

Tate Etc Guide to Black Atlantic

Jennifer Higgie for *Tate Etc* Issue 53, Autumn, 2021

At over 41 million square miles, the Atlantic is the second-largest ocean on the planet. Covering a fifth of the world's surface, it stretches from Antarctica to the Arctic Circle, is bordered by the Americas, Europe, West Africa and the Caribbean, and has been described as 'an immense conveyor belt driven by shifts in temperature'. For millennia, it has been central to trade and travel routes.

In his book *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (1993), the British cultural and social theorist Paul Gilroy coined the term 'Black Atlantic' as a challenge to the long-held assumption that Western culture was the product of European history.

Between around 1492 – when Christopher Columbus reached the Americas – and the mid-19th-century, roughly two-thirds of the people who crossed the ocean were enslaved. A tragedy of unspeakable proportions, it was the largest forced migration in history and resulted in 12 million captive Africans crossing the Atlantic, with millions dying along the way.

Before 1820, 80 percent of new arrivals to the Americas were born in Africa and across the globe, disparate peoples were forcibly bought together. Counter to the white-centred narrative that dominated Western history for centuries, the intellectual contributions and physical labour of enslaved peoples helped shape European and American culture. Over time, a new, hybrid Black consciousness evolved that, in Gilroy's words, transcends 'both the structures of the nation state and the constraints of ethnicity and national particularity.' The impact of the Black Atlantic on the development of music, literature and art – and, in particular, on modernism – has been immeasurable. It can be witnessed in the influence of African sculpture on Pablo Picasso and other avant-garde artists in early 20th-century Paris; in the riches spawned by the Harlem Renaissance in New York in the 1920s and 30s, through to a rich cross-section of contemporary artists from South Africa to the United States, Britain, the Caribbean and beyond who are exploring the legacies of slavery and colonialism.

Black Atlantic is not a singular entity but a loose system of exchange that is multi-faceted, organic, hybrid and shape-shifting – elements embedded in the paintings, sculptures, installations and performances of many artists working today who explore what Gilroy describes as ‘the polyphonic qualities of black cultural expression’. Using distinct, often wildly inventive visual languages, painters and sculptors of British, American, African, and Caribbean heritage – such as Frank Bowling, Sonia Boyce, Ellen Gallagher, Lubaina Himid, Glenn Ligon, Steve McQueen, Carrie Mae Weems, Chris Ofili, Adam Pendleton, Betye Saar, Kara Walker, Kemang Wa Lehulere and others – sample and recycle satire and slang, popular culture, memory, identity, and politics, exorcising the traumas of racism as they celebrate the power and potential of Black creativity in the ever-restless present.

