette Johnson with 'Three Women' at Brixton Underground Station. Photo: Angus Mill, 2024; Courtesy the Artist and Hollybush Gardens, London

by **Precious Adesina** • October 30, 2024 • [Share This Article](#)

Over the next twelve months, as commuters walk down the steps of Brixton station in south London, they will find a triptych by British artist Claudette Johnson. In *Three Women* Johnson portrays a trio of female figures in distinctly different styles. The sitter on the left is depicted almost entirely in blue and brown tones; the middle is more “monochrome” and sketch-like; whereas to the right the figure is more “representational,” she explained on a video call.

According to the 65-year-old, each piece is “a bit experimental, even though I think that when people see them, they will say, ‘That’s very much what Claudette does,’” she said. “I wanted to see how it feels putting these three different approaches together.”

Despite the disparities in Johnson's technique for each of the three aspects of the work, what ties them together is the fact that they all illustrate a Black woman in a powerful stance, staring unabashedly at the viewer (or, in this case, at those walking in and out of the station).



Claudette Johnson, *Three Women*, 2024 at Brixton Underground Station commissioned by Art on the Underground. Photo: Angus Mill, 2024; Courtesy the Artist and Hollybush Gardens, London

The installation continues an ongoing project in Brixton by Art on the Underground, an initiative that seeks to enrich London's tube system by commissioning artists to create a mural that responds to the vibrant area. Each year, a work of art is placed in the same spot at the opening of the station, for both expecting and unexpected passersby to ogle at.

"I've never been involved in mural-making before this," Johnson said, noting that she's thrilled that "three black women are going to occupy that very prominent space for a good amount of time."

The public nature of the installation also added an extra layer of appeal to the commission. "It's very exciting to think on such a large scale and about the huge numbers of people passing through that station that will glance at it or stop and look at it," she added.

Johnson's piece also comes at an ideal time for Art on the Underground, as she reaches a new height in her career. The artist had two major solo shows, "Claudette Johnson: Presence" at the Courtauld Gallery in London and "Claudette Johnson: Drawn Out" at Ortuzar Projects in New York, both of which bagged her a career-defining Turner Prize nomination this year.

The prize's official exhibition of the nominees' work is currently on show at Tate Britain, only a few tube stops from this installation. While this alone will draw numerous art enthusiasts to Brixton, interest will only escalate if Johnson is announced as the winner in December.



Installation view of Claudette Johnson, *Pietà* in "Turner Prize 2024" on view at Tate Britain from September 25, 2024–February 16, 2025. Photo: Josh Croll; © Tate Photography

It is an experience Johnson is still grappling with herself. "It is a kind of pinch myself moment when I really let it in," she said. "I make work in my studio, and it's just me and the work, and it's all quiet," she added. "It's a very private thing, so when I release it and get all this feedback, it's just the most extraordinary moving experience."

The inspiration for her Brixton mural comes from one of the most well-known paintings of all time, Pablo Picasso's *Les Femmes d'Alger* (1907), which depicts five nude women in a brothel. Two of them have faces painted in a style reminiscent of African masks.



Three Women, 2024. Photo: Angus Mill, 2024; Courtesy the Artist and Hollybush Gardens, London

Like many viewers of this piece—which Johnson saw for the first time in person in New York last year—she has a love/hate relationship with it. "I look at that work, and I see a lot of fear of women in it, a kind of misogyny, though it also has a real power that I'm excited by," she said, explaining that despite the women being subjected to the male gaze in how they are depicted, there's a more profound "story about women being told".



Picasso's *Les Femmes d'Alger* (1907) at MoMA in New York City. Photo: Stan Honda/AFP via Getty Images.

Johnson feels she is “reclaiming” that narrative through her own work. “There’s something I recognize in there,” she said. When she looks past “all the ethnographical nonsense that was part of his thinking and making of that work,” Picasso’s piece serves as a jumping-off point for her to consider how she approaches her own portrayals of women.

When preparing to make *Three Women*, Johnson asked her sitters to adopt a pose “loosely based” on the women in Picasso’s piece. “I thought it’d be quite nice because the last time I did a work featuring three figures was in a trilogy from 1986,” she said.

Trilogy (1982–6) is a similar triptych of Black female figures dressed in blue, black, and red, though in that instance, “I just asked them to stand in ways that were reflective of who they were,” she explained. “Whereas in this one, it is not about reflecting who they are [because] it’s projecting my response to that work by Picasso.”



Three Women. Photo: Angus Mill, 2024; Courtesy the Artist and Hollybush Gardens, London

Somewhat surprisingly, Johnson's practice subsided around the same time she created *Trilogy*, and after participating in an exhibition at the ICA titled "The Thin Black Line."

It was fellow artist Lubaina Himid who convinced Johnson to return to her art-making in 2014, ahead of a show she was curating at the London-based contemporary art gallery Hollybush Gardens. "It was such a huge thing to be invited to show work again, so the exhibition that Lubaina Himid invited me to be a part of was a big enough step in itself, and I certainly didn't think that was the first step in this journey to a Turner Prize nomination," Johnson said.

"It was enough just to find myself making the work again, having a good reception for it and the means to continue making." Over the decade since, Johnson's career has flown through the roof. She has become a household name in the art world and beyond, and her piece at Brixton station shows that this journey is certainly not over yet.