

Donald Rodney (1961-1998)

Self-Portrait 'Black Men Public Enemy' 1990

Medium: Lightboxes with Duratran prints

Size: 5 parts, total, 190.5 x 121.9cm

Collection: Arts Council ACC7/1990



1. Art historical terms and concepts

Subject Matter

Traditionally portraits depicted named individuals for purposes of commemoration and/or propaganda. In the past black figures were rarely portrayed in Western art unless within group portraits where they were often used as a visual and social foil to the main subject. Rodney adopted the portrait to explore issues around black masculine identity - in this case the stereotype of young black men as a 'public enemy'. The title 'Black Men Public Enemy' comes from the writings of cultural theorist Stuart Hall about media representations of young black men as an 'icon of danger', a metaphor for all the ills of society. Rodney said of this

work: "I've been working for some time on a series...about a black male image, both in the media and black self-perception. I wanted to make a self-portrait [though] I didn't want to produce a picture with an image of myself in it. It would be far too heroic considering the subject matter. I wanted generic black men, a group of faces that represented in a stereotypical way black man as 'the other', a black man as the enemy within the body politic" (1991).

Rodney is asking the question: 'Is this what people see when they see me?' He has created a kind of 'everyman' for every black man, a heterogeneous identity. These faces address directly a number of issues, including: physical sickness as social sickness (the figure top centre and on the left has sickle-cell anaemia, as did Rodney); police brutality (the figure in blue is hand-cuffed); and racism (the aggressive identikit face at the bottom). All are pre-existing 'found' images from medical and media publications. The 'real' individuals are contrasted with the identikit 'black man', just as physical pain is contrasted with emotional pain. The cross-shape of the work reminds us of martyrdom and redemption. These figures are not venerated, but instead linked to negative stereotypes within the British press, of black figures as aggressors.

Visual Analysis: The five light boxes take the compositional form of an Egyptian, or Tau (T-shaped) cross. While the shape makes a clear reference to early Christian religion and veneration, the inclusion of human figures immediately links the work to Christ's physical martyrdom and later resurrection of the soul.

Within the tradition of portraiture, frontal full-face images demand our attention. In this case we notice immediately the closely cropped colour photographic at the top centre. It looks like a police mug-shot especially when paired with the profile image of the same man to the left. This image looks out, perhaps to the past. All the photographs are linked by the colour blue: from the backgrounds of the head shots to the shirt of the younger male, who is seen twice, in close-up on the top right and reversed half-length in the centre, where the body of a crucified Christ would be. In both images this man looks down and take our eye to the lowest face: a police photo-fit, of a man that looks thin, ill and long-haired, rather like a black Christ.

Pale blue is stereotypically associated with masculinity (blue for boys), but in Christian imagery it signifies spirituality and heave. The glowing internal light from the light boxes combined with the highlights of the photographic images, suggests a reference to religious symbolism and aesthetic traditions.

The black censor bars are used to hide the personal identity of the subjects, both for anonymity, and to ensure that copyright of the found images is not violated. More importantly, the bars stress contemporary culture's negation of young black men as individuals. By removing the eyes, the 'windows to the soul', and the most effective way of suggesting individuality, Rodney points to society's tendency to represent young black men as a generic, a collective entity - 'mugger, rapist or robber' - as can be seen in the identikit photos, the only one without a strip. The black strips highlight these possible meanings thus linking aesthetics directly with ethics.

2. Cultural, social, technological and political factors

The work addresses Rodney's sense of identity, as a British-born male artist whose parents had emigrated from Jamaica to Birmingham. It deals with themes relating to mortality and his own illness - sickle cell anaemia - a debilitating 'emblematically 'black' disease' (Stuart Hall) which he was diagnosed when a baby and resulted in persistent chronic pain, hospitalisation, blood transfusions and surgery. Rodney was the youngest of twelve children, three of whom died of the disease. Rodney used sickle-cell anaemia, a genetic inheritance associated with

slavery and the African-Caribbean diaspora, to explore the black body and as a metaphor - a 'signifier of blackness' (Eddie Chambers) - in relation to racial stereotypes, and black masculinity. The lack of research funding for sickle-cell anaemia within the NHS was also a pertinent and political issue in Britain, especially by the late 1980s with the AIDS/HIV crisis. Rodney's family were active members of the Pentacostal church, yet Rodney was rejected by the church community at an early age due to his illness. He later wrote: *"I thought this was very unchristian of them."*

While studying fine art at Trent Polytechnic, Nottingham in the early 1980s, Rodney was already spending long periods in hospital. He met and became a close associate of Keith Piper (b.1960) and Eddie Chambers (b.1960). The work of Piper and Chambers was a revelation to Rodney in the way that it dealt directly with the experience of being black. Together with Marlene Smith they formed the BLK Art Group. From this point Rodney's work became explicitly political, dealing overtly with the themes of black identity and the position of ethnic minorities in Britain. In 1982 he joined the Pan-Afrikan Connection. He was part of a generation of British-born black artists, filmmakers and performers who began to challenge accepted notions of what it meant to be British and contributed to an emergent black British consciousness.

Much of Rodney's imagery stems from the fact that he suffered from sickle cell anaemia. He developed a highly personal vocabulary: for instance incorporating discarded X-rays, and even his own skin, as raw materials. He intended these references to medicine and the body to refer metaphorically to social sicknesses, including racism, police brutality or apartheid, as much as to his personal circumstances. In this way his autobiographical approach enabled him to explore wider questions of identity.

The 1980s and early 1990s was a time of extreme political oppositions, with Britain and North America led by Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan, respectively. After the Brixton riots of 1981, and the Brixton and Tottenham riots of 1985 the British press focused on the black male as aggressive. Yet there was also violence among whites during the miner's strike, and the confrontations between far-right groups and Anti-Nazi League at demonstrations, not to mention the poll tax riots. From 1982 the Greater London Council worked more inclusively setting up the first Ethnic-Arts Sub-Committee and funding multi-ethnic culture. The Cold War ended in 1989, the same year Rasheed Araeen put on the exhibition 'The Other Story: Afro-Asian artists in Post-War Britain' at the Hayward Gallery in London (a show that did not include Rodney's work). In 1990 Nelson Mandela was freed, while in Britain the results of Thatcherite entrepreneurship emerged in the fine arts with Damien Hirst's 'Freeze' graduate show in 1988 and Charles Saatchi buying Hirst's A Thousand Years in 1990. Meanwhile in the USA Spike Lee had commissioned from rapper Chuck D's band Public Enemy the song 'Fight the Power', a title that is not incidental to Rodney's work.

With textual references from Stuart Hall to hip hop, Rodney's work addresses ideas of identity, family, masculinity, community and Britishness – particularly with respect to a British, African-Caribbean diaspora.

3. Developments in Materials and Techniques and Processes

These five photographs are Duratrans - a term copyrighted by Kodak in 1979 - printed on a translucent base material in a large format, ideal for displaying on lightboxes with a controlled backlight so that light passes through and illuminates the display for maximum colour saturation and contrast. Each photograph is framed on its own lightbox. Together the lightboxes are displayed on the wall in the shape of an Egyptian cross.

Rodney's use of photographs lit from behind can be related to his hospital experiences, linking to the extensive medical data accumulated over his long illness including photographs, X-ray

scans and DNA sequencing. The use of the light box ground allows the viewer to penetrate the surface - to see through to another deeper level, below and behind. This could reference the 'medical gaze' (Michel Foucault) – a social-pathological investigation.

The pictures that Rodney uses are all ready-made 'found images'. Reading from left to right, the first two which look like 'police mug-shots', are in fact from a medical textbook on blood, that tried to pinpoint key physical features of those with sickle-cell anaemia, including the convex profile with protrusion of upper lip and recession of chin, which Rodney shared. Such research links not only to his personal identification, but also to stigmatisation and negative labelling. The young man in the blue shirt "apparently handcuffed, his head bowed" (Eddie Chambers) was cut from the Sunday Times colour supplement. The photo fit face at the base - an 'absurd, grotesque and vicious 'identikit' construction of "Black man as mugger, rapist or robber"' (Chambers) - was also a mass media image, this time taken from the Evening Standard. This sourcing is directly related to the content of the work.

4. Ways in which it has been used and interpreted in past and present societies

Rodney's work can be located within the highly politicised work of the 1980s Black Arts Movement in Britain in its most general sense, but more specifically through his affiliation with particular groups of artists, and inclusion in exhibitions. As James Baldwin said: *"The victim who is able to articulate the situation of the victim has ceased to be a victim; he, or she, has now become a threat"*.

The work deals the notion of what it means to be Black and British, and as such it paved the way for the next generation. Later practitioners such as Chris Ofili (b.1968) would find themselves categorised within the art establishment as part of the YBA (Young British Artists) movement, especially after Ofili was the first Black artist to win the Turner Prize in 1998 – the year that Rodney died.

Here, Ofili describes his own influences: *"I was listening to a lot of hip hop, music like Public Enemy that was about raising consciousness, and I realised I could feed that directly into my work, using images in a way that was a bit like sampling - taking images from diverse places, exploring the contradictions without trying to hide the seams."*

Related works:



Frida Kahlo The Broken Column 1944



Marlene Dumas Woman of Algiers 2001



Keith Piper A Ship Called Jesus: The Ghosts of Christendom 119



Donald Rodney Britannia Hospital 3, 1988

Further Reading:

Rodney, Donald et al (1991). 'Shocks to the System, Social and Political Issues in Recent British Art' from the Arts Council Collection (with Sonia Boyce, David Medalla, Sunil Gupta, Favin Jantjes, Roney Phillips, Keith Piper and Donald Rodney). London: South Bank Centre.

Hylton, Richard, ed. (2003) Donald Rodney: Doublethink. London: Autograph (including articles by Eddie Chambers and Virginia Nimarkoh).

Links:

<http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artists/donald-rodney-3076/donald-rodney-practice-unfolding>.

www.iniva.org/autoicon

www.sickle-thal.nwlh.nhs.uk/Documents

Questions:

1. When you looked at the image with the title, did you think the top and left images were of the artist himself?
2. Did you assume he had done something wrong, because the images look like police mug shots?

3. Does the fact that the pictures are taken from a medical text book, change the way you look at them?
4. Why do you think Rodney was looking at medical books with pictures of other people with sickle-cell anaemia?
5. Does the figure in blue look like a young boy or a man to you?
6. Can you tell that he is handcuffed? If so, how?
7. Does the face at the base of the cross remind you of anyone? Christ?
8. The cross shape is very powerful within the history of art. What does it make you think about?
9. In these images who is suffering the most?
10. What is the difference between a victim and a martyr?
11. In the 1980s during the period leading up to Rodney making this work there had been several high-profile cases of police brutality with unintended victims of police violence such as Cherry Groce (shot while police were searching her home in Brixton for her son), and Cynthia Jarrett (suffered a heart attack while police searched her home in Tottenham). It was widely recognised that disproportionate numbers of young black men were embroiled in the justice system, and more likely to receive heavier sentences.
12. If you were in the USA today you might make an art work featuring leading black men who have died from police brutality (for example Rodney King, the Ferguson shootings etc.) or about other figures who have stood out in defying racist categorisation (for example Prince). Who might you include in a work about black British figures?
13. Does art *reflect* the social and political situation or can it actively *affect* it? Think of some evidence for your answers.
14. #Black Lives Matter was set up by three women in March 2013. Are you surprised it was not organised earlier?