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Elbow room

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**About the author(s)**

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Cover image: **Fig. 7** *Trilogy (Part Two) Woman in Black*, by Claudette Johnson. 1982. Pastel, gouache and watercolour on paper, 157 by 126 cm. (© Claudette Johnson; Arts Council Collection, London; exh. Courtauld Gallery, London).

# Elbow room

by Amy Tobin • 13.12.2023

The two temporary exhibition spaces at the Courtauld Gallery, London, have been transformed by *Presence*, an exhibition of works by Claudette Johnson (b.1959). Behind a labyrinth of European Post-Impressionism, these rooms are scaled for the art of an earlier period: paintings made for salons or living rooms, drawings and prints of intimate dimensions, perhaps a triumphalist abstraction, a genre painting or a sculptural maquette. Given over to Johnson's mostly larger-than-life figurative drawings, the walls, cornices and corners are animated. The first room is dedicated to Johnson's practice of the 1980s and early 1990s, while the second displays more recent works, made from 2015 onwards – the year that Johnson returned to artmaking, prompted by Lubaina Himid (b.1954), who invited her to participate in the exhibition *Carte de Visite* at Hollybush Gardens, London.<sup>1</sup>

Resembling a kind of monumental frieze, Dorothy Price's and Barnaby Wright's hang affords Johnson's figures the phenomenological 'presence' of the exhibition title: it masses them together, while also signalling stylistic groupings and distinctions. Johnson has had impressive solo shows before, at Hollybush Gardens and Modern Art Oxford, for example, but this exhibition, at least in part, is about taking up space at the Courtauld Gallery.<sup>2</sup> There is specific resonance in situating Johnson's work here, or more accurately, in resituating it, as three early drawings, *Trilogy* (1982–86), were first displayed during a group exhibition organised by the Courtauld Institute's curating students in 2017.<sup>3</sup> As Johnson remarked to Price and Wright: 'I imagine it will raise many interesting questions about what belongs in this space, who belongs here, and who can find a sense of belonging here, in this building' (p.61).<sup>4</sup> Indeed, one cannot reach Johnson's work without negotiating paintings by Édouard Manet and Paul Gauguin. When one does arrive at the temporary exhibition galleries, the sightlines offer a backdrop of Amedeo Modigliani's nudes and Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec's waxen Parisians for the subjects foregrounded in Johnson's pastel and gouache drawings.

The exhibition opens with *Untitled (Standing Woman)* **FIG.1** – one of a group that Johnson made of herself shortly after the birth of her second child – which makes clear her conversation with modernism. Lightly gesturing to the figures in the gallery behind, the wall text states:



**Fig. 1** *Untitled (Standing Woman)*, by Claudette Johnson. 1990. Pastel on paper, 128 by 72 cm. (© Claudette Johnson; Wolverhampton Art Gallery; courtesy the artist and Hollybush Gardens, London).

She has spoken of having ‘ambivalent feelings towards working with images of women who are naked because of the exploitative history of “nude” painting in art’. However, her ambition is to create drawings of women who ‘are so obviously engaged in creating themselves’ that they challenge and redefine those traditions,

offering new ways of depicting Black women.

Looking at this self-portrait, in which the figure escapes the narrow confines of the paper and frame, it is hard not to recall the loping incline of Modigliani's *Female Nude* (c.1916) in the Courtauld's collection; her rightwards lean pivots in the opposite direction to Johnson's left-turning twist. The gap between them may as well as be a gulf – the *Female Nude*'s closed posture and downward gaze stands in absolute contrast to the facial and bodily address of Johnson's figure with hand on hip and legs apparently spread – but their relationship is also an opportunity to look again at figurative art as formalist abstraction, rather than only representation.<sup>5</sup>

Also in the first room, the visitor encounters *I Came to Dance* **FIG.2** and *And I Have My Own Business in This Skin* **FIG.3**. These earlier works tangle with the 'problematic' modernism of Pablo Picasso, specifically his infamous *Les Femmes d'Alger (O. J. R. M.)* (1911). The Courtauld does not hold any major works by Picasso, but this hardly matters for the legibility of these drawings, which vibrate with combinations of kinetic line and bodily curve – an evident rearrangement of Cubist techniques. In conversation with Price and Wright, Johnson described the correlation between *Les Femmes d'Alger* and *And I Have My Own Business in This Skin* as a 'fairly direct line': 'I wanted to divest the women in his work of their fetishized otherness and use the flattened planes and fractured space of Cubism to create my own language' (pp.27–28). The work also resists the controlled and sexualised image of Black women, which is in part achieved by the figure's contrapposto pose intersected by many vectors of colour, line and densely and sparsely worked passages. This figure has depth, which might be everyday emotion, spiritual connection or desires of her own.

A circle hangs from the woman's ear, echoing Johnson's *Untitled (Woman with Earring)* (1982), which is currently on display in *Women in Revolt! Art and Activism in the UK 1970–1990* at Tate Britain, London.<sup>6</sup> There, the earring is composed of two Venus signs – a symbol associated with political solidarity between women – gesturing to the gains won for representation and cultural presence in the late twentieth century and Johnson's own commitment to feminism. As in *And I Have My Own Business*, the figurative composition is augmented by a single line – one that does not bisect or fragment the plane so much as resemble an inverted number five. This is reminiscent of the number drawn on the poster for *Five Black Women Artists*, the exhibition that Himid curated at the Africa Centre, London, in 1983, which included Johnson's work. This mirrored numeral marks the entwining of art practice and arts organisation in this period, catalysed by the generative spaces that Himid opened and held for Black women artists over that decade. If in part Himid described the exhibitions she organised as a means to 'make ourselves less invisible, at least

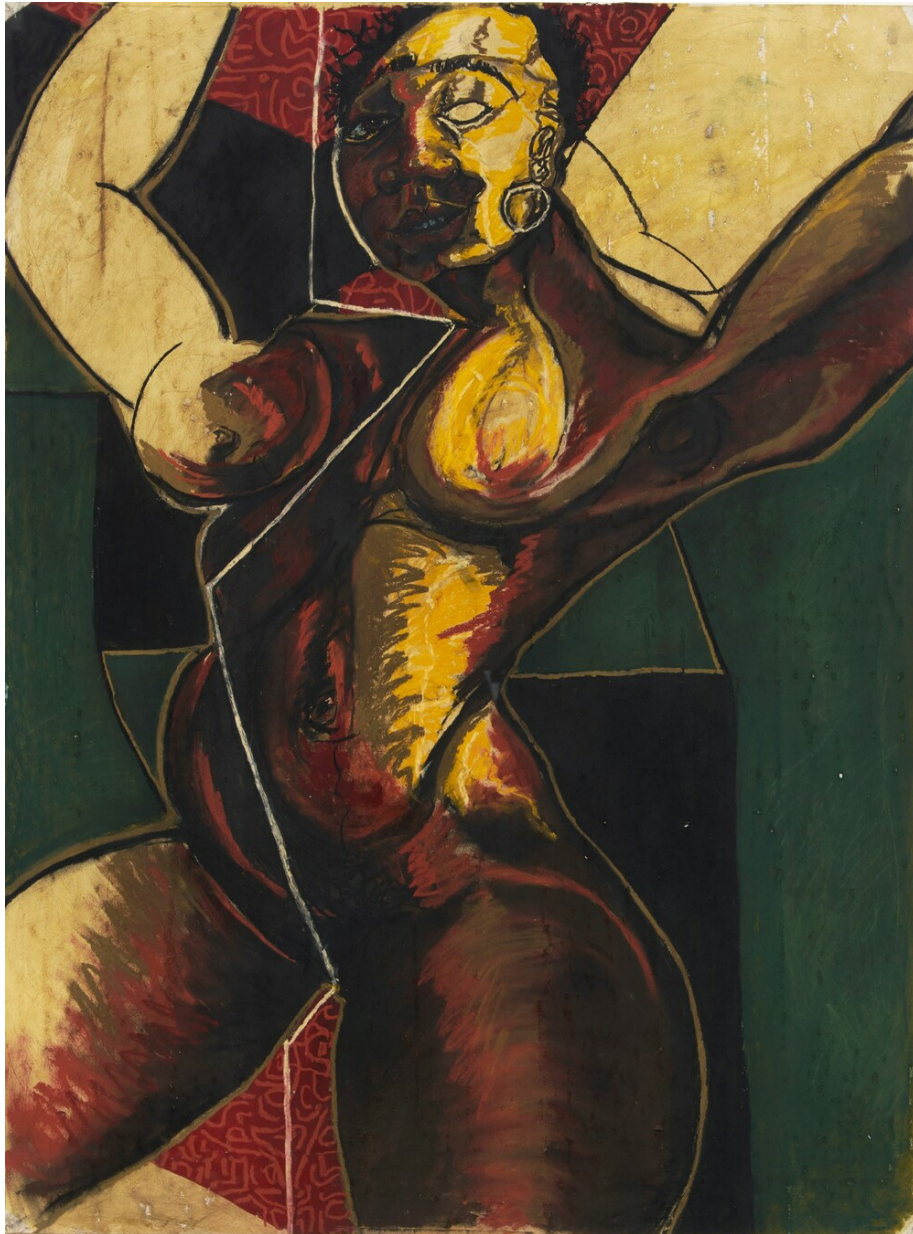
to each other', it was also in coming together that 'the daring and the richness' lay.<sup>7</sup>



**Fig. 2** *I Came to Dance*, by Claudette Johnson. 1982. Pastel and gouache on paper, 130 by 100 cm. (Courtesy the artist, Hollybush Gardens, London, and the Courtauld Gallery, London; photograph David Bebbler; exh. Courtauld Gallery, London).

*I Came to Dance* seems to sit between the sharp counterpoint of *And I Have My Own Business* and the atmospheric plenitude of *Untitled (Woman with Earring)*. Radically spare, this figure manifests by way of a few generous curving lines and sections of dense moulding alongside accordion zigzags and geodesic folds. A partial face, hand and leg suggest flashes of a figure moving to a rhythm beyond the comprehension of even Cubist dynamism. What is unrepresentable here is worked out in fuller terms in the second gallery, through touching juxtapositions rather than Picasso's overlays. Here self-portraits stretch and lean in relation to African and Caribbean masks and figurines; bodies meet at belly or thigh **FIG.4**. While these works suggest some personal restitution beyond

the appropriative logics of primitivism, the earlier works offer still urgent tactics for resistance. *I Came to Dance* and *And I Have My Own Business* are situated on the back wall of the first gallery to face-off with modernism's unhappy legacies of colonial violence, extraction and cultural destruction, like totems of jubilation and resolution.



**Fig. 3** *And I Have My Own Business in This Skin*, by Claudette Johnson. 1982. Pastel and gouache on paper, 143 by 111 cm. (© Claudette Johnson; Sheffield Museums; courtesy the artist and Modern Art Oxford; exh. Courtauld Gallery, London).

It would, however, be a mistake to read *Presence* only for the (uneven) parallels it draws between works in the collection and the longer legacies of cultural imperialism or sexual difference they represent. Johnson's work captivates on its own terms. These effects come into full realisation in the second room. Her figures pull attention, courting both recognition and complex ambiguity.

Sometimes portraits, sometimes studies from life models or photographs and sometimes entirely imagined, the continuum of Johnson's figuration resists absolute knowability. This is an ethical practice of representation that is not solely concerned with presence as singular being there, but being as existence, an event, endowed with dignity, authority and beauty.



**Fig. 4** *Figure with Figurine*, by Claudette Johnson. 2019. Gouache and pastel on paper, 150.2 by 105.5 cm. (© Claudette Johnson; Rennie Museum, Vancouver; courtesy the artist and Hollybush Gardens, London; exh. Courtauld Gallery, London).

The encounter with these works unfolds over time and never completely. It is often said that Johnson's figures seem to exist beyond their support, scaled outside the limits of the material



form that she gives them. Some of her imagined figures lend themselves to archetypes, abstractions or the protagonists of a mythic cosmology, whereas portraits of friends and intimate relations allow even familiar forms the grace of ambiguity. These effects are produced by a variety of techniques, which are often reliant on a balance between line and modelling, and between blank support and pattern or colour. Such combinations are paralleled by the composition of figures who often seem to turn away, or otherwise interrupt the conventions of portraiture.

Amid all this rich variety, one motif in particular reoccurs: elbows. Crevices, folds and extensions parallel the abstract forms of Johnson's backgrounds. Twinned elbows extend from hands held on hips, jut at extreme angles, provide a barricade or even a pillow, as in *Reclining Figure* (2017). Lone elbows add further momentum to contrapposto or support a chin on a fist. They reinforce but they too take up and hold space, bringing to mind the phrase 'elbow room', which was also the name of a temporary exhibition space run by Himid and Maud Sulter (1960–2008) in the late 1980s.



**Fig. 5** *Figure in Blue*, by Claudette Johnson. 2018. Pastel and gouache on paper, 163 by 133 cm. (© Claudette Johnson; Arts Council Collection, London; exh. Courtauld Gallery, London).

In *Figure in Blue* **FIG.5**, the elbow is both heavily worked and almost absent. It is lost between creases of fabric, blank paper and the ghostly draft of another arm. In the three drawings of men in the exhibition, elbows take different forms: foregrounded, round and strangely fleshy in *Kind of Blue* **FIG.6**, locked to one side, gently curving in *Young Man on Yellow* (2021) or the only part of the arms omitted in the close-up focus of *Figure with Raised Arms* (2017). In the latter, the title of which recalls arms held up in surrender, the figure is in repose; hands cradle head and neck and elbows jut out beyond the paper's edge. This pose echoes *Woman in Black* **FIG.7**, which was incorporated to form the second part of Johnson's *Trilogy* in 1986. Whereas *Figure with Raised Arms* communicates ease and trusting vulnerability, *Woman in Black* is about power, poise and drama. The sharp points of her elbows extend the width of her body, and her posture teases high femininity, pleasure and control. She demands our admiring gaze, but we will never meet her standard. Johnson's exhibition is concerned with the physical space of the institution and the conceptual space of art history as a discipline; it may invite lessons about visibility and recognition; but it is also about experiencing the presence of these monumental figures who will take the room nonetheless.



**Fig. 6** *Kind of Blue*, by Claudette Johnson. 2020. Gouache, pastel ground and pastel on paper, 121.9 by 152.4 cm. (© Claudette Johnson; courtesy the artist and Hollybush Gardens, London; exh. Courtauld Gallery, London).



**Fig. 7** *Trilogy (Part Two) Woman in Black*, by Claudette Johnson. 1982. Pastel, gouache and watercolour on paper, 157 by 126 cm. (© Claudette Johnson; Arts Council Collection, London; exh. Courtauld Gallery, London).

### **Exhibition details**

**Claudette Johnson: Presence**  
29th September 2023–14th January  
2024  
Courtauld Gallery, London

### **About this book**



**Edited by Dorothy Price and Barnaby Wright**  
**Paul Hoberton, London, 2023**  
**ISBN 978-1-913645-54-0**

## Footnotes

- 1** See *Hollybush 4* (2015), available at [hollybushgardens.co.uk/files/hollybush-gardens-is-sue-4-carte-de-visite.pdf](https://hollybushgardens.co.uk/files/hollybush-gardens-is-sue-4-carte-de-visite.pdf), accessed 12th December 2023.
- 2** E. Ridgway, ed.: exh. cat. *Claudette Johnson: I Came to Dance*, Oxford (Modern Art) 2019.
- 3** *CORPUS: The Body Unbound*, Courtauld Gallery, London (16th June–16th July 2017).
- 4** Catalogue: *Claudette Johnson: Presence*. Edited by Dorothy Price and Barnaby Wright. 120 pp. incl. 58 col. + 4 b. & w. ill. (Paul Holberton, London, 2023), £25. ISBN 978-1-913645-54-0.
- 5** Courtney J. Martin recently argued for the formalist relevance of Johnson's work, C.J. Martin: "'Some people think little girls should be seen and not heard": Claudette Johnson and representation circa 1982', Courtauld Institute of Art, London (12th December 2023).
- 6** L. Young, ed.: exh. cat. *Women in Revolt! Art and Activism in the UK 1970-1990*, London (Tate Britain) 2023, to be reviewed in a future issue of THE BURLINGTON MAGAZINE.
- 7** L. Himid: 'We will be' [1987], in A. Correia, ed.: *What is Black Art?*, London 2022, pp.136-44, at p.137.

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