

Transcript

Speaker 1

This is the image that actually got me started on this quest. This is *Portraits du Nègre*, and it was painted in 1800. And I found her, I was walking down Charing Cross Road in the rain, and I popped into foils. and just walking around and these books were there and there she was and I had never ever seen an image like this. We were enslaved then in Europe and also in the Caribbean and in Africa. And then at the same time this incredibly noble image of liberty. My first response to her is a response from me to this.

Speaker 2

I would say for me too, I mean it's a question also in terms of how you react and I mean, my ancestors are very important to me and I also think that other people's ancestors are very important to them, and so this woman will have descendants in this world. And I often feel that these paintings speak to me and say, represent me.

Speaker 1

Represent me. Represent me.

Speaker 2

When I'm working on portrait work, I very much like to know about my sitters. I don't pick people off the street because in some way I want your portrait to echo to the present and back to the past about what you're doing.

Speaker 1

This is a personal journey through a maze of representations of the black image in Western art from the Middle Ages on. They seem to me to echo not only the age in which they were created, but also to tell us about something hidden in the European psyche. This white dress makes me think about that what I really wanted to do was start thinking about whiteness first as a construct, and because people generally don't, and Richard Dyer has written a book about it. That fascinates me.

Speaker 3

I think there's a way in which white people are always represented as just being ordinary humanity. They're presented as kind of the norm, but without even really thinking of it as the norm. So what I wanted to try and look at is the fact that whiteness is just one particular way of being human, which has a history, which has been put together in particular ways, has conventions of representation and so on. You can't go lynching me.

Speaker 1

I'm a white man. I remember that film, and Richard Dyer's book is a lot about movies and popular culture, but I wanted him to go back to where the idea of whiteness began. and tell me why he uses the word raced. What do you mean when you say raced?

Speaker 3

Well, I think there's a sense in which a representation of a white person is essentially a representation of a human being, whereas-- A template human being. Yes, yes. Whereas a representation of a non-white person, and we could talk about that term, non-white, because it's sort of problematic, but anyway, a person who is not white, is always therefore not merely another human being, but another human being of a particular race. The habit of, I actually do think most people in Western society, is to talk about white people and never actually to mention the fact that they're white. That's the assumed norm. But as soon as they're not white, then it gets specified in one way or another. That's what I mean by saying that they are raced by the culture.

Speaker 1

I wondered how much Christianity was to blame.

Speaker 3

I think Christianity is very important in understanding all of this. is not at all to say you can't be Christian and be black, and it's obviously not true. And Saint Augustine was black. There are two things about Christianity that are important. One is that it's had this distinction between black and white, it used the distinction between black and white, first of all as polar opposites and secondly as associated with black evil, white good. So it already had that. But in addition, it's very odd about the body, Christianity. In a way, although Christianity is all about the spirit become flesh, it's also about the importance of transcending the flesh.

Speaker 1

So we have in Christianity, it's somewhere around the Crusades, let's say, a spirit body split, and that white people were seen to have a body. But as you say, that body, what was important about that body was the spirit within the body.

Speaker 3

And which could subjugate the body, which could transcend the body, which could control the body?

Speaker 1

So therefore black people were the body itself with all these various problems and so forth.

Speaker 3

Both couldn't control their own bodies and needed to be controlled. I think it's important to say that the emphasis upon black people only being their bodies, I think that is actually later. I think when you talk about the Middle Ages and even the early Renaissance, there is a sense of black people being the infidel or being without Christ and all of those sorts of things. There isn't necessarily a sense that they could not be Christian. And I mean, the key representation of that is the introduction of Balthazar, one of the three wise men that visited Christ in the state. So clearly another example of a kind of the good black. And I think what all of those kinds of images, and of course the whole cult of the Black Madonna is very important, are a representation of the possibility that black people could be saved too.

Speaker 1

I grew up on the south side of Chicago and we had these holy cards that had Jesus as this blonde, blue-eyed, long-haired hippie type and they were gold embossed and all of that and I had no idea that there were any sort of black images of God or his mother until I moved to Europe 16 years ago and found out that they not only existed but that they are integral to the history and the religion of this continent. In almost every country, there is a black image that is central to it. The Black Madonna of Chestakova has been crowned Queen of Poland. I've been to Krakow myself, and I've seen her revealed to her devotees. On August 15th, a feast day of the Blessed Virgin Mary, in towns like Le Pouillon-Villet in France, a Black Madonna is brought out from the cathedral and carried in procession through the streets. When I moved to London, I discovered there was a Black Madonna in Willesden just up the road from me. Pilgrims have been coming here since the Middle Ages, but the original Black Madonna was burnt on the orders of Henry VIII. Now there's a modern version, which I went to see with my friend, Sarah Boss, an expert on Black Madonna shrines.

Speaker 4

Look at this beautiful profile.

Speaker 1

I know her, lovely, lovely, lovely. It's an African profile, I mean the back. This part of her, the nose and the breasts and the belly itself. The sort of power that she has. And of course, she's holding out a son who is God. And it's almost as if when you stand back and look at her, you know, you pull yourself back and really look at her. color invites you to come inside.

Speaker 4

Yes. This is interesting in Wilson, I think, where there's a holy well here. But part of this is to do with the darkness of the earth. And the springs well up from the darkness of the earth, like, as though they're life coming out of a womb.

Speaker 1

It's delicious, isn't it? Certainly doesn't taste like London.

Speaker 5

No, it doesn't.

Speaker 1

And this water is presided over by a black image. She is in a wild place, even in the middle of London.

Speaker 4

It feels like that, doesn't it? I mean, originally this was all in the woods and was really wild.

Speaker 1

Having talked with Richard Dyer about whiteness, I wanted to ask Sarah about the appeal of blackness for many Christians.

Speaker 4

I really think that from a spiritual point of view, the blackness of the Black Madonnas is something to do with the significance of darkness and light being created out of darkness. You know, in the book of Genesis, at the very beginning, It describes everything as dark and without form and then God creates light out of darkness and then everything else follows from that. And it's almost as though that's a pattern for how the human person is as well, that we emerge out of a state of darkness spiritually to illumination. And I think all the world's great religious traditions are concerned with that journey. And so The Virgin Mary, in a way, stands for or participates in that sort of primeval darkness out of which something divine and light is going to emerge. So the light and the darkness belong together, I think. One author I read said the thing about the white Madonna is that she belongs with the white Madonna and vice versa, that you move from one to the other and you can't have one without the other.

Speaker 1

And too bad that that's not the way that we see human beings. Yeah, it's very sad. Sarah, how do you account for the split in the European psyche between the revered black image and the fear of real black people?

Speaker 4

I sometimes think of that idea that what psychological idea that what we most fear is what we most desire. But I think in an image such as this, in the Black Madonna, you have the desiring aspect that this represents something that's but sought after.

Speaker 1

Was there any connection with the color of the statue, having connection with the color of the wood or the tree?

Speaker 4

I always used to assume that it was, that, you know, black Madonnas were made of ebony or something like that. And then when I started reading about those that had actually been examined, and it turns out almost none of them is made of black wood. They're nearly all made of light woods, ordinary woods that are used for carving, boxwood, applewood, oak. And so they're light woods and they're deliberately painted black. So that's one of the things that's very interesting when people say, oh, well, perhaps they've been blackened through candle smoke or indeed there are legends about them being blackened through fire. But what's interesting, I think, is that people have gone on deliberately painted them black.

Speaker 1

That fascinates me too, because what does that mean?

Speaker 4

Yeah, they didn't clean them up and paint them white again.

Speaker 1

But what does it mean? What does it mean that they've done that?

Speaker 4

That's the mystery, isn't it? What do you think?

Speaker 1

What do you think?

Speaker 4

I think some of it is that the image isn't to do with blackness of skin, but it's to do with darkness. I mean, you know, Our Lady of Le Puy, for example, certainly used to have, according to the old records, had dark face, and Christ had a dark face, but their hands were white. Yeah, she still does, yeah. So it's as though she's not meant to be like a real black person. It's almost like that's a clue that this is some kind of symbolic darkness.

Speaker 1

I finally got to see Saint Morris, the African martyr, who's been standing guard over the Cathedral of Magdeburg since the Middle Ages. It wasn't until I saw the books that I saw that Saint Morris was black, and of course the Theban legion that was a Nubian legion

was allegedly a black legion. So he was a patron say in the Holy Roman Empire, which you imagine to be this, you know, bastion of Christianity, and one of the patron saints of Germany. I've told other people, other black people especially, I've said, you know, that there is this amazing patron saint of the German people, and he's black, and their first response is, That's incredible.

Speaker 6

I think at that time, when he first came to the cathedral, the racial question was not central for the people. People were seeing him as a symbol of the church all around the world in this guardian, in this military function. And they could relate to someone like that, even though he was of a different race. This is our most famous depiction here, but Morris pops up at different parts of the church.

Speaker 1

How many images of St. Morris are here in the cathedral.

Speaker 6

Over 20 altogether.

Speaker 1

Just different St. Morris'.

Speaker 6

Different St. Morris'. We have one painting, mostly sculptures, reliefs and so on.

Speaker 1

He's gone through World War I, World War II, he's gone through bombardment, he's gone through unification in the 19th century, he's gone through the GDR, the old communist Germany, he's gone through reunification, and he's still here.

Speaker 6

He survived. It was by chance, by good fortune, by the grace of God, take it as you will. But he's, of course, scarred through the centuries. Yes, as we all are. We all would be. But if you take a look at him, he's still going strong. He's still going strong. And his faith is unperturbed and undisturbed, if you look at him.

Speaker 1

He has been German for hundreds of years, and here he is, here he is.

Speaker 6

Mauritius der Deutsche, Morris the German, that's something that. And at the same time, Morris the African.

Speaker 1

Morris the African, Morris the saint. Morris the soldier.

Speaker 6

The guardian, as you said.

Speaker 1

Morris the guardian.

Speaker 6

There's a depiction of him on the outside and again guarding the inside, guarding the tomb of Archbishop Arnis.

Speaker 1

These are the western doors.

Speaker 6

These are the western doors.

Speaker 1

That's the doors of death. That's when the sun goes down.

Speaker 6

Is the first statue of St. Morris, you see if he would come through the western doors, if they were open now.

Speaker 1

Actually, he would be, you come right through those doors, and there he would be. And he's standing there in a posture where, at the same time, he's looking up to heaven. His face, again, is that beautiful Negroid features and his lips. People nowadays would say, oh, to see a bunch of black men on the corner would make me nervous. But in medieval times, if seeing this particular black man, you would have had another feeling altogether. He looks like my uncle. And you tell him, he really does.

Speaker 6

The pulpit is still used during services here. It's not that it's a piece of art, just a piece of art, but it's also in liturgical use.

Speaker 1

There he is.

Speaker 6

There he is with his standard, always depicted as a soldier. Very typical. And on the shield, because he was the patron saint of the German Empire, the early German Empire, you have the eagle of the empire on his shield.

Speaker 1

Do you know what he reminds me of? You can see, for instance, in London, lots of black men who are sort of bodyguards. They stand in front of nightclubs. And it almost seems like Morris is kind of a bouncer in a way. He's a person who's sort of holding, do you know what I mean? He's sort of holding back any of the kind of evil that might be coming. And also thinking of this whole sweep, as you walk up here and you look at this black man standing here, it's as if he's the last protector before you go up to the altar itself.

Speaker 6

When you proceed to the Eucharist, you will always pass him.

Speaker 1

Dr. Giza Lacroix, the dean of the cathedral, had told me earlier how important St. Morris had been for him as a symbol of political resistance.

Speaker 7

How did you use him to rally the people around the anti-communist stance?

Speaker 1

How did you use him?

Speaker 7

They chanted pigs at the police, and in scenes repeated in cities across East Germany, hundreds were beaten and 700 were arrested in Berlin alone. I'm not in October. I'm not. I'm not. I'm not. I'm not. I'm not. I'm not. I'm not. The church as the only independent organization provides the main focus for the opposition. Sympathetic pastors have kept their congregations in touch with news of events denied to them by the East German media.

Speaker 1

I also talked with an Ethiopian member of the congregation who settled here. and played St. Morris in a pageant. What is it like now to be a black man in this town?

Speaker 5

Here.

Speaker 1

What is it like?

Speaker 5

You know, it's now it's nice. Now the black people or other foreigner can good live here in East Germany.

Speaker 1

Good life, yeah.

Speaker 5

But 1994, 1995, It was a difficult time.

Speaker 8

Guns and knives are also used to intimidate foreigners on the streets of cities like Magdeburg.

Speaker 2

Last year, neo-Nazi attacks doubled in several eastern states, creating a climate of fear.

Speaker 5

Somebody, some Ethiopians in 1995, asked me, why you live here? You see what you see what how the people attack. So, why you live here? No, I must live here. They must, they must love, they must understand us, and we are guests. We must also with living with these people, so So I tried with these people to live. And I'm a beginner. I have kids. I have a gentleman's wife. I live here. I pray God and I have a good people. And the church people, they are different. They are good.

Speaker 1

They are nice.

Speaker 5

Like my home. They feel me like my home.

Speaker 1

A few years ago, while teaching in Ghana, I made a trip to Elmina. Elmina was one of the great slave ports of West Africa on the Atlantic coast, and probably was where my ancestors were put on ships in chains and sent to the so-called New World.

Speaker 9

This very dungeon housed between 150 and 200 women, so there wasn't enough space for one even to lie down. In fact, it was the Africans who did their raiding and selling of Africans to the Europeans.

Speaker 1

It was a very poignant trip for me. Then I went to Holland, which had been one of the great slave trading nations. At the Maritime Museum in Amsterdam, there was an exhibition of slave ships, and talking to its curator, Dirk Tang, brought back memories of my return to Africa. When I went to Elmina, I also went up to Kamasi, where the Shanti Henny and the Shanti are their strongholds. And of course, I was actually traveling with a German. And I noticed as we were traveling to Almina, he got redder and redder in the face because of the humidity and the heat. And then it suddenly dawned on me that, of course, Europeans did not go into the interior because they couldn't.

Speaker 10

No, they couldn't. And they couldn't. And they even could hardly suffer whenever they were at Almina.

Speaker 1

At Almina, yeah. This room interests me because I was actually in this room. This is the room of the governor. Looking out of that window there is actually a kind of Dutch genre view. So it's interesting to see this picture. Of course, in that picture is the way Elmina looked when I was there, the rough sea and so forth.

Speaker 10

Now there's something amazing going on here. is an African person. I mean, absolutely he's a black person, first of all. But if you look at it carefully, you will notice that he has this Brazilian Amazon headdress. And who painted this? Clearly he didn't know what Africans looked like at that time.

Speaker 1

It's quite scary in a way. It's quite spooky for me to look at it because these are the display of all of his possessions, including that human being there and that little dog.

Speaker 10

And that little dog, yeah. They're on the same level.

Speaker 1

Yes. This is actually a sort of calling card, isn't it? So the whole of slavery, if we want to look at it this way, is about the sort of accumulation of capital and the display of wealth. And then this little boy would have been an example of the wealth of these people.

Speaker 10

You see, he's dressed up very well. He has this very large pearl in his ear.

Speaker 1

Yes. And you can see behind him, you can see the ship. Obviously, he was a ship's merchant. Yes. So you can see the ship back there. You can see the pearl earring. You can see the oranges, which didn't come from the Netherlands.

Speaker 10

In my opinion, this whole composition is made as a show off. Look at me. We are sort of world citizens. because we are acquainted with Africa. We know that people, there are other places in the world where people live who have other skin colors, like black, for instance. And we are the bosses of them. Imagine yourself living in the Netherlands around 1600 and not thinking about enslaving your neighbors or enslaving somebody from another town. And then still be capable of boarding a ship, going to Africa, and dealing with slave trade. and become part of it.

Speaker 1

What gets you started?

Speaker 2

It depends, really. I guess when I'm working on a montage piece, it just comes from what's around. If there's a particular painting that I've been studying and I've 19th century photographed, then I guess that's different. For me, I'm using the subject matter of my personal history and my personal experience as an African and a European, stretching from Scotland to Ghana in my case, but also acknowledging other people's histories as well.

Speaker 1

Maude, you're talking about working with the past to create something new. Reminds me of the time that I visited Amsterdam and I met black artists there. Meeting them caused some very surprising encounters for me and really touched things in my past I hadn't expected. How is it for you to live here as a creative woman and also to know that this town had all of this history with it?

Speaker 8

No, it's true that it's quite, I mean, even for me, when, for example, I see those images which are just behind us, when you see all those women who have been treated like dogs, terrible things. I mean, we could have been those women.

Speaker 1

Yes. This woman hanging from a tree. Yeah.

Speaker 8

It was sort of very strange, I would say, because I could see, for example, on the map, the name of Loango, which is in fact right, the Bay of Loango, that's a bay in Congo, which is in fact where all the trading going to, and in fact, Luongo is really the, my family is still there.

Speaker 1

Do you know what's hitting me right now as you're speaking, and you mentioned it, I didn't say it, possibly your ancestors could have sold my ancestors. I thought about it. I mean, you know, that your ancestors, we could be cousins. I mean, we could be related. that your ancestors could have sold my ancestors, and that we met in Amsterdam. That's emotional. You know, I feel emotional when I said it. So we met again. Oh, it suddenly just hit me. It just suddenly hit me when you said that, that that's a possibility. It's quite odd, isn't it?

Speaker 10

In an order to process the slave trade, people were dehumanized and they were named Piesas, Piesas de India. The Piesas de India is a female or male between 15 and 35 years of age. So if you were a slave plantation owner and you ordered slaves, you always ordered piezas. So you said, I want 100 piezas. And that could mean that you would end up maybe with 115 or 118 people.

Speaker 1

So they didn't even call them people. They'd call them piezas. Another side of the story was presented in a parallel exhibition downstairs, where the artist Geraldo Pinedo turned the pieces back into people.

Speaker 8

This is made by heart. I mean, I went very deep in the slaves, how I put them together. I make all this figure one or one.

Speaker 1

As opposed to upstairs where they're just the same. Now I can see it. Every one of them is different. Everyone has a different...

Speaker 8

Exactly.

Speaker 1

Oh, my goodness.

Speaker 8

Not close enough. They should be closer. They have too much space. I mean, from the reality, how they transport it.

Speaker 1

You've actually individualized each one of these people because you never see these people individualized ever. And each of them has an individualization. This is magnificent. Magnificent. How long did it take you to do this?

Speaker 8

One and a half year.

Speaker 1

And this man, what is he doing here?

Speaker 8

Playing suicide.

Speaker 1

He's about ready to go.

Speaker 8

Yeah. This document, this is a document that the British government sent to the slave trade from Cuba.

Speaker 1

That's amazing.

Speaker 8

And I printed so big I could on this that everybody can see how much money they was making this time for, I mean, It was the black gold.

Speaker 1

This is the killing part. They've even calculated the blood money for landing the slave. The interest that's going to be paid.

Speaker 8

You can see end of the year how much money in this time they was making this.

Speaker 1

And the profit. They've even calculated the profit. They even got a 10% mortality rate in it. Yeah, what do you say? what do you say?

Speaker 8

This is in the beginning was very hard for me, but I have to say it one more time. This part of the religion. Give me a balance in thinking.

Speaker 1

Because the religion gives you a balance. Give me a balance. Because otherwise we would be all raging maniacs. And I always say that to people, you know, how people always say, well, you know, all the crime and so forth that black people allegedly perpetrate in the West. And I say, but if you look at the whole picture.

Speaker 8

You have to go very bad.

Speaker 1

You have to go very, you know, into what happened.

Speaker 8

Far away.

Speaker 1

And also that actually is the wonder we all did not go mad. And it is because of the religion. It is because we were able to hold onto the gods. Your exhibition is a kind of an antidote in a way. Your exhibition actually says to us, they brought over an enormously rich culture. And in spite of the evil that was done, they held onto it. When the exhibition opened, there appeared this ghostly, strange slave ship right in the museum courtyard. I saw a picture of it and I thought, I really want to meet this guy. Ruben, suddenly you wanted to show me this. Why, why?

Speaker 11

Because the feeling that I get when I see him is like it is my grand and grand and grandfather.

Speaker 1

Yeah. Ruben traces part of his ancestry back to this very admiral who raped and plundered in the Caribbean colony of Curacao.

Speaker 11

At that moment, I think my life started.

Speaker 1

That's very powerful because what you're saying is that this man who, if I look at him, he looks a little bit like you. I mean, it's the nose, the eyes.

Speaker 11

Most of our from Curacao look like him. Have something. from him of something from the Tripoli.

Speaker 1

This Admiral Pete Hain.

Speaker 11

Yeah, it's Pete Hain, yeah.

Speaker 1

And so from the violence that he wreaked in Curacao, your images of ships, your obsession with ships and movement is from this maybe, maybe, maybe from this man. Are you still working on this?

Speaker 11

Yes, just now I'm working, my lady, because we are doing together, and it's the contrast, huh?

Speaker 1

Yes.

Speaker 11

And my lady is doing it with me together. We love-- we like to confrontate people like contrast. We are contrast from each other. And we like to confrontate people with things. Because she get enriched by knowing, and I get enriched by knowing by her.

Speaker 1

Yeah. So you make a slave ship out of Coca-Cola.

Speaker 11

Because the Coca-Cola must be bring by ship to Africa. I cannot drink the water from Africa. So I go and I buy a Coca-Cola. But I come from Europe, so I have the money to buy the Coca-Cola. If I buy other products that are cheaper, I get from that belly, you know? It's the same as slavery.

Speaker 1

That's right.

Speaker 11

I want to make a new slave ship, bring African product to here. Europa. Equilocate water. Van Europa. Mir. Nar Africa. Breng. N for Copa. Echa. Africa water. Breng nar Europa. Equilocate Europa water. Drink.

Speaker 1

But it seems that the British portraiture had a lot of these little children in the background or at the foot of the mistress and so forth. Was this a particularly statement about the empire or beginnings of the empire?

Speaker 12

Well, in terms of that original genre in English art of conversation pieces, which is distinctly English rather than French.

Speaker 1

What are they?

Speaker 12

Well, a conversation piece is, it was the most common of sort of 18th century art in the first half of the 18th century, where you'd have ladies and gentlemen sitting around a, say, card table or a tea table, engaged in conversation, polite conversation. And there would frequently be a black servant there, normally in the background, a kind of shady figure coming in with a cup of tea. So in the conversation piece, the black figure is crucial, especially when you think that in the 18th century civilization was defined by the mastery of the word. So that when you have a black in a painting which is about speech and language, you know immediately that black is a foil, that black is a symbol of everything that is not English expression. I mean, I just find it really interesting talking about the English language, how the word patron in the 18th century had a dual meaning. Patron meant, as we know in the art world, somebody who patronizes the arts, the support of the arts. But patron, which is another version of the word patron, meant owner of slaves. See? And so therefore, in that one word itself, is a history of the relationship between art and slavery.

Speaker 2

You've got nice fingers, so we'll have them in when we're in, when we're coming in with a camera, we'll be quite close.

Speaker 1

This outfit that you're constructing, representing, would have been around the time of this music, that we're listening to, the Chevalier de Saint-Georges, who was a black man, a contemporary of Mozart, a great virtuoso violinist, a great adventurer. He was the first black colonel in the French army. He was an amazing creature. And then he disappeared after he died in 1799. And that's got to only be because he was a black man. It's amazing. These black holes, if you like, in European history.

Speaker 7

We have to keep our hands quiet.

Speaker 2

Let's find a place and more or less keep them.

Speaker 1

How's that? Perfect.

Speaker 12

In *Mariage à la Mode*, there is a very explicit image that tells you directly that the aristocratic patronage of art is directly related to funding from slavery, because you have the juxtaposition of a black boy and art objects with an auction list. Although almost every single detail in a Hogarth print or painting has some kind of narrative meaning, when I saw the black figures, I couldn't find anything in art criticism to tell me why the black figure was there. I could find out about why a tobacco paper was there, or why a chair that is...

Speaker 1

Why did you think there was a why to it, David?

Speaker 12

Because Hogarth is overwhelmingly a narrative artist, and everything in Hogarth means something. There are no redundancies. Every detail is pointed. It's part of a very tight narrative structure. There's a kind of ricochet of meaning within the tight organization of A-frame. So a black figure And of course it wasn't one, it was several, and they were in all his major series. They were throughout his work. So they must mean something. So that led to an investigation of what the nature of blackness was in the 18th century and understanding of the black presence in Britain in the 18th century. But more importantly, the discovery that the very first, to my mind, the very first anti-slavery image in English art is in Hogarth, in the image of a pregnant, depressed-looking, pregnant black woman beating hemp in an English prison in Bridewell, a print that he did in 1732. It's one of the frames of *A Harlot's Progress*. And this is a black woman at the very far end. You have to really look for her. But when you see her, she has her

mallet, and she's resting it in her belly, so there's a pun on labor. She's black, so obviously that points you to slavery and to the colonies. But once you pull that figure out of the shadows and read that figure, that black pregnant woman, then you come to some kind of understanding of the compassionate nature of Hogarth's art. And I suppose ultimately that's what drew me to him. He was the first English artist to represent the lives of the common people. And I think he had the same kind of artistic excitement and the same sense of artistic challenge when he painted black figures as he painted the black boy in the captain Lord George Graham painting. You know, the challenge of getting the reflection of light in the boy's forehead and his nose, the way the light then echoes the sheen of the boy's buttons. Getting that kind of black subject caught in a certain light and in a certain darkness at a certain moment and trying to capture the spirit of that moment. You have to understand that people like Hogarth and Reynolds, they were fed up of painting white. That's all they had. They had to go and do the portrait. The worst thing that they had to do when they had portraits of white sitters was to clean it up. You had to lie when you painted white people when you were a portrait painter, but if you had a black figure, you didn't have the pressures of commerce. This is why Gainsborough, you can sense in Gainsborough's portrait of Sancho an enormous, well I would always use the word merriment. Gainsborough must have thought, oh God, I don't have to do another Gainsborough. I can do my friend Sancho.

Speaker 1

Yes, that's a wonderful image because he's standing there and he's almost, his head is back and he looks almost as if he's like striding forth and he's very free.

Speaker 12

He's beautiful and he's warm and he's human and his nose is broad.

Speaker 1

Yes.

Speaker 12

The challenge of getting those hues, to getting the various shades of of blackness.

Speaker 1

It sounds like the way some people would go down the black section of town just to chill out, you know, just...

Speaker 12

Except that this wasn't kind of smoke rolling.

Speaker 1

A joint with Bob Marley.

Speaker 12

This was art, this was making great art, you know?

Speaker 1

There was this moment at the beginning of the 20th century when European artists used, and I'm thinking of Picasso particularly, used African art to not only revitalize their own work but to reinvent European art. Suddenly African art came along and was brought into the picture and revitalized and created modernity in European art, European painting. I find that quite ironic.

Speaker 2

Picasso has never really been a preoccupation, although, I mean, there are other black artists who, engage quite a lot with Picasso's work. I guess I'm more 19th century than 20th.

Speaker 1

I came out of the black consciousness movement growing up in that and moving through all those stages as a woman. And then suddenly I saw these images of Grace Jones. Something was suddenly released that we had been told you're supposed to keep down. And Grace never kept it down. So there was always that kind of contradiction raging in us. And I mean, obviously, you were aware of this as well.

Speaker 13

Yeah, less than her. I just juxtaposed my fantasies on her because she was ready to interpret them. So what did I draw from? I drew from what she had to give me. And at that time she was wild. She took great pride in her behaving wildly. I said, well, why not? Why not dramatize that? I wanted raw excitement. And Grace, of course, did the same thing. I took her to the gym. She learned how to move, how to fight, basically. So the look developed with her complicity, of course. I designed this character that was black on black in black, certainly, that dramatized the color of her skin. The only thing is that she didn't realize to what point I thought that she could become a real heroine. The only way Grace could exist was through this character that I created for her.

Speaker 1

But you know, you did make a hero because I'll tell you, Grace was the first image of a black woman as a solo, sole entity in herself. She combined a very sort of graceful beauty with the street, with an idea of like, you know, this is who I am and this is what I look like and you don't like this, da, da, da, da. And a lot of us who've grown up in, you know, what they euphemistically call the ghetto, that's how we felt anyway. We went to

work, we went to the office, we went to school, and people would say, you know, Don't wear that lipstick, don't dress like that, don't look like that, and of course you conform. But Grace never conformed. At least the image of Grace never conformed. So you did make a hero, actually. You really actually did.

Speaker 9

Come in all, you Jackson.

Speaker 13

This is what my idea was. You take somebody to a peak and you want them to stay there. The problem is when you do that, you don't realize it yourself, but people have their own personalities. You can't tell them, please hold the pose, because after a while, it's impossible to hold the pose. It's a question of design. It's terrible to talk about a human being in terms of design, But, that's what I do. Ironically, wanting her to hold the pose made me the slave of my preacher. It's a Svengali situation and it's not comfortable.

Speaker 1

It's funny, coming to Britain, coming to Europe has really made me look at blackness more so than it did in the States in a very, very interesting way. And Picasso, I suppose, like Jean-Paul Goude and Le Gautier, actually refocused me. And I can't explain why that is, but they've made me look at something. They've given me a distance. Do you think that the French see black and the color black as the opposite and a way of being free in themselves?

Speaker 9

Dark and black is also like a mystery. It's also maybe something more deep, you know, the black hole, more deep or more that we don't know. Maybe it can be also considered like something mystic and something very deep, you know, more things than the white. But I think that now people are enough educated, like, to feel that black is beautiful. It was a slogan of many, many, many books, many even designer couturier. Black is beautiful, black is power, black is sensuality, black is also ***** black is life, black is life and joy.

Speaker 1

In everything that you do when you create, is that sense of blackness, that sense of mixture and that sense of sort of freedom, does that come in every collection in a way, even if you don't express it?

Speaker 9

I am sure. So for me, I must say the difference became maybe my motivation and my excitement on my so black skin is a difference from my skin and it is beautiful. I did a collection where I use only like black girl, all black girl and there was only one white one. That collection was about like a play with the richness of the skin, of the color, of the fabric, of the elegance, natural elegance, natural extravagance also of black ladies, you know. I only work on emotion, visual emotion.

Speaker 1

At this point, I thought I should talk with one of the most perceptive cultural commentators I know, Stuart Hall, about a recent book of photographs he and others have put together. Why this book now, Stuart?

Speaker 14

Well, it's really about It's about black photography since the 80s. Here we're dealing with the constructed photograph. These are specially set up, rather posed, constructed images. All artists who have been clearly also in touch with other traditions. What these images say is you can be black in a thousand different ways. It's not a reduction to one image. A thousand. You can be black politically and stylistically and sexually and so on. It encompasses the whole human range. So it's not a reduction to one thing, but it is different from the mere play of difference on the surface. What I would say is that no black artists makes a representation of a black subject without being aware of how that subject has been represented elsewhere. So the particular image has a meaning only in relation to what's gone before. I mean, that's to say, to put it simply, a black person is bound to be aware that the black subject has been systematically stereotyped in the visual languages of the white West. So if you're going to make an image, you can't just come into this space. It's an already constructed space, stereotyped space. You can't just come into it innocent. I think what's very important here is the sort of kaleidoscopic way in which blackness is treated. And this is really running right against the grain of the way in which race and colour have been represented in the Western canon, which tends to say, Ah, it's black. I don't understand what that's about. This says, Ah, it's black, and you don't have the clue what it's about yet. You don't have, you know, you see a rote in ***** Coyote, you don't know where this comes from, where does it come from. It comes from Africa, you know, it comes from his training in the US, it comes from living on the front line in Brixton, it comes from being an African who can't go home, it comes from being gay. You know, this kaleidoscope of experiences is really what the difference of blackness means to him. What I think is very important about a lot of this work is the way in which it went back to the figure of the body itself. It's as if all the explorations about what blackness is, what blackness can mean, how many things can it mean, are explored through the image of the body itself. And, of course, coming to terms with the body is to come to terms with that one thing which racism has privileged so much because racism is only about the black body. Without the black

body, racism wouldn't exist without some way of identifying market. So I think that these images are really like laboratories. It's as if the body is a kind of space of exploration. It doesn't have any answers. It doesn't have a counter politics. You can't look at this and say, well, tomorrow I'm going to do this, and then the world will be OK. What they say is, we don't know really what black will become, what it will mean. What will it mean in the 22nd century? Will it mean the same thing? It won't mean the same thing. Will we notice it at all? It holds open that possibility, because it's never, the story is never finished. These images are on the way to somewhere else. The people on the way to somewhere else.

Speaker 2

We'll definitely get above the head, yeah? Yes. Doesn't have to be a lot.

Speaker 7

Yes.

Speaker 2

Yes, I mean this is a painting I've wanted to make an interpretation of and I think Bonie's the right sitter for this.

Speaker 1

I think this is a person who's saying, what's the story? And of course, There is no one story and no simple end. For me, the process of making this film raises new questions. It's been a very personal quest, and Maude's beautiful representation of the image that began it somehow suggests a future where we black people, our present and our past, our image and our reality, can come together in new ways. That's what this says to me. More than just a famous painter next on BBC Four into the curious mind of a Renaissance genius, Leonardo da Vinci.