

# INSTITUTE OF CONTEMPORARY ARTS

PRESS RELEASE

ICA announces *Connecting Thin Black Lines 1985 – 2025*, curated by Lubaina Himid

*Connecting Thin Black Lines 1985 – 2025*  
24 June – 7 September 2025  
Lower Galleries and Concourse



Lubaina Himid, *Venetian Maps: Shoemakers*, 1997. Acrylic on canvas. Courtesy of Hollybush Gardens, London and Greene Naftali, New York © Lubaina Himid

This summer, the Institute of Contemporary Arts (ICA) in London, in collaboration with Lubaina Himid, will present the major exhibition *Connecting Thin Black Lines 1985 – 2025*. Celebrating 40 years since *The Thin Black Line*, the groundbreaking group show of young Black and Asian women artists curated by Himid at the ICA in 1985, the exhibition will present work by the original artists **Brenda Agard, Sutapa Biswas, Sonia Boyce, Chila Kumari Singh Burman, Jennifer Comrie, Himid, Claudette Johnson, Ingrid Pollard, Veronica Ryan, Marlene Smith and Maud Sulter**. It will be the first time that works by all the artists will be exhibited together again, featuring new commissions as well as artworks made over the past four decades.

In the early 1980s Himid curated three exhibitions of young Black and Asian women artists, positioning their practices at the fore of debates in the British art world: *Five Black Women*, Africa Centre (1983), *Black Woman Time Now*, Battersea Arts Centre (1983 – 84), *The Thin Black Line*, ICA (1985 – 86). Developing within the wider discourse surrounding the British Black Arts Movement, these landmark

# INSTITUTE OF CONTEMPORARY ARTS

exhibitions platformed female artists, highlighting the intersections between race and gender.

Now, 40 years since the original presentation at the same venue, *Connecting Thin Black Lines* at the ICA seeks to expand contemporary interpretations and conversations around the practices of these eleven artists today. Rather than a restaging or retrospective, this exhibition looks forward as much as it does back, with two new commissions by Burman and Smith. In her signature style, Burman will light up the ICA's Concourse with new neon works. Building upon her ongoing exploration of the materiality of objects and embodied perception, Smith will produce a sculptural installation which takes centre stage in the Lower Gallery.

The exhibition will feature several important loans from the Arts Council Collection including Johnson's *Trilogy (Part One) Woman in Blue, Trilogy (Part Two) Woman in Black* and *Trilogy (Part Three) Woman in Red* (1982 – 1986). These large figurative works on paper foreground Black female sitters, who include Agard and Pollard, each holding distinct stances but whose gazes all directly meet ours. Their individual, self-assured poses suggest both their agency and trust in collaborating with Johnson as sitters.

The exhibition highlights the interconnected and wide-ranging roles that *The Thin Black Line* artists have been playing in art and exhibition making, and the meaningful paths crossed between these artists over the course of the last 40 years. This is underlined by several significant loans from Himid's personal collection, including works by Boyce, Pollard, Sulter and Himid herself, from 1982 – 2018. Lubaina began collecting these works from 1980s onwards, demonstrating the enduring relationships between the artists. The intimate traces of Himid as artist, curator and collector are felt throughout the exhibition.

*Connecting Thin Black Lines* features an archival display of professional and personal documents relating to the original exhibition including photographic documentation of the 1985 show. The quotidian work and care behind this historic exhibition are revealed in correspondence between the artists, exhibited here for the first time.

Alongside the exhibition, Himid will curate a rich event programme that will showcase film screenings, sound installations, spoken word and live performances by the following artists: **Amber Akaunu, Sutapa Biswas, Helen Cammock, Trevor Mathison, Pratibha Parmar, Andra Simons, Rommi Smith** and **Magda Stawarska** as well as a social media takeover by **Tao Lashley-Burnley**. In addition, a critical panel discussion examining the significance of *The Thin Black Line* will bring a range of perspectives from artists and curators of different generations into dialogue. Taking the 1985 exhibition as its starting point, the curated event

# INSTITUTE OF CONTEMPORARY ARTS

programme highlights how Himid has continued to foster supportive networks, connections and communities in artmaking for over 40 years.

On the occasion of this exhibition, the ICA will republish the original 1985 exhibition guide accompanied by a companion pamphlet. The original publication serves as an important resource for curators and art historians but has been long out of print with only 27 copies held in libraries globally. Widening access to an important primary source, the new publication will also provide space for reflection today.

Further information about the exhibition, event programme and publication will be announced in the coming weeks.

*Connecting Thin Black Lines 1985 – 2025* is supported by The Ampersand Foundation and Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art.

Lubaina Himid, Curator, says:

After 40 years of experiencing both rapid change and slow developments in the art world, it's thrilling to be working with the ICA again to celebrate how much has been achieved and how much we can still do.

Nicola Leong, ICA Assistant Curator, says:

It is a great privilege to work with Lubaina Himid and this group of formidable artists on the development of this reflective yet forward-thinking exhibition *Connecting Thin Black Lines 1985 – 2025*. This is a long overdue celebration of each artist's success individually and collectively over the last 40 years. They have continued to inspire by forging ahead in their own accomplished careers while generously opening paths for other marginalised artists.

Bengi Ünsal, ICA Director, says:

The ICA serves to platform bold artists and thinkers who challenge our perceptions and interrogate our understanding of the world around us. 40 years ago, this group of daring, young Black and Asian women artists did exactly that, transforming the British art world through their sheer talent. The ICA is honoured that Lubaina Himid is bringing these leading artists, who include Turner Prize winners and nominees, together at the ICA again to create new conversations and connections between both iconic and newly commissioned works across multiple disciplines.

# INSTITUTE OF CONTEMPORARY ARTS

## Biographies

**Brenda Agard** (1961 – 2012) was a photographer and writer who described her practice of photographing Black women as a strategy to document truthful images in opposition to stereotypical representations. She was an important figure in The Black Photographers Group, which sought to platform Black photography in mainstream art venues in Britain, and was also a founding member of 'Polareyes', a journal showcasing the work of Black women photographers.

**Sutapa Biswas's** (b. 1962) works are shaped by her observations about the relationships between people and the places they live in. Born in India but having lived in the UK since the age of four, Biswas is especially interested in how larger historical narratives collide with the personal. Underpinned by an engagement with colonial histories and how this relates to gender, race and class, her art is nuanced by the ways in which oral narratives reveal the human condition and their relationship to our collective histories and to questions of time.

**Sonia Boyce** (b. 1962) is an interdisciplinary artist and academic working across film, drawing, photography, print, sound, and installation. Boyce came to prominence in the early 1980s as a key figure in the burgeoning British Black Arts Movement with figurative pastel drawings and photo collages that addressed issues of race and gender in Britain. Since the 1990s, Boyce has shifted significantly to embrace a social practice that invites improvisation, collaboration, movement, and sound with other people. Working across a range of media, Boyce's practice today is focused on questions of artistic authorship and cultural difference.

**Chila Kumari Singh Burman's** (b. 1957) work has a unique visual identity spanning diverse media such as neon sculpture, printmaking, collage, painting and video. Her work is shaped by her working-class childhood in a Liverpoolian, Punjabi Hindu household, often drawing imagery from popular culture. Her practice is devoted to challenging stereotypes and placing alternative perspectives of Britishness at the forefront of art history.

**Jennifer Comrie** (b. 1960s) is an artist best-known for her pastel drawings which lie between figuration and abstraction, with text being an additional important part of her practice. She describes her work as emerging from the cry within her and the Black community. Her Blackness and spiritual awareness are important elements in her work, and her personal experiences directly inform her artmaking.

**Lubaina Himid** (b. 1954) is an artist and curator who has dedicated her career to uncovering marginalised and silenced histories, figures, and cultural moments. Himid employs her distinctive vibrant visual language across painting, drawing, printmaking, installation and assemblage, often also producing work imbued with

# INSTITUTE OF CONTEMPORARY ARTS

performative potential. Himid's curatorial practice has championed the work of underrepresented contemporaries, particularly Black and Asian women artists.

**Claudette Johnson** (b. 1959) is celebrated for her figurative portraits of Black women and men in a combination of pastels, gouache and watercolour. Countering the marginalisation of Black people in Western art history, Johnson shifts perspectives and invests her portraits of family and friends with a palpable sense of presence. Johnson's empathy and intimacy with her subjects is felt through her sensitive and dramatic use of line, colour, space and scale.

**Ingrid Pollard** (b. 1953) is a British artist and photographer working across photography, installation, video and printmaking. Her work uses portraiture photography and traditional landscape imagery to explore social constructs such as Britishness or racial difference. Pollard nuancedly deconstructs and uncovers the complexity of assumed notions of identity, ownership, borders and subjecthood. Pollard is associated with Autograph ABP, the first Black British photographic association.

**Veronica Ryan** (b. 1956) is a visual artist working primarily in sculpture and assemblage. Often working from a diverse range of materials, including organic forms, Ryan's work elicits a wealth of histories, meanings and multiplicities which she describes as bearing powerful 'residues, traces, memory and deposits.' Her works' deep psychological subtext resists narrow categorisation, as she tussles with oppositional principles such as interior and exterior, absence and presence, container and contained.

**Marlene Smith** (b. 1964) is an artist and curator, and one of the founding members of the BLK Art Group. Smith's practice is concerned with the materiality of objects, both inherited and created, and their embodied perception. Through experimentation with their properties, biography becomes not a means of classification and stratification, but instead a similarly malleable object that becomes engaged, activated, and transformed through artistic practice.

**Maud Sulter** (b. 1960 – 2008) began her career as a writer and acclaimed poet, expanding her practice to include photography and performance. Sulter's multi-faceted practice sought to claim space for Black artists and address the erasure and representation of Black Women in the histories of art, the media, and photography. Sulter critically investigated the complex experiences of the African diaspora in European history and culture, producing substantial bodies of work built upon this research.

# INSTITUTE OF CONTEMPORARY ARTS

## About the Institute of Contemporary Arts:

The Institute of Contemporary Arts (ICA) is London's leading space for contemporary culture. We commission, produce and present new work in film, music, performance and the visual arts by today's most progressive artists. In our landmark home on The Mall in central London, we invite artists and audiences to interrogate what it means to live in our world today, with a genre-fluid programme that challenges the past, questions the present and confronts the future.

The ICA platforms the daring and the curious, supporting artists and ideas that challenge perceptions, inspire social change, and connect with diverse audiences locally and globally. As a space for bold, boundary-pushing creativity, we cultivate connections across disciplines, communities, and cultures. Our cross-disciplinary programming invites audiences to explore beyond the boundaries of individual art forms, fostering experimentation and the discovery of new perspectives. Open to all voices and ideas, we embrace interplay and interaction across club nights, film festivals, gigs, exhibitions, talks, and digital art. With inclusivity and collaboration at the heart of our work, we remain fearless in shaping contemporary creativity, connecting diverse voices, and making unexpected connections that define the future of arts and culture.

Our history of presenting and promoting visionary new art is unrivalled in London: from Kenneth Anger to Kathy Acker, Kano to Klein, Jackson Pollock to Jean-Michel Basquiat, Gay Sweatshop to Forensic Architecture, David Bowie to Stormzy, Pop Art to queer techno. Today, as ever, our inclusive programme reflects and represents who we are as a disparate and diverse collection of cultures and identities.

Exactly 78 years after a group of artists and poets founded the ICA as an alternative to the mainstream, we are committed more than ever to pave the way for the next generation and to platform creative voices. The ICA continues to celebrate risk and champion innovation, and experimentation across the arts – a playground and a home for today's most vital artists.

Central to the ICA's vision and mission is a commitment to diversity, equality, and inclusion at all levels of the organisation. We want to create and maintain an ICA that is a positive environment where similarities and differences of people are valued – a space where everyone belongs and feels welcome. We hold ourselves accountable through our regularly reviewed Anti-Racism Strategic Plan; Equality and Diversity Policy and Action Plan; and Safety Policy.

Since its inception, the ICA has been the home of future-thinking ideas and urgent cultural discourse. We are committed to fostering a diverse and inclusive environment that encourages dialogue and debate, recognising that differing viewpoints are essential to the advancement of contemporary arts and culture.

The ICA is an Arts Council England National Portfolio Organisation.

## Press Enquiries

Kitty Malton, Sam Talbot [kitty@sam-talbot.com](mailto:kitty@sam-talbot.com)  
Rebecca Boswell, ICA [rebecca.boswell@ica.art](mailto:rebecca.boswell@ica.art)

To download press images, visit [ICA's Dropbox](#)