

BY THE RIVERS OF BIRMINAM

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BY THE RIVERS OF BIRMINAM

24 July to 15 August 2014

FADA Gallery
University of Johannesburg

In association with the Visual Identities
in Art and Design Research Centre





(Front cover)
Vanley Burke
Dodgem cars
1973
Silver gelatin print
12 x 16"
Courtesy of the artist

(Inside front cover)
Vanley Burke
Boy with a flag, Wilfred, in Handsworth Park
1970
Silver gelatin print
12 x 16"
Courtesy of the artist

(Top left)
Vanley Burke
Professor Stuart Hall in his office at Birmingham University, School of Cultural Studies
1975
Silver gelatin print
12 x 16"
Courtesy of the artist

(Bottom left)
Vanley Burke
Disturbance in Lozells, Handsworth, where police brutality in the Black community reached its height
1985
Silver gelatin print
12 x 16"
Courtesy of the artist

By the Rivers of Birminam

> The still image arrests the flow of time, freezes the event, allowing us to look longer, get more out of it. But it is not complete – it can't, in the end, 'speak for itself'. What signifies is not the photographic text in isolation but the way it is caught up in a network of chains of signification that 'overprint' it, its inscription into the currency of other discourses, which bring out different meanings. (Hall 2007)

By the Rivers of Birminam is a retrospective exhibition of 100 photographs taken by esteemed documentary photographer Vanley Burke. Curated by Professor Lynda Morris (Research Professor Curation and Art History, Norwich University of the Arts), the exhibition documents the history of the diasporic African-Caribbean community in Birmingham, and particularly Handsworth, from 1968 to 2011. In its photographic detailing of the everyday lives of Birmingham's black community for close on four decades, this visual record is one of the most extensive and significant photographic archives of African-Caribbean life in postwar Britain. His intimate, insider's view presents an alternative to previous ideologically-laden, historical archives that purport to 'document' black presence and settlement in Britain, yet mostly do so from an uninformed, skewed or biased outsider's perspective. Burke's collection of photographs forms a substantive and powerful archive that holds the means to speak to, and of, a broader pluralistic consciousness and historical moments from multiple positionalities and perspectives.

Through his photographic practice, Burke raises questions that speak cogently to the broader politics of photographic representation, and more specifically as they pertain to documentary photography, as well as to postcolonial debates around diasporic conditions of uprootedness, alienation, displacement, adaptation and belonging. Burke's work; its integral relationship to the socio-political historical context in which it was produced; its connectedness to Birmingham's intellectual and cultural milieu from the late 1950s onwards; and the issues around the politics of photographic representation that it raises, form strategic points of departure from which to explore issues associated with documentary and vernacular photography in relation to broader historical and contemporary frameworks.

Although 'documentary photography' and 'vernacular photography' can be understood as discreet terms, they are often interconnected. For example, vernacular photography may employ the aesthetic modes of documentary photography, while photographs of the 'everyday' can act as 'records' in that they document a particular moment in time and space. Burke's archive contains a rich store of what Paul Gilroy (cited in Hall 2007) terms "indirect evidence"; his images offer detailed glimpses into the everyday lived experiences of individuals in British African-Caribbean communities, whilst simultaneously acknowledging their social and political struggle to define a sense of belonging and identity over three generations.

Stuart Hall's (1989:68) observation that, "The practices of representation always implicate the positions from which we speak or write – the positions of enunciation" is pivotal to these debates. With acknowledgment of how the differing historical, political, geographic and social contexts in which photographs are taken significantly influence the ways in which they are read, the complexities relating to documentary photography – for example, issues of agency, and the power relationships between photographer-as-author, and subject – that Burke's work raises, and his personal and political impetus to record, find strong resonance, despite their very different socio-political contexts, with many examples and archives of documentary photographs taken by South African photographers from 1948 onwards.

Okwui Enwezor (2013:33) identifies 1948 as the year in which a "truly South African photography" emerged in direct response to the formation and consolidation of the apartheid state. According to Enwezor (2013:30), the National Party's institutionalisation of apartheid changed the "pictorial perception of the country from a relatively benign colonial space based on racial segregation to a highly contested space". This socio-political change prompted what Enwezor describes as a "visceral, direct, and social" shift in South African photography "from a purely anthropological tool into a social instrument". From its use as a socio-political tool, photography came to occupy a central discursive space in the documentation of apartheid. As Enwezor (2013:30, 32) states,

> a defining feature of the struggle against apartheid is the paradigmatic role played by social and documentary photography, reportage and the photo-essay in documenting, recording, transmitting, and shaping a broad and complex understanding of the law, bureaucracy, institutions, and everyday life under apartheid. … The pictorial records of apartheid – whether quiet pictures probing the seemingly mundane or the brash images of frontline photography are not merely vehicles for presenting facts. They are above all ways of seeing and knowing, and, as argued by the photographers themselves, oftentimes a form of politics dedicated to exposing the underbelly of apartheid and its social conditions.

Contemporary photography in South Africa remains steeped in this documentary tradition, with a younger generation of post-1994 photographers continuing to engage and further that legacy. Some do so as activists; others seek to capture the *zeitgeist* of their social domain or socio-economic-political era, producing photographs that articulate the specificities of lived experience in a contemporary, postapartheid context.

Framing the historical socio-political context of Black Britain

The emergence of a black diaspora through mass migration of people from formerly colonised areas to other countries or from New Commonwealth countries to Britain during the second half of the twentieth century provoked an unsettling of spatial, social and cultural relations for both the immigrant and 'host' communities. As Couze Venn (2010:322) notes, "displacement – whether diasporic or otherwise provokes dislocation in how subjects are grounded in a network of relations, and how they insert themselves in that network". The multiple paradoxes and ambivalences that characterise postcolonial (re)readings of diaspora are encapsulated in James Clifford's (1997:255) identification of diaspora as a site of otherness (displacement) and a site of othering (displacing); it functions as a space in which cultural relations are formed and contested, and is constituted in relation to other sites (the homeland; the new country) by its difference.

It is against the backdrop of such observations that the African-Caribbean diaspora in Britain, widely considered to have begun with the first influx of immigrants that arrived from the West Indies on the MV Empire Windrush in 1948, may be seen as a pertinent example of how diasporic displacement impacted on the construction of subjectivities and identities for both the Caribbean immigrants and the British people. Hall (2007) notes that the story of the first wave of Caribbean immigration to the colonial 'motherland' of Britain tells of how that generation and their descendants "made a life, created communities, struggled for their rights and recognition,





(Previous spread)
Vanley Burke
Africa Liberation Day, Handsworth Park. The crowd listens to speakers from Africa, America and the Caribbean bringing news and information of the Black Diaspora
1977
Silver gelatin print
12 x 16"
Courtesy of the artist

(Top right)
Vanley Burke
Inspector David Webb of Thornhill Road Police Station leads the Africa Liberation Day march through Handsworth
1977
Silver gelatin print
12 x 16"
Courtesy of the artist

(Bottom right)
Vanley Burke
Young men on a see-saw in Handsworth Park
1984
Silver gelatin print
12 x 16"
Courtesy of the artist



Vanley Burke
Police in Winson Green confront protesters demonstrating against a National Front march in support of Robert Ralph. Ralph was detained in Winson Green Prison for openly stating that he would only sell his house to a white family
1976
Silver gelatin print
12 x 16″
Courtesy of the artist



Vanley Burke
Police posted to allow a National Front meeting to take place at Bolton Road School
1977
Silver gelatin print
12 x 16″
Courtesy of the artist

resisted racism and established a black presence" amidst a sense of alienation, and in the face of openly expressed hostility. This hostility speaks to "how their presence 'on native ground' summoned up ingrained fears and stereotypes and awakened new prejudices and enmities among 'the natives'" of British society (Hall 2007). Hall (2007) describes how black immigrants were considered as "foreigners" and treated as an "alien force" that not only threatened to disrupt British cultural and moral values, but also "unsettled popular misperceptions of the so-called monocultural character of 'Britishness' and of white British society".

Although diasporic displacement is often understood in terms of resistance, contestation, and conflict, it is also accepted by postcolonial theorists such as Venn (2010), Paul Gilroy (2000), Homi K Bhaba (1994), and Ien Ang (1990) that, although they seldom take place without tension, the difficult processes of dislocation and relocation can also provide generative opportunities for the production of new cutural paradigms and identity formations. As Clifford (1997:3) states,

> difference [is] articulated in displacement, entangled cultural experiences; [c]ultural action, the making and remaking of identities, takes place in the contact zones … new paradigms begin with historical contact, with entanglement at intersecting regional, national and transnational levels.

Clifford (1997:10) further notes that heterogeneous cultural identities produced by diasporic movements and consequent processes of cultural contact and exchange (hybridity, creolisation, acculturation, transculturation and syncretism, to name but a few), have the potential to "stitch together languages, traditions, and places in coercive and creative ways, articulating embattled homelands, powers of memory, styles of transgression, in ambiguous relation to national and transnational structures".

If the second half of the twentieth century was characterised by marked mass migration of people for political, social, economic and other reasons, the still photograph is a predominant means through which the socio-cultural shifts that ensued as a consequence of migration and cross-cultural exchange were 'recorded' (Hall 2007). There had been a black presence in Britain for several centuries prior to World War II. Consequently, photographic documentation of black settlement in Britain can be traced from the late nineteenth through to the late twentieth centuries, with early photographs produced primarily to illustrate stories in the popular press of the time. Whilst purporting to convey 'informational' content, these photographs visually represent racial and cultural difference in ways that are ideologically laden, foregrounding assumed European superiority over black subjects through the construction and perpetuation of stereotypes, racial othering and objectification.

According to Hall (2007), one of the primary reasons why Burke's images carry currency is because they represent one of the first comprehensive photographic explorations of "'blackness'", and ways of being "'black'" in postwar Britain. As Hall (1993:12-14) notes, Burke's photographic archive represents "the first time that an intimate, insider's 'portrait' – as opposed to a sociological study – of a settled British 'colony' and its way of life ha[s] found its way into print". Burke's position of intimacy in relation to his subjects and his embeddedness in the community he portrays is significant. It is from his position within, and as part of, the Birmingham black community that Burke reveals those aspects of social life that reflect his subjects' immediate lived experiences. Such experiences lie outside of, or behind, the partisan, often sensationalist representations of black Britons ubiquitously reproduced in the mass media from the late 1960s through to the 1980s.

Vanley Burke
A woman ironing in the house she shares with a group of Rastafarian women, Fentham Road
1983
Silver gelatin print
12 x 16"
Courtesy of the artist



Vanley Burke
Two people at Summerfield Park show their respect for the young men killed in the 2011 riots
2011
Silver gelatin print
12 x 16"
Courtesy of the artist



Vanley Burke
Anti-National Front demonstrators march through Birmingham City Centre to Digbeth where the National Front was holding a meeting
1978
Silver gelatin print
12 x 16"
Courtesy of the artist

Some of the 'everyday' practices Burke portrays include activities such as worship and baptism in a local church, children playing in Handsworth Park, families celebrating birthdays and weddings, men drinking or playing dominos and pool in local pubs, youths 'skylarking' on street corners, community participation in racially-based public demonstrations, solidarity marches, and confrontations with the police. The images of racially charged events and those depicting daily occurrences are pertinent examples of ways in which Burke's work straddles both documentary and vernacular photographic modes. While the former overtly reference the socio-political context in which they were taken, they are also records of the everyday, as culturally and politically charged events formed an integral part of African-Caribbeans' lived experience in Britain for three generations. Conversely, the images showing everyday experiences and practices also carry broader meaning in terms of the socio-political context in which the subjects of the photographs are located.

Speaking about his photographic practice, Burke (Through the eyes 2004) observes that his "photographs are … part of a documentation process which we as black people need to go through ... it is not an attempt to show the black community to the wider community … it is more importantly a record". On one level, Burke's photographs function as records of key socio-political events and scenes of daily life of the African-Caribbean community in a particular temporal and geographic context. They carry conceptual currency in that, as Hall (2007) observes in relation to an uncatalogued collection of formal studio high street photo-portraits taken in Birmingham circa 1961:

> 'documenting it' … putting one's finger on it, giving it an image, naming it, representing it, bringing it into the sightline … mattered. It registered. It was part of the politics of representation. It disturbed the 'field of vision' of its time. If it had been left unseen, unsaid, the black politics of resistance of a later period would have had only an empty void to build on.

Yet, on another level, Burke's work is not limited to a documentary recording of historical events. As Hall (1993:12) continues, through the duration of his oeuvre, "the personal, social and economic life of black people as they arrived, settled and became established in British society – is … given … meaning, significance, value, by Vanley Burke's camera eye, [and] not merely 'captured'". In this sense, Burke's images might also be read as visual manifestations of his attempts to interpret how these socio-political events and societal positionings were experienced and understood by those who lived them.

> [I]f we do not take account of the histories of the subjects in the [official] archive articulated by the subjects themselves, then th[at] archive remains the determining discourse (Doy 2000:136).

Burke's powerful recordings of a particular set of narratives from a position inside that domain, and his ensuing archive of photographs, provides an alternative history of black people in Britain; a counter-archive to the state-sanctioned 'documentary' images, with their implicit codes and meanings, that construct dominant readings of Black British history. If read from a public – as opposed to personal perspective – Burke's images reflect the changing nuances of black diaspora over generations, and the destabilising political, racial, and social impact it had on conceptions of British national identity. The first generation of children born in or brought from the West Indies to Britain, grew up to become a new generation of 'Black British' citizens (Chambers 2012:12). This generation and the





(Top right)
Vanley Burke
A demonstration organised by the Asian community in protest against racist immigration laws and deportation
1978
Silver gelatin print
12 x 16"
Courtesy of the artist

(Bottom right)
Vanley Burke
Ivy House Pub, Soho Vanley Burke Road, was one of many Black-owned businesses in Handsworth
1987
Silver gelatin print
12 x 16"
Courtesy of the artist

generation to follow occupied a position of in-betweenness that differed from that of their parents', in that their identity constructions drew on their or their families' migrant backgrounds, experiences of living in Britain and having been exposed to processes of cross-cultural contact. Their identification of themselves as 'Black British' marked the beginnings of a new set of cultural and political paradigms that came to redefine the formerly 'fixed' constructions of both Caribbean and British identities. Influenced by ideas prevalent in the Caribbean and amongst black communities in the United States in the late 1960s and early 1970s (such as the Black Consciousness movement), as well as renewed interest in ethnic origins (roots), and the right to racial justice and equality, these first and second generation immigrants played a critical role in developing new forms of black self-expression in Britain, and in so doing, destabilising former conceptions of a racially homogenous British national identity. Burke's images, then, might be considered as what Gilroy (cited in Hall 2007) terms "fragments of an unfinished history"; they do not illustrate an already-completed narrative, but form part of a racially contested history, whose full significance is still emergent.



(Left)
Vanley Burke
Velrose, Cannon Hill Park
1972
Silver gelatin print
12 x 16"
Courtesy of the artist

(Right)
Vanley Burke
James Hunte campaigns as an independent candidate in the local election
1977
Silver gelatin print
12 x 16"
Courtesy of the artist



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