

inability to process his existence in time. But the film is also a tender portrait of a family, of lost members consigned to fleeting recollections and photographs.

In 'Dead Star Light', Tribe draws a parallel between the complexity of the workings of memory and that of the universe. Her triumph is that she never forgets that the former is anchored in emotion. ■

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## A Missing History: 'The Other Story' re-visited

Aicon Gallery London 30 June to 24 July

'The Other Story: Afro-Asian Artists in Post-War Britain' opened at the Hayward Gallery in November 1989. Curated by artist and writer Rasheed Araeen, the show's main objectives, Araeen writes in his 1991 essay 'The Other Immigrant', were 'to give material evidence of the contribution of Afro-Asian artists to mainstream British culture in its Post-War period'. The exhibition included 24 artists, was seen by 25,000 visitors, and toured to Wolverhampton Art Gallery and the Cornerhouse in Manchester where it closed, 20 years ago, on 10 June 1990.

'The Other Story' has become a key date in the chronology of the art world's progressive opening up to issues of race, diaspora and post-colonialism. In her 2009 paper 'The Other Story and the Past Imperfect', scholar Jean Fisher describes the exhibition as 'a major breakthrough in "de-imperialising" the institutional mind'. For the director of London's Aicon Gallery, Niru Ratnam, 'The Other Story' is on an equal footing with Jean-Hubert Martin's 'Magiciens de la Terre' of 1989, the 1993 Whitney Biennial and the Okwui Enwezor-curated Documenta XI of 2002 – three exhibitions now largely recognised as major steps towards a less eurocentric understanding of modern and contemporary art.

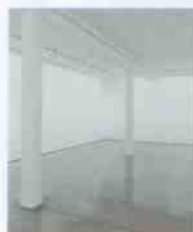
Like most of these shows, 'The Other Story' sparked a virulent controversy, spearheaded in London by art establishment dragons Peter Fuller and Brian Sewell. Fuller wrote in the *Sunday Telegraph* that the pieces on display were 'of little, if any, aesthetic or artistic value', while Sewell asserted in the *Sunday Times Magazine* that 'the work of Afro-Asian artists in the West is not yet worth even a footnote in any history of 20th-century western art'. The reactions of these notoriously conservative critics were perhaps foreseeable, but disapproval also came from scholars and artists more sympathetic to Araeen's concerns, namely Homik Bhabha and Sutapa Biswas, who strongly objected to the small number of female artists in the show (four), accusing Araeen of reproducing the 'masculinism' inherent in western modernism.

Last July, Ratnam set out to revisit Araeen's show with an exhibition at Aicon which, he says, is 'neither a memorial, nor a

strict repetition, but a creative reinterpretation of "The Other Story"'. Ratnam believes that the controversy around the show distracted from the art on display. A re-presentation, he argues, would allow visitors to look at the works for what they are, and revive a debate which has somewhat faded over the past few years. The Aicon show borrows its title from a 1999 quote by former DCMS Secretary of State Chris Smith. Cultural professionals 'should be aware of how narrowly based their own interpreters of history can be,' he said. 'They need both to employ people with a wider vision and to undertake projects that focus on a missing history.' And it is really 'history' which is at stake here: the history of British modernism that Araeen so convincingly attempted to redefine, the history of his effort to do so, and the place 'The Other Story' has, or should have, in British art history books. But perhaps even more importantly, 'A Missing History' puts our own current situation in perspective.

The exhibition gathers 13 artists, 11 of whom were featured in the original show. Attempting to redress 'The Other Story's' gender imbalance, 'A Missing History' has two newcomers: Chila Kumari Burman and Biswas (the once-vehement critic of the project's shortcomings). There is a strong rationale for such a curatorial decision, but it contributes to the confusion in the show's conceptual identity. How different from the original can a 'creative reinterpretation' be? If it becomes an independent entity, are its comments on the original still valid? Moreover, yesterday's mistakes cannot be redeemed by today's actions, as this inclusion could suggest. Yet Burman and Biswas's works bring to the exhibition nuances that would have been missing otherwise. Burman's heap of glittered biscuit cones *Cornets and Screwballs*, 2010, is a fun chunk of colour in stark contrast with the demure palette of the other pieces on display. Her work is also a potent reminder of the distance covered by artists from the diaspora in the past 20 years: *Global Fiddle*, 2009, a collage combining bindis and cut-out papers, demonstrates an espousal of her Asian origins, much at odds with the attitude of Afro-Asian modernists in the 1960s.

And it was first and foremost for these artists, designated 'the Commonwealth Generation' by Fisher, that Araeen devised 'The Other Story', those who arrived in the UK in the 1950s and 60s, who sometimes studied in British art schools and who only gained recognition very late in their lives (if at all). FN Souza, Aubrey Williams and Araeen himself could all be singled out as case studies. Now, somewhat belatedly included in part of the Tate Collection – the institutional endorsement *par excellence* – these artists spent most of their career relegated to the margins of the art world, although they fully embraced the modernist ideal and aesthetic. 'They wanted to be seen alongside Matisse,' explains Ratnam – or in the case of Araeen, alongside Carl Andre, Sol Lewitt and Donald Judd. Araeen's *Char Yar (Four Friends)*, 1968, a composition of brightly coloured cubic modules on display here, clearly belongs to a



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minimalist tradition, but the artist's work has only very recently been acknowledged as such.

It is important to note that, Araeen apart, the work of this generation of Afro-Asian artists is not only an art of referencing and investigation in the modernist vein, but also an art of synthesis. This is particularly obvious at Aicon in the work of the Guyanese Williams's *Sun Hieroglyph (Olmec Maya series)*, 1983, which seems to draw as much from Arshile Gorky as from pre-Columbian signs. The 'Commonwealth Generation' not only inscribed itself in European modernism; it also extended the definition of Modernism by weaving non-western experiences into its fabric.

These early works became more visible in the 1980s with the emergence of the following generation of Afro-Asian artists who directly challenged the British art establishment. Gathered under the banner British Black Arts Movement, these artists (led by Eddie Chambers and the already-veteran Araeen) didn't ask for inclusion in the existing system, but fought for a new one to be put in place. They set up several exhibitions in major venues – including the ICA and the Whitechapel Gallery – which paved the way for 'The Other Story'. Fisher goes as far as arguing that without 'the pressure exerted on art *habitus* gatekeepers' by this new generation, 'The Other Story' might not have happened. Yet the artists involved in the Black Arts Movement were scarcely represented in 'The Other Story', and scarce they remain in 'A Missing History'. Keith Piper's large drawings *Body Type One & Two*, 1982, vehemently denouncing a fetishisation of the black body, are here the most representative examples of works from this period. Instead of focusing on older pieces, Ratnam has

made the choice of including new works by some of these artists, such as Lubaina Himid and Biswas, opening his show to their recent developments. Biswas's single-channel film *Magnesium Bird*, 2004, exemplifies a progression towards more intimate pieces of work, shared by several artists once involved in the Black Arts Movement.

'Twenty years on', Fischer concludes rhetorically, 'is the story any different? Has justice finally been served?' The presence of many of 'The Other Story's artists in important collections, and their soaring prices on the secondary market, would suggest it might have been. Yet it is telling that 'A Missing History' took place not in a mainstream art institution – like so many Black Arts Movement-organised exhibitions in the 1980s – but in the very particular context of a private commercial gallery explicitly supporting international artists. Ratnam has expressed his concern with a growing parochialism in British contemporary art – this year's British Art Show selection, the director pointedly remarked, doesn't really demonstrate an expanded idea of Britishness. 'A Missing History's half-revision of the past may be somewhat problematic, but the show proves that the issues which triggered Araeen's show are yet to be resolved. ■

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## Arabcity: Such a Near East

The Bluecoat Liverpool 2 July to 5 September

Exhibitions of art from the Middle East, and more specifically from the Arab world, are increasingly in vogue. Recent developments include the foundation of New York-based *Bidoun* magazine – the first publication dedicated solely to art from the region – the expansion of art centres in Arab cities such as Beirut and Cairo and, not least, the commercialisation of such work, as has been evidenced by the Saatchi Gallery's acquisition and exhibition of Middle-Eastern art in 2009.

While all publicity is beneficial to practitioners seeking to earn their bread and butter there is, arguably, a simultaneous danger that these works are being appropriated and fetishised. It is unmistakable that capitalism thrives on difference, and the new terms of exclusion that pique interest are the words 'terrorist', 'Arab', 'Muslim', 'migrant' and so forth. Accordingly, it isn't surprising that some of this work has been utilised for public provocation as, some may argue, was the case with the Saatchi show.

'Arabcity: Such a Near East' is an exhibition with a contrary aim. Curated by Rose Issa to coincide with the Liverpool Arabic Arts Festival – the only festival of its kind in the UK – the exhibition resists simple stereotypes by presenting six artists who explore the confines of their identity. Using the expansive geographical parameters of the region as her starting point, Issa proposes to

floor  
Rasheed Araeen  
*Char Yaar (Four  
Friends)* 1968

wall  
Uzo Egonu *Restaurant  
at Bad Orb* 1980

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