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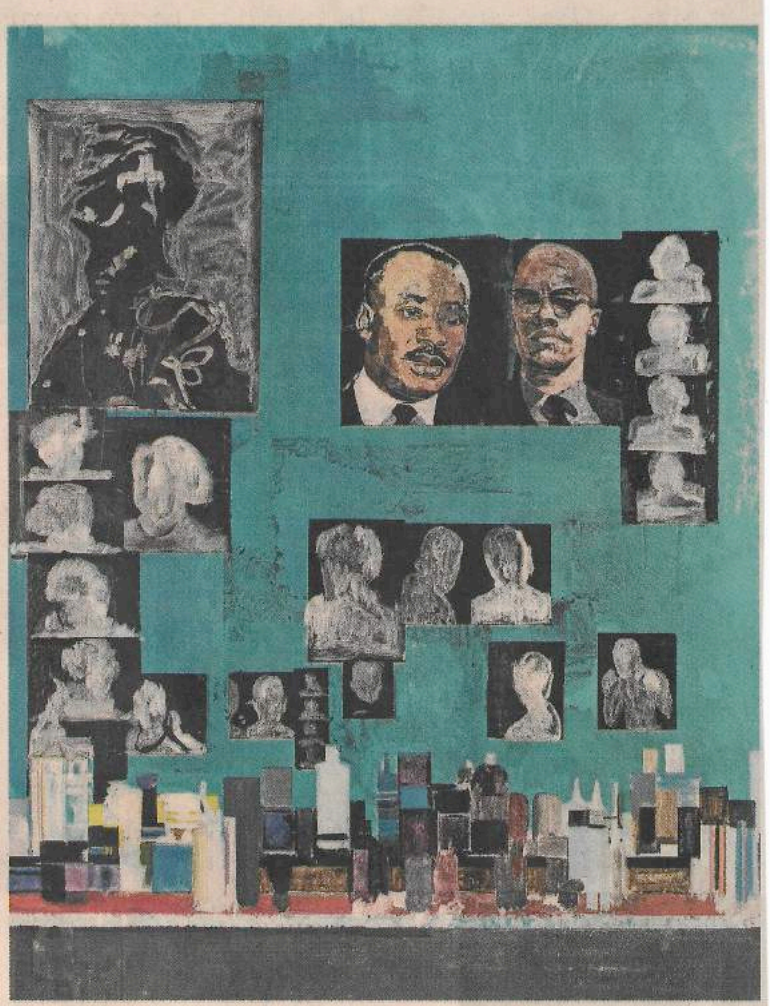
Older artists, better show

This year's Turner Prize exhibition thrillingly captures the pulse of the moment, Jackie Wullschlager writes



Formally assured: 'Is it OK to be black?' by Hurvin Anderson

Opening this year's Turner Prize to artists of any age, not just those under 50, has had immediate results: an impressive, wide-ranging shortlist and, in a gracious, thoughtful presentation at Hull's Ferens Art Gallery, the most serious, accessible Turner exhibition this century.

With each artist dedicated to a specific medium — painting, sculptural installation, film, archival work — the show embraces today's broad spectrum of art-making. It also catches wonderfully the pulse of the moment: all four contenders — none has UK-born parents — share essential concerns with images of otherness, with interpreting and disrupting historical and contemporary narratives about difference.

This is most subtly achieved in Rosalind Nashashibi's "Electrical Gaza" (2015). A film montage of extraordinary enchantment, it depicts everyday life — eating with friends, children playing in run-down streets, yellow taxis speeding past figures in black burkas — in claustrophobically self-contained Gaza through documentary observation, staged scenarios and fantasy animations of cartoon people among idealised palms in Disney colours.

Threat and oppression permeate — Hamas youth marches, Rafah border gates clanking shut — but, drenched in crystalline Mediterranean light, most scenes, including, magnificently, boys washing horses in the sea, celebrate quotidian rhythms. Meditative and lyrical, Nashashibi resists linearity and authorial omniscience: when her intimate, hand-held footage yields to an aerial, security-led gaze on Gaza, Benjamin Britten's fanfare from "Les Illuminations" sounds, with Rimbaud's boast "J'ai seul la clef de cette parade sauvage" an ironic comment on Gaza's ultimate unknowability.

Nashashibi sets the bar for politically engaged poetics. Andrea Büttner is by comparison desperately heavy-handed. Her giant black and white woodcuts "Beggar" (2016) depict abject or beseeching hands, a motif inspired by Ernst Barlach's "Cloaked Beggar-woman", the 1919 bronze embodying German shame and defeatism after the first world war. Büttner is essentially an archivist: she surrounds the woodcuts with hectoring panels documenting philosopher Simone Weil alongside reproductions from the great photographers August Sander and André Kertész. Entitled "Simone Weil: The Most Dangerous Disease", this was made in 1990 in response to German reunification and, says the Ferens, "is typically loaned to community centres and libraries to educate people on Weil's writing, advocating her pacifist and socialist beliefs".

Lubaina Himid's centrepiece is also an older work, "The Fashionable Marriage" (1986), an arresting array of larger-than-life wooden and multimedia cutouts that push figuration to extravagant reduction: a Georgian toff with

lace ruff a flopping mess of rubber gloves, a cardboard box robe inscribed "the white dress is part of a plot to escape". Himid, at 63 the most senior artist here, started as a set designer and brings playful exuberance to this take on Hogarth's "Marriage à la Mode", its narrative reworked with a black inflection. The piece evokes 1980s unthinking prejudice — something Himid helped change as what she calls "a political strategist using visual language". I admire her tenacious vision, but find it hard to feel excited about such obviously didactic pieces as a "Swallow Hard", a dinner set repainted to tell the story of slavery.

"Is it OK to be black?" is the title of Hurvin Anderson's painting depicting a

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barber's salon in two zones: below a range of bottles, Morandi-like, as painterly abstractions; above pictures of Martin Luther King, Malcolm X and hazier black faces instead of expected images of potential haircuts. Anderson, a former Peter Doig pupil, describes his paintings as "a dialogue between two territories", his native Britain and ancestral Jamaica. In Hull he shows formally assured, gorgeously textured canvases from his acclaimed barber series, inspired by his father's African hairdresser in Birmingham, and stunning vertical imaginary landscape paintings. These include "Ascension" and "Greenstem", dated 2017 — the only new work in Hull's entire exhibition — where tropical foliage is both subject and screen for vibrant light effects piercing decorative surfaces built from sensuous layers of washes and stencilled patches of colour. Languid, mysterious, spatially unsettling, encapsulating their subject — alienation — in form and pattern, these deliver a punch of visual pleasure, steal the show, and deserve the award.

Ferens Art Gallery, Hull, to January 7
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