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Art

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Review

The Time Is Always Now: Soulscapes review - the Black figure reframed to momentous effect



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Sun 25 Feb 2024 04:00 EST

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Still You Bloom In the Land of No Gardens, 2021 by Njideka Akunyili. © Njideka Akunyili Crosby, courtesy of the artist, Victoria Miro and David Zwirner

National Portrait Gallery: Dulwich Picture Gallery, London

The presence, and absence, of Black figures in western art is turned on its head in an exhilarating showcase of 21st-century artists from the African diaspora. Elsewhere, some of the same artists reimagine landscape

At the start of this tremendous exhibition - stunning from first to last - are two mysterious screenprints by the American artist Lorna Simpson, in which Black faces from *Ebony* magazine ads are superimposed one upon another. At first you seem to be looking at a 60s model, frozen and unknowable, in heavy eyeliner and beehive. But through a simple overlay, her face shifts, her right eye quickens and she breaks out of her pose. Through layers of inky blue and emerald, a model turns into an actual human being, coming alive into our present.

This swither back and forth through time is enigmatic, and beautiful to behold. It might also stand as an emblem for this show. The representation of Black figures in art runs back through the centuries, but so often as a succession of models, masks, ciphers or types - only there to signify something other than themselves. The *Time Is Always Now* marks a momentous shift in western culture. In all of these works - made in the 21st century, by 22 great British and American artists - each Black figure is free to be their own unique and singular person.

Here is Jennifer Packer's marvellous portrait of her friend Ivan, lost in thought on a seat that you only deduce from his hunched pose, hands dangling between his spread knees, one sock on, the other foot bare. The magenta of his sweatshirt seems to tinge the air around him, as well as his lower lip and nose; unless it is the colour of his thought itself.

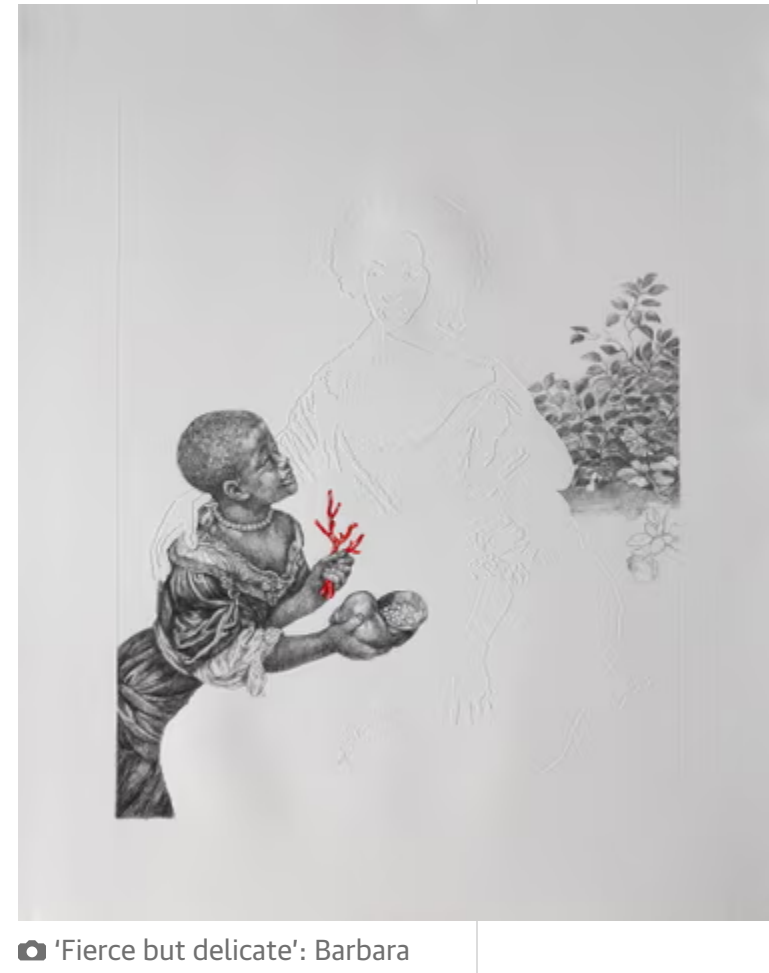
Packer's fellow New Yorker Jordan Casteel paints an elderly couple sitting on a street bench somewhere in Harlem. The late afternoon sun touches their heads and parkas with fugitive light. Their smiles deserve your smile in return. Their arthritic fingers, intertwined, stiff, are right at the heart of the canvas.



Their smiles deserve your smile in return: Jordan Casteel's Yvonne and James, 2017. Courtesy the artist and Casey Kaplan, New York

Njideka Akunyili Crosby's *Still You Bloom in This Land of No Gardens* shows the artist herself, in a dress of Nigerian patterned cotton, young child on her knee, almost camouflaged behind the flourishing plants in her garden. Yet they are imaginary, the creation of many hours of library research to discover species that thrive in both Nigeria and California, where the artist lives now. Crosby's glorious painted collages marry naturalism with graphic quotation and pastiche. Through the open door, pinned to the fridge in the kitchen, you see her ghostly reprise of a photograph of her late, beloved mother.

Barbara Walker, shortlisted for last year's Turner prize, also brings forth the people of the past in her fierce but delicate *Vanishing Point* series, literally plucking them out of old paintings. In her version of Pierre Mignard's *Louise de Kéroualle, Duchess of Portsmouth, With an Unknown Female Attendant* (1682), the duchess is reduced to a relief outline on a white page - essentially a blank - while the attendant becomes the brave protagonist, stoically smiling in graphite and coloured pencil. You are now looking (only) at the overlooked.



Fierce but delicate: Barbara Walker's Vanishing Point 24 (Mignard), 2021. Courtesy the artist and Cristee Roberts Gallery, London

Two of British-Jamaican artist Hurvin Anderson's post-pop paintings show the Birmingham barber where his father used to get his hair cut, along with other Windrush customers. A man sits with his back to us in a cape of what might be Caribbean fabric. His face is invisible in the not-quite mirrors in this unreal room. The roof opens out into white emptiness above. His father is alone, contained in his dreams or memories.

There is such power of thought in these images, and so often carried in the *means* of representation. Amy Sherald's *A Midsummer Afternoon Dream* (2020), for instance, shows a white picket fence running between a bright blue sky and a manicured lawn. A woman in white sneakers and summer frock perches on a bicycle, its basket stuffed with flowers and cute lapdog. It is all immaculately painted, almost Alex Katz in its stylish flatness. Except that the woman is not white, nor quite Black, but a curious grey. It is impossible for you to see her first (or last) in terms of colour. Sherald uses pin-sharp reality to question the reality of the image itself.

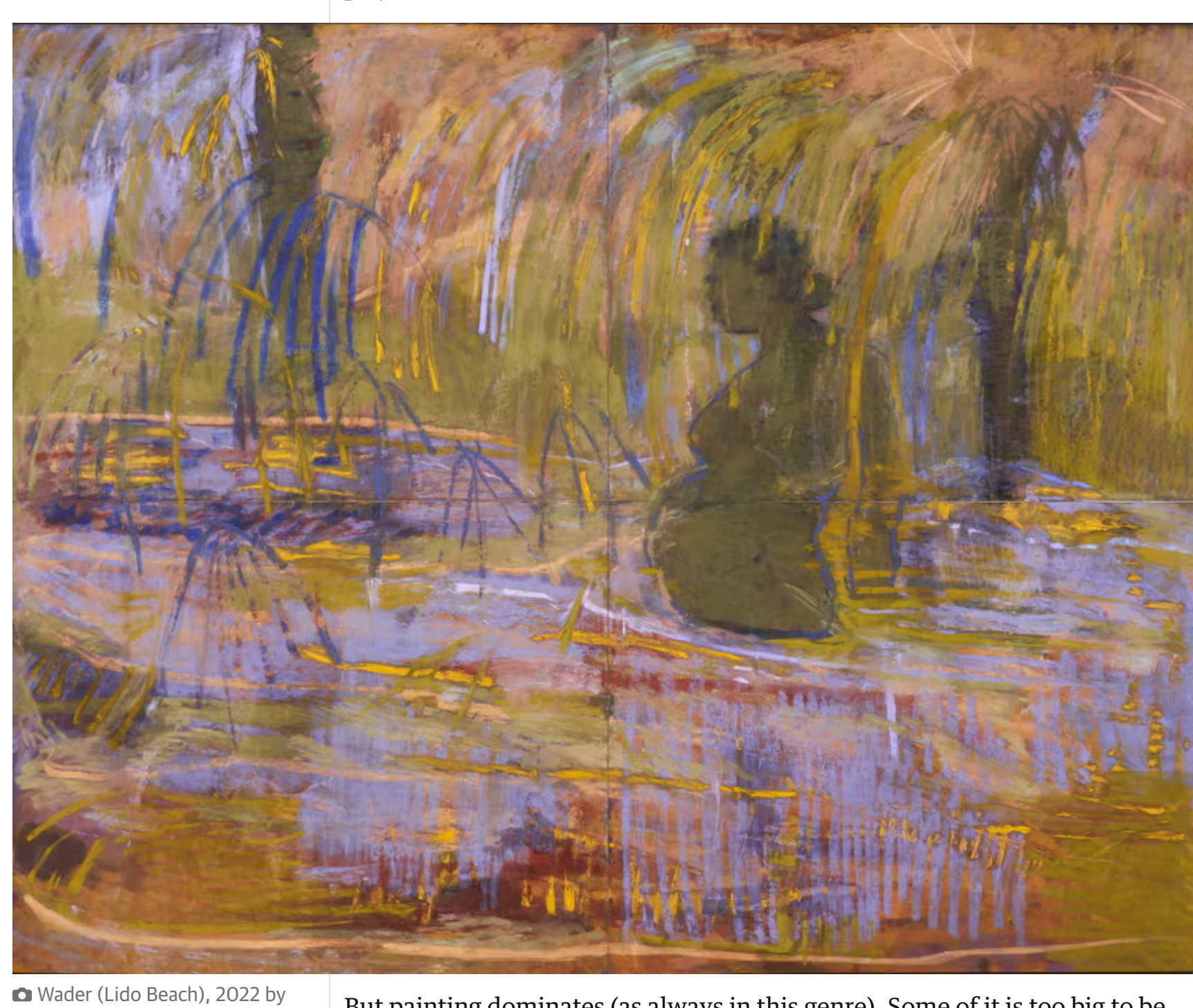
There are many other stars in this show - Chris Offill, Michael Armitage, Claudette Johnson and Kerry James Marshall - whose pioneering paintings are presented in a special enclave of their own. His *Untitled (Painter)* from 2009 seems in this context newly potent and sardonic. The Black woman in her striped smock, holding a brush in one mars-black hand against an even blacker backdrop, is apparently working on a painting-by-numbers self-portrait in which someone else has determined the garish palette of bright colours.

There are paintings by acclaimed artists that even the most passionate gallery-goer may never have seen; and artists who will certainly go on to achieve that fame. Ekow Eshun's curating is judicious, far-sighted and full of flair. So is the show's design, by JA Projects, in which walls shift from oceanic blue brushmarks to silvery steel to a cheerful lawn of green carpet in the final gallery, which seems to bowl right up to a marvellous double portrait by the LA artist Henry Taylor.

This painting, from 2023, shows Taylor sitting outside with his great friend the artist Noah Davis, at whom he is looking with all the empathy the gentle brushwork can summon. Davis died of cancer in 2015 at the age of 32. This is both posthumous portrait and eulogy.

Davis is the biggest revelation of all - a great corner of shapes and images, of strange and immemorial scenes. A Chicago swimming pool from the days of segregation (it takes a moment to notice all the figures are Black) brought into the present by the flying soles of a diver's feet at the centre of the canvas. And the haunting *Mary Jane*: a girl in overlarge shoes, hands already so worked they seem too big for her thin body, face slightly spectral: here but already departing, a last glimmer through time.

Soulscales, at the Dulwich Picture Gallery, includes several of the same Black artists reimaging landscape. It is an ideal companion show. There are textiles - Kimathi Marafio's gorgeous embroidery, in which the artist emerges from a muslin cocoon into a luscious landscape; photographs - Monica de Miranda's montages of Black figures in formal dress, all at sea in distant oceans. An exquisite film by Phoebe Boswell overlays footage of fishermen slowly labouring through the day on an African shore to melancholy effect; it plays in the mausoleum.



Wader (Lido Beach), 2022 by Christina Kimeze. Photographs © Matthew Hollow

But painting dominates (as always in this genre). Some of it is too big to be viewed at sufficient distance in the enfilade of slender galleries; and some feels slightly immature. But there are marvels of the imagination. Christina Kimeze's *Wader* - a lone woman, pensive and pregnant in a glowing pond - marries figure with landscape in a fever dream of paint. Ravelle Pillay's deep waters, overarching with shadowy fronds, are pure menace.

And Hurvin Anderson's enormous *Limestone Wall* pictures some curious concrete structure glimpsed through deep Caribbean forests, lost like some ancient ruin. Or does it? A faint grid lies over the whole scene, pinned together with points of bright colour, and the foliage runs in liquid swaths - a painting of a memory, or perhaps a vision that was never really there.



A painting of a memory: Hurvin Anderson's Limestone Wall (2020). Photographs: Richard Ivey. © Hurvin Anderson. Courtesy the artist and Thomas Dane Gallery

Star ratings (out of five)

The Time Is Always Now: Artists Reframe the Black Figure ★★★★★
Soulscales ★★★★★

The Time Is Always Now: Artists Reframe the Black Figure is at the National Portrait Gallery, London, until 19 May

Soulscales is at the Dulwich Picture Gallery, London, until 2 June

I hope you appreciated this article. Before you move on, I wanted to ask if you would consider supporting the Guardian's journalism as we enter one of the most consequential news cycles of our lifetimes in 2024.

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This is a wonderful article, Laura Cumming! In addition to five embedded images, you included 16 links! The wealthy curious minded, thank-you. :-)

"Meanwhile, this painting caught my eye....
Here is Jennifer Packer's marvellous portrait of her friend Ivan...." - photo

I liked that one a L...

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Guardian Pick
with my history major, I'm reminded of European medieval stories and images of black people - helped by stories like

"the phenomenally wealthy Mansa Musa (r. 1312 to 1337), emperor of Mali, whose empire covered an area larger than Western Europe. In 1324 Mansa Musa made a pilgrimage to Mecca, bringing so much gold with him that it devalued the price of gold in Egypt, where he stopped on the way (9 years afterwards). He is