

Title

Donald Rodney: Visceral Canker

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About the author(s)

is a London-based artist, writer and curator. She has written for platforms and organisations including *Elephant*, the *London Magazine*, *Smiths Magazine*, Tate, Vinvin Gallery and Studio West Gallery. Selected exhibitions include the co-curation of *Experiential Play*, Fine Liquids Gallery, London, and participation in *Two Fold*, Southwark Park Galleries, London; *Aesthetics of Bliss*, 67 York Street, London; *The Moments Tender*, Five Fold x H.A.E., London; and *Keep in Touch*, Host of Leyton, London (all 2023).

Cover image: **Fig. 5** Photographs with hand-tinted black background used to produce the slide tape work *Cataract*, by Donald Rodney. 1991. Photographs by Viv Reiss. (Courtesy the Estate of Donald Rodney; photograph Frederic Griffiths; exh. Whitechapel Gallery, London).

Donald Rodney: Visceral Canker

by Katrina Nzegwu • 23.04.2025

In October 2024 *Ethnic and Racial Studies* published an article by Nick Drydakis titled ‘Discrimination and health outcomes in England’s black communities amid the cost-of-living crisis’.¹ The report emerged just one month after *Visceral Canker* opened at Nottingham Contemporary (28th September 2024–5th January 2025), as though in corroboration of the exhibition’s timeliness. Having toured from Spike Island, Bristol (25th May–8th September 2024), and now on view at Whitechapel Gallery, London, the retrospective is at once raw, sensitive, abrasive and nuanced. Evading a chronological approach, it addresses a key concern throughout the practice of Donald Rodney (1961–98): the use of his sickle cell anaemia diagnosis as a vehicle to explore chronic illness and interrelated issues of racialised medical treatment.

The ‘canker’ referenced in the exhibition title is most visible in Rodney’s works that explicitly deploy medical ephemera. The central image of *Flesh of my Flesh* [FIG.1](#), a work comprising three photographic panels, shows a tightly cropped scar on Rodney’s thigh: the result of aggressive stitching following a hip operation, which weaves across the pictorial plane like a multilegged insect. The impact of the image is augmented by the inclusion of preparatory photographs shown in a vitrine nearby. The words ‘THE OTHER STORY’ are cut into one, succinctly articulating Rodney’s counternarrative – one that attempts to reclaim the subjectivity occluded by dehumanised, medical imagery.

Rodney also frequently used X-rays as material, working atop prints of his own interiority. *Britannia Hospital 2* [FIG.2](#), for example, which derives its name from Lindsay Anderson’s darkly humorous 1982 film, is a grid of radiographs layered with a pastel drawing of a woman. The formal structure of the piece is at once physical necessity and affective technique – the artist often made use of the grid format as his mobility declined towards the end of his life, the composite method allowing him to continue to make large-scale works. In *Britannia Hospital 2*, a small fire dances across the subject’s palm in a visualisation of localised pain. She shuts her eyes in an indeterminate gesture: perhaps a grimace of agony or fervent prayer for relief. Considering the thematic content of the film after which this series of works is named, the image astutely indicts the inadequacies of the British healthcare system to take care of marginalised subjects.

The grid composition of *Britannia Hospital 2* suggests a fragmented approach to identity construction – an idea echoed in

the mixed-media work *The House that Jack Built* FIG.3. Here, a similar constellation of X-rays is arranged to form the façade of a house. Across the X-rays, plaintive utterances are incised in jagged fits and starts in a manner that recalls the non-linear nature of memory, as well as shifting, oral narratives that are passed down ancestral lines. With recourse to intergenerational trauma, these phrases – such as ‘WHISPERS FILL EACH ROOM IN MY ANCESTRAL HOME’ and ‘SAVE OUR SHIT / SAVE OUR SOULS / SAVE OUR STRUGGLE’ – further Rodney’s critique of Western notions of medicine and science. The artist goes beyond the objective documentation of physical sickness, to speak to the mental and cultural sickness that relentlessly and inescapably plagues certain bodies from birth.

Described by the artist as a self-portrait, *The House that Jack Built* illuminates another central thread throughout Rodney’s practice: visions of Black masculinity and sexuality. The deliberate ‘anonymity’ of the seated figure in front of the house serves to reiterate an observation the artist often made: that, stereotyped and homogenised by society, a portrait of one Black man amounts to a portrait of the generic ‘other’, the ‘black man as the enemy within the body politic’ (p.32).² This idea is exemplified in *Self Portrait: Black Men Public Enemy* FIG.4, a series of five lightbox panels arranged in a T-shape, each of which contains a face. Despite the title, none of the images are self-portraits. Two are mug shots of the same man, while another two show a young boy; black rectangles have been placed over their eyes. At the bottom is an identikit reconstruction of a Black male face. Rodney sourced the images from a book on blood diseases, and such newspapers as the *Sunday Times* and the *Evening Standard*. Although produced in 1990, the work is no less pertinent some thirty-five years later, with the evolution of artificial intelligence technology deployed to target and profile.



Fig. 1 Installation view of *Donald Rodney: Visual Canker* at Whitechapel Gallery, London, 2025, showing, on the back wall, *Flesh of my Flesh*, by Donald Rodney. 1996. Colour photograph on aluminium, 3 panels, dimensions variable. (Photograph Above Ground Studio).

Cataract **FIG.5** also foregrounds this societal bias; the title is a deft pun, consolidating Rodney's pathologisation of systematic inequality as societal disease. A compilation of anthropological illustrations, medical photographs and portraits of Black men – including the artist – are screened onto the wall, using three unsynchronised slide projectors. The sound of the shutter seems to audibly invoke the instant, reductive judgements that define societal conceptions of Black masculinity. As Alice Correia notes in the accompanying publication, 'making no attempt to obscure the suture lines between the different facial fragments, the collation and coexistence of different features belonging to different people in "Cataract" creates a composite that retains its visual tension and multiplicity [...] Aligning himself within the purview of militant or threatening Blackness (whether that threat was real or not), Rodney put pressure upon the ease with which that stereotype may be applied to heterogeneous Black constituents' (p.35).



Fig. 2 *Britannia Hospital 2*, by Donald Rodney. 1988. Oil pastel on X-ray, 122 by 244 cm. (© Donald Rodney Estate; Sheffield Museums; exh. Whitechapel Gallery, London).

In the centre of the exhibition, there is a video interstice: the Black Audio Film Collective's *Three Songs on Pain, Time and Light* (1995), which documents Rodney's life and work. In a climate in which artists of colour are often defined by external curatorial narratives, it is enlightening to hear Rodney's own voice. Sonia Boyce (b.1962), too, remarks upon the artist's subversion of typically 'gendered' practices, challenging the idea that men's work is non-sentimental. The film also touches upon *Doublethink* **FIG.6**: a

sculptural installation that critiques the treatment of Black masculine physicality in professional sports. Rodney assembled over one hundred cheap sporting trophies, each engraved with stereotypes about Black people. The rippling muscles that are otherwise condemned become objects of reverence within the sporting arena, and yet, still, the Black man is reduced to a unit of service. There is an irony in Rodney's bulging cabinets. In lieu of accolades, such phrases as 'BLACK PEOPLE NEED CHARITY' recur across the trophies, their repetition an unsettling replication of how reductive stereotypes are perpetuated. Even in prowess, one's body is not one's own; it belongs to fans whose approval can turn on a whim and to managers, owners and coaches largely of the white capitalist elite.



Fig. 3 Installation view of *Donald Rodney: Visual Canker* at Whitechapel Gallery, London, 2025, showing *The House that Jack Built*, by Donald Rodney. 1987. Mixed media, 183 by 183 cm. (Sheffield Museums; courtesy Whitechapel Gallery, London; photograph Above Ground Studio).

This sensation of bodily estrangement finds resonance with Rodney's experience of chronic illness, and is visualised in arguably his most recognisable work: *In the House of My Father* **FIG.7**. Rodney's magnified hand takes centre stage in a photograph taken by Andra Nelki; his sculpture *My Father. My Sister. My Brother* (1996–97) rests upon his outstretched palm. The sculpture is a minute house constructed from the artist's skin, removed during one of the many operations he underwent. The title is two-fold. In the use of his own skin, he acknowledges the DNA he shares with those for whom the sculpture is named. Scholars and critics have also noted the evocation of Christian symbolism in the work: the pins holding the skin together are reminiscent of the stigmata, while the scale of the house in comparison to Rodney's hand functions as a visualisation of God's omnificence.³



Fig. 4 Installation view of *Donald Rodney: Visual Canker* at Whitechapel Gallery, London, 2025, showing *Self Portrait: Black Men Public Enemy*, by Donald Rodney. 1990. Lightboxes with Duratrans prints, 5 parts, overall dimensions 190.5 by 121.9 cm. (Arts Council Collection, Southbank Centre, London; courtesy Whitechapel Gallery, London; photograph Above Ground Studio).

The exhibition culminates in *Autoicon* **FIG.8**. Conceived in the mid-1990s but only completed after Rodney's death, the work conveys the artist's preoccupation with his own mortality. This interactive work of art presents viewers with a post-mortem version of the artist premised on amalgamated data: interviews, memories and simulated dialogue. It is emblematic of Rodney's unique creative power to create connections across space and time, and to forge links between personal, subjective and collective experience. To

have a canker is to possess an ulcerative lesion. Indeed, the exhibition title frames Rodney's practice as a raw abscess, foregrounding the vulnerability and veracity on which his output rests.



Fig. 5 Photographs with hand-tinted black background used to produce the slide tape work *Cataract*, by Donald Rodney. 1991. Photographs by Viv Reiss. (Courtesy the Estate of Donald Rodney; photograph Frederic Griffiths; exh. Whitechapel Gallery, London).



Fig. 6 Installation view of *Donald Rodney: Visual Canker* at Whitechapel Gallery, London, 2025, showing *Doublethink*, by Donald Rodney. 1992. Trophies with engraved texts, glass cabinet, larger trophies and engraved captions with Eddie Chambers, dimensions variable. (Courtesy Whitechapel Gallery, London; photograph Above Ground Studio).



Fig. 7 *In the House of My Father*, by Donald Rodney. 1997. Photograph, 123 by 153 cm. (© Donald Rodney Estate; exh. Whitechapel Gallery, London).



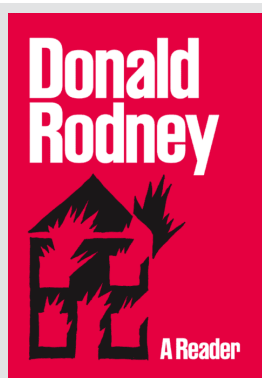
Fig. 8 From *Autoicon*, by Donald Rodney. 1997–2000. CD ROM, digitally transferred, dimensions variable. (© Donald Rodney Estate; exh. Whitechapel Gallery, London).

Exhibition details

Donald Rodney: Visceral Canker

Whitechapel Gallery, London
12th February–4th May 2025

About this book



Donald Rodney: A Reader

Edited by Nicole Yip, Robert Leckie, Gilane Tawadros and Cameron Foote
Whitechapel Gallery, 2025
ISBN 978-0-85488-323-3

Footnotes

- 1** N. Drydakis: 'Discrimination and health outcomes in England's black communities amid the cost-of-living crisis: evaluating the role of inflation and Bank Rates', *Ethnic and Racial Studies* (23rd October 2024), doi.org/10.1080/01419870.2024.2410900.
- 2** Donald Rodney, quoted from accompanying publication: *Donald Rodney: A Reader*. Edited by Nicole Yip, Robert Leckie, Gilane Tawadros and Cameron Foote. 207 pp. incl. numerous col. ills. (Whitechapel Gallery, London, 2025), £20. ISBN 978-0-85488-323-3.
- 3** See D. Symons: 'In the House of My Father: fragments of body and time', in Yip, Leckie, Tawadros and Foote, *op. cit.* (note 2), pp.151–57, esp. p.155.

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