

# Postcolonial Influences on British Art

*Background notes*

Barry Venning - 6 November 2019



Anwar Jalal Shemza at the Edinburgh Festival, 1969



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In 1955, when the distinguished art historian, Sir Nikolaus Pevsner, delivered the annual BBC Reith Lectures on 'The Englishness of English Art', he began by considering "the English national character as expressed in terms of art". In the postcolonial and post-Windrush era, it is no longer possible to write or speak confidently about 'Englishness' or even 'Britishness' in British art: for more than half a century, some of the most significant contributions to the British art scene have been made by artists of African, Caribbean or Asian origin such as Sonia Boyce, Rasheed Araeen, Keith Piper, Lubaina Himid, Chris Ofili, Yinka Shonibare, John Akomfrah or the Singh Twins. Although all those mentioned on this short list now enjoy prominence and critical respect - it includes OBEs, CBEs, two Turner Prize winners and two Royal Academicians – their status and influence has been hard won. For the first generation of artists who arrived in Britain from the Commonwealth, professional success was elusive. The example of Anwar Jalal Shemza (1928-85) is particularly instructive in this respect.

Shemza is currently one of the most highly respected post-war artists of South Asian origin. In the last twenty five years, his work has frequently been included in high profile international exhibitions, including a solo display at Tate in 2015. In 2017, an *Untitled* oil painting from 1959 sold at Christie's for £68,750 – around five times more than Christie's modest estimate. This high critical and market status, however, is largely posthumous; much of Shemza's career was a struggle for recognition in postcolonial Britain. He was born in Simla, Kashmir, and studied at the respected Mayo School of Art, Lahore, from 1944 to 1947. He achieved widespread recognition in Pakistan with figurative works that drew inspiration from Mughal and Hindu themes, and in 1952 he was a founding member of the Lahore Art Circle.

When Shemza moved to the UK in 1956 to study at the Slade, it was as if his previous achievements counted for nothing. He was taken aback to hear Sir Ernst Gombrich declare in a lecture that Islamic art

was 'purely functional', and when he subsequently read Gombrich's celebrated book, *The Story of Art* (which was for decades the standard textbook for art students), he found that it reduced the history of more than a thousand years of Islamic civilisation to a mere two pages. Disheartened by the marginalisation and lack of recognition he experienced in his early years in Britain, Shemza destroyed much of his earlier output and began to search for an art form which would establish his own cultural identity in the UK art world. The approach he developed was to combine the lessons he learned from European modernist painters such as Klee, Mondrian and Kandinsky, with lines, shapes and motifs derived from Islamic calligraphy, decoration and architecture, thus creating a visually distinctive, hybrid formal language.

Like many artists from the Commonwealth, and in spite of the richness and versatility of his work, Shemza found it impossible to achieve the recognition he deserved. This was partly because the influence of American abstraction was so pervasive in Britain in the 1950s and 60s that it sidelined the efforts of South Asian and Caribbean modernists. It was also because racism was as much a part of the British art world as it was of society at large in the 1950s and 60s. Exhibiting opportunities were harder to come by for black and Asian artists than they were for white contemporaries, although there were perceptive London gallerists such as Denis Bowen (who founded the *New Vision Centre*) and the eccentric but brilliant Victor Musgrave (*Gallery One*) who consistently supported artists from South Asia, including Shemza, Avinash Chandra (1931-1991) and Francis Newton Souza (1924-2002). Musgrave's shows attracted considerable attention - the President of Pakistan, General Ayub Khan, was a visitor to Shemza's exhibition – but Shemza was unable to support his family by his art alone and he spent much of his career, from 1961 to his death in 1985, teaching art at Stafford College.

Shemza remained in Britain but some of his most gifted contemporaries were so dismayed by the obstacles they faced here that they left for the USA in search of recognition. This was the career path of Frank Bowling who, along with Aubrey Williams, Donald Locke and Stanley Greaves, came to the UK from Guyana to work and study.



**Frank Bowling, *Cover Girl*, 1966. Private Collection**

Bowling studied and socialised with David Hockney, Derek Boshier, Tom Phillips and R.B. Kitaj at the Royal College of Art, and a work like his *Cover Girl* seems perfectly representative of the 'new figuration' that was emerging there in the 1960s. And yet, in spite of growing critical acclaim and a notably successful exhibition at the Grabowski Gallery in 1962, Bowling found himself excluded from the important 'New Generation' exhibition at the Whitechapel Gallery in 1964. Those of his friends who were included went on to become famous, but Bowling was sidelined. Bowling later said that he was told privately that the reason for his exclusion was that "England wasn't ready for a gifted artist of colour". His response was to move to New York in 1966, where he was encouraged and championed by the influential modernist critic, Clement Greenberg. Unlike the narrowness and racism he faced in London, he found American modernism to be an inclusive scene. As he later recalled, "Clem (Greenberg) was able to make me see that modernism belonged to me also".

The racism and exclusion that Bowling experienced was no less marked in the following decades; if anything, exhibiting opportunities further contracted during the Thatcher era, when there were swingeing cuts to public subsidies for the arts. The response of the next generation of Caribbean artists was to take matters into their own hands. In order to promote their work, they opened their own galleries, published magazines such as *Savacou*, *Black Phoenix* or *Variant*, formed co-operatives such as *The Caribbean Artists' Movement*, *The Pan Afrikan Connection* or the *Black Art Group*, or curated exhibitions of their own work during the 1980s. The decade culminated in *The Other Story* (1989), the first retrospective exhibition of British African, Caribbean and Asian modernism, at the Hayward Gallery, London, curated by the Pakistan born conceptual artist, Rasheed Araeen.



*The Other Story*, 1989, installation view, including work by **Rasheed Araeen**. Hayward Gallery

The exhibition included the work of post-war modernists such as Bowling and Shemza (whose work supplied the cover for the catalogue), but also brought together younger artists such as Mona Hatoum, Sonia Boyce, Lubaina Himid and Eddie Chambers. Chambers's *Destruction of the National Front*, a four panel collage, created when he was only nineteen, is a vivid evocation of the way in which the National Front, then at the height of its popularity, appropriated the national flag for its own fascist and racist ideology.



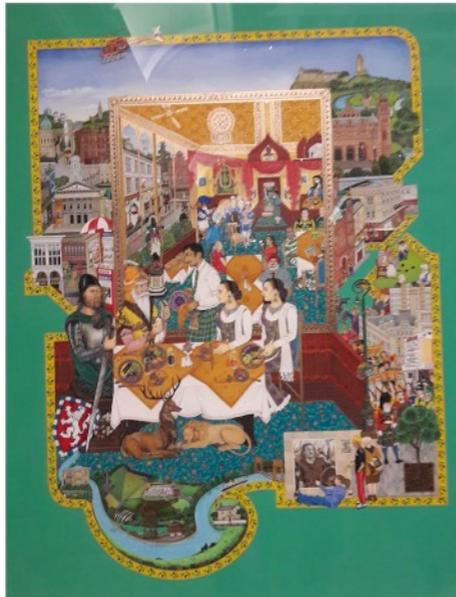
**Eddie Chambers**, *The Destruction of the National Front*, 1979/80.  
Four panel collage. Tate

*The other Story* met with acclaim and derision in equal measure, and some of the reviews demonstrated that racism and bigotry were not confined to members of the National Front. Brian Sewell, for example, wrote:

“Why have Afro-Asian artists failed to achieve critical notice and attract a London market for their work? To that, the answer is short – they are not good enough. They borrow all and contribute nothing”.

Brian Sewell. ‘Black Pride and Prejudice’. *Evening Standard*. January 4<sup>th</sup> 1990

Time has completely repudiated Sewell's blinkered judgment: all of the artists whose work was shown in *The Other Story* are now respected, collected and acquired by national and international museums. The pioneering work of Chambers, Keith Piper, Lubaina Himid, Sonia Boyce and others which often, but not exclusively, dealt with Empire, ethnicity and identity, has set the agenda for much of the visual culture of late 20th and 21st century Britain. The next generation of artists, including Hew Locke, Hurvin Anderson and the Singh Twins, address the condition of postcolonial Britain through their art. The Singh Twins, second generation Sikhs, who dress identically (and traditionally) and work collaboratively, produce images that they punningly describe as 'past-modern': their style is heavily indebted to the tradition of Mughal miniature painting, but their subject matter in works such as *Mr Singh's India* is resolutely contemporary.



**The Singh Twins, *Mr Singh's India*. 1999-2000. Kelvingrove Museum and Art Gallery, Glasgow**

*Mr Singh's India* is a thought-provoking exploration of modern Glaswegian identities, but carried out with a brilliantly light touch. It takes its name from Glasgow's oldest and best known Indian restaurant, where the Indian waiters wear kilts and the menu includes haggis pakora. The painting is a joyful celebration of hybrid cultures and hybrid identities; as such, it is also a witty rebuke to the dogmatic nationalism that seems to dominate the modern political landscape.

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